



**Keeping Company with Bill Rauch:  
2011 MATC Keynote Interview, Minneapolis, MN**

**Sonja Kuftinec:** Welcome to “Keeping Company with Bill Rauch.” (Laughter) I’m Sonja Kuftinec and most of you may know that I’m the theatre history respondent here at MATC, but you may or may not know how long I’ve been keeping company with Bill Rauch, which is since 1994, right? It’s hard to believe since I’m only thirty! (Laughter) I want to begin by—as Henry Louis Gates would put it—signifying on the idea of keeping company. For me, it’s about both being in relationship with you—of keeping company with you—and also how I understand you as “keeping” or holding company. Which is paradoxical. Right? You as an individual are often seen as the center of company even when it’s an ensemble. I feel like part of our relationship has been about me negotiating the “keeping company relationship” part, and the “questioning what it means for Bill to be center of company” part. For me to be “keeping company” with Bill is to be both totally in love with him and within that love to be asking a lot of hard questions along the way about some of the assumptions that underlie things he says or what the companies he has worked with have proposed. I’ve written a book—a dissertation and book, which were related—about Cornerstone called *Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-*

*based Theater*<sup>1</sup>—and the project I’m working on now is also looking at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. So Bill has kept company with my research and my research has kept company with Bill for many, many years. I am, as Bill puts it, constantly asking questions, and I think most of the time that can be generative. And I imagine some of the time it’s irritating, so I wanted to invite you to introduce how you understand our relationship after I’ve characterized it.

**Bill Rauch:** All right. Yeah. Seventeen years of: I think differently about the work that I do all the time because of questions that you ask me and because of the way you complicate things, and I know that language that I use today in my remarks—in ways that I couldn’t even begin to pick apart—have their genesis in conversations that I had with Sonia. So it is actually a very profound relationship in my life because you care about the work and you care about it enough to challenge and complicate and so that has changed the way I think and the way I speak. I feel very lucky to be in collegueship with colleagues who care enough to ask a lot of questions.

**SK:** I feel like I just want to stop right now and hug you. (Laughter) This is what it’s like to be in company with Bill! So what we’re going to do is index the ways that Bill has been in company at Cornerstone and head of company at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and I’m going to ask him some questions about things that he said in the keynote—things that I’ve asked him before—but I’m also going to try to model what to me is a form of what David Román calls *critical generosity*: it’s about being in relationship with the mission and goals of a company and companies and a person whose values I deeply believe in. So the reasons I ask those questions

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<sup>1</sup> Southern Illinois University Press: 13 May 2003.

is because I believe in those values so deeply that I want the work to be living up to its own professed examples, and at the same time to sometimes point out the contradictions that are deeply rooted in any understanding of doing community-engaged work. One of the first conversations that Bill and I had—one of the most critical conversations we had—was questioning the very idea of community as a kind of warm, fuzzy site of inclusivity, because community by definition must be exclusive. Otherwise it's not community. It's about looking in, but also recognizing that in the process of looking in and building internal relationships you're creating a boundary that you might not even know exists because you're so within that space of community. So how can you pay attention within that structure, and within that idea of creating community, to the ways in which there might be borders that are being constituted at the same time? And one of the questions I wanted to open up with is about Cornerstone as an ensemble. Bill has talked about some of the hard work of consensus-building, but in my conversations with other company members who were part of the early Cornerstone days, one of the terms that came up with them was the invisible hierarchy within the organization: the sense that for some people in the company, there were the people at the center, but because it was consensus run, those structures were never named and the people at the center didn't know that that invisible hierarchy existed. Because when you're at the center, you don't always know the kinds of disenfranchisement people may feel at the margins. So I want to open that up to you, about thinking through some of those complexities of the early Cornerstone days and negotiating that kind of complex understanding of community.

**BR:** I think there are a lot of layers of invisible hierarchy when you look at Cornerstone’s early days. Alison Carey<sup>2</sup> and I are the cofounders of the company, as I’ve said a couple times—and so it was interesting: we worked by consensus, but there was a modified... there was a loophole, which was if the ensemble couldn’t reach consensus, the majority of the ensemble could vote to turn over decision-making power to the two cofounders. That only happened twice in the company’s history, both in the same year. One of them was about the very particular thing about whether or not to rehire an employee who had punched another employee in the mouth. And the other one was what city we were going to move to as an ongoing home. So, different scales of how those decisions would affect people’s lives. In both cases, Alison and I were at opposite sides of the issue and found the compromise that we could both live with. But it was very real. I think you helped make us more aware of it sometimes with some of your work, but I think there were, as I said, layers. There were Alison and me as cofounders, there were those of us who had gone to school together and had long-term friendships, and then there were people who joined the company and weren’t part of that original number from college. Certainly, when the company started we were a group of all white people—the original founding members—and when we moved to Los Angeles, the company began to rebuild itself to be truly multiethnic and multiracial. That had its own dynamics, of course, in terms of length of service. You know, I will say that I think we’ve always been pretty good about naming those things, and that when they’re not visible but somebody brings them to light, to not say, “Oh, we gotta hide that,” or, “Oh, that’s not true.” But to be

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<sup>2</sup> Alison Carey is co-founder and resident playwright of Cornerstone Theater Company.

like, “That’s absolutely something that exists. How can we name it and address it and not try to just sweep it under the rug to make it go away?”

**SK:** You talked in the keynote address<sup>3</sup> about how sometimes you’re not necessarily aware of that until the moment of verging on crisis. I remember the first time I was lucky enough to be a participant-observer/dramaturg/flute player for Cornerstone in the fall of 1994 in Watts. You invited me—and the company invited me—to all of your ensemble meetings, which was really a risky thing to do, I think, to invite a scholar into those meetings.

**BR:** Who was writing her dissertation about you!

**SK:** Yes! And the only thing you asked was to be able to invite me to leave if you felt like it wouldn’t be appropriate, and that never happened. I was never asked to leave the room, even when things were hot and bothered.

**BR:** Even when we should have!

**SK:** But the very first meeting I was at, the company started with a check-in, which I know is something that Page [Leong] and Shishir [Kurup]<sup>4</sup> introduced. They were new company members. And the way Cornerstone started meetings was to invite everyone to situate where

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<sup>3</sup> From the 2011 Mid-American Theatre Conference held in Minneapolis, MN.

<sup>4</sup> Page Leong is a film, TV, and stage actor who joined Cornerstone in 1994. She has collaborated on many projects with actor/writer/director/composer Shishir Kurup, a fellow Cornerstone member.

we were emotionally, and then check in, and after the meeting check out. It is part of what it means to be working functionally as an ensemble: to negotiate all of the energy that we bring into the room, and to name when that energy is discordant. And the very first meeting it was like “Welcome to Cornerstone!” And I remember Shishir, in his check-in, looking straight across the room at one of the ensemble members and actually just saying, “We never really negotiated tensions that we had around *Ghurba*.<sup>5</sup> We need to find the time to do that.” He was naming something that had been unnamed, that had been an energy that had been at the heart of something. And I thought, “Wow, I wish my faculty could operate this way.” (Laughter)

Departmental meetings might be intense at first, but also potentially we could get different kinds of things done if we were able to name face to face, rather than in the hallways behind people’s backs, some of the things that were structuring our incapacity to negotiate our understandings and our values together. So that just felt really important to me, to be able to see these values at work. But another thing that we had talked about before, and I sent Bill this morning some word tracking comments on his draft of his talk, and he gave the talk and none of my comments were being used. I thought, “Did he just hate everything I said?” It turned out he couldn’t read the word tracking.

**BR:** I opened it and I was like, “It’s so great that Sonja read my remarks in advance and... oh, she didn’t have anything to say!” (Laughter) I should have known right then and there! (Laughter)

**SK:** There were many questions I posed of the keynote talk and now I get a chance to ask them.

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<sup>5</sup> Cornerstone’s citywide collaboration with Arab Americans that Shishir wrote and directed.

**BR:** I've still not read them, so... (Laughter)

**SK:** I'll show you how. (Laughter) Historiography is in part about paying attention to the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and the way those stories sometimes are predisposed turns toward certain narrative drives. The work of critical historiography pays attention to the stories that don't get told or the stories that get told and part of the story doesn't get told. And I've heard the Edret Brinston story a couple of times in Cornerstone history.<sup>6</sup> As I was doing some more archival work, there was a follow-up of the story of Edret, who passed his literacy exam after he was functionally literate, doing Cornerstone and rapping Shakespeare, all of which I think is an amazing and great story to tell. But there is another part of that story, which is that Edret was incarcerated after the show and has had a lot of trouble. I think that's not to say that Cornerstone failed Edret, or Cornerstone failed by not telling that story, but to recognize that if efficacy is measured only in terms of individual achievements then it doesn't get at some of the structural conditions that have created those divides in Port Gibson. Those conditions are situated in our country's inability to really negotiate the central contradiction of being founded on the basis of equality and being economically grounded in an institution of slavery. And that's also all part of Edret's story. I'm just curious about how you negotiate how to tell the story of Cornerstone in all of its complexity.

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<sup>6</sup> Cornerstone had cast Edret as Romeo in a cross-racial *Romeo and Juliet* staged in Port Gibson, Mississippi in 1989.

**BR:** Well, it is a selective process now, isn't it then? There are talks that I've given in my life where I talked about Edret in more complexity and the fact that he passed his literacy test—it was amazing—and then we hired him to be part of a national tour that we did: *The Winter's Tale*.<sup>7</sup> The story was: "It was because of the play, we all met, we learned to trust each other through the play" in Port Gibson, the Main Street USA town. But we had to get him out of jail to be able to join the company. And there were all sorts of conditions in terms of his probation and getting him out early and what we had to do in collaboration with the legal system to allow him to be with us that year. And I don't feel the need to hide that. I think sometimes, in terms of what I choose to tell, in many ways I hit you with a lot of anecdotes and a lot of stories and a lot of those kind of "greatest hits" to make a larger point. But I think the point is well taken and, you know, the thing that scares me is: what are the stories I no longer remember? The shadow versions of, or when you talked about the invisible hierarchies. It's important, I think, to celebrate the power of the work, but I'm incredibly aware that there is, in all of our creative endeavors, the potential for destruction as well as the potential for good. One of the things that became a very big drawn line in Cornerstone's life was when we moved to LA. We were still an all-white company, and some of us—myself included—went on to become convinced not that it was true, but that it was possible—that it was possibly true, at least—that as an all white company working in (often) communities of color, that it was possible that we were doing more damage than good. That it was possible that we were walking into a room and a child of color was looking at the fact that all the people working for that company were white and that that became the straw that broke the camel's back in terms of that kid's self-confidence. And that

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<sup>7</sup> 1991.



was a big moment for me and some of my colleagues. And there were other colleagues who still—to this day, years and years later—get very emotional when that comes up because they feel like that framing is disowning our history or somehow apologizing for the work that we did. And it's very emotional. I can't even remember where this all started now. I think it's fair to say: you tell this and not that. And if I keep going I'm going to sound defensive and I don't want to, so I'm going to stop there.

**SK:** Well, maybe a way to reframe what you just said—and I don't think you're saying it about yourself—is I think we get caught up in understanding things in personal ways, rather than historical ways, and in understanding ourselves as we are both unique individuals in the world and constructed of a set of materials and social conditions. And that's important to own up to. And a group of people who start a company at Harvard is going to be standing on top of a whole set of conditions that were established before they entered into that space. So it's really a question about recognition, not feeling the need to wear a button that says, "I'm guilty; I'm white." That's not the point. But the point is to recognize the way in which even whiteness gets constituted, as race has to do with setting up a differential. And that leads me to a question that we were already talking about that I wanted to open up more publicly. In the keynote, when you talk about how it's hard to be black in this field, it's hard to be white, it's hard to be all of these different things. There's privilege and challenge associated with everyone's race and ethnicity that cuts in every possible direction. And my comment was that I'm cautious about reducing all difference to the same plane. The privileges associated with whiteness and the challenges associated with race, ethnicity, and class are quite distinct, historically produced,

and culturally instilled by representational practices like theatre and film. Very little did as much damage to what it means to be black in America—as an understanding, as a representation—as minstrel shows and melodramas, where the creation of fantasy images of the black male as either a “shuck-n-jive Tom” or a violent potential rapist of white women prevented the rest of the US from engaging a central contradiction—that I mentioned before—of a country grounded in ethnic inequality and the economic realities of slavery. So I understood everything that you were saying in that sometimes it’s hard to be this, and sometimes it’s hard to be that; but to reduce the difference to this kind of plane where we all have to negotiate all sorts of challenges is complicated by all of those different kinds of historical realities. And I know that’s something you know, too, so I’m just wondering how you negotiated it in the company and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

**BR:** Well, I think that—and I’m glad you’re naming it—one my challenges, coming into a largely white company in Oregon—there is definitely a fair amount of racial and ethnic diversity, but it’s a white majority company—not the acting company, but the rest of the company—I think that I made a lot of mistakes early on because I talked so much about change as a purely positive force and how we can improve ourselves. And I was not remotely plugged into the fear that a lot of my white colleagues had about “there’s a new artistic director who doesn’t like us because we’re white and doesn’t want us to work here because we’re white and doesn’t value us because we’re white or doesn’t value us because we’ve been here for thirty years and he only wants the new sexy people that he wants to bring in who aren’t me.” And there was a lot of pain about that. And I would never—certainly, I wouldn’t intentionally—try to say all social

injustice is equal and all pain is equal. I talk about the way privilege forms in terms of what I think is a neutral fact, which is that it is that historically and in the current environment we have an unlevelled playing field. But I do think both things are true, right? That everything you're saying is true, and it's true that it absolutely sucks to be reduced to an element of your identity. And whether it's your ethnicity or your sexuality or your gender or your age, when somebody just looks at you and says, "I know just who you are. I know just who you are, white person. I know just who you are, gay person. I know just who you are, fifty-three year old woman." It's so unjust, and we do it all the time to each other, all the time. And so that's what I'm trying to get at. But I think you've complicated it, as always. Yeah, I think both things are true.

**SK:** I don't know if you want to say anything about how some of that material that you shared with us actually came from a company speech.

**BR:** Yeah, it was adapted.

**SK:** And what happened?

**BR:** I think in my first four years in this job, I just keep learning—as I referenced earlier—I think I've made a lot of mistakes and had a lot of breakthroughs about how to create a tone that is truly inclusive in terms of everybody who has been at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival for many years and people who are new. And there's just a lot of different fears that are associated

with different parts of people's identity. And it's something that we really wrestle with. And I think we're—I was saying to Sonja last night—we had dinner together—I've been very happy lately because I feel like there's been a real sea change in the company morale in the last year. I think that that's people being courageous and speaking up and I think it's me and others actually listening to things that have been said. If you read the company call speeches that I give—I give three a year—you can kind of track what the journey has been, in terms of learning how to really speak to everybody in a way that is more responsive and more responsible.

**SK:** We've also talked about some of the really interesting things that it sounds like open up spaces for conversations at OSF.<sup>8</sup> And I don't know how many of you are familiar with some of the productions, but there are some really deeply intense and interesting productions. I often leave an OSF production feeling like, "Oh, my God, I need to sit with someone in a room now for an hour and talk about all of these things," because this theatre actually had an impact on me, because I wasn't watching it at a detached distance in order to assess it, but I was really drawn in to a lot of problems. And I remember feeling, after seeing *Ruined*,<sup>9</sup> deeply troubled—not by the play—provoked by the play, but troubled by the fact that I was seeing it with a 95% white audience. And it was a school show, which may say something about the demographics of Oregon and who goes to the company. But there were all these young high school girls who were kind of weeping in their seats and I didn't know what that was about—I didn't know what it was about that they were having this cathartic moment in relationship to this event. I didn't

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<sup>8</sup> Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

<sup>9</sup> Play by Lynn Nottage, produced at OSF in 2010.

know if they were able to actually engage in the fact that they too are implicated in the story, that what is happening in those civil wars in that play is as much produced by our necessity to have cell phones made of the material that is mined out of that land as it is by intertribal warfare—whatever narrative gets placed onto the stories. All that is in preface to say that I know that one thing you've done is create spaces for the actors who are in those productions to be able to name and negotiate their own feelings about what it means to do this work, and not to assume that as an actor you're just going to kind of take care of yourself. But it raises—in the actors doing this work—a lot of stuff. And to create spaces where they can negotiate that with each other, and to name their discomfort with what they're doing or what they're seeing, I think is an incredibly valuable space that you're creating that I wish I had more of as an audience member.

**BR:** There are so many things I want to say in response to that. First of all, specifically on *Ruined*, there was an actor in the cast—a young African American man—whose blocking was to kind of grind up against another female cast member in the brothel in the play, and was up against an audience railing. And this woman in the audience took her purse and began to beat him. And it was unlike anything I've ever... you know... it's like, where do you begin? I'm just putting that out there. That play and that production I think did engender some really—

**SK:** Could you tell us what that show is about?

**BR:** *Ruined* is Lynn Nottage’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play that deals with rape in war-torn Congo. It’s a very contemporary play. All of the characters are African, except for Mr. Hatari, who is an Arab dealer in precious gems. About the audience—I was on the board of TCG<sup>10</sup> some years back, after Cornerstone had gone through a lot of really painful, really productive transformation. And I remember one of my fellow board members saying, “Come on, come on, name one theatre in the United States that’s truly multiracial. Just one theatre.” And everybody was like blank looks: blank, blank, blank. Somebody said, “Well, Cornerstone. Cornerstone’s the only one.” Now, whether or not that was true at that time, the fact that a bunch of people sitting around a table—and I started to tear up because I thought the fact that we’d gone from being a group of friends from college who were all white to, at this leadership circle of TCG board members, Cornerstone being cited. So that was deep. I said to the board of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival when I was hired, “If I can’t contribute to the true diversification of this audience in X years—I’ll leave out what the X was—I hope you will fire me and hire somebody who can do a better job.” Can a large-scale regional theatre end up with a truly diverse audience? We go to race and ethnicity a lot—it’s very visible, and it’s big, it’s really big—but it’s certainly thinking about socioeconomics. You know, how are we paying for that \$29.1 million budget? You know, it’s expensive to see shows at OSF. But we also have a lot of ways that it can be less expensive. But the point is: I think about who’s in the audience constantly, and I individually talk to audience members and every one of them has a story about why they’re connected to the work that moves me so deeply and makes me so excited. And then there are times that I walk into a show and I feel like my lungs are collapsing a little bit by the lack of

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<sup>10</sup> Theatre Communications Group.

diversity, whether it's a particularly old audience or a particularly white audience, and I actually have trouble breathing from it. And I say this again: every individual was there for the right reasons, but I think it's huge. I want to problematize your comment about the student audience: interestingly, the demographic records of our audience were kept for, like, thirty years by who the ticket buyers are—who bought the tickets—and it didn't include students. And, in fact, one of six public school kids in the State of Oregon is Latino, and we have way more kids come from California than from the State of Oregon, so there is huge diversity in those young people—maybe not the particular show you saw, but yes. And there is a lot of invisible diversity, even racial and ethnic diversity that's invisible in our audience. So I realized I'm also putting my stuff on like, "Oh, I'm feeling suffocated," but screw you, Bill! You don't know who each of these people are and what their life journey is and what they're carrying! But it is something I talk with the acting company a lot about, actors of color talk about. You know, you get up there and you're pouring your heart out and you don't see yourself represented in a significant way in that audience and how painful that is. So it's big. It's very, very big. And it's very emotional. And I've got lots of feel-good stories about progress that we're making and they are good stories, but I just want to honor the challenge and why has our field created a largely white audience? Why has our field created a largely upper-middle-class audience? And why do older people with discretionary income go to the theatre more than other people? And there are lots of ways to answer these questions. But what can we do about that? Because, for me, it is kind of life or death. It really is if we're busy trying to tell stories that reflect the diversity of our nation and the people coming to experience those stories don't reflect that

diversity, there's something wrong about what's happening in the room, I think. And I think the stakes are very, very high.

**SK:** Maybe you can speak here about the audience development manifesto.

**BR:** Sure. Our audience development manager—Freda Casillas, very brave—came into my office and said, “Here’s the deal, Bill. You talk a lot about audience diversity, but you and Paul Nicholson”—our [former] executive director—“are not on the same page. You guys are not on the same page and the lower down in the organization you are, the more we can smell it. And you guys have got to get your act together. You’ve got to be on the same page.” Pretty brave, you know? Pretty extraordinary. So we’re like, “Okay, so let’s have a meeting to try to get on the same page.” Cut to a year later. We had a year’s worth of meetings. It was the director of marketing and communications, our associate artistic director, myself, Paul—our executive director, and Freda—this woman, head of audience development—and the five of us, we met two to three hours at a time, frequently over a year. And we started by listing all the myths that we think were held about audience diversity at Oregon Shakespeare Festival. So I’m trying to remember some: “The new artistic director doesn’t value white audience members;” “Latinos only come as families;” “Black people only want to see August Wilson plays and their own stories and they won’t come to anything else.” Just anything that we had either heard or said or thought, but we tried to keep it safe as what we had heard. And we made a long list, and then we unpacked those at these meetings. And where we landed on the other side was a document called “The Audience Development Manifesto”—to the horror of a few members of our board,



calling it “manifesto.” But it’s just a statement about what we’re trying to do, in terms of having our audience better reflect the United States in the twenty-first century, and how to be ahead of the demographic curve, not behind the demographic curve. And it was a very profound year of meetings. And obviously I really believe in the document that resulted. And we’ve involved our board in the document now and we have the document read by random company members at company call. It’s been very interesting; I’ll be about to announce a season and somebody will say, “If you pick this play over this play, you are in violation of the Audience Development Manifesto that you helped write.” You know, it’s a document that’s used to help hold my feet to the fire, which I love. Even when I hate it, I love it. So, yeah, it was big. It’s a very healthy thing.

**SK:** What does your audience think of it?

**BR:** That’s a great question. And, you know, this year one of my New Year’s Resolutions is to actually talk. I think I’ve had that, “Oh, if I’m in a room with fifty donors and forty-nine of them are white, if I talk about audience diversity is that somehow an attack?” And I realized that’s ridiculous. Audience members have had the same experience as Sonja. They’ve sat and watched *Ruined* and recognized that most of the people in this room are white, and it has impacted the way they’ve watched that story. So this is: “What am I—who am I—protecting?” I’m protecting myself and my own damn cowardice that I’m afraid to speak up. So my New Year’s Resolution—and this will start beginning as I start addressing big groups of donors and audience members—is to talk about our quest to more proactively diversify our audience with

the people who most love this organization. Alongside those of us who do the work in the organization are these audience members—people who’ve come for thirty, forty, fifty years—who love it so deeply. And they talk about how much they love being in an audience with a large school group and the energy of that and the exchange of that. And when we had a really strong group of Latino audience members for the opening night of *Measure for Measure*,<sup>11</sup> and *los gritos*<sup>12</sup>—you know, greeting the mariachi singing—you know, it’s different. It’s different depending on who’s in the room. It’s different. And, you know, there’s not a good audience and a bad audience. But there is “let’s mix it up,” and then, yeah, that was very interesting to watch the play with that audience. And you see the play in a whole new way. I’m trying to own my own fear in involving the audience in this discussion—the core audience. But, yes, anybody who wants a copy of it, we’re not hiding it. So if anybody wants a copy, we can certainly share it.

**SK:** I’m going to ask just a couple more questions of Bill and then we’ll open it out. But I did want you to talk—and it relates to this idea of the audience, because it’s one of the things that I love about OSF, and I know that it’s a tradition that precedes you—is the Boarshead, the season selection committee. This is one of the spaces that I referred to in my head as an island of restructuring the organizational infrastructure of the institution of OSF, creating spaces where people from different departments can work together on something. I wanted you to talk a little bit about that and about the different kinds of islands that you and the institutions are trying to create in order to de-structure those spaces of separation.

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<sup>11</sup> Produced at OSF in 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Men who yell loudly in Mariachi music; shouts of enthusiasm from Latino audience members.

**BR:** Yes. That's great. Boarshead is the tavern—of course, in *Henry IV*—so it's a Shakespeare reference. There's a lot of naming things for Shakespeare for a Shakespeare festival. (Laughter) Mostly in ways I love; sometimes in ways that... Boarshead is, again, gathering a large group of stakeholders to read and talk about and debate all the plays that the artistic director is considering. And the one change that I made was that everyone who had been there was there by virtue of their job title. So the head of the props department is there, or the director of marketing and communications, or the head of the scene shop. And so we tried to democratize it more so that there are a certain number of seats that are at-large for anybody who works at OSF. We even experimented by adding a couple of audience members, which was very interesting. So it's a huge group; it's up to fifty people. And it's a ton of reading because they have to read all the plays that are really in close consideration. And it meets once a month for five to six months, so it's a long process. And it is wonderful. I love your description of it being an island. And we talked about invisible hierarchies. Everyone in the room knows I'm going to decide what I want to decide, that it's my privilege and my burden that I get to pick what the plays are going to be, and it's on my back in terms of how well those plays do and yadda, yadda, yadda. But people are very fearless. There was a very, very vocal carpenter in this last Boarshead process who just had very strong opinions about the plays. She was brilliant. And I didn't know what a good dramaturgical mind she had. I knew I really liked her and she was a really good carpenter. I had no idea just how smart she was about plays until she started reading and weighing in about these plays. And we do keep trying to look for those. The first company call when I was artistic director, we did a buddy system where everybody was just

randomly assigned a buddy in the company and you had to spend a couple hours with your buddy, you know? In a corporate world, five hundred fifty is quite small, but in the theatre world, that's a lot of people: five hundred and fifty people working for one organization. And, as the company has grown in scale, the relationships can be more fractured, where you just don't know other people in the organization and people who work in other parts of it. I can rattle off more, but we're constantly looking for ways to create the islands that you referred to. That's beautiful. No doubt the next time I speak publicly I will refer to the islands of working together. That's great.

**SK:** Archipelagos.

**BR:** Yes. (Laughter)

**SK:** One of my favorite stories about that is the band that formed out of that one guy in the prop shop and one of the actors.

**BR:** I talked about the Green Show<sup>13</sup> in my remarks: we encourage company members to apply to perform on the green show stage too. And an actor had a brilliant idea: he knew that there were all these really good guitarists that worked in different parts of the company, so they formed One Night Band. And it was guitarists from the lighting department, the stage ops crew,

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<sup>13</sup> The Green Show is a curated space of free outdoor performances coinciding with outdoor Elizabethan Stage programming at OSF.

the scene shop, actors, somebody who worked in the development office, all of these guitarists. And they just got together and jammed and it became a Green Show. So now One Night Band is an ongoing band. They come back and perform a couple times a year. Yeah, and it's just beautiful, right? Because this relationship is getting formed or reinforced that wouldn't exist otherwise. So, yeah, I think it's really important to look for those.

**SK:** Well, the last question I'll ask you before we open it up is about the U.S. History cycle. And I wonder if you could talk about the relationship that Alison formed with a self-defined conservative woman who wanted to know where the space was in the cycle for a conservative voice.

**BR:** Yes. Maggie Gallagher. She is—on a very personal front—very challenging for me because she is the head of the anti-gay marriage movement. She has been a major engine in that movement in this country. There was a New York Times article about “Where are the conservative playwrights? And why are all playwrights liberal?”<sup>14</sup> that probably many of you read, and Alison was quoted in that article, saying, “In the breadth of doing thirty-seven plays that look at U.S. history, we would love a conservative playwright's voice to be a part of that mix, or more than one.” And Maggie Gallagher called Alison and said, “Okay, this is who I am. And I want to help you try to find these conservative writers.” Sonja talks about “fuzzy, fuzzy, warm, warm, warm, inclusion, community, community,” but then there's that your fuzzy, warm, inclusive community is built on who's excluded. And so we're in it. There's no nice, neat

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<sup>14</sup> “Liberal Views Dominate Footlights,” Patricia Cohen, 2008.

red bow to put on the story. We've commissioned fourteen of the thirty-seven writers—none of them is a self-described conservative. Alison is beginning a tour of college and university campuses that have a preponderance of conservative students because she's not done with this work. She feels like there's more work to be done here. And it is, for me, it's that I want to produce good plays, and when one of those good plays... if one of those good plays... I don't know. I get letters from audience members... This is a deep topic. Can you tell? For me? Last year we did the first show in American Revolutions, which was created by the group Culture Clash, starting off with a good celebratory comedy *American Night*. It's a colon title: *The Ballad of Juan José*.<sup>15</sup> Culture Clash, for those of you familiar with their work, their point of view about immigration issues is very transparent. And they wear their politics very much on their sleeves. And this piece did. But the thing that I love was that many, many members of our audience who are Republicans—a woman who was the housing secretary for Schwarzenegger in California—you know, real hardcore Republicans—say, "I was so moved by that show. I could tell the politics of the show were very clear, but it was a show that really, really celebrated what it is to be an American. You know, it was a truly American show." And that really moved me. So, I don't know. Obviously I'm impressed. I'm wrestling with all of this. It's like, "Do we need to hire a conservative playwright because we told Maggie Gallagher we would try? Do I want to present work whose world view is in contradiction to my own?" No. But are there choices that are made by playwrights and directors and designers where I would make different choices if I were directing or if I were the playwright? All the time. All the time. It's part of what I like about being an artistic director—that the canvas of the work is much wider than my own. And the

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<sup>15</sup> *American Night: The Ballad of Juan José* by Richard Montoya, 2010.

power I have ultimately is to not hire the person back. I can't go in there as an artistic director and say, "You change this. If you don't change this, I'm going to make you." I can't do that. That's not the kind of artistic director I am. It's like, "I'll tell you what I feel. I'll tell you my opinion, and if you don't agree, then you're the artist I hired. It's going to be your work on that stage." I've got to defend it as artistic director. So I'm sorry I'm rambling, but it's interesting—you can see I'm in it, right? (Laughter)

**SK:** I wanted to open it up to see if other people here might have some other questions to pose either of Bill or of me as to problematize anything I've said.

**Audience Member:** So you would say that one of the things you want to do is produce good plays. What to you is a good play? How do you make that choice? How do you define a good play?

**BR:** You know what's very interesting is that at OSF I've learned that because we have such long runs—things open in February and then they close in November!—it's crazy!—I've learned that how I feel about a show the first time I see it in the rehearsal hall—it's going to be different than how I feel about it opening night. And then how I feel about it opening night is going to be different after I've read all the reviews, after I've talked to hundreds of people about it, after I go back and see it three more times. So I've learned that my opinions of the work we do are not static. And things that were deemed failures become some of the most important work we've done. Or shows that everybody loved I've grown to resent more and more and more. (Laughter)

Right? It's a gift of the long run that my feelings about the work morph. But for me—to try to answer your question—I love work that is theatrical. I love work that surprises me. I love work that creates discomfort. I like work that is really joyous and really celebratory. Those are some things I like. And I could go on with that list.

**AM:** In your keynote speech, you talked about the perseverance needed to deeply engage with a space during your early Cornerstone years when you're coming in as outsiders to a community. What are some specific ways or strategies you had to create that space of trust—where challenges still exist—to form those collaborative relationships? How do you create a true tone of inclusivity?

**BR:** That's a great question and, honestly, I think perseverance is the key. I get so darn many stories from Cornerstone. We had lots and lots of people in the show in Eastport, Maine, but we didn't have any senior citizens, in particular an older woman. We had an older man, but we didn't have an older woman. And we felt like we weren't telling the story of this community. And I just became a crazy person about how there's got to be an older woman in this community who's willing to be in our play—there has to be! And I just kept talking to older women everywhere I went, trying to get my colleagues to do it, too. (Laughter) And finally I was standing in line at the bank to cash my 187-dollar paycheck—I remember the amount the paycheck was that week—and there was an older woman standing in line behind me. And I talked to her. And this woman Jerry ended up being in our show. I just wouldn't give up on it. And then of course there were things I wouldn't give up on that didn't work out. They don't



always have a happy ending. When we were still an all-white company, we went to Marfa, Texas, and the Latino community was not auditioning for our play. The community was 80% Mexican-American. The power structure in the community was white, but the majority of the people in the community were Mexican-American. Now only white people were trying out for the play. Hmm... I wonder why. And we finally—talk about facing terrors—we went into Catholic Churches and spoke in Spanish. My Spanish is above intermediate—it is well below fluent—but I and some of my colleagues who had some Spanish, we got up there and we spoke. And we did it. And we were still all white, but that bridge—that offer of “Okay, we’re going to come here and we’re going to speak in your language”—we were flooded with Mexican auditioners the next day. And that was amazing. And I think part of why Cornerstone succeeded early on is that I do try to be a generous person, but when people say to me, “No, you can’t do that—it won’t be done,” I do become a little bit crazy about “You’re wrong! No!” I do think that—“No! No! That’s not true!” I remember we did a project to deal with the AIDS health crisis in Miami, Florida, and I remember we could not get press coverage. And I remember being on the phone with the editor of the *Miami Herald* going, “You just tell me what’s more important than our play!” (Laughter) He had a long list of things. (Laughter) But they did eventually write a story. So I do think that if you believe in your heart about something, you can’t stop fighting for it, you know?

**AM:** I lived in Texas and I’m deeply—my perception of Oregon is like this liberal heaven, so I think I’d like you to speak to what kind of political challenges you face there.

**BR:** Well, Oregon is interesting because it's a blue state—if you want to do the blue state/red state thing—because of Portland, because of Ashland, because of a couple cities, but there's a lot of conservatism. As I've said in some of my company call remarks, we bemoan, "Why can't we get more audience members of color to come?" The Ku Klux Klan marched in Ashland's Fourth of July parade a couple years before the founding of the theatre in 1935. That's a hard legacy in the life of a community in a way. And so, yeah, there were a lot of issues. I get letters sometimes about "You assume everybody in your audience is liberal," and I don't. We get a lot of conservative audience members. One of my first remarks to a group of OSF patrons after I had been appointed—I was so proud, I felt like I'd knocked it out of the park, I felt really good about the remarks—and a man came up to me on the sidewalk and said, "Okay, referring to your husband once is maybe something we can swallow, but doing it twice in the same speech, you are throwing it in our faces. And that is offensive." And, you know, I was like, "I'm going to pack up my bags. I want to go home right now." I felt so... you know. And then trying to have more sympathy in my heart... okay, he was in pain that I used the term "husband," you know, and that obviously shook him in a deep way. And I tried to have more empathy for him and why he felt that. But it's interesting. I know I'm not answering your question at all, am I?

**AM:** Can you speak specifically about legislatures, money from the government, things like that?

**BR:** We do have the Oregon Arts Commissions under threat like arts commissions are all over, but we do have state funding for the arts, and OSF gets it because 85% of our audience comes

from a couple hundred miles away or more. We're a pretty big tourist engine in the state. So in that way our state appreciates us. Our director of education<sup>16</sup>—her husband, Peter Buckley, is a brilliant state legislator who was also the managing director of a theatre. He went into politics, interestingly. So, yeah, we've got a lot of support, but as the work becomes more political and as we do work that is more challenging, those questions come up more.

**AM:** I've been hearing echoes of Cornerstone devising techniques, specifically administrative practices you've described—

**BR:** At OSF?

**AM:** Yes, at OSF. And I was wondering if you could speak a little more explicitly about the potential and limitations of taking community-based theatre devising techniques and using them in a large-scale administrative context.

**BR:** That's a great question. We also did that "let's name the uncomfortable myths." One of the best things that's happened at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival is that Paul's<sup>17</sup> direct reports and my direct reports meet together for 90 minutes every week. That sounds like a no-brainer, right? That had never happened before. And we started doing that. And it's really changed a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot. And one of the first things we did at a retreat was name myths. And

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<sup>16</sup> Joan Langley.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Nicholson, OSF's Executive Director at the time.

one of the myths is “OSF is now being run by Cornerstone.” That was one of the myths that one of my administrative colleagues put on the table, which was really brave. And that’s not true. Like many things, it’s both true and not true—that because I am who I am, because I’ve brought three of my closest Cornerstone colleagues with me to OSF—yeah, it affects things, it really does. I also left Cornerstone because I didn’t want to be part of a consensus-run ensemble anymore. So it’s not like I’ve come to OSF wanting to turn it into Cornerstone. But it is in the air. In my optimistic days, in what Cornerstone values, and in what OSF values there is significant overlap. And there had darn well better be because I’m working there, right? And I spent twenty years at the one and now I’m devoting however many years of my life to the other, so there had better be overlap in values. So I think when anything that we’re doing is rooted in values that are shared by the two organizations, we’re great. If anything is getting away from those values, or I’m not or we’re not making a good case for how they’re rooted in those values, then we’re in trouble. And I think it’s not even a conflict of values; it’s that we’ve not done a good job communicating why we’re doing a certain thing. That’s a very vague answer, but I think it gets to the... is that okay?

**AM:** I have a question for you, Bill. Looking at everything that you have to do—directing, producing, running an organization—how do you put up boundaries so that you can be a father and a husband? How do you balance all that?

**BR:** Now I’ll really start crying. (Laughter) No, but I actually think I do it darn well. I started working with a coach. I talked with this guy—he lives in Thailand—and I talked to him for thirty-

five minutes every two weeks. And it's really good. We named a new mode—it's "Bill's tired victim mode." (Laughter) The "tired victim mode" is when I'm in bed, answering emails at 11:30 at night and my husband is watching TV, and I'm like, "Ugh, I work so hard." (Laughter) So our new thing is: "How do I get myself out of the tired victim mode when I start falling into it?"

Clearly, I love theatre. I love directing plays. I love being an artistic director. I'm a dad and husband first. And I'm in a job that could take every single ounce of my energy and time, and it takes a lot of it, but there are parts that I will not give. And I've made mistakes and I've learned. I missed Liam's first day of kindergarten. You know why? Why did I miss Liam's first day of kindergarten? Because it was the first day of rehearsal of *The Cherry Orchard* at Yale Rep.<sup>18</sup> And what would Yale Rep think of me if I wasn't at that first day of rehearsal? What a stupid decision. I will never get that back. I will never be there to see that little boy with his little backpack on. That was a terrible choice. And I talk to seniors in the field who say, "I gave my all to the theatre and I screwed up all my relationships because I gave everything to the theatre and I'm proud of that." And I'm like, "I do not want to be you." (Laughter, applause) You can have a family and you can have a relationship and you can... absolutely, absolutely it's hard, but it's fantastic. Every time I think, "Oh, I'm not there enough for my kids," I think so many children have parents who come home and are full of rage because they hate their job, because people didn't listen to them at their job, because they feel disempowered, because they feel less human because of their job. I come home bubbling and glowing about how even the problems are energizing. And my kids get to experience that. And that's deep. So thank you for that important question.

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<sup>18</sup> 2005.

**AM:** I'm curious: where did you find the endurance to sustain the consensus system that Cornerstone operated with?

**BR:** Well, there were those moments, like the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grant story<sup>19</sup> I shared, where I was like, "Ugh, the group is so much smarter than I am, so much smarter," where people in my life—my colleagues at Cornerstone, Sonja—will problematize something. I have a vivid memory; our first regional theatre collaboration was an adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* at Arena Stage<sup>20</sup> with fifteen professional actors and fifteen actors from east of the Anacostia River who had never acted before. We were working on Tiny Tim—in our adaptation he was T.T. and in a wheelchair—and somebody was just going off on how Dickens sentimentalized the disabled community and you're contributing to that with your portrayal. And, you know, it's those moments, where if you're willing to open up and listen, even when it's really hard, you grow. The endurance was that I kept growing. And then there came the point when I was like, "I'm not growing as much anymore," where I know the group is smarter

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<sup>19</sup> In his keynote speech, Rauch discussed how consensus decision-making at Cornerstone saved him from his own instincts: "After banging on the door of the NEA for two years—at that time to us, an eternity—we received the stamp of approval of our first federal grant the same year that the Jesse Helms-authored obscenity clause was added. Any organization receiving federal funds would have to sign an oath promising, in essence, to not do anything obscene, including but not limited to depictions of homoeroticism—a linguistic turn that I remember vividly two decades later. At that time, I was terrified of turning down the grant: as a young company, we had fought so hard to win it. Moreover, Theatre Communications Group, of which we were a brand new member, took the official position that it was necessary to sign the oath under protest in order to not prove to conservative legislators that the Endowment was no longer needed—a pretty darned compelling argument to me at the time. It was only through the rigors of consensus-decision making that I finally saw the group's wisdom and changed my position. If Cornerstone were to be footnoted someday as the final nail in the coffin of the National Endowment for the Arts, then we'd wear that label with pride and not with shame. I was saved by own fear through the consensus process."

<sup>20</sup> 1993.

than I am. But I've got things to give the world as an artistic leader that I'm not able to give anymore, because I can want to hire somebody, but that somebody in a company meeting will say, "Eh, I'm not sure." And we'll have two months of arguments about it. I felt like I had stuff to give that couldn't work within that system anymore, after twenty years. That's me, and that's where I was in that journey. I know there are people in their seventies and eighties who work within consensus and they wouldn't have it any other way. I think it's what you're getting out of it as well as what you're giving to it and there's a balance there.

**AM:** You're talking about company during your keynote and relating it to your experiences of friends sleeping over and sleeping in the tub and on the floor and things like that. Company necessarily kind of defines a boundary, and we've been looking at company as a kind of sanctuary, but it can also be either a fortress or a prison, which you kind of alluded to there. I was wondering if you could go a little further into that.

**BR:** I think, to me, there's been a lot of pain in my first couple years as artistic director in relation to the acting company because I think my predecessor at OSF, Libby [Appel], is a more decisive person than I am, and I wrestle with decisions longer. And I think with Libby it was pretty clear: if you were in, you were in. If you were out, you were out. And if Libby asked you to not come back, that meant you were fallen out of favor and your career at OSF was over. I'm totally oversimplifying. And if you were in and you were getting leads, you were going to keep getting leads. And it's been way more complicated with me because there were some of her stalwart veteran actors who I let go in my first season. And then three of those I brought back in

my third season. And what I keep saying is: we are healthier as a company if people come and go. Sometimes you're going to break my heart by saying you're not coming back next year, sometimes I'm going to literally disappoint you by not having a job for you, but it's all good because we will be stronger as a company if there is coming and going. I'm just riffing on the acting company in terms of this fortress. The problem is we're in an isolated rural area, so people move there, they move their elderly parents there, they're raising their kids in the school system there. So it's not like you're in Chicago and Steppenwolf doesn't have a job for you so you can maybe get a job at the Goodman or at one of the other theatres in town. If you're an actor and you live in Ashland and I don't have a job for you, that's a real problem. So I'm not trying to sentimentalize it, but it's, again, balance. This is all about balance. It's how can we preserve—how can it not become a prison? What I want to do is not get to the point where I'm cynical about "Well, come on, their kid is going into high school," and I hate their work, but I've got to keep casting them. I don't want to be that guy. I don't want to be that guy for their sake. I don't want to be doing people favors in that way. It's horrible. So hopefully it's that balance of not allowing it to become a fortress, but letting it be sanctuary. And being proactive about breadth in and out.

**AM:** How necessary do you think it is to have the set boundaries of a company while maintaining an atmosphere in which taking risks is both encouraged and necessary?

**BR:** Personally, I believe that there are ways in which you can get complacent in a company and become risk-averse, but I think there is a greater danger of being risk-averse with a bunch of



freelance people thrown together. I think there is more fear of “I won’t get hired again at this,” or “These people won’t want to work with me if...” when it’s a bunch of strangers who are thrown together for the first time. So I think there are dangers in both ways, but I believe that—and obviously I wouldn’t be where I am if I didn’t believe this—I’m in Oregon because I believe that there is a greater chance for people to take risks within the confines of a company. Did I answer your question?

**AM:** Kind of. I was wondering: how much do you think that atmosphere of safety is contingent upon the physical structure of the company?

**BR:** What do you mean by physical structure of the company?

**AM:** Like, this is our company, these are our company people, our twenty-five/thirty people or whatever. And how much can you be expansive about your idea of company? How far can that idea stretch? Can it stretch to not just an acting company, but to an entire community or even the world?

**BR:** I believe it can. I’m choosing to do my work as an artist and artistic leader within a large-scale company that has some flexibility built in. That’s where I’m at personally right now, but I think you can create great risk and brilliant work in any setting. In any setting. And it’s just what is in your heart that maximizes the chances for great beauty and great risk-taking.

**AM:** If you could have one “do-over,” either at the Shakespeare company or even with Cornerstone, if you could go back to one situation and try another alternative, what would it be?

**BR:** I’ll just go with the first thing I thought. I don’t know if it’s the best answer, but I think those early company call speeches I made in Oregon, where I was like, “Change. New. Change. New. Change. New. Change. New,” not instinctively understanding that it sounded like “I don’t want you all. I don’t want you all. Fuck you all.” I didn’t understand what I was doing. I was naïve. And I began right around the same time as our president and the whole “Change, change, change, change, change is nothing but good.” I felt like I learned a lot from Mr. Obama, too. That’s the first thing that came to mind: I wish I had had more empathy for the fear that people had. You know what it is also? Coming from a consensus-run ensemble... the power. I get uncomfortable talking about it. I do have power, running a \$29 million theatre. And I walk into a room and I say, “Okay, let’s all solve it together.” It’s like, “No, Bill, you’re going to tell us what to do.” It’s uncomfortable for me. Of course, part of me likes that or I wouldn’t want that job. But I think that I wasted some time and some energy being coy about the responsibility that I had and the power that I had at my job.

**AM:** We began the Q&A part with a question about “What is a good play?” Because we want to make good plays. But it doesn’t seem like that’s necessarily your priority. You seem to have family first. And everything I’ve read about you and what I know of you—and people, first—has there been—and you mentioned this in at least one example of this from your Cornerstone

days—has there been a time at OSF when you’ve thought, “Maybe what we’re doing is not the best thing?”

**BR:** Like the best quality?

**AM:** No, not the best quality, but is it actually now working against the things that you prioritize?—family, people.

**BR:** Listen. I’m not sure what’s underneath your question. I’m not sure how to answer it in the most—

**AM:** Well, when you mentioned Cornerstone you said, “Maybe the way that we’re going about doing this is—”

**BR:** “Could we be doing more harm than good?”

**AM:** Or has there been a time at OSF when maybe theatre is not the best way for me to value my priorities?

**BR:** No, if I were not a theatre director, I would probably be an activist of some kind so I’ve thought about: what if I became a social justice worker? What if I became a politician? I’ve thought about those things, but I so believe in theatre and I’ve seen people’s world views

completely changed because of plays. And I felt it in myself when I met a work of art that completely changed me. Something that I've said to my company a lot is: "Yeah, it's really naïve to think 'I'm going to change the world with this work of art in this way,' but it's equally naïve—and I would argue even more dangerous—to think, 'Oh, the work that I do doesn't change the world.'" Because we know that we are shaped by artistic experiences. The values that we hold, the stories we choose to tell about the world are because they've been imprinted on us by our experiences, not just as artists, but as audience members. I think—I hope—that I am always open to the possibility that an artistic choice has created more harm than good, and I will be vigilant about how much good. It's all "good/bad," right? It's like moralizing; it's not that helpful of a construct, if we want to put it out there. But just the unintended consequences of the work. And can I be open—can we all be open? And it's something that Sonja has been—I'll use the phrase—a godsend in my life because she is willing to point out possible unintended consequences to my work, and actually cares about that with a passion. That's a gift. When I see that stuff, I may not agree, or I may agree and say, "Yes, but..." So I don't know my answer to the question.

**SK:** I want to close by repeating some of the words you said that I'm still resonating with from earlier, Bill. And this idea of what it means for us to grow—I think both as individuals and in relationship to each other—is to be constantly open to learning new things, but in the service of reconnecting to deeper truths. And I think that deeper truth is that our ego can get in the way of paying attention to the possibility that what someone else thinks and believes can open us up to be bigger and larger as individuals in the world, and can open up the possibilities of what

it means to be in this world together, even when—and especially when—we don't agree. So thank you. (Clapping) Thank you for keeping company with us!

**BR:** Thank you so much! Enjoy the rest of the conference! See you all in Ashland! (Laughter)