A TEI Project

Interview of Shishir Kurup

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1.1. Session 1 (April 15, 2010)

Collings
This is Jane Collings interviewing Shishir Kurup on April 15, 2010, at his home.
Good afternoon.
Kurup
Good afternoon.
Collings
Why don't we just start out with when and where you were born.
Kurup
Okay. I was born in Bombay, India, November second--shall I date myself--1961.
Collings
Up to you.
Kurup
I'm originally from--my family is actually from the South.
Collings
South of India.
Kurup
South of India. It's called Kerala, and Kerala is the southernmost tip--it goes all along the west coast, the coastline of India on the western side, and it's just below Goa. I'm sure a lot of Americans have heard of Goa.
Collings

Yes, sure.

Kurup

So Kerala is the state below it. They call Kerala the Goa of now. Goa is not Goa anymore, you know.

Collings

Oh, is that right.

Kurup

Well, because it became like the tourist place. A lot of Americans went there in the sixties to tune in, turn on, and drop out, so Kerala now is more that.

Collings

I see.

Kurup

Kerala is known for the fact that it was one of two communist states in India, and so because of that--and Kerala particularly. Bengal is the other one--the most artistic people come out of Bengal and Kerala, tend to be anyway. Satyajit Ray, the famous filmmaker, is from Bengal, and in South India, there are a lot of wonderful filmmakers down there, Shyam Benegal and people like that, but the literacy rate is really, really high. There was some statistic in the mid-nineties where they said that it was almost 99.9 percent literacy, and it had more Ph.D.s coming out of that area, per capita, than anyplace in the world.

Collings

Gosh. That's quite an honor.

Kurup

I would imagine that's a true statistic. I think it was in "Time" or some other magazine, and certainly a lot of software engineering and all that stuff. I think Bangalore, which is not in Kerala but nearby, is the Silicon sort of Valley of India too.

And so one of the things about being from Kerala is also all the land reform, the caste reform, women's issue about women's rights, and so the politics of that part of the country are very different than, say, the northern part, like in Bombay where I was born. So born there, and I was there till I was five years old.

What's interesting is that one of the things that is a thread through my solo performance work and also just being a playwright is this idea of being an eternal outsider, so that even born in the city in my own country, but the North and the South are very different, very different. I mean, at that time, when my mom first came to Bombay from Kerala, pretty exotic, the southern people. We're darker, we're more a mix of sort of the Dravidians and I think some people who came through. The Dravidians are considered the indigenous people, but if you go to Tamilnadu or Madras, as it used to be known, you'd find more of the Dravidian people without too much of the mix, while in Kerala you find, because it's coastal, you know, the Portuguese, the Chinese, the British, everybody came, and the first place

Vasco de Gama landed was in Calicut, which is in Kerala, so you have all this mixing that has happened over the years.
Kerala has had a perfect one-third, one-third, one-third of Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and that's a high population of Christians--

Collings

It is.

Kurup

--because even though India overall has a hundred million Muslims there, it's the second-largest Muslim country, even bigger than Pakistan in terms of Muslim population, that kind of proportion of a third, a third, a third is not common--

Collings

No, I wouldn't think so.

Kurup

--in India. So that's also another interesting thing about Kerala. It's considered the Venice of India, because there are all these waterways that come through, so these, you know, paintings you've seen on silkscreens of like those long, thin boats with a tall long man with a--or maybe a short man with a long stick in those creeks, going along, that's Kerala, the houseboats and hotels on water and that sort of thing, so kind of a rich area in terms of like how people thought about things.
And it was the only matriarchal state, before even independence and all that, for hundreds of years, and then that changed recently, in the past forty, fifty years, I think. But money passed down the mother's line when people got married. In India, most of the time when you get married, the bride goes to the husband's house, because the families still live together. You just expand your property or make another house, or the house is already big enough to accommodate another person, and usually the wife goes to the husband's house. And, of course, there are all these problems with the mother-in-law issues, and women become a little bit more subservient to that family. But in Kerala, it goes the other way. The husband comes to the wife's house and lives there, so the woman is in her comfort zone. It's her domain, in a way, and from what I understand, what my mother used to tell me, the way--all a woman needed to do to divorce a man is if he came home one day and found his shoes outside the house, that meant that he had to take a walk.
The other thing that's really interesting is that in Kerala, the women--you know the saris, the way they are. It's a wrap thing and then there's a blouse and then there's a thing that goes over the shoulder. Well, in Kerala you had the wrap thing and the thing going over the shoulder, but no blouse, so women walked around with one breast exposed, and it was just considered like the men would, because it's very hot there. So they're not forced to overly cover themselves, or they weren't. Now they don't do that, of course, and they haven't done that in a while. But my grandmother used to walk

around topless all the time, which is shocking for me as a city kid to go down there to see; not shocking, but it was interesting. But my mom would always like say, "Please, there are children here. Now cover yourself up." And my grandmother would be like clueless. "Why? So what if there are children here. What's the big deal?" Right?

Collings

So your mother's family is actually from this region.

Kurup

From that region, my father and mother both, from different areas of it, but they're both from--yes, you know. Groups tend to--you know how it is. It's like if you're a fan of the Lakers or the Dodgers, but the Dodgers don't get into the World Series, so then you're going to be for the Padres. It's like whatever's closest to you. So in India, you know, if you're from Kerala and you're a Hindu, you want to marry a Hindu from somewhere close by, nearby, but if that's not, then at least maybe you'll marry an Indian, and if not an Indian, then at least a Hindu Indian, so I mean, it's just that kind of way of like how close you can keep to the original whatever subset you're a part of.

Collings

Right.

Kurup

So they were from that area. My mother moved up when she was about seventeen. The first one--I mean, her older brother had gone up and was working for the railways, and she went up to become a nurse. She wanted to become a doctor, but we didn't have the money, so even then you had to have money to be a doctor. So at seventeen she was sort of a pioneer, and I would actually say that my mother, because of her pioneering, got her rest of her family out. Her sister went to London, who's doing very well now, also a nurse, and got her brother out and lives in Philadelphia, and they're doing fine, so my mother has actually had a harder time and is actually now, because of the economic thing that just happened recently, you know, the downfall--actually, Goldman Sachs is to blame, and I'm glad that's on the record.

Collings

Good.

Kurup

But it has to do with the fact that the gas bubble that Goldman Sachs helped create, basically cut all their revenue, because they had a motel on the side of the I-95 in Georgia, which was a fantastic place for people going from Miami to Canada. Because of that bubble, people stopped traveling, and it just became an--all the motels around in that area started going under.

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

And a motel because--my mother is not a business person. She was a nurse. But my stepfather, when she remarried--my parents got divorced--but he's a Christian Indian. The Christians tend to be more business in India, I mean in Kerala anyway, and even the Muslims are more business, but the Hindus are not as business. But now up north the Patels--you've heard of the Gujaratis, and there's a group called the Parsis and the Sindis, they're all business people, mostly business Indians. Those are the ones you've heard of here in this country. And, of course, so a lot of doctors, and like in Kerala, a lot of physicists would come across, nuclear physicists, all that kind of stuff, and now software engineers, but less about the business if they're Hindus. So, you know, it's that kind of weird sort of stratification, who does what.
So living in Bombay, my father was in the Navy. He basically went to two years of college, but he had three sisters back home. You know, what you do is you leave the village and go to the big city, and then what you do is you send money back.

Collings
Right.

Kurup
So my mother would literally--she would tell me stories of like she would go, she would send back, like if she made fifty rupees a week, she would keep about like five rupees, or two rupees for laundry and about five or six rupees for food, and the rest she would send home. I mean, that's a huge chunk of your--

Collings
Yes, about a third.

Kurup
Yes, out of fifty she kept maybe--

Collings
Oh, fifty, yes.

Kurup
Out of fifty, she maybe kept ten, maybe kept ten. And my father was going to college, but then he had three sisters back home, and so he decided to join the Navy and send money back so that two or them, or two or three--he had four sisters, and maybe three of them could go to college. So two of them finished, and they became--so, again, you know, we're talking about in the fifties and women going to college, and that's not something that even you heard of here, and they were doing it, and he was doing it there, and they've since become teachers and all that.
So they met, my mother and my father met, and they had what they would call a love marriage, which means it was not arranged, which means that they met themselves. And, of course, love marriages meet with a little bit of resistance from the families, and it can sometimes create tension for the couple and everybody, so it was fraught from the beginning, so to speak.

And during that time I was born, and then about two and a half years later a sister was born, but she had jaundice and she died after three days.

Collings

Oh, what a shame.

Kurup

In those days it was a little bit hard. My mother had two C-sections. In those days, a C-section wasn't a tiny little--it was a whole thing. It was a big deal. And she always talks about, literally, when I was born, I had the cord wrapped around my neck, and I was having trouble coming down, so they had to do the C-section. When they pulled me out, they literally just cut the cord and took me off and ran and literally left her lying on the table, literally opened up.

Collings

Oh, my gosh.

Kurup

And she was a nurse there, so it's kind of dramatic. She has all these amazing stories. I mean, my mother would be an amazing oral sort of factory of stories. She helped deliver over three thousand babies in her time.

Collings

That's a lot.

Kurup

She was a midwife and a teacher. I mean, as a nurse she had been a midwife, a psychiatric nurse, a surgical nurse, so she moved through all the different kinds of areas. And she talks about one time, one of the most fascinating ones was when she's riding in a horse cart, you know, in India, one of those horse-drawn--they're covered and it's like a taxi, a horse taxi. She was in the taxi with a pregnant woman across from her, and the woman went into labor.

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

And so my mother helped her lie on the seat or on the ground, I can't remember where, and started unraveling the sari, these yards and yards of cloth, right? And this wasn't her first child, this woman's. Then you have to take off this other gown underneath, and then you get to the underwear, and you pull that off, or maybe there was no underwear because the water had broken or whatever, and she's like, "There's no baby. What's going on? Where's the baby?" And then she found it in the roll of cloth. It had already come out. That's the thing, you know. Your first child is a hard one, but this woman was going into labor and pretty quickly it just came out. So she finally found the baby. He was rolled up in the cloth. She took it out and everything was okay.

So after that, my father was in the Navy. He was in there for ten years, and that's how he supported his family back home and also us, and her with the

nursing. So I was a kind of early latchkey kid almost, because my--but we had family. My mom's sister had come to stay with us. My dad's sister had come to stay with us, so there were people there to take care. It's different than today, you know, where you have to pay for babysitters and all that. There you have family come in and live with you, and they're there to help. My mother's sister was learning to be a nurse also. My father's sister was more of a--you know, there's this interesting thing of relegating one of the girls, especially the youngest, to become the caretaker of the older people--

Collings

Sure, yes.

Kurup

--as life goes on, and that became her job, and it was really unfair, because she's a beautiful, sweet, thoughtful woman, and her name is Lila, and my mother's name is Lila, so they both have--and Lila means the dance of life. Maya means the illusion, the veil of illusion of life. Lila means the dance of life. And this young woman never got to go to college. She may have finished high school, I'm not sure, but she became like the caretaker and has continued to be the caretaker still in some ways, but now she's married, but has no education like the other sisters have. So I, actually, because I have a real fondness for her, over the past few years I was doing a lot of pilots and TV stuff, and I made a little bit of money, and so when I had a little money, she was needing a house. And it was the one thing in my life that I feel like I just was able to help a family member by giving her enough money for the foundation and the walls of the house, that she was then able to make her own house--

Collings

Oh, that's great.

Kurup

--so it's almost like the ability--she took care of me as a child, and then maybe as she got older, I was able to do a little bit of taking--I don't feel like enough. I could do much more, but that was what I was able to do. So there was this experience of being kind of a latchkey kid, but not really, because I had been taken care of.

And then what happened was things started getting a little bit tough. I think after my sister died, things got a little bit rough within the family. I think that grief sometimes, you know, you're not able to express it properly, and so it gets sublimated into other behavior, whether it's drinking or just abusive behavior towards yourself and to each other. So the plan was that my mother would go to Africa to make better money.

Collings

As a nurse.

Kurup

As a nurse. Because, now this is a theme that has repeated itself in our life, because nurses are a premium all over the world, and the same way we got to come to the United States with our green cards--

Collings

Because she was a nurse.

Kurup

--because she was a nurse, and she applied to an ad in the paper, and we moved to Kentucky. But what happened was we had family in Kenya, my father's aunt, so my great aunt, so my mother took a steamer, one of those big steamships, from--I think they still have them. In India they do, probably, I'm sure. I think it took--I may be crazy--it may have taken a couple of weeks or a month to travel across the Indian Ocean, that area now where we hear about piracy and all of that stuff? That's where she traveled. And I was left back with my dad and my aunt, her sister.

And about three, four months later, I took my first plane ride at the age of five and was sent with another family, a family that I didn't even know, but they were friends of my great aunt in Mombasa. The town we moved to was Mombasa. It's a tiny island. It's famous for being a very natural port, and all of the American battle cruisers and all that, they begin operations there, so they have a connection with Kenya in that way. But Mombasa, this town--it's a little bit of an island that fits inside a divot along the coast, with one corner or one part of the island connected to the land, so it looks like a little uvula or something.

Collings

It sounds like a very sheltered waterway.

Kurup

It is a very sheltered waterway. And what happens, actually, what's interesting about it, it's beautiful white, white sands, and the kind that when the tide goes out, you can literally walk out for about a mile, so it's like pretty astounding that you can sort of--it's like beach for suddenly a mile and then when the tide comes in, you can't believe how full it is. And amazing trade winds. Apparently Mombasa has some mention in the Bible, not by that name, but it's that old a city, because by sort of thinking, by making the coordinates between how it was described in the Bible, it seems to land right where Mombasa was, and they talk about a prosperous people that had buildings that had gold and filigree on it and ivory and all of this stuff, so they were very wealthy and mentioned in the Bible and had been burned down many, many times, by Arab invaders, by all different kinds of invaders, including the Portuguese and the very famous Portuguese fort over there, so it's a beautiful part of the world, and it's a very interesting history. A lot of Arabs have lived there. Now a lot of Europeans come to buy property along the coast and all this stuff.

So that's where we lived and that's where I grew up. I was there from the age of five to twelve, and my father came a couple of years later, couldn't

find work in that town, because he had been doing other things when he got out of the Navy, and then he became a teacher when he came there and ultimately an assistant principal at one of the schools. But he would go to Tanzania, the next state, and try to find work there as a teacher, and he did that and then so he was with us very little. So we were always traveling to see him, or he was traveling to come back, and finally he did get a job in Mombasa. But we were there from--I was there from '66, end of '66 to '74 before we came to the States.

Again, we came to the States because of opportunity. We came as a family, the three of us, and left the island of Mombasa, which was actually an incredibly formative part. I would credit my ability to write and tell stories, partly because of, certainly because of my mother at the beginning, because even as a child in India, the only way she could get me to eat was to tell me stories, and they were all about the Hindu myths, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and all of the stories, so I knew all of those. A lot of my plays, you know, I've got this play called "As Vishnu Dreams" that we did through Cornerstone at East-West Players, and it's my take on the Ramayana, and I've a very kind of subversive look at it, because I'm telling it from the point of view of the southern people who tend to be described as the demons of the tale. So when you're the demon of your own tale, how do you tell your story? So I was very interested in looking at how that affects the psyche of the demon on the people, because there's a lot of stuff.

Much of the work I deal with has to do with issues of color, internalized self-hatred within a group of people, not even looking at the outside culture of, say, Anglos and light skin versus dark skin, that. I'm looking at the conflict within the group itself, because India is filled, and even Africa, most places filled with these images of lighter-skinned people of that race who are favored. You know, we've heard about all these.

Collings

Sure.

Kurup

You know, African Americans will say high yella, and café con leche for Latinos. In India they call it now wheat colored.

Collings

Oh, wheat colored.

Kurup

Wheat colored, yes, because they used to say "fair." Like in matrimonial ads, you would see, "She's well-educated, she's got this, and she's fair." Well, they're looking for a fair-skinned wife. Now it's become like, "Oh, that's gauche. You can't say that. That's actually kind of offensive." But we say wheat colored now, which is the same--

Collings

So they're still looking for the same thing, but it's different terminology.

Kurup

They're still looking for the same thing, it's just different terminology. It's a way to sort of subvert the intention through language, but the intention is still the same. So what happens with this sort of notion of the southern people and that, (a), you're the demon, (b), you're dark, also the people of that southern area not far from there, we're also called the monkeys, because like Hanuman is a famous character who's a monkey god, so to speak, and so it's very much in line with kind of Africans and how they were dealt with, because the southern people look more sort of indigenously aboriginal. And, in fact, in that documentary "The Journey of Man," which is about DNA and looking for--what is it called, it's not aberration, it's the--I always forget this one word, but you look for a genetic mutation, and in the process--it's how you make connections to the DNA trail. And when they were looking for the connection between Africa and Australian aborigines, they found it in South India.

Collings

Oh, really.

Kurup

Yes. Because, you know, the way the DNA works is that it's making this copy of--it's like a copy machine. It's making these copies over and over and over again, and then at one point if you look at the copy machine, there's a little mutation, because a little something blurry, something changed, and they found that mutation down there. So there's this interesting history between Africa, South India, and Australia. And, in fact, if you ever go to like Ethiopian restaurants or a Somalian restaurant, you will see the people and their artwork and their food very much resembles South India. They have a particular look. Their nose is more toward the aquiline in the way that South Indians are, and they have similar features. They have a kind of food that's like a--there's a thing called a dosha, which is almost like a crepe, and they have their own, it's called injera, and then they have all these like lentil kinds of things, so there are these interesting--and their paintings, they have that same kind of long-boat thing with the creeks and all that I was describing earlier. So there's a fascinating connection in that way.

But I think I was talking about the idea of like how a lot of my work was influenced by this time, these times, because when I think back, you know, when we all look back on our memories of our childhood, these are the places I go to. These are the stories-- Particularly to Africa, even though I'm Indian. You know, I call myself an Indo-African American--

Collings

Oh, I see.

Kurup

--as a kind of a disruptive kind of thing, because I do think I am--for one thing, I think I am of all three cultures but I'm of none of them. It's both. I feel like I'm not an Indian or an African or an American, but I'm all three. And I chose to become an American, because I became a citizen. I could

have stayed in India. I had an Indian passport, so having an Indian passport in Africa and then here, but then, you know, you travel to England, it's not so good. They don't like to have that Indian passport. And also I didn't get to vote, because I think I was getting to that place where I was getting politicized. I wanted to be able to participate.

So we left Africa to come here in the mid-seventies, which was a very potent and interesting time in this country, I thought. It was sort of a really vibrant, odd time, odd. It was starting to--you know, the fractures of the sixties were really coming to root in the seventies. There was kind of disaffection that was going on. We first moved to Louisville, Kentucky, and it was a big shock in some ways. But you know, when you're twelve years old, you're going--I'm in the deep end of the pool. I'm just going to learn to swim. And I'm going to think about what this is only years later, to see what that effect was, to have been thrown into that deep end of that pool.

So, (a), I come in with a different accent. I come in with a little bit of an Indian-ish, British-ish kind of mixed accent, and so within six months I just knew I had to change my accent, without consciously doing it. It was just a natural response to the landscape and to the body scape and just transformed my--and what I've learned is that I have, as a survival skill, developed a very strong ear. So the ability to start mimicking without knowing it, almost mirroring people, which then I guess in some ways, if you want to look at it in terms of a continuum, later on leads to the ability to act and to be characters and play different things. So, you know, all of these. Joseph Campbell talks about--I can't remember which, Heinrich somebody, one of the philosophers he admired, talked about when you look back on your life, you notice an arc that you're hardly aware of while you're in it, when you look back on something. So that's how I make these connections. These were the things, along with the storytelling that my mother told me--while I was in Kenya, we had neighbors who basically took care of me, again because I was kind of a latchkey. My mom was working, Dad was working, my great aunt was working, and even though we had a person, an African man who was sort of, I guess you would call him a servant, but he was a cook. You know, in Africa, Africans are still at the bottom of the--and this is the great injustice there, right? If you were an official or educated, you did well and you moved up. But most of the people who were not educated, they had to be workers in houses. They went off home every night and they would go to their houses. A lot of them came from in-country to come to the coasts to get jobs, and many of those jobs were to do work in the houses. And we had somebody who lived in our house who cooked, and he learned how to cook all the Indian foods and everything, so it's really, again, cultural mix is really fantastic. And he would try to introduce some of his food. I was like, "What is your African food like?" His name was Maru, M-a-r-u, and the Kenyan food--this was called Kenyan food, and they would mash potatoes and mash peas and mix them together, and that was the food. That was one

of the things. Another thing was a kind of a Cream of Wheat kind of thing that got solidified, called ugali, and it was like you could make balls out of them and you would dip them in a kind of meat sauce with meat and eat that. But mostly he was learning how to make Indian food for us.
But even though we had all that, our neighbor who was a Gujarati woman, which is from the north of India, one of the business people I was talking about, her family and her daughter in particular, took care of me. She was like everything to me. She was at least fifteen, sixteen years older than me, and she used to read me Edgar Rice Burroughs, "Tarzan of the Apes." She would read me all these stories. I was fascinated by it. She would tell me the stories. She would not just read for me, but then she would then have the book there. I would say, "Tell me the story of Katchak [phonetic] or--," whatever. He was one of the apes. And then she would just tell me. So I think that instilled in me this notion of how to tell a story.
And she would also tell me--she introduced me to Elvis. She had these old Elvis records. She had these Beatles records, and she had Cliff Richard, who was the British Elvis, and he was big in Africa. So, now, this is well past Elvis' heyday, or in his late--but still, there he was quite big. By the time I was listening to music, Santana was huge. He was huge. He was a god in Africa.

Collings

Oh, really.

Kurup

Oh, my god. Because he had brought that African, the Afro-Caribbean rhythm section to this fiery guitar playing that was blues-based. He was really melding culture. And if you notice in our conversation, everything for me has been about a fusion of culture. So you have this guy who's huge. So not my generation, actually the generation in front of me was really into Santana. But I was really into him because my father also liked him, so I was sort of like connected to my father that way. And, of course, in the nineties he has a huge album. He's got a whole other--he's had like four different generations of people that he's had under him or under his influence.
But so this woman in a way also taught me how to tell stories. I used to also--there's this amazing--I'm only telling you this because I think it really applies to who I am as a storyteller and an artist. I lived in the middle of Mombasa, and Mombasa is, if you took New York and squeezed and squeezed it down, squeezed it sideways into an island and then squeezed it down, because I think the highest building had about eight stories; incredibly bustling, with Indians, Africans, Arabs, a mix of Arabs and Africans called Mooraboos [phonetic], the people that--it may even be an epithet, I'm not sure, but it was a mix of African and Arab. For some reason, they tended to be the poorest, and they were in a particular part of town that was like something you'd see in "Raiders of the Lost Ark," in those Arab bazaar kind

of areas. And so a rich, rich culture, and a European influence also. The British influence is still there. So a bustling city with cars and transportation, but also all these different people.
And where I lived was in the heart of the city, and I could literally--so I grew up in a city environment, so I was comfortable crossing streets and all that at a pretty early age. And because my parents were working all the time, I would hang out in the streets, and we would play soccer in the streets, on the sidewalks. Those were our playgrounds, because unless you were at school, you didn't have a grass field. You were in the middle of the city, and so you were playing soccer or cricket in the alleyways.
But there were movie theaters all around me. There was one movie theater that literally I walked down the stairs, crossed the street, there was the movie theater, and that movie theater was called the Regal Cinema. The Regal Cinema is now gone, but it was an amazing place, because it was the only theater in Mombasa that played Italian spaghetti Westerns, Chinese kung-fu movies, English kind of caper films, "Blackula" and all those--

Collings

Blaxploitation?

Kurup

--blaxploitation films, "Billy Jack," all of those movies. And so all the other movie theaters were Hindi movie theaters, so they played Bollywood movies. And even, now, we had a drive-in, and they did both Bollywood and some mix of like maybe some American films, but very little. So I mean, you know, I grew up with Clint Eastwood, Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson. These were our heroes down there, all the action kind of people, and these interesting sometimes quiet British movies. It was a real mix. So I was fascinated with film right off the bat. We didn't have television, so you went to a movie theater all the time.
Our friends, some people had television. Television had come to Kenya, but it would be only programming from like six o'clock at night to eleven, after the news and then it would go off, and then later on it got a little bit later. So we didn't have a TV. I'd go over to a neighbor's house to see "The Three Stooges" or "Hercules," this cartoon, and that was about it, not too much more; "Beverly Hillbillies."

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

"Beverly Hillbillies" used to come out there. And so I would watch these films, and so I was influenced by the Bollywood films. We would go to a movie, a Bollywood movie, and I would walk out of that movie theater--my mom told me this recently. She goes, "You know, you heard those songs once, and you would walk out and you were singing the songs when you walked out."

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

So I didn't make that connection, but she said, "You used to sing in the shower." And then many years later, I found a lot of songs on iTunes and all of these places. I found a lot of these old songs, and some of them I had not remembered, but they were appealing to me, and I just got a bunch. And one day I was playing it for her and she goes, "Oh, you know, you used to sing that song in the shower when you were little." And I said, "I don't even remember singing it." But she said, "Yeah, you knew that song really," and you didn't go see a movie more than once, so that's the connection.

So these things are really influencing me as a kid. I'm reading these novels from English writers. Enid Blyton, she was a children's writer, and she would write all these mystery novels. They were like "Hardy Boys" but from England. They were even Western books, reading a guy named J.T. Edson. I believe he was an Englishman but writing about the wild west and writing about characters, these characters that became iconic to me. But in a way, it was always this outsider view, because Enid Blyton is writing like "Hardy Boys," but it's her own version of it; a lot of food involved. The British like to talk about food a lot and real good descriptions of jams and butters, and so as a kid, you want to eat that food, because that's not the food we ate. We didn't eat toast and jam and buttered. I'd had it, but not all the time. Indian food is all prepared and all this. I wanted like fast food. I wanted like easy food to eat. I wanted a sandwich. I wanted to hold a cucumber sandwich and eat that and that they would describe it. And potted meats. I didn't even know what a potted meat was, but I wanted to have a potted meat, so that was exotic for us.

So this is the brew, the stew that I'm stirring in, along with pageantry, the pageantry of the Indian festivals, going to the temples. Right next to the temple is the mosque. I always talk about this in terms of like Mombasa would awaken every morning at six a.m. with the mosque--the meddin or muezzin, either way you could say it, is the caller--

Collings

The call to prayer.

Kurup

--the "Allahu Akbar," the call to prayer. That's at six a.m. in the morning, and there were other times in the day, of course, five times in the day, but that was the first one. And about fifteen minutes later, right next door the temple would start ringing the bells, start ringing the bells, so a lot of noise in the morning, like, but all of it is calling to God, so to speak. And then on the way to school we'd pass the Catholic church, dead still, dead quiet, no sound and a graveyard right next door. So, you know, in my mind, I associated the church with death, not with life. So it was really interesting, because then if you think about the history, I mean you think of Jesus'

ascension as a triumph over death, and yet the feel of the church is less about life than it is about revering death on some level.
But I was fascinated by it. I was fascinated by walking in there and seeing these pews. We didn't have pews. The Indian temple is open air. It has pillars. It looks more like a Greek open-air kind of thing, maybe it's marble with big pillars and then a roof and a bottom, and it was wind passing through, people running freely, children running around playing hide and seek in the temples, that was part of how you--and lots of pigeons everywhere. But the pews were--it was much more an environment you walked into, because, (a), it was exotic. It was different. It was not something we did. We were only invited every once in a while by our friends who were Christians who come in there, and I really wanted one of those things that they were putting in people's mouths when they knelt in front of you, the wafers. I just imagined it tasted amazing or something.
So, again, this is the brew. Then that led me to--that influenced a lot of what I was looking for. So when we came to the United States, the United States was a big deal there at that time, because all these movies, all the cool people. It was big cars, all of this stuff. So, (a), you're a little bit terrified about going there, because you have all these fears, because you hear there's crime. And you know, time gets compressed over there in one's head. You think of people in Chicago driving around with machine--tommy guns, shooting out the windows like they did in the gangster era, because those are the movies you're seeing there, because there are old movies coming. And then even the later movies you started seeing, whether it was "Shaft" or something like that, you'd see a lot of violence in the streets, so there's that fear. There's the fear of a racier culture, maybe more--like streaking, for example. You'd never hear of streaking in Kenya or anyplace. And yet, if we think about India, we think of--or Africans, the savages. They're like dressed only in loincloths and all of this stuff. Like there they're like, "What? People running around naked, for fun?" And then we never understood like the Europeans who came, and they would go trekking through the safari park with tents and walking. We're like, "Are you crazy?" But they did. I mean, that's the thing. Europeans were intrepid. They were like crazy intrepid, you know.

Collings

Yes, that's so true.

Kurup

They still are. They go and they'll go--like George Adamson, who is Elsa the lioness and all, George--

Collings

Oh, right, right. Of course, yes.

Kurup

They were all in Kenya. Lewis Leaky, Richard Leaky, they're all in Kenya in the Olduvai Gorge, which is right there where the birthplace of mankind,

possibly, most probably. So they're living out there among the animals, and so we would look at them as crazy, crazy. We're going to stick to the--

Collings

Right. We'll stick to the coast.

Kurup

--we'll stick to the coast and where the animals don't come. But we would go to the parks and go see the animals in the wild. I've gotten to see so many amazing things in my childhood that probably are gone now, don't even exist. So, again, these are the images and the stories that have influence, and there are so many stories within this context.

So we come here, we're in Louisville, Kentucky.

Collings

And why did you come to Louisville in particular?

Kurup

It was the ad that my mom replied to. They were looking for them in Louisville.

Collings

For a hospital?

Kurup

For a hospital, yes. She had passed all her boards in Kenya and in India, but here you have to pass another one. So when you've come, you come in a lower grade, and you're like not a nurse, you're not an R.N., you're like a nurse practitioner at that time. But my mom passed her boards right off, the first time, so that was good and that was kind of rare, because a lot of her friends took three, four times before they passed. I think maybe her English was good, but it also had to do with she was pretty bright. So she passed that pretty quickly, but I mean quickly in terms of like at first she had to go through these lower ranks.

And so we struggled a bit, and Louisville was a culture shock. It was also like the beginning of weather that we didn't understand, because, you know, we're used to--I mean, I grew up with shorts and a T-shirt, or shorts and a very thin cotton shirt and flip-flops like this. I still wear flip-flops all the time at home. It's like a beach kind of world. To come to a place where you wear coats--I had never seen snow. I'd never even felt the cold until we went up to Nairobi at one point, which is up high. Elevation is higher, so you actually have to have a couple of shirts or a sweater or something. I never remember ever wearing a sweater in Mombasa. So now you're wearing coats, heavy coats and stuff like that.

Collings

Boots.

Kurup

Boots. So there's a physical shift along with the mental, cultural, and emotional shift that goes on. So here we are living there, and within about six months we were like we knew no other South Asians. There was no

terminology called South Asian. We didn't know any Indians, is what we were. So we moved up to the Chicago area, where there were a lot more, and we had some friends up there. So Chicago became--

Collings

So you were in Kentucky about six months.

Kurup

About six months, yes. Well, actually not even. What's so funny is when we first came to Kentucky, you know, because I was from Africa, we got there in, say, the very beginning of March. So in Kenya, the school year goes from January to December. We go January, February, March, then you have a month off of April--I think we talked about this, April--then May, June, July, another month off, then August, September, October, and then December holiday. So you have a three-month break, but it's broken up three times. So basically, I started seventh grade in January and we left in February, so I did one month of seventh grade in Kenya, then came here and March, April, May, June, so I only did like four or five months of that year. But the first thing they did was they put me right into--they assumed I couldn't speak English very well, and they assumed I didn't know math or anything. They put me in the remedial class, and it was sad to see how many African American kids were in that class.

In Louisville, we were in the middle of--here's the interesting thing. I grew up with African kids around me, right? And here's another thing. We used to have--in school it was a British system in Kenya, in Mombasa, run by Indians. But it was a Muslim school. It was an Ismaili school. Ismaili is Shia Muslims. Ismailis, their spiritual leader is the Aga Khan, you know, married to Rita Hayworth and all of that stuff back in the day, so kind of an interesting group of Muslims, but very educated and they ran schools and stuff, so I was part of those schools. But in British school system we had standard one, which is first grade, standard one-A and standard one-B, so you stigmatized children right off the bat. You're in the A group or you're in the B group. So each class had about twenty-five to thirty people, so B was filled with African kids and some poor Indian kids. So you could see immediately there class, everything playing out, and you could have some brilliant kids in B, but because they didn't fulfill certain things on the A, the way the As look at things and the way the structure was, they would be in B.

Collings

And the language of instruction was English?

Kurup

Was English. Was English, exactly. So that could be also another factor, depending on where you ended up. If you didn't speak English very well, you were in B probably. And so then came here--but our friends, we'd mix around. A lot of the Indian kids stuck together, but I had friends who were African friends also, and there's just a different feel about African kids. The eyes are completely--they're animated and full of energy and life.

So when I saw African American kids here, I thought, "Oh, I can be friends with them," because that's what I knew back home. But the kids were different there. They were inner-city kids. They were already hardened, starting to get hardened by the age of seventh grade, eighth grade, and it was the beginning of all of that sort of stuff.

Collings

Right, 1972 you said.

Kurup

Seventy-four, '74. So here I am kind of running toward them, but I don't see them responding, so I didn't know where I belonged. Was it with white kids? Was it with black kids? Because there were no other Indian kids. Literally, in Louisville, Kentucky, in that class that I could see, there were no other Indian kids. So looking for a place, looking for a group, and looking to belong was an interesting negotiation.

Collings

And especially at that age.

Kurup

At that age, it's a very interesting age for that, just the cusp of teenage-hood. So basically, my classes were filled--I was in this remedial class, and I would literally--like all they did was they'd give you a paper--they were trying to test you to see where to put you, I guess. So I would like finish it in like five minutes and then sit there for the hour, waiting to finish the class. Then finally got into the regular classes and then those were better.

And we moved up to Illinois because of the friends thing, and that was also interesting because when we moved up there, we moved to a little suburb town. But it was a pretty--it was kind of those places that you would see in movies, you know, where the kids wanted to get out of there kind of idea. And so that was my introduction to American heartland culture, kids who were riding motorcycles at a very young age. I mean, literally, we were thirteen years old, and these were like later on became like motocross kind of people, like really amazing riders on the motorcycle. How they rode that way with the speed that they did was uncanny, and I was a little sheltered. I wasn't even allowed a bicycle in Mombasa. We didn't have one, because my parents would not get me one in the middle of the city, and so I didn't even know how to ride a bike, except if I had these friends of my mother's doctor's friends, who lived by the hospital, which is a little more suburbany feeling, and you could ride bicycles there, I would have never learned. And then I came here, I finally got to ride a bicycle, but that was about the speed I could handle, because these kids were like doing wheelies and riding on their bikes for a while, and I was like, "Man, I missed out."

But there was a lot of--there was a kind of toughness that I noticed when I came to America, and when I say toughness, I don't mean like just strength, but a kind of a shut-down anger underneath with the kids. The kids were very angry. I think they were angry at their parents, like almost like the

parents had neglected them in a way. These were the parents from the culture of the sixties, and many of them had a cigarette in their mouth, and they had had that difficulty, like I think they weren't educated, so they were doing more menial work. They were doing more mechanical work, and so it was the blue-collar life, and so it was hard-drinking, so I think there was abuse that was going on, some verbal abuse and emotional abuse and who knows what other kind, if there was, so kind of toughened kids. There was a lot of hazing in the schools, a lot of cruelty, that kind of meanness to the younger kids, like what you see in these movies now, like in the eighties and the nineties movies about--like those John Hughes movies, like how kids, especially if you were different, if you were effeminate, if you were a different color, you know, you were really--there was that danger.
And I was somehow lucky that I was able to skate in between things. Like I had a sense of humor, so that was disarming. That allowed people to feel very comfortable with me, to the point where they were very confused by the fact that I was from India but I lived in Africa. Whoo, that was very confusing. Only Africans lived in Africa, and Indians live in India, you know. So they used to say, they used to sign in my yearbook "To my favorite little nigger," but they meant it as a loving thing.

Collings

Now, there were not other immigrant communities represented--

Kurup

Not so much. Not quite.

Collings

--in this town, in this area?

Kurup

Not quite in this town yet. They hadn't quite--this is right next to Wheaton, Wheaton, Illinois, which is now sort of the Christian capital of the United States, maybe, this place called Warrenville and then Naperville. And Naperville is nice, but Warrenville has become--I don't know what it is now, but it was mostly farmland at that time. So how the references--I mean, like I was accepted into white culture through a kind of, "Hey," you know--

Collings

A waiver.

Kurup

--a waiver, exactly. So I've actually had--this is interesting, because it affects how I feel about the card I carry, like that it could be revoked at any time. Even with Cornerstone, I don't know if I should be sitting there going--like they've let me into--it's the idea of being let into a country club, but just waiting for the moment when that other shoe will drop. They say, "Okay, but it's now time to get out," right? It was the same kind of thing, where I was let into these groups where they would tell black jokes, and I would have to go along, just sort of listen to them. And then there were times when I would participate in it in order to be part of it, so it really creates a real

schism within yourself, because you identify with these other kids who are being joked about, but you've been let into the club to get a little glimpse into it, so you really have to start building a kind of internal fortitude to be able to stand up to some of this stuff if you ever try, which is a little bit frightening, and it can be dangerous. So how you negotiate all of that was a real interesting thing, and that's what I've written about a lot in solo performance and stuff like that. I've explored some of it through that, because I needed to get it out.

Collings

Right. Now, did you meet any of these friends' parents?

Kurup

Yes, oh, yes.

Collings

How did they respond to you, the parents?

Kurup

Oh, you know, similar things. I mean, I had parents asking me, "Did you live in a mud hut? Did you swing from trees like Tarzan?" Because even the parents had this idea that what you read in those--again to come back to Edgar Rice Burroughs as a theme here, that was their image, because you know, they're coming out of the sixties. What did they have in the sixties? "Daktari." With "Daktari" you could see a white guy out there trying to help all these poor black people in their--he's a doctor, right, so he's an animal doctor. Vet, really, they should call him veterinarian. But then the other was Tarzan with Ron Eelie, a very popular show, and that was Africa. But Africa to me was like New York City smashed down on the coast of a beautiful white beach, on the sands of a beautiful white beach. So it's so completely opposite to what was being portrayed here.

Collings

Did you have your friends come to your house and meet your parents?

Kurup

Yes, they would come and meet my parents. And in time, you know, as we moved away, what happened is in Illinois we still had a little bit of that kind of ignorance, you know, some of the ignorance that happened. But as times goes on, (a), you learn how to educate people. You learn how to be able to talk to them without, (a), being threatening, because that's a big part of what I was learning about this country. You know, how you negotiate people and not be a threat to them allows them to be able to hear you, to see you, to understand you possibly, and yet at the same time, a small rage can be building inside, because it has to do with the fact that, why do I have to spend so much time teaching you? Why don't you know this stuff? I know so much about your culture, because I'm forced to be. I've been thrown into the deep end of the pool. I can make references about your culture from here till the cows come home, from now till the cows come home. That in

itself was a reference to American--now till the cows come home. But this idea that you're not taking the other initiative.
Now, of course, I had a few friends who were smart, intelligent, and they were very interested in culture. We all made jokes and stuff, and they would like find a way to make jokes about stuff, but it still came from a place of interest and curiosity, as opposed to a place of, "You fit into my--." And I think the schism in this country today has changed, is very much reflecting that difference between people who are actually interested in how this country is changing and interested in its evolution, and people who are not.

Collings
Right. That's the Tea Party.

Kurup
That's the Tea Party and the people--these are euphemisms for continuing a kind of racialized background and a racialized past and wanting to hold onto that. And it's really a class war. You know, it's not really a race war. But it manifests through manipulation into a kind of a race war, because really, if you think, poor white people and poor black people really have a lot more in common. And I always say this too. I think African American culture and white culture, they are the two real Americans. In the eyes of the world, even when I was a kid, the other American was black. I, even today, in the eyes of the world I'm an interloper, you know?

Collings
From the eyes of the non-American outside of this country.

Kurup
The non-American outside of this country, because that's the message that's being sent out to the world. I mean, you've got everybody from Eddie Murphy to Wesley Snipes to whatever are the other American, and they're like, when they are playing these certain characters, they are as--

Collings
As American as apple pie.

Kurup
--as American as apple pie, and as ignorant as a white cop, as a black cop, about other cultures. You know, like that movie with Sean Connery and Wesley Snipes, who's dealing with Japanese culture, kind of a--

Collings
Was it "Rising Sun"?

Kurup
"Rising Sun." I think it was a Michael Crichton book--

Collings
Michael Crichton, yes.

Kurup
--who's not the paragon of understanding or cultural exchange, you know. He's got his view, or had his view on the world. But this kind of idea that the two Americans, who are most sort of oddly pitched against each other, are

actually the two only recognized Americans. Mexican Americans or Latinos born and raised here, Asians been here since the turn of the last century, even South Asians who came here in the turn of the last century to work in the paper mills are not considered Americans by the rest of the world, so I find that to be a fascinating juxtaposition and irony.

Collings

Yes, that is quite interesting. Now, when you were living in this Chicago suburb, did you and your parents speak English at home?

Kurup

Yes. Language is a really interesting thing in my life. When I was living in Bombay, I communicated in English. Right from the start, English was a part of our life. But Malayalam, which is my mother tongue--which is a palindrome by the way, Malayalam, M-a-l-a-y-a-l-a-m, you can spell it both ways--and then Maharati, which was--Bombay, or Mumbai now, but I feel pretentious calling it Mumbai, because I grew up calling it Bombay, so it's very hard for me to go back to Mumbai. And Mumbai is part of a nationalistic move anyway, so I don't know where I stand with all that. But Maharastra is the state, and so they speak Maharati there, and Hindi. So those are the four languages that sort of we went in and out of.

Collings

At home with your parents.

Kurup

Well, at home, mostly English and Malayalam. But in the world of Bombay, Hindi, Maharati, English, and then no Malayalam out in the world, because none of the North Indians spoke our language. When we went to Africa, Maharati went away. Gujarati came in instead, because there were a lot of Gujaratis there, and Hindi started getting also a little bit flattened out and going away a little bit, but instead Swahili came in. So now in Africa, in Kenya, my friends and I are speaking English, Swahili, Gujarati, because that's the dominant Indian language, and Malayalam at home, and English at home.

So now my Malayalam is starting to go away, because I'm not speaking it so much. I understand everything, but I'm not speaking it anymore, because part of it is, you know, you aspire away from your roots to like learning Swahili, English, and getting even more English, and then this Gujarati, this other language, because all your friends are speaking it, so you have to speak that. So nobody is speaking my mother tongue, so that's starting to go away for me. The only place I do it is at home, and when I do it, my mom is always making fun of me, like because I speak--it's a little stilted. So making fun is like, "Oh, that's so cute," which is a way of actually shutting down a kid. You want to say that to a boy at the age of seven, "Oh, that's so cute when you do that," they'll stop doing it.

So and then we came here, English and Malayalam at home, lose everything else, all gone.

Collings
All gone.
Kurup
All gone. Although, you know, Swahili, when I went back to Africa in the mid-nineties, it started coming back. It was amazing how it started coming back. And if I went to South India and lived there for a month, I bet you my Malayalam would get much better, because I'd be forced to use it, because I would then have to connect cognitively what I understand, to make the muscles of the tongue do what I am trying to do, to think about. And there are things in the language that are really, really hard to say, that the English tongue doesn't use, so the tongue has to move in certain ways, and there are just words that are kind of impossible to say without you sounding like a four-year-old. So here it became--but then what you're picking up is this amazing amount of slang, right.
And so again, my ear for language has been about survival. I mean, I recognized that only much later. But it is also a boon, because it has allowed me to absorb culture in a deep way, I feel. And so we leave Illinois because of a particular incident where, I mean, we were there when there were these amazing drifts, the famous snowstorms of the mid-seventies, like '77, '76, '77.
Collings
Oh, yes. I remember those. Sure.
Kurup
Are you a Midwesterner yourself?
Collings
Yes, yes, I am.
Kurup
Where?
Collings
Ohio.
Kurup
Ohio, so you remember the seven-foot drifts--
Collings
Of course.
Kurup
--and like literally you could walk off your roof onto the backyard, because it had been covered up. And I remember walking to school where you were walking, and you were walking in chasms of ice or snow, and then you would pass the doorway of the house that's right next door to you, and it's just like a tunnel to their doorway, and it's so high up. And then the street is just this one long tunnel to get to where your bus is. So that was bad enough, so we were like, okay, but it was kind of fun for us, because for the kids it was great. But we were living in a town called Elgin. My mom was working at the mental institution there as a nurse, a psychiatric nurse, and I was going to a

school in a cornfield, which was a tiny school where in the summer you couldn't see the school because of the corn--

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

--and in the winter, you could see nothing but the school because of the snow. And that was out in the middle of nowhere. I mean, my god, you want to talk about not hicksville, because it was a mix of like farmer kids and then other--and it's amazing. Some of those friends, when I was doing my play in Chicago--I've got a couple of my plays happening in Chicago the last few years, a piece called "Merchant on Venice," and then a piece called "A Bolt From the Blue." Somehow one of those friends from that corn school, the cornfield school, found me on Facebook and has reconnected with me, and it's amazing how much the church plays a part in their life, which I don't remember so much when we were in school. It didn't seem to be a big part. A lot of my friends from that era, the church plays a huge role in their life in a way that I was surprised by. I think a number of them went through--not all of them, but a number of them went through the excesses of the seventies and the eighties and then now have come back because of the church, so to speak, while others are more ecumenically bent and have become pastors and things like that.

Collings

Oh, really. Hmm. Gosh.

Kurup

This really interesting kind of connection.

Collings

And was your family practicing religion when you were growing up?

Kurup

Yes. We were Hindus, and not too many Hindu temples in this country, so Hindu is like, have altar, will travel.

Collings

That's great.

Kurup

So my mother had a little--wherever she went, she would have a little thing that she did her pooja. Pooja is basically prayer or devotion, and she would have a little idol of some sort that she would anoint and do all her things that she did. Less so now. Now she just reads the books and she recites--she just reads a lot. My mother is a voracious reader, I'm telling you. Like I think she's read everything in that bookcase. I haven't read half of that, you know? But anything I have, she'll go through it in a week or so. She says, "Nothing stays in here, though." But she reads. I mean, she loved Joseph Campbell. She's read a number of his books.

I'm trying to get her into Alan Watts, and especially as she gets older and she's reading about Hinduism, when she hears Alan Watts now coming from

this Western perspective, but really giving her an insight into Hinduism in a way that she didn't have as a practitioner, coming from the inside, because when you're inside it, you don't question it in a way, or you don't look at it from this particular angle. And Watts has a way of bringing Hinduism back to Hindus in a more profound way, I feel, in a way that a lot of Hindus don't know some of the actual--like a lot of Christians don't know the etymology of words and where this comes from and what the ideas are about. Vice verse, Hindus don't know either. They just have been reciting these words for years. They don't necessarily think about the weight or the meaning of all of that. And when you hear somebody like Alan Watts teach you that again, it's like it's fantastic. So in her later years now, she's learning from the white man, you know, about her own religion, which is fantastic.

Collings

Now, would you allow your friends to see this altar when they came over?

Kurup

You know, I did. I was like trying to show them all about the culture, and back in those days, there was more curiosity than today's kind of witch-hunty kind of people. I mean, people have become a little crazier now. I think it's because, I don't know, many reasons, but I think part of it is because they got marginalized for a while. They were the less intelligent and all of this kind of stuff, and you know, it's not the case. I think but if you marginalize people and make them feel that way, I think after a while they're going to get [unclear].

Collings

Yes. Did you go by Shishir?

Kurup

I did. And here's another--so I've got a lot of things about my name. I do a lot in my solo pieces about--funny stuff about the name. But underlying, there's a vein of both sadness and anger. But I literally had a guy--I have this thing that I noticed when I used to say my name. It still happens even to this day. They'd go, "Hi, I'm Tom." I'd say, "Hey, Shishir." They go--the eyes just sort of like get a little fear come into them--

Collings

Because they can't remember it.

Kurup

Or they think that they're going to make a mistake, they're going to feel foolish, and I know when it's happening, because the guy goes, "Oh, hi." Because otherwise people go, "Hey, Shishir?" Or the more adventurous will go, "Was that Shishir?" And I'll go, "Yeah." "Aha, good, good."

Collings

How do you spell that?

Kurup

"How do you spell that?" and then, "Oh, good, then now I can remember." So those are the people who are willing to take the initiative. But a lot of

people do the other, which is the fear, and I know, and then I'll make it easier a little bit and I'll go--again, once again being that teacher thing, which is both a curse and a boon, is that I go, "Yeah, like think of Cher and then just stutter before you say her name, Shishir," because it's like close enough. And they have all these jokes. They used to call me sheer energy, like the pantyhose.

Collings

Oh, right.

Kurup

Because of Shishir, they would just say Shir sometimes, Shir. They'll say faster, "Hey, Shir," or Shish. But then sometimes people would go--I'd say, "My name's Shishir." The guy goes, "I'll call you Steve." [laughs] And I said, "No. My name is Shishir. I'll call you Tony, even though your name is Carl." You know, it's like, what are you talking about, you know? Don't call me Steve. I'm not going to--but then I did work a couple of jobs in high school, where selling products on the phone, there I was Steve, because I didn't want to have to deal with all this other stuff. So, yes, name is a huge thing, and ownership of that name and the ability to sort of hold onto the idea that this is my name, and I need you to take the time out to learn Shishir the way I had to deal with Schroeder. Now, Schroeder is not an easy name. I mean, I had a friend named Mike Schroeder. You couldn't spell Schroeder. At that time, my god, how do you spell Schroeder? And I have to deal with a lot of Polish names in Chicago. That's a hard name. Wojciehowicz, like on Barney Miller, it's just like all of these names. So if I can do that, you can do this, and you know what? I'm not going to lay down. And I see a lot of Indian guys now changing their name to Raj, you know, Roger. "My name is Roger." His name is Raja. So don't do it, I tell him. Don't do it. And it is Samir. Let them say Samir. They need to be able to say the word Samir over and over so it doesn't become a frightening name to them, and we've gotten to this place in time when we're afraid of Samirs, we're afraid of Mohammeds, you know, we're afraid of all of these things, and we should not be, because if you are the Samir that they're going to be coming across all the time, and they know your humility, they know your humanity, then they're not going to be afraid of other Samirs. And it is incumbent upon you to hold onto Samir, so that they will hold onto Samir, you know. And so I insist on that.

So that what happened was the incident that happened in Elgin was that apparently I had some terrible, terrible stomach pain, and my mother's hospital--not that; my mother's hospital where she was working was a mental institution. But the hospital that we were supposed to go to was a mile away, just a mile away. But there had been a major snow storm and then a freeze, rain and then a freeze, and what had happened was that the roads were completely iced. So my dad--I'm in the backseat. I don't even remember this. My dad is telling me this story later, many years later. Oh,

my mom was reminding me of that. They're both trying to drive this big old whatever car, and it's like sliding all over the road, and it took an hour to go a mile.

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

A whole hour. And I was in agonizing pain in the back. And so that was it. They said, "You know what? We are going to move from this state. We don't care where."

Collings

They don't like the weather.

Kurup

They don't like the weather. And we don't understand the weather, you know. So basically, I think I was getting ready to go to--it was the winter of my tenth grade, and they were like planning the future for me. "You're going to be a doctor, and we're going to go down to Florida. There's a teaching hospital in a city called Gainesville, and you're going to go to high school there, eleventh and twelfth grade, and Mom can get a job at Shands Teaching Hospital, and you will be in state to be able to go to the University of Florida, which has the Shands Medical Teaching Facility there, and you're going to become a doctor."

Collings

All right. So that was taken care of.

Kurup

That was all planned. Well, the best laid plans of mice and men. And so we moved to Florida in '77, and--

Collings

Did you miss your friends at high school?

Kurup

I did miss my friends. You know, those couple of years I had made some good friends, and so but I had moved--from seventh grade I moved to eighth grade to another city in Illinois, so Illinois is eighth, ninth, and then in eighth and ninth, we went from eighth to ninth--some of us went to the same high school, but some of our other friends scattered and went to other places. Tenth grade I had moved to Elgin, so that was a whole other school, so a whole new bunch of friends. I was like an Army kid almost, you know? And then in eleventh grade moved to Florida, and there I got a solid eleventh and twelfth grade that happened, and that was fantastic.

And what I'd done, when I was in eighth and ninth grade, I was able to do the thing--when I first came here, what was terribly--I was feeling terribly lonely at home. I missed Kenya more than anything, I can't even tell you. For the first four or five years, I was just pining, pining, pining to go back. Even though this was kind of exciting at first to come to America, the culture here was so nuclear, as opposed to sort of--I don't know what the opposite

of that word would be, but communal maybe. You know, there it's constant life going on. You walk down in the streets, there's so much to do. There are so many people down there. There are vendors, there are your friends, there are shopkeepers who you know, and it's all completely familiar and filled with life. Here you go home into your house, you barely know your neighbor, you may know the person across from your neighbor, you know the person to the left of you and the right of you, and that's about it. And it still is the case here, even in this. So this nuclear living I don't necessarily think is a healthy living for a good life. There's that movie "Antonia's Line." Do you know that movie?

Collings

Yes.

Kurup

You know, where they all have dinner together and all that, in this compound. It's that kind of life I think is actually a healthier life. We are very lonely people in this country, and we are trying to reach out to each other, and I think this generation, I mean these last two generations have been trying to reach out and break away from that nuclearism, but I think we are struggling to find what that is. And we're trying to make the rest of the world like us, and really, we should not be exporting this part of it. There are many things we can export, like the "Bill of Rights," for example. We can export that. That's fantastic. But this I think we could keep to ourselves, or maybe we can learn from the others.

I mean, that's what happens. They come and recreate that. Mexican culture comes here and recreates its own culture. It doesn't try to be nuclear. But when African American culture went from the rural, with the larger, for better economic reasons, they also nuclearized themselves and I think in a way changed their own destiny in a funny way. And all American culture has gone in that road. And I think different people thrive in different ways. Especially if you are maybe Anglo culture and you're able to make more money, you can buy yourself things and all that, but I don't know if you can buy yourself community.

Which in a funny way ties to Cornerstone. I mean, connecting to Cornerstone has been so powerful for me, because I feel like this city has become my community. I did plays over in that place. I did plays over there. I know people who live there. Those people--we had a potluck at that house, you know, and these are people I know. You can still get isolated in this place, but it's been a powerful connection to Los Angeles culture, and there is a huge, vibrant culture here.

So moving to Florida started opening that up a little bit more. It was still sort of nuclear, but it was slightly more rural, suburban, but here I was not so exotic, although being exotic has its perks. But what happened was when I was living in Kentucky, mostly white and then only black, and then these

more hardened black kids that were not like the African kids I knew, so didn't quite connect.
When I went up to Illinois, still again mostly white people around, just the smallest trickle of maybe an Asian here, maybe a Mexican here, or maybe a South Asian here, not much more.
Went down to Florida, a lot of black people, a lot of Latino-looking people, but more black, and then these black kids were more open and friendly toward me. Like they were fascinated with my African--of course, it's a few years later now.

Collings

Yes, I was thinking that.

Kurup

So culture is changing. Mainstream culture is changing. We're seeing Richard Pryor. We're seeing more people now who are talking about the whole Africanism that was sort of coming in, and so there's more fascination about my exoticism as an African man, Indian African person. And girls would talk about my hair. African American girls would talk about my hair and liking my hair and my complexion and then all of this kind of stuff. You know, that's very complicated right there even, because they're talking about some things about straightening their own hair ideas and all these issues of what's beauty and what's not, all the things we talk about now, but at that time it was about--what is that? Is it about an internalized sense of self that is not up to par with what the mainstream is rewarding, so to speak? But that was exciting. So there were more Cuban--there were Cuban people there, so it was a little more--and it seemed like--.
And in each of these, like in this school and in the eighth and ninth-grade school, there was soccer, so that was--part of my pining was able to be alleviated by being able to play the sport that I loved to play. African kids are some of the most amazing soccer players in the world. I've never seen kids--one kid could go through ten Indian kids, you know, but they didn't know how to play with each other. They were hotdog. They're like the kids in street games, you know, just do magic by themselves with basketball, but had to find a way to learn how to play with each other. So in time I realized that the sport was helpful for me to feel connected to my past. And I would actually look at PBS to find "Star Soccer," which was a TV show that they would show from England. The English leagues were playing. This isn't even the seventies. Oh, to me it was like a blast from the past, because we used to see "Star Soccer" down in Kenya, or a version of it there. So that's part of how I was able to feel connected to my past. So the sport allowed that, and that was good.
And by this time, I'd started playing music. I was a guitar player, Santana being the huge influence and wanting to be like him, wanting to play. I love this notion of an Indian kid living in Africa, being influenced by a Mexican guy who was doing Afro-Caribbean music. That, to me, sort of like typifies a

true world experience. And so he was very important to me, his sound, his music, what he was trying to do with it and what he was bridging.
So I've looked at my life kind of as this kind of bridging idea, and you know, Cornerstone has these things called bridge shows--

Collings

Right, that's right.

Kurup

--which are, we do disparate communities and then we do a bridge show that connects all these communities together. So, funny way, these metaphors of my own life are reflected in the work I've been doing with Cornerstone. Again, looking back in the way we're talking about in terms of the arc, I see an arc, but it's not like I'm at the end of my life.

Collings

No, of course not.

Kurup

But enough of a life has gone on to where I can go, "Oh, look at that arc, and look at the resonances between those things and where I am today and who I am today and how they made me." And this bridging, this internalized bridging that I feel that I have made, I can walk into a room and feel pretty comfortable about many different cultures I can touch upon. Very comfortable with white culture, because so much of my early years here were about that, and television is filled with white culture. This is how we learned about white people, right, by watching TV. Most people of color live in two worlds. We've heard this. We always talk about this stuff. So African Americans know about white culture, but they know about African American culture in a way that white people don't know about African American culture, except what they've seen on "The Jeffersons" or much later on other better shows, hopefully.
So where does dominant culture get left out, in a funny way, in this conversation? Because they're busy being the dominant culture, they miss the other cultures going on around them. And that is--it's just like the people who say English only. Are you actually benefiting by English only? Or is this Mexican kid or this Iranian kid, who's translating for his family from English to Iranian and back and forth, better off than you are? Because he has two languages, and maybe he's picking up Spanish from his Latino friend, so now he has three languages. Who is better off? Look at Europe; at least three, four languages a person. And, you know, I grew up speaking all those different languages, and so I feel a deficit in my life, because I'm dying to learn how to speak Spanish. I know how to speak Spanish really well; I just don't understand what I'm saying. My accent is really good, but again because of the ear, but what I don't have--I took a couple of years in seventh and eighth grade, eighth and ninth grade I mean, but still, I've forgotten all of that information, because I didn't value it then, because,

"Why are we learning Spanish?" There were no Latinos up there. There were no Spanish-speaking people in Illinois.

Collings

Now there are.

Kurup

But now I've moved to Los Angeles. Especially once I moved to California, that was like, why don't I know how to speak this fluently? And I really should learn how to do that. So that is part of my evolution, and I want to make sure that I learn Spanish and be really fluent in it. But it's harder. Language gets harder as you get older.

Collings

As you get older, yes. Do you want to finish up with the high school years today, or do you want to pick back up on that next time?

Kurup

Sure. I think I can finish up. We can do it in about ten minutes probably. So what happens is then I move to Florida, and it's a really interesting time for me, because I'm feeling pretty in--I'm coming into my own. I have a rock and roll band.

Collings

Oh, you do?

Kurup

Yes. I make friends with a young man named Lance Harmling, an African American kid, and I'll tell you a story. We were--first day of school, eleventh grade, he's in ninth grade. I'm standing against the wall. I don't know anybody. I had a little operation on my chest. Elvis has just died. In fact, he died on the day I had the operation on my chest. There was some tissue in my chest that they had to remove. They wanted to make sure that it wasn't cancerous, and for me it was a little embarrassing, because it was a little extra like material here, so it made it look like slightly feminine, so I was happy to have it gone. But I remember having this tape around my chest and very painful, because they'd basically ripped it out. It was just like a week before that I had had the operation, and Elvis had died that day.
I'm standing against this wall, and this African American kid next to me, kind of cool looking, very handsome, he's singing. He's standing there singing, and I'm like, the gall, you singing like that, you know, openly. I was very shy about singing openly. He was just standing against the wall, and we weren't like talking to each other. We were just leaning against the wall. Cut ahead six months later, the variety show. By now I have a little band, a three-piece, me singing. We were doing a song called "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" by, oh, god, what was his name, Gordon Lightfoot, and a bass player and a guitar player playing. So we're auditioning for the thing, and I recognize, "Oh, I think that's that kid who was singing next to me." And he sings a song that he has written. He's in ninth grade. He's written a song, and it's a beautiful little song kind of based a little bit on the chord

progression of "House of the Rising Sun," and he's made his own little song that's got a lonely feel to it, and it's quite melodic and beautiful. And I'm sitting next to a guy that I know. His name is Chuck Wolfe, and I guess he was just sitting in to watch. I don't know if he was going to also audition. But I look over and I go, "Wow, he's pretty good, isn't he?" And he goes, "Yeah, for a nigger." And it was like in that moment it just changed everything, like for a moment.

And he's going to be a friend later, but you know, this is how it was. You could say those things. You can talk about it in those ways. And I was like, I was just so mortified inside, because it was like, (a), that word was new to me only after coming to this country. We didn't have that word in Africa. I hadn't heard it. You know, we didn't use that word. And then--but what he had done is, whatever insecurity he was living in because of the talent of this guy up on that stage, by just saying that, no matter what this guy did, he would be always superior somehow. So, I mean, at the moment I didn't think that. I just thought, "God, you are an asshole." And first thing I wanted to do is I wanted to meet him, I wanted to bring him into the band somehow. And later on he told me that he was impressed with us because we were a three-piece, so we became a four-piece and we made music. We played local--I mean like we played in school when we would have recess, or I mean lunch breaks we would do concerts there, and we played our pep rallies, all that kind of stuff.

So that was an important part of my sort of like coming into the world of arts, because I couldn't do theater, because it was against soccer season, so I had to choose soccer versus doing theater. The plays, you can go to rehearsal, and it was a no-brainer for me. I was not going to do theater. I was interested in it, but I was not going to do it. I was going to play soccer. But I was connected to all the theater people, the choral people, the choir people, because we would sing and I would do all that stuff, but I didn't do the theater part, but we all knew each other.

So that was kind of the grounding in those years. Rock and roll was my grounding into the arts, and as we finished off the high school years, that was our way in. And I would say I had a seminal moment as a musician that I think has affected me in terms of stage fright and going on to do theater and to do all of this other stuff. But at that time in the late seventies, like it's almost '80, 1980, late '79, the song that every band had to play and learn was "Freebird"--

Collings

Oh, right, yes.

Kurup

--by Lynyrd Skynyrd. You had to do it, because you had to show off your chops in the end as a guitar player, and I was a lead guitar player and singer, and Lance was the bass player and singer, or actually played the other guitar, because there was another guy playing bass, Jeff Brown. So we

did this one big school pep rally, and it was actually the year after I'd just graduated, but I went back to do this thing called Cat Prowl. Cat Prowl was the big pep rally for the big game. And here we were. All the cheerleaders who would never look at us were like below us, like all looking up at us--fantastic--because we were the long-haired, dope-smoking, you know, not hooligans, but actually very sensitive good kids in many ways, but considered the sort of whatever you call that, unwanted or whatever, the unwashed.

Collings

The unwashed.

Kurup

But so here we are. There's this moment where the song is now gearing up. You know, we all know the song. It's a ballad that turns into something very rocking. And there are two thousand people almost in that auditorium, because it's a big pep rally, twelve, fifteen hundred people at least. So I'm completely terrified, and I have this moment where I feel the song is cranking up to do this thing, and I'm doing it, and I have to move up, and there's a catwalk, so I'm like I feel my knees start to buckle, and I felt that fear that I am going to choke in a huge way. And it's just basically when that moment happened to start playing this, the lead solo, I just took a breath and stepped forward, and that's all it was. I walked forward. And in the process of walking forward, I started playing, and they screamed. And when they screamed, that lofted me even higher, and that was a seminal moment for me, because I realized that, you know, there's that adage that a hero and a coward run for the same reason, they just run in different directions. Right? In that moment, I felt like I crossed a line. I crossed a boundary that I could very easily have crumpled and gone the other way.

And it has served me well in terms of like that sense of like, press on, press on, and that can work in many ways in life, everything. It certainly does in art. Because, "I don't think we're ready to open. We can't, we haven't had a dress rehearsal. What can we do?" "Just do it," and see what happened. And many of those Cornerstone shows in the early days, especially in the early L.A. days, it was--we didn't have previews. The show "Los Faustinos," we didn't even have a run through. We finished tech, we couldn't even get to our run through, and we did our first performance in front of an audience, and it went over, and it went over well.

Collings

Good.

Kurup

So that could be our end.

Collings

Yes. Okay, that's good. That's a great introduction.

Kurup

I was talking a lot, but--

Collings
No, it's fascinating.

1.2. Session 2 (May 5, 2010)

Collings
It's May 5, 2010, Jane Collings interviewing Shishir Kurup at his home. We left off last time with you getting over stage fright for good while playing "Freebird" at a high school concert.
Kurup
Right, right.
Collings
So now we need to get into what happened with your life and your theater before you came to Cornerstone.
Kurup
Yes. So really quickly, after that moment of stage fright, stepping over the line, I at that time had just started college at the University of Florida, and I was slotted to be a doctor. So somewhere within those first two years, there was a bit of a cataclysm in our family, where my parents got split and divorced. And I had sort of felt like I had no choice, really, I was going to be a doctor. So I was trying to find all these ways to somehow be happy as a doctor. So first of all, I thought, well, if I'm going to be a doctor, I think I would like to be a--
Collings
Okay.
Kurup
So I was trying to find a way to be happy in such a career. So I thought, well, I will be a plastic surgeon. I don't know why. That made sense to me and I was like, I'll be a plastic surgeon. And then I was like, but I don't really want to cut into people, and I don't want to go to medical school, I didn't think, and so I was very much--
Collings
Okay.
Kurup
So I went from plastic surgery, I was like, well, I don't want to cut into people, I don't want to go to medical school really, and then I thought, well, I'll become a psychiatrist. Well, before I said I don't want to go to medical school, I said, maybe I'll be a psychiatrist. And then I didn't want to go to medical school. Then I said, maybe I'll be a psychologist, and that's what I was starting to move toward when the sort of cataclysm happened within our family. And I think, interestingly enough, when those givens in my parents' lives changed, especially in my mother's, who I was living with, or who I ended up with when my father moved out--I was nineteen, which is

an interestingly late time for divorce, but it's because it's not common for Indian families to get divorced.
And so that cataclysm allowed me, because of my mother going, "You know what? These givens I thought were for life, and these ideas that I wanted my child to be a doctor because I couldn't be a doctor, I had to be a nurse, we didn't have the money to be a doctor, that sort of thing, maybe they can change too." In a way, I think--and we didn't speak these words out directly to each other, but certainly when I started coming up with the idea of, "Look. I'm starting to take all these theater classes, and they feel really, really exactly what I want to be doing." And her worry was the big thing, like, "Well, how are you going to make a living?" and all of this stuff. "You don't look like all the people who are on the movie screens and in the theater. You will be passed over," and all of this stuff. And I remember teachers later on telling me, "It's going to take you twice as much time to be--," especially in that particular time when I was coming along. There were like no South Asians in the theater community.
When I finished graduate school, I was the only one in all the schools that went to these things called the League Professional Theater Training Programs, where we auditioned in New York at Julliard, these ten--I think by then it was eight schools, only South Asian in it. So it was this weird sort of like, she was right on one level, to worry, and yet after a couple of articles in local papers in Gainesville from shows, and her friends calling and saying, "Oh, I saw Shishir's name in the paper," it became a little more legitimized, like, oh, okay, maybe there's a little possibility here and there. So I would say her own cataclysm, her own schism in her own life allowed this sort of possibility for me to break through and go past something that had been destined for me, to find my own whatever that is, destiny.
I joke that I now play doctors on TV a lot, so that part is good. And so University of Florida began this thing, but what was good about the University of Florida is it was like a good workshop place. It was like a meat-and-potatoes kind of factory, where they threw you into the deep end of the pool, and those teachers, some of them were interesting and good, and others were fair to middlin', and you literally learned by doing, and it was good. It was like the equivalent of what you would call the apprentice and like an apprenticing that you did, and you learned--we did a lot of musicals, we did a lot of--dancing is not my forte, especially choreographed dancing, but singing and music, all of that seemed to work nicely; dance stuff came in well with theater.
And after a while, I think I forced myself into a place where I wasn't just playing the bartender or--because it was pretty parochial. This is Florida, and it was kind of, you know, black people were mostly playing the maid parts. It sort of was the stereotype you would think of. So anything that was odd, so if there was a challenging play--and one of the sort of breakthrough plays for me was a play by Lanford Wilson called "Rimers of Eldritch," in

which I played this sixty-five-year-old guy who was a homeless person, and he was the black sheep of the community. They thought he was--it's about a Christian town colluding in the murder of one untouchable or a person who was a miscreant in their mind, right? So it was a really brilliant play in many way, and that character was unlikable, but was he worth killing? And was he actually doing the thing that he was accused of? Really, what he was there was a witness to an actual rape, and so he was, in a way, murdered for that. It's the old Rikki Tikki Tavi story. Do you know that story?

Collings

No.

Kurup

It's one of my favorites as a kid, I don't know why. It's, what's his name, the famous English writer in India, who wrote "Gunga Din." My brain--you know who I'm talking about? [Rudyard Kipling]

Collings

Oh, yes. You're not talking about Burroughs--

Kurup

No, no, not Burroughs, but he's very famous. He's actually considered a literary person. You know who I'm talking about. It'll come to me. But Rikki Tikki Tavi was a mongoose, and he was adopted by I think an English family, who--and I think it's a metaphor for how Indians lived as workers in the house of rich white people, at least that's how I'm looking at it. But Rikki was a mongoose, and he was a child's companion. There was a baby and a child, I believe, so Rikki was there to always--was playful and was there as a protection also against cobras, because India, cobras, together. And so one day Rikki comes--the parents go out and a cobra does come in, and Rikki and the cobra have this huge battle, of which Rikki triumphs, but he's covered in cobra blood, and when they come home they see Rikki with blood all over him, and they think he's harmed the baby, and then they kill him. At least that's how I remember the story. And then, of course, when they find that the baby was protected and they see the dead cobra there, they are aghast and so very sad.

So I've always found that to be a very powerful story. It's about not jumping to conclusions, judging the book by its cover. It's very kind of in the mode of, I would say, Victor Hugo and the Romanticists who were writing about, whether it's the hunchback or whatever saying, look--did Victor Huge write "The Hunchback of Notre Dame"? He did, right?

Collings

Yes.

Kurup

Yes, and seeing the beauty inside the package that is less than beautiful. Why was I saying--wait. I jumped to that because?

Collings

Well, you were talking about the play that dealt with the--

Kurup
Yes, the "Rimers of Eldritch," and that's what he was. This was an undesirable and for that he died. And so it was great, because it was a chance to actually age and do something very different, and, of course, college productions with like young people playing old people can be a bit insufferable, but it was, for me, a kind of a breakthrough as an actor there. And even the reviews were like--because the makeup was really good. And then it hit me, you know. All this time I'd been wanting to be a plastic surgeon was really this desire to change and be able to put on different skins and different things, you know. And the psychology and psychiatry was about what I think the actor does, at least, is go within to bring forth something, and that's kind of what the psychiatrist does. You know, psychiatrist and maybe the actor are the sort of modern shaman. They're like going in to pull something out and tell us a story of some sort. Even if that story is the story of myself as I'm sitting in a therapist's office, or with an actor, I'm still telling the story of myself, but hopefully in a more universal way, that people can see themselves in it. So I realize, oh, that's what these things were, so maybe this is the right thing to do, and that allowed for the possibility.
After that I was like--I did, however, tire of theater people in that particular kind of mindset, which was all about Broadway and doing theater that is--I don't know. They didn't talk about anything about the world. They didn't speak of the world. They spoke of the stage only, and I felt like I was not interested in that. I've always been interested in the world, because I feel like, how can you represent the world if you only think of the fabricated world? So it grew tiresome. It was a bit petty. It was bit snipe-y. It was all about stuff that you kind of--all of the clichés of theater were there also. Wonderful people in many other ways, I mean good friends and all that, but there was that feeling. And I was like, well, I don't think I want to--I don't know. You know, I love doing this, but I don't know if I love doing it in this way and what was going on.
Collings
Was everybody from the south Florida region?
Kurup
Kind of. There were some people everywhere. There was some--I think I had spoken about my friend Lance before, who was the bass player in our group. Two years later, he came to school there with me, and there's another actor there, a guy named Malcolm Getts, who has gone on, actually, to do a couple of TV shows, "Caroline in the City," and then he's done other stuff. They were in the program, too, and they were coming along, so I had friends there.
We actually did one show--it was really funny--in the grad program. Now, the undergrad program was run by a guy--his name was Jim Hooks, and he was basically like a coach. He was a large man with a big cigar and chomped

it a lot, and he used to do things like, he would say--he'd call me Shashir, Shashir. Now, he knew we had a band, and he wanted us to put together a mid-show band between two single one-acts about Texas. One was called "Lone Star," the other one was called "The Adventures of Corky Brewster" or something like that, and in between we had a little country band. So like at the beginning, start the show with the country band and then do the show, the first piece, do the intermission with the country band, and that was it. And so it was me, a South Asian guy, an African American bassist, a gay piano player, and sort of a hippie drummer. So we were playing a country band, and somebody joked, "What country?" And so we would actually do these funny things. Like we would make these jokes and banter, and we realized there was this kind of like rapport that we were improving every night with the audience that was a lot of fun, between me and Lance and Malcolm, who was playing the piano, who's a fantastic piano player, by the way.

And so we used to do a song by--we used to do this weird little tribute to Dolly Parton as a silly joke, you know, whom I actually love as a musician. She's a fantastic musician and writer and such an amazing singer. But at that time it was a parody, and we would do this thing, and it was sort of sexual innuendo, because she was always sort of set up that way, as a kind of a sexual joke because of the breasts. And so but we would do a song that we dedicated to her, which was odd. I don't know why we did this, but we did John Denver's "Annie's Song," and we would do it and then we'd do a tribute to her and then we'd sing the song. It starts with, "You fill up my senses," and it's a beautiful song. And so one day Jim Hooks comes up to me and he says, "You know, Shashir, my boy, young Jim, is going off to--," what's that place, the army academy--"West Point," or Annapolis, I can't remember if it was Annapolis or West Point, and he said, "He's going off. And you know that little tribute y'all do? Could you do it to young Jim Hooks?" And I said, "Okay." So we do this whole thing, and we says, "And going off to Annapolis," or West Point, "is young Jim Hooks, and we wish him the best of luck." And then I go, "You fill up my senses." It was the most ridiculous thing to do, because it was this quite homophobic man, you know, in the way he talked about stuff, asking me to give a tribute to his son and then singing to him, because we would sing to him. We were singing to him, in a way, so it was silly.

But that place allowed a lot of learning, a lot of learning where things went wrong onstage, and I started learning to relish things going wrong. Now, this is important in that it sets up a kind of thing that can happen in a Cornerstone show, because of working with people who have never been onstage before and anything can happen. And beyond that, there are other stories I'll tell soon about more than what goes wrong onstage, what can happen backstage or before a show or whatever, and there are some

interesting stories that I'm sure you'll hear from other people, but certainly I have too.
So that process led to this thing of feeling fairly comfortable onstage and actually looking forward to things going wrong, because pretty quickly it was--shows, you know, even though we didn't do long runs, we would do maybe a couple of weeks of run, it would get pretty boring after a little while, especially in summer rep when you're doing stuff like that, where--then you come up and start playing games onstage. Like, literally, you go to shake someone's hand and you pass a marble, and who has the marble has to say certain things, or you have to figure out how to--so we would play those kinds of games, write notes and pass it to the person onstage, so I think all that stuff can seem unprofessional, but actually what it is, it's building a real life onstage. It's like making you feel--give you the ability to not focus on the terror of being onstage, or focus on the issue of being this character. You know, how can you actually live, inhabit that skin? So it was a bit of fun.
But a key moment happened. I was sort of going, you know, I don't know if I want to do this, because I think these people, at least the people I would--they seemed too obsessed, especially in the undergrad world, and they were the BFAs, you know, not the BAs. The BAs I've learned, even as I teach now, I find them to have more scope.

Collings

They're broader.

Kurup

They're broader. They're broader, they're more interesting, they're some of my favorite students when I have them. BFAs can be, but overall they're a little geared, they're a little too geared toward, I don't know, success of that kind, which is about getting somewhere, which means about a focus on what feels to me a bit trivial. So I said, "What am I going to do? I really want to do this, but I don't want to do it with--." And then I saw a production of Steppenwolf's, a PBS filming of "True West." And I was already into Sam Shepherd at that time and enjoying that sort of mythic Americana, again, another part of my education.
You know, a lot of my education, I think I may have mentioned to you, was about Americana. It was like the television. I had not had a television till I was twelve. That's when we came here. Then we had a television, and I learned about America, for better or for worse, and I think most of us learn about America, whether you were born here or not, through television, because there's a kind of culture where I think ultimately life starts repeating art, you know, following art as opposed to art--what is it? What is that phrase, art--

Collings

Imitating life.

Kurup

--imitates life. I feel like life starts imitating art, and we all learn the same punch lines. So it's an odd circle around the fire, where we're all learning stories with each other and all of this stuff, so I think the television became that. So all this sort of way of disseminating information gets pooled in us, and we find these commonalities, right, that cut across the country. You can make a Monty Python joke in New York and in Chicago and out here, and if you find the right person, who's the Monty Python person, you will have found a friend and you will have found an ally.
So I was talking about that for a reason. It had to do with--

Collings
Well, you were finding the BFA people to be a bit too--

Kurup
Yes, exactly. And when I saw--

Collings
And then the Sam Shepherd.

Kurup
--because of his Americana stuff, that was so interesting for me, and the mythology of the West was interesting to me. I was blown away by the production and, wow, this thing looks really good. I don't know if you've seen it.

Collings
No, I haven't.

Kurup
It's really--

Collings
I love Sam Shepherd, though.

Kurup
Yes. It's worth seeing "True West." It's John Malkovich very early, before he broke as a movie star. In fact, this is the thing that put him on the map as far as I know. This would have been 1982 or '83 or something like that. And it was astounding the commitment, the rawness. It was sort of like you were watching Stanley Kowalsky kind of for the first time kind of idea, when that happened, when Brando came in, when he was doing that. And Gary Sinise was the other actor. You know both the actors, I'm sure.

Collings
Yes.

Kurup
I think Gary Sinise had directed the project, and he was in it also as the younger brother. And so that was actually, I thought, very--it was seminal in that moment for me, wanting to--"Okay, maybe I can." Because I was like, "I'm going to see if I can become a movie actor," in sort of theater, and so I think what I chose to do then was to say, "Okay, well, the things that I really enjoy are this kind of thing like Shepherd and the large mythic work,

and I like Shakespeare. So how am I going to learn how to do that?" So I applied for the grad schools--

Collings

In Florida?

Kurup

No. Actually, I wanted to get away as far from Florida as I could at that time, and what I did was applied for--actually, I didn't want to go to certain--like I had friends who had gone to ACT [American Conservatory Theater], so I think it was all about reinvention. I think that's where I was at that moment, and I chose UCSD, because, (a), I saw that they had Allan Schneider there, and he was the premier director. He introduced Beckett to the United States, and he did all these huge productions, not huge but famous productions. But also I thought, well, that's great, so this is the kind of school I would want to go to. And it had everything that I wanted, which was a sort of conservatory element.

Now, here as I'm talking about BFAs and all, I was a BFA, and I became an MFA. But I think I had a little more--at least I fancied that I had more scope than the BFAs I was running into.

Collings

Well, you had more life experience.

Kurup

I'd had more life experience, that's true, and being from different places was really--you couldn't help but think about those commonalities that you have. And oddly enough, one of the things we do in Cornerstone constantly is look at these things of commonality. We even play games. When we start work with a community, we look for commonalities, and we have cultural mapping is one of the games we play, so that commonality is something that you're always looking for. You recognize difference, but they seem peripheral. They seem superficial. But commonalities feel deeper, much deeper. And so I picked that because there was a sense of, you know, you started in the morning with a yoga kind of thing, which moved into a voice class, which moved into a movement class, and all of that sort of thing that you fantasize about as being true training and all this stuff. And it certainly had it there, and that was exciting. It was a three-year program, and Allan Schneider was there, so I focused on that one.

And then a program at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, which was not part of this League of Professional Theater Training Programs, but they were vying for it. So I went up to Chicago to audition for it, and I went ahead--I hadn't heard of them. I'd only applied to UCSD, and on the way there, I went to the audition for the Milwaukee thing, and it was very impressive. They had their whole faculty there. It was a two-hour audition. I mean, you went in there, you didn't just do your monologues and all that. You basically did a lot of improvising and everything like that. It was great, so I thought, wow, this place would be great too.

I was accepted to both, and I was lucky. Actually, the head of the program, the acting program at UCSD, Arthur Wagner, basically talked me into it, said, "Do you really want to--?" He sort of cajoled me to go there. And then I thought about it. Do I want to go to California, or do I want to the frozen Midwest? I'd already lived in the frozen Midwest. We moved out of the frozen Midwest to get away from the frozen Midwest, so I'm going to go to California. And that was a pretty important and seminal kind of thing also for me, because to come out to this coast, and I felt completely at home.
I was already starting to remember--I think when we had talked about that I said I started feeling already a little more at home when I came down to Florida, because it was weather I understood. I started seeing black people. I started seeing some more Latino people, because there were a lot of Cubans there, right, so I was starting to feel like, oh, I'm not completely this peppercorn in a sea of salt. I mean, there are some other people that I can relate to in a way, or--not assuming that just because someone's a person of color that I could relate to them--

Collings

Yes, of course. Yes.

Kurup

--but the idea that, oh, well, maybe we'll have some commonality in experience of being a peppercorn, you know what I mean? Everybody needs to be able to tell that story to each other. "Do you have this experience?" "Yeah, I have this experience." You know, that kind of thing.
Go out to California, now I'm running into a lot of Mexicans, a lot of Mexican food. San Diego has got such a Mexican influence or Spanish influence, but definitely the Mexican influence. I'm discovering all of this other stuff while I'm going to school there, this alternate culture, and a lot of stuff comes in which is really fantastic, which is there was a Che Café, which they were growing food in the back, and they were using what we're now calling local, going local with our food and produce, they were already doing then in the mid-eighties, and it really influenced a lot of sort of--Florida is more parochial, was narrower.
I remember in Florida having slightly more conservative values as my father, who was trying to fit in in this country, and in the process you pay obeisance to whoever is the leader, and Nixon was the leader, Gerald Ford was the leader, so you want to be with that leadership. My mom was always a Democrat. I don't know how, but she always was a Democrat. In '76, she voted for Carter, and that's been lifelong for her. But my dad was a little more like, "Oh, well, Nixon is a good man. He opened up China."

Collings

Well, that's true.

Kurup

So I said, "Okay. Nixon's a good man, he opened up China." But he was bombing Cambodia, later I find out, you know, but, but you've got to give

him due credit for where he's due. So those values there are far more parochial. I found in California they started widening. But at the end of my time in Florida, I did meet people who helped that broadening also. Oddly enough, you'll be talking to Bill, and an actor named Jeff King who's up there, and I knew him in Florida, oddly enough. We did a play at the local Equity place.

And what was really interesting here is that I remember there were a lot of executions starting to happen in Florida at that time, or were happening in Florida, and you know, having a lot of conversations with friends about the death penalty, and my feeling at that very much being, "You know, if somebody did that to my family, I would want them to be killed," and my friend Jeff going off to do vigils at prisons. And I was asking him, "You're going to do this. Why are you doing this?" Now, mind you, while this is going on, there was a guy named John Spincklink who was about to be executed. He had killed a few people or something. I don't know what his crime was, but I know he'd killed, he had murdered people. I was driving by and I saw a sign at a burger joint that said "Today's special." What was it called? It was like "A half-pound burger and Spincklink fries." Right, Spincklink fries. I was like--and that just hit me wrong. I just said something like, "Okay, there's one thing to say you should kill a person, but then there's another thing to make it this--," I know it's gallows humor, but some respect, you know.

But then I'm talking to Jeff and I said, "Why are you going to this vigil?" And my friend Jim was another guy. The two of them were colluding, in a way, just to open my mind up in some way, and I really value that. And how they did that was I said, "Well, you know what? I want to kill him myself." He goes, "You know, I don't have a problem with that. If you want to kill him yourself, that's fine. That's up to you and him. But I don't want to live in a state where a state decides that they can kill another human being." And for some reason, that made a lot of sense, and that was it for me. I shifted, and I have many, many, many more reasons now why I feel like it's an immoral thing, but it began then.

And California helped sort of open that up more, and while in San Diego this was a very rich and potent time, because this is when Joseph Campbell is being interviewed by Bill Moyers, and we're all starting to get caught up in--I'd already told you that I like Sam Shepherd because of the sort of mythological aspect of a dimension of his work, and here comes Joseph Campbell, who was very instrumental in opening that up, and later on, for me, Alan Watts, who was even more so opening. And it's pertinent in that Alan Watts' philosophy helped me approach my play "As Vishnu Dreams" for Cornerstone many years later, and that kind of thinking has lived in my plays for a while now, how to approach some of this.

And a lot of it, you know, I come from a Hindu background. I know all these stories. A Hindu knows these stories. They're just part and parcel of everyday life. Kids can--it's like as if you're imagining like you were Greek

and you knew all the Greek stories, you know what I mean. That'd be the cliché, but it really was true. The Indians have--the mythology lives in everything they do. So everybody knows the story, so when I start talking about Karna, who's a fantastic character of the Mahabharata, all the Indians know that. All the kids know, and the ones who are tuned into him go, "Oh, my god, it's the saddest story ever, and it's the most unfair. It's truly about a lack of justice and how--," so a piece I've been wanting to make for a long time, which I haven't yet, but I will. But I have these sort of other epics that I've written, you know.

And so all of this percolation that's going on at UCSD is about that. I meet a friend who's a therapist, and we become friends because we're working on Sam Shepherd's work together. He's there to write about Shepherd and Shepherd's work in family, the family dynamic of Shepherd's work. Because he was starting to write books about sibling abuse, and really, "True West" is totally about sibling abuse in many ways. His name is John Kafaro [phonetic], and he has written a number of books now, and the big book that he wrote is about sibling abuse, and some of it is sexual abuse and all this stuff. But he used Sam Shepherd as one of the ideas of approaching the dynamic of sibling abuse and the idea of family within the dramatic structure. And, of course, we go back to the Greeks; it's all about the family. And I do think that the lineage passes down from the Greeks on to Shepherd and others.

And so the connection with John helped me also open up different ways of looking at art, and we were both very interested. We became fast friends immediately, and it influenced how I was looking at art, what he was talking. He's from the sixties. He'd seen a lot of concert people that I admired from--because I've been very interested for a long time to bring the rock and roll world into the theater world. I found the theater world to be polite and staid.

Collings

Yes, I was just going to ask you about that environment at UC San Diego. It wasn't as staid as it had been--

Kurup

Exactly, because UCSD is a very avant garde school. I mean, we had people who were teaching there--one of my teachers was Ann Bogart, who is the big, very avant-garde director and creator, and we studied Tadashi Suzuki's movement method while we were there. I mean, because we were connected to the LaJolla Playhouse, which--- But people like--it was inaugurated by a production "The Visions of Simone Machard" by Peter Sellars, and his "Ajax" was done there, so I'm seeing work that--and Robert, who did a lot of Shepherd's work, Robert Woodruff, who was doing work, so all of the sort of--Bill Irwin come out there, the clown, the famous MacArthur clown. Do you know who Bill Irwin is?

Collings

No, I don't.

Kurup
He's a fantastic clown. In the eighties, he sort of revolutionized the whole notion of clown work and bringing it into the avant garde, as opposed to the circus. He and Jeff Hoyle and a few other people were instrumental in making the clown movement sort of becoming big in that time, in the eighties. You ever see that movie "Rachel--" wedding, something about--it was recently with--
Collings
Yes, I know what you mean, "Rachel Getting Married."
Kurup
"Rachel Getting Married." Bill Irwin was the father character, so if you ever see it, he has a very nice scene in there, actually. So that percolation was very, very important in terms of defining what was becoming interesting to me as art and how to make art. So I would almost say, yes, UCSD was percolating in that way. It was the snooty kind of place. Also in some ways it was the avant garde place, not necessarily like University of Florida, which was the populist. So now I'm looking at it as a kind of balance, right. I come from this really populist kind of place, all about the musical.
Collings
Right, sort of community theater, repertory theater.
Kurup
Yes, but maybe considered a little higher than the community theater that was already in that town, but like a little more training, but very much populist, right, or mainstream. Let's say that's better than maybe populist, but in the mainstream. And then here, UCSD is much more expansive, very jazzy. It's jazzier, so it makes me feel like I can think outside of the box.
Collings
Okay, we're back on.
Kurup
Are you on digital tape? Is that what you're recording on?
Collings
Yes. So you were talking about the difference between the sort of populist/mainstream focus at Florida and the more avant garde--
Kurup
Yes, and jazzy, in that it was very expansive in so many ways. And, actually, we did a lot of training with Tadashi Suzuki, so a lot of the work we were doing--and his work was really avant garde, because he was doing the Greeks but in this really martial form of theater. His ideas were about breaking down the actor. It was giving American actors a way to be onstage and to be epic, because Americans were particularly good at the naturalism and being able to be from--
Collings
Very low key.
Kurup

--the low key and/or the rampaging bull, you know, be able to do that Brando-esque kind of thing, or if you want, [Robert] De Niro in "Raging Bull" or whatever, but gritty realism. Now, this was about epic theatricality, how to be simple onstage and yet have a voice that could get out there. The same kind of thing like, say, the Russians could do or the British could do and the Japanese were doing now, have this incredibly powerful voice. I mean, there's a character in Suzuki's "Trojan Women" where this guy named Jueda [phonetic], who is one of the lead actors in the company, he starts--it's magnificently beautiful to look at too. I mean, he walks out, he's all powdered in white, and he's wearing a gold robe that actually spans the whole stage.

Collings

Wow.

Kurup

And he walks out and it's like it's dragging behind him, and he's got this huge staff. So it starts with this character walking out in very slow motion, with eerie, interesting music. He comes and then he places himself in the middle of the stage, and he plants his staff, and then for the next hour and fifteen minutes of the play, he does not move. He's absolutely still and present throughout it. And then you don't even notice that at some point toward the end, he has moved off and crumpled into--and he's like a Buddha figure, and the death of the Buddha or like the idea what happened, like not God is dead, but this idea that something has now failed and broken down. So giving the actor the power to be able to stand still onstage and be completely present and powerful, so we did a lot of that kind of training. And Ann Bogart was our teacher there, and she was noticing that a lot of the people she was trying her technique with, which is this what they call viewpoints, a lot of them from UCSD were doing really well with her technique, because--and yet they were the opposite, seemingly. Hers is about free improvisation based upon dance-theater techniques and creative improvisation, and this is about rigid kind of following patterns of movement and stillness. Hers was about movement, but stillness is, of course, the other coin of movement, right, so these matched really well. What was interesting for me is that I was like getting both of these trainings before they even came together. The two of them came together I think in the early nineties, and she had gone out there to see some of the work, and she was invited to direct out there, so then they become--now Ann Bogart's company called SITI, the Saratoga International Training Institute is what it's called, they are based--she's at Columbia now, Columbia College--

Collings

In Chicago?

Kurup

No, or Columbia University, I'm sorry, in New York, and her and Suzuki have come up with this thing that they've done together. I don't know if they

work together anymore or what, but it's called S-I-T-I. But she was our acting teacher in our third year, so a lot of cross pollination of this sort that is allowing for a great deal of, what's it called, creative burst of like what is possible in the theater. And being some really seminal work, like seeing one of Ann's pieces right after I graduated, I went back and saw--it was called "Strindberg Sonata," and she was doing devised work, taking a lot of work from one author and chopping it up like a rap artist in a way, you know, chopping it up and then putting it through a blender and then creating images around it, and again giving me, as a young, emerging artist, ideas of what you can do with theater. How do you make pieces feel pertinent today and now, and not have to have a narrative in the way we've always had, you know, a beginning, middle, and end, Aristotelian ideas of the unity of time and place and all that--

Collings

More of the notion of the pastiche.

Kurup

More the notion of the pastiche and also of mixing genres and mixing disciplines, which I'm very interested in because, you know, the musician part of me always want to--what I was trying to earlier say was bring the energy of a rock concert to a theater. Of course, now they're doing it. Like you've got Green Day is on Broadway, is going to be on Broadway. "Rent" was an early version of this, but I didn't find "Rent" to be all that rocky. In fact, it felt like just updated musical theater. Nothing against that, but I didn't feel that energy of rock and roll until "Hedwig and the Angry Inch." I remember when I saw that I was like, okay, now we're coming to someplace that was really--and then there's a piece called "Passing Strange" recently that was on Broadway that has that same kind of power, and now Green Day. "A Spring Awakening" also had that kind of rock and roll thing, but the Green Day thing sounds really interesting. I haven't seen it. But I was really interested in that back in the eighties.

And so, basically, now I come out of school with all of this stuff inside, and I start working at the Los Angeles Theater Center. So I got invited because they were starting--I'd just come to town and literally that fall--I came in in the summer, and then that fall Los Angeles Theater Center, which was very thriving, it was supposed to be the--run by Bill Bushnell and a woman named Diane White--it was supposed--I don't know if you know anything about it as a theater, but it was supposed to be the Public [Theater] of the West. It had four theaters, just like the Public, and I think they have only four; they might have more now. But four theaters. They were the antidote to the Taper, which had by then become very mainstream, mostly a white audience and very sort of mainstream plays, while these guys were trying to be reflective of the people who walked around that building during the day. So it was supposed to be representative of the demographic of Los Angeles.

And in that group of people was Latino Lab is what it was called, and they had gotten a Ford Foundation grant, so they were starting to become players within the theater; the Black Theater Arts Workshop; the Women Artists Group, so there were all these different workshops that were getting grant money for doing work. And we were just starting the Asian American Theater Project, and I was invited as--you know, in all these groups they start like this. Forty people show up at the first meeting, twenty people the second meeting, and about eight for the third, and those eight tend to be the core that goes on, and I was one of those eight that continued.

And then within about a year and a half of it starting, which was in '88, the big controversy of "Miss Saigon" happened, which was them casting Jonathan--that actor, good actor, a white man in a role to play a Eurasian, because originally it was an Asian, and then it became a Eurasian or something for a Broadway play. And B.D. Wong, an Asian American actor, said, "What is this?" And David Henry Wong joined him, together, and they protested against it, and our--the guy who ran the project, his name was Don McWilly [phonetic], I think he was certainly a bit frustrated by that, but also frustrated by the fact that we were getting very little recognition of the work we were doing. He wasn't having much voice in the theaters, because these labs were supposed to be a place where we were going to start creating work, and then they were going to be reflected on the main stages, and they were going to be places where you would actually--and they've never really become that in any place around this country that I know of, that I can think of.

There was one point that the Taper had a lab of their own, and they haven't produced any of their people except for maybe one. Maybe Lisa Loomer was the only person at that time that produced. Yet Cornerstone had commissioned almost every one of those playwrights and produced their work during that time, Lynn Manning, Lisa Loomer, Luis Alfaro, Che Yu, a number of people who were in that, but that's an aside for the future.

So when I came to L.A., my other big seminal influence was that I was doing this during--I was working at LATC, trying to create work at night, and during the day I was working at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the AV Department, where I was showing films, setting up concerts, and setting up exhibitions. So I say that those three years that I was there, from '88 to '91, was a time when I got my second MFA in art history and a third MFA in film history, because we showed unbelievable films that you just won't see anywhere, and brand new struck prints by UCLA Archives and, of all places, Turner Classic Pictures. Ted Turner got a lot of flak for being a colorizer, but he was only colorizing these cassette tapes. The films were pristine. I mean, he paid--they spent millions of dollars restoring old films, and I showed a lot of them.

So I'd never seen "Wizard of Oz" ever. It was like, "How can you be an American?" "Well, I'm not an American yet." I hadn't become an American

yet, but I was like, when I saw it in its unbelievable Cinemascope color and all of that, I was like blown--Technicolor--I was blown away by it. It was amazing. And we showed "Gone With the Wind." So I was a projectionist, I showed these movies, and I was learning about--we set up Robert Longo, do you know him? He's an artist.

Collings

Oh, yes.

Kurup

Robert Longo's art exhibit, and he had these amazing photos. They were called "Men in Cities" or something like that, with them jumping and the ties going straight up in the air. And I remember I would spend hours while I was working, I would just like--we had a lot of autonomy being in the AV Department. We could lock our doors, and we could be doing our work. We're basically inspecting film. If they need a projector somewhere, we have to go and do that or whatever. But we would have Bill Moyers and Joe Campbell talking on three-quarter-inch tape all the time. It would just be running on a loop, you know, and so that would be our--while we were working--

Collings

That's your Muzak.

Kurup

--that's our Muzak going on. And there would be people coming up from other departments and, "Hey, we want to requisition this," and they would come, and they'd be there to--and then after about twenty minutes later, they're just like listening to Joseph Campbell talking, and they go, "Oh, god, I have to get back." And then they'd look at us and go, "You guys have such a great job."

Collings

You have a good job.

Kurup

"Our sucks." And then they'd go back down. And we had the theater. Sometimes we would be able--and, you know, some of the folks I worked with liked to indulge in the smoke, and they would smoke up, and if one of us would be inspecting, we'd pipe in--what's that music called--Gregorian chants into the theater in these massive speakers, and we'd have the lights off, and they'd be just sitting there like chilling to that. I mean, I'd love to put this--I've always wanted to put this into a TV series or a film.

Collings

It sounds like it would be great.

Kurup

It could be fun, wouldn't it?

Collings

Yes.

Kurup

But at the same time, there was so much learning going on. I mean, I had incidences that were like really defining in some ways. I got to see a full Cocteau film festival, a bunch of Cocteau's work, "Eurydice" stuff. I got to see "Orpheus" and then "Blood of a Poet," things that you never get to see. Then we had a whole degenerate art exhibition, which is what Hitler had tried to show as being degenerate, these amazing Conrad Felixmüller and George--well, George Grosz was a little earlier, but some of these fantastic artists of that particular period, who were considered sort of the scum of the Weimar Republic, in a way. But they were doing amazing, amazing work, you know, talking about the darker side of German culture at that time. And so what he had done, Hitler had taken all this art, put it in one space, and then in another space he put his own art and other Germanic sort of very martial stuff in this other building and showing you the contrast. Of course, I mean, this work was so much more interesting than this.
And so during that time we did a whole German expressionism film festival, and we had the Goethe Institute coming and doing all kinds of panels and talks--

Collings

And you were getting paid at the same time. Amazing.

Kurup

I was getting paid to do this. You know what I mean? And of course at the time you're like, "Oh, I'm going to work. I'm here to be an actor, and I'm not auditioning for this, but I'm learning all this other stuff." And I'm making work at night at the Los Angeles Theater Center, and these things are influencing how I'm creating this work.
That "Strindberg Sonata" piece I'd told you about that Ann had made, blew my mind. It was one of the most powerful things, where I--again, the pastiche was far more powerful than any narrative I'd seen up to that point. So all of these things leading to work that, at one point I'm watching a film, I'm showing a film in the senior matinee, "Birth of a Nation," so we now how important a film it is on some level, but it is an incredibly painful film to watch. It's racist. It's horrible imagery, people in blackface, and I remember watching the film, and what was hard for me was that the senior matinee was for people, and they were in their eighties, seventies, sixties, and I just imagined all these older white people walking out going, "Ah, those were the days."

Collings

Really?

Kurup

That was my--because, you know, they were all watching. Nobody was standing and going, "Boo. Stop this. Hey, this is awful." They were all like, you know. And so it just made my stomach turn even more. So I went--and the guy who ran the program was named Ron Haven. I was just a projectionist from the AV Department. I was really--and we had great

conversations. I went in there one time, I was like so angry, I said, "Look." I said, "How can you put this film out there without having a panel about it? When we did the Nibelungen and all of these German expressionist films, you had Goethe Institute there to talk about it, contextualize it, talk about the ring cycle and its sort of Aryan images and why--contextualize it, contextualize it." And he says, "I'm sorry. Listen, Shishir, I'm telling you, I tried to get--D.W. Griffith is a god in this town. I could get no critic, no critic to come and sit and say, 'This is problematic.'"

Collings

Interesting.

Kurup

"'This imagery, even though he helped create the close up and he helped create this and this and this,' nobody was willing to sit down and go, 'And it is yet also problematic.'" So nobody wanted to touch that. Nobody wanted to come into that space. And I learned a lot. Again, this is what I mean about the learning.

So LATC now, to jump back to the idea of "Miss Saigon," uses that as a way for feeling disrespected and also because of the situation of the "Miss Saigon" thing, he uses the "Miss Saigon" to say, "Boom, I want to get out of this. I don't want to do this." And I said, "Why are you leaving? How are we going to do this?" "Because, well, I wouldn't be leaving if I didn't think you could take over." So I took over the lab and I ran it till the theater went under in 1991, for various reasons, including city mismanagement and theater mismanagement both. But it was this fantastic--the whole point is that the city was supposed to revitalize that whole street, Spring Street, which has now happened with all the art walks. People did that, it wasn't just--but cultural affairs had already spent twenty-seven million on that building, and then they let it go to waste. So it sat there fallow for many, many, many years, from 1991.

A group of us who were working there tried to keep it going for another couple of years, by just renting it and trying to occupy it. The Latino Lab actually tried to occupy it by forcibly staying in there, and then they were removed and all this stuff. And now it's being run by Jose Luis Valenzuela, who now it's called Latino Theater Company. But there's still a pastiche. They haven't really quite found how to make it a running place, and I want to support them however I can, but it's still finding its legs many, many, many years later. It took fourteen years of being like a rental house before anything started changing there.

So now we were prime. Now, here's an interesting way of connecting this to Cornerstone, because while I was there running the Asian American Theater Project, there was a guy named Peter Saigal. He's the guy who runs now a show called "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me" on NPR.

Collings

Oh, right.

Kurup
Okay. Peter and Steven Weeks were the two literary managers at LATC. Morgan Jeness, who is another--she's now an agent, but she was also a well-known dramaturge, and she's sort of a person of the theater in some way--she came out. They'd actually offered me this position to take over as literary manager when Steven and Peter left. But before Steve and Peter left, Peter had gone to Harvard, and he knew the guys in Cornerstone. He knew Bill [Rauch], he knew Alison [Carey] and a few other people. And I was running the Asian American Theater Project. I'd just heard about Cornerstone. They were starting to make a little bit of a buzz, because they were traveling. And oddly enough another connection, in my class at UCSD, one of the directors in my class, a guy named Michael Kantor, who ended up making a film about Cornerstone called "Cornerstone," if you have ever seen it--have you ever seen it?
Collings
Is that the documentary that documents the rural years?
Kurup
The documentary. It documents the "Winter's Tale" tour--
Collings
Right, right. Exactly.
Kurup
--which was the bridge show.
Collings
Oh, that's a fascinating documentary.
Kurup
You saw it, right?
Collings
Yes.
Kurup
Michael made that film. He was one of my classmates. And the reason he and Bill became--he got to know Cornerstone is because they were both--in our second year, it would be '86, the spring quarter of '86, we as a class would go off to do externships in other theaters, and I believe that's the time when Michael went to the Kennedy Center and was assisting Peter Sellars, and the other assistant was Bill Rauch. And Bill was coming up with Alison about the idea of Cornerstone. And I think, if I'm not mistaken, Peter said, "That'll go over like a lead balloon," kind of so to speak.
Collings
Yes, I've heard something along those lines as well.
Kurup
Yes. He said, like, "That's not going to work," and then later on became a supporter, and then, of course, later on we had a pretty interesting time together when he came and worked with us, which I can tell you about later. But I think Lynn probably talked a little bit about that too. I'm not sure. But

so these weird coincidences, right? So there's this connection between Michael, one of the directors I worked with a lot in college, in grad school, and then Peter Saigal from this other side, saying, "You should work with Bill Rauch. You guys should work together. And I know that Bill Bushnell, who ran LATC," he said, "is interested in Bill Rauch coming to town and supporting them in doing something, and they're interested in doing this Japanese fifteenth-century playwright," or sixteenth-century playwright, maybe eighteenth, I don't know. "Chikamatsu is his name, and you know, thought maybe the Asian American Theater Project would be a great place where it could land, and you guys can create a work together. That would be kind of cool." And I said, "Great. If he comes to town it'll be fantastic. I look forward to that," and all that.

Well, that didn't happen, and that would have been 1990 or '91. Bill--they were into their fourth, maybe fourth or fifth year, going into their fourth or fifth year as a company; '86 is when they started. So we would have maybe connected at that time, but we didn't, and it didn't happen. So now the theater goes under. I'm making work here. Page [Leong] and I have this company together. We're called the Raven Group. We decide we want to do what the Renaissance Theater Company in England is doing, or if you want to say it the way they do, re-nay-sonce, you know, with Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson in there. What they were doing is they seemed to be making pieces for the theater and then they were translating them to film. I think "Hamlet," they ended up doing that in film. All the things that they were doing, they had already touched base with in the theater.

So we were very interested in that, except we wanted to do it a little bit more avant garde. We wanted to go--we conceive of it as a very avant-garde play, and we make a kind of a more filmic and narrative film, or vice versa, so we would do something a little bit different, so it was not just redoing what we were doing for the film and the same thing for the stage. So really what that did is it started to bring a lot of video into our work, like starting to work with live video, and you know, the Wooster Group was kind of doing that also at the time. They had already been doing it. But I hadn't seen any of it. I'd only heard about it, but it was something that we were interested in using, so we were doing that, and we were creating work that was wanting to be challenging.

We also had a political cabaret there, called The Platform, that a woman named Banoor Karevli started. She's actually a documentary filmmaker now. She's Turkish, has made some interesting films about Islam and women and all that. And Morgan Jeness was a part of this mix. We were all there trying to do all this interesting work, but once it started going under, everybody scattered and were absorbed, were absorbed by the Taper. Luis Alfaro started pretty much at LATC. Culture Clash started at LATC. Reza Abdo--I don't know if you know who Reza Abdo is. He passed away a number of years ago from complications due to AIDS, and he was an Iranian-born

director whose work was incredibly challenging. I mean, he was--talk about the pastiche. He took that and he mixed it with like heavy, heavy rock and roll, and he was doing--

Collings

Did he operate a theater as well, on Lincoln Boulevard?

Kurup

He may have had. He had a company called Dara Loos, and some of his company members are in town. A guy named Ken Rote, his choreographer/lead actor, is still doing a lot of work in town. And Reza was a challenging and interesting artist. I really miss his--you know, there were times I completely disagreed with his work, I found it to be gratuitous, but I felt like, boy, I'm so glad that he's doing this work, like somebody who's really pushing those boundaries. So I appreciated knowing of these artists. And so again, we were like being influenced. Like I was feeling rich in what I was gaining from them.

And by now we've got this company, the Raven Group, and we're part of a larger group of different groups that were out of LATC, called the Artist Collective, and we're trying to figure out how we can live in this building and will cultural affairs support us.

So Cornerstone comes to town, '92, and they do their first production there called "The Clay Cart," which Bill has recreated at Ashland a couple of years ago as "The Clay Cart." Here they called it "The Toy Truck," and they worked with--I'm sure Lynn talked about it, at the Angelus Plaza Senior Housing, largest one in the country. So I hear they're in town, but I didn't know them. Peter was gone, Peter Saigal was gone, so I didn't really attempt to make any connection. But suddenly, Cornerstone people start showing up. Ninety-two is the time they came to town. We had just had the riots, the Rodney King riots, uprising. We were actually downtown when it began, and we were rehearsing a new play by a guy named Michael Ahn, Korean American playwright. It was called "The Barking Wall," and it's a surreal--and it was perfect for what was going on. It was like about all these people who'd been chased into a building from these dogs outside, and you know, that was what was happening out in the streets, that like people were taking the streets like "Who Let the Dogs Out" kind of, you know, and other people were afraid and running into the buildings.

So I remember we were downtown, and they said, "Well, look. The crowd is starting in Florence [Avenue], and they're going to be--." "Florence is pretty far from here. It's not going to be here." But they said, "Fires are starting," and all of this stuff, so we left. And we were supposed to open that coming weekend, and we were like devastated, like we'd worked really hard on this. What are we going to do?

Collings

Well, there was a curfew that weekend.

Kurup

There was a curfew, so that whole weekend, so we had to go. So we came back here, and we were living, literally, down the street here, and so like, "What are we going--?" And we couldn't leave. People couldn't go out of their houses. People were worried about people, calling us. All of this stuff was going on, and Cornerstone had just come to town. So what happened was, we decided as a group, after about four days, we were like, "Okay. We're going to open the show. We said we were going to open it, we're going to open it," when we said we would, which was the following weekend.

Collings

Oh, the following weekend.

Kurup

Yes, the following weekend, yes, because we were going into tech for this coming--and we were finishing up tech. And so we went back, we said, "We're going to do it. We don't care. If people don't show up, they won't show up." And we went back. People were relieved to be able to leave, to go back into the streets again, and we were full.

Collings

Oh, really. That's great.

Kurup

We were full. Now, another coincidence. Bill knew Michael Ahn, the playwright, and he had asked Bill to come see the play. So Bill came to see the play, and from there on, Cornerstone people started showing up. That year I had a solo performance piece at Highways performance space. A couple of Cornerstone people came to that. Why is this? What are they doing? Why are they doing this? Then they came and saw "Festival" that we did later that summer, and it was becoming evident that something was going on. And then Bill invited me to come and see his "Romeo and Juliet" that they were putting up at Highways, because Cornerstone was actually stationed at Highways. We had one of the offices there. That's where our offices were till like 1999.

Collings

At the 18th Street--

Kurup

At the 18th Street Arts Complex, and one of those places is Highways performance arts space. So this was a piece I'd commissioned. They came to see it. Then Bill said, "Come see my play." I went and saw that, and I asked him, "Hey. I have a reading of a play that I'm going to do. Can I use your screens?" And he said, "Sure. Go ahead and use them." And he said, "I would love to talk to you about possibly directing our third show in our first residency here in L.A." Now, they'd only planned to be here for five years. This was going to be the urban residency. Five years of a rural residency. Bill is very strategic in how he thinks about things. He thinks about them in concepts. He's very good about that. He knows how to--he thinks in those models that are easy for people to wrap their brains around. You know what

I mean? So you can see things easily. He's a good impresario that way, too, and a good producer from that standpoint.
And so he said, "I've been asked by--." Basically, it was the Arena Stage, and they were--

Kurup

So Bill said--Bill had directed every Cornerstone play until that time, and he had come to see a number of things, including this one piece I directed about the L.A. riots, because we'd actually gone out--as part of The Platform, this political cabaret I'd mentioned. One of the things is we went out on the streets right after and asked people and got stories from them, and then we chopped that all together, taking news stories, how the cops had behaved, this and that, and we made a piece called "Angels on Fire." Now, Ben Cobb and Lynn Jeffries helped with that show, which is part of this whole thing. Like, why are these--I'm really digging that these Cornerstone people are coming in and helping out, but why are they doing that? And I hadn't quite known yet.
And then Bill was saying, "Listen. I've come to see your work. I feel like if anybody can direct a Cornerstone show, you can do it, and it'll be the first time it'll be somebody else doing it. I'm going off to Arena Stage to do this other production. They've asked us for our first ever institutional collaboration, so a big theater bringing in these upstart, community-based theater makers. So will you consider it?" And I said, "Great." "And the community we were hoping that you'd work with is the Arab American community," and that's how it started.
But Ben Cobb was an actor in my piece, and working with Ben and with Lynn--she helped with some design things and helped bring water bottles, because we wanted the sound of water bottles in the show--was, particularly my collaboration with Ben, who was more on--he was in rehearsals all the time. Lynn came in toward the end to help out--was, I said, this guy is the kind of guy I want to work with, completely enabling, one of those people who's always--you know, good theater people are good problem solvers, and Ben is a fantastic problem solver. And one of the things about Cornerstone that I loved when I first started is like it was always about solving problems, so it was always about rolling up your sleeves together and trying to see how to make this thing roll, how to make this thing roll better, how to make this thing fly. And it's about an openness to creativity, it's an openness to solutional thinking, and I just found it fantastic. And I was like, "Yes, let's work together. I want to do this play. I'll write it. I'm a writer-director, that's how I want to come in.
[Interruption.

Kurup

So what I got was a glimpse into the kind of working style that Ben sort of epitomized, and I thought, okay, this is exciting. And he was signed on to do the show that I was going to direct and write, and so I felt we can move

forward on this well. And we'd had this nice experience together with "Angels on Fire," and so, basically, that was my doorway into stepping into the world of Cornerstone, with no expectations other than the fact that I was going to write and direct this show about the Arab American community in Los Angeles.

1.3. Session 3 (June 8, 2010)

Collings
Today is June 8, 2010, Jane Collings interviewing Shishir Kurup at his home. As we were just saying off tape, we'd finished up last time discussing your work on "Angels on Fire" with Ben Cobb, and it had been such an energizing, creative experience that it made you interested in the "Ghurba" thing coming up, and so how did that come together?
Kurup
Well, what happened because of that experience, as I'd said earlier that I'd started seeing Cornerstone people showing up at shows, and partly because I think one of the reasons being that they were looking to integrate the company, and that most--I think I spoke about this, which had to do with the fact that they would go into communities, many communities of color. There were hardly any people of color in the company, and now there was one Asian American person who was part of the company but on an administrative level. So in the process, I think when they came to town they were asking people around who they should look at, and I think myself and Page's [Leong] name came up, because we had a company and we were working at the old LATC.
So out of that came the connection with Ben Cobb and actually Lynn Jeffries also, who helped with some set design stuff and acquiring certain props and things like that. So after that process, I was invited to go see a version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" that Bill [Rauch] had directed over at Highways, and it seemed to coincide with a play of mine called "On Caring for the Beast," which was very recently, actually, produced at Cornerstone. It had a New York run in 2001, but that was around when I had workshopped it and created it, and it was about torture, and I actually asked--I went to see the play and enjoyed what Bill had done with it. It was funny and actually kind of very bawdy. There was a kind of bawdy quality to it. I was like, "Oh, this is really interesting," and it mixed up sort of gender, sexuality, and all of that, and I thought, "Oh, this is great."
And then Highways is a great place for that, because Highways is known for very, very on-the-edge performance art work. And I think I'd mentioned to you earlier that it was a place that had been targeted by Congress to be defunded in the eighties because of all that work. They were working with queer artists and they were working with AIDS artists, people who had AIDS and were doing work that had to do with blood, and it was just like really--

Collings
Yes, that was a time when the NEA was sort of on the war path.
Kurup
NEA was, exactly, and they were actually trying to shut down the NEA. They were called the NEA Four, Tim Miller, John Fleck, Karen, you know, the woman--oh, there were four artists, and no less than Jesse Helms was targeting them.
Collings
Right, right, yes.
Kurup
And so it was a very exciting time, a really scary time, and so I had done a couple of solo-performance pieces there, so I had a relationship with Highways. And so they were performing there because Cornerstone had come and moved into one of the spaces at 18th Street Arts Complex and was, in effect, part of 18th Street, which has many different performance arts groups and all that. So they were doing the production there. I went to see it, and they had these two screens that they were using to project on, and they were making really interesting pictures with them, I thought, or three screens. And I asked Bill, "Hey, you know, I'm doing my reading here. Will you come see the reading? And also, can I use your screens?" And he said, "Sure, no problem," and he came to see the reading.
So now we've had a number of different people from Cornerstone scouting out my work as a writer, as a performer, as a director, and the one that I told you about before was called "Barking Wall," that Bill knew this guy Michael Ahn, so after that process, Bill asked me to come see a project they were doing in Pacoima. Coincidentally enough, we're going back to Pacoima this summer. This year for us is a year of return. Like in the summer, we're visiting Pacoima. In the spring of next year, winter/spring next year, we are going back to Watts for a production. So Watts was a key place for us to establish Cornerstone in this city.
Collings
And you'll be working with someone who got into the theater through that Watts' residency.
Kurup
Yes. Well, what it was is actually the person that we met there who got into the theater, who had been a theater student but had gone off to Argentina to play basketball and then came back and was looking to find his artistic sort of soul and become an artist, and his name was Quentin Drew. Quentin joined us in a play back then at Watts called "Sid Arthur," which I had written, which Page directed, and based on "Siddhartha," I think I mentioned that. And Quentin then became an artist that we worked with a couple of times in Watts, and when we left, he and Lynn Manning, who's the person we're going to be working with, formed the Watts Village Theater Company.

Oddly enough, I'll tell you that one of the young boys that we met in Watts during that time, who was about sixteen or seventeen, because of that experience in "Los Faustinos" that we did, went off to college to become an artist, and became an actor and a director, came back and joined the Watts Theater Company and is now the artistic director of it, because Quentin, sadly, passed away five years ago.

Collings

Yes. That's--

Kurup

I don't know if you had heard that story already.

Collings

Yes. Yes, it's quite a return, as you were saying.

Kurup

Yes. So I feel very connected to Quentin, because it was my play that got him into the company's sort of eye, and also Page was really a big champion of him at the beginning. So that was a little side note.

But jumping forward to now go back, Bill asked me to come see a production called "Rushing Waters" by a woman named Mehdalia Cruz, and it was in Pacoima. And I had to go out there, and I got lost on the way to Pacoima, and this is the interesting thing for me. I was also only in Los Angeles for, by that time, about five or six years, and I was like most Los Angelenos, only knew what I knew in the areas I lived in and some of the places where I went to, but so there wasn't a lot of traveling into other neighborhoods. And, you know, we'll talk a little bit about what I think I brought to the company, but what the company brought to me was a real connection to the city, a real--I call myself now a real active citizen of Los Angeles, a real Angeleno. I've never been able to call myself any particular thing. I call myself Indo-African-American disruptively, to be able to say, "I am none of those things, in a way." I am not Indian. I'm Indian by birth and race, I suppose, African by desire and a romance of my childhood, and then I'm an American by sort of now the migration and the marination of who I've become. But I say I'm Indo-African-American; I'm none of them and I am all three.

But now I'm also adding Angeleno to that, because I feel like I can say this is my home, and I would say that Cornerstone helped with that marination, that Angeleno marination, and I'm very--that's like one of the--I'm most grateful for that, for allowing that to happen and making me understand the city better, not fearing the city, not fearing going anywhere.

So anyway, I'm driving in Pacoima. I've no idea where I am. I get lost. I don't see the first half. I come for the second act, and it looks like a circus. It's like a mess. I've no idea what's going on.

Collings

And this is the one in the adult school, and it's a vast space?

Kurup

Yes, it's a vast space, and it's a place where I think as part of the process, there were a couple of kids who were killed by gang members, and somehow they commemorated them somehow in the play, so it was a moving experience, I think, for them, and I think not a common experience of people dying. But oddly enough, we've had so much death since then in different ways, whether it's through violence or through just old age, because we do work with a lot of older people, or death through disease, young people dying for no reason at all, meaning disease-wise, Quentin being one of them, who was forty-one when he died, which is really young, and he was at the height of his powers. Unfortunate.

So I get there, I see the show, and I'm like, "Oh, my god. This is--." It was a huge mess, you know. And yet I'd seen Bill's "Midsummer Night's Dream," and that was tight, and it was muscular, it had all the things. So I trusted the artistry of the person who was asking me to come see the work because he wanted to then have a conversation about somehow doing something. And Bill is very methodical in many ways. He plans well in advance. I mean it's part of his success is that he is able to be so--in terms of process, he has a long vision that I think has really helped him a lot get to where he is, and helps people, I think, feel comfortable, because there's enough lead time and stuff like that.

Now, in this case, I think we had not quite the time that we have nowadays, or we try to have nowadays, but I think after the production--there were things about it that I really enjoyed. I certainly understood why this work was going to be vital, is vital, and yet--and partly it was because I had missed the first act--it looked quite jumbled to me, and I had no idea what was going on.

But we met up at a little Denny's afterwards, up in Sylmar, and we talked about doing a production, because Bill had been asked by the Arena Stage to do a production of "A Christmas Carol," and they were going to call it "A Community Carol." Alison [Carey] was going to write, so a good team. Like I think Lynn would also go to design. A good away team had happened, and they were keeping back a couple of actors, Ben Cobb and Ashby Semple, who were ensemble actors. And they would do a production here, because the third of the first three communities, one characterized by age, another one by--what was it? I think the Pacoima one Lynn might know better. Do you remember--

Collings

Was it geography?

Kurup

Geography, yes, geography, and then the third was by language and culture, and that was the Arab American community. Yes, yes. But, yes, "The Toy Truck" was the first one, "Rushing Waters" was the second, and "Ghurba" was the third. So what happened--and you see a picture of Quentin right there. That's Quentin right there, the tall man.

Collings
Yes, wonderful.
Kurup
Yes, strapping, fantastic guy. So the conversation was about, you know, like Bill had come to see "Barking Wall." He really enjoyed the--he thought the quality of the directing had a real sort of I guess a sizzle to it. That's what he said. He was like, "If anybody can direct a Cornerstone show, it's this guy." That's what he said to me anyway. You know, again, who knows what's true or not, but that's what he said to me. I guess I have to believe him. So then became the process of like how do we do this? Bill's not going to be around as an artistic director to necessarily oversee anything, because this was his first institutional collaboration. This was Cornerstone's first institutional collaboration with any large theater.
You know, for so long the company--I couldn't say we then, but the company had been sort of the renegades, the outsiders, the people--are they really art? Are they actually really theater? Are they some sort of social service idea?
Collings
Exactly.
Kurup
What are they exactly? Can this really be something--even I think Peter Sellars--Bill had first--I think I mentioned that he told him about the idea, and I think Bill would probably tell you exactly what he said, but it was something like, "Oh, that should go over like a lead balloon," or something like that. Not unlike what Pete Townsend said to Jimmy Page when he was talking about Led Zeppelin, and that's how they came up with Led Zeppelin. You know, "I want to do a heavy blues band that has a really crunching sound," and Pete Townsend said to Jimmy Page, "Well, that should go over like a lead balloon," and that's why Led Zeppelin came out of that. Something similar to that Peter said to Bill.
Collings
Meaning it would be too difficult to work with all of these diverse elements?
Kurup
Yes, I think so. In a way saying, "I'm not sure if that would work," or maybe saying, "I'm pretty sure it wouldn't work." But, you know, nonetheless, Bill and Alison persevered and they got it started. So to be invited into a place like the Arena Stage was a milestone, was a step toward legitimacy. And, you know, I do think that the company suffered a little bit from a bit of an inferiority complex, and maybe slightly also a slightly superiority complex at the same time. I don't think inferiority complexes and superiority complexes don't go together. They very much go together. But that's the only way you survive when you have a new idea, you have something different, and you are trying to sort of say, "This is legitimate. This is something." So what comes up sometimes is like you can feel like you're being ignore, that, sure,

there are a few articles in "American Theater" magazine, and there are some people who are championing you, but overall, most people are looking at you a bit askance. There's a lot of, "Wow, that's God's work you're doing. Thank God you're doing it and we don't have to do it."

Collings

And we're not, we don't have to do it, yes.

Kurup

Exactly. So here it goes to Arena. So there's not much sort of like, "This is how you do it." And I had just come off of a project a few years earlier, working with a guy named Steve Kent in Milwaukee, while I was in grad school at UCSD, so now I'm coming out of a program that is very--it's down at UCSD. The La Jolla Playhouse is the theater. It's connected the way the Yale Rep is connected to the Yale Conservatory, that way. There's a lot of sort of avant-garde theater from Robert Woodruff and Peter Sellars and people like that doing their work there, and Des McAnuff, who's the artistic director. Ann Bogart did some of her work there also, I believe. Ann actually first started doing her work with the students at the theater, at UCSD.

So one of the things we did when I was in school was to go for an externship at Milwaukee Rep, and we created this project called the Milwaukee Project, where we walked the streets and we interviewed people, not unlike some of the stuff we did for "Angels on Fire," as I mentioned. We would actually record people and their stories. But Steve had this thing, this technique called recording people. Go out not with a tape recorder, but observe people and capture their essence. Then bring them in and create that person onstage with a few phrases that they were using, and then in some ways tell their story by embodying them.

And oddly enough, Ann Bogart had her own sort of technique of that kind of thing, where she would say, "Come in as a character." And she didn't care whether you went out and studied somebody or you were just making something up. "Come in and then what we will do as a class is interview you as if we're all reporters, and you're that character, and you speak from that place." So, now, these were techniques that I was really excited about, for some reason. I found that because I loved improv, I loved this sort of idea of just creating characters out of the thin air, speaking with accents, all these different things, really listening, because as I'd said earlier, survival for me in this country was about being able to mimic the mainstream, mimic the one, not the other. I was the other. I felt like survival meant I can sound like these different kinds of Americans, everywhere from the darkest, sort of the place of where African American all the way to Appalachian, you know, from the whole spectrum of color in between, and that would make me fully American in some way, in my mind. But [unclear] survival.

So these techniques were interesting. So I thought, well, Cornerstone does a lot of interviewing. You're getting the stories from the people. I insisted at that time on getting a group of, along with the Cornerstone actors, who were

both Anglo, I said, "I really feel like we need to put Arab American actors also onstage." And they didn't know any at that time. But through the community, we put the word out, and we got a smattering of people who auditioned who were actors, and we got a nice little handful.
What I did with them was that we had about six or seven, including the Cornerstone actors, and we did a number of weeks of work with each other where we did a lot of ensemble building, and then a really important thing, because they were all Arab Americans from different parts of the Arab world, Lebanese, Moroccan, Syrian. And so what we started doing is teaching each other our folk songs, the folk songs of the culture. So we built that sort of thing. And then at the same time, I was teaching them Suzuki, a movement technique, and I was teaching them the viewpoints that I'd learned at school from Ann Bogart, and put those two together before there was a city company or even Ann and Suzuki had met, because it was literally a few years, or she was just starting to do that. But I'd been using that because that was all I knew. Those are the techniques I learned in school, so I just put them together naturally, and in this process, I brought it in.
So all of this to create a common language as actors for each other. So if I say, "I want this thing, this moment to feel like this," they know what it is. Or if I say, "I want this to be like statues, or I want it to be like sitting statues," or whatever, there would be different ways of communicating in shorthand with each other. And then through the process, while we were doing this, about two or three hours of the day were dedicated to interviewing people from the community, and this time rather than one person, like a writer, going and interviewing either a circle of people or one person, we, as a circle, interviewed one person, and we did a number of these.

Collings

How did you find these people?

Kurup

They were brought to us through the different community organizations. The way Cornerstone does it is we make community partners, and those community partners may be introduced to us through the Chamber of Commerce, or it might be through a friend who knows this pastor or this cleric or whatever, and that leads to many different--"Oh, you really should talk to," who knows--

Collings

Such-and-such.

Kurup

--such-and-such," and, "Oh, he's the keeper of all of that history." So we had amazing people. We had Casey Kasem.

Collings

Oh, really?

Kurup

Do you remember Casey Kasem?

Collings

Of course.

Kurup

Yes. Don Bustany, who's on KPFK, he has "Middle Eastern Focus," and a number of, I mean, doctors and people who were happy to talk about--because, I mean, Casey Kasem is about as American as pie, as it can be, right. I mean, he's top-40 radio, and Don Bustany, he's a totally American guy. But these guys--and they're older. They're in their seventies, sixties, seventies in that time, maybe a little less, they're now in their seventies at least, so their parents and grandparents came at the turn of the last century; not a history of those people here. Even Khalil Gibran used to do what one of the characters who Ben Cobb ended up playing--he used to, I think, sell encyclopedias door to door. But out of this came a history of like the equivalent of the rag seller. You know, in African American culture there are these--

Collings

Yes, peddlers.

Kurup

--the peddlers who would bring rags and if you needed little things. They used to bring in these little wagons like this thing called kashishes. It was like little things like sewing needles, thread and--

Collings

Yes, notions.

Kurup

--notions, exactly, yes. And that was basically a lot of early Arab American sort of, so we were really interested in that. So I was like, "What should we do? How should we create this piece?" I was really interested. And then usually Cornerstone takes a classic text of some sort and takes the flesh off, uses the bones to create new flesh that is a story's, and you want to have some resonance off the two. So the themes that kept coming up were that of belonging and longing, right, leaving something behind, longing for that, and then the conversation of belonging in your new world.

Collings

Is that a theme that came out of the conversations with the community?

Kurup

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I, as an immigrant, had complete empathy toward it. I had a very strong feeling, and perhaps I was also working out as an artist my own belonging-longing issue. And "Ghurba" actually means to yearn for the homeland. And at the same time, it can mean alienation, to feel alienated in your homeland and outside of your homeland. It has a double meaning to it, and so it's a very complicated and interesting word. So the minute I heard that word, ghurbi--ghurbi is a word that they keep using in the song, in terms of remembering, to remember the land, to yearn for

the land--so immediately I knew also, because it was a Palestinian man who was our translator and this incredible singer, beautiful voice, and he was a very effeminate, openly gay, HIV-positive man, so very complex and very complicated.

Collings

Was this Sammy Azuki [phonetic]. Maybe not Sammy.

Kurup

No, Samir?

Collings

Samir, yes.

Kurup

Samir's last name--oh, no, no. Are you talking about the man I'm talking about?

Collings

Yes, I was asking if that's--

Kurup

Salim, Salim Azooka. Actually, I ended up making a film a number of years later with him in it as his full-blown belly-dancing character. I mean, he's quite an amazing person in many ways, you know, very self-involved in some ways, but part of it is that self-involvement is part of what allows him to sort of keep pushing forward this agenda of like, "Look at me. I'm queer, I'm Palestinian, live with it." You know, there's like this kind of--and he's an activist on both levels, so it's all of the things that are anathema, because to the Palestinians, especially the sort of more fundamentalistic Palestinians, he's anathema because he's queer, and being a Palestinian is in itself a kind of anathema in Western culture, so I think he straddles a lot of worlds. But I found him very interesting, because he's a deeply poetic translator also, so I found that to be very, very helpful.

There were other people in the cast, a guy named Ismael Kanater, who was also helping translate, but he's Moroccan and he's more of a ne'er do well kind of interesting former--and actor from Morocco itself, wonderful actor, a very strong actor, heavy accent but compelling, compelling, so sometimes he really worked hard to get his enunciation to the place where his English was understood well and quite well; terrific. He ended up working with some Cornerstone for a few other shows after. So there were these amazing people that were helping us, and particularly Salim was very helpful in these translations. And he was going to be the main singing character, him and then we found a woman in the community. I mean, we found him in the community, but his thing is mostly being a belly dancer and a kind of a performer but not really an actor, so that's what we had to build up in him. And then we found a woman in the community who also sang beautifully, and so they were the two mains.

So the piece was not--it was a bit of a surreal thing, and, you know, Arabic poetry is so surreal. He connected me to Mahmoud Darwish, who is a poet

and writer, and his books, called "After the Last Sky," so we were using kinds of the ideas in a lot of these things that had to do with exile and had to do with yearning and being away from home, and yet not being fully comfortable at home either, right. So in the process, we've now started interviewing a lot of people. I'm trying to figure out, what is my source text? So instead of making a source text where I pull the flesh off, I'm a huge fan of Yeats, and I thought Yeats, mysticism, Yeats is mysticism and might go very well with the mysticism I'm finding that I want to write about with this piece.

And so the piece got created, kept Yeats' eight-page play, nine-page play called "Purgatory," which is basically about a father and a son who walk by a house, and you find out that the house was the old man's. They're poor. He's a ragged man, but he tells his son, "See that house, that burnt-out house? That was a mansion. I lived in that house." But he's somehow the bastard stepchild.

Collings

Oh, yes.

Kurup

And he was probably--what's it called--he was created through rape, a product of rape, and hated his father and all. So there's this--but it's a burned-out house, but he sees the ghosts of that house, because he ended up burning that house and killing his father in it.

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

So it is about this sort of mythic Greek, so it was, to me, perfect. And then at the end of the play, he kills his own son with the same knife that used to cut his meat, as he said, because he wanted to stop this line from going on, this bastardized line. So it's a deep and heavy play.

Collings

Very.

Kurup

It's an eight-page, nine-page poem, basically, but a very poetic play. So what I made was, I thought, "I want to make a ghost story out of this." And the whole idea of "Ghurba" was about--because of this travel, right? Everybody here came here because they were looking for the promised land. So ghurba, the idea, became a town or a place that they were going to. "We're going to the land of Ghurba."

Collings

Right. And that's how it also fit in with the geographical communities.

Kurup

Exactly. Exactly. Exactly.

Collings

Except this time it's a mythical place.

Kurup

It's a mythical place. It's a promised land, basically, but a promised land where because of it's nuance, you're not necessarily completely comfortable in either, because I think that that's ultimately a richer story, because I'm trying to tell my own story through this in some ways, not being completely comfortable wherever you are. Because once you've traveled and you've made these jumps and leaps, you can't quite be exactly of those places.

So Ghurba itself--so what we did was, the set was a really kind of brilliant idea of collusion between the artists, the designers, Lynn, this guy Doug Smith, who was doing both set and light, and we created the ruins of a house. In the middle of it--the house had an incredible Arab carpet pattern, you know, a Persian carpet, like that sort of intricate--but right through the middle it was worn, because people had been traveling, and they were traveling right through that house. But in that house ghosts appeared of that house, and the whole play happened right in front of it, because this is a place that had some water, so people could stop there, so it was like a Chaucer's kind of thing where the pilgrim is going.

And Ben Cobb played a character who was Arab American, Lebanese, pushing this kashishes, the notions truck. But he had decided what he was going to do was be a person who was going to serve the people on the road to Ghurba. That was going to be his gift to mankind, and he was going to be there for them, because they needed a place to stop, and there was water there and there was food. And so when the play starts, there's eggplant all over the stage, beautiful purple eggplant, and he talks about the eggplant, and then he starts cooking the eggplant throughout the act, with garlic and oil and butter, whatever. So throughout the whole first act, the audience is smelling this amazing smell, and while other things are going on.

So it's all about travelers passing through, and it's all about this ghost story that keeps happening. So there's a father-and-son character in the ghost story. They happen to be a father-and-daughter character, as a Palestinian and his daughter traveling through. So people come through and play different things. They'll play themselves and then--so I also did the thing that I always do or I've done for a while now, which is Thornton Wilder-like, I will have music. Here comes a character, and a drum will sound, because we had live musicians, and Ben will go, "This is Ismael Kanater. He's going to play this character. Ismael, tell them a little something about your name," or, "Tell them a little something about where you're from," or whatever. And so these were all called through like conversations. "What is something unique about--?" "Oh, you know, Ismael meant--," da, da, da, da, and so he would make a joke, "Call me Ismael," and stuff.

And then there was a woman, the one playing his daughter had--again, this is a thematic thing with people who come to another country, right? Their name is Samir, but they change it to Sam, you know, in order to fit in, right? And she was like, she wanted to be called--her name was Rana [phonetic],

but she wanted to be called, like, Elise or something. I can't remember what the name was. But in the process of the rehearsal, we convinced her that her name should stay Rana, because you should hold onto who you are, too, and be proud of that. So things like that. So every time somebody came in, there would be an introduction, and then [snaps fingers], boom, you're back in the character, the play goes on.
So this play was sort of built upon that ghost story, and a very key element of it is that the little girl is left behind at this place, because the road to Ghurba could be possibly treacherous, and so the father makes a deal with the eggplant seller, who is Ben Cobb, and says, "I will come back for her. Will you take care of her?" And to me, this is an immigration story, right? I will leave my children behind, I will make a home, then send for them. But what happens is when he goes--there's a story about Palestinians and their keys, how they've always held onto the keys to the doors that they've been kicked out of or sent away from. They hold onto those keys in order to one day, when they come back there, they will be able to open their door. And he, well, he gives her the key, and he puts it on her before she goes to sleep that night. While she's sleeping, he gets up and talks to the--and goes off. She wakes up, finds out that her father has left her, and she's heartbroken, and she vows never to speak until he returns. And she puts on the thing, she stands by the water and doesn't speak a word from there on.
And these travelers come through. The basic premise of the play, the travelers come through, and they start--they would be there. They're talking to the vendor, then eating, drinking, but they start talking to the girl, and she doesn't respond, and they keep talking to her, and they feel better. And so slowly the story of the holy child on the path to Ghurba. "You must stop and talk to her. She will relieve you of all your troubles." You know, we're getting very pilgrim-like stuff. So one after another, people start talking to her. But then she's getting older, and she's changing gender. So actors then that have come through, or after they've had a moment, they switch. There's a very ritualistic switching. They do this--and meanwhile, we have the story, the ghost story of Yeats building, building, building toward the killing at the very end.
Intermission, people are starving, because they've been smelling eggplant all day, so they would run to the machines, and there's like a huge line for all the machines, and they come back in kind of stuffed with bad stuff, and in the second act we serve them the eggplant.

Collings

Oh, that was nice.

Kurup

So we couldn't be that cruel, right? And then by the end of the play, basically, we've had all these rotations of people, and by now the little girl, whose name is Jenin--and I picked Jenin because that's the town that Salim came from, and it is one of the places that you see all the time has been

bombed to bits, you know what I mean. So Jenin is now a seventy-two-year-old man, and we had this wonderful white-haired old man, who ended up--his name was George Haddad. If you ever were to interview a person from the community, there is nobody who has done more shows with Cornerstone than George Haddad, and George Haddad had probably done more shows with Cornerstone than some of our ensemble members. So he came to drop off his daughter and grandson to the auditions, and when I saw him, I said, "You have to audition." He's also a very charming guy and was immediately loved by everybody and has done so much with us now, including that film I told you about that I made.

So at the end of the play, basically, he is there waiting with the keys around his neck, and the father comes back finally. The vendor is long dead. The father has come back for his daughter, can't recognize his daughter anymore, because here's this old man standing there with keys around the neck and saying--and then there's this idea that, "Did you kill my daughter? Did you take--?" He hasn't aged. The father has not aged. Time has been playing a little bit, a little lost, playing a little bit with time. And he comes back, and it ends with the two of--because he had taught the daughter a little lullaby, and mystically, when the father returns, for the first time the old man speaks, or the daughter speaks as an old man, and into the place where the father's almost going to kill the daughter, thinking, who is this old man in her place? Did he kill her? And then he starts singing the song, the lullaby, and they see each other. They don't know how this can be, and they slowly sink to the ground as the lights go out. So I think it was a pretty dark kind of ending--

Collings

Well, yes.

Kurup

--and not necessarily a Cornerstone--

Collings

Not a Cornerstone ending.

Kurup

--not a Cornerstone celebratory ending.

Collings

That's exactly what I was thinking.

Kurup

And I have to say, that is one of the things I think I brought to this company. And I remember Steven Gutwillig, who was the managing director at the time, he came up and he was like, "Thank you. You're bringing a sensibility that I think is going to be valuable to us." Because it was very poetic. There was a lot of poetry in the piece. It was different. It was not about the here and now, although it was very much about the here and now, because we were talking about people who are literally here. Their stories were part of what was in the script. What I did was, in the seven-week

process of rehearsal, about two and a half, three weeks into it, I went off for two weeks, and Page and the ensemble kept working physically through things, making actors stronger, making community people do Suzuki, viewpoints, getting them to play and learn while I wrote the play in about two weeks, with all of the material that I had. And then I came back to rehearse, and we finished. So it was a very different process than we've necessarily had all the time since.

So that is what I think I'm happy about. In a funny way, Page and I, the way we were doing these story circles--there was no name for it then. Nobody called it story circles. It only became that later. But we literally, we did the opposite. The number of people circled the person we were interviewing. Now we do the thing where one person tries to interview a number of people. But the best work, the best stuff comes out of individual--like in a story circle we go, "Wow, that woman, her stories are amazing. I need to talk to her," and there are deeper conversations with her. So the story circles are a kind of methodology, a methodological sort of way of referring to something, but the true stuff really does come from these individual interviews.

Collings

Because they don't have these utterances in the context of the group setting, you're saying.

Kurup

Necessarily; exactly. And sometimes you will. There are some people who are freer with that stuff than others. And yet with those people, because you are diluting an hour and a half to two hours, or maybe even two and a half hours, with twelve, fifteen people, you know, what do you get out of that? Just little bits. But when you actually go and sit down with somebody, you're getting a lot more, and two or three-time follow-ups, just like we're doing. In order to really get to the depth of a person, you need to spend some time with them. So I think, interestingly enough, later on this word started coming out, story circles. But we were just sort of trying to figure out how to do it, and this was one way we came up with that was as valid as any other way.

So out of that came a sold-out run, part of the L.A. festival, for three weeks, and people came back eight, nine times to see the play.

Collings

Wow.

Kurup

Because there had not been a play about Arab American culture and life. And there was something really cool. One of the design elements, along with this amazing sort of path that gets cut through the carpet, there were these things called falookas, which are ship sails, like Lebanese--

Collings

Like Phoenician.

Kurup
--like you think about Phoenician sails above it, on which we projected--we asked for Casey Kasem, Don Bustany, all these sort of famous people and not-famous people, "Give us pictures of turn-of-the-century families, of your own family." So throughout the piece, we projected. And I've always wanted to work with live video, because performance art has influenced me also over the years, so I'd wanted to do more actual live video, too, which I later on ended up doing with the company. But these were just beautiful projections, and they were slightly distorted because they were sails, but they were quite amazing. You were seeing these incredible turn-of-the-century, 1901, 1907, 1898, these kinds of photos of Arab American culture in this country, and that, for me, was what was so unique and rare, and I've not seen too much more of that since then.
Collings
No, you don't.
Kurup
And people were actually coming back so many times that other people couldn't get into the theater, so there were like people upset.
Collings
Oh, because they said, "You've already seen it."
Kurup
Yes. I know, "Please, give us a chance," kind of idea. And we had a three- or four-piece live band, headed by a guy named David Markowitz, who has now basically become one of my songwriting partners and has written so many shows with me, in terms of the songs of the shows of Cornerstone, and we met some amazing people.
Collings
So this really sounds like a departure, as we were just saying, from the more uplifting tone of the earlier Cornerstone shows. How did the Cornerstone ensemble and Cornerstone company members see it?
Kurup
It was really interesting. I mean, you know, Chris' [Moore] brother just passed away around that time, Chris Moore, Bill's partner. You know, I don't know. I can't remember what Bill thought of it, but I know that other folks who had come to the company--because Bill was gone for so much of that. It was incredibly celebratory, and yet it had a--because I cannot put out work that is just about, "Yay." It's about, "Yay," but there are these nuances that are awfully problematic.
Collings
Well, I mean here there had been all this work about community, and then you pick like probably the most disenfranchised, displaced community in the face of the earth.
Kurup

Right. Oh, well, actually, they actually picked it themselves. I mean, Cornerstone actually picked the community.

Collings

Oh, I see.

Kurup

And part of the reason, I think, that Bill had thought about somebody of color like me, like I may be the closest thing to a Middle Eastern sort of connection, like because I'm South Asian, they're sort of East--they're not East Asian. There's another name for them now. It's sort of Middle Asian or something. I've got to really figure out what it was. But Middle Eastern culture felt closer toward even South Asian culture, and I think so when he was looking at this, who might direct it, I think that was one of the things that came into play probably. So they'd picked the community, but it was a community I was very interested in, because I was very up and aware about the Palestinian issue, what's going on, because once the first Gulf War happened, I discovered KPFK and Pacifica Radio Station, and from then on, for the past twenty-some years I've been listening to them, and there's only a few places you can actually get that information about what's actually happening on the ground there, and it's from them.

And so I was very interested in the Arab culture and how they existed here, and this one wasn't specifically Muslim, because we had Christians, we had Muslims, we had Druze, and so these different kind of religions. And you know, within the context of the play I realized why the Middle East is the way the Middle East is. I mean, they love to argue. There was a great--"Oh, well, no, in Lebanon we put the veil this way in the marriage." But, "No, no, in Syria it's like this." And so I go, "Let's put it here then," so you have to find these compromises constantly and say, "We're making theater. We're making something that is about things coming together and compromises being made without the art being compromised."

So, yes, it becomes a bit of a departure, and that's what I mean. I think bringing in a discipline like Suzuki and bringing in viewpoints and pushing the community to do physical work--I never thought I shouldn't do it. You know what I mean? Because as a person coming--here's another nuance. A person of color in the theater. One of the things that we--because somebody told me, "You're going to have to work five times as hard to get--."

Collings

Right. That was your teacher in Florida.

Kurup

Teacher in Florida, yes, exactly. And so in order to do that, you have to be so sort of always aware of the quality of the work, of what you're doing. More so than the freedom of somebody going--I feel like there are liabilities to that self-scrutiny and that sort of level of, have to get this to a really high level to be accepted, because what are you trying to be accepted into? A kind of mainstream that looks at you as somehow exotic, right? So you keep

coming at it with, "I'm not a threat. I am part of your culture. I can actually bring something to your discourse, and even maybe being the outsider, I might be able to speak about it in a way maybe you haven't thought about." So these are all the things that you come in with.
So when I see actors of color onstage, I want them to be of a high caliber. They've never been onstage? I don't care. I'm going to help them become--so as a director, and being an actor, I know how to talk to actors. I know how to get, without sort of spoon feeding them or talking down to them, I think I know how to get performances out of them. If I value anything about the actors who work with me, I think people walk away going, "God, the level of acting, I could not--." Not just, "I couldn't tell," but, "I really felt like it reached another high level." So I felt really important that there's no reason that this woman who's in her fifties and a little overweight can't--or maybe more than a little overweight, and complaining about how difficult it was to sort of sit in this position for a while and all that. You know, and I would try to appease her, but I would say, "No, I still need you to hold that position longer and hold that."
Because there was a lot of surreal stuff. There's a body. There's this one monologue where she's doing, where her dead body--her husband is there on the road to Ghurba. She's trying to take the dead body to Ghurba, and she has to wash, because I wanted to show ritual. I wanted to see Arab American ritual. I wanted to have the call of the muezzin, which is the call to prayer, and it was very beautiful, and Celine sang that while she's cleaning the body, and she has this song that she's singing about their life together, and then she does this kind of a funny monologue about him, so, again, to undercut. There's a thing in the play, a three-to-five-minute monologue, which is a standup routine by that seventy-two-year-old man I was telling you about, right, all in Arabic. So it's a standup routine that only the Arabs would understand, but the Americans would have to sort of go along with the laughter of the audience, the delight of the man in front of them to then enjoy the humor, and what I wanted to do was give them the opposite experience of what Americans do, when they come here and have to listen to standup comics for the first time.
Listening to Johnny Carson, I learned a lot about American humor, and Richard Pryor was a huge influence on me, because I learned irony, I learned all of the different kinds--now, South Indians are very acerbic, witty people. It's not necessarily American humor or British humor, but it's something that I was gobbling up, right, but by these people. So what I wanted to do was have that experience, because for me it was like understanding, "Oh, these are the little signs, these are the little indicators of what humor is," and all that. Same thing I wanted to do, but I was struggling to understand some of the actual context as a kid, and the actual language, because there was a lot of slang that I was just learning, right? Vice versa. Now I'm going to put an Arab monologue up, and sometimes I

laughed even when I didn't understand what it was as a kid, but I was laughing because I understood the rhythm of that humor, so I laughed with the other people. Same thing happened here. Americans would start laughing. They got delighted by the energy in the room.
So there were all these little things that I think the play was trying to play with, that had to do with turning the tables a little bit. And so it was very important for me that Arab Americans also come off really well, in terms of as an actor, as presenting it as a thing that felt of a high caliber and all that, something that obviously I might worry about less if I had been an American who felt a little freer to not have to be carrying the weight of this stuff, like has to be--

Collings

Yes, absolutely.

Kurup

So a lot of my work has been about that. Whenever I do a piece, I really feel like I'm not going to treat--the danger that happens at Cornerstone when people come here, and I think sometimes, I think a little bit Peter fell into that, Peter Sellars, which I will talk about later, but I think that there's a danger of it where, like, "Oh, you know, they're supposed to be kind of wooden. The acting is supposed to be kind of--." Well, it's just putting the noble savage on the stage and letting them just be who they are; that's enough. And I think it's anathema to those of us who were part of Cornerstone, especially in the early years, who were like working with that inferiority-superiority complex of like not being looked at as proper art, proper theater. And we're saying, "We are proper theater. We are a theater company making, in our opinion--," and Bill and I used to always say this, "We are the avant garde right now. It's not wearing black tights and putting white makeup on the face and doing a black-box piece of theater is avant garde. It's this." It is putting the world into the theater. It's breaking down that barrier between the professional and the folk, the audience, the viewer and the viewed. That is the avant garde.
And so for us, this idea of just presenting the noble savage, like King Kong or like some tribesman from Borneo, that's not how I wanted to look at these people, and that's how I don't think at our best we are when we don't do that, when we say--because, ultimately, if we don't fully humanize somebody, we can kill them. That's what I think the danger of--and that's the extreme, of course. But when we sort of put any culture onstage, and we don't make them fully--sense of humor, anger, find their flaws, put the ugliness and the beauty onstage, I think we risk limiting them to something not fully human, and therefore the extreme of that is genocide, which we've seen through history, right? So I was playing on no less than that level, in my mind. But that's why I need to do the work in this way.
And I feel like I think when we're doing that, we are working at our highest level. So this play then became a way--so my introduction to the company

was as a writer-director. They'd already known I was an actor, because they'd seen solo performances, they'd seen this piece I did that went to Cuba, and so a comic sort of vaudeville kind of piece, so I think now they had more than one kind of person in one person.

Collings

Were there particular shows where you felt like you veered too closely to that notion of putting up King Kong on the stage?

Kurup

I'm trying to think. I think it's less--

Collings

Where you ran dangerously close?

Kurup

I think we constantly, you know, we come to the line. We come to the place, I mean, and it may have to do with different sensibilities, but what I've always enjoyed about the room is that--and that circle--and you know, now, Page and I are the first two people-of-color performers, at least that I know of, at least in Los Angeles, that were part of the ensemble, that were made a part of the ensemble, so I think we bring immediately a kind of a new dialogue. And I think all of this happened because there had been a retreat that the company had had with itself, led by an African American woman, who really brought the company to task in terms of how white the company was, and there was a lot of emotions involved with that, because I think when you challenge the--it's one thing to be challenged from the outside, but when you challenge yourself, which is what I appreciated so much about those people in that circle that I had not entered yet, they have the wherewithal and the sort of insight to be able to look and see that there's something not quite right here. We're living in this incredible--we came to this city because of its multiplicity, and we should represent that same demographic as best as we can.

And that's really hard, because what you're asking is to change yourself, dissolve yourself in a certain way, and things that you really--people that you value--so there were some difficult decisions Bill and the ensemble had to make in order to--there were a lot of friends they had here, there were a lot of people who are white who had been great for the company, but they set out to integrate themselves.

Collings

And here they are, coming into a city which is an immigrant city--

Kurup

Exactly.

Collings

--at a time when immigration is higher than it's ever been since the 1910s, 1920.

Kurup

Twenty, yes, exactly, because, yes, in the teens and twenties of this country, we were still dealing with a lot of sort of Asian-exclusion stuff, and not until the sixties could Asians finally come back again. I mean, there were these Indians that came here at the turn of the last century, like in the 1890s, brought here, big Sikhs who were brought to work in these paper mills up in Oregon and Washington, and then by the late 1800s to the early 1900s, you have the Asian-Exclusion Act. And so we always think of the Asian-Exclusion Act as something that the Chinese had, but it was actually, they used to actually say, "No hindoos," and they used to spell it h-i-n-d-o-o-s. And in that they were referring to Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, everybody, but they were all called hindoos.

And so what happened in that time is that these people, these Indians, because there was no Pakistan or anything of that sort then, when the mills closed and they moved down through California, they went all the way down into Mexico. Some of them stayed up in Yuba City, which is northern California kind of, mid-northern California, and they have their own city there, called Yuba City, and it's all Sikh. It's mostly Punjabi. But a lot of the rest of those Punjabis and other Indians went down into Mexico and met women there who looked like the women they knew. The food was similar, with the chapatis and the tortillas and the beans, and there was more spice there. They intermarried, and you see some of their offspring. I look at them and go, "God, you are from Kerala. You're totally from--." And they're not. So, yes, it was an amazingly immigrant city. They came here, looked at their own composition, and said, "Something should change." And in time, this company has become incredibly integrated, but due to that, the sort of--

Collings

Executive decision.

Kurup

--that executive decision and then actually walking that walk, you know. So one of the coolest things that happened during the time--and I talk about this all the time when I talk about Cornerstone and my appreciation for what Bill and everybody in that company did. They were at that time guaranteed something like, I think, thirty-four to forty weeks of employment a year. It's pretty high.

Collings

They had a tenure system.

Kurup

Well, the actual tenure system didn't come until later, and I'll tell you about that another time, or later. But it was basically the fact that because everybody was doing a little bit of everything, but you had forty-some weeks of work time, which is pretty good, even though I think the money wasn't that much. It was something like 400 or $450 a week, which is still pretty good for that time and for the theater, and you're getting to do the work you

want to do. In order for them to allow Page and me to come in, I think they each had to give up four weeks of employment.

Collings

Right, right. Yes, I've heard about this, that if you want to bring somebody else in, you've got to shave off your own.

Kurup

You have to shave off your own, and to the point now where most of us get about ten weeks of employment at the most, which is I don't think ideal, but it is also in order--I just hope that there'll be a day where if people could actually have forty weeks of employment and we are the size we are, it would be great. But, I mean, you can also sort of kind of divide yourself into oblivion, which is the danger of it, and then you can dissolve into something else. But for me, that was quite amazing, and we were the first recipients of that, and I've always been really aware and grateful for that sacrifice, so to speak. And then I made that sacrifice, and we all made that sacrifice as we expanded. We could have easily stayed a small group of four or five, and for a while we were. I mean, there were four main actors in the company, Page, Chris, Ben, myself, and Ashby, too, but then Ashby left in around '94, '95, for many reasons. She was out of the company after that. But the four of us mainly were the actors, and then we didn't expand until--then in '96 we added one more actor, Armando Molina. But it was a pretty small, tight group doing most of the work. Especially the ensemble work was very much about just this small group of people. Now we have about six actors, which is bigger than we've ever had, in a funny way.

So out of that process, that's it. I'm done with the production. It's gone well. I think they're happy with everything, and they ask Page to go to Arena with them. So Page is doing my production of "Ghurba," and right after that, you know, Bill has been going back and forth, planning stuff over there, and then they hire Page to go to Arena. And it was really interesting. I was like, "Oh, that's great," and I didn't know why. And then I found out later it had to do more with them then wanting to work with Page. They'd gotten more of a picture of me, you know. I've written and I've directed, and they'd seen me act, so I think they wanted to work with her a little bit more, to see what she was like to work with. So she went there and she did the Arena thing, and I went and visited, and it was very clear we were all in love with each other. There was no question about it. There was this--it's immediate. It's like when you meet somebody you fall in love with, and it was like that. And then very soon after that, after the Arena experience--and I'd gone down there to hang out, and you can tell a friendship starts beginning now with all these different people. This is '93, end of '93. Pretty soon after that, they asked Page and I to join the company, because it was really interesting. They were talking to us about like, "Hey, you know, we're thinking of doing 'Twelfth Night' in the spring. Like what do you think of 'Twelfth Night'?" I said, "Oh, I love "Twelfth Night." And then they said,

"What role would you think of if you were going to be playing in it?" And I said, "Well, I've always wanted to play Feste," and I said, "I have these ideas about Feste as a guitar-playing kind of clown, and I thought of him--." So that kind of stuff was being sort of bandied about, and I was like, "Okay, well, that's interesting." And then they said, "Look. We would love for you to join the company."

Now, what was interesting is that Page and I had a company also. We had a company called The Raven Group. We had come out of LATC. We were part of a larger collective called The Artists Collective, groups that had come out of LATC, so we were trying to keep that building alive, as I had said before. So there was this weird thing, and I know at first Page was very, like, "I don't know. We've worked really hard." She'd worked on the press kits. We'd worked hard on building our company. And I said, "I know, but don't you feel this affinity?" And she goes, "Yeah, I feel the affinity, but you know, we've worked hard. This is our company. We should do--." And I said, "Well, you know, they have an infrastructure. They're working in a way that I think was really meaningful for us, what we did. I feel like we can bring a kind of sobriety and a kind of rigor and a kind of--." She's a dance major who's come out of UCLA with a master's degree. She can bring choreography. Because most of the people in Cornerstone were English majors, art majors--

Collings

Right, philosophy majors.

Kurup

--philosophy majors. Amy was a comparative religions major, so they were not theater majors. So at least here are two people who are theater majors, or a dance major and a theater major, and people who may bring some technique of a different kind anyway, you know, not better or worse, but a different kind. And I really believed that, because I think what they were already doing, they were inventing their own thing, and certainly Page and I were inventing our own thing, because I think any artist, once they come out of school, they're not just mimicking what they learned in school. If they're of any value, they're creating something new with that, and they're creating their own thing with it.

So my degree had been first as a BFA in acting/directing and then just as an actor. But then I became a writer and a composer, a director, and that through Cornerstone. A lot of that work was done for--and I was like, "This is what we've always wanted. We've wanted to work with an ensemble of people that we care about, we believe in what we're doing." And she was like, "Well, do we always want to work with communities?"

Collings

Well, that's what I was just going to ask. Yes.

Kurup

That's what she said. "Is this what we always want to do is work with communities?" And I was like, "I don't know." I said, "But look at this 'Twelfth Night' thing we're doing. It's not community, and we can bring our own rigor to it in a different way." And that is why we did those ensemble shows, because it pushed us and our muscles in a different direction. Because when you're working in a community, you're often helping. You're there as--Bill is working in a circus. He would overcast, you know, thirty-five, forty people, and it's like a lot of people, and he's trying to find--and he can't even--there's no way for him to keep his eye on everything. And so Chris is over here, I'm over here, Page is over here, Ben's over there. We're helping people. We're trying to fix this here, do little things, just going off and doing them, fixing them on our own, telling Bill.

And one of the things Bill would do, in the afternoons we would rehearse. This is technique I think Bill came up with, which nobody would normally think about. But he's working with community people. What he's trying to do is work out blocking in the afternoon, and so we come in in the afternoon, we try things. And Bill was lucky. He had these self-starting actors, the ability to sort of push things and try things and not be afraid to--not actors who go, "Okay, where do I go now? What should I do now?" like a lot of regional theater actors and all of this stuff. These are actors who would try things and say, "What if we did this? Let's try."

And Ben Cobb, as I said to you, one of the most sort of out-of-the-box kind of thinkers, and he'll say something that seems like the most ridiculous idea ever, and then we'll all go, "Yeah, let's try it." You know what I mean? And really everybody in that little group was like that, daring to try things, and that was what was so exciting about that early nineties period, that '93, '94, '95, all that era. We were making it up, and that's what makes that time so particularly special. We're still making it up in different ways, yet things have become more codified, so there are certain things like, "This is the Cornerstone way." And then we were like, what is the Cornerstone way? I'm always like that. When you've done all that other stuff and you're making it up, you're still knowing, like, "Guys, we're still making it up as we go." There are things that we follow, some protocols, but when people come in who have studied Cornerstone, or people come in who know of Cornerstone and then read about it and try to deal with it from that point of view, it can fall into a bit of the, "Well, this is how you do it." And I think like that can sometimes stilt us a little bit.

So part of what was going on in that time was us being very creative in the afternoons, then that blocking being written down, and then when the community comes in at night, saying, "You know, can you try crossing on this line? Can you go over there for this?" And so that blocking that we had helped create would happen in the evening with the actors. So that was one way of working, and I thought, well, that's an interesting way. So that kind of jamming is what Bill called it always, jamming, and jamming on ideas,

jamming, and that was what was always fun, because if I then work with a director now from a regional theater, it's very different, and so I don't want to work in the regional theater. I hardly want to work in these theater companies. I was working with a group of people that I wanted to work with, and we worked in that way.
When I'm directing the play--I had, of course, the benefit of working with Bill as an actor in his production. He's never gotten the chance to work with me as an actor, because he refuses to act. He will not get onstage.
Collings
That's interesting.
Kurup
Even though at one point he had acted, and actually when we do readings, he reads very well. He's a very intelligent guy, and he can make sense of the lines, and he's got this horribly, appalling memory that allows him to remember every line. He's got like a photographic memory. And so he will say lines back to you that are your lines that you're not saying correctly, which is very annoying but very helpful. So this kind of way of working was very invigorating.
So after that, what happened was we did "Twelfth Night." It was received very well. We've got a lot of Dramalogue Awards and a lot of Garland recognition--that was the Backstage West thing--and we ended up getting our first Ovation nomination, and it was the first Ovation year, the year of Ovations for the first time. You know, it was trying to be our Tonys, right, or Chicago's Jeff Awards or whatever. And Chris won best actor for his double portrayal of Sebastian and Viola. So that started putting us on the map. And before, there was this whole, "Are you theater? Are you--?"
Collings
Community service.
Kurup
"Are you a community service?" And you know how we are. We're actors, and it's like, "Award? Oh, you've got an award? You must be good," which is a lot of crap, but it's also, if that's what it takes to start getting recognized. But so that was a little inkling there, and people were like coming to see the play, and even though they were a little--I think there was that first sort of repulsion toward changing Shakespeare in any way at all, I think there were other people who were more adventurous going, "Hey, that's interesting that you were able--." And we dealt with the Tailhook scandal at that time. Do you remember that, the hazing of the women and all that?
Collings
Oh, yes, yes, in the--
Kurup
Malvolio was a lesbian woman--I mean, of course she had to be a lesbian woman--and Ashby played it. We had some very exciting things that happened. Ashby, on opening night, opening night, jumped over what was--

you know a swimming pool diving board--jumped over it and broke her foot. Opening night at the end of the act, she jumps over, breaks her foot, and a woman named Rebecca Clark was actually a student of mine over at UC Irvine, and she was a friend of Chris', and she was a super understudy, as we would call her. She was ready backstage. Act II she comes on as Malvolio and has to take on opening night duties, and she gets reviewed. It was so weird. And Ashby then did the whole rest of the run in a cast.
We've had a lot of adventures of that sort, so that speaks--we used to have an understudy policy, which we don't anymore, and it was an amazing save for the moment. We did "Twelfth Night." That did well. And then after "Twelfth Night" we did the bridge show, our first L.A. bridge show. By then I was part of the company, and we did this show called "L.A. Building," and I'm sure you've talked a little bit about "L.A. Building," and one of the hardest things, because we were doing a tour in the summer of the different areas where we'd worked, with the Arab American community, in those physical, geographic places, Pacoima, all that. And it was ninety-eight degrees in the Valley. It was a hundred and five degrees inside the auditorium, and Lynn constructed this all-steel set--

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

--that we had to take apart every Sunday after the matinee and then construct it again on Tuesday for our Wednesday tech and run through and then a Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday show, and we did five weeks of that. But the genius part of it was--so, literally, there were times--I remember very clearly thinking one day, we were in Pacoima, I think, and it was so hot, and we finished and we were like--and by now, because every week the bolts are getting--

Collings

They're getting stripped.

Kurup

--they're getting stripped, and they're bending, and it was so hot in there, I literally felt like I was going to spontaneously combust. But there was a real sense of like, if I do spontaneously combust right now, I am exactly where I want to be.

Collings

I'm in the right place.

Kurup

I'm in the right place. Because this was the place I wanted to be, and it was an amazing feeling. The boat was going, and we had no idea--it was a fog ahead, but we knew "Ghurba" was ahead, you know? And out of that, the best thing we did was at the end of that, we did the last week of performances in Watts, because we knew we were going to Watts. And it was fantastic, because all these people from Watts came, and then all these

people wanted to be in the show, and so they auditioned at the different places that we did.
We then went into--I'm sure Paula has talked to you a lot about the chronology of things, but I'm pretty much also a chronology guy, because it's all in my head--

Collings
Yes, yes, that's fine. Yes.

Kurup
--I mean, even Lynn goes, "Shishir, when was that when we did that?", so even though Lynn's been here the longest of all of us, even longer than Bill. So then we do Watts. We start in--as you know, we were brought to Watts because there was a board member, Alex Nunez, who had said, "There are tensions between the Latino and the African American community. Watts is really 60 percent Latino now," and maybe now it's even more, "but it's still recognized as an African American enclave. There are all these gang issues, street issues, colors issues, all of this stuff."
So we first do a play at the Watts Towers, and that was called--there was a little short play called "Breaking Plates," and then the thing that went on which is the thing of the nightingale--what's it called?

Collings
"The Love of the Nightingale"?

Kurup
"The Love of the Nightingale," which is basically the story of Tereus, it's an old Greek myth, and it's Timberlake Wertenbaker's. It was the first time we've ever done a play intact, a modern play written by a playwright, and basically paid rights for it and did it. And here's the thing, here's the interesting thing. I come in, I'm the first person to direct a Cornerstone show other than Bill, and I'm doing more than one thing. I'm writing, I'm directing, I'm acting, and then I'm also composing now. So in a funny way, what that does is it opens up the door for other people to go, "Hey, I want to do this." So Ashby says, "I want to direct," and so she directs "Love of the Nightingale."
We meet some people for our--oddly enough, somebody we met in the community at that time, M.C. Earle, is now a member of our ensemble, many, many years later, and you will see him in the play. He starts off the play. But we met him then, and M.C., he's a very interesting character and would have worked with us even more--in fact, he was coming to rehearsal one day a few years later, two years after we met him, and he decided to do something that he would really regret, which is be the driver for a car that was part of a heist, and got thrown in prison for it. So for about four years he was out of the picture. He would have been working with us, probably. He was a good actor, natural actor. His father was an actor in Watts.

Collings
Oh, really.

Kurup
Yes. He grew up with actors around and poets. The Watts Poets were his uncles, basically. But it was tragic stuff, you know, found his father asleep on the couch, had OD'd, so all kinds of difficult, difficult life stuff; even with Quentin. I mean, the stories we had in Watts with people we met, the stories we got out of them were suddenly so much bleaker and darker and sadder in many ways, even though the kids in Watts were so--the littler kids were like so present, appreciative, compared to kids from like other neighborhoods where, especially wealthier neighborhoods, it was very different, the difference between Watts kids. Now, when you got to about fourteen, the Watts kids were starting to have that deadness in the eyes. There was a kind of like thing that was sort of shutting them down. And yet, when you broke through with those kids, they would break your heart with how present and loving they were.
Collings
Well, one of the things that Lynn said about the show was that the community members insisted on doing it as a straight--
Kurup
Play.
Collings
Thracian garb, and didn't want to bring it into the contemporary.
Kurup
Yes, they didn't. They didn't want the here and now. In a funny way, because the here and now for them was not particularly appealing.
Collings
And there wasn't an interest in exploring these tensions that you were brought in to explore, it sounds like.
Kurup
Yes. Now, across the way in San Miguel Church, which is what I was working on with Juliette--it's the first time we worked with Juliette Carillo, who has now also become a member of our ensemble. Across the way, we were working on "Los Faustinos," written by Bernardo Solino. It was the Faust legend, and there we were. And actually--
Collings
But you were doing it as two separate productions, the African American production and the Latino production.
Kurup
And the Latino production. And how the tension sort of came in is like at one point we met this woman, Theodora Hardy, over at the "Nightingale" production, because the idea was to, let's do separate ones and then we'll bring them both together in the next two plays, and particularly in the bridge show.
Collings
Oh, I see.

Kurup
Do you see what I mean? So that's what--let's give the specificity the specificity, and then let's bridge it. That's always what the bridge shows ideas have been. Let's be specific and then, not general, but let's bring it together.
But what happened was after we met Theodora, we liked her. Her presence was amazing onstage, a larger woman that just had big voice and just presence. So, well, we lost an actor from the "Faustinos" production, and we asked Theodora to come and join, and she came and did a couple of days, and then she basically said something like she didn't want to be around Latino people--she's African American--which was, we were like, "Is that for real? Or is it just because the part's really small and she just played a really big part?" And so we weren't sure what it was. Because we had since, from there, since that point will have worked as--it's so funny to talk about the future coming up, which is in the past--we worked with her a number of times after, and Theodora is like one of those people within our culture, her trajectory and growth as a person, an accepting person from a person who was a little more rigid, is one of those Hallmark Hall of Fame movies, you know what I mean? Like, literally, what she came to accept as being okay with her Christian beliefs was much more catholic than parochial, and widened so much more. But one of them was this, was her saying that, "I don't want to work with Latinos," and so she actually dropped out of that show.
A little anecdote. There was a woman working with us, an African American woman. She was playing a character in the Latino show, side of the community, she was playing this character where she couldn't play anything other than the sassy--and she'd gone to college and had studied a little theater. She was doing this sassy kind of thing, and we're like, "No, no, no, you don't have to do that. It's just--." I think it was Juliette was trying to work with her, saying, "You don't have to--." But she didn't know how to, because every director she had worked with in college--
Collings
Right, wanted her to be that sort of street--
Kurup
--had wanted her to be that street-sassy maid or whatever. It's really, that's one of those things I was like, "Oh, my god. You can't actually break out of it, because that's the only thing you've been allowed to do." It was interesting.
We had two African American actors that joined our company at that time, not as ensemble members but as guest artists, because we couldn't afford to bring new ensemble members in, but that's when we invented the idea of guest artists, saying, "You're going to come on. You will represent the company. You can come to our company meetings. We'd love for you to be part of that." One was a hard-of-hearing actor, C.J. Jones, and Carol

Forman, a formidable young actor, female, an actress who I'd worked with before, Page had worked with before. She came out of LATC, and we recommended her to Cornerstone. And both of them had trouble going back to Watts. C.J. said, "I left this, this kind of place. I'm not comfortable going back to it."

And early on, while we were at the Watts Towers, we were given a talk by the police, and it was one of those bizarre moments where they were literally saying to us, "If you're coming up to a stop sign, you're at the stop sign and somebody starts walking up to you, gun it and get out of there." So you're creating a--because they were afraid about all these white people coming into--now, we weren't all white, but those of us who were white were to be afraid, like Watts was a place to be afraid of. Now, you know, granted, at that time in '94, there was a lot of--you know, crack had been devastating the communities, right, so there was a lot--I mean, working at LATC in the late eighties, I was seeing people smoking crack on the street all the time, and it was like we'd come out of rehearsal, sometimes in the afternoon, you know, they'd be out, people smoking crack in the afternoon. So it was prevalent and I understood that, and so there were a lot of killings that were going on in the name of drug dealing and all that. But the scare tactics just piled upon it. Literally, Carol left the show.

Collings

So were the police brought in to speak to you by the--was it the assemblyman or the supervisor who had brought you in in the first place? Or how did this meeting take place?

Kurup

That's what I'm not sure, how that happened. Like I think it was just like, okay, you're in Watts, you're going to be walking around here, you should have, basically, a conversation with the police and say, "Well, what is safe and what is not safe, and what should be done, and where should you not be, and where should you be," because there are neighborhoods there you shouldn't be walking or driving in, now, depending on what color you're wearing.

Collings

And so you said Carol left the show.

Kurup

Carol was like--I don't know what was the reason she gave, but I think ultimately, if I remember correctly, the true reason was I think she was uncomfortable with being there. We were walking along in Watts Towers area, and I remember bending down, and I picked up a little bullet, a spent bullet, not a cartridge but the actual lead. And I kept it in my pocket as a souvenir to like maybe make a chain out of it or something. But I remember her seeing that, and it was like, "Oh, my god." And Page, too, was a little freaked out. We'd never gone into Watts before, and Watts had this mystique around it, but not the kind of mystique that one wants to be drawn

into, but mostly about being repelled from. So everybody was a little bit on edge and afraid, and, you know, we were working inside San Miguel, which is like inside near Grape Street, not far--it's like around 108th, I think, or 112th. I can't remember now. But, you know.
I'll give you some examples of what are interesting--closing day, we're--not even, before closing. We're in rehearsal. Suddenly gunshots ring out, and all the Watts folk go, boom, on the ground. All the Cornerstone people are like, "Huh? What's that?" You know? So that's one little example. Then I remember closing very clearly. Back in those days, we struck everything. We'd build, we struck, as a company. We don't do any of that anymore. All Equity stuff and all of that now. But I was literally carrying out some flats, putting them down, and I look over--it's pitch black, it's Sunday night, and suddenly I see flames shooting up into the air. It's a machine gun, somebody shooting a machine gun [imitates sound] into the air. It's Sunday night so it's party, it's a kind of like a partying kind of situation. Maybe the next day was a holiday, I can't remember now. But it was like, "Oh." Surreal, because you're looking at it going, "What is that?" because it takes you a while if you're not used to something. And suddenly it's like, "Oh, that's machine-gun fire." And then it doesn't occur to you, oh, that you have to sort of do anything about it. You just look at it, you know. Very strange. But here's the other side. We had amazing audiences. In San Miguel Church for "Los Faustinos," Juliette will probably tell you it's one of the hardest things she's ever done. It was just not too long out of school, she'd just started some of her professional jobs, and this was one of them. It was one of the hardest things--the set designer, one of the hardest things she'd ever done. I knew how hard, but I was a little more used to it, and I knew what to expect after I had done a few already. I played La Muerte, which is a great part, because it's like the death, with a skeleton suit on, and I played the guitar; I had a cape.
And I was the bandleader in that show. I had a little bit of acting, but I also did band, I did music. It was me, a drummer, and an accordion player. That was it. It was written by a Mexican guy who was doing all this very ranchera kind of music. That's when I first learned about ranchera music. It was great, again an opportunity Cornerstone has given me to learn all these forms of music that I've learned to play.
But it was great. The kids loved La Muerte. They were terrified of him. You'll see, there's some video of me coming out, and the kids are like, "Oooh." You know, you can hear little kids crying and all that, but then other kids just enjoying the fear of it, you know. Full house, day one. People had come from Downey, different places, because they've never had a play inside that area. So here they come into the church hall.

Collings

That's part of the Cornerstone mission right there.

Kurup

Very much so, very much so. And we were inside a church hall. We had not even had a run through of the show, not even--forget previews. There's no such thing as previews in those days. We had not even had a run through of the show, a full run through of that whole thing with tech and everything. But there was an audience, and we did it. And, you know, people like Luis Alfaro and other people who are well-known folk in the arts world here, came to see it and were blown away by it because of its--part of it is that audience, children running around, the pieces going on, all of this, the madness of it, and yet this cogent piece of theater that was happening there.

Now, two little stories, or three little stories. One is one of the things about doing it in San Miguel Church. Juliette tells this story of like these people coming to see--oh, no, I'll tell you another story first. George, this young kid named George, comes up to me when we're striking the set, and he's helping. He's like hanging out with me, and he's saying to me, "Hey, you know, how come one time you did the play, you said the line like this, and then another time you said it like this? And then that other time, you were like playing the guitar and then you played this thing, and then you did--." And he was like saying--I said, "George, how many times did you see the play?" He goes, "Nine." And we did only twelve performances. He saw three-quarters of those. Half--kids would come and see that show that had come--they'd never come to a theater, so they would come. They were the kids of the neighborhood. They came every night. Along with that--and I'll put George in that story, because I think he was one of those kids--they're at the desk, at the box office, which is basically a table, the entrance, and this kid comes up and he goes, "Pay what you can, huh?" And they said, "Yeah." So he reaches into his pocket and pulls out like this many pennies.

Collings

Oh, that's very generous.

Kurup

And he puts it down, like seventy-two pennies or something like that, right? He goes, "Seventy-two," and about five kids walk in with him. Right? Pay what you can. That, to me, said a lot about poor people, and I come from a poor family. I understand this, this pride. I don't want to do this for free. You're saying pay what I can? I understand that concept. I'm paying what I can. And, you know, that was very moving for me. So these are the kinds--. And then the final thing is, we also were starting to have a following now of people in Santa Monica, so a lot of more affluent white people who have seen some of the work, Arab Americans had come to see it, so they're coming to Watts now to see a play in Watts, because we're there, and this is an exciting company that is making them go to different parts of their city. I've always said something I've been saying a lot recently, but the thing is, you know--I think I said this earlier--Cornerstone brings L.A. to L.A. and makes it see L.A. like they've not seen L.A. before. And I have mapped my

life here in this city by the plays I've done in these different locales. Most people can't do that in this city. They think about, "Oh, I worked in that theater. I worked at the Mark Taper. I worked at the Pasadena Playhouse." I say, "I worked in that church over there. We did a play in that restaurant. We did a play in that subway terminal building. We did a play in that library. We did a play in that mall." You know? That, and I have friends who live on that street, because I've gone to dinner at their house. They're community people who have invited me to their house. So this is part of how I've mapped L.A., and this is why this is my city. This is why I'm an Angeleno. Now, these guys are being brought over to come see us in Watts. Not being shipped there, but they're coming on their own, but they get lost.

Collings

They get lost.

Kurup

This one group, this one family gets lost, terrified because they have all heard all the stories of Watts and it's kind of the neighborhood you're supposed to be scared of. It looks scary in the way we've stereotyped it. Knock on the door and they say--the guy goes, "Hi. We're just wondering, we're looking for San Miguel Church. Can you help us find it?" He goes, "Oh, are you going to come see Cornerstone's 'Los Faustinos'?" And he goes, "Yeah." He was like, what a relief, you know? Then she goes, "Oh, yeah. You just have to turn on that street and then turn right there, and they're over there." And that was such an amazing sort of story of like, you know--

Collings

Yes, indeed.

Kurup

--that the community knew that this play was going on, and they made these white people feel very--

Collings

Welcome.

Kurup

--welcome, you know? And for me, that's like a huge thing, for this person who was adventurous to begin with, and got rewarded for that adventurism by actually meeting somebody who welcomed them into their neighborhood and didn't make them feel like they were the bad guy or the outsider who's always making judgments about me or whatever.

So we do that, and then the next play is we work at St. John's, and St. John's, that's when I wrote "Sid Arthur." Originally, Chris was supposed to do that. He was supposed to direct that piece, and there was supposed to be another writer, but all that fell through because Chris pulled out, not directing it, and Page decided to direct it, and I fashioned a play based upon "Siddhartha." We called it "Sid Arthur," and that was very much about the here and now, and it was a song-filled play.

One of the things that we do at Cornerstone a lot, and we used to do a lot more--Michael [John Garces]'s presence is different. He's not necessarily a--we don't do as many musical-ized things, you know, except we are doing a big musical, an actual old-fashioned musical in the fall, so it's a different thing. But we have always done plays with songs, like a Brendan Behan play, you know what I mean, like "The Hostage" or something. That's what I've always liked about it, because it's more Brechtian in its approach, I feel. So "Sid Arthur" had a lot of songs. We worked inside St. John's Church, across from the Watts Towers. We were working with a chorus of four people who were crack addicts, who were in a place called the House of Uhuru, and a guy named Vernon was the lead sort of singer. There was another guy named Teddy, and then a couple of other people, two women. And, you know, they were pretty volatile people in that they were the sweetest people, but they could go off really easily with each other, because they had their own dynamic, so there was always a fear of things going--

Collings

Haywire.

Kurup

--haywire, you know, including at their House of Uhuru. They were staying at their House of Uhuru as a sort of a halfway house to keep them out of jail for crack, so they had to keep their nose clean. And it was amazing to meet somebody like Teddy, who's this tall--this is where we met Quentin, who's also tall, handsome, just a vital person. And Teddy was also very beautiful, and to hear that Teddy used to know when McDonald's was throwing out their two-hour-old hamburgers and go dumpster diving because he was so cracked out, you know, that he knew all the places to go to get food. It was like a lesson in survival as a homeless person. He was a homeless person. So sort of as part of a tribute to those people who had been homeless within our cast, I let Sid Arthur become a homeless person at some point, living under a bridge, because it coincided with Siddhartha's own giving up everything and becoming a mendicant, a person who walked the world looking for alms.

So that's where also Guillermo, who is now the artistic director of Watts Village Theater Company--he had just done "Los Faustinos" with us, and we cast him as Jesus in this one, who's playing the Govinda role, which is the parallel journey of Siddhartha's, you know, his friend that goes through life. And again we tried the idea of people aging and changing and all that, and at the end it was a man who was in his eighties at that time, Alex Andratti, and he's died since, of course. Quite old now, he would be a hundred years old now, almost. That would have been Jesus as he got older. Sid never ages. Sid Arthur stays the same. Everybody else ages along. So similar technique, oddly enough, from "Ghurba." Now I'm only noticing it as I'm saying it.

And some of the production was marked with all kinds of interesting things that were challenging. We had lockdowns at the House of Uhuru, and so people wouldn't show up at rehearsal. They couldn't, because they were literally locked down. They were marked with--the last day of our show, all our mics were stolen. Power issues. And then one day, literally on the day of opening, the afternoon of opening, getting ready to let the audience in, and Vernon comes up to me, and I'm not directing the show, Page is directing the show, but I'm there helping, because I've done the sound and I've done the music, and I'm helping the young guy, Andrew Escobar, who we met in--his whole family was in "Los Faustinos." So he was a kid, he was really in sound, so he was going to be the sound guy, he was going to run the board. So I was there to help him with all that stuff, and I was around. I mean, it's our production. So Bill was gone. A lot of people were gone. It was funny, there were times like that. We're just left alone, you know. It was like so it suddenly became Page's and Shishir's show, and it was us and Geoff doing the lights, and Nephelie, who's now with our company, doing set design. Lynn wasn't there. I don't know where they were.

But Vernon walks up to me and he goes--he's got his bag and he goes, "I'm going." I said, "Where are you going?" I said, "We're about to open. We're about to start the show, let the audience in." He goes, "I've had it with Teddy. He just--," he said, "I can't put up with these people anymore. I'm leaving." I said, "Vernon, you're singing every song. You are playing this major character in the play. You can't leave right now." He goes, "I can't work. I'm sorry, man. I really can't. I'm sorry to do this to you." And I'm like--so then I had to go into like therapist mode. I said, "Vernon, what is the main thing that you guys talk about all of the time? Seeing something through. This is what your program is all about, finishing what you started. The recidivism has to do with what? Not finishing." He goes, "Yeah, I know, I know, man. But I can't--if he doesn't apologize--." I said, "You know, you have a show to do. That's what you are. You're an artist. You're here to do a show." And he had a fantastic voice. He has an amazing singing voice. And I said, "If you walk out right now, you will have failed the way you've said you don't want to fail. You know, you're not going to be very happy with yourself. But if you stay, I think you might find something of value by having stayed. Don't stay for Teddy. Don't leave for Teddy. Stay for yourself. Stay for me. Stay for our show. Stay for Page. You care about her. You say you're thankful for what she's done. Show her." He stayed and we did the show, and he came up afterwards and said, "You know, thank you. You're absolutely right. If I had left, I would have hated myself."

So I don't know how many theater experiences make you have to deal with stuff like that, but I have to tell you that I value that, because what does it do? It makes you have to improvise. It makes you present. It makes you deal with life along with, you know, this sort of hermetically sealed world of the theater, which is so--ultimately, was the seductive thing that pulled me

into it, this special world that you can fantasize and you can playmake and do all this stuff, and you're cocooned in this environment. But then that cocoon can become a gilded kind of cage. You know?

Collings

Yes. Well, do you think that it's of particular importance, from an artistic standpoint, to be working with communities that are in crisis in the way that you describe?

Collings

You know, it's interesting, because we've always thought of the underserved rather than crisis, but somehow they seem to dovetail. You know what I mean? So I don't think it was sort of like, "Let's look for communities in crisis." Like, say, for example, people who've done a lot of work in prisons and stuff like that. It's not what Cornerstone was ever looking for, or at least not from what I understand. But we were always looking to where the voice is not coming out of, where it's invisible.

You know, in one point many years later, when we did our show with the Muslim Americans, the gay issue that came up in "Can't Take it With You," Bill gave a really interesting speech, and when we get to that, I will talk about it more directly. But a phrase that came out of it, that as he was talking he said, "I think what we are is we represent not just the minority but the minority of the minorities." And I think that that's what I mean also when I'm saying the underserved and the invisible. I mean, the Arabs were invisible, literally, right? And Watts is really underserved on so many levels. I mean, one of the things that we found in Watts was how much food crisis was going on there, when we ended up working on the next show after "Sid Arthur," which we were already experiencing a little bit in "Sid Arthur." When we went into the bridge show, which was the final, culminating piece, called "Central Avenue Chalk Circle," this is the one that Lynn Manning wrote, and he's writing for our next show, too, we would come to rehearsal and the kids were starving. And we did not have an infrastructure that had allowed us to connect with programs that brought food to communities. You know what I mean? We had not thought of that at the time. Later on we've tried to think about it, but it didn't quite happen. So we were often paying out of our pocket, taking kids to Jack in the Box or Pioneer Chicken or Popeye's, buying them things. But we were making 450 bucks, 500 bucks a week, which on some levels, hey, that's good money for '94, but not really, not really. And so we would be like, we're paying something that we can't really pay for. But it was that tension. "I'm going over to--because there's no--."

And that's the other thing you notice. There's nothing to eat in those communities but the worst kinds of food. And then there's obesity, and then you look at these poor people who are horribly fat, for one thing because, (a), they're dealing with a lot of stress and a lot of stress that triggers eating, eating that is horrible because it's only crap food, and even the food-stamp places like the Food For Lesses and all that out there, they're stocked

with the worst kinds of food, not the best kinds of food, you know. So you really notice the tension. You look at a fat African American person and you go, "Oh, you're poor but you're fat." Well, but do you realize what's happening? This person is actually dying from that, from this food.

Collings

Yes, and also, you can't afford to spend money on food that the kids won't eat.

Kurup

Yes, yes, exactly, and all they've ever had is the fast-food kind. So these are the things that came up for us that were really hard, and "Chalk Circle" was exciting on one level, because we got to work inside this big warehouse of the WLCAC, which is the Watts Labor Action Community--there's an acronym that I can't even keep up with it. That's not my forte, acronyms. But a well-known place in Watts, controversial place in Watts, but also gave us this big space, and we turned it into a theater. We turned it into a kind of a theater in the round, where action happened behind and in front of the audience, so the audience was in the middle ring, so you could look this way and see things happening around, and then you could see action happening down there, so it was kind of exciting. This guy named Ed Haynes designed the set, "Chalk Circle," and when we were done they said, "We want to keep this. This is going to become our theater." And so that set has remained there for sixteen years now.

Collings

Gosh.

Kurup

Long time, huh?

Collings

Yes.

Kurup

So that play was a wonderful play, and that play won an Ovation Award for best production of the year in a small theater, and that was the second Ovation. There was one in '95 and then one in--'95 being the year after--because that was the first year of Ovations, I believe, and then I think in '96 is when we won the--two years in a row. And we won the best actor, best production, and that was, "Okay, oh, Cornerstone, they must be real theater people." It's like, jeez, you know. But the production was startling and beautiful. We were able to drive in cars, so it had some of that epic quality that you heard about from the rural years, like being in a play with a bus on the middle of Main Street in this small town. It's exciting.

Collings

Well, Lynn had said that Cornerstone had always loved to present spectacle.

Kurup

Spectacle. Well, and particularly Bill. I mean, Bill's esthetic is large and visual, and he likes a lot of props, and he likes to do big things. It can be

kind of campy sometimes and very Americana, almost kind of--it can be kitschy in other ways.

Collings

And this was sort of the grounds for some of the criticism, particularly in the "Steelbound" production, for example.

Kurup

Yes, which that woman wrote about Sarah [Brady]. I can't remember her last name, but Sarah something. Yes, it is the danger. I mean, it's the danger of--but part of that esthetic, the kitschy esthetic and all that, a campy esthetic is also a very gay esthetic, and that's part of the world. I mean, you know, we had a lot of gay folk in our company, not that Bill and Chris were particularly out, but camp, you know. We did a lot of cross dressing. Chris did a lot of roles where he played women. I've played a couple of women in different--we've all done--and so it was a part of like embracing that camp esthetic.

Now, my own esthetic is not that way necessarily, in that I wouldn't think of it. But I enjoyed doing it, do you know what I mean? I enjoyed, partly because camp and kitsch--if I would go back to the conversation we were having earlier, as a person of color, coming to prove that as a person of color I'm firing at the top cylinder kind of idea, camp and kitsch is for performance art, it's for burlesque, it's for all of the things that are not considered legitimate theater. And yet, in the years to come after that, burlesque has become big on Broadway. You look at what's his name, Charles--god, what's his name, that theater artist, and you know, Harvey Fierstein and all these people who are bringing a more sort of campy esthetic to even like mainstream stuff. Well, that was kind of what was happening through them, and I didn't quite understand, because I was a little afraid of it, you know what I mean? But for me to act in it was not a problem. I just couldn't create that.

I can create Vaudeville. I love Vaudeville. I love Commedia. But the camp and Americana camp and the kitschy camp was not something I knew. But that was something that that spectacle that Bill loved was--I mean, I think that part of the esthetic is definitely his. The spectacle I am interested in is more sort of still.

Collings

It sounds like it's more dreamlike.

Kurup

It's more dreamlike, exactly. Because one of the shows, as I moved into this--what I didn't touch upon is "Everyman in the Mall." Well, I'll do that in a second, once I've finished about this. But, I mean, and you know, Lynn had brilliant design for this, because we were talking about "Chalk Circle," so she decided that everything that this--I played two characters in it. I played the narrator in the first act, and then I played Azdac, the judge, in the second act, and I also wrote all the songs. That one almost killed me early

on, because I wrote twelve songs for that show and had to sort of oversee the band. I had a bandleader, but I was not, what's it called, on the--I'm sorry, what was I saying?

Collings

You had a bandleader.

Kurup

I had a bandleader, but I was also acting all through the play, so it was hard to sort of stay on top of everything, and singing songs and all of that, so that show was quite the bear, overall, but again, came off well, did really well as a production, put us on the map.

But I'll jump back now to this idea of spectacle. Oh, what I wanted to say about that spectacle. Her props were amazing. They were all made out of cardboard and chalk and costumes. Well, costumes weren't made out of paper, but there were hats and things like that created that she did that had to do with paper and cardboard and chalk. And the idea was that the narrator was a chalk artist, and he had created all of these kinds of things, and so as he's telling his story, he's telling a story of chalk and paper and cardboard.

So now let's jump back to where I think Bill's esthetic and my esthetic sort of came together really well, where we co-directed for the first time in '94 in the fall. At that time we were doing a lot of work. We literally did "Ghurba" in the fall, we did "Community Carol" in the end of the fall, early winter, came back in the spring and did "Twelfth Night," the summer we did "L.A. Building," which is the tour, and then that fall, before we went into Watts, which is in the late summer, we did "Everyman in the Mall," which is a play--I've always wanted to do "Everyman," that allegorical first English-language kind of play, I think it is. It's a German play. It's simply about God being dissatisfied with man, everyman, and he sends Death to bring, to come up to God for a reckoning. And Everyman says, "Can I bring someone with me? I'm afraid to go on that journey alone." And Death says, "Sure, if anybody will come with you." And so he starts going to all these allegorical places like people like Kindred and Cousin and Knowledge and Wisdom and Good Deeds and Goods, and none of these people will go with him.

So I thought, well, we're working in a mall. Here's this play I've always wanted to do. I brought two plays to Bill. "We're going to co-direct. Here are the two plays I've always wanted to do. I wanted to do 'Everyman,' and I've always wanted to do 'The Adding Machine' by Elmore Rice." I thought because I found that, again, allegorical, but it's got this whole heaven part and it's dreamlike. Yes, dreams are a big part. I was reading a lot of Castaneda in those days, a lot of Castaneda, and you know, Hinduism is based on dream work, right? I mean, reality is not reality. Reality is a projection from the godhead. What we are actually experiencing is a dream, but the dream is actually the reality. So I've always been fascinated with this.

Then I started moving away from "Everyman." I was like, "No, I think let's go toward--." But then Bill said, "No, no, no. Let's do 'Everyman.' That's good. Let's do that." So we kind of adapted it a little bit, lightly adapted it, and I wrote like four songs for it. We co-directed that piece, and we did stuff that was like, I think where our esthetics came together, it was spectacle, because we needed a glass elevator, because when Everyman has his heart attack, it was very much like a "Jacob's Ladder" moment. You know that movie "Jacob's Ladder"?

Collings

Yes.

Kurup

It's like the moment of someone's death--

Collings

Right, and it flashes back.

Kurup

--and then he flashes. And what happens is the whole film takes place in the few seconds before his death, right, that's what we see. So the same way we were doing--Everyman has a heart attack, and we don't realize this. The play starts inside a community room in the mall, and rather than thinking of God as some sort of biblical God, even though this was written in a biblical framework, we changed it to--we had Yahweh, we had Kali, we had Ogun. We had these different gods from different religions.

But then the audience--this was our first big traveling play, and the audience came in. Everybody in the play is a god, basically. It was a convention of god. Then you would be a god, I'd be a god, and then we'd have nametags, and then we were talking about why Everyman is pissing us off, and then Death was summoned. But that's the first bit of theatricality. We're in a danky little community room, and the doors opens and there's mist and smoke, and there's an old-fashioned cart with a hooded Death with a scythe and with echo and all of this stuff. And audience is looking back, and there's the doors open to the mall, right. And then the guides in these orange jumpsuits say, "Will you please follow Death into the mall?" So you go into the mall, and we don't just go into the mall. We go into those back doorways. You know, you never get to go where the backs of shops are, and people would walk in.

It was like a Halloween thing. It was like smoke and Death, and Death is talking to them, and they go through the tunnel, the idea of death. You're going through it, and you come to other side when they open up to the beautiful mall. There's nobody in the mall now. You got your ticket at about eight-thirty, and the show started at around eight-thirty, but the mall is starting to close. By the time we get out there, the mall is even quieter now. When you come up to this place, you've seen all this scary stuff, and then the door opens, and you hear one of those famous tunes that you would hear in Muzak playing, pulling you in. I think it's called Summer something.

And we walk out, and you see this huge glass elevator where Everyman has his heart attack, and there are all these Deaths coming after him, and then we go on this journey.
And the whole play has got spectacle, and it's literally, like the first time I saw the escalator I said, "Bill, we've got to do a scene on the escalator, people coming down the up escalator." I made that--so we jumped on different chunks, and the escalator was mine. Like we would work together on how the elevator should happen and the glass, and how he should die at the end and all of this stuff, but I got to do the escalator, it was a total Vaudeville. Kindred and Cousin, they were totally dressed like a Vaudeville duo, and they were working together and walking down, so they were able to stay in one place. Now, [unclear] did rehearsals for that. I mean, for hours sometimes. You know, like an hour on that, it's like a Stairmaster, so these actors were like wiped out but in good shape by the end.
So we were allowed to work with people. One of the most spectacular things was people would leave this one area and follow, and it's becoming really spooky and beautiful and poetic, that kind of quiet mall at night, and many people who had been leaving the mall joined the cast, didn't pay, they just joined in, so we would swell every night with people. For example, we're hearing Everyman running to Goods. "Goods, Goods, where art thou? You'll come with me. You've always come with me, my Goods." And they come up to this beautiful boutique store, and they're told to sit down, and we can hear Goods, but we can't see Goods. And so Everyman is in front, and now we're doing the same thing, where every actor plays God, every actor plays Death, and every actors plays Everyman, so there are six actors in the piece.
So we're standing there and like, "What's going on?" And Everyman is standing in front of the glass, and then we hear--I remember watching for the first time somebody actually seeing it, somebody going, [whispers] "Oh, look," like that. Then everybody starts looking and they see--Goods is a mannequin. It's one of those beautiful--and it was Page. Page is very skinny, and every night they would give her a different outfit. They would leave--the shop owner was smart, because all these people are looking at his store exclusively for about ten minutes, right, would probably make people want to come back to the store. He paid extra to have his employees stay a little later, and you could see her kind of in the background, kind of sitting there, and then she would like close up shop after. But there was Goods as a mannequin, and you couldn't tell it was a mannequin until she actually moved her head at one point, you know. So really beautiful things and a very spectacular ending.
What actually happens is that Good Deeds is an AIDS patient, walking with an IV, and Good Deeds is what carries Everyman up into the elevator that got stopped halfway up when he had the heart attack, but now the elevator is filled with smoke and light below, and it's glass you can see through, and

it's quite beautiful and all that. So that's where our esthetics came together really well. But there was a little bit of the camp, there was a lot of the dream happening together, so it was satisfying. It's always hard with two directors anyway, because there are competing esthetics, but there are also things that you have to agree on, but I think we did okay. Bill might say differently, I have no idea.

Collings

Yes, that sounds like a good example of how the two came together.

Kurup

And it was still pretty spectacular. We were creating vistas. People were seeing things from far away that they were coming through to. And then doing a traveling production, having the audience travel--how do you get sound to them? How do you get them to hear? How do you get music to them? It was all a real and interesting--

Collings

That had been tried a little bit in the library production, as I understand it.

Kurup

That actually came later, and by then we were even better at it. That one I directed all alone, so I didn't even have Bill, except toward the end in tech, he would come and give a helping hand and sort of--

Collings

Oh, so you were innovating these techniques for the library, the central library?

Kurup

We were innovating them in the mall. Exactly. By the time we got to the central library, which is a few years later, literally--well, what happened is we got a chance--"Everyman" became so popular--in fact, there is some scholarship about it. It's included in--there's a whole "Everyman" festival that happens in Germany and Europe every year, and a scholar wrote about this production. It's one of those productions I'm very proud of, because the Irvine Foundation said, "This is a fantastic idea." Because at that point at Cornerstone, Bill was talking about-- We were particularly interested-- So we want a mall to give us a space that we want to create a theater in, and in those years we ended up doing one, two, three productions in malls between the years of '94 and '96, "A Seagull," a version of "The Seagull," and a Moliere, three one-acts called "Mall-iere," and they were very funny. That one was very funny. And we did a mall festival also.

Because what happened then is Irvine Foundation said, "This is brilliant. We want you to go and--"

Kurup

"We'll give you money to do this production in different malls around the Southland." So then we had to go to Montclair, these other areas in Los Angeles, not even in Los Angeles County. It wanted to be around--and they

had to have glass elevators, so it was hard. So we toured that in '97 and '98, so we had two summers of touring that play.

Collings
And this was a purely ensemble production, then.

Kurup
Purely ensemble, and by now, Chris wasn't in it, and other people weren't in it, so we had to substitute. People like Peter, who weren't in the company at that time, who is now back in the company, he came in and substituted a couple of times.

Kurup
We'll have a clean end.

Collings
Yes.

Kurup
And that led to these mall plays. But these two particular years of producing "Everyman" again and again, you know, two summers of that, which then led to better technology, because Ben was like trying to figure out a way that mics would work better inside this. So he literally was saying, "Like what if we could do radio signals?" And so people were listening on infrared and all of this stuff, and I'll tell you about a production that we did later that actually used that kind of stuff and what I learned during "Candude," which was the Central Library production. So maybe that'll be how we can pick up, even though it's a jump in gap, but I can get to that anyway, if you want to touch on that.

Collings
All right.

1.4. Session 4 (June 10, 2010)

Collings
Today is June 10, 2010, Jane Collings interviewing Shishir Kurup in his home.
We finished off last time with a discussion of "Everyman in the Mall," which we'd sort of gotten into because we were talking about the tradition of spectacle in Cornerstone. And then coming after that is "Candude," of course.

Kurup
"Candude," I actually will talk a couple of minutes about "Candude," because I feel like it was an even bigger challenge in some ways.

Collings
Right, being staged at the Central Library downtown.

Kurup
On different floors. Yes, that was a thing I wanted to make sure I touched upon, because the sort of traveling pieces, which are so very specific, are

really interesting in terms of choreographing audience movement, as much as choreographing the actors' movement, and then getting audible sound and all of that to the location, wherever we're moving to, and how to do it in a fashion that is a smooth as anything that one would tech a show with. Because there is that element of the audience that you have very little control over until they actually show up, and each audience has their own particular personality.

So as part of this whole notion of site-specific theater that is--we have static site-specific theater, where the audience comes and sits in one place, and then we have the kind where we have created many different--an experiential thing where people move through everything. One of things that I've always been interested in, and I think I may have explained this when I was talking about "Ghurba" a little bit, where when the audience comes in--almost everything I've done, the play is almost always in process when the audience comes in. I'm very rarely interested in the traditional walking in, there's a curtain, the curtain goes up or whatever. Or not a curtain; there's a preset, and people come and sit, wait, and the productions start.

Often when they come in, there's already a character onstage, somehow engaged in stillness or some sort of movement, so that they are entering something in progress, and then their entrance into the space changes whatever the mood, the temperament of that space is. So with these kinds of plays, I find that is very valuable.

So "Candude" has some very really interesting elements, like the experience of the audience was that we started outside in the daytime when it was still light, because we were doing it in the late spring, early summer, so what was happening was they would come in, and we would enter from a side of the library where, again, looking for staging opportunities, we had parapets and walls that we could put people on. And so the piece began outside and then pulled us in, and then we journeyed through this library. And what was amazing, the library had just reopened after a terrible fire a number of years earlier and had been closed down for a long time, so this was part of also celebrating the library itself and showing people what a beautiful space we have, what a beautiful library we have here in Los Angeles.

It was going to be a bridge show originally. I mean, it was supposed to be part of a cycle that would lead to a bridge show, where you work, where you play--what is it, work, play, and something else--

Kurup

Live? Where you live?

Kurup

And live, and live. Live, work, play is what it was called. So the idea being that we would do one show in people's houses maybe, another show at someone's place of work, and then the third at someone's recreation place, whether that's a bar or a gym, all the different things, a church, who knows. We work in churches all the time, so probably something else. But then that

thing got smushed together into one show, so it was its own kind of bridge show, and we were working with civil servants. We decided we would work with civil servants in their workplace, but we decided that we would focus on one civil service place. We were--should we do it at the post office? Should we do it at City Hall? Central Library, beautiful architecture.

Collings

What was the thinking behind going with civil servants?

Kurup

Wow. I think it had to do with--I'm trying to remember now, because it went through so many sort of permutations. But one of them was, I think we've always been interested in working with civil servants on some level, the kind of work that they do and who they are. Oftentimes they have impact on our lives, whether it's policemen or road work, the people who work for Caltrans, or you know. And those are the people we work for, and I'm not completely--

Collings

Well, they have a very integral role in any kind of community. In any civil society, you--

Kurup

Absolutely. That's exactly right, I mean, and that's, I think, where that interest began was they work for the people, in a way, in a different way than, say, service-industry people do, because that seems like for profit. This is, as you said--

Collings

This is delivering the mail, public safety, putting out fires, teaching kids to read.

Kurup

Yes, public safety, exactly, exactly. Right, exactly. See, the kinds of jobs that one would say is God's work or whatever, that kind of thing. Or maybe not quite that, but the thing that keeps our society functioning. Where I think if we had a few less Goldman Sachses, I think our society would function awfully well. [laughs]

So anyway, this piece began outside, went through the library, and we took "Candide," the book, and I was working with this woman named Tracy Young, who's actually a director and has worked with us directing other pieces, or hadn't yet but was going to, and I was excited about working with her, and we became friends in the process. And we spent a good six, eight sessions in La Cabana, the Mexican place down in Venice, transposing "Candide" the book into "Candude," the play. And "Candude," the title, came from Leslie Tamarabuchi, who was our managing director at the time. She says, "We're in southern California. It makes a lot of sense."

So it was "Candude: Or the Optimistic Civil Servant." And so what we were going to do is that Candude would go--his journey would be a journey of jobs.

Collings
Whereas the civil servant's experience is so often a journey of frustration.
Kurup
Frustration in the same job over a long period of time. And so for Candude, it was frustration through a series of many jobs, of a lifetime. But he always keeps his optimism, while everyone else around him, especially Cunegonde, or in this case, because we were in a library, Tracy named the character Page, after Page. Page Tome was her name. But we did all these transpositions to southern California. We brought in the things that were very familiar, to make this journey fun and sort of, again, spectacular, you know, the whole idea of spectacle, one example of which, when people came in--this is one of the more exciting things. We had a whole library room that was empty, because they were still--now it's not empty anymore. It's been filled with other things. It was sort of a storage place, but it was huge. It's one of those huge rooms.
They allowed us to make--when you entered the room, vast room, the first thing you saw was a bed that was probably about the size of this room.
Collings
Oh, gosh.
Kurup
But it raked up at about a thirty-six-degree angle. So you walked in and it was that big, the bed, had a big sheet over it, and at the very top was a woman sleeping in her bed. So it was a huge stage. It was like literally taking a stage and doing that and turning it into a bed, and a lot of stuff happened in that particular room, including things like shootouts between Cardinal Baloney--because in "Candide" there's all that stuff with the church--and the movie industry. Steely Dawn was her name, as opposed to Dawn Steele, who was a big executive at the time. So, I mean, literally fun things like that when you came in, and the entrance people dancing on the parapets. They were all library women. So the thing about the play that became so much more sort of stylized and spectacular is you would go into the big rotunda there, and because of sound issues we would record some of the dialogue. It would be done as a dumb show, but people lip-synching to it, so there were very different kinds of ways of working, basically because of these limitations that spaces provide, that art gets created in response to that, and suddenly it becomes a stroke of magic or genius or whatever you want to call those things, and yet it's because of the limitations of the space. So then what happened--one of the most amazing things about that play, finally when people have moved around, come through, we would do a section, which we employed later, because we would have so many people but not enough space in certain areas, we literally would repeat scenes where half the audience would go one way, the other half would go this way, and two songs would be happening, because it was a musical, and we had a few composers on that one, myself, Tracy's partner Kyle Gass, who, by the

way, is half of Tenacious D, you know the group, Tenacious D, Jack Black and him, and Jack came to see the play. They're all friends from the Actors' Gang days. And another guy named Lawrence O'Keefe, or Larry O'Keefe, who's a pretty big Broadway musical guy now, he did "Bat Boy," the musical. I don't know if you ever heard of it, but it's--

Collings

No.

Kurup

And he did "Sweet Home--," no, what is it called? That movie, there was a movie that they made a musical out of on Broadway, so this is early on. But what was interesting was that you would have a song happening on the stairway, and then in another room right behind was a little children's theater, and in there was a puppet-show song that was happening. Again, you know, taking this sort of almost like childlike quality of Candide, the character, and playing with those kinds of ideas, and yet there was a darkness that infused the play.

Collings

Is there any risk of like losing the attention of the audience when they're walking from space to space and when there are these competing elements?

Kurup

Yes. There is a danger, but what it is is those things--what we tried to do is make those elements have some pertinence to their journey, so that along the way we try to put, whether it's a message or somebody saying something or walking along with them saying--it's very hard to walk and see, because there's height differential. The sightlines are bad, so it's often sound. Sound is telling them things, giving them music to follow, and often the sound is leading them. So it's amazing. People are very interested in getting to the next thing. That's what I've found. Even though in the process we were trying to also let people see the library, to see how beautiful it was so that maybe they would start coming back to it.

Collings

It almost sounds like a haunted house.

Kurup

Yes, it's very much like a haunted-house idea that we do, but there's such a strong narrative thread going on that they're compelled to go, as opposed to, well, there's somebody just jumped out and scared me here, and I don't know where the next scare is going to come from, it was much more about, well, what's going to happen to Candude next? But the thing that was interesting is that we had to time these songs exactly, so stage managers would be telling people, "Okay, go now." And the songs had to be around the same amount of time, and even calculating how much it took this many people to come out of this room versus these people going around through this way. So they never saw each other.

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

So they would split, they would do the song, and then these people would be coming this way, these people would be going into the entrance this way. So it was clean. The song would start again. The song would start again. And we used that later in a piece called "Crossings," which was the beginning of our faith cycle, and it was a huge--we were in the condemned Archdiocese of Los Angeles called St. Vibiana's, which was condemned after the, I think, Northridge earthquake, or maybe the earthquake after it. We literally divided the audience in that case into fours, and when they came in they split into four different buildings, and then it was a constant round robin, and so everything had to start at the same time in a particular way. It was one of those plays that literally, that one, we were turning fifty, a hundred people away a night.

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

And we could hold a lot, because there were no Equity--it was like a performance art piece, so there was no Equity sort of numbers of people to contend with. It was amazing.

And then "Candude," of course, one of the most beautiful things about it is what you learn in the process, and "Candude" is all about positivity. And we were trying to figure out how to end. We knew that we wanted the people to go back out into their city at the end of the play, in the night, and see the transformation between when they came in in the light and went out in the night. There's Flower Street, and there are these other places.

Collings

Hope Street.

Kurup

And that's where we went. We went to Hope Street. And by this time Page, or Cunegonde, is very, very, a completely cynical person, and she's aged from her own cynicism. And then there's this beautiful moment where Candude says at the very end, "Page, come with me. I want to show you something." "What, what?" "Come, I want to show you." And he walks her out and we all follow, and it's Hope Street, right? And then there's a laugh, but there's also something very wistful about it. We all go out, we're looking out, and we're now looking down Hope Street, so it's cinematic, you know? So these guys run down, and we're up here watching them far off as they're walking away.

Now, the radio mics wouldn't work, so what we did was that same technique we were using earlier with the recorded sound. We played, with monitors blasting toward them, but also toward the audience, so that they could hear the dialogue. They weren't speaking, but they were acting out the dialogue as if they were speaking it, so you could still hear them perfectly. You never

lost their radio mic, because there was a place where it would go out, but because that recording would start [snaps fingers], and they're walking down Hope Street, and it's a beautiful Charlie Chaplin ending, you know, going down a big city street. So that was, I would say, one of the more spectacular kinds of endings for our shows, and we have plenty of those. So I would say that's why I wanted to touch upon that, this sort of--the large bed, the large everything. The guns were big, so there was this sort of oversize quality to the piece. Because the space is so big, you have to match that.

Collings

So with all of the people that you attract to come and work with Cornerstone, I haven't heard any mention of particularly people who are sound engineers or who can do some of these wonderful things that you've described.

Kurup

We actually--and maybe it's unfair to not like talk about those designers, because the designers on that were Rachel Houk, who came up with the bed and the whole idea of like we talked about--but the sound designer was a guy named Paul James on that, and it's the first time we've worked with him, and after that he sort of joined our company, not too long after that. And Paul is particularly good--he's a pretty multi-talented guy. He is a composer, an actor, a musician, and a sound designer, and he works often at Ashland right now with Bill.

Collings

Oh, I see.

Kurup

And so he's doing very well.

I want to talk two talk two seconds about technology and how important technology has been to Cornerstone in that in the early years, you know, we literally worked on cassette tapes, and when I say early years, for me early years are like from '93 on. Before that it was the same. It was even more so that--

Collings

You were talking about the cassette tapes.

Kurup

Oh, technology, cassette tapes. I mean, it was impossible. You made all these recordings and you had four-track things, and then they'd come out, we'd have to transfer them, and then you were stuck. Then you needed to change it, you'd have to take the next day or two to fix it and come back, to the point where the jump between that and, literally, about seven years ago we were working--on that one I was just doing sound design and composing, and in that we were working one--Tracy was directing that play, too, and it was called "Center of the Star," part of the Faith show.

And my friend David Markowitz, who I mentioned in "Ghurba" as becoming my sort of song-writing partner, we created music together. And one night at the end of rehearsal, Tracy said, "You know, I love that song you guys have come up with, but it's darker and I need it to be more ebullient, and so can you come and listen to this thing that I have? I was thinking it would be more in this fashion." So we listened to the piece. We went home that night and in about two hours we created a new piece that had the vibe of that thing. We were able to then go in that next morning, that next evening early, about six o'clock, give that piece of music to the choreographer. She took about twenty minutes to re-choreograph it, and that went into our first preview that night.

And to the point where to now, just about two, three months ago in "On Caring for the Beast," which we just did, I wrote and was directing that piece, and I was talking to the sound designer. In the room, he was making changes, changing the actual pieces themselves, because he's now on the computer, he's connected up to the thing, and he's able to drop it in. I mean, that is powerful for a company like ours that is constantly changing, and especially if you want to be creative as a director and you're doing all this. So sound design is a huge part. Lighting design still tends to be--now is much faster. We've got lights that can change colors. We can have lights that are like moving spotlights, so the difference between that and what we were working with is vast.

And so the designers for Cornerstone have to be quite facile. We've even had like some designers, young designers were coming in from like CalArts, teaching us things by going, setting up in the room while I'm rehearsing and trying things while we're playing, like literally having a passel of sounds there in front of them, going, you know. He'll just try something, and I'm like, "Oh, what's that? That's perfect. Who's doing that?" You know, I didn't even know where the growl was coming from. "Oh, that's great. No, keep that." So it becomes really improvisatory kind of, almost like a bunch of musicians trying things and then finding a groove together. To start having that in the theater is a real boon, I think.

And I would say--I don't know if anybody's ever talked about in terms of Cornerstone and the hardest position ever in Cornerstone is the stage manager. I mean, we burnt out so many stage managers, because we're talking about dealing with thirty-five, forty, forty-five people, three-quarters of whom, maybe five-sixths of whom don't know the protocols of theater. They don't know what they're getting into when they start. I don't know if anybody else has mentioned this.

Collings

Yes, Paula [Donnelly] has talked about this.

Kurup

Paula must have talked about that a little bit, right. So those are like the yeomen. They are the stalwarts. They are the people who you feel like, if

you were twelve-stepping this, you'd be apologizing and making amends to the ones who came through before, before we understood a better sort of way to comport ourselves so that we don't burn out these people, which we have.

Collings

Yes. Well, it sounds like on the one hand, you're dealing with a lot of expertise and perhaps even expertise of people who work in the industry with sound, perhaps, plus combining it with all of these newbies from the community. So it's two extremes.

Kurup

Two extremes, and yet at the same time how they come together and what we learn from the newbies, because whenever you work with a newbie, you're always reexamining how you do what you do, because you always have to come from this place of refinement of what you think it is and then connecting that to basics. And we forget to do basics often when we're working with just the pros, you know, because, well, it's like falling off a log. Well, it's not, because there may be things that people have forgotten to do and even as they become pros, they take for granted, while when you're working with a newbie, you are reexamining how you even approach the basic connection to expressing something onstage truthfully.

Collings

Now, this might be jumping ahead, and if you don't want to jump ahead that's fine, but as I understand it, one of the problems when Cornerstone was working with Peter Sellars was that he was interested in a kind of an untutored quality of the community members, and what you're describing is how you would, in fact, teach acting techniques with community members.

Kurup

Well, and I might not even be saying the word--I wouldn't maybe even use the word technique, because, again, it's about giving--I guess the difference for me would be, with an actor you hone and build and you create over a certain amount of time, and, of course, if you're teaching in a conservatory, what you're doing is building these--it's like working out. You're building different muscles constantly, right. You don't have that kind of luxury of that time with Cornerstone actors, with new people. But I will fight--as I said to you earlier, I really sort of demur quite strongly from this idea of the noble savage, because I'm an exotic myself, you know. Just the way I look, my name, where I come from might be enough to get me in and then just be yourself, and, you know, if you're not an actor, you're in your most stilted self.

And I think what we've always looked for, at least I have--I know Bill and I have talked about this in that way, is there's a spark in that person. There's something about them that is compelling. So we can't cast everybody. Many people come. Sometimes we err on the side of casting too many, because we can't bear the thought of turning somebody down who's that enthusiastic

about being there. And the danger, I think, of the noble savage thing, is that we sit there, and the people who come to Cornerstone feeling that that is what Cornerstone is about, I think end up making a kind of theater where, I think one of the reviewers said that after one hour it was mildly unpleasant, after two it was excruciating, at the third, one lost the will to live, or something, in "Los Biombos." I don't know if I agree with that. I thought there were some really amazing things about "Los Biombos," and yet I could see why, because I think for Peter, he would have been happy with that review, because he's like--

Collings

Because he wants to mess with the mind of the audience.

Kurup

Yes. He's always--the whole idea of messing, you know. The thing I've said about Peter before is that I think he embodies, or I think he walks through the world as a trickster of some sort. I think his intentions are--and I don't know where they come from, whether they're--you know, we all have our pathologies based upon whatever it is that made us, right? And some people are messianic, some people are tricksters. There are different ways of like how we--some people are pleasers. And there is a sort of quality that Peter brought that I think was, in my opinion, a person who feels that he's there to sort of put the mirror to that person, you know, the trickster who's going--and in a way, wanting to destroy that person with maybe the idea of rebuilding, which I think he would apply to an organization also, destroy the organization to somehow recreate itself in some form, which I think we came pretty close to in that one.

Because, you know, it was an interesting relationship he and Bill had. They seemed to be very close, and I think it affected their relationship. I think the way he treated some of the Cornerstone actors was less than respectful, and particularly Chris and Page, which was really odd. They didn't have a lot to do in the play, and I don't think he knew what to do with them. I felt fine, the role I did. I think we communicated okay. I felt like I had something to do in the play that I really enjoyed, actually, and still valued the performance. I got, actually, a Garland Award for the performance, not that that means it was good, but it does mean some recognition of something was going on there. And I actually felt good about it. I mean, I don't care about the awards; more is what I felt. And I think there were a couple of things.

We had gone to see Peter's show, "The Persians," at the Mark Taper Forum, and I remember going in and I was fascinated by it. I had seen his work at school when I was still at UCSD. When he did "Ajax," I found it fascinating then, too, and I thought "Persians" was particularly good, although the Taper audiences were walking out in droves. I mean literally. I was there. I was watching them walk. A lot of older people seemed very upset and offended by it, and particularly the end. But I do think at the end, the play

itself got a little unhinged in the writing particularly, I thought. And then sound design brought it into a place of like being very, very directly about Iraq, the Iraq War experience, the first one, Desert Storm. Yes. All these beautiful movie titles for our wars.
So what happened during the process of "Los Biombos" was that I imagine on some level there must have been some fear involved with working with the way we work. Peter had been a big champion of the company, even though I think at first he has said to Bill, "This isn't going to fly," you know.
Collings
Like a lead balloon? Wasn't that what he said?
Kurup
Yes, some sort of idea. I think that's what I remember hearing about that. I may be wrong, but I think you could check with Bill about that. But when he came in before that, he would always talk about Cornerstone, but the way he would talk it, he says, like, "Well, the first act is too long, and the acting is dreadful, but by the middle of the second act, you realize something important is happening here," that sort of thing. It was sort of like, I don't know. I feel that's very sort of New York elite, kind of, "Well, we will tell you what the good stuff is, and even though it's crap, this is actually really beautiful, amazing crap."
Collings
It's good for you.
Kurup
It's good for you amazing crap that's actually transcendent on some level.
Collings
Well, how did he feel about the fact that Cornerstone would have all these repeat audiences and these really enthusiastic community audiences?
Kurup
Well, I don't know how--he didn't seem to--I don't think he really thought about any of that. And we were working in this terribly musty, upper, almost like, I don't know what you would call it, an attic of the Skill Center in Boyle Heights, at this college, a technical college. So it was upstairs. I mean, I hope there was no asbestos up there, because there could very well have been. These buildings were filled with asbestos in those days. We'll find out. It takes twenty years, right? God, I hope not. And we were working in terribly dusty conditions. And we had this--you know, Peter always has great ideas of who to bring together. He brought Gronk in, who's a well-known artist, muralist. But we had these moving murals, like big canvases that moved through that Gronk did the paintings for, so there were interesting designs.
You know, it's taking a hard play like Genet's "The Screens", and then also trying to do--and I think Peter had said, "I never was able to get through 'The Screens,' reading it, so I knew I had to do it." So anyway, I felt like he came into it with a certain amount of, I think rightly so, a certain amount of

trepidation, you know, a white guy coming into a particularly mostly Latino community, and I think he was determined to be more Cornerstone than Cornerstone.

Collings

Oh, I see.

Kurup

And that's my sense of it. And whatever that means. I mean, more indigenous than indigenous, more Latino than Latino, you know, like he was going to win them over. That's my sense.

Collings

That's interesting.

Kurup

Because then--and, you know, he's such a complex person. There's a great amount of generosity from him. I mean, he basically used his fee money, and even more than the fee money, to pay for dinners for every night for the cast, and we didn't have that kind of budget. And it was something that we've always, actually, in a funny way, dreamed of, being able to feed the community as part of our work there, because of the experiences I told you in Watts, where there was so much hunger, with the kids particularly, so it brought in a kind of tradition in Cornerstone to make sure that we have some nosh for community, because they're coming from work and all of that. And I think I would say Peter's generosity in that case was really helpful in us creating the tradition.

I mean, there were other things. He said to Bill also about tenure, because we had these ensemble members for life kind of thing, and it affected Bill, because Peter didn't believe in tenure. I wonder if he has tenure at UCLA.

Collings

That's an interesting question. [laughter] He may very well.

Kurup

But so anyway, that affected how our--and it affected Bill more than anybody else, I think, because most of us, you know, we didn't take for granted that we were going to be here forever. But for him, because that was in his mind, that we work together, we'll be working together forever kind of thing, even though we've had people leave or have asked people to leave, even, but rarely that happens. So that created a whole new system of how to look at it. Now we renew contracts every year, every two years, every three years, something like that. Now we have a system of people come in, they renew after one year, they renew another year, and then they're up for a two-year and then a three-year, and then from there on, you just do three-year contracts if you continue on. So one could say that's a good thing. Other people could say it's not a good thing. So, again, the trickster at work. It's complex.

Collings

Did he come in at a particularly significant point in the lifecycle of Cornerstone?

Kurup

Yes, I would say it's in the time when we were building our reputation in the city, and as I said, we had had best actor and then the best production, so '95, '96, and this is like '97, end of '97. This is after "Candude," and we were doing a play called "Los Vecinos." We were doing two plays in Boyle Heights. One was "Los Vecinos," directed by Dianne Rodriguez, co-written by her and Luis Alfaro. I wrote music for that one, and that one I was just like a bandleader again. Then we had who else on it? But this was sort of the main team of the on-the-ground folk. And Peter was at the same time creating his cast, and there was not really any flow--there was some later--finding some people in this cast to then come and join the "Los Biombos" cast.

And we were in a place where we were, I think, building a reputation, so there was an ascendancy in Cornerstone's place in Los Angeles theater in a way that when, in '92 and '93 and '94, was just the beginning, and it was kind of like fighting and struggling to make--but then Watts put us on the map in a way, especially because of "Chalk Circle."

Collings

It's almost as if you were at a position to really professionalize and think about what the--

Kurup

Yes, and moving away from the more folksy part of Cornerstone. Not moving away, but moving--in a way, as you said, professionalizing the folksiness of it also. Some of the reviews, they would always bring in the word folksy in there, which is why I use that. We always found that a bit funny and annoying at the same time, you know, this folk--

Collings

It doesn't seem to apply to Los Angeles per se.

Kurup

Well, that's why I think there's this kind of like, "Well, these country bumpkins have come out here," I mean, "These rural bumpkins have come out here to make us a little folksy," and it's more about the sort of--it's not because everything on the stage is everybody's wearing black and bit droopy and saying important things on the stage, like, or self-important things. There's a sense in Cornerstone's work of the celebratory. And as I said now, there have been many different variations of that celebration. I certainly was--my work has always been much darker, and Michael's is darker, so I feel like there are variations on how Cornerstone's working, but the perception for a very long time was, celebratory, we are the world, everybody is in, you know.

Collings

Yes, the rainbow--

Kurup

The Rainbow Coalition, so to speak, right. Or if you want to go Muppet, it'll be the "Rainbow Connection." So I think so what happened is there was a sense of, if you want to be more Cornerstone than Cornerstone in a way, is there's a kind of usurpation--is that right? I don't know how to use that word--that goes on, and I think after a while it created a lot of tension for--you know, as I was saying, how Chris was being treated. And it was Chris' idea.

Collings

To bring him?

Kurup

To bring Peter in, yes. I think he's the one who actually--in fact, I know he was the one who said, "Let's bring Peter in and see what that's like, because he always talks about Cornerstone, he's been a supporter of Cornerstone, so why not have him have that experience?" And so that had its--

Collings

Now, am I remember correctly that Peter Sellars did not stay in town to attend the performances?

Kurup

I'm not sure, but I thought he saw--he was there a lot. I mean, he spent a lot of time in terms of--

Collings

Because the response of the audience and that dialogue seems like it's an important element of the performance.

Kurup

Right. And, yes, I don't know if he was there for that much of that. One of the things at rehearsals, sometimes we would come there at whatever time, one o'clock, two o'clock, to start rehearsing, and we wouldn't start rehearsal for--or three o'clock. I remember like we had afternoon rehearsals for people who could make it there in the afternoon and then evening rehearsals. Most of us were there all day long, you know, the company members, the ensemble members. And rehearsals wouldn't start for hours. There would be a lot of talking, a lot of ideas, but then not a lot of rehearsing. And it's the opposite with Bill and myself. We do a lot of rehearsing, because some people don't know what downstage is. And, of course, here we didn't really have a downstage, because the space is this big space you roam through. It was sort of like an open space that would have a few flats that delineated spaces, and you would actually go, following--again, it was sort of a peripatetic piece like some of our other ones.

And what was frightening for me is that there wasn't a lot--like with me, I remember Peter giving some notes, saying, "Hey, try this and try that." But I didn't see a lot of that with the community. And I think that happens with outside directors a lot. There's a sense of that, like, "I don't know what I can say. I don't know what I can push." And I don't know if that was what Peter's thing was, but I think that there is a fear that, "I can't really tell

these people how to act, or show them how to act or do whatever." And we're not actually talking about teaching them acting skills in the way that you would in a conservatory. I think what you're doing is you know there's something compelling about this person. What is that? What people do sometimes who are naturally compelling, when they then have to act, they put on a semblance of acting as they think acting is about.
So really, all you're trying to do, because they've seen other people do it or other bad--people who don't do it well do it--what your job as a Cornerstone director is, is to bring that person back to themselves, the authentic self of who they are, and then speak those lines with a certain amount of verisimilitude. And when that happens, when that click happens, it is the most profound acting and the most profound moment that you can feel, beyond when you make an actor do a line better or find their character. You know what I mean? There is something about this person whose never been onstage before, clicking into something. That's when I say--you know, we were talking about awards earlier, or best actor, all this stuff? I would put sometimes these people as the--at that given moment, nobody is acting better anywhere in the world. And that's what's very moving for me.

Collings

So there's a certain sort of talent-scouting element to it.

Kurup

Yes, or talent excavating, because it's there. It's about allowing old ideas or different ideas or ideas that have nothing to do with actual acting, to remove those and say, "You know that thing you did when you just read that and you just said it? That is what we're looking for. Now, how do you make--." And they will also question, "Well, this line doesn't really make any sense." And them dramaturgically, they're affecting the play, and the playwright goes, "You know, you're right. Let's get rid of it."

Collings

I think there were a lot of good examples of that from the rural years, where communities would insert their own vocabulary.

Kurup

Yes, because they would say, "I would never say, 'Thou art an errant knave.'" And they'd say, "Well, what would you say?" "Thou art a horse's behind." And that would be, "Oh, does that work? Well, it does, so let's change it." So in this case, I think it became a bit truculent but in subtle ways, because everybody was still trying to keep--

Collings

Yes. Well, have you seen Marina Goldovskaya's documentary ["Art and Life: Finding the Thread"] on Peter Sellars, by any chance?

Kurup

You know, I've wanted to. I've heard about it.

Collings

Yes. Well, because there's a segment on "Los Biombos."

Kurup
Oh, there is.
Collings
Yes. I can show it to you if you'd like.
Kurup
Yes, I'd love to.
Collings
But you get the sense that the community members involved in the production are really having a wonderful, wonderful time.
Kurup
Yes, well, they were. He ended up using a lot of the community people again and again, Alex Miramontes, Omar Garcia, who ended up working with us a couple of times, too, and then a couple of other people. There was a group that was with us. There was a group of Chicano artists that were starting out of Boyle Heights. I can't remember their names now. And, yes, but that's what I was saying. He was winning them over. He didn't need to win Cornerstone over. In fact, in a way, in order to win them over, I feel like he won them over at the cost of--yes, I think the Cornerstone people paid the price. Again, I have a different experience, because I had a good time. I actually enjoyed what I was doing, and I was lucky. But I was having a terrible time seeing other people being treated badly. So it's complicated for me.
I'm fascinated by Peter. You can help it. He's an interesting guy, and at the same time, he can be a really destructive guy in a way that I hope he looks at. I think it's problematic. I don't think you should be treating people like that, because what it does is it values--he's valuing a kind of indigenity over these interlopers, but he's an interloper too. But he has to be the interloper, and you see, I think that's what's problematic. That doesn't make for--well, I don't know what that doesn't make for, but it's sort of, it seems a bit self-interested and ultimately, is the art good? Is it great? I don't know. I mean, there were things about it I thought were fantastic, and then--but I'm inside it. I don't know what the experience of it is from the outside.
Collings
Now, was this the only time that Cornerstone used a director that was not brought into the company as an ensemble member?
Kurup
No, no, no. We've had a lot of directors from the outside that don't become ensemble members.
Collings
Right, that's what I thought. But the others have respected the culture of Cornerstone in a way that--
Kurup
And I don't know if Peter didn't. Well, I think it's about the iconoclasty, if there's such a word, of like, who's bigger, Cornerstone or Peter? And so he

comes in, and he's not going to do it the way we do it, whatever that is. And that's fine, because I didn't necessarily do it, when I came into Cornerstone, the way Cornerstone does it. And we're open to that. But I don't think one needs to break that door down in a way, with that sort of force, because, actually, doing something different--Peter did a few different things that were really good. But I still feel that the part of it that I didn't respect was not just about the way he treated Cornerstone people, but it was the sort of--I didn't care for that noble savage sort of approach, I mean, and I thought some of that was happening. I know there were actors--so we would try to sneak in and try to help that moment, try to clean that actor up, or give him a thought that would allow him to sort of not sound so wooden. Why would you want to do that?

Because for me again, as I was saying earlier, people of color being onstage, not too many times that that happens. It doesn't happen. And so for them to appear wooden--there's a lot of people walking in and going, "Well, see, this is what happens when you put people of color onstage." I mean, I may be being very reductive, but I think that people are actually simpler than we think they are, and yet more complex than we could ever give them credit for, and more nuanced. But this thing of like, well, you are doing this thing that really, if I took five minutes with you, I could make you come back to yourself. That is a gift that you give that person and that you'll give to yourself for the play.

I think that was my--that and sort of taking over our house. And that was one of the things I said to him and Pete Galindo. Pete was his right-hand man, so to speak, a young guy just coming out of college, and he relied a lot on Pete, and Pete became his sort of ally. And later on we have run into Pete, and he's humbled. He's a much more humble guy now, you know. But at that time, he was young, Peter Sellars is telling him he's the best thing since sliced bread, and I remember we were sitting, we were working on "Medea, Macbeth, Cinderella," and we had this meeting, this conversation. We invited him to our ensemble meeting, and we were like talking there, and I was saying to him, "You know, I felt like you came into our house and you completely disrespected it, and you didn't--I felt like people didn't feel comfortable in their own home." And, you know, Peter might go, "Well, that's good." And who am I to say that that isn't good?

But one can argue about what is the better guru, you know, the guru who teaches the tantric way, which is probably Peter, or the one who teaches the more Zen way. There are so many different ways to approach how you teach or how you comport yourself in the world, and I guess if you fancy the trickster-tantric way, then I can't argue with it, because I also value it. I think that there's a great deal of value in that. Being the recipient of it sucks sometimes in a huge way, and so what it did--I don't think in the end it was the worst thing for the company. I mean, I think there was an awakening

that could happen. I think that it was tough, it was difficult, but I don't regret it.

Collings

Would you have ended the tenure system if you hadn't gone through this experience?

Kurup

Well, you know, again I have to tell you, the tenure system was all inside Bill's head.

Collings

I see.

Kurup

I mean, most of this was in Bill's head, and so it was much more of a profound explosion for Bill than it was for us, at least for me and for other people in the company, and I've talked to other people about it. So it's much more about their relationship, and it affected their relationship for a little while, for a number of years. I don't know where they are now in terms of their communication and stuff like that, but you know. In time--at first I was angry about it, partly because I was angry for, as opposed to angry at, you know, angry for. But in time, I've grown to also go, I think I very much valued the experience, so then I end up valuing Peter as a person and as a presence, even though--

Collings

Was this the only production that people came out of angry?

Kurup

You mean us as a company?

Collings

Yes.

Kurup

No. We had another one called "Magic Tricks" which was a bit hard, because it was really--there was a lot of sort of back-stabby kind of--it's really interesting. I was talking to you earlier about the whole idea of, you know, we were in our B.H. cycle. It's the same cycle that we're talking about with Boyle Heights, with Peter's piece, and we did a lot of shows in that B.H. cycle, Boyle Heights. We did two plays in Boyle Heights. We did one in Baldwin Hills. We did one in Broadway and Hill, which gives us four plays? Or maybe we--I thought we did more than--

Collings

And there was Beverly Hills.

Kurup

And then there was Beverly Hills, so we had five shows in that cycle. That ended up becoming "Broken Hearts" as the bridge show, which is a beautiful play written by Lisa Loomer. But when we worked--and remember I told you when we worked in Watts there was this kind of sense of like, yes, everything around had this degradation, and Jack in the Boxes for the first

time we were seeing with steel doors. It was like going to the bank. You would put your money in this way, and then you'd pick up your food over there, and there was a big heavy plastic--what is it called--bullet-proof glass that they would open and give you, that stuff. And yet, the children had such a level of life and desire for love, and very loving toward us, just fantastic resilience of life and--

Collings

And this was really striking compared to all the other communities you'd worked with?

Kurup

Yes. I mean, I don't know if it was any more, but because we spent such a concentrated time in Watts, we really realized that. In comparison to, say, again, African American kids in Baldwin Hills, which was a middle, upper-middle-class group of kids, and they suffered from all the same things that affluent and middle, upper-middle-class kids suffer from. Not all of them, but there was an overall sense of entitlement in a way that, say, maybe the Beverly Hills' kids had. They were wonderful kids, but there was a level of entitlement in the Beverly Hills' kids here and there, and the same with the Baldwin Hills' kids. But there was no entitlement for the kids in Watts, not that they walked around with their heads hanging low, but it was about how their curiosity, their interest, their lack of cynicism, at least the younger ones--the later ones, as I said, there's that danger of the deadness of the eyes. But if you get past that deadness in the eyes, like I am right now talking--like one of the young guys in our show right now, a guy who's been incarcerated since he was eleven--

Collings

Oh, god.

Kurup

Remember I told you? Did I mention that to you?

Collings

No.

Kurup

He was eleven years old. They put him in heavy lockdown child/juvenile, and I mean, how do you do that to an eleven-year-old kid?

Collings

I don't know.

Kurup

Smoked crack when he was six the first time, mother was a dealer, came from another country, Colombia, doesn't even really have papers, but deep, smart, sensitive, but all covered over by this sort of protection, right? You get through that protection and what you're seeing is pure light. It's the same with these kids. Now, maybe the kids in Baldwin Hills, if I could have gotten through the layer of, what's it called, consumerism that their layer

was--I guess I was having a harder time getting through the sort of entitled consumerism kind of protection--

Collings

Well, it probably seems less worthwhile to wade through.

Kurup

It does, because it didn't have depth. There was less depth going on, in a way, with some of these kids, and those kids over there and the kid I'm talking about now--I say kid even though he's nineteen or twenty now, you know, and he's a father, but you know what I mean. So, yes, Baldwin Hills, I was making that comparison because I was trying to touch upon this idea of like, it's not about the race, it's about class. It's often about class and certainly affects race a lot, but I think we deal with those things.

Collings

Well, what class do Cornerstone members identify with?

Kurup

I think we have a variety within our group. I certainly identify with lower-middle class, and that's what my family comes from in terms of wealth. But in terms of education, I think it's something that we always prided, so whether it's autodidactic or whether it was college or whatever, we were always trying to strive for being educated about--but I think there are different levels. I mean, I think Chris comes from pretty much middle class and a little lower-middle class himself. He's got Irish family, many kids. Bill I think comes from a little more affluence from his family, and Lynn comes from a lot more affluence. Alison is much more middle to more in the range that Chris and I are in, so it's a wide spectrum.

But I think we fancy ourselves sort of middle-to-lower-middle class, on who we are. But I think it might average out that way, given who we have in our group. I don't think we're necessarily that different than the communities that we go into, except when we've gone into very--like if we're working with homeless people, and we have worked with some homeless people, it has a bracing layer of shock to it. And now, dealing with these young men in our show, every night I take one of them home, I'm going into the projects that are--you know, these projects have been here for a long time. I didn't even know where they were, and I live three minutes away from it, five minutes away from it. And now I know the projects in my own neighborhood. I've been here for fifteen, sixteen years. And it is that thing where you see lives living on top of each other and just the difference between somebody seeing their first murder at the age of seven and then losing at least ten people that they grew up with, their childhood friends, and they're only nineteen years old, I think is a bracing difference in my experience of life.

And yet, this is a kid, this other kid--

Collings

You're speaking of a particular person who had got involved in a Cornerstone production?

Kurup

Yes, exactly.

Collings

Which is an amazing leap, really.

Kurup

Yes. And here, again, it's fortuitous for this kid that he's in a class in a school in the projects, and he's got this amazing teacher. See, it is the thing about this one person who can come into your life and just nudge you a little bit to get you going into this other direction. And he's been also lucky to be able to be pulled into a group called Street Poets. They have a building off the 10 Freeway where they literally have recording equipment. They have people come in, and they teach kids how to make music and to take poetry and turn it into rap and songs and stuff, and he has learned how to use Logic, which is the recording software on Mac, and he's amazing. He taught himself how to play the piano. He doesn't know a chord. He doesn't know how to read music. He knows how to play the piano.

This other kid I was telling you, who was incarcerated, has taught himself to play the accordion. So there's this real kind of desire, and, you know, it's their individual personality. There's an innate talent that they have, and there's an innate curiosity, and there's an innate sort of philosophical outlook on the world that makes them particularly attuned to what we're doing and actually allows them to thrive. And for them, it's very much they can feel it. It's like any--the same feeling I had when I walked into a theater, and I walked into that smell, that slightly musty smell of the theater. There was something that felt really right. I felt like I belonged there. I don't know if it was from a past life or something, where I was like at home. I'm feeling the same feeling from these kids, and I'm feeling them from other people and other kids at different times, where they go, "Man, it's like--."

There's another kid, another young guy who we worked with in the last play, and he is the same way. He says, "You know, in my neighborhood, I can't be myself," which is, what that is code for is sensitive, intelligent. "I can't show my intelligence. I'll get beaten up for it." It's danger. I could get killed for it, and I have to keep everything close to the vest. And he said, "Being with you guys calms me down." And it was like, it's profound. That's profound that by being with us--and being with us doesn't just mean in rehearsal. It means hanging out, talking, once the shows are up going out, having a party at the house so they're all coming over, we're talking about--and deep conversations are going on.

I mean, one of the things that I hope we get to touch on is the "You Can't Take It With You" stuff, the conversations we were having backstage that had to do with Muslim kids who were working in the show, who were--it was

anathema, the gay stuff, and there was the gay Muslims who were--there's a whole thing which, I don't know, I'm sure we'll do at some point. But it's these conversations, to me, that we have backstage in our green room, in the dressing room, in rehearsals, during tech when we're waiting around, and then in these parties that we have after, that are absolutely transcendent for me. For me, that's the life work. The theater stuff is, you know, it's what it is. It's the work. That's my job. This other stuff is the bridge that makes me feel that this is the humanity, this is why I'm doing this.

Collings

Well, this is interesting, because you've spoken so well about what happens between the performers and the audience and that dynamic, but now you're drawing in this other element, which is what happens among performers before, during, and after--

Kurup

The process.

Collings

--the process, and saying that that is, in fact, the most profound part of the process.

Kurup

Yes. You know, the thing I told you about earlier, that after a particularly fractious tech process, Page asked Bill, "We need to do a ritual to bring us together," and so she and Bill put their heads together. They came up with that thing I told you about, which is called our ritual.

Collings

No, I don't think we've talked about that.

Kurup

We haven't?

Collings

No.

Kurup

Oh, okay. We had a particular--

Collings

And I wanted to ask you about that, because I think that was something as well that didn't go over well with Peter Sellars or something.

Kurup

No, you know what? It hadn't--

Collings

You hadn't started it yet.

Kurup

That had not started yet, because that came in the bridge show of that cycle. There were other things that Peter didn't care for. He didn't care for check-ins. He didn't care for--

Collings

A check-in, maybe that's what I was thinking of.

Kurup

Yes. That's something that Page and I brought from our friend Steve Kent that I told you about. Basically, it was a way of coming into the room. We check in all the time, saying, "I feel--." It's about how you feel at this very moment, and what it does is it diffuses anything that if you're walking around carrying something heavy inside, or something you're upset about, or something you're happy about, whatever, it diffuses any like, "Oh, what's going on with her?" in a rehearsal space.

Collings

And do you do the check-in with just ensemble members, or with everybody?

Kurup

We do it with everybody. I mean, we start our ensemble meeting with check-ins, and our company meetings, and we end with checkouts, and we do the same with our rehearsal process.

Collings

Involving the community members as well.

Kurup

Involving the community members as well. Exactly. And, I mean, we've had check-ins that have sometimes taken over the rehearsal because of something profoundly traumatic happening in that person's life. And that's okay, because that's part of who we are and what we're here to do. We can't suddenly say, "Okay, your father just died. Let's go back to acting." You know what I mean? Or, "You're actually being beaten up by your father?" That was one of the things that was going on at one point.

Collings

And this was a community member who'd brought this in?

Kurup

Yes. It was a young woman we'd met in the community, and then she was doing, actually, one of our ensemble shows, and in that there was only six or seven of us, and I was the director and writer of the piece. I remember we were sitting there and she brought that up, and it took over the two or three hours of that--it took about two or three hours of our process, because she was crying and weeping, and everybody was moved, and in that case it was a therapy session. Or I wouldn't say it was a therapy session. It was a support session is what it was, to be truthful, and that was what was necessary. There's no way I could have gone on with rehearsal that day, and what was revealed in that room.

So speaking to that, this thing that came up, it was a fractious--meaning that it was particularly like--you know, in tech everything is broken down, and the community can feel like spread out and where are we and what's the arc of the piece again. So--

Collings

Paula talked about how disenfranchised people, community members, would feel after the institute events, for example.

Kurup

Oh, really? After the institute was over?

Collings

Yes.

Kurup

Oh, that's interesting.

Collings

So this might be a similar kind of dynamic.

Kurup

Yes, I think it's what happens--and there is a disenfranchisement that all community people, a lot of community people feel after the show. Some people are like, "Thank God I did that, but thank God I don't have to do it ever again." And then there are many people who say, "When are we going to do it again? When are we going to do it again?" That's why we had created this thing called the Past Community Network, and now that we're in one city, we just try to stay in touch with them, so that they are always asked to come to next shows, or you know, whenever we get in trouble and somebody has to drop out, and people do that all the time--there's huge attrition issues with Cornerstone--we grab somebody from the community that we've worked with before, that we know will come through, and put them in that if they're appropriate.

But what happened in this situation, with this ritual that got created eleven years ago, was we were doing "Broken Hearts," which it's so interesting we're talking about Peter Sellars and the B.H. cycle. It was at the end of the B.H. cycle. And we said, "Well, how do we bring this all back together?" And I think when Page and Bill talked about it, Bill is not much for ritual. He's not a Mr. Ritual. In fact, he's a little like, it's a little like too woo-y for him, you know what I mean? Although he's a very sensitive and thoughtful and caring person, that's not where he comes from. And I think Peter might be like that, too, in terms of the ritual idea. So, but Page comes from dance and a little mysticism. I also, I have a love-hate relationship with the woo-y, and at the same time I'm very much drawn to it.

So they came up with, together, a word, a line, a scene, a moment in rehearsal, or something about the play that has specific resonance to you. And it can be more than one thing, but let's, because there are forty people here, say at least one thing. And we found that to be one of the most profoundly moving aspects of doing this work, with that first one immediately, because we didn't realize the depth of emotion that people were carrying. (A), some of it was about what was going on in their life, but also about how important this process had been for them. And what we'd been feeling is like, oh, my god, it's fractious, people are all over the place. And then there's this other effect that happens. You're listening to people

talk about the play you're in, with all these different points of view that you never heard or even occurred to you, and you couldn't possibly have connected that special story that they just shared, why this was so important. So suddenly the play is rich, is rich with humanity, and you can hook in again. And it's never without a lot of weeping.

Collings

Wow.

Kurup

And we do it before opening night, which is just how it happened that time, and so now we keep it. You know, it's the dangerous, like "Life of Brian," when that thing becomes codified. "A shoe, we should pray to the shoe." And that's the danger of Cornerstone too. It's like anything getting codified can also become moribund, you know, but this is not one of those things. I think this is one of those things that's actually of real value, and we've done it every time. And I can't tell you--everybody in the company--Geoff [Korf], I know, he's the lighting designer, a fantastic lighting designer, he makes sure he's there. He tries to come to the ritual because, you know, we're also connection junkies. That's what theater people are. Cornerstone people have a higher sort of capacity for the connection junkiness of themselves. And it really--this is one of the best things I think Cornerstone's ever created, and I would use it whether I direct here or there or anywhere else. I will always use it now.

So I think all of this to say, go back to that idea we were talking about, which is the process, that bridge we were talking about between all of us, is the process, the conversations, what we learn about each other in this process, and how our lives are changed by each other. It's very easy for us to go, "The community, oh, the people, they're so transformed by it." But I can't tell you how many transformations I've had, with every show, with every new person that comes in. After all these years, these young guys who I'm driving home every night, what window they're giving me.

Collings

Is that something that you routinely do? You personally offer transportation to--

Kurup

Well, we have to. Some of these guys can't get there. They have to take buses and, you know, we're dealing with people who don't have money. They don't have a car. And it just happens to be--it's not completely convenient, but it is, at least in terms of the loop I have to go. I think I can manage that loop, driving home in a particular way to get both of them home, and I don't regret it, because in the end, what I get out of those conversations and just the idea of, like, communing together. Even if we're not talking, there is this level of like, we are--most of the time we're talking, but just this idea of like taking somebody home who it would take them

hours. I mean, one time one of the kids, I wasn't at rehearsal, and it got him home at four in the morning--

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

--at his house. A bus took him--you know, it took him an hour and a half to walk to the bus station, caught the bus, took him to a place where it then took him another two hours to get home by walking, because this is a vast city, and fourteen miles from Cornerstone to this area, with the bus covering only a certain amount of it, you've got this kind of situation that happens. So I feel it's part of my journey, so I'm like, what am I learning from these guys? So anyway--

1.5. Session 5 (November 30, 2010)

Collings

Jane Collings, November 30, 2010, interviewing Shishir Kurup in his home. We were going to start talking about the role of food in the Cornerstone process.

Kurup

Yes. Because I touched upon the thing that we were talking about with Peter Sellars before, bringing food, and then the Watts issue of where we really realized that, boy, it would be great to have some sort of connection about food and how to feed the community, without having to come out of our own individual pockets.

What happened was, one of the nicest things about our bridge show, because I think that the last time we talked, we talked about the different B.H. [Boyle Heights] shows, and then we ended up in a show, our bridge show called "Broken Hearts," written by Lisa Loomer, directed by Bill Rauch. It was one of our plays with songs, with many songs in them, and we had the several B.H. communities represented, with different people from each of them in it. And one of the nicest things that I think that was devised for that process was on Sundays we'd end up losing a little bit of rehearsal--I think it was Sundays. It could have been Saturdays--but we lost a little bit of rehearsal to meet in the various neighborhoods. Say, for example, somebody would take us through Boyle Heights. Somebody who was from Boyle Heights, who had been in one of the shows and/or was in the show right now in Boyle Heights. would take us to a particular restaurant, one that was emblematic of the community, one that people felt very strongly about, and we would all go break brunch there, and people would talk a little bit about the neighborhood.

So I don't know if you remember seeing the Cornerstone film ["Cornerstone: An Interstate Adventure"], the journey through the states. It was called "Cornerstone," about "The Winter's Tale"?

Collings
Yes, yes, the HBO production.
Kurup
Right. What was really cool about that is that once they went to--that whole film was about people going to Kansas from different parts of the country with Edward, and then the most moving part is everybody then busing and trucking back to their own towns, right? Do you remember?
Collings
Yes. Oh, yes, very much so.
Kurup
So when that would happen, there was always a sort of excitement, "There, there, that's it--," and their buses coming into town, and there's that sense of like people pointing out their town, and the excitement of the people who now know each other, so now their lives become important to them, so that when you look at what's out that window, there is a connection to it. It was a mini-version of that, where people could then share their town and a little bit of the history of that place and the food, and it was an interesting time to talk about how much ritual in our lives as human beings is planned around food. I mean, obviously we know that. We just came out of Thanksgiving, and we know how potent food is. Almost every meaningful meeting of any sort has food around it, connected to it. So I thought it would be interesting to touch upon that as a way to start.
Collings
Well, it also sort of suggests, in really clear terms, how Los Angeles itself is not just one city, because you draw the analogy with people going back to their different communities, and here they are pointing out these entirely separate communities in Los Angeles itself.
Kurup
And the specialties of it.
Collings
Yes, exactly.
Kurup
And I think if anything Cornerstone does--I may have mentioned this before, but I've said that Cornerstone brings L.A. to L.A. And in that process, we are always trying to highlight what is special, what is interesting, what is problematic, what is celebratory. These are the kinds of things that people come see the shows to see the little bits of light that are illuminating this particular community and all the individual lives that are in there.
So we would go to these different places, so by the end of that process, we had eaten in a number of places, and when you eat in places, you remember those places.
Collings
Yes, that's true.
Kurup

You know, there's always a sense of connection. It feels very primal. Even in a city that is so much about concrete and driving and all that, I still feel like there's a primal connection to, "I ate at that place." I told you before, when I drive through the city, I think about, we did a play in that little barn, or we did a little play in that abandoned building, or in now buildings that are gone, like the cathedral that was the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, which got condemned during one of the earthquakes. I think it was the Whittier one. It was a beautiful building. Some of the buildings around there that we worked in are gone. I think the actual church is still there, but it was condemned and can't really be used for people to be in there.
So it's the idea of connecting to the architecture of this city, and connecting that architecture to the different peoples that have moved through that. And, you know, Boyle Heights is famous for like a lot of communities.

Collings
Yes, definitely. That's a really good example.

Kurup
People just moving through, the Jews coming through, the Latinos now, so it's a very--and that way of sort of representing the city, through food and through architecture, which Mike Davis did in his book, "The City of Quartz," is really interesting, especially when you do the theater in these buildings. And oddly enough, of course, we're now about to embark on a cycle called the hunger cycle. I think right now we're calling--

Collings
Now, in terms of cycles, you went from B.H. cycle to, what was the next one after that?

Kurup
The faith cycle.

Collings
The faith cycle.

Kurup
That was the next big one, yes.

Collings
And then into the hunger cycle.

Kurup
Oh, no, then there was the justice cycle after that.

Collings
The justice cycle, right.

Kurup
That was the last one we just finished, and we're moving into the hunger cycle. We've had a sort of a looking-back cycle in between that's a mini-cycle. It's not even really a cycle. It's just a year of looking back at the communities we've been to. We went this summer with our institute to--I'm sure Paula's talked about the institute a lot. We went back with the institute to Pacoima, which was the second show ever done when Cornerstone came

to L.A., and we went back to West Hollywood to do this musical that we just--I don't know if you got a chance to see it, but we just--

Collings

That was the one that was just recently--

Kurup

"Making Paradise," the West Hollywood musical, so that was looking back again, coming back. And then the next one is going to be in Watts, and that's a new play, well, an adaptation of the "Dybbuk" by Lynn Manning, who was the playwright for our "Chalk Circle" that we did there. He's a terrific, terrific playwright and friend.

Collings

So what has prompted the themes for the cycles since? I mean, we've talked a little bit about how, for example, the B.H. cycle or Communities Within a Community and that kind of thing came together, but these other ones are more conceptual--faith cycle, justice cycle, hunger cycle.

Kurup

Yes. The faith cycle began a particular kind of cycle, too, where we would have this cycle, and then we would have a sort of a guiding question. For example, with faith, the faith cycle, it was, "How does faith unite and divide us?", which I think we can attribute to Peter Howard. He came up with that guiding question. And how the cycle came about I'm not completely sure, but it happened--back in those days especially, we would do a lot of--we had a couple of people who had houses or their parents' houses that were out, say, in Malibu, far out in Malibu towards Zuma and all that, and we would actually go out and spend a weekend as a company in--like Steven Gutwillig, for example, who was our managing director at the time and has moved on to many different organizations since, his mom had a place out there, and we would go out there. So these were our retreats.

Or we would go to the Serra Retreat, which is a Franciscan retreat in Malibu, right there in Malibu, right off after Sunset. And we would spend the whole day by the beach and get ourselves out of the head of all the business there and start doing a little bit of dreaming, and what would it be, what are the interests. And oddly enough, if I'm not mistaken, the faith cycle came out of conversation where I think somebody brought up--it could have been Bill or somebody else--brought up something about prisons and going to prisons and doing work there. And I remember, I believe it was Page was saying, "Oh, I would love to look at--I mean, our work takes us into such difficult places to work. I wonder what it would be like," you know, and I'm now speaking for her, so when you talk to her you can ask her about that, but I remember it being this thing where she said, "You know, what about exploring the idea of faith, this thing that gives people something to hold onto in difficult times," whatever, you know, all this sort of idea of peace. Where do you get peace from and all that.

And I remember that was one of the things that sort of facilitated us moving into this cycle, which interestingly enough, it was also during the B.H. cycle that we had had a pretty fractious kind of tech process, and we were working at the Los Angeles Theater Center, inside a theater for once, not out in the community, but we just thought it might be the best place to do it. And we did B.H. over there in the beautiful Theater Two, a very raked theater, where it's literally like almost a forty-five, at least a thirty-six-degree rake. So it looks like this. Here's the proscenium stage, and it almost rises up from the ground to the top. It's almost nose-bleedy.

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Kurup

But it's a very exciting theater, but it's a proscenium space. And we were doing--we'd had a tough tech process, and Page suggested to Bill we should have some kind of ritual. So the two of them came up with this idea which we still practice, and I don't know if you've mentioned this before.

Collings

I think that you touched on it.

Kurup

I touched on it. And this is where it was born, in 1999, the one where you pick a word, a moment, a scene in the play or in rehearsal or anytime in the process, that is of some significance to you, and it's been put to amazing use since then, but particularly the faith cycle there were some amazing things that happened during that time. And so that was born out of this particular show, the "Broken Hearts."

Collings

I was just going to ask you, I mean you're talking about coming up with these ideas on the retreat. That's different from what you were talking about earlier, which was sort of bringing ideas out of the community.

Kurup

Right. So in a funny way, so this is posing the question first and then going to look. I'm sure there was some aspect of posing the question first always before, too, like what town has this kind of demographic, and/or what question are we asking, and this is better to ask for the folks like Alison and Bill, who were in the earlier days, and Peter, in those rural years.

Collings

Yes, because it does seem like there's a little bit of a--

Kurup

Some sort of transition, or it might just be something that got highlighted a little bit more than the other way around, because I would have to think that if they'd picked a town like, say, Marmarth, there would be something that they would have found out about it, what are the interesting things about Marmarth, so that you could then bring a few different plays to it and say, "By the way, which of these plays might fit you better?" So in some ways I

think it was just--you're right. The faith cycle that came out of B.H., even though the B.H. is kind of a conceptual cycle, we were looking to find--but it was geographically located, right? It was still, we're looking for this place where L.A. is geographic. A lot of the plays have always been about geography.

But we've been messing around over the past few years about, what is community, like going back to "Birthday of the Century," can it be by birth date? Can it be by work and where you work, where you play, that sort of thing? And some people have issues about us making community out of this, saying, "This is actually community," and saying, "It's disrespectful to community." But a lot of us also felt like, "But the fact is, we find community everywhere we go, and it isn't just a particular kind of community that can be celebrated or explored." So, yes.

On one level, though, to name something the faith cycle and then ask a question about it, seemed really--I think part of it, if I'm not mistaken, was that we were coming up on a millennium. I can't imagine that that wasn't a part of it. I'm not completely certain, but I do remember as we were coming up on it, it was Y2K was facing us, and there was all this stuff. There was this sense of like, you know, what if the computers crash and they don't know? And so all of this stuff. Does it take us back to a different time and a way to think a little bit differently and all that? So I imagine--and as I say it, it's bringing up something as a body memory, so I think that was part of it as we were coming to that threshold.

And it seemed like, well, right after that, of course, some big things happened in this country that really changed us as a country, at least in how those of us who had not ever been reflexive or looking back at ourselves, it was a big shock. But most of us who were looking at those sort of things, it wasn't that shocking that those things had happened.

Collings

And you're referring to the September eleventh?

Kurup

September eleventh, which is what was about to happen. So oddly enough, as we crossed over from 1999 to 2000, which, to me, is the year--I guess it's really the end of the year is when you actually cross over, but you know. But in 2000, basically, we did one other bridge show after we did B.H., and that was a thing called the citywide bridge. We decided, well, what would be interesting is at the millennium we would touch upon all the communities that we had worked with, and we did this in conjunction with the Mark Taper Forum. It was a play called "For Here or To Go." I don't know if I mentioned this, but it was based on a play that Bill had read a long time ago and really thought he'd want to do, because it seemed so Cornerstone in some ways, in the same way, what's it called, "Waiting for Guffman" could also be very Cornerstone, so was this play in that it was a sixteenth-century play. I don't remember the writer, but it was the kind of play where an audience member

actually stood up and said something to the stage, people on the stage saying, "Wait a second. I don't see myself on that stage. But little young Jimmy here can juggle. I'd like to see that onstage." And so it's that sort of thing.
Of course, "The Knight of the Burning Pestle" is--what is that called when you--it's not a metaphor, but it's--
Collings
An allegory?
Kurup
It's an allegory, but it's actually referring to, I would imagine, some sort of venereal disease. [laughter]
Collings
A euphemism.
Kurup
A euphemism. That was the word that was escaping me. So that play was picked, and we were supposed to do it in conjunction with the Mark Taper Forum, and it was going to be a special Christmas show. And it happened to be that was the year that I think Kwaanza, Eid, and Hanukah and Christmas all around the same time.
Collings
Oh, gosh.
Kurup
So we thought it would be a great way to lampoon religion, in a funny way, but also ourselves as a company, because Cornerstone is looked at as the can't-we-all-get-along company, you know what I mean, like, "All right, everybody. Let's all sing Kumbaya and hold hands." Although I would argue that our work is hardly that, but I can also see why people would think that, because it is about bringing all these people together, especially in the bridge shows. So it was a perfect opportunity to lampoon ourselves, the idea of spirituality and religion, but also to lampoon the Taper, because they were the cultural palace on the hill, so to speak, and we would be about as close to the grassroots as it gets, so, you know, these sort of opposites coming together in one space.
It was a great opportunity and I think one of Alison's best scripts. It was really delightful and funny, and there was a lot of rewriting with a lot of good dramaturgical support at the Taper, and good questions being asked from the cast and the community, so it was a funny show. But one of the main conceits of the piece was that we had to come up with a way to fool the audience, because we knew we were going to have all these plants in the audience. Almost half the cast, or at least a third of the cast was in the audience. So one of the ideas that we came up with was including at the poster--and we still have the poster, which is a lot of fun--is that if you look at the poster, it's like a very Christmasy thing. It was a special two-week, I think, two-week run at the Taper. It was supposed to be a special holiday

offering for the subscription audiences, the idea being that Cornerstone had done the show, written by Alison Carey and directed by Bill Rauch, but something happened and both Alison and Bill were--

Collings

Indisposed.

Kurup

--let go, let go, yes. And there was a bar across the thing that said "Written and directed by Shishir Kurup."

Collings

Oh, okay. That's interesting.

Kurup

And if you were a person who had come to a lot of Cornerstone shows, it would make some sense, not that Bill and Alison were fired, but the fact that I could have written and directed a show, because that was something that I had done a couple of times, a few times with the company. And if you didn't see the show, it wouldn't matter. You would just buy into the idea that, oh, somebody else was there--

Collings

There was a switch.

Kurup

--there was a switch and something happened. And so the show always started with either Gordon Davidson, who was the artistic director at the time, or one of his associate artistic directors, introducing not just the show but the idea of the show, like, "We're doing this experiment, trying this working with a local company, Cornerstone, and here's our writer-director, and he'll explain a little bit about the show." And I would come out and I would talk to the audience, and often it was like we had some guidelines of where we were going, but a lot of it I was just--so that was extemporaneous, and one of the things to seed was to seed the different communities in that audience, saying, "Who's seen a Cornerstone show before?" And people would raise their hands. And then, "Who's first time to seeing our show?", whatever, "Who's new to the Taper?", and then, "Who are Taper subscribers?", and people would raise their hands.

Now, what was really important there was to set up our Taper subscribers who were plants, so that when the interruptions happened, what could come out of that. And one of the surprising things is how long people stayed fooled about what was going on.

Collings

Now, you say the Taper subscribers were the audience plants?

Kurup

No, no. They were fake Taper subscriber audience plants. They were our audience plants who were fake Taper subscribers.

Collings

Okay. And were there Taper subscribers at the--

Kurup
There were plenty of them. Yes, I would say at least half the audience was that. So I think one of the brilliant things about the show was how we made the opening song, which is one of the funniest things we've done before. It was a song that brought in all the different prayers. It was a very sort of one of those--it would be a multicultural nativity scene, if you want to call it that, and people doing their Kwaanza, they were doing their Eid-al-Fitr, and they would do their Hanukah menorahs, and their nativity scene, and it was incredibly cloying. And it was the kind of thing like if you'd never seen this show and depending upon your hipness, you would be like, "Oh, my god, what am I in for? An hour and a half or two hours of this? This multi--"
Collings
This treacle.
Kurup
Yes, this treacle with multiculturalism with a capital M, and all the catch phrases that got invented in the nineties about diversity. Well, diversity is more now, but multiculturalism and political correctness and all of these words that, you know, the people who were actually being accused of it are not the people who came up with it, or whatever. It was these imposed words. And it's during that time where a scene begins and all this, where the first interruption happens, and as a director, I've already told them, "This is a workshop production. You are a test audience, and I'll be standing over there. During intermission, please come up to me, talk to me about what you think, how would we make the show better," and all of this stuff. So it's inviting the audience, in a way, to participate, and so it was set up. And we had all these bets of like how long it'll be before people figured that out.
Collings
Really?
Kurup
I was like, "It can't be more than fifteen minutes." I was surprised that there were some people at intermission who were still fooled by it. So, you know, these interruptions begin, and it's really interesting how many people got fooled, even fairly hip, smart theater people, and that's a great sort of accolade for us to have, right? Like you fool people that are hip to the theater. In fact, it was so sweet. There's this wonderful actor, and he's a director, named Allan Miller, who I've gotten to know over the years, and he's very friendly, and he was sitting next to this guy Bruce Friedman, or in front of Bruce Friedman, who was one of the plants, who was one of our cast members. And he was a Taper subscriber, you know, and when he interrupted the show, and I had to come in there, and I was like arguing, there was a point when Allan later told me, he says, "You know, I almost hit that guy." As a protective measure, like, you're ruining my friend's show, which I thought was like so great. I felt like that was like the best review, to be able to fool the people whom we love and also who know the theater.

Collings
Was anybody upset by it?
Kurup
Oh, there were people very angry. I'm sure there were people who were angry about it, by it. You know, people get--I'm sure there are things that we've done over the years also, you know, people are completely blown away, really into it, or people also kind of find it problematic, and you can't just sort of paint them all with one brush there. It's a variety of things.
Collings
Well, I mean, it seems like you're doing something kind of risky. I mean, it's a holiday show, and maybe they want to have this shining holiday moment, and you're playing with that.
Kurup
Absolutely. So there's that side of it. Then the other side of it is the whole idea of like fooling us. That also can be--I think if you go to the theater, if you delight in the artifice, you might delight in the idea of being fooled, and that could be fun. I mean, when we did "Birthday of the Century," people had problems with how we were trying to define community. Some people found that insulting. Other people found it thrilling.
We did a show called "Footmouth," which was technologically something we'd been wanting to do ever since we did "Everyman in the Mall," the idea being that how could we actually get to hear sound without having a sound cart that always ran with you and all of this stuff. And one of the ideas was to do infrared hearing pieces, you know, almost like you do with the docents or a guided docent tour.
Collings
That's a good idea.
Kurup
But in this case, in "Footmouth," the audience came to the mall knowing there was a show there, and they would stop--they were told where to go. They would get tickets, and then they would all meet at a prearranged place. The mall was still going. It was eight o'clock at night, so it wasn't like "Everyman," where we started at nine-thirty once the mall was closing down, but it was more about using the mall as is. Christopher Moore directed that piece, and it was basically a Pirandello play called "The Man With the Flower in His Mouth," and then another short, which was "Footfalls," Beckett's "Footfalls," as is. You know, you can't touch Beckett. We were able to adapt Pirandello, and Alison did that.
And that would be me and Armando Molina, the two of us in a mall talking, and at first it was Page doing this woman who's, in a way, talking to her mother in her head. There's a sense that she may be contemplating suicide, and she was standing on the higher balcony, so there was this sort of slight danger about that. And the audience came and gathered in one place. So they watched the show for maybe--it began from two floors above, looking

down at where we were, but they could hear us because we were mic'd. So they were getting a close up in terms of what they were hearing, but we were playing to a wide angle, a master shot, so to speak. So it was like a filmic thing at the same time it was theatrical, you know?

Collings

Right, right.

Kurup

And we had to--and there were a number of times this happened, where people came up to me in the middle of the scene, while I was talking, because we blended in completely. Nobody walking by knew we were actors at that moment. But a couple of times, somebody came up to me and said, "Hey, I heard there's a theater piece going on around here. Do you know where it is?" And I would have to have a conversation with them. And mostly in that piece I spoke and Armando listened. He'd have a few lines in response, but I was doing a lot of talking, so it was really kind of scary to think about where this person came in, whoever, you know, if they interrupted, how would you then get back to the script the way it was. And then the other thing is people would sometimes come up to both me and Armando and go, "What are all those people looking at?" Right? There would be all these people looking down. They were wondering what that was about. And you'd see people walking along, going like that, looking up at the people, and it was devised so that you could actually end up closer to--to the point where we actually then walked up right next to the audience. In the audience, it's everything, from--now, there were people, I think, who came to see that show, who felt, wow, we were making fun of the people in the mall.

Collings

I was just going to say, I mean, malls in L.A., they're all so different in terms of their community. Which mall was this?

Kurup

This one was our favorite mall of all, which is the first one, which is Santa Monica Place Mall, which is where we did "Everyman in a Mall." It's where we did "Malliere", it's where we did the "California Seagull." We did the mall festival, we went back there. It was a very potent mall, that one, for Cornerstone anyway, because there were people who ran the place at that time, and their main job was to bring art into it, community artists, their paintings, and Cornerstone just fit in perfectly. We happened to be in Santa Monica at that time, so it was perfect. We were part of the community, and even when we went away from the community, we came back over the years to sort of work with them.

Collings

And that's when you were in the Highways space.

Kurup

That was in the Highways space, exactly, on 18th Street. And it was also the mall that's been torn down. It's gone. They now have another mall there. Page said she went to it recently, and it's not nearly as interesting. That was a Frank Gehry mall, by the way.

Collings

Oh, was it. I didn't realize that.

Kurup

It was a Gehry-designed mall. So anyway, people felt that that was mocking the audience, and I don't know. Were we mocking the audience? Possibly. I don't think so. I mean, most of the time we were just blending into the audience. We were trying to give a sense of--and really, one of the things that people left with that show, because that man, "The Man With the Flower in His Mouth" is a man who has cancer, mesothelioma, and the woman across is a woman contemplating possibly suicide. So people walked out of that theater piece going, "Wow. Now when I pass anybody in a mall whom I take for granted, thinking, oh, you're here to shop, I start thinking about what else might be going on in your life," which I think is exactly what we wanted to have happen. But, of course, you can also make the argument, are you making fun of people by sort of having them look up and what's going on, nobody knows, and people are like--there's a little bit of a prurient quality of like we're peeping Toms into this. But I think, isn't all art a kind of a peeping-Tom thing?

Collings

So what was the impulse, on the part of the company, to sort of blend in with the regular customers?

Kurup

I think creative--it's something that because we had done the spectacle of "Everyman in the Mall," which is to have the mall to ourselves, be able to go inside, let shops allow us to use their--let Page be a mannequin behind the glass, and use the elevator and fill it with fog, and make this sort of larger than life sort of spectacular images, and then we got to go inside the mall store and make smaller pieces in there, a comedy, a Chekhovian drama, and then we thought, well, what's the next thing? Just like with "Candude" when I was talking about how do we take a journey? You know, "Everyman" was a journey play. Then we said, "Well, not only do we want to go inside the library, but we want to come out and explode into the city, so that we end our audience looking at their own city, saying how beautiful the city is, how beautiful the skyline is," and, of course, we were going down Hope Street at the very end of "Candude," which was Chris' great idea. We were like, "Well, there's Flower Street. We could go down Flower." "No." And Chris said, "Hope Street." For "Candude," that was perfect, right?

So coming back to--well, why we did that because we thought, well, then, how do we blend--how can we do invisible theater, you know, like street theater but nobody knows there's theater going on, except the people who

have come there purposefully to look for drama, pathos, or comedy, whatever.

Collings

Yes. Well, it's almost like you're doing a cycle that deals with that particular kind of space as well. You're doing all these different--

Kurup

And even though it was sort of spread out over time, between, say, '94 and '99, which is when we did "Footmouth," oddly--it's such an interesting thing you point out, because if you think about it, that's exactly what--we were exploring mall, this mall particularly, but mall. And the reason that we wanted to go into mall was, for better or for worse, I think it was Bill who said that American culture exists in malls, for better or for worse, and that the ideal place for Cornerstone to have a theater would be in a mall.

Collings

That's true.

Kurup

And that made a lot of sense, you know, just right next to Auntie Ann's and Chick Filet or whatever. There was something really appealing to that. Also, there's something so garish about malls, and yet we're completely drawn there. George Romero has this movie--

Collings

Yes, I love that movie.

Kurup

--"Dawn of the Dead" is like one of my favorite movies. And he says, "Why do they come? Well, they don't know. They just--."

Collings

There are these urges for when they were alive or something.

Kurup

For what their life was like. It's fantastic. I love that idea of it. So this all began because I was talking about the idea of, like, how people can feel upset by what they're seeing, or people can be thrilled by what they're seeing. And one of the things that continued in "For Here or To Go" was the idea that people were--it was so interesting. It brought up so many little things for people. As we interrupted the show, I would think that a large portion of the audience started realizing, "Oh, okay." Because we gave them a fake program and everything. Only at the very end did we then hand out the real programs, who had done what, who were the real actors, you know, all of this kind of stuff.

But the Taper subscribers were at one point, Bruce, the character that Bruce Friedman is playing, and Lorraine Shields was playing his wife--they were really chastised by the other subscribers next to them. Like this older woman said to Lorraine, she says, "Sit down. Sit," like, you know, "You're a disgrace."

Collings

That's what I was wondering about, because there are certain cultural norms, I would think, for Taper subscribers, of the theater, for the real ones.

Kurup

That doesn't work, right? It wouldn't work to be able to stand up and--like we always talk about how African Americans talk back in the theater. There's almost the tradition of being able to speak out like when you're having a church kind of situation, where the opposite is true with most white culture. It's about, there's that respectful, or here's somebody speaking. It's more the podium speaker and then they're speaking to the rows of people, right? Nowadays we think of it differently, like council is in a circle. Cornerstone does everything in a circle. I mean, even our emblem is in a circle. If you notice the new emblem, it is just like a big O and like a beautiful little whoosh with like a paintbrush whoosh, and that circles--even in this new musical we just did, one of the first things it talks--there's a song that talks about sitting in a circle, which is--sitting in a row as being fascist, they're calling them fascist rows, versus a circle, where you get to see everybody in that circle. And a lot of cultures sit in circles. You can go back to Arthur, you can go back to the Native Americans, you know, "The Legend of King Arthur," the Native Americans, all kinds of spiritual circles that happen. So, you know, this whole idea of looking down upon rows and pontificating is a different kind of culture.

So the theater becomes a little--I mean, theater was born on the steps the temples, so there's a reverence to it, and I feel like perhaps that got rattled a little bit, and maybe in some ways the thing that brings up some of the ugliness of actually saying to somebody--it's like looking at your neighbor's lawn and saying, "Your lawn needs to be as good as my lawn, because in order for us to keep up our appearances here, we need to have the same kind of lawn." Except in California, it should be against the law for us to make that lawn. When people are trying to change their lawns to these eco-friendly, at least to the desert, they're getting in trouble now in certain communities. You know, they have to have the green lawns and all that. Well, this was sort of pushing against the lawn, you know.

Collings

Pushing against the lawn.

Kurup

And it was sort of this idea of, what does that bring up for people? To the point where Lorraine said while she was in the bathroom during intermission, a woman came up to her and kind of pointed at her, and I don't want to overexaggerate, but kind of poked her chest a little with her finger, saying, "You should be ashamed of yourself."

Collings

Boy, that's really strong.

Kurup

Still not realizing that the play was a play.

Collings
Oh, gee, she must have been embarrassed at the end.
Kurup
Well, I wonder if she even came back for the second act. I don't know.
Collings
With word of mouth, though, were fewer and fewer people fooled as the performance went on?
Kurup
I think on some level, the people who were going to pass the word along were delighted by the fooling, and so--
Collings
Oh, they didn't reveal it.
Kurup
--it's like they didn't reveal it. I mean that's the sense, because I think from what I remember those two weeks, people seemed to really still fall for the different places and laugh at the different places. And also, I mean, there was something really interesting that we touched upon in a way where we talked about--because if we were in the place of like really looking at ourselves, being self-reflexive, looking, lampooning ourselves as much as we're lampooning anything else, you know, including the cloying Cornerstone, let's all sing "Kumbaya," to Peter bringing up stuff that had to do with like how convenient it had been in many Cornerstone shows--and he may have spoken about this. I don't know if he did, but--
Collings
Peter Howard you're referring to.
Kurup
Peter Howard, yes, if he spoke about talking about this notion of, like, often because we were working in communities of color, the bad guy would be played by Peter, a white guy.
Collings
Oh, right, right.
Kurup
Or Chris, or somebody else.
Collings
Yes, actually, Lynn Jeffries talked about this.
Kurup
She did speak a little bit about this, right? And Peter brought that up during this particular play. And what was another thing that--and I'll tie this into our ritual. I'll take us back. I think I talked to you a little bit about when we were doing in Watts, when we did "Los Faustinos," one of the women who was in this show called "The Love of the Nightingale," the Timberlake Wertenbaker play, which was the first play we've ever done as is, because the community in that particular case asked for doing a play in not the here and now, but some--

Collings
And they wanted to do it in the period costume--
Kurup
I'm sure that Lynn spoke about that, too, maybe at some point, right. And I think I touched upon it. And in that play we had met this mother named Theordora ["Dora"] Hardy and her daughter Joanne, who was three or two at the time. Dora had done that show and had a great big part in that, and then we'd asked her to do "Los Faustinos," and she'd come over and then had left the show, we think maybe because she didn't want the smaller part, you know, "I've just played a big part." But it could have been. But she said it was because the reason we were there to begin with, which tried to bring together, maybe find a way for Latinos and African Americans, because that tension was rising--
Collings
That's why you had been invited to come in.
Kurup
That's one of the reasons we were invited to come in, to say, can we do--because ultimately, with the bridge show we could bring both the Latino--because we were being very specific at first. First we were mostly working with the African American, and they we did Latino, and then African American, you know. We were being very specific and respectful of those boundaries, because we found that in Watts, those boundaries could mean death, right, if you crossed those boundaries. Literally, if you crossed the wrong street, you could get hurt and/or killed.
But she left that show, and there were like--we worked with a lot of people who are very Christian but sort of more on the fundamentalist level, and also on the level of being people who homophobic. You know, we've had that experience. And so the gay people in our company could not necessarily openly be gay. It was still okay. While we were in Watts, the number-one epithet is always, "Fag." Now it's, "That's really gay," but we have a different context to it now, because people are much more accepting of that, but back then it was dangerous to be any of those things.
So one of the things Peter also brought up was being the bad guy is the white guy, but also this whole thing of homosexuality, you know, and how could we then also sort of explore some of that in the play, in how we hide ourselves. There were things that Bill and Chris would be able to communicate with each other, like saying, "I love you," without actually saying it to each other in front of other people, but they would be able to do it in front of other people because it was coded language, right. So this coded-ness was something that we were trying to experiment. If I'm not mistaken, it was Peter who was sort of driving that train a little bit, to say, "Hey, can we look at this?"
Collings
This was within the "For Here or To Go"?

Kurup
Within "For Here or To Go," within the context of "For Here or To Go."
Collings
And it had sort of come to a boiling point during the Watts residency, but you chose not to explore it in that context.
Kurup
Yes, well, actually, the boiling point came ever further later, which I will touch upon, which I'm sure some other people have already touched upon. But it began to be explored there. But how I'll tie it in with our ritual is now this is 2000, so we met Dora in '94. So six years later, now Joanne is like nine years old, and she's kind of growing up around us. She's seen a number of shows. And Dora was a very strong--in fact, in the play, my god, she was in the play, she was so funny. She has this huge voice, and she's a beautiful singer, and she's a forbidding woman. She's a foreboding and forbidding woman. She's quite powerful in her personality. And she would call my name. It was the first time I had to use my own name in the play as the character, because I was playing Shishir Kurup, the director, you see. And so she would say my name. She was like [demonstrates], "Shishir, Shishir." She's looking for me, like what is going on? And the way she would scream, it was like terrifying, you know.
So anyway, before we open the show, we're doing the ritual. And Dora, in the process of talking about the show, and especially, I think, affected by the stuff about the homosexuality and all that, brings up, in a way, how much Bill and Chris mean to her. And it was so moving, because there's her daughter, she's raising her. You know, for a Christian woman who has heard from the pulpit that this is wrong and it's a sin, and she couldn't think of two any better people to influence her child and the children that they were--well, the child that they had now, you know. It was just incredibly moving to hear. To me, that was--to see somebody go from a little more of somebody who has followed a certain path then go, "You know what? I can still be this person who I am, but I can open myself up to something that I've realized is possibly folly to have a prejudice against," and all of that. And she said it in an incredibly beautiful way. I wish I could remember the exact words, but the gist of it being how much she loved them, how important they were to her in her life, and how she was happy to have her child around that, you know what I mean?
Collings
Oh, that's lovely, yes.
Kurup
So it was moving. And there's also another very interesting thing. There was a guy named Eric who was a cop in the play, a real cop. We actually had cops and former gang members dancing together in a kickline, which was really kind of beautiful, at one point in the play. And this guy Eric, I think Bill walked into him, walked into the theater one day not long after our ritual, I

think, it may have been the same day as our ritual, and Eric was sitting the in the seat bawling. He was crying. And Bill asked him what was going on, "What happened? Is everything okay?" And he says, "Everything's great. It's just I didn't think I would ever have an experience like this ever in my life, to be on the stage here and to do this, and to share this with people," and I imagine--because what do you realize when you're a police officer and you're in a play where you doing a kickline with a gang member? You know what I mean? Or a former gang member, you know. There are realizations that get made, and it was incredibly powerful to hear him be so moved by that.

So these are one of hundreds of these kinds of experiences that I've had being in this company, and in so many different sort of situations, that ultimately you might understand why I've stayed with this company all these years.

Because the work is hard. The work is so much harder than the regular theater work, which is fairly--I mean, people talk about how hard theater work is. It is hard, but, you know, when you're in a plush theater--but it becomes so much about an inward gaze, and what I love about Cornerstone is it's this outward gaze. And in the process of the outward gaze, you're brought back to yourself, just like Eric was, just like Dora was. She goes out, she sees what is the possibility and the different kinds of nuances in life, and comes back to herself and her own child. Eric does the same thing as a cop, and I do so as a human being and as an artist too.

I think to me, to be around the theatre, with the r-e at the end, is a different kind of world. I mean, it's, I think ultimately, not as interesting to me than to do this work, where you are still getting up there, and you are doing work as--and we've always argued that this work is as--we don't need to apologize for this work. We don't even have to--I mean, I don't even believe in contextualizing it, but I'm happy to contextualize. "Oh, these are people who haven't been onstage before," because I go see plenty of theater in Los Angeles and many other places, where I wonder if these people have ever been onstage before. And they're not, and they're professionals. So it doesn't really--to me, the contextualization of having these people who've never been onstage before is kind of not of any value, especially after all this time. I just say, "Come see the work. If you know anything about the company, great. If you don't, great." Whatever. But more than anything is, "Are you seeing something on that stage that moves you?" And depending upon the person, yes and no. So anyway, that's why this work has been so meaningful for me.

Collings

Does a company like Cornerstone have a life cycle? Because, I mean, obviously there's the rural years, and then coming to L.A. and exploring these communities, and now getting into--you can sort of see the influence of people such as yourself, who have a background in theater and are

interested in exploring concepts and theatrical ideas, and then what is sort of--

Kurup

There's a next cycle, yes. For a long time, we were sort of trying to live--we were known as the rural theater company, and that was only five years. Can you imagine, we've been almost doing this urban thing for twenty years? It was supposed to be another five-year cycle, an urban cycle. So instead now twenty years later, we're in the same--so this'll be in 2011 will be our twenty-fifth anniversary.

Collings

Gosh.

Kurup

So twenty years in this city alone. So it's always been this sort of rural-urban. But you're pointing up interesting differences, interesting ways that we've not looked at it yet, which is like even naming the mall as a possible cycle that was disbursed over a few years, without us really thinking about it as a cycle, and then to look at it as, well, we go from geographic to then exploring what other kinds of community deviations there are, or concepts of community there are, to then conceptual ideas of, what are we exploring, the larger question that we're asking when we're doing that with community. Yes. No, that's really interesting. I haven't really thought about where, because right now I think we're in that conceptual phase of that guiding question.

Collings

Ah. You're sort of moving into a new--

Kurup

Yes, this is our third. This is our third of those cycles, with faith being the first one. One could argue B.H. was also that, but it was still kind of geographical. B.H. was Beverly Hills, and then Broadway and Hill was the only little cheat, because that was Chinatown, because we were trying to get Chinatown in there, but we called it Broadway and Hill and that made it B.H. But I think we're in the middle of our guiding question kind of thing, and I wonder if this is a cycle that has enough sort of gas to keep the fire going, or then does something else come out of it. What's the next thing, you know.

Collings

Well, what spurred the beginning of the justice cycle? What was sort of the impetus behind that?

Kurup

I think, oddly enough, it was a thing that was--because I think we did talk about when we left the faith cycle, we talked about it as being what was the root of the faith cycle, and that's when that question about, oh, we were talking about working with prisons, and I remember that was one of the things then. And I remember, oddly enough, that people were like, "Well, do

we want to do work in prisons?" "Not necessarily, because there are other companies that are doing that already." "So what would make it uniquely Cornerstone?" And out of that, I think, came that conversation. I'm not completely sure how it got crystallized, but I know that Michael came to this company, and I think he may have had some influence in that, in that he had wanted very much to work with undocumented immigrants, and he was looking at that. And I think that that could have been part of crystallizing it. Because certainly the third piece in the justice cycle was "For All Time," which was about retribution, crime and punishment. Crime and punishment was being explored, and we actually did work with people. There was one point when we were talking about working with a women's prison, and, in fact, the Manson women were in there, and maybe even having some writings from people in there, doing some sort of simulcast in the play so that you could actually have life footage of people who were behind bars somehow performing with the people onstage. There were all these ideas about how--and then things prevented us from doing it. But so I think that that was how, conceptually, that came up.

And then out of that came--I mean, not out of that, but after we were finished with that, we were like, "Well, what's our next cycle?" And we wanted to go back to something a little--at first it was a little bit more whimsical, because the faith cycle we were--no, no, the justice cycle, justice, so much seriousness, hardly any music.

Collings

Oh, really.

Kurup

Hardly any. In fact, only one show that had songs in it. Now, we had always had--almost every show had a few songs. Brecht has been a huge influence on this company. At least I don't know about anymore, but it was. It was a huge influence on this company, his influence, the idea that you can have a play--Brendan Behan, I guess, if you look at "The Hostage." "The Hostage" is a play, Irish play with songs. But we keep saying that we've had our first musical, and it's true we have, on one level, with "Making Paradise," in the classic book writer, lyricist composer. But we did have--in the rural years they did a show called "The Mask Family Musical," which had the book writer, composer, I think the composer-lyricist was one of them. But that's also a musical.

But the idea that that cycle was so heavy, you know, that part of what we were looking at is like, can we go to something that's more connective? And food is like one of the most connective things, right? And could it have a bit more whimsy? That was another thing. For example, why we do ensemble shows, and this is an explanation that I've sort of landed on why when people ask, especially people who are newer to the company.

Collings

Ensemble shows as apart from the community.

Kurup
As opposed to the community. The ensemble shows--and I've talked about a number of them as we've gone, including "Everyman in the Mall," and I think I mentioned MMC, "Media, Macbeth, Cinderella" and shows like that. "Antigone" is one of the ones we haven't talked about, but that's something that I'm sure we'll touch on, is that these shows were there to help us flex our muscles, because so much of our work is done--we are flexing our muscles as actors in those shows, but what we are doing also often is looking at everybody else. As artists we were--and we do that less now than we did back then.
But the idea was that when you're working, you're not just working on yourself. You're helping other people. You're taking them aside. You're running lines with them. You're helping them with moments. When you have a cast of forty or thirty-five or fifty or whatever, the director can do so much, and the rest of--you have to be a particular kind of actor to be in Cornerstone. You have to be willing to be a person who has to sort of submerge what your needs are, and actors are very needy in many ways, right, so that's the other thing, what I love. In terms of the outward gaze versus the inward gaze, you know. It's about how much willingness you have to go, "Okay, it's about your time. Let's figure out how you can do it. I'm going to go home and work on my stuff. In my scenes, when I get a chance to rehearse, I'll try to find what I can find. But how can I help other people?" And oddly enough, you know, there's something incredibly satisfying and gratifying about doing that sort of work.
But then we would also have this yen to just work with each other, just to give ourselves a break, remind ourselves, these people that we love to work with, have fun with, and make these fun, funny, silly, profound, all of the different kinds of metaphors you want to use for what this work is, and get to just play, and whimsy is a big part of that. Ah. One of us has this idea. They really want to explore the idea of avarice and reckoning, the idea of like, do we have to pay for our shopping mentality. I mean, "Everyman" came out of that thing of like, "What are we doing? We have a chance to work in a mall."
And I brought "Everyman" to Bill. I brought two plays to Bill. One was "Everyman" and the other one was "The Adding Machine." First I was like really into "Everyman." Then at some point I said, "Oh, no, let's do 'The Adding Machine.'" And he was like, "No, no, no, no. This 'Everyman' thing, that will work really well," and that's what we ended up doing. And it made a lot of sense in a mall, right? So that kind of idea, but you could still be exploring something of meaning. You could have fun with it and be silly. Well, sometimes our work, maybe the justice cycle because of the title, justice, it just made things a bit heavier.
Collings
Right, like the Justice Department.

Kurup
The Justice Department, yes. You know, "Law and Order," [imitates heavy tone]. You don't hear "Law and Order" [imitates light tone]; you don't hear that.
Collings
Exactly.
Kurup
And I'm not suggesting that the hunger cycle is going to be [imitates mid-tone], but it might have a little bit of the combination.
So the thing that was amazing about when we went into the faith cycle was right after we announced it and started beginning this thing called a faith festival, which we're in the process of planning a food festival coming up soon, but the faith festival was being planned including an ensemble show called "Zones" that Peter Howard wrote, which I'm sure he talked about, or he may have not, I don't know. It was an interactive--it was a Planning Commission meeting, one of those--right now they're talking about the mosque in New York, right?
Collings
Oh, right.
Kurup
This is exactly what this was about, nine years ago, nine years ago.
Collings
It had to do with a mosque?
Kurup
It was a Zoroastrian group of people who were like doing this sort of--it wasn't Zoroastrian; what was that called? They were a dualistic religion of some sort, an early dualistic. They were going to make their own church, and there was a lot of--so it was basically a community meeting about whether this church could be built there or not. And I was a pastor who was against it, because I was a Christian pastor and you know. So that was the kind of argument in the play. But right at that time, 9/11 hit, and it was really interesting how raw everybody was. And it was an incredibly powerful time. And everybody was going, "How did you guys come up with these?" You know, like right before it happened, we were going to explore faith. And I thought what was really interesting--I don't know if Peter talked about "Zones," but one of the powerful things, I found, is how raw people were, because that happened in November. That play happened, I think, in maybe October, around that time, of 2001, so so close to 9/11. So we would have conversations after the play, and we'd sit in a circle and finish. We were doing amazing--I thought the faith cycle was really well thought through, because we had a lot of support from the NCCJ, used to be the National Council for Christians and Jews. Then it became Communities and Justice, and then I think it just became the National Council or something. But you

may want to check if that's the right title, but that's what it was. That's what I remember.
But they helped us have these things called Weekly Wednesdays, which were interfaith dialogues, and all of this before 9/11. I mean, we had planned all of this before 9/11. So 9/11, we had already started the weekly Wednesdays, and people were already having these interfaith dialogues. 9/11 hits, it becomes even more potent, you know what I mean? So we were doing pieces at--I wonder if Lynn [Jeffries] spoke about this, because she was a producer in one of these places of worship. What we did was a Buddhist temple, a ouple of different churches, an Islamic center, and I can't remember the name of the school, but it was an Islamic school in Pasadena. So when that happened, the security going into the Islamic school was like unbelievably high.

Collings
Gosh.

Kurup
And so all kinds of things. They were thinking of pulling out. It was all of this, you know.

Collings
They were thinking of pulling out?

Kurup
Yes, because they were afraid. They didn't know who was going to be--what the fallout was going to be. Everybody was very, very frightened at that time. And I remember the experience of "Zones" being very emotional for people, and the conversations afterwards being much more painful and raw. But this was the precursor to our cycle, which began, actually, in 2002 with a play called "Crossings," where we were exploring Catholicism, but through a very specific angle, which was Catholics from all over the world who live here, so how Catholicism had affected these native cultures, and how the native cultures affected Catholicism, and how they all lived in all these different cultures. So that's what we ended up having. What we were exploring was in "Zones," that conversation allowed us to get to this place of like really people were needing to process.
But then we did it again the following year I think it was. At some point we revived it. With a number of months away from 9/11, very different response.

Collings
In what way?

Kurup
Less raw, less immediate, less fraught, less with that kind of pain attached to it. And you know, of course, we are in L.A., so we are three thousand miles from ground zero, so we have a different relationship to it. We think about it, we care about it, but it's not like when the earthquake hits here or up in San Francisco. That is, for us, far more immediate, and the mourning

is there. We've also gotten so, I think, L.A., I mean, my god. You have these dry summers leading to very wet winters, which then have us mudsliding like crazy, followed by riots, followed by fires when we come back, and then earthquakes, you know. It's like, okay, what else? So I think that part of that has made us a little more oddly resilient, but that first time was--I noticed a difference in how people responded and all the dialogues we had. So oddly enough, everything we planned, it almost seemed like we knew something like this was about to happen. And so in a funny way, I also think Cornerstone as a company, partly because we do sit in a circle and talk about this stuff, we seem a little bit ahead of the curve every time when we come up with these ideas. And even the justice--I mean, to tell you the truth, Michael's idea of "Los Illegals" and wanting to do the undocumented stuff was incredibly prescient on one level, because, yes, we've been dealing with this issue for years and years and years. But the way it came to a head right around 2007, 2008--

Collings

Exactly.

Kurup

--and we did that play in the spring of 2007, and that was at the height of all of that stuff.

Collings

That's right.

Kurup

So in that way.

Collings

Well, that congressional bill that got everybody so upset was spring of 2006, I think.

Kurup

Yes, exactly. And so we had already planned the cycle, and "Los Illegals" was already being worked on when that happened. So again, you know, the prescience is a part of it.

So in that cycle, I can just briefly touch upon, really I can just zip through those, is that "Crossings" was this amazing play we did at the old archdiocese right down in Little Tokyo area, and for some reason right now it's escaping me, but there was a name. It was called--I'm sure we'll be able to put that, figure it out. I can't remember what it's called now. But we did it at that space, and we were basically exploring the Bible, but they were through the communities of like French Catholics, but in from Africa, the Congo, Congolese Catholics, Mexican Catholics, Cambodian Catholics who were converted on the boats coming over, and then this huge church down in Torrance that has services all day, because the communities move through it, from Somoan to Korean to all kinds of Catholics that are passing through there; Filipino.

So one of them was a mix of all of those people, and then there were these specific--and we did round robins. People would come in, watch the play. Everybody would watch the first play together. Then guides would break them off like we did in like the traveling pieces, where if you came and saw the play one night, you would see it in one order, if you came another night, you would see it in a different order, so it affected--act two was many years later, some of these characters grown up, and act two is a scripted play by one author, one playwright. The rest of it were smaller plays by a bunch of different people who'd written them.
Amazing thing about that one was a lot of amazing things, very beautiful. Catholics were coming up and weeping in our arms.

Collings

Oh, my goodness.

Kurup

Friends of mine, other artists who were artists, who had sort of had a tenuous relationship with their Catholicism, or reformed Catholics or any of that stuff, people coming up and just hugging me after the play and crying and all, artists I'm talking about. But one of the things that was really, really moving was when we were doing our ritual, and again, you'll see now, now that '99 has passed, the ritual plays a huge part of what is so moving about--because one of the main things about the ritual, right, is that when somebody--everybody goes through it, and everybody gets to do it--everybody goes through and touches upon a moment or scene or a word or whatever.
What they have done is that they have now made the play unbelievably relevant to everybody who's doing it. Each one of us is processing it through our own experience. But when we hear all these other experiences of like why that meant so much to Jane, because that was something her father and her used to do when she was a little kid, and this experience, "And so when you say that line, it reminds me of this," so now everybody is sharing this. This is a very powerful way, right. So it's no more just a play from the point of view I see, but I now see everybody's point of view, and I live in a richer broth, so to speak.
And in this case, one of the most powerful ones was the Cambodian story and this one woman who--I mean, and every one of these rituals ends with people pretty much devastated, but we do go into opening night with this amazing amount of power.

Collings

So the ritual is only before opening night?

Kurup

Right before opening night, usually right on that day and then we have opening night. And so this woman who talked--Page was working with the Cambodians, and she'd written a version of Noah. I thought it was very smart. I don't know if she talked about it when you talked with her, but it

was between the moment when Noah sends out the dove and the dove comes back. It was called "Afloat," and these were all fifteen-minute plays, so you saw fifteen minutes, fifteen minutes, fifteen minutes, fifteen minutes, so there were like four fifteen-minute plays that made the first act. And "Afloat" was really beautiful, because it dealt with the Cambodians and their story of just waiting and waiting and waiting to be rescued, and that's what Noah was doing, so they've been waiting to find land, right.
But the woman told this amazing story about her conversion, the thing that kept her sane by becoming a Catholic, and Jesus was--she watched her children, her husband, her parents starve to death in front of her.

Collings

Oh, my god.

Kurup

And she's the survivor. And can you imagine survivor's guilt on that level? So people were--I mean, we were just--I mean, I've been in a number of these, many, many circles now, and the power of that one is still there, to imagine what that is. So anyway, it was a great show, and we turned away 150 people. Like toward the end--we got in, we could only get in like--I think it's a ninety-nine seat, but we went well over it, I'm sure, because we made it like more of a spectacle thing so we could get away with it. We only had that many seats. But this is one of those shows where the line was long, and people were actually turned away, which was unfortunate but kind of exciting.
And there were a number of plays in this cycle, exploring all kinds of different faith. I mean, I'm sure you have what they were, but we did the Catholic immigrants, we did Hinduism, but everything we were looking at from a very particular--we were looking for gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered people of faith. That was called "Body of Faith." It was written by Luis Alfaro, directed by Chris Moore.
And then we did a very powerful one, which we did--and powerful in that--I'm not necessarily saying the art in one was more powerful than the other, but some of their responses to things that were pretty powerful. One was called "Black AIDS/Black Faith." It was a fraught experience, that one, because there were some things that happened during the process that were problematic, with directors we had never worked with before, in particular one director whom he had to fire. But the thing about that play that was powerful is that we were looking at the idea of, how did AIDS become so prevalent within the African American community, and did the clergy have something to do with it by not speaking up about it in the community, and letting it be a bit of a secret. And it was at that time when the statistics of the largest growing population of women with HIV, wives and girlfriends of men on the "down low," so to speak, and so that's what the play was exploring.

And at the beginning, we had met with a number of pastors. As you know, we have these advisory committees of community advisors and their community partners, and a number of them fairly virulently anti-gay or homophobic and felt that this was all the things you would think, you know, being it a curse and this and that and God's way of punishing and all this stuff. And, you know, it's hardly ever that we get this feeling in the theater where you actually do a piece of art and you can actually have some sort of reverberation from it, you know? But at one point, we'd wanted to have maybe some of the pastors on video, speaking their mind about this, as a kind of juxtaposition to what the play was exploring, but none of them really wanted to do that.

But all of them came to see it, from what I understand, and it was interesting that like the most vociferously virulent one saw the play and the following Sunday preached from the pulpit about the scourge of AIDS within our community. And I don't know how long that lasted. I wonder if there was any follow through. I have no idea about what happened there. But to hear that was powerful.

Collings

Yes. Now, who was the audience for the play, for the most part? Which community was this?

Kurup

Oddly enough, we did that play in Watts. We went back to Watts.

Collings

So what kind of responses were you getting from audience members about the play?

Kurup

Well, for one thing, it was a musical. It was all-out kind of, you know, what they call the urban circuit. They used to call it the chitlin' circuit, which is a kind of play that goes through the churches, and they're fairly garish, and they have a kind of--but they're like "Barbershop," the barbershop kind of movie, but they're musicalized versions of it, and I never saw all of "Barbershop." I've seen bits and pieces of it, but it gave me that sense. But, you know, your very sort of stereotypically effeminate gay men in it and all of that stuff, and it was part of the style of the play, because Paris Barclay was one of the directors, and actually, was he the composer also? I think he was the composer, and he had somebody else arrange it.

Paris is somebody who has--do you know who he is? He's a director, does a lot of television stuff. But he's an old friend of the company's and knows people from back in the Harvard days. And he, in fact, when we were in Watts, he and I both wrote songs together. It's funny. We've written music and songs for different plays together. But he was the one who was very--the piece was called "Order My Steps." It's a famous gospel song called "Order My Steps," beautiful song actually. And his idea was to make it this big entertainment, and it was, and it was. So it was received--it seemed like

the people who came to see it enjoyed it very much. But the way the community responded to it was pretty powerful. And the community we were trying to reach, I think also, the clergy, had taken that into account.

Collings

So were people coming to it based on the theme, or were they just like coming to a musical?

Kurup

I think they were coming to see--it's hard to know.

Collings

Because it sounds like, I mean, it could potentially be pretty risque for certain--

Kurup

Audience members? Yes, yes, exactly. Yes, I'm not sure. We're always surprised that anybody comes to any of our shows, so when they're there, we were just happy that they're there. And, of course, now we've become, over the years--we take surveys and try to understand this.

Collings

Oh, do you?

Kurup

Oh, yes. Did I tell you the statistic that at some point in 1999, when we did "Broken Hearts," the one I was just telling you about, the end of the B.H. cycle, we did a survey in LATC--

Collings

Oh, you were talking about you started charging admission, because you found out that the people coming could afford it.

Kurup

Oh, no, I didn't say that. That was somebody else. That may have been--no, that year we filled out a survey and we got the surveys back, and it just happened that we hit the exact demographic of Los Angeles--

Collings

Oh, my goodness.

Kurup

--the percentages.

Collings

That's amazing.

Kurup

It was weird. I don't think we've ever done that before, I don't think it'll ever be possible again. But it was literally like this much percentage was African American, this was white, these people have this kind of income, these people have this kind of income, and it was a pretty interesting statistic in 1999. So anyway, but this whole idea, yes, we've done statistics now to try to find out, and surveys to find out, "Where are you coming from? How are you hearing about us?" And it's just still always a mystery. I mean literally at this point, where Cornerstone has had this reputation now for a number of

years, we still don't know if anybody is going to show up. Just as recently as the musical, you know, like, will anybody show up? And then it did, and then it got sold out, and if we could have extended the run, I think we would have done fine, but things didn't work out that way, in terms of the hall being booked and everything like that.
So the next thing that came along for us was "You Can't Take It With You," the first time. You know, we've had a number of firsts. We had, like--Tappan Wilder is the nephew of one of my favorite writers, you know, "Our Town," Thornton Wilder, Thornton Wilder, and he had allowed us to adapt "A Long Christmas Dinner," which was called "The Birthday of the Century," and that was the first time he'd let anybody adapt any of his uncle's work, or I think it was his uncle.

Collings

Do you have any idea why he agreed?

Kurup

I think because he had heard about Cornerstone, he had heard about the kind of work we were doing, and actually what had happened, I adapted that script and then afterwards we were invited by PBS, local PBS, to make a short of it, as part of an evening of short films that they were going to make, and I went ahead and adapted it into a fifteen-minute screenplay, and he refused, because he says, "No, we've got a new book of Thornton Wilder's books coming out, and I had agreed to do the play, but I don't know about a screenplay," like a short screenplay. Why he would be averse to a screenplay I don't know, in the fact that, you know, it could have only helped. I mean, if anything, it'd help people want to be interested in Thornton Wilder, I would think, but I don't know the thinking behind that. But I appreciated the fact that he allowed us to adapt "A Long Christmas Dinner."
But Brecht, Stefan Brecht, has allowed us to adapt Brecht a number of times right now. I don't know how many times he's allowed that to happen before. I don't think he had until he allowed us to do it, and I may be wrong, but the sense I got was that he had not allowed that to happen before. So we've been very lucky, very lucky.
And then Kaufman and Hart did "You Can't Take It With You," and I believe this was the first--and Peter [Howard] got to adapt that one, and it was--I think Chris Hart is Moss Hart's grandnephew or nephew or something like that, and he allowed us to do it. I believe it was Christopher Hart, I believe. And that was an interesting controversy that we had, and maybe Peter talked about it. Did he mention this at all?

Collings

Actually, I haven't interviewed Peter yet.

Kurup

Oh, you haven't. Oh, I thought you had. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Okay.

Collings

I mean, we talked about it, but it hasn't happened.

Kurup

Oh, it hasn't happened. Oh, okay. Yes, if you do interview him, I'm sure you will talk a little more about this. But it was an interesting thing, because one of the things he wanted to do--he made--it was called "A Muslim Remix." It was "You Can't Take It With You" with an Arab Muslim family and a Pakistani Muslim family, so both an Indo-European family and a Semitic family, but of the same faith. And it was lovely. It was very funny. And one of the things that Peter was exploring in that was just this very subtle thing. In the original, there's a black couple who live in the house. One lives in the house with them, and the other one is a visitor, and so it was, for its time, pretty radical to have a member of the family who was--I don't think she was a maid. I think she just lived with them, or maybe she was a maid, I don't remember now. And then there was this little love affair, I mean a quiet love between the two.

And in this case I think Peter--you know, it was directed by a gay man, written by a gay man, so the idea was like, well, what if they were two men? And one was an Arab Muslim but with African features, and the other was actually an Indian Muslim, not necessarily a Muslim by following Islam, but--

Collings

By birth.

Kurup

--his name is Ali Khan. Yes, his name by birth is Ali Khan, Alexander Khan, so it's complicated. But so oddly enough, when we did the reading of the script, some people started saying, "Well, this is an odd little relationship, these two men. They seem to be very close, and what's this about?" And I think some of that became an issue, like, "Wait. If we do this, if you allow, even though it's very subtle, it's a whiff of it, it might keep people away." And it was a difficult decision to not allow that to sort of reach its full bouquet, so to speak, and that it, in essence, got quashed a little bit. Difficult because there were gay Muslims in the play.

Collings

And you had put the word out through perhaps a mosque or something like that, to invite people to participate?

Kurup

Well, we worked with the Islamic Center. We worked with the Islamic Center as one of the places, and that was a place, and so we'd done readings there after the play.

Collings

So you were specifically reaching out to this Muslim community.

Kurup

We were, absolutely, absolutely. And we wanted, especially after--because this is 2003, and this is two years after 9/11. It was really important. We were always going to explore Islam in different ways, but how do we do it?

We thought, well, why not a comedy? You know, that was Peter's brilliant idea, because everything about Muslims is serious, serious--

Collings

So serious.

Kurup

--and so sober and all of this stuff. Yes, and as a religion it has a tendency toward sobriety and toward like rigor and sobriety. But you've got Kawalis, who are ecstatic, Rumi, who is ecstatic, and out of ecstasy there is also humor. There's humor, there's music. You know, Islam, there's this thing about not having music, but the Kawali singers are some of our greatest singers, and some of the most moving poetry comes out of there, some of the most sort of, you know, questionable who's speaking to whom poetry from Rumi. I mean, Rumi is very clearly writing this to Tabriz as his lover, but the love--no, no, no, that's higher love. That's a much higher love. It's not carnal. And one can argue all kinds of things.

But the point of this being that we were going to explore comedy, which seems antithetical to what people think about Muslims, and we were going to have a good time, and we wanted to see Muslims in that theater laughing, and other people who have come to see the play also laughing along with all that. So there were a couple of things that happened in it that I thought were really interesting. You know, I'm a bit of a pot stirrer when it comes to stuff. I think part of it, it comes from kind of an anger when--you know, I think it's humorous. There's a lot of humor in it, but you know like humor can come from a place of like lack of justice. You feel like there's a little injustice going on.

So I remember one of the things that we would do, we'd have breaks in between the show--I mean not in between the show but during the show, and there were people in the dressing room who felt--very nice, sweet, good, thoughtful Muslim young people, who loved the sinner but hated the sin kind of thing, because the people who were gay people were their friends, they were people they knew, and we would have these powerful conversations, and it was really great what was going on. And the gay Muslims in the piece were--one of the things they felt was that they were abandoned. And it was not easy to hear, especially when you have a company with that many gay people in it, you know what I mean? So it was a really interesting--the decision I completely give over to the writer and the director, because I felt like it was--I think they thought they were doing what was best, and they were right on the level that they got--we saw a theater full of hijab-wearing women, laughing and enjoying themselves, and I don't think we would have had that. So to have that experience was of great value. It seemed important to reach out and connect. And yet there was this abandonment happening at the same time, so this again is the double-edged sword that is Cornerstone and the nuance that we have to be

dealing with all the time, and who do you leave out when you're letting someone in.
We can say, "We're about community and inclusiveness," but there's always somebody you're leaving out. Right? So there is no total inclusivity, so this was one of those moments. And one of the ways that I decided that I was going to ameliorate some of this, in my mind, was to play the father. I played the father of the more stodgy Pakistani family with a lot of money. The Arab family was the more quirky, eccentric, and that was another thing that Peter wanted, was the eccentric, quirky Arab Muslim. Again, I'm putting things into his motivation and intention, but I think I get this from what I think he had intended, to have the whimsy of that, you know, somebody being able to say, "Oh, look at that, a quirky Arab Muslim family." And the stodgy Pakistani family is probably de rigueur, but--

Collings

We're all familiar with that stereotype.

Kurup

Yes, yes, exactly, exactly. But that was a great juxtaposition, so you've different kinds of Islam going on, you know?
So one of the things I did as the father was I decided I wanted to make him very effeminate, but married and having a son and all of this stuff. It was just my little way of having a little, not a poke, but a little poke, to the point where one day the woman who was the assistant costume designer, a Muslim woman, or at least Muslim by birth, I don't know if she was following it, but she was standing next to our director, Mark Valdez, a gay man, and she was watching me, and she was like, "What's Shishir doing?" And Mark goes, "What do you mean?" She goes, "Why is he acting like that?" He goes, "Like what?" She goes, "You know, so faggy." And it was really--you know, was this my greatest moment onstage? I have no idea. I felt good about it. I felt people were laughing. I got a lot of laughs. I was able to find some places of things that felt meaningful with pathos.
I have no idea, but I know that why I chose that was because I was responding to what felt--and, you know, I know a lot of Muslim men who are gay men, who are married and have children, and/or are very effeminate but forced to marry, so it was sort of my little bow to them, and it felt real. It felt like this is a reality that exists in many cultures, not just Muslim culture. I mean all of these cultures that value family more than anything, you know what I mean? That's really the thing. Hinduism doesn't have a lot of--you know, there's nothing in it about homosexuality that you can go, "Oh, you can't do it." There's nothing wrong about it. You know, Krishna--

Collings

So it's not frowned upon?

Kurup

It's not frowned upon in the way that you would as a fundamentalist Christian or Muslim. Islam might have the clearest things in the Hadith,

where there are people, you know, there's some reference to throwing off of the highest building and all of this stuff. Hinduism, I mean Vishnu comes down as a woman sometimes, and Shiva has his female side. Krishna has his consort who's Radha, who is actually him. Hinduism is like, it's more of a--it's a real odd muddle in many ways, because it's a muddle but it's not a muddle. It's very philosophical, so what you have is, is it real or is it Memorex, or whatever. It's like two sides of the same coin. It's the double-edged sword. But how it does live is family. Nothing more important than family, having sons, which is, unfortunately, the first thing, having sons. Not just having children, but having sons. But having children, big part of--so in order for the family to flourish, there has to be procreation going on, and that's how it lives. It doesn't live in that other way, in the sort of sin and all of that kind of thing.

So anyway, for me that was a way of dealing with that and having some fun with it. We then went on to--we did the Hindu project, which was a play called "As Vishnu Dreams," which I wrote, and directed by Juliette Carillo. That was our last of the cycle, and then we went to do our big bridge show, which was "A Long Bridge Over Deep Water," written by James Still.

And just a really great shout out to James as a playwright. He was the epitome of the bridge show writer, in that he spent so much time coming to Los Angeles--well, of course, he lived here, but he traveled a lot. He works in Indiana Rep as an associate artistic director or associate artist/playwright in residence, that sort of thing, but he would come to most of the story circles as the plays were being researched. He came to every single play. He did his own story circles, based on whom he was most interested in, how he was going to go there, and was just absolutely the model artist to work with for that project, and out of that project came "A Long Bridge Over Troubled Waters," No, deep waters, I'm sorry. Troubled waters is the song. Deep Water.

We did that at the John Anson Ford. It's an 1800-seat theater, I believe. Maybe it's 1100, 1100 or 1800, I can't remember, but pretty big. And the play "La Ronde" was picked, Arthur Schnitzler's play about syphilis that gets passed through the whole play, starting with, I believe, a prostitute and a soldier. Scene one is that, scene two is this, so seeing how the syphilis gets passed all the way around. I believe it was syphilis. In this place it was religion that got passed around, and you went from one to another to another, how you met these people, including atheists, which is one group that we had not done a play with, but we decided that we needed to include them, because you know, we have atheists within our company, so you know. And great conversations with the Center for Inquiry that's down here and really interesting people.

But here again came the question of Islam, and in this play, this time we decided that we were going to keep it in, keep in the idea of Islam homosexuality and actually focus. And one of the crucial ideas within that

scene was about a young man who has been bashed, and he's trying to hide it from people by saying it was racist bash.

Collings

Very interesting.

Kurup

You know what I'm saying?

Collings

Yes.

Kurup

And at the same time feeling guilty, because he's a young gay man, of not saying what it really was, because if he said what it really was, it would be, what would happen to the family? Family was such a big part of it. And there was a really interesting parallel to this story, a young man that we met in the community early on, who was not out, who I think on some level recognized the love between the two men in that first play, and may have had some--I don't know, I can't remember now if he had anything to do with that conversation or but at least I think he caught it. And I remember his presence at the Islamic Center during that time, and he was there at the readings. He was very interested in what was going on--who ended up auditioning for the play, because sometimes it's not just people who have worked with another place that end up in the bridge show, but people who we've met during story circles, and then they can audition for the play and we get to try them out.

And he auditioned for the play, and he was in this, and what happened was we had a big actual summit.

Collings

A summit.

Kurup

A little summit. Bill was there, a bunch of the cast, before, I think, we even went into rehearsal. We had cast some of the people, the young people I told you from "You Can't Take It With You," who loved the sinner but hated the sin, and some of the people who were gay and who were out and came and sat in, and one of the gay men brought his mother, a good Muslim woman who supported her son, and so we had this amazing conversation. And I remember I was there. I was one of two or maybe three Cornerstone people, and Bill was the other one, and I felt good being there, because, (a), I was in on that other thing. I was backstage with them. I was part of those conversations, and it was a deep conversation about, "What are we going to do?"

And it was in this place where I think I was there to give a little bit of moral support, but Bill came up with something that I thought was really wonderful, and he said that Cornerstone has always been a company that put out the minority view. But he realized that, he says, "As I hear all this," because he wasn't really in on that "You Can't Take It With You" stuff,

because he was actually on sabbatical at that time. So he said, "But I realize that Cornerstone is the--we take the view of the minority's minority," and in that case it would be the Muslim, the gay man or gay woman, lesbian woman. It was really lovely and moving, and, in fact, that whole conversation was--there's no way to sort of pull that conversation and reenact it, but that conversation was then taken to a theater communication groups' conference about a year later--

Collings

Oh, interesting.

Kurup

--and it's where Michael, I think, saw the conference, and he saw the conversation. He was very moved by it, and that's what made him want to apply for the company.

Collings

Oh, really.

Kurup

I think that's what I remember him saying. Or at least that was what interested him.

Collings

Well, I can certainly see the conundrum, because you're sort of making a leap from portrayal of Muslim as terrorist, past your average-Joe Muslim into, as you say, the minority's minority.

Kurup

Yes, it is. And here was the other conundrum. We knew we would lose our hijab-wearing laughing women. We hoped we wouldn't.

Collings

Well, that's what I'm saying, because they were probably having this wonderful release because for once it's not a terrorist up there.

Kurup

Yes, it's a quirky family, we're enjoying ourselves. It's real people--I mean, it's comic people talking about fun things.

Collings

And how cathartic, after--

Kurup

The convulsions and the rupture.

Collings

--the sense of horrible betrayal, I mean the sense of being cast out after 9/11, cast out of the mosaic, as it were.

Kurup

Yes, absolutely. It's, yes, beautifully said, I think. So what was really hard in that process was we were basically saying, "We are going to honor our gay brothers this time, and last time we didn't. This time we will," because we got the chance. We did both, you know, and I thought that was, in a funny way, it was the minority's minority viewpoint.

Collings
Yes, that's a good way of putting it.
Kurup
So the parallel here, what was interesting, is that the young man who then auditioned for the play, for that role, had a really interesting process of his own coming out and was actually even surprised by it. But you know, in that play the exploration was about, when I am a good Muslim, when you're a gay man, I feel like I'm being a bad Muslim. When I'm being a good Muslim, I feel like I'm being a bad gay man. So nothing to say of an ethnic person, how the ethnicity plays into it, but these two things were the crux of his argument of what was tearing him apart. One could then say that--I mean, those words are perfect to put into the mouth of any young teenager. You could say that about Christians, a Christian teenager. So in a funny way, this story also--and now he works for us.
Collings
Oh, really.
Kurup
He's our communications director. And also in that story what happened is the "L.A. Times" did a big story about him.
Collings
Oh, I know who this is. What is his name?
Kurup
Yes, Ramy Eletreby.
Collings
And he's a comedian as well? Or is this somebody different?
Kurup
That's somebody different. Are you thinking about--oh, yes, okay. Did you hear it through Cornerstone, or was this another story?
Collings
From Lynn.
Kurup
Oh, from Lynn. Oh, okay. It must be. It has to be if that's the case.
Collings
Yes, maybe it's the same person.
Kurup
Yes, so you know what happened was he got outed in the paper.
Collings
Oh.
Kurup
And it was one of those things where it was like hard for him to--you know, like he had not quite had that conversation with his family yet--
Collings
Oh, gosh.
Kurup

--so that was really hard. So, I mean, I think he's a happier man today, much happier man, and his family dynamic is good again, but it's just that I think that was a really difficult time. And so it's just very interesting to see how these parallels in people's lives and how that--but very few Muslims came.

Collings

Really?

Kurup

Yes.

Collings

And you know that from surveys?

Kurup

But just by hardly any hijabs in the audience. We were filled with those hijabs, and it was unfortunate. We were saddened by that.

Collings

But how did people know in advance what the content would be?

Kurup

I think the article may have had some--

Collings

Oh, the article came out ahead of the--I see.

Kurup

It came ahead of the--I think so. I think partly, and I think also the word, the word got out. And sadly, even one of the scholars who had worked with us, who had actually been in one of the plays with us, also came to see the play, and right around the end of that scene got up and walked out, and it's a big theater, right? It's a big outdoor theater, and he was far up front, and he got up and walked out. Now, it could have been a coincidence that's when he left the play. I have no idea. But it was one of those things that like seemed awfully queer that that was the time that he just, boom, walked out then. And it was really--it was unfortunate.

Collings

Is sexuality the most divisive issue that Cornerstone has dealt with, do you think?

Kurup

It's one of them. I think it's the one that's--you know, I've always said that like trickle-down politics or economy doesn't work, but trickle-down virulence and hatred works beautifully, in that whatever is bad in the mainstream culture has a potency down when you come to the harder-hit communities. Like the danger of being a gay Latino youth or a gay African American in gang culture and all this stuff, although now some of that is changing. I was just hanging out with some of the kids that are in the last show I was in. You know, they've seen gang activity, they know about gang activity. One of them was a gang member, but another one was on the outskirts of it, says that one of the major Mexican Mafia folk in this city, one

of the main people's son is a gay man, and everybody knows that. But as long as he does what he's supposed to do, which is take care of the business of the family, which involves lots of bad things, I guess, it's fine, which is really amazing to me.
I've always thought, you know, I would think about like politicians who are virulently anti-gay, I always go, "Thank God for gay children," because they have to face them. They have to deal with them, you know what I mean? And we're not in a time when we can just sort of beat the gay out of them, although people do try.
So, I mean, I think with that bridge show we did sort of embrace this thing. There was fallout. We lost people. We paid a price for it, but it was the right thing to do at the time, just as it seemed--both seemed like the right thing to do. There's the right thing then. The right thing to do during "You Can't Take It With You" was to want to have as many hijab people in there, so I think that was important.
I think it also brings us to the end of the faith cycle.

1.6. Session 6 (December 1, 2010)

Collings
Here we are, December 1, 2010, Jane Collings interviewing Shishir Kurup. We're going to wrap up a little bit with the justice cycle and how that was kind of the second to the last in terms of the chronology.
Kurup
Yes. Well, we haven't begun our next cycle yet, and we're in the middle of a cycle, a mini-cycle called--not officially called this, but sort of looking back.
Collings
Oh, really. That's interesting.
Kurup
And that's what this past summer, which was we went back to Pacoima, which was actually the second community that Cornerstone first worked in, in 1992 I believe, or late '92, early '93. It was our institute show, directed by Juliette Carillo, and you know something about the institute shows, where we teach peers in the field and new incoming graduate students.
Collings
It's kind of a reprise of the rural years, but in a more contained--
Kurup
And it's specifically made for a way get our methodology out to peers and new students, because Cornerstone--nobody was teaching community-based art making in schools, but they are now. I mean, universities, their textbooks have been written, there have been books that are used as textbooks about Cornerstone in a lot of M.A. programs. USC had one for a little while, and there are some colleges around the country that teach Cornerstone.

In fact, I was doing a TV show once, and I'll jump to these later, too, but I was doing a show called "Sleeper Cell."

Collings

Oh, right.

Kurup

Do you remember that?

Collings

Oh, yes.

Kurup

It was on Showtime.

Collings

Yes. I never saw it, but I saw the ads for it.

Kurup

It was a much more meditative take on "24," you know, and much more sort of complex. I think "24" was complex, but it was one of those shows that allowed you to think that actually beating the truth out of somebody is actually possible, and it happened almost every episode, which is a bit--it was a bit reckless, I feel, personally.

Collings

Yes. Well, actually, the military, in fact, asked them to stop it.

Kurup

The military did?

Collings

Yes.

Kurup

Oh, interesting, because I read that in Guantanamo they were using those techniques.

Collings

Well, maybe that's like specialized cases, you know.

Kurup

Interesting.

Collings

Well, because it was teaching people that this is like the way to go, and they thought it not so effective. Maybe there's two schools.

Kurup

Yes, that's true, there are two schools. I think the sort of yahoos feel like, oh, well, it's a walk softly and carry a big stick kind of thing, and whack it across somebody's head and they'll tell you whatever you want them to tell. But a lot of FBI folks feel like this is reckless information to put out there. What really actually works is befriending the person and actually having a relationship with them, which makes a lot more sense.

But I was doing this episode of "Sleeper Cell," and I was the--you know how in the show, there's a title to every show--

Collings

Oh, I haven't seen the show.

Kurup

I mean, most TV shows--

Collings

Of course, yes.

Kurup

--they title each one, and this one was called "Salesman," and I was the character of the salesman. It was basically about them entrapping a former Afghani operative who had helped the CIA and the mujahadin. He was a go-between between the CIA and the mujahadin to beat the Soviets, you know, and so now he was trying to do one last deal, but he was being entrapped, and it became a very--so it was called "Salesman." I was a character.

But the guy who wrote it is Alex Woo or Alexander Woo. He's a television writer and producer now. He's now on "True Blood." I remember when we first met, it was just the strangest feeling in inflection. We were talking somehow, we were hanging out on the set while we're waiting in between takes or whatever, and we would chat, and I started talking a little bit about doing theater. He goes, "Oh, you do theater in town?" I said, "Yeah." And he says, "Yeah, you know, I come from the theater. I did a play on Off-Broadway and they found they liked the play," and so that's what helped build his career. And I said, "Yeah, and I have this company that I'm a part of, called Cornerstone." And he goes, "Cornerstone? I studied Cornerstone in college." That was in the like mid-nineties. And I was like, "What?" I had no idea. And he said, "Yeah, and what was his name, your artistic director, William, Bill, Bill Rauch, he came, Bill. He came and talked to our class." So it was fascinating that somebody that was writing for television now, (a), would know Cornerstone. He says, "I love Cornerstone." Of course, a lot of people who love Cornerstone haven't seen Cornerstone. I didn't know if Alex had actually seen a Cornerstone show, but I think way back when we were talking first, I'd said that a lot of people haven't come to Cornerstone shows, but they love Cornerstone. They love the concept.

So I think I remember saying before, like, "Don't love us before you see us. You may not like what we do. You may hate what we do, so please, don't love us yet." I don't want those kind of expectations put on us, because it may not be everybody's cup of tea. But I do think the people who have a general idea that they like Cornerstone do end up liking it, or even loving it. So that was just a weird little jump to sort of a different part of this city and the different part of the city's industry that might even know, so that to make the point that Cornerstone is being taught in these schools. So I think I did that--why did I talk about that? I was saying that it had to do with--oh, we were in Pacoima, and I was trying to make the connection to--

Collings

Were you doing the looking backward--?

Kurup

Right, that's why. That's why I jumped. Wow. [laughs]

Collings

It's one of those days, huh?

Kurup

I'm nothing if not discursive, and peripatetic. [laughter] So, yes, this is the year of looking back, and it brings me back again to why we had talked about this was it had to do with the fact that the institute is about teaching people in the field how to continue doing Cornerstone's work. You know, hopefully one day there'll be many companies around, the idea being that people get trained in this and then go back to their town and start doing work--

Collings

And that's happened in many instances, hasn't it?

Kurup

It has. It has happened in a number of instances, and they're starting slowly. Maybe when the funding world changes, and maybe when our priorities in this country change about how important art is, and especially art that is being created and fostered among the communities themselves, and I think rather than these sort of Broadway and/or high cultural places dropping it down into communities where it actually has very little relevance, if it grew from within the roots of the community, I think the work might be more impactful and more meaningful, because, again, you know, I think you get to tell these specific stories that are so important to make also history of our country at this particular time, when everything is about video and this and that, film.

We have lots of records of movies and film and TV, but very little record of what is actually happening on this grassroots level, because hardly any of those things capture what is actually happening in small towns, what is actually happening in these villages, if you will, or even little larger cities, smaller larger cities--smaller larger, is that possible--smaller large cities. So this idea of two kinds of going back, going back from the people who've come to the institute--and we're big in Sweden. Sweden loves Cornerstone.

Collings

Why?

Kurup

I have no idea. Maybe it sort of fits into their idea of the social democracy that they have there, and maybe they have more funding and they're interested in doing this sort of work. When I was just in London a month ago--I had actually done a film earlier this year. It was a Disney film, and I met the young girl who was playing my daughter's father, so the two fathers met, you know, the fake father and the real father.

Collings

Oh, I see, yes.

Kurup

And he was a pastor. He had a church in London. She's half Indian, half Anglo. And so while we were talking, he said, "Hey, you know, you have the theater company you do this work with." He says, "It's interesting, because I have a woman who works for me who's just out of college. She's very interested in doing outreach to the community through the church, but to really tell the stories of the community," and all of this stuff. I said, "Well, I think she would be a good candidate to come and join our institute." So while I was in London, I met with her. She didn't know much about it. She'd checked out the website. I went ahead and we had a great conversation, and I'm hoping that this summer she's going to come out and do the institute.

So this last institute we looked back at Pacoima, and we kind of did work in a community garden there, almost sort of--

Collings

Kind of leaping into the food cycle.

Kurup

Exactly. Just sort of like planting a seed, so to speak. And then this fall we looked back and went to West Hollywood, where we had done, when we were in--the B.H. cycle; B.H. cycle, is that right? No, the faith cycle, I'm sorry--the faith cycle, and we had worked with West Hollywood on a production called "Body of Faith," I think I mentioned before, gay/lesbian/transgender/bisexual people of faith. And this time what we were doing was making a musical to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the formation of them getting cityhood, West Hollywood. So we decided that we would do a big gay musical. And it is sort of commemorated as the first gay city in this country, and proudly so. Some of the most interesting city council meetings, and people dressing in far more flamboyant fashion than you would, and yet getting amazing work done. One of the things I loved about being there was like Andrew Campbell, who was the guy who was our liaison there, he said, "You really get one of the most amazing things about West Hollywood, is you get to see small government at work."

Collings

Yes, that's true.

Kurup

And not in that sort of small government in the Republican way, but sort of like, literally, you can actually get things done by going--

Collings

The voice of the community can be directly heard through their local government.

Kurup

Absolutely. And so we did this really fun and I think moving musical, for which Michael [Garces] and Mike Valdez, who was our former associate artistic director, and Michael is our current artistic director, co-directed. It

was written by Tom Jacobsen, who was a longtime board member and a well-known playwright in town and around, and I wrote the lyrics, and a woman named Deborah La Puma wrote the music. And it was fantastic. It went over like gangbusters and really good reviews. I mean, the "L.A. Weekly" gave us a really good review, and the "L.A. Weekly" hates us."

Collings

Really? Why?

Kurup

I don't know. I think for years they were just way too cool for school, for Cornerstone school anyway, except when we would do certain things. When we did "Medea, Macbeth, Cinderella," they were very good. When we did "Antigone," which I didn't really get to talk about, but that was also they gave it a good review, not just a good review, there was a good conversation about it. I even had a conversation with the critic. I've always thought that artists in a town should have a conversation with their critics, and the critics should have a conversation with the artists, because to make the work better, it needs to be a conversation, not just some scathing thing or whatever. I think it really feels like in the best situation, that's what it could be. So we've had instances where they were kind to us, but most of time they're just sort of a little bit dismissive and all of that.

But in this case, Steven Leigh Morris, who reviewed it, was generous and kind and actually laid it out for people, saying, "This is why this work is important," and it was great to hear. And people came back, and people were walking out humming the songs.

Collings

Oh, that's wonderful.

Kurup

I think it was because they were very catchy, and they seemed to really enjoy it. So that was the second looking back, and the third one's coming up in the spring, and that is revisiting Watts, and collaborating with one of--you know, what Cornerstone could look at as one of their successes, or our successes, of planting a seed and a theater growing there, with Lynn Manning, who is a wonderful playwright, and who's going to be writing an adaptation or has written a first draft of an adaptation of the "Dybbuk." It's called "Unrequited," I believe, and it's going to be an interesting collaboration, because here we're going back. When we went first, there was no Watts Village Theater Company. After we left, Watts Village Theater was formed with Quentin Drew and Lynn Manning.

Quentin passed away in 2005, a very young man, forty-one, and he died of renal cancer that went into the brain, and it was unfortunate. And he was a force, he was real force in Watts. His thing was to bring theater to Watts, to bring arts to Watts, and have kids be able to walk home safely, you know, just simple things like that. And it was a big loss for us, because he was the prime example of self-identified artist from the community who then took

the ball and ran with it and created this theater company with Lynn. And now it's being run by Guillermo Aviles [-Rodriguez] and Lynn Manning. They're the two, I think, co-artistic directors.
So going back to that, and now there's a collaboration happening between the two, and we're looking forward to it being a good one. I'm sure there'll be complications with--you know, when you have a parental figure almost, because we were the people who came in and then out of that came this. I'm hoping that what we will find, though, is a really cohesive and/or at least copasetic, to be very L.A., kind of relationship. So that's this year, giving us a little bit of a buffer before we jump into what was originally the food cycle, but now we're calling it the hunger cycle. What feeds us?

Collings

Oh, I see, so you're taking it beyond--

Kurup

Yes. I feel like we're best when we ask now these guiding questions, but then also the other part of that trick is to be very specific in our inquiry. So we can use what feeds us, but we go very specifically into, like, gay and lesbian, transgender, bisexual people of faith. You know, that's a very specific demographic, and the same way, the inquiry needs to be that specific so that it can be manageable, but it can also hopefully then be universal in that in this very specific inquiry, what else can we learn that everyone else can identify with.
So there's not a lot sort of formed yet about that. We've kind of categorized it in certain--like scarcity and abundance is a big one that we've been looking at. Another is urban-rural and how that falls out and who's interested in it. We're looking at sort of cafeterias, in like how those live in schools, because we're connecting with schools. And also we're going to be working with the Homeboy Bakeries--

Collings

Oh, wonderful.

Kurup

--so restaurant. So looking at the idea of, like, Homeboys are about gang members turned into entrepreneurs, right, and there's a restaurant that's connected to it, there's bakery going on, you've got this whole religious element of the Jesuits, you know, with Father Greg Boyle who's running it, so there's just many elements there that make a lot of sense and could be very interesting. So we're looking at food, we're looking at hunger and how will we navigate through that, so that's what the future is--

Collings

That sounds wonderful.

Kurup

--it feels like. And I guess I could jump back, really, and quickly, and just go through our justice cycle, which we had done in the--oh, by the way, we're thinking of doing a hunger-cycle festival, the way we did for the beginning of

the faith cycle, which kicked off the faith cycle, inviting certain artists to collaborate with people they know and/or community, I mean Cornerstone ensemble members, but making pieces in different places, shorter, smaller bits, everybody working on it on some level, and it's long enough away from the first time we did it that we don't have a memory of how hard it was to do. So, you know, it's like birthing again, where we're excited about doing another festival, and I think that that might be next fall, in about a year.
So jumping back, this cycle did not have a festival, so the speak, the justice cycle, and we jumped into "Los Illegals," written by Michael [Garces]. It was his first play for the company, and I directed it, and it was an amazing experience, because what he did was he based it on "Fuente Ovejuna," very cursorily. It was just using the form. He was interested in the plight of the undocumented immigrant and the person making the crossing and what it was like. So the idea was to meet people from the community of undocumented--and we learned terminology, undocumented and under-documented.
We had these several community partners from whom we had access. NDLON was one of them, the National Day Labor Organization Network, and SAN, the South Asian Network, who work with immigrants of all kinds, helping them with passports and green cards, and they have a domestic-violence abuse kind of area and all of this, because immigrants go through a lot and how sometimes it manifests is in violence within the own family, where whatever they are dealing with out in the world manifests back at home, because they can't quite do it. So that's part of what some of these organizations we work with do.
So what was challenging about this play was that we were going to be putting people onstage that are--and I'm doing air quotes--illegal. We preferred to say the word undocumented, because we don't think anybody is illegal. No human being should be illegal anyway, let's say that. And it was a challenge, because at first we were going to see, well, how does the art get reflected by these parameters? I mean, that's one of the things about Cornerstone sometimes. There are things you can't do because of whatever the issue is, whether, "Oh, we thought we were going to do this in the VFW hall, but we're going to have to do it under a bridge." Okay, so how then do the parameters prescribe the art? And always parameters we know help make the art really interesting, you know, and help define. Anything that allows that kind of definition gives clarity.
So one of the things that we had to deal with was, how do we protect their anonymity? So, what, just put first names? Maybe don't ask anybody their status, so that we're not liable. And it's not our job to ask people their status. We can't pay them even--you know, we always pay our community actors what would be a ninety-nine-seat wage, which is enough for the performances, for gas money, something like that. But we couldn't even do that, so we had to find other ways to remunerate them, but it had to do

mostly with food or ways to give them groceries. We had to find different ways, because it's dangerous to do those sorts of things, because they can find ways to go after any of us for doing that, you know.

Collings

Now, did you do story circles with--

Kurup

We did, and how we did them--

Collings

And what kinds of things came out?

Kurup

Well, very much the--you know, first of all where we found them. By working with NDLON, we used their center. We worked with UCLA's Labor Strategy Center, and there were wonderful people there to help us, a woman named Jana [phonetic], and we would meet at these places to do the story circles. And you know, a lot of translation was necessary. We had to deal with just horrific stories of coming over, and once again, our circle at the end before we opened was devastating and powerful, unbelievably powerful. Just the person next to you, you've been having this funny guy, good actor, and we found some really interesting people, really interesting, committed. And it was very moving, because they knew they faced certain dangers by exposing themselves onstage of a theater company that is putting on a show undocumented immigrants, right? But it was more important to them that they tell the story that they felt strongly about, that Michael had written, that I was going to try to tackle as a director and see, well, how do we protect--should we come up with masks? Should we have masks? Should we do mask work? Should we have paper bags over people's heads? Should they perform as--what should we do?

And one of the main places that we recruited people from and auditioned them and all that and did some story circles with was at these centers, these work centers, that you know, like Home Depot, understanding the situation of immigrant workers, instead of like having you stand around in the parking lot--they're called the cowboys, the ones who do that--to organize it through NDLON and other groups that would help organize it at the work center, which was in the back side. It's a fenced-in area with a little trailer usually and maybe some bathrooms, and a covered awning with benches, and a lot of little checkerboards, like so you can play checkers. Because what happens is that the folks who are willing to be organized would go in there every day and put in their chit, whatever their name with what they do and put it into a basket, and then if somebody calls--they have people walking the perimeter up in the parking lot with these vests that they're officially supposed to be there. Somebody's looking for a plumber, so they'll call in. So they'll pull from the plumber section, like they'll pull up a name--

Collings

It's kind of a lottery.

Kurup
It's a lottery. So sometimes people are there sitting--sometimes people will go three, four days sitting there not getting any work, and yet they believed in the organizational idea of it, the organized idea of it, as opposed to catch as catch can, being up there in the cowboy version of it. So then it became clear that what we should do is set it in a work center. We wanted to create a work center onstage. And at first it was like, okay--I mean, the play was set in a work center, but there was also a kind of more surreal part of it which had to do with people crossing the desert. One was crossing the desert to come here. The other one was coming in a refrigerated truck across from Guatemala, so coming across Mexico to get here from another country.
And all the things you run into on the road to that, you know. The dangers of it are myriad. Not the least of which in the crossing are hallucination from the heat, and many people dying on those, and the curious phenomenon of people taking all their clothes off, neatly putting them in piles, very neatly, and then walking off and dying somewhere, and people always finding these piles of their clothes. It's a very strange phenomenon of why, because they get deluded, completely deluded. So there's this surreal aspect of it.
But we decided--we had been given a place to do the play, and it was under a bridge, actually, speaking of. I can't remember what street bridge it was, but 7th Street Bridge or something like that, right next to a place called Farm Lab. So we devised it--Nephelie Andonyadis, who now is one of our designers, set designers, she and I were looking at the space, and Geoff, who is one of our lighting designers, Geoff Korf, we were walking around and it just sort of hit us, like, where's the audience? Where's the audience? Are they standing watching this way, into the thing? And I don't remember who it was, it could have been Nephelie, somebody said, "Well, why don't we just put them into the thing?" And we're like, "Oh, there's a great idea." So the audience comes in and sits and has the experience of being a worker waiting for the lotto, the lottery. So that's what we decided to do.
But then about a week or so into rehearsal--so we now had a set design, we were doing to do a ground plan, we were going to rehearse--we lost the space, so we had to find another thing. But we hadn't found anything, so we said, "Whatever we do, we're going to make the work center wherever we are, and we're going to base it on whatever dimensions that we had there at this other place." So we went to a place called the armory in Pasadena, we finally found, and we used their parking lot, and that was our set.
And it was astounding. I mean, I was incredibly proud of the work with the actors. We got some really terrific performances out of community folk who had never been onstage before, in some cases. And one of the artists was Betto Arcos, and he's a DJ, I mean he's a manager for musicians like Lila Downs. She's a Mexican singer. She's fantastic. But he was a radio programmer for Latin music and all kinds of music, but he would do a thing

called Global Village and was one of the people who helped found it, I think. But he'd never been onstage before. He was terrified. But he'd crossed over.

Collings

Oh, really.

Kurup

He crossed over, you know, twenty years earlier, and he was very much ensconced in the community now, not necessarily the new immigrant community, but now he was working with KPFK, which is the progressive radio station. So he was wonderful. There were a number of people that just were wonderful actors, and we created this work. So all of that stuff we threw away, you know, the masks, whatever. NDLON said, "Don't worry about it. Take the risk." And, of course, the times were bubbling with all of this talk about immigrant this and illegals this, and they were becoming the scapegoats, so it was like a perfect sort of storm of art for us to be making it at that time.

So the idea was, one more time you were being surprised by who was a worker and who wasn't a worker. So some of the people were obvious, because there were a couple of people who were like running the place, so those were actors. You knew that those were some of the performers. But you didn't know if the person sitting next to you was. And then some people, we waited until second act before they actually piped in and became a part of the play.

Collings

Now, did the play have any of the sort of celebratory aspects that some of the Cornerstone work has?

Kurup

It did, it did. And again, remember, this is the [deep voice] justice cycle, so it was the beginning of the heavier stuff. But also, it did, it maintained--there was a sense of fun. There were some surreal things, and I think one of the stuff that made it theatrical and fun was, last minute we had an idea that part of the set was a desert landscape, and the other part of it was a refrigerated truck, the back of it, and our actress, who was coming across, was going to be sitting in there in the refrigerated truck with the door up. And it was just not satisfying. It was like, this is not smart. This is not transportive. The desert landscape is fine and it's good, but this feels cheesy. Well, what to do?

And I remember we were in tech. We had finished tech, if I'm not mistaken, and I remember going--and I said, "Michael, I think I want to close that door." And he goes, "Yeah?" And I said, "Yeah." And he says, "Well, do it." And I said, "Okay, let's close it." So, well how do we get to see her? So we came up with this idea to get a tiny little lipstick camera, put it inside--

Collings

Oh, what a great idea.

Kurup

--so you literally had her shut down--the truck starts and you know, the top, and then it comes on, and we had a projector, and I said, "Let's project it onto the back of the door that's been shut." So what you saw was this woman inside this truck, projected onto the back of the door. So you had that happening, and then you had this live person going through the delirium and the desire to get to the new land, to see his brother, ended up not making it, while she, you could see her.
Now, the problem for the actress, unfortunately, was that people didn't realize that that was live. They thought maybe we had recorded it. But still, then at the very end of the play she opens up, and it's like supposedly a crash has happened, and she comes out and there are dead bodies lying there, and she's stepping over them and all. Now, that's not particularly celebratory, but at the end, by the machination of the play, one of the people is returned, comes back after being arrested or something like that, and there's a big dance at the end, and there's music. There was music in the play, not sung but that played, because music plays in these places on old transistor radios and all that. So there was a sense of celebration in that there was a sense of life going on. And then there was an intrigue that happened within it, and then a moment of injustice, which then led to a protest.
And at the same time, we were trying to give a sense of, through sound design, protest by Minutemen going on. We even had a sort of a Minutewoman character, played by an African American actress, Banhi Turpin, one of our company members, so coming from this point of view, especially at that time three years ago, of African Americans having bought into the idea that Mexicans are coming here and taking jobs that they might normally have, and so a complexity and a little nuance that we were bringing in, which I thought was really helpful, that Michael wrote in.
So there were layers. There was the staff of the Home Depot, what world they live in, what strata, the immigrant workers, the protestors, and then them trying to sort of stand up for something they believe in, and then the cowboys who are outside the fence and having scenes with them too. So you're trying to show like many different lives, including the man who's crossing the desert, his brother there at the worksite. Sometimes the worksite people would be there and they were there for days, so they'd start painting. They would make paintings and stuff like that, and they were artists. In this case, this artist was painting his brother's journey, so there was this surreal thing of the brother's journey happening over there and him doing the thing.
I think that was something that we discovered in rehearsal and said, "What's he painting?" "Well, he could be painting--." And so the painting is about this brother coming slowly closer and closer, and so he's waiting for his brother, and he never makes it, so that's the tragedy. So it showed you like kind of a day in the life, but it spanned a little more than a day.

Collings
One thing that I thought was interesting about the bridge show that I saw in June at the California Plaza--
Kurup
The "Three Truths."
Collings
--there was a border scene--
Kurup
Yes, where they jumped over.
Collings
--a border-crossing scene, and it was presented in the context of a family drama. So I found it very interesting that this heavily freighted political landscape was just a kind of a set for this very powerful family drama, which really, in the lives of ordinary people, that's exactly what happens.
Kurup
Exactly, and we picked what drama of all dramas, the "Oresteia."
Collings
Yes.
Kurup
So, yes, that was interesting.
Collings
The crossing of the border was just--the border was just a sort of an impediment that had to be dealt with to deal with this other more pressing matter, which was--
Kurup
Was the father and the mother, the father's death and the mother's, you know, Clytemnestra kind of, having to be dealt with by, what's his name? My brain is not working right now. You know who I'm talking about. Sorry, those who are listening. I should know my "Oresteia" better. And, of course, because we were using all these different names as opposed to the original names, so that's part of why I'm a little foggy.
Collings
I don't know, Agamemnon springs to mind. That's probably a different story.
Kurup
No, Agamemnon is, it's exactly, it's Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are the two, but he was called Rai in this piece. Rai just means king, right. Menelaus was the king, but in this case he was Rai, and then Clytemnestra, and her name was Cleodora, so there were all these different--we do this constantly.
Collings
Also, the immigrant community is not like monolithic in its support of, quote, unquote--
Kurup
Oh, yes. No, no, no.
Collings

Did any of that come out in the story circles?

Kurup

That's interesting. In the story circles, not the ones I was at, and I don't remember there being--

Collings

It probably had to do with who was being recruited.

Kurup

Yes, I think so, because of who we were talking about. And, you know, there are just so many things that happen to the people during the rehearsals. I mean, there was this one guy who came from Guatemala or Honduras or El Salvador, I can't remember now, but one of the three places. And, I mean, he was this buff guy. I mean, he looked like somebody off of Venice Beach. His name is Jesus, great guy, and he had a truck that he was driving people to rehearsals on, and we depended on him to bring three or four people to rehearsal. And one day cops pulled him over. He had paid for the thing, but he didn't have any papers for the truck. They couldn't, at that time, ask him for his papers, and they literally just took the truck. This is what they can do. This is what you can do to these immigrants.

And you know, people talk, "Oh, they come here and their anchor babies," and all this. People are so clueless to the lives that these people have to live, and the amount of stress. You think we have stress? I can't even imagine the daily stress.

Collings

I can't either.

Kurup

And the level of good nature that exudes from them is, I tell you, absolutely inspiring and moving. And one of the things that's great is that we have, in different ways, gone to those centers and used the same actors that we had first as actors, to then be able to work in doing things for different projects, and recasting some of them in later plays, including "Touch the Water," which is one of the ones we did after.

So anyway, it was a big success. Every night there would be helicopters flying over, and it became a part. Every time Cornerstone does work in the outdoor work, we have to be very aware of external sound and particularly planes and trains and automobiles and also helicopters. But every night. There were some nights, I tell you, I wanted to tear my hair out, but people were excited by--they would literally, because the area of where the armory was in Pasadena was a little more of the area where you would have the equivalent of Watts or places like that, where the cops are always chasing somebody. The armory had that sort of feel down there, and they would be hovering right above us, three, four helicopters sometimes. It would just become insane. And people would be like, "How could you afford those helicopters?" This is jokingly, of course. Just at the right time to come in and all of this stuff. So we had to deal with a lot of that stuff.

So this next play we did was "Someday." We left the outdoors, and I think I've said most of the important things about that other one. "Someday" was about reproductive rights, and it wasn't like this thing outdoors. It was its own thing indoors. It was written by Julie Marie Myatt, who's now a member of our company. She was not before. It was a lovely play about finding--it was very complicated, because it was dealing with so many different issues about reproductive rights, you know, surrogates, and people who wanted to have children who couldn't have children, so it was a different kind of justice. It was this, do we have a right to have children, in a way, and then what if you can't, and who negotiates that, and how is all that, so it was interesting. And how does money play into this.
And then the play after that we dealt with--I just acted in that one, so I didn't have a lot of dealings with much of--

Collings

The sets and the conceptualization.

Kurup

--the sets and the logistics, other than the normal thing. I mean, one thing I did want to talk about that I forgot to tell you is our circle of "Los Illegals," the stories we heard were amazing. But one of them that was powerful was about an older man, Ebaldo [phonetic]. He talked about the tragedy of crossing the Rio Grande and losing a child as they were crossing, which devastated everybody, because suddenly this man who you know, of such good humor and nature, and then suddenly they are telling you this awful story of loss; it becomes a whole different thing. It's not unlike the Cambodian story I was telling you about.
And then so we did "Someday," and then after that was "For All Time," which is about crime and punishment, and oddly enough, the "Oresteia" was the template for that. This was the one where we were trying to do work with a women's prison in Chino, and it was an amazingly cooperative venture between--they allowed us to go in and work with some of these women. Laurie Woolery directed that, and she's our associate artistic director. It was a heavy piece. It was written by K.J. Sanchez, from New York, and she writes in a very interesting way. She kind of takes the Cornerstone--but she doesn't deal with the Cornerstone methodology. Her thing is like you interview a person, you don't take a tape recorder, and you don't even really write down much. Maybe you can write a little word here and there, because you really are focused on this person. Because you're just not trying to capture the person's words, you're trying to capture their essence as a person. So then what you do is after you finish that, you go outside and you write down immediately whatever just stuck in your mind, what came out, and the monologue comes out of that. You create monologues out of that.

Collings

That sounds very challenging.

Kurup
It is very challenging, but it's also very interesting. It's certainly something--I wrote a piece for it, based on this very interesting character I went and interviewed out in Long Beach, and came up with a monologue, and some of that was used in the play. So she has a way of like compiling this work and then creating a piece out of it, and that play did have a lot of weight. It felt quite heavy. And I was not at all involved in that play other than that little bit of writing that I did.
And then the final play before we went into our bridge show, and that was called "Touch the Water," which we had a great time. We were working with environmental justice, and we decided to shine a light on the L.A. River. We went to a part of the L.A. River that was where the cemented part couldn't hold cement. The springs were so powerful that, basically, you had this verdant area inside this concrete area. In fact, sometime if you look up to the right heading toward the hills, it looked like you were in Wyoming or something. It was that green.
It was written by Julie Hebert, who's a playwright for many years, but also then for a number of years was working on shows like "ER" and "Numbers" and shows like that. And the play was really beautiful. It had a lot of music. We had a live band. We did it by the banks of the river. People came out, and it had that festive kind of celebratory thing, so at the end--I feel like we bookended it with--I felt like "Los Illegals," despite the depth and the weight of the matter, had a life to it that felt celebratory, and then so did "Touch the Water," because, (a), you had a live band out in this area overlooking the river. People came out there, and we would do this, and that river was quite powerful at that time. That's 9,000 years that river has been going. It used to flood, and that's why they've cemented it, you know. It used to flood quite powerfully. And, of course, people died because they'd built around there, right by the water, which was unfortunate. And mostly the Indians and the Spanish would go, "Why are those white people building right by the river?"
Collings
Don't they know that's a floodplain?
Kurup
"Don't they know that's a floodplain? They will die." And they said, "Well, we've got to control this river," and they did that. Well, now there's this whole thing of like bringing the river back and finding ways to let the water come through, and communities all along the river are trying to do that. You know, the greenification, the beautification, the aquafication of it, and I do think that the play brought some light to it and helped that happen. So like the situation where the preacher finally preached from the pulpit in "Order My Steps," some of this actually did help the actual environmental justice issue there.
Collings

Well, I think that's interesting, because in so many of these instances you do have the potential to win hearts and minds, but I think probably in "Los Illegals" it's, you don't.

Kurup

Yes.

Collings

Are there others where the odds of actually achieving some kind of change on the ground is stacked so heavily against you? Or is that the only one that really stands out that way?

Kurup

You mean in the justice one?

Collings

Or just throughout.

Kurup

"For All Time" is a very stacked one. I mean, in terms of the justice, just on a performative level, one of the things we wanted to do was create a, what do they call, a live simulcast or whatever, with the women in the prison, and we were hoping that maybe there was a way to have them do some--because these women in there are amazing, and they're serving life sentences, and some kind of prison reform needs to be begun. There are people who want to abolish prisons altogether, but I think a huge amount of prison reform would be a huge deal. But these people's lives are just sort of being frittered away, but they are sentient and powerful people with poetry and writings that they want to share. I think some of it did end up in the play, but the idea of like having a live simulcast performance from the prison would have been something quite unique and exciting, and that never happened. And not because--I think the warden would have been open to it, but again, the system didn't allow it to happen, or we were not able to make it happen. Maybe it was cost, I don't know.

But it's rare when you actually go, "Okay, well, this can actually have an impact." But particularly on the justice cycle, of that, since "Touch the Water" was able to do that, and "Order My Steps" had that moment where the preacher preached, I think those are the little things that you can sort of look to as like, oh, well, that was positive, that was interesting. But most of them, yes, you're right. What could you do?

Collings

Oh, no, I was kind of saying the opposite, that, in fact, most of them have--you've pointed to many instances where in the ritual before the performance, something has come out which--

Kurup

Oh, you mean the transformation of the cast and the people involved? Absolutely. Oh, yes, yes, yes.

Collings

Yes, yes, that there has been these transformative moments--

Kurup
Oh, absolutely.
Collings
--and even within perhaps audience members, I think you've pointed to that.
Kurup
Yes, individually, absolutely. I have no doubt. And people have come up, and I mean, even if it means bringing back wayward Catholics back to their faith, at least to look at it in a particular way, that they don't have to look at it in the way that they did, which was running away from it. You know, the fact that they were so moved by it, or the specificity of who comes to see these things and then can see themselves in it I think is transformative, and that can be--you can be a jaded artist and feel that you're part of this community and then be moved and changed in that way.
So, yes, I think there is the capacity for transformation when we see that. And you know, I think more so than most other theater, whether it's regional theater or Broadway or very, very, deeply or heavily commodified theater, I feel like is less so that. I think it falls more into the entertainment, it falls more into--but not so much the transformative.
I think here's a simple thing about transformation. We would go out there to the river, once we were finally able to go out and rehearse at the river, and, notice, I can speak more about it because I was involved with it more heavily. I was an actor in it, and I wrote the songs for the show and was sort of in constant communication with the band and in a funny way was a bandleader, but the actor version of the bandleader in there. But the thing that we would do, every time we would finally, when we were out in that space, come to rehearse, it would transform us, all of us, that river. The minute we got there it would just change everything. We'd just come through hellish traffic to get to this space. Once we got there, the river would completely take us over, and there was a power in that, in the heart of Los Angeles.
Collings
Right. It's so unexpected.
Kurup
Completely unexpected, and the audience felt the same thing. They would come in, and you know, it was not the most attractive place on earth in terms of like where--it was kind of junky. We did a lot of cleaning up. We cleaned a lot. And we had actually--because a number of the people who were part of it were Friends of the L.A. River, so whenever there was a cleanup, the whole cast would go down there and do cleanups. Tala, my daughter, went, and she saw how much plastic was embedded into trees. I mean, growing inside a tree was a plastic thing, a shirt growing inside a tree.
Collings

Oh, how interesting.

Kurup

We would see a wheel sticking out of the ground, and you could pull out a full shopping cart after you'd dug it all out. And literally to see plastic and tree melded, it will change you. And to see my, at that time, six-year-old, six-and-a-half-year-old daughter, just like aghast at what was happening. "This is terrible," you know. And she's very conscious now, and her school is conscious about this stuff. That's my hope is that that generation, when they go out to become leaders, if there is a world to lead, they will, I think, remember these experiences and try to do things that are different than that.

So that was transformative for us as a cast. The river was transformative for us as a cast and as audience, and the audience came out there and at the end of the show we would, like, keep jamming. I would join the band, and I would be playing my guitar, and sometimes we would spend forty minutes after the show, forty-five minutes. People hung out, they walked by the river, they listened to the music, they'd talk.

Collings

It sounds wonderful.

Kurup

And it was chilly. It would get chilly, but people were there. We gave out blankets. We have become--we understand weather. We're climatologists now, and we bring a lot of blankets for people, and so with your ticket you can get a blanket and sometimes you can get a pad. So, yes.

So that's a different kind of transformation, but it's a beautiful transformation that fit in with the whole notion of ecological-environmental transformation. And that piece was what ended the cycle.

And then we did "Three Truths," which was our bridge show, which brought in people from each one of those last four shows. And we did it at the same place where we did "Birthday of the Century" that I talked about before, which is the California Plaza, which is this beautiful plaza up in downtown and had a lot of water around it. It's the water court, and it's also a very cold place. And we had about probably anywhere from 350 to 400 people. It's an outdoor free space, so we couldn't charge, but they're always hawking the bucket full of--"Throw your money in," something we don't do very much anymore. We used to always ask for money after a show, and now I think we've become a little more institutional.

Collings

Why is that?

Kurup

I don't know. I think it's leaving behind the folksy ways, you know? I don't think it's necessarily conscious, but it started falling away anyway, because people were having a hard time doing the ask, and then as we were getting more foundational money and funding, it didn't feel like we needed to do

that as much, and it was always a little embarrassing. And yet, it is such a time-honored busking, theatrical tradition, you know, going back to when you came through the town in your wagon. I really feel like you lose something when you don't, because what we're saying to the people is like, "You know, you're getting this thing. This country doesn't subsidize this stuff. Throw in a little extra money." And, you know, over the years they've suffered less and more, but right now they're suffering more, so it's harder to ask people for that. But still, it's an interesting tradition, so that's one of the differences.

I mean, it's not just the difference between where we are now and where we were, but these are some of the changes. You think about all the things--there are hundreds and hundreds of things--well, not hundreds, that's a lot, but, you know, tens to a hundred of things that have happened that like, oh, things that we left behind. Some things were good, some things were not so good. The things that were not helpful, getting rid of was okay, but some of the things that maybe we've left behind are valuable to like look at again, and they get lost in history, right? They get lost in the turnover. They get lost in who's coming in now, because that history starts then, and it's very hard to have history collide, in a way, because what you have is the old and the new. Now, the old is saying, "We want to look to the new, but here are some of the things that's historical."

This is why historians are so, so, so important, in my opinion. The historian is the memory, right, and so it's important not to get caught up only in the past or only in the future, because it's about that balance of being able to look back without it being a weight on you, and let it be a way to propel you forward so that you're doing it from a place of knowledge, as opposed to a place of like just, "No, no. I was not involved in that, so I needn't know that." But I think that that's foolhardy.

I'm just trying to think, because now we come to "Three Truths," and "Three Truths" is kind of a fraught situation, a script that's pretty late, and we start rehearsals with basically one act of a three-act play, and somewhere through there we get more of an act, you know, the second act.

Collings

Why was it so hard for that piece to come together?

Kurup

I'm not quite sure, but from what I understand, you know, circumstances of the playwright's life and new job and moving from one job to another job, and I don't know the personal details, but there were things that were happening, and I didn't know what they were exactly, but that was part of it. In fact, that was most of it. But I think we did a yeoman's job in terms of getting a piece that we didn't get the final act in until about maybe a week and a half before tech, a third act, you know, which is pretty--I was very appreciative of Michael [Garces] in that situation. He kept us--I'm sure he was going through all kinds of conniptions on the inside, you know, but he

kept his cool. He's very good at working with other playwrights. He's a playwright himself. He's done a lot of work with playwrights, so this was one that I'm sure took its toll, but his front was good. It helped a lot.

Collings

Well, when you talk about the pressures, that the playwright had other jobs and things like that, I don't know if it was industry jobs, but we were talking about what kind of pressure that puts on--

Kurup

Yes, yes, being a Cornerstone member, yes, and I think the first people who brought that kind of pressure into Cornerstone was me and Page, because we had already been working as television actors here and doing television work, and I'd done a couple of films. Like one of my first films is a movie called "Coneheads," from way back.

Collings

I remember that.

Kurup

That was when I pretty much had been working at LATC, as I'd said earlier, and I was so focused on doing theater when I came to this town, and I was working at this really cool theater called LATC, as I'd said earlier. I was like, "Well, film, TV, that'll come." And a few years later it came, and I started doing it, got an agent and all that. Again, it came out of the theater, because I did the solo performance show, and I do have these solo pieces I've done. Through Cornerstone I've written about--and not just Cornerstone, but Cornerstone, and I've written about twelve, fourteen plays, of which three of them are solo performances, and I take them around, and one of them led to an agent, and that led to doing a lot of television work, and mostly television. I've done a number of pilots and some that went, some that didn't go, some where I was a principal, some where I wasn't. But I'd done a lot of the things that--everything from "Alias," and as I said "Sleeper Cell" to "Heroes" to "Chicago Hope" and "ER" and all of those kinds of things, you know, as a way to subsidize my theater work.

And being with Cornerstone, this pressure is--and especially at that time in the early nineties, most of the folk working at the company at the time were working full-time. I don't know if I mentioned this earlier, but I think when Page and I were inducted into the company--

Collings

Inducted.

Kurup

Inducted, that's an interesting slip--but were brought in, everybody had to give up a certain amount of work weeks in order for us--

Collings

Right, right. You mentioned that system, yes, to the point that people are down to very few--

Kurup

Remember that, remember that system? We're now down to like ten--we're going to completely make ourselves obsolete individually. But at that point, people had a substantial amount of weeks that they were working. They were working anywhere from thirty-four to thirty-eight weeks, you know, so if everybody gave up like four or six weeks in order for us to join, it was still fairly substantial. Not a lot of money, but it was enough to sort of survive back then.

So there wasn't this sort of culture of people going off to do TV. So what was hard when we came in and I think challenged Bill a lot, was that we brought in this idea that as actors we can make money doing this. We love doing this company, and so in a funny way, the work that actually causes pressure here can actually help subsidize the work, because we obviously can't make enough of a living. If you're doing twenty weeks a year for Cornerstone, or even twenty-four weeks, even thirty weeks, it's very hard at that time. You're not making a lot of money. So you had to find a way to subsidize that work.

But that tension is hard, because here's what happens. You don't know when that work's going to come. Your agents want you to go and do this work. So what happens is you're going along and you've got a big role and you're doing it on the stage, and you're doing all the different things I've already mentioned at Cornerstone, and suddenly, a week before you go into tech, you get a gig that takes you maybe four or five days away from the show. Television doesn't work that long. You can be hired for a week, but you may only be working like two or three days, or four days, but they may be key days. They may be days where, you know. So, yes, there was a lot of pressure. There was a lot of resentment, I think. When I say a lot of, I mean it was hard on Bill. It was hard on me if I was directing. If I was directing, when I put the other hat on I was like, "You terrible actor, taking work outside of the company." But I couldn't do that. I knew.

One of the things I think, having done what I've done in Cornerstone, which includes the writing, directing, acting, and composing, and now lyricist--composing, but I mean I used to write the lyrics, too, back then--is that I've kind of been in each of those positions, so as a director, it's hard for me to get angry at an actor who needs to take a few days to do the show. You know what I mean? And vice versa and all the other versas. So its helpful, but it doesn't reduce the amount of tension. But what it does do is it does teach you that, you know, at the end of the day, we'll get through all of this. We'll get through this stuff. It's not impossible. It does give you a kind of can-do-it-ness, a kind of larger sort of throw where you can go, "Okay, it'll happen, don't worry."

Collings

Was there any sense that it was sort of impure or scandalous in any way to be going over to the other side, so to speak?

Kurup

Yes, you know, there's always been that sort of false animosity created between the different--and yes, there is a thing if you come from the theater, you're trained in snoot, you know. Your nose actually does this tiny--kind of goes up a little bit anyway. But I think it's unfortunate, because right now in time, I think television is doing the most interesting work, not the theater, not film, television, from the HBOs to the AMCs to all of that. It is the last place where the writer is king, actually, in some ways, so it's something that I'm interested in doing is to figure out how to get into that medium as a writer, because your work is actually respected there. Granted, you have to do a lot of rewriting, but that's like network television. But if you're doing really good television, and I know a number of people who are writing for those things, they have a lot of clout. It's not the director's medium, like film is. It is definitely the writer/producer's medium.
So I feel, yes, there was--there's a little bit of the snoot, but then what happened later is that Bill started getting more work outside. He started. So I would in some way say that the actors in the company, myself, Page, and then Chris, who started getting work in television also, and Ben and other people, Ben Cobb, who was with our company--you must have talked to Alison.

Collings
I did.

Kurup
Yes, okay.

Collings
No, no, no, I'm sorry. I haven't.

Kurup
You haven't. You're planning to, I think. Ben is her husband, and he was one of the founding members.

Collings
I just feel like I've talked to her.

Kurup
You have, you have, right, because so many people have talked about her while they're talking.

Collings
Yes, exactly.

Kurup
Right, exactly. So it sort of prepared people for changing the company, you know, like how--so these are the ways change comes in, right? Necessity.

Collings
So how did this change the company?

Kurup
Well, one of the ways was to--I told you when we were doing the work with Peter Sellars, I don't know if I mentioned, but one of the things that Peter

brought up for Bill was saying, you know, "Hey, tenure is like the worst thing ever." Remember I told you that?

Collings

Right. Yes.

Kurup

And so when we abolished the lifetime tenure for everybody, we then also--around that time, the company, the board, decided to give Bill and Leslie a different contract, like to, rightly so, raise their salaries and let them negotiate certain things. This is never done before in that way. It was just like this is what you got. None of this professional development was taken into account and all of this stuff, because, again, Bill had been doing everything. Cornerstone was everything. He put sixty, seventy hours a week, maybe more at work, and worked very hard, he and Leslie both, but there could be some resentment when, well, other people are taking work outside. Well, they have to. They're not making as money as he is, not putting in the hours that he is, but they're putting in a lot of hours.

So that prepared the sort of way to start looking at different ways to sort of allow people to have--like there is this thing in the nonprofit world, you've got to burn yourself out, as opposed to, "No, we need to keep ourselves healthy so that we can keep doing this work." So my sense of it is that I think overall it was a healthy change, but what we also created at that time, which is now not in existence anymore, and I think it is something that we need to talk about as a company, but it may not actually happen, but we came up with the workers' rights. Like what is our professional development? What do we get? Because now, the minute you suddenly raise the artistic director and the managing director to a different position, the way it is in a more traditional setting, right, you start creating a class system. And that's natural and it's normal, but--

Collings

But it was never there before.

Kurup

--but it was not there before in that way. You know, there was always the recognition of, well, these people are putting in more time, but they're also getting more weeks than anybody else, so that's how they're--if they're getting paid fifty weeks of the year, and they get two weeks of vacation, most everybody else is working anywhere from ranging from forty weeks down to twenty weeks, so commensurate pay, right. But this is now, okay, there's a new layer. So, well, then we started looking at actually having tiers for actors also, so that they come in, you come in at one rate and then you move up after six months, and then you move up after six months, so there's a certain--and we froze them now for a long time at this other rate, but it's been a while.

And then along with that, a system for how we can take other jobs. For example, in the middle of a rehearsal, you can do this, you can go a day or

two. But maybe--I think we came up with a blackout on opening weekend. You can't do this. And we came up with a system at that time of having understudies, especially for the ensemble shows. So that was a really interesting time. And as a company, we brought in healthcare, so that was really important for people. Now, what was great was another benefit of being a SAG actor or AFTRA/SAG, was that you could get your benefits through big television. So you're helping the company by getting your benefits--

Collings

Somewhere else.

Kurup

--so the company doesn't have to pay for it, and yet it can also cause tension that way, when you have to.

Collings

Does having the industry around impact Cornerstone creatively or philosophically in any way?

Kurup

Well, so many Cornerstone friends are in the industry, because a lot of those Harvard folk came out here and became writers and producers and writer/producers and actors. Amy Brenneman comes out of the company, right, and she's had a huge career on television and even in movies, and a lot of folks that--you know, big people. Paris Barclay, who's now a writer/producer on "Glee," he's on "In Treatment," he's doing all of this stuff, was an early board member of the company and an old friend of the company, so, yes--R.J. Cutler, he's the guy who was one of our founding board members, is a documentary filmmaker, and he made "The War Room." It was nominated, I think, for an Academy Award, and he's made a number of other documentary films. So there are a number of people that we've known that make their living in Hollywood.

And, yes, there's always a little bit of--especially back in the day, when they feel like they were slumming, or, "You guys are really doing the art." But they were making the huge amounts of money, so you say, "You know, give me some of your--"

Collings

Give me some of that slumming money.

Kurup

"Give me some of that slumming money," you know what I'm saying? But, yes, so I would say in many ways the industry--I don't know if it affected or influenced the company, but it was much more about, I think, it recognized that there may be a place for artists, like there's a way to maybe utilize the industry to subsidize the artistry. And then also having these people who are well known actually speak up for the company and all that was also very helpful. I mean, Amy's been incredibly generous in not just giving money to

the company, but also talking about the company, fundraising for the company.
In the last few years particularly, our fundraising efforts, due to Tali, have really risen. We used to never make money on our fundraisers. They were fun. They were just about fun. The bridge awards that we came up with about almost ten years ago now, were much more a breakeven affair. If we broke even, that was great, but we put our name out there, we did this, and we did that. Now we're actually making money off of these fundraisers, and part of it is, like one of it is Amy getting up there and saying, "I'm going pledge this much to the company. Who's going to be out there?" And she's got a bunch of her producer friends out there, and so they are shamed into doing it, and they'll do it and start a bidding. And we would have like, "This painting has been donated," and she'll start with, "I'll give it three thousand." "Do you hear five?" you know, all this stuff, and literally it becomes like a little horse trading up there.
So that's changed the culture a lot in the last few years, Hollywood and then corporate culture has come into Cornerstone. Now, we've had a lot of conversations over the years about corporations and getting money from corporations and how do we feel about that and all. So, you know, how do we do our 401(k)s? Is it all Calvert, or is it whatever? I can't remember some of the terminology, but it has to do with like small cap, large cap, how quickly you can make it turnover, all this stuff. But a number of us were fighting for, what is it called, economically--you know what I'm saying--socially conscious, socially conscious investing.
Look. There was a time when we were in Watts, we were thinking, like, well, should we get sponsorship? Well, sponsorship, one of the things in Watts at that time in the early nineties was mostly liquor stores. So would we go to Schlitz? Would we go to some beer company? Is that how we're going to do this?

Collings

That would be a little awkward.

Kurup

Is that how we want to do this? I mean, it didn't seem right. But we did do a successful foray into a corporate funding thing that happened, and that's because of our former managing director, Shay Wafer's sister, a woman named Deborah Wafer, who works for Gilead Sciences. They're like maybe the third largest pharmaceutical in the country.

Collings

Oh, really.

Kurup

And they were very interested in what Cornerstone was doing for AIDS awareness and HIV awareness in communities of color, particularly, to make them aware, to get tested, to look at all the new possibilities of what kind of drug and what kind of medication is out there, and Michael and Peter

Howard and to some extent I think Tali, have been strong about--and Page had been a big member of that little trio there, writing a play, then later directing a couple of the films, the short films that they use like as industrials within their training staff, so basically making plays that would go with certain actors and then go to different cities and do outreach by doing a performance, a short performance, under an hour, and then having people in the audience talk, ask questions, and they were very happy with it. And so for the past three years almost now we've been doing that work, so at least it's connected to doing something for a community, and we're bringing in our community methodology.

Collings

Yes. It's medical.

Kurup

It's medical, and it's hopefully helpful. Yes, it's a pharmaceutical who makes money off of this, but that's great. If they're trying to actually reach people and that's their goal, then we're going to help them. And now we've done a series of films, short films for them to use, and we're about to start a whole new cycle of two more plays are going to come out. Now we're trying to reach the Latino audience. It was a lot of African Americans first we were reaching. So it's a really interesting model, and I would put that at Michael's feet and Tali's feet for--I mean, Deborah Wafer's gone, Shay's been gone, so it's more about like these guys, and Peter, who's been sort of administrating a lot of it.

Collings

Well, it almost sounds like because the company has been in existence for a while, and people have become so adept, because there is so much expertise, you're in a position where you can actually go out there and pick up some of this kind of work. I mean, you're not sort of trying to feel your way through the Cornerstone method anymore. You've got that figured out.

Kurup

Well, you know, we've got it figured out, and yet every time, every single one is like remaking the wheel, and yet we have at least something to cling to. I've directed a number of plays or written a number of plays. I certainly know how to approach it as an actor and even a composer. So you have your own system, and everybody does it a little bit differently. Michael does it very differently, because he's one of the newer people, but he's found his way in it, you know what I mean, so everybody's finding their way to take this methodology forward. And I think it's best when the methodology is not rigid and it's not completely codified, but it does have aspects to it that we can sort of use, that say, "Okay, this makes sense."

And we've had a lot of expertise in a lot of different things now. I've had the chance to make a feature film within this company, make a couple of short films, and do things that stepped out of--I mean, when I first came into the company, I came as a writer, writer/director, and an actor, and that's only

because a couple of years earlier than that I'd said, "Wait. I can write that." Or, "Wait. I can direct this," because coming out of grad school, I came out as an actor and then built on that, built on it, and now there are lots of different skills that we can use.
Now, as an actor or as an artist of any sort, you have to cobble together your life, right? It's not just a matter of, "Oh, I go to a nine to five, get all my benefits from here, and I do this." No. You do a little bit of acting here, you do a little writing that'll give you some money, and I even do books on tape as a narrator.

Collings
Oh, really.

Kurup
Yes. Banhi Turpin in our company also does that. And I'm looking now to do more writing for hire, which is not something I really think of myself as, because I've always had control over my writing. I've had plays now that actually kind of began in Cornerstone as an idea and was commissioned through Cornerstone, but then it was not really a community thing. I have a verse play called "Merchant on Venice," which appropriates Shakespeare's story line, but then all the language is taken off. It's in modern iambic pentameter. It's not Christians and Jews, it's Hindus and Muslims, set in Culver City, and it's had great success in Chicago, and it's being looked at right now in London, and I would love to get it out there, because you know how Americans are very Anglo-philic. If it does well in London, they'll want to do it. So it's silly, but you know. I mean, it should be done in this city. I mean, this was written for this city. But sometimes you can't get arrested in your own city. You can be famous somewhere else before you can come back home, or you have to be famous somewhere before you can come back home.
So there are all these different ways of cobbling together life, and so I'm hoping all this has been about just adding colors to the palette and touching on when you need them and see how they affect--you know, one of the greatest things that I had before I was seriously working in the theater--when I got out of grad school at UCSD, I got a job at LACMA. I was talking about that at the beginning, right?

Collings
Yes. You talked about that. It sounded wonderful.

Kurup
It was an incredible job. And the ability to go and just spend like two hours in a gallery, in some of the most expensive art and the most interesting art, and then let that affect the work you're doing on the stage, saying, "That image, I want to get that image onstage. That movement that I feel from that painting, I want to get onstage. That color, I'd like to see on the stage." It's powerful. I kind of wish I had a little bit of that reconnection. Although

one of our major board members is one of the vice presidents of LACMA, so, funnily enough, so it's possible.
But it's this kind of--it's like how as an artist do we evolve, and where do we get our paints from, and how does one influence the other? How do you learn from this medium and translate that into this medium, and so then you become a really rounded artist. Always been interested in being more of a Renaissance person than a master of one thing particularly.

Collings

Yes. Well, it sounds like Cornerstone has been the perfect incubator for that.

Kurup

It really has, because we were all flying by the seat of our pants from the beginning. So when you fly by the seat of your pants, everybody's doing something. Everybody's holding a joystick, or holding the wing of the plane. The other one is trying to hold their pants up, you know, and it's like ultimately you then say, "Okay, this time I'm going to hold the plane's wing, and this time you hold the joystick," and in that process you get to try and you learn and you fail and you also sometimes succeed.
So I feel like the incubator, as you mentioned, has been incredibly powerful, has given me a lot of gifts, and I hope I have also influenced the company and been a part of its marination to the broth or the stew that it is now. I think I'm an ingredient in there somewhere.

Collings

Oh, I'm sure that you are.

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