



Above: One of many powerful images in *Say Their Names* is a kind of pietà in triplicate of a man holding a dead child. Below: Each entry in *The Seed Project* completes a sentence that begins with "Today I am planting a seed..."

FACES^{OF} CHANGE



Two extraordinary visual displays at the Public Theater speak directly to the horrors and hopes of 2020

By: David Barbour

The shutdown of theatres is one of the most painful aspects of the pandemic—the moment when, arguably, theatre’s ability to give voice to the otherwise voiceless was most needed. This is especially so of the Public Theater, the New York City institution that for seven decades has contributed much to the national conversation with a distinctive mix of Shakespeare revivals, new writing of a sociopolitical bent, innovative musical theatre, and formal experiments. It is a company defined by its electric connection to the city.

How to keep that connection alive in a pandemic? Like many others, the Public has moved online, hosting a series of civic salons that address today’s key political issues, streaming concerts from the in-house cabaret Joe’s Pub, and presenting radio-play versions of new works, such as Anne Washburn’s Trump-era drama *Shipwreck*. During the Black Lives Matters demonstrations following the killing of George Floyd last summer, the Public opened its lobby to protestors, offering them water bottles and a place to rest.

But the Public has also lent the façade of its Lafayette Street building for an extraordinary pair of visual displays: *Say Their Names* directly confronts one of the most painful facts of American life, the killing of Black people by the police. *The Seed Project* pays tribute to the members of Public Works, a program that provides a creative meeting point between theatre professionals and members of the larger community. Together, the projects, which were seen for several weeks in the fall, make a powerful statement about what’s wrong with the way we live now and the tremendous hope that remains on the horizon. (A gallery of images from *Say Their Names* is available on the Public’s website, as is a video of *The Seed Project*.)

Say Their Names

Say Their Names was developed by the projection designer Lucy Mackinnon and curator Garlia Cornelia Jones. Mackinnon is a Tony nominated designer whose Broadway credits include *Jagged Little Pill* and Deaf West’s revival of *Spring Awakening*. At the Public, she has designed Suzan-Lori Parks’ *White Noise* and Tony Kushner’s *A Bright Room Called Day*. Jones is an Obie Award-winning producer, among other things, she is a founding member of Harlem9 and works with the group to produce an annual event, “48Hours in...Harlem,” which is billed as being a twist on the traditional 24-hour play festival. She is also a playwright and photographer, and her essays have appeared in *The*

Washington Post and *The New York Times*.

“*Say Their Names* was the culmination of a months-long development process between The Public, Garlia, and myself,” Mackinnon says. “After George Floyd’s murder in May, I reached out to The Public to see if they would be interested in doing a projection project—turning the outside of their building into a sort of ‘stage’ while the inside was closed.” She contacted Oskar Eustis, the Public’s artistic director, about the idea. “The Public was very interested, and we got to work immediately. But there was so much to do. Between site visits, permitting, and construction it took several months to install. It would have been hard to begin this project any time, but it was especially hard in the middle of a pandemic.”

Mackinnon adds, “Garlia and I together landed on the idea of projecting this very, very long list of names. Her role was to create that list, to structure it, and to choose what would be said about each person. She was the curator and also the author of the piece. My role was to design what the piece looked like, create the animations, figure out how to program and structure the content, and work with the visual artists to lay out their work on the building. Garlia and I did our work separately but talked constantly, and our conversations shaped and built the installation.”

Early on, Jones says, “We didn’t know how many names we would have; we knew that it would be more



Some of the artwork in *Say Their Names* makes use of collages of charged words.

INSTALLATION



Mackinnon employed six Epson 31K projectors to cover the facade of the Public. Media was delivered using a disguise 2x4pro server.

than 30 or 40. It took time to develop the process and to curate art that would stand alongside the list of names. As we got further in, I wanted to tell a story about each of the lives. When we first met with the ACLU—which provided the germ of the idea that became *Say Their Names*—“we had only one sentence: ‘[NAME] should still be alive.’ But I’m a playwright, and I run two organizations for Black artists. I want to make space for stories of Black people. It was important to me to give these names a story.”

Jones continues, “Lucy had suggested the idea of doing different types of sentences. I thought, let’s just tell their stories. I felt it was important to honor each person, make a note on their life.” She pulled the names from the website Mapping Police Violence (<https://mappingpolice-violence.org/>) and the *Washington Post*’s Police Shootings Database.

As you can imagine, the process of going through this catalog of ruined lives took its toll. “I had to just stare at it,” Jones says. “I was almost in shock, emotionally frozen, and was unable to do anything for a couple of days. When Lucy first saw all the names in the document, it hit her, too. We had deadlines that I certainly missed; I was feeling traumatized.”

One thing that helped, she adds: “There was such a collaborative spirit at the Public. I had an extremely supportive supervisor, Yuvika Tolani, who is really brilliant.” In any event, “I was able to create a full database with the name of the person, the age, the location of death, and how they were killed. I had the age of the person and the age they would be now. The family was also important to me because what is destroyed—what has always been

destroyed for Black people in this country—is our families. I wanted to show that each of these people was someone’s daughter or son.” Researching each killing, she found telling details, including a victim who was an expectant father and a woman who was four months pregnant. “Of course,” she adds, “not everyone was innocent. This is not about crimes. We know a lot of white people commit crimes, but they don’t end up dead. That’s in the artistic statement: We’re not here to judge; we know there’s a cost to being Black in this country.” The databases used for the research date back to 2013; more than 2,000 names were



Each name mentioned in *Say Their Names* includes a salient fact about the person’s life.

used in the project.

Once she identified the names to be used, Jones used a team to review the copy of the sentences. The *Washington Post* database, she says, “included names and ages of each person. You’d have the date and where they were shot, the manner in which they were shot, if the person was armed, their gender, if there were signs of mental illness, threat levels, if they fled, the way they fled, and if there was a body camera. The autopsy reports were valuable, and we found quite a bit of information in the obituaries, too. We made sure the information was accurate and I would edit it.”

Jones also curated imagery supplied by the artists that she recruited: Sydney G. James, Jarrett Key, Jill Knox, Brianna Pippins, Tylonn J. Sawyer, and Dáreece Walker. In contrast to the names, which are seen in a narrow band on the center of the Public’s façade, the images cover the space. They range from a collage of words associated with police incidents—“Don’t shoot,” “Hands up,” and “I can’t



Say Their Names ends on a note of hope with Jacob Blake, the only survivor among the people displayed.

breathe”—to murals depicting street demonstrations and a kind of pietà in triplicate in which a man, posed against the stars and stripes, holds the body of dead child. Jones’ statements about the murdered register with blunt force: “Al Jarreau Cross reportedly ran.” “Alvin Cole was someone’s teenage soon.” “George Floyd couldn’t breathe.”

The Seed Project

The Seed Project was a project of Public Works, a program at the Public Theater that partners with community organizations in all five boroughs, working to connect people through theatre. Classes taught by master teaching artists are held in community centers around the city. Monthly potlucks allow for the participants to get together and share

their activities. Other programs include a community choir, a newsletter, play attendance, member-run leadership committees, and ACTivate, a theatre making program. (The Public Works program is also affiliated with 11 theatres both nationally and internationally including in Dallas, Seattle, and London.) The biggest event of the year, in some ways, is the annual “pageant,” a musical production, staged at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, with professional actors and 200 community members from Public Works. The two most recent offerings, a musical version of *Twelfth Night* and a new stage version of the Disney animated film *Hercules*, were widely acclaimed and wildly popular.

Of course, there could be no stage musical this year, which is where *The Seed Project* comes in, says Laurie Woolery, a playwright and the director of Public Works. “This would have been the eighth year for the pageant; the community has gotten used to having an annual event. It’s more than the chance to be in a play; it’s an act of civic engagement. After much conversation with our national partners and affiliates who also had their summer programming cancelled due to COVID-19, we decided to keep alive the spirit of the pageant, which is community-centered, ambitious, and celebrates and reflects the city. We brainstormed the idea of sharing a unifying prompt: ‘Today, I am planting a seed of...’ And each participant would be invited to contribute to the creation of a community-generated piece of public art to share with their city.” But what would that art be? “We had to find something that would allow our community partners to participate without leaving their homes and violating safety standards.

“I heard that Lucy had offered her services to the Public for a project built around Black Lives Matter and that Garlia was working on it. I thought, if we band together, we could make this seemingly impossible thing happen. These two art provocations could hold hands and move through the organization. Once we had that lined up, it was easy to imagine.”

And, she notes, just as *Say Their Names* recognized a social issue for which a reckoning is overdue, *The Seed Project* went to the heart of the Public’s mission. “These communities are the heart and soul of Public Works. Without our community partners, we don’t exist. To have them appear on the building, consecutively, for hours at a time, a group that ranges from children to seniors with words of how they are coping at this moment and their collective hope for the future—it felt like the visual equivalent of the 7pm banging of the pans for essential workers.”

The display, Woolery says, was the product of an ambition that is typical of the Public Theater and Public Works. “Our communities deserve the best of what we have. For us to be the people’s theatre, we have to do our best. I was so moved by Lucy offering her skill set and the volunteerism of our partners.” The latter, she adds, are extraordinary in the dedication to appearing onstage. “They’re dealing with work, finances, and childcare; they have to get on



The images in *The Seed Project* feature dedicated photography by Jennifer Young.

the subway car, a bus, or a bike to get there. But their passion for being citizen-artists, that activism, is more than a costume and a song and dance. We are gifting the community with something.”

Woolery engaged the photographer Jennifer Young to photograph the participants in *The Seed Project*. “We originally thought we’d use headshots from the pageants. But when we laid them out next to the writing prompts, they looked like people from a different time; they didn’t match the moment we’re living in. We worked with Dahlia Ramsay, our community coordinator, to find locations where we could get the most photography done—at parks, or buildings, or intersections that capture the city. There were a lot of challenges, but I’ve always found in theatre that limitations always lead to amazing innovations.”

In any case, the dedicated photos were shot and paired with the prompts, many of which are deeply moving. Kian Miranda-Rodriguez’s statement is “Today I am planting a seed for the safety of my family.” Rosalind Svendsen: “Today I am planting a seed of unconditional love.” Frank Lindsay: “Today I am planting a seed of positive light and progress.” And speaking of many of us in this most difficult year is Aden Munassar: “Today I am planting a seed of perseverance, simply because it’s all I’ve got left.”

The process

“We started working on the list at the end of May,” Mackinnon says, speaking in November. “When we began,

we understood that there would be a lot of names, but finding more than 2,000... It’s a lot. I hope that when people see this—when they read the names and sentences, when they see the length of the list—they will reflect on the enormity the problem.”

Regarding *The Seed Project*, Mackinnon says, “Laurie and I discussed many ways of crafting this piece and using the building. In the end, we decided to entirely cover the building with panoramic portraits. The idea was to create a large-scale display that took over the building, turning it over, in some sense, to community members and inviting people to come down and see one another.” Both projects, she notes are “gestures of respect and caring.”

“The Public Theater has a facade that is well made for projection,” Mackinnon says. “Despite it being made of red brick, it works well as a projection surface because it is a large, flat building on a wide avenue. It helps that several spaces across the street are operated by friends of The Public, too. In fact, we’re projecting from the roof of Blue Man Group’s building.”

The imagery was delivered by six 31K Epson UDX-4K32 projectors, donated by the New York office of 4Wall Entertainment. “We’re using a disguise 2X4pro media server,” Mackinnon says. “To focus the projectors, we divided the building lengthwise into three sections, and converged two projectors in each area. There are some very small overlaps between the projectors, but we mostly avoided edge-blending.” For previsualization, she adds,

“We did manual measurements of the building so we could place content.”

Putting the projects together in a time of constant uncertainty posed its own challenges, she notes. “When we started talking about *Say Their Names* and *Seed*, there were curfews in the city. We were trying to imagine how to focus with curfews in place. In the end, however, the projects took longer than expected to plan, and by the time we were ready to load in, we knew how to work together safely.”

The creative partners all note the complementary nature of the projects. “For *The Seed Project* to be in conversation with *Say Their Names* is very deep,” Woolery says. “We see the vibrancy, hope, and humanity in *The Seed Project* and in *Say Their Names*, we also see the inhumanity that our brothers, sisters, mothers, and husbands are facing. *Say Their Names* is a reckoning; it’s part of the dark history of this country. But the metaphor of planting a seed is, you have to wait. It requires time and tending in order for something to grow. My grandmother, an immigrant from El Salvador, didn’t speak a word of English, but she



The images in *The Seed Project* strike a celebratory note that contrasts strongly with the requiem tone of *Say Their Names*.

loved trees. Wherever our family moved, she always planted a tree. It was her gift to the future. It’s close to the Native American idea that says if you’re not thinking seven generations ahead, you’re not thinking right.”

Jones says, “We end *Say Their Names* with a bit of hope: Jacob Blake survived. It’s one inkling toward the idea that something can change. I knew we would be working alongside *The Seed Project*, that was a way to segue into or shout out the hope that comes from that.”

