

Social Work

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A moment from The Civilians' Paris Commune at the Public Theater Steve Cosson and The Civilians create non-traditional work that engages with community at every stage.

In asking Artistic Director Steven Cosson where the name of his theatre troupe, The Civilians, comes from, I expected a very civic-minded — or perhaps even military — answer. But no. “It’s from old vaudeville slang,” he admits, “referring to people outside of show business.” The moni-ker reveals much about his OBIE-winning nonprofit company; not only do The Civilians usually operate way outside of showbiz themselves, but, as Cosson adds, they always strive “to look out-side of ourselves” to the community at large.

All six Civilians productions so far (since their founding in 2001) flow from the company’s stated mission to “develop original projects based in the creative investigation of actual experi-ence.” Far from the “based on a true story” formula of film and television docudrama, though, Cosson and his colleagues view every piece as an opportunity to “experiment with process, con-tent and form” — often incorporating interviews with real people, extensive historical research, and always, live music and song. *The Ladies* (2004) juxtaposed the lives of infamous dictators’ wives (like Eva Peron and Imelda Marcos) with some of their own; for *(I Am) Nobody’s Lunch* (2004-2006), Civilians actors surveyed average citizens for their reflections and rants on current events and enacted them through songs and sketches; *Gone Missing* (2003-2007) also incorporated real-life interviews from a

diverse sampling, but on more personal themes of loss — from the spiritual (9/11 stories) to the hilariously material (shoes and sock puppets).

The Civilians Artistic Director Steven Cosson

Do the Research

Well aware of the apathy of his 30-something peers toward “legitimate” theatre, Cosson (who always directs and either writes or collaborates on the scripts) longs to capture the more spontaneous and visceral experience of a rock concert in his work. The pseudo-cabaret formats he has devised with longtime collaborator Michael Friedman, one of Off-Broadway’s most acclaimed young songwriters, “helped me to articulate to myself the kinds of theatrical experience that I really crave and look forward to,” he claims, “those kinds of shows that are very much alive and ‘in the room’ with the audience.” Such breaking of the fourth wall, he hopes, “really celebrates the aliveness of theatre” and maximizes its uniqueness over other media. (“Ask yourself: ‘how would this be different if I wasn’t here?’ If the answer is, ‘It wouldn’t be,’ then leave.”)

This relatively pop sensibility, at least for the theatre world, has indeed helped The Civilians connect with an audience distinctly younger than the typical American playgoer. At the same time, the sheer pleasures of their musical theatre stylings have also helped them cross over into the mainstream. *Gone Missing* — a show originally work-shopped in 2003 under the roughest of conditions — enjoyed a nationwide and international tour soon afterwards and, in 2007, played a six-month commercial Off-Broadway run at the Barrow Street Theatre. (A cast album has been released by Sh-K-Boom records and Dramatists Play Service now licenses the script for performance.)

A moment from the This Beautiful City workshop at Colorado College

This year, with two major premieres back to back, this always active ensemble has been busier than ever. *This Beautiful City* (which premiered at this spring's Actors Theatre of Louisville Humana Festival) is a panoramic documentary piece about both political and personal life in the evangelical community of Colorado Springs, Colo. The play came out of an intense "field work" process where actors lived in the town for several weeks, observing and recording the diverse views and experiences of residents regarding the role of organized religion in their lives. After favorable reception in Louisville and at Washington D.C.'s Studio Theatre this summer, the Ci-vilians will take *This Beautiful City* to Los Angeles' Center Theatre Group in September and to New York's Vineyard Theatre early next year.

Their second 2008 premiere, *Paris Commune* — which played at New York's Public Theater just one month after the Humana Festival — recounts the 1871 uprising in the form of a Brechtian musical revue, using songs from the period. Given the historical setting and the fact that "the people involved are all dead," Cosson's process followed a more traditional "page-to-stage" model, working intensely with Friedman over five years, researching the period and translating the songs' lyrics into a raw modern vernacular that spoke to present concerns.

The contrasts between these two projects indicate The Civilians' wide range of both subjects and working methods. (Currently in development are a documentary piece about gentrification in Brooklyn and a collaboration with playwright Neal Bell based on the ancient Babylonian Gilgamesh epic.) But whatever the topic or process, political and social issues are always a given. "Theatre is inherently social," says Cosson. "It takes place at a particular place and time in some kind of room with the people who are actually there."

Ian Brenna (foreground) and the rest of the cats of *This Beautiful City* at Actors' Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival.

This zeal to connect with whatever is most pressing, even controversial, comes in part from his formative experience studying with British director Les Waters in the MFA program at the UC San Diego. A veteran of the London theatre collective Joint Stock, Waters instilled a passion for the kind of activist collaborative research and development that led to such milestone plays as Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*. "The thing that was most inspiring about Joint Stock," Cosson reflects, "was that their process and their methodology came from the fact that they were a socially engaged theatre company. The artists were looking outward at social questions and devised their way of working to facilitate that kind of engagement."

Keeping Focus

While they have achieved considerable success for a small company with no permanent space and little resources, getting such ambitious and unconventional projects off the ground never ceases to be a challenge. Because they are, as Cosson insists, "a creative company, not a producing company," they depend on partnerships with other organizations for public exposure — whether larger institutions like the Public (who presented *Paris Commune* as part of an experimental "Public LAB" series in association with LAByrinth Theatre Company) or the occasional interest from commercial producers. *This Beautiful City*, for instance, was made possible by Colorado College, who provided a residency for Civilians artists to serve as faculty and involve students in the developmental process. The obstacles The Civilians face, Cosson claims, stem not just from potentially challenging content, but also from their insistence on not adhering to familiar theatrical genres at a time when arts institutions and grant opportunities still favor the traditional models of production (a single author writing a self-sufficient dramatic text) as opposed to more collaborative processes.

“The idea that new work can be created by a company is exciting to a lot of artists and audiences, but there are very few theatre funders who identify that as a priority,” Cosson laments. As daunting as the challenges may be, The Civilians, now in their eighth year, has demonstrated impressive longevity in an environment increasingly inhospitable to small nonprofits. The secret to their success might very well be their refusal to be pigeonholed, defying expectations with every new production. “We’ve managed to survive by being flexible and reinventing ourselves as we go,” Cosson believes. “The way the cultural and economic landscape is now, you have to be able to reinvent yourself pretty quickly.”

By such masterful quick-changes and variety acts, as well as an unsinkable determination to always go on with the show, The Civilians have proven themselves quite able vaudevillians after all.