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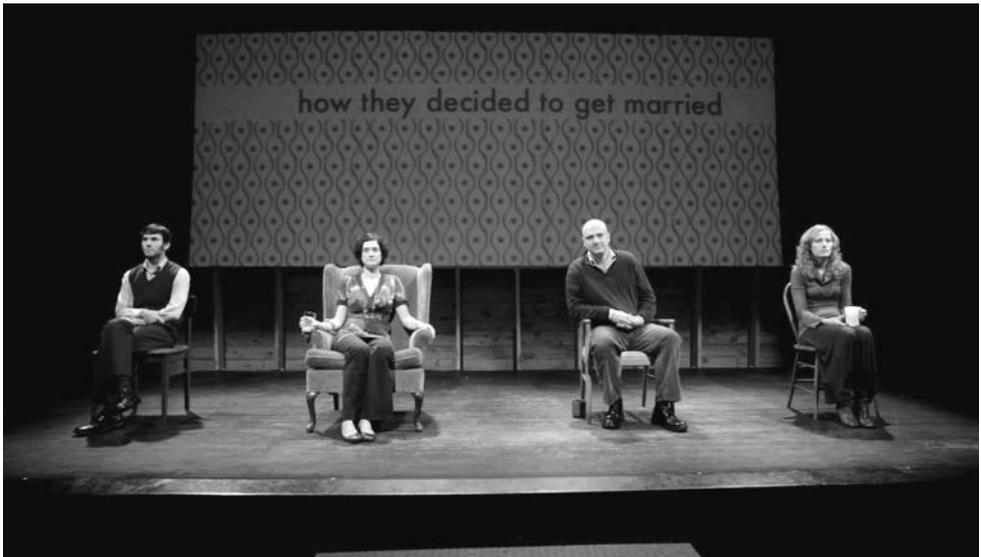
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Discovering What We Don't Know

An Interview with Steve Cosson of the Civilians

Sarah Kozinn



As the *Deepwater Horizon* oil rig that exploded on 28 April 2010 continued to spew upwards of 25,000 barrels of oil a day into the Gulf Coast waters, devastating its fragile ecosystem, the Civilians, a New York-based theatre company, was in preparations for their 12 May reading of *The Great Immensity* at the Public Theater's *New Works Now!* festival. *The Great Immensity*, both the name of a Chinese Panamax ship the authors saw while conducting investigations for the play in the Panama Canal and a metaphor for the overwhelming size of current global environmental problems, is a departure from the work the company is best known for: non-narrative, ensemble-devised theatre that uses music and verbatim texts culled from interviews conducted by cast members.

Figure 1. You Better Sit Down. From left: Robbie Collier Sublett, Jennifer R. Morris, Matthew Maher, and Caitlin Miller. Galapagos Art Space in Brooklyn, NY, 13 November 2009. (Photo by Aaron Wesner)

Sarah Kozinn is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Performance Studies at Tisch School of the Arts/NYU, where she also earned her MA. She was a Performance Studies Fellow at Wesleyan University and received the 2005 NYU Performance Studies Award and the 2009 Paula Goddard Award. She currently teaches in NYU's Undergraduate Department of Drama and teaches acting technique at the New York Film Academy. She has studied theatre, puppetry, and street performance around the world, has produced several plays and films, and performs improvisational comedy in New York City.

The company developed *The Great Immensity* during a yearlong collaboration with faculty, researchers, and students from the Princeton Environmental Institute (PEI) and the Princeton Atelier at the University's Lewis Center for the Arts. Steve Cosson, the Civilians' artistic director, wrote and directed the play and Michael Friedman¹ composed the music. The play weaves together interviews with scientists, environmentalists, and everyday people on the topic of climate change with a fictional story about two identical twin sisters, Phyllis and Polly. The plot follows Phyllis's hunt to find her sister who disappeared during a research trip to Barro Colorado Island. We learn that Polly became so overwhelmed by the environmental depredation that she stowed away aboard *The Great Immensity* on its way to arctic Canada. Phyllis has no choice but to follow her sister in order to bring her home.

The fallout from these environmental troubles directly affects each character. In one scene we listen to a formerly enthusiastic teenage member of an international youth committee that travels around the world to witness ecological disasters first-hand solemnly resign from her post. In her final vlog (video blog) entry, the actress stands and faces the audience as she recounts in great detail how human neglect is causing the death and extinction of animals and ecosystems. Unable to bear witness to any more disasters, she says good-bye to her online followers. The mournful timbre of her final address demonstrates the spirit-crushing aftermath of facing the "great immensity."

In another scene, a scientist pleads for people to pay attention to more than just dying polar bears and to turn their focus onto the totality of the disaster caused by global warming. In this scene, we see how Friedman's musical numbers strategically borrow from diverse musical styles, creating a conversation between the severity of the show's themes and the music. Friedman and Cosson use the music and lyrics to comment on the events of the play. For example, after her address the scientist sings a torch song to megafauna while a photo of a polar bear is projected and then left to linger in the background. This musically romantic lament to the death of polar bears is discordant with the brutality of the actual disaster and, in effect, turns the disaster into a beautiful song. It is a eulogy to megafauna, and as the song lures the audience into its melodic phrases, the text tells us that by enjoying the song we are celebrating the beauty of extinction. This incongruity of music and text echoes Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's theatrical objectives in such songs as "Zuhälterballade" (Pimp's Ballad) from *The Threepenny Opera* (see for example Albright 2000:121).

While watching the 12 May reading, I couldn't help but draw parallels between the content of the play and the news articles I had read before arriving at the theatre. As the play described the grim state of affairs in arctic Canada, I became lost in images of oil-drenched animals, dying reefs, and polluted beaches I had seen in the news earlier that day.

Of course Cosson could not have predicted that the reading would coincide with the oil spill. It was a coincidence, and in many ways the art of the coincidence has defined the company's methodology in their research-driven shows. Rather than force a theme, the company trusts that themes and commonalities will naturally emerge from their topical investigations. "The play exists out there in the world," says Cosson. In *The Great Immensity* the themes that emerge eerily echo the sentiments we had been hearing on the news in response to the disastrous BP oil spill.

Cosson incorporated the Civilians in 2001 and, as a nonprofit company financing its productions, it is dependent on artists' residencies, grants, public funding, and private donations.

1. Friedman is a composer and lyricist who is a Founding Associate Artist of the Civilians. He has been working with the company since it started in 2001. In addition to his work with the Civilians, Friedman has written music and lyrics for *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* (2010, with Alex Timbers), *Saved* (2008, with Gary Griffin at Playwrights Horizons), *In the Bubble* (2007, with Michael Greif at Northwestern's American Music Theatre Project), *God's Ear* (2007, a New Georges production with Anne Kauffman at the East 13th Street Theater), *The Brand New Kid* (2006, with Nick Olcott at the Kennedy Center), and *The Blue Demon* (2003, with Darko Tresnjak at the Huntington Theatre), to name a few.

The group's work has been produced at theatres all over the country: at the Public Theater and the Vineyard Theatre (New York City), at Center Theatre Group, A.R.T. (Cambridge, MA), La Jolla Playhouse (La Jolla, CA), HBO's US Comedy Festival (Aspen, CO), Studio Theatre (Washington, DC), and the Actors Theatre of Louisville (Louisville, KY) to name a few. Since making their first show with only "six dollars and a pack of gum," the company has expanded ambitiously. Currently, they have their hands full with a diverse range of projects varying in topics and styles. They are working on: *You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents' Divorce*, a play made from the artists' interviews with their divorced parents (first performed on 13 November 2009 at Galapagos Art Space in Brooklyn, NY) that has also been made into a series of short video clips broadcast online through the WNYC website (<http://culture.wnyc.org/articles/civilians/>) where audiences can contribute their own divorce stories; *Let Me Ascertain You*, a musical about the porn industry that was performed as a cabaret at Joe's Pub in New York City on 4 June 2010; the commissioned *Nottage: Childs Musical*, a musical by Pulitzer Prize-winner Lynn Nottage and acclaimed composer Kirsten Childs that looks at how the Atlantic Yards development is changing the face of Brooklyn; and several other commissioned projects. Though the company is composed of a changing group of associate artists who are actors, dancers, composers, choreographers, writers, and directors (64 of whom are listed on the website), Cosson began the company by "collecting" artists he enjoyed working with—several of whom, like Michael Friedman, Anne Washburn, Anne Kauffman, Jenny Morris, Damian Baldet, Trey Lyford, Christina Kirk, Caitlin Miller, and Colleen Werthmann continue to work with the company.

As mentioned above, the Civilians are best known for their investigative, documentary theatre-style shows, and though they are not limited to this type of production, several of their most successful shows follow the methods that were inspired by Cosson's work with Les Waters. Les Waters is a former member of the Joint Stock Company (a theatre company founded by David Hare, Max Stafford-Clark, and David Aukin in London in 1974) who taught Cosson in his graduate studies at the University of California, San Diego. The Joint Stock had a unique interviewing method: the interviewers did not use any recording devices. Instead, as soon as possible afterward they would perform their interviews from memory, a method that demanded absolute concentration, presence, and receptivity. The aim of the interview process was not to find an answer to a particular question, but rather to get to know the person on a somatic, psychological, personal, and instinctual level without the obstacle of a recording device.

When teaching actors how to interview, Cosson often uses the four rules he learned from Waters: 1) avoid value statements; 2) let people talk about what they want to talk about; 3) try to get them to talk about what is most interesting to them; and 4) get people to talk past their "scripts." Then Cosson adds a fifth rule: Learn to practice your "neutral empathetic," which he otherwise calls being "a good listener." During the first stage of development the Civilians employ these rules while interviewing a range of people about a general topic or idea.

Though the Civilians' interviewers now use recording devices, the actors still perform their interviews from memory as part of the rehearsal process. The progression of jumping quickly from the research phase to the in-rehearsal performance phase gives the actor the opportunity to circumvent more traditional script and textual analysis used to understand character. Because the actors are required to perform their interviewees immediately after the interview, their presentations are based on their initial and instinctual response to that person as opposed to the usual method of developing a character through an analysis of text and story. Cosson describes this as a "reversal" of traditional acting techniques. Actors learn who their characters are through their performances of them. These performances are not only for the actors to experiment with their understanding of their interviewees, they are also part of the playwrighting process for Cosson and his collaborators. These performances help Cosson and his cowriters determine what characters should be part of the show, how their texts will cut together with other character's texts, and how different characters will work together onstage.

The Civilians

Date and location of premieres.

- 2002 *Canard, Canard, Goose?* Written and directed by Steven Cosson. Music and lyrics by Michael Friedman. HERE Arts Center, New York City.
- 2003 *Gone Missing.* Written and directed by Steven Cosson. Music and lyrics by Michael Friedman. The Belt, New York City.
- 2004 *The Ladies.* Directed by Anne Kauffman. Written by Anne Washburn. Dixon Place, New York City.
- 2006 *(I Am) Nobody's Lunch.* Written and Directed by Steven Cosson. Music and lyrics by Michael Friedman. 59E59 Theater, New York City.
- 2008 *This Beautiful City* by Steven Cosson and Jim Lewis. Directed by Steven Cosson. Music and lyrics by Michael Friedman. Actors Theatre of Louisville Humana Festival of New American Plays, Louisville, KY.
- 2008 *Brooklyn @ Eye Level* by Steven Cosson. Directed by Steven Cosson. Brooklyn Lyceum, Brooklyn, NY.
- 2009 *You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents' Divorce* by Anne Kauffman, Matthew Maher, Caitlin Miller, Jennifer R. Morris, Janice Paran, and Robbie Collier Sublett. Directed by Anne Kauffman. Galapagos Art Space, Brooklyn, NY.
- In process *Nottage: Childs Musical.* Written and directed by Steven Cosson. Music and lyrics by Michael Friedman.
- In process *Paris Commune.* Created by Steven Cosson and Michael Friedman.
- In process *Pretty Filthy* (formerly *Porn Musical*, then *Let Me Ascertain You*) by Bess Wohl. Directed by Steven Cosson. Music and lyrics by Michael Friedman.
- In process *The Great Immensity.* Written and directed by Steven Cosson.

Produced in 2002 at HERE Arts Center in New York City, *Canard, Canard, Goose?* was the Civilian's first company show. This production was also how they learned to trust their instincts in their investigative process. The company went into rehearsals for *Canard* only a few days after 9/11. At that point, they had no show, but when Anne Kauffman told the company that while vacationing with her husband in the Adirondacks she had heard a story that the 1996 Disney movie *Fly Away Home* had trained geese to follow an ultra-light airplane and then, after the production, abandoned them in the Adirondacks to die, the company decided that an investigation into the death of these geese had to be the jumping-off point for their first company production. Furthermore, Cosson says that in the wake of 9/11 the company members needed to leave New York City to "get some distance from being in the middle of the smell and the smoke and the craziness," so an investigative process conducted in the Adirondacks was enticing.

As they describe on their website, the company was surprised that the interviews with residents in the Adirondacks revealed common themes of "disorientation," "misplaced empathy," and "coming home" (*The Civilians, Canard*) in a post-9/11 climate. They tied these themes poetically together with an article Cosson found that was written by the Canadian pilot, Bill Lishman, who taught the geese from the film to imprint on planes. Unable to relocate the article, Cosson told me that he remembered it describing a scene in the movie when the pilot leads a flock of geese around the tops of the World Trade Center buildings, an image that profoundly and lyrically linked together the themes of the show with the tragedies of 9/11. This fortuitous connection between online and in-person research helped cement the company's trust in the art of the coincidence.

Canard, staged in HERE's intimate theatre space, helped the Civilians define a form and process for their style of investigative, documentary production that they continued to use in several of their later shows. Cosson and his collaborators cut together texts and interviews, Michael Friedman composed the music, and the company developed stylized and dance-like



Figure 2. (I Am) Nobody's Lunch. From left: Jennifer R. Morris, Brad Heberlee, Quincy Tyler Bernstine, Matt Dellapina (on table), Caitlin Miller, and Daoud Heidami. 59E59, New York City, February 2006. (Photo by Leslie Lyons)

choreography to add to the stage direction. The final performances are plot-free and episodic, like a series of vignettes strung together by common themes. The shows create an open-ended journey rather than a conclusive story with a beginning, climatic middle, and resolution.

Their positive experience in developing and performing *Canard* led the Civilians to their next projects. In their 2003 production of *Gone Missing* at the Belt Theater in NYC (and then in 2004 at the Gate Theatre in London), the company went into their investigations asking people general questions about things they have lost or things they have found. From lost loves to lost shoes, from sentimental

items like engagement rings to the myth of the Bermuda Triangle, the show capitalized on the metaphorical associations people draw on when they are asked about loss. In their 2006 production of *(I Am) Nobody's Lunch* performed at the 59E59 Theaters, the cast asked, "How do we know what we know when everyone in power is lying?" (The Civilians, *Nobody's Lunch*). As in the other shows, each ensemble member plays multiple characters. The subjects are extremely diverse, ranging from elementary school kids responding to being asked about how they know if something is real—as one character says in his definition of what is "real": "Sponge Bob is not real. And neither are mummies" (Civilians 2006)—to a man who thinks he is a 40,000-year-old alien and believes he can interpret the "truth" because the universe talks through him. The choreography comprises quotidian movements that are then assembled, exaggerated, and extended in more dance-like combinations. The set is only a few moveable furniture pieces, a painted stage floor, and a hanging lamp.

While still simple, the projections and brightly colored lit panels of Neil Patel's set design created a spectacular 1970s game show backdrop for *This Beautiful City*. Produced in 2008 at the Humana Festival followed by a run at the Studio Theater in Washington, DC, at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Los Angeles, CA, produced by the Center Theater Group, and at the Vineyard Theatre in NYC, the company researched the evangelical movement in its "unofficial capital," Colorado Springs, Colorado. In addition to investigating the culture and life surrounding New Life church, a large nondenominational evangelical church in Colorado Springs, the show also looks into the relationship between religion and the US armed forces. In an exemplary scene, the action cuts between an actor playing Mike Weinstein, a Jewish air force veteran whose children are now in the air force, and three air force cadets. The conversation across the overlapping, simultaneously staged scenes points to the vast difference of opinions on evangelizing in the air force. The writing does not take sides, but paints pictures of two contrary sentiments on religion's role in the military. As in the staging at the Vineyard Theatre, all this is set to the music of a pop-rock style band, visible to the audience throughout.

Stylistically and objectively, the Civilians' use of music and spectacle emphasizes the difference between their work and other contemporary documentary theatre productions that tend



Figure 3. *This Beautiful City*. From left: Marsha Stephanie Blake, Brandon Miller, Alison Weller, Brad Heberlee, Stephen Plunkett, and Emily Ackerman. Kirk Douglas Theatre, Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles, 2008. (Photo by Craig Schwartz)

to match serious subjects with equally serious productions. Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator led the modern documentary theatre movement in the 1920s, and today artists and companies such as Sarah Jones, Anna Deavere Smith, and the Tectonic Theater Project (to name a few) make work that is most popularly associated with the genre. Unlike Anna Deavere Smith’s performance strategy—by which, as she says, “If you *say a word often enough, it becomes you*” (Smith 1993:xxiii),² suggesting a distinct accessing of the person’s essence through their words—the Civilians’ actors acknowledge in their performances that their presentations are their own *interpretations* of the characters. This difference, along with the Civilians’ other theatrical strategies, performs the multiplicitous nature of truth, suggesting that no story is absolute. It also gives the company more freedom to play.

The company attempts to make a new kind of theatre by treating documentary theatre with a refreshing irreverence. (They call their show *Gone Missing* a “docu-cabaret” [in Mechling

2. Smith first records video and audio of her interviews and then listens and watches the tapes until she can say the words with the same intonations, rhythms, and breath as her interviewees. She believes that the way someone says something reveals who they are; saying what they say *like* they say it gives her more intimate access to this person than if she repeated back the words with her own cadence and rhythms: “If we were to inhabit the speech pattern of another, and walk in the speech of another, we could find the individuality of the other and experience that individuality viscerally” (1993:xxvii). It is not only the words spoken that make somebody who he or she is, but also the moments and breaths taken between the words.

2007].) This marks them with, as Cosson puts it, a different “aesthetic strategy” than those of their colleagues: “The theatricality and performativity of our shows puts the emphasis on the performer and the creation, and not just the reality of the show.” This comes through in the musical choices, the stage movements, and the way Cosson juxtaposes wide-ranging opinions. Strategically, this engagement with play and spectacle (the music, the dancing, and the abstract and changeable sets) thwarts the audiences’ reception of the actors onstage as representatives of the actors’ interviewees. Cosson says, “The theatrical reality of the show, its artifice, and the entertainment value of the music changes the relationship of the audience to the show and reminds the audience that this is a play. This is a show. This is a work of culture and not an objective window into reality.”

Music plays an important role during the development process of all their productions. Cosson has noted that sometimes during rehearsals the connections in the show emerge more from the music Friedman composes than from the texts: “In the development of the show, sometimes the music and Michael’s songwriting can really start pointing the way to what the show is really about.” Friedman and Cosson structure the music to use the “music-gesture” in discordance with the “word-gesture” as Daniel Albright describes the relationship between text and music in the work of Brecht and Weill (2000:120). The Civilians’ music, sometimes made from verbatim interview texts and sometimes a riff off of them, comments on and complicates the scenarios. Cosson says, “Michael Friedman is very good at using genre and using a certain kind of comedy or style in the song to really draw the audience in and create certain expectations so that we then can flip it around a little bit.” The music is an instrument of perspective that gives the audience yet another vantage point.

Through these techniques, Cosson attempts to “undo” audience expectations and challenge quick judgments of the plays’ subjects and characters. He hopes to make theatre that “wakes up” audiences to their own habits and proclivities by using common social tropes and images, devices that tend to illicit particular emotional responses, and then pointing out why these images work while others do not. Rather than creating what he calls a “theatre of assurance,” a theatre “where you get to experience some conflict so the world that you want to believe in is restored by the end of it,” Cosson wants his theatre to “encourage people’s doubt and curiosity [...] to find a way to change and evolve the stories that we tell.” Cosson tries to evade the political thrust of message-driven shows. Though the topics are evocative (loss, knowledge, religion, etc.), the Civilians’ productions avoid promoting any particular stance. They are more like a quilt than a woven blanket: some of the pieces clash with each other; some compliment their neighboring patches.

In our interview, Cosson expressed excitement when discussing the future of the company. With several acclaimed shows and published plays under their belt,³ Cosson is ready to expand the scope of their productions as the organization works to move beyond media perceptions of them as a young, low-budget “downtown” company. I spoke with Cosson at the Bittersweet Cafe and in Fort Greene Park, both in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, NY, over a period of two days in June 2010 about the Civilians’ process, their past and present projects, and how he sees the company growing.

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SARAH KOZINN: I saw the reading of *The Great Immensity* at the Public Theater, and I was wondering what you think about the timing of the reading coinciding with the BP oil spill that's devastating the Gulf Coast?⁴

STEVE COSSON: *The Great Immensity* really came out of me trying to figure out how to make theatre about how we relate psychologically to these environmental and climate issues that are so overwhelming. Through my experience in doing the investigation for the show, I really pushed everyday life out of the picture and focused on some of these larger phenomena that are scary and disorienting and that we, in many ways, don't have imaginations equipped to understand. That's why the show is called *The Great Immensity*. It's literally named after a ship we saw in the Panama Canal, but there's this underlying theme of "That which is too big," and how we deal, or fail to deal, with phenomena on that level. Now I feel like I have a real awareness of when I'm letting something into my mind and when I'm not—of when I basically just can't deal. In many ways it's akin to the same things that go on psychologically with the Iraq War or the war in Afghanistan or any larger complex phenomena that for the most part you don't really live with on a day-to-day basis.

KOZINN: To cope with it you have to tune it out?

COSSON: —or not deal with it. There's one line in *The Great Immensity* when Charlie says, "People don't like to deal with stuff." That's why terrible things happen down the road and nobody solves the problem. With the BP oil spill you have it on the edge of your consciousness for a little while. You go on and live your life, but then a certain detail will be communicated and the whole thing becomes emotionally real and you become affected by it. After having thought so much about what works on us when it comes to environmental issues—what triggers "caring" from us, what makes it difficult for us to care, and what the psychological impediments are—I feel that I'm fine-tuned to those triggers in such a way that I'm very self aware.

KOZINN: What are those things?

COSSON: Well, I was listening to the radio, and I was going about doing something, and a mayor of one of those towns in Louisiana talked about these pelicans that were endangered. Now they are coming back, but after the spill they are now covered in oil. When they go to try and rescue them, the pelicans can't fly, so they just run into the everglades. There are also these turtles that they're trying to rescue, but their nostrils are all clogged with oil so they're suffocating. When you get a concrete image like that, that's connected to a living thing, it makes you picture a turtle whose nostrils are clogged with oil. Those kinds of images affect us.

KOZINN: Were you trying to employ similar tactics in *The Great Immensity*?

COSSON: Yes. In many ways I was trying to put together a narrative of details to use those triggers to elicit responses and emotions from the audience. I think the trickier thing about the

4. The 12 May 2010 reading of *The Great Immensity* at the Public Theater was bare bones. The actors only had a few days to rehearse. During the reading, the actors sat or stood behind music stands. There were no sets, but they did have images projected onto a screen behind the actors. This was a preliminary showing, intended to introduce the audience to this work-in-progress.

show is that we're also trying to put in some distance. We're trying to play the game and play outside of the game at the same time. There are some distancing techniques that snap us out of it, that then say, "Why does a polar bear make climate change real for us so we can care about a polar bear but we can't care about Bangladesh in the same way?" It doesn't come up in our consciousness or in the media in the same way. In a play, since it is a performance and you are creating what you want in order to create responses in your audience, you can tell the story, create your argument and how you affect the audience, and then flip it around and give them a different perspective on why they were affected and build a critique of that into the show.

KOZINN: Sounds Brechtian.

COSSON: It is in a way. It has a very different aesthetic, but I think sometimes there are similar goals. A good example might be how in the first act we plant an idea with one of the scientist's interviews where she talks about charismatic megafauna. "What does it take to make people care?" We care about big animals. Cute animals. Predators. Things that give us a sense of power and nature. Because of that we often miss the complexity of the natural system. We don't get the real story because we're fixated on the panda bear or the polar bear or the whale. And if you don't get the full context you can't even help the thing that you care about. From that we go into a torch song about charismatic megafauna, which is not what the audience expects. I think that's a good example of how we use music and also how Brecht used music to get the A-effect, to snap the audience out of the play into something else. Michael Friedman is very good at using genre and using a certain kind of comedy or style in the song to really draw the audience in and create certain expectations so that we then can flip it around a little bit. This torch song to charismatic megafauna is big and fun and torch-songy. Even in these workshop versions we project a cute picture of a polar bear at the end of the song, and still the entire audience goes "ahhh" because it's a really cute polar bear. I think it is hopefully right there at the end, that it really sinks in. That what she's singing is, "It's such a beautiful pleasure to watch you die." So that's when there's that little switch.

KOZINN: You use the music to open people up to a message that might be hard to hear otherwise?

COSSON: I guess you could say that, but when I'm constructing a play I don't think of it in terms of messages or arguments, but more of changing perceptions in the audiences. When I sequence something or build something, I think more about how I'm leading the audience to think in this direction or go down this road. Then I'm going to make another choice where they realize this road looks different from above. Whenever I'm doing a show using interviews and doing something verbatim, often I'll try to find a character that the audience might think they understand at the beginning of their introduction, but who then reveals something that won't fit in with that first paradigm. The audience will then get a new understanding of who that person is. Especially with the reality-based work that I do, I think of the reality as a way to actually strip away our overly narrow preconceptions of how people work, how the world works, how social systems work—whatever the subject is. So there is not necessarily a particular truth or message that's in the song or scene or in the monologue that I'm ultimately trying to get to. It's much more the process of how it gets there.

KOZINN: Sounds more like an undoing of a message?

COSSON: It's more of an undoing. Whenever I start a project and work with people who may or may not have done this for the first time, I tell them that the purpose of doing an investigation at the beginning of the show is more to discover what we don't know or what we can't know or the limitations in how we think rather than going out and getting a particular story or fact. In order to do that, it has to be a real investigation—you're interested in a subject matter for some particular reason, but you've found a way to frame your investigation as a real inquiry where you can't have a forgone conclusion. You're working from real curiosity, and you've set



Figure 4. Brooklyn at Eye Level (*The Atlantic Yards Project*). Dancers from *Urban Bush Women's Apprentice Company* and Jane Lee (*the reader*). Brooklyn Lyceum in Brooklyn, NY, December 2008. (Photo by Adrian Kinloch)

up your collaborators to be surprised and confused and to be challenged, because ultimately my goal is to find a way to make art that will actually open the world up and be the opposite of what I think of as a “theatre of assurance”—a theatre where you get to experience some conflict so the world that you want to believe in is restored by the end of it. I feel like my mission as an artist is to encourage people’s doubt and curiosity, and that’s what leads me to make new work—to find a way to change and evolve the stories that we tell.

KOZINN: Thinking about your show (*I Am*) *Nobody’s Lunch*: it seems to project exactly this idea you’re talking about, the idea that there really is no absolute truth, just a lot of stories.

COSSON: Whenever we get to that stage of working on a project when everything is kind of coming together, but it’s not quite there yet, and you have to lock yourself in a room and say, “What are we talking about? What is the show ultimately doing”—a lot of the time we realize we have a kind of opposite message that we’re giving to the audience. A play is often boiled down to what might be pithy Buddhist slogans.

KOZINN: Can you give me an example?

COSSON: In *Nobody’s Lunch* the message—having just said we don’t have a message, but rather what we’re *encouraging* the audience to consider while they’re watching the show—is that there is no absolute truth and, at the same time, you must insist on a truth. That’s the world we live in. In a way *Nobody’s Lunch* was a very political show for us. That show started in that very crazy political moment that we were in, and we put a lot of work into how we could engage in that subject.

KOZINN: Was that 2003? The era of “weapons of mass destruction?”

COSSON: Yes. “Everyone is lying and it’s working.” And “What’s happened to our country?” That’s when the show was born.

KOZINN: Did that experience turn you on to political investigations for other projects?

COSSON: It opened the door for us. I started the company very much with the interest in doing a certain kind of political theatre. I think there’s certain politics within everything we do. There are some projects that are more head-on in the subject matter and ones that are more oblique. The company had to develop and learn how to work and develop some resources before we could take on more ambitious subject matter. We made our first two shows with six dollars and a pack of gum.

KOZINN: How all great things begin. You started in 2001? Did 9/11 influence your decision to start a company?

COSSON: It did in an inevitable way. I started developing the company a year before. We incorporated in July. We had a lot of meetings over the summer. We had our first gig in the fall.

KOZINN: Who else was involved?

COSSON: A lot of people who are still in the company: Anne Kauffman, Michael Friedman, Anne Washburn, Jenny Morris, Colleen Werthmann. They were all people I had collected along the way. Though we’ve always been called a young company we’re not young. I was 31 when we started the company. I was out of grad school. We did start like a young company with nothing, but we weren’t kids just out of NYU. I collected people I loved and wanted to work with more.

Our first show we all made together, and we had no idea what we were doing, so we said, “Let’s just do it.” As for the 9/11 question: We had a plan for what the first show would be. Our first rehearsal was September 15th, which we then sort of put in the show—a show version of that meeting. We had an idea and we thought, “our idea makes no sense, doing a play makes no sense.” We had a performance coming up. In a way the first three shows are really all about 9/11 and its political aftermath.

KOZINN: This was your first show, *Canard, Canard, Goose?* How did it go?

COSSON: *Canard* was a very instructive show because I had a bunch of ideas about how we’d work. Like I said, we lost our plan, we had a deadline, and we had to go on instinct. We had to just jump with both feet into the water. I had done similar group devised work before, and something that I’ve always enjoyed from it is that when you have a group of people working on an artistic project, you create your own culture and reality for this period of time and coincidences start to happen. It’s all your perception, but you create a collective. Everyone’s unconscious is involved. You’re making decisions and your analytic mind is involved, but your unconscious mind is also involved. You feel like you tap into, as a group, some crazy gestalt that’s happening. This happened with our first shows that were an investigation of an idea more than any particular or discreet subject matter or story. There was a very associative process: randomly-interview-the-person-next-to-you-on-the-bus and see what happens process.

With *Canard, Canard, Goose?* we had no show. Anne Kauffman had been on vacation in the Adirondacks with her husband and said, “When I was at this motel, this woman told me that Disney made a movie with Anna Paquin called *Fly Away Home*. They trained all these geese to fly after these little airplanes and then when they were done filming they just left the geese there, and the geese died.” It was just after 9/11, and we were all crazy people, and when she told us that story it seemed exactly like what we should make the show about. Which is ridiculous.

KOZINN: How did you tie it into 9/11?

COSSON: We didn't. You could make a documentary play interviewing the workers down at Ground Zero, but that's not what we do. It seemed like we had to get out of New York.

KOZINN: This sounds a bit like the phenomenon we discussed in the beginning of our conversation, that when the realities of the world are too horrible we cope by filtering them out or putting them on the periphery. Were you coping with 9/11 by leaving?

COSSON: For that show we used the story of the geese only as a premise for going to the Adirondacks to talk to the people in the town. So of course the story is about all sorts of different things. But everything became about empathy and about these people's relationship to the geese, their relationship to animals, their relationships to other people—and to get the perceptions from these people in a small town in the Adirondacks about 9/11. There were people who were devastated, who were terrified, who were paranoid, who thought the water was being poisoned, and other people who said "I don't know. It's so far away, it's hard to feel anything about it." One woman said, "I know it's a big deal, but I went to New York once on a school trip and it rained. That's all I remember." In a way I think even if we didn't know what were doing, we knew we needed to get some distance from being in the middle of the smell and the smoke and the craziness.

KOZINN: But you inevitably brought the smell and smoke with you. Did you become representatives of the disaster?

COSSON: Yes, so everyone talked to us about it. Then, at the end of it all we found out that the story this woman from the Adirondacks told us about the geese was completely untrue. We traced the rumor and found out where it comes from, and the whole story falls apart. On the internet I found an article about this wonderful, crazy Canadian guy who developed a technique on how to imprint birds on ultra-light airplanes. He teaches them how to migrate, and that's where the whole Anna Paquin movie came from. It's based on him. I found this story written in his quirky Canadian-inventor voice. In the movie they wanted a flock of geese going by the World Trade Center and they needed a better pilot. They needed somebody to pitch in, so he actually comes down to NYC. He talks about going up at dawn, flying around the New York harbor with all these geese around him, and going by the World Trade Center. People are just starting to work. He has this little ultra-light plane, and he's seeing people in their offices, getting this little bird's-eye view of downtown Manhattan, and then flying away. That's what this play was leading to.

KOZINN: That seems like a fortuitous find.

COSSON: It was a great beginning for us because we then had faith that you can trust your instincts even if they're totally ridiculous. Also it was a way of training us how to pursue a story, how to investigate a story in a way that we're still involved, that we're still drawing on our own subjectivity, but we're also truly open to whatever the real world story is.

KOZINN: Can you tell me more about your artistic process?

COSSON: One very important thing that informs every aspect of our work is our conception of the company. Our technique was something that I learned from Les Waters, who was a member of the Joint Stock Company. He was my grad school professor in San Diego, and he would do a Joint Stock interviewing class for the grad school. That's what got me hooked on the whole idea.

KOZINN: What was it that hooked you?

COSSON: He gave us a technique on how to interview. He gave us a few guidelines, and as a class we'd pick a subject and go out into San Diego and find people and go through the process and do the beginning, the first phase of what an investigative theatre project would be—the first phase of one that involves interviews. There were four guidelines that Les gave us.

KOZINN: Are these guidelines that you teach your collaborators?

COSSON: Yes. When we did this Joint Stock class, we did the interviews with no notes and no tape recorder and no nothing. It was kind of like the way Truman Capote wrote *In Cold Blood*. He didn't want people to know an interview was taking place, so he would just talk to them and then run behind a tree and write down everything he could remember. This process is done with the same motivation. It's very terrifying when you do it the first time, especially when they talk for four hours. It feels more like a real conversation because you don't have [*makes a gesture of a tape recorder*]. Anyhow now we use recorders because we do so much in a concentrated amount of time.

KOZINN: Do you ever revert back to that method?

COSSON: Only if I'm teaching people how to listen and how to interview. Otherwise, if I'm doing a project that involves interviews, we record them. Doing the interview itself is a lot like learning how to be a good therapist, though with different objectives, obviously. I kind of describe it as learning how to be engaged and present and how to really listen and be there as a person. It's also important to allow yourself to be neutral so that you allow the person who is being interviewed to really feel like they're in charge. There are some little tricks, little sorts of things that you normally say to make someone feel comfortable, and, it's not that we want someone to be uncomfortable, but there are little tricks of things *not* to say in order to *not* normalize the situation.

KOZINN: Like what?

COSSON: One example that I often use is that if someone tells you that his or her parent died recently your natural impulse might be to say, "Oh, I'm so sorry. That's terrible for you. What a great loss." It might in fact be the right thing to say and you might know that you should say that in another circumstance, but in the interview it might limit the conversation. The person might just respond with, "Yes." In reality they might hate their mother, and might be glad that she's dead. If you can allow yourself to be empathetic and you listen, show that you care, and are not disconnected then maybe instead of, "I'm so sorry. What a tragedy," you find a way to ask a question. You ask a follow-up question so they talk more. In many ways you can get to the complexities by staying out of the interview. Mostly it's about shutting up and not saying too much and letting people just talk...like I'm doing.

KOZINN: I have to admit that it's a little intimidating interviewing someone who has devoted so much time and thought to the interview process.

COSSON: I think actors can be really good at it because they're good at being present and listening. You can feel when someone is listening to you, and that's what keeps you going.

For me, in a really good interview I come out realizing that the fundamental ways in which I unconsciously thought people worked are not steadfast because I just met someone who does not work that way. The world is a bigger more complicated place now. That's very liberating. There's more to discover. There's more to learn. When I go to the theatre and have that experience, I feel it's the greatest sensation—that sort of waking up to reality in a new way.

KOZINN: You use the term "waking up." Is this the kind of sensation you want to re-create with your work? Do you want to wake-up your audience?

COSSON: Totally.

KOZINN: Tell me again about the four rules?

COSSON: Now there are five. I added one. It's not really a rule: Avoid value statements. Ask a question instead. Avoid, "That's terrible" or "That's great." Let people talk about what they want to talk about and try to sense where they are most heated up about something. The rule

that balances this out is: Try to get them to talk about what's most interesting. You're still there thinking and sensing the places where there's tension or noticing where they've contradicted themselves or don't make sense. You balance this with the second rule, so as soon as you notice something like that you don't cut them off and say, "Wait, wait, wait. That doesn't make any sense. I thought your mother already moved out." Hold onto it. Let them talk about whatever they want to talk about. Then bring back what you care about. The other technique is being aware when people have finished their usual spiel about something, and then you get them to talk past that. Really get them to actually think and behave in the present.

KOZINN: Is that what you mean when you talked about finding the behavior? Is it only when the script ends that we can get a glimpse of who the person is behind their social mask?

COSSON: Yes. For a theatre project, you're trying to get a dynamic interaction even though the interviewer isn't doing or revealing very much. You're getting them to behave against you as this perfect listener, and for that you have to get them to the end of their script.

KOZINN: Behave against you?

COSSON: "Behave against you" in the way that when you're talking to your therapist you can go through all sorts of behaviors against their fairly neutral demeanor. It's like a scene partner. It's like Strindberg's *The Stronger*. It's like that. Mrs. X is behaving a lot against that woman, Mrs. Y, who is just sitting there saying nothing.

KOZINN: You react against your projection onto that person?

COSSON: Yes, and the fifth thing I encourage people to do is practice their "neutral empathetic," which is how to be a good listener. That's why actors can be particularly good at it. You can say so much with your body language and what's coming through your eyes. You can hear it if you are actually present in the moment and are not letting your mind wander. People try to process what's being said, try to figure out what they think about it, and try to think of what questions to ask about it. This pulls them away from the engagement.

KOZINN: As actors we're trained to read between the lines and the words. Even though we're listening to the words, we're listening to the breath—

COSSON: —and the body

KOZINN: —and the body. We're studying how someone is saying what he or she is saying as well as the content of the statements.

COSSON: Actors do receive more information. If we do a company-driven interview show, we'll combine interviewing with getting together and meeting. An actor might interview someone on Monday and then come into rehearsal on Tuesday, put her notes down, and re-create the interview. The actors perform them very quickly and inhabit them, and then speak to the rest of the group. In a sense the actor has to know who they think that person is and connect to that character and then we, the rest of the company, have the experience of the person through the actor. So it's already in its first step bridging the line between reality and fiction even though it's all their own words. For example, it's actress Emily Ackerman's understanding of the woman she just interviewed. I think it's a very freeing and exciting experience for actors because you haven't gone through any of the traditional processes of figuring out a character in order to build them. You actually sat in their living room and observed them. Then you perform them the next day. Sometimes when it really clicks, the people come in and will remember an hour and 20 minutes of an interview and do it off the cuff. In *This Beautiful City* there was this preacher at a Baptist church. One of the actors, Marsha Stephanie Blake, went and saw him and came into rehearsal and said, "I'm going to do his sermon." She did 40 minutes of the sermon, and it was a big Baptist sermon—a black Baptist sermon—all sorts of idiosyncratic jokes, details, and some shaking. He's a brilliant preacher. He's just totally in control and totally free.

She did this in rehearsal and as soon as she was done she just collapsed on the floor, and we all fell out our chairs.

KOZINN: But how does she do this again? What if you want to do this in the performance, but her performance in rehearsal was “off the cuff”?

COSSON: Then you go and you work on it and you reshape it and recut it. Then you have to learn it again through the traditional path, but you know what’s at the end. You lose it for a little while but you know it’s at the end. It’s not going to be exactly the same, but you have a real gut sense of what’s at the end of the road.

KOZINN: The process seems quite ephemeral. What do you do as a writer and director to ensure that the actress who improvised the sermon in rehearsal can return to this “end” place when the play is all put together?

COSSON: You go into your regular theatre work. It’s transcribed. She has the recording. Then my cowriter and I go off the transcript. Edit and edit. We try to get to the core of it so that it’s a 5-minute sermon instead of a 40-minute one.

KOZINN: I see, so it’s just a rehearsal exercise.

COSSON: Yes.

KOZINN: To better understand the character?

COSSON: It’s also to create the show. In that type of process I’m writing from performances I’ve already seen. It is not just the characters, but it’s also the story itself. The ideas, the conflicts, the potential structures are all being revealed through this rehearsal process of performance. It’s a great disruption of the traditional sequence of creating a show because you have some stuff there from day one, and you learn all sorts of things, especially if you’re going to stick with a particular cast. When something really connects well,

it’s because that actor can really do that person and understood them and can get them. That’s why the acting process, in a way, is backwards. You have to get how they tick and their insides from the interview so you can perform them. Then you have to figure them out. We also have a company that’s watching everything and talking about it. Me and the writer and the composer are there, and the actors are there and you have their responses to things, and then you start to perceive associations between things. But we work very differently depending on the project. I want to keep qualifying our process as specific to the project, because I feel like we’re largely known as an ensemble that does verbatim shows from reality with music. But that’s not the full picture. The *Great Immensity* was very different. For our upcoming “porn project,” there wasn’t a cast attached as we did the interviews. For other shows we commission writers. There’s one play that Anne Washburn wanted to write and to do, so she needed actors to stay in a room for



Figure 5. The Great Immensity (work-in-progress showing). From left: Emily Ackerman, Dan Domingues, Hannah Cabell, and Carolyn Edelstein. McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, NJ, 17 April 2010. (Photo by Denise Applewhite)

five days where they just tried to remember Simpsons episodes. That was the workshop. That's it. For something like *This Beautiful City*, which was probably the most ambitious interview show, or even *Gone Missing* or *Nobody's Lunch*, and like I said for *Canard*, these shows set us off on the right track. As a company we then had a belief that the play exists out there in the world. Not just the story, but also the structure exists. Somehow the conflicts and the representations of those conflicts are out there walking the streets somewhere. The deeper themes that are going to resonate through the structure are out there in a real building if you just walk into the right building and watch it happen. Of course, art comes from the fabric of life. The metaphors we work with are determining how we know and understand the world and create the world we live in. It's all...it is all connected. I'm back to my pithy Buddhist slogans. If you can be open to it, it will reveal itself to you.

KOZINN: And how does the music fit in with this agenda? How does it forward the artistic project, and how is it part of the process?

COSSON: That's something that's always different depending on the nature of the show and how it plays out. Ultimately, once the investigation phase has been completed and the material exists and the idea of what show we're going to make from the material exists, the process of collaboration is similar to the creation of any new work. It's idiosyncratic to the people who are involved, their relationship to each other, and how each of them work. So it's always a little bit different, but it's not that different from how I develop musicals with other people. To give you a range of things: With *Gone Missing* and *Nobody's Lunch*, and especially those two because there's no narrative, they were an exploration of an idea through using verbatim texts. They're all real words. For my part, I'm writing the book. The texts are very processed. It's not like there's a series of monologues. The texts have really been constructed into something, but the music naturally has a different function. Even if it's using someone's real words, it has a different kind of authorial voice because as a song it has more form. In the development of the show, sometimes the music and Michael's songwriting can really start pointing the way to what the show is really about. If a song comes to him, it can really push the show in a strong direction.

KOZINN: And what motivated you to use music?

COSSON: In hindsight there's probably some deep answers to that, but in the beginning it was really because I like music, I like very theatrical shows, and I like Michael. I had just done a couple of projects with him and knew he was definitely someone who needed to be in this group of people who were gathering together. I think the reason why I'm interested in including music in the first place, especially for shows that do engage with reality and larger social questions, which overlaps with what is being done in documentary theatre, is to use very different aesthetic strategies. The theatricality and the performativity of our shows put the emphasis on the performer and the creation and not just the reality of the show. It reminds the audience that this is a play. This is a work of culture and not an objective window into reality. It's subjective. That's a part of it. Often in documentary theatre, like in documentary film, there's a kind of weightiness to it because they are about important and difficult subjects. Maybe human suffering is involved. Documentary theatre takes that issue and makes it very personal, so the audience feels like they've now met these people, and in that way it becomes more real. For example, actors become real men who were prisoners at Guantánamo. You know they were real, and you know that out there was someone who said these real words. However, these actors are here in the room with you, so you believe it in two levels. You believe it in the theatrical experience of being in real time and space with this performer, and you believe it because he's representing somebody and you're hearing their voice and somewhere out there that subject exists. The Civilians' interests, our objectives, are different from those objectives. There is a lot of overlap. Our work is really more of a hybrid of fact and fiction. The facts are an impetus to make a different kind of fiction that wouldn't be possible if the artists didn't go out and deal with it in real life. It's not the fact in and of itself.

KOZINN: You have mentioned that the public knows you best for your ensemble-created shows from interviews, but that you are not limited to that. Who are you also?

COSSON: As an organization we're at a stage now where we're really trying to grow from being a project-to-project led company and really enhance our work and the scope of our organization to fulfill the mission in a broader way.

KOZINN: What is your mission?

COSSON: It is hard for me to give an off-the-cuff mission statement because we revise it. But to give you the nuts and bolts, it is to be able to support a kind of new theatre that requires collaboration, the involvement of other artists in its gestation and development, and involves interaction with the broader world. With that, even though this isn't explicitly in the mission statement, the "why" of why I do that is to be able to support theatre that can take on a different kind of subject matter and scope. The kinds of plays that I want to be able to support are the ones that couldn't be done by a single artist working on their own. The ideas of the new programs we want to do are to actually formalize our new play commissioning programs and identify a couple areas that we're really interested in. For instance, we are interested in developing plays that are more political and deal with social justice issues. Certainly the projects we did with Atlantic Yards and Colorado Springs would fall under this goal. It would take what we've learned from doing *The Great Immensity*, which was developed through interacting with scientists and looking at environmental issues, and make that into a program where we're able to not just commission work by me or people who are already associated with the company, but also would bring in more people and do play development in a new way. Instead of commissioning 10 new plays about science we're going to find projects that we're going to invest in deeper and over a longer term and really get them made. We will create an organization where an artist who has a vision for something, but might need to travel to Africa and spend a month to do the research, can be supported to do this. I think since we have a lot of expertise in how to do that kind of work. Now's the time.

With *You Better Sit Down*, we're trying out some ideas that we've wanted to do for quite some time—especially with a fairly universal subject like divorce. In many of our other shows, if we've done interviews and brought that into the play and then performed them, it elicits so many stories from the audience. With the possibilities of new media, the idea is to think of the show as more of an ongoing project instead of a single performance.

KOZINN: Where do you see the company in 10 years?

COSSON: My hope for the company is that we can really grow into more of an organization that is able to support a more significant creative output. One of the challenges that we've faced since the beginning is how we're understood. I don't know if this is justified or not but my wish for the company is that we're never referred to as a troupe *again*.

KOZINN: Why?

COSSON: It makes me think of Renaissance fairs and actors in the town square. The media tradition is perfectly respectable but it's not what we do. It links all of our identities together—the idea of "The Civilians" as a group of performers. And New York wants to have its downtown troupes. It's not unique to the Civilians that as a group we feel misunderstood and somewhat invisible, in that theatre in America is theatre institutions. You're either a small theatre or a big theatre. I was really struck by the review in the *Times* [by Charles Isherwood] of Sarah Ruhl's *Passion Play*, which the Epic Theatre Ensemble produced. Still, the criticism was, "Isn't it funny that a playwright of Sarah Ruhl's stature who has been produced in major institutions is being produced by a small Brooklyn ensemble?" That makes you think of a scrappy group of young people. We're often called a young company because we're a com-

pany and we're not of Anne Bogart's or the Wooster Group's generation. I'm not young. We're not young. I'm 15 years older than young. So, my hope is that 10 years from now, if we're still around, the company is still about being a very creative weed breaking up through the concrete, while at the same time we're understood to be a legitimate organization that is able to do something that's valuable to the field and to the culture as a whole. And ultimately I do think that companies like ours, whose organizational culture is all about innovation, flexibility, and breaking down the walls of the "theatre," has a very special role that is recognized and understood by the culture we work in.