

Plenary Session: A Brief Introduction to the Organizing Principles of Appalshop/Roadside Theater

[Appalshop/Imagining America National Institute](#) – July 14-18, 2016



Facilitator: To start this next session, we want to quickly get on the table several questions that this Institute is making you wonder about.

Audience member: How do you find language to explain the value of the arts to economic development people that doesn't position arts as a value *added*, like a thing that's nice to have when you get everything else sorted?

Audience member: What's the background on the term "unbounded imagination"?

Audience member: What does the end of poverty look like?

Audience member: How do I apply these methodologies to an urban setting?

Facilitator: Thanks. Now with these questions in mind, we turn to Dudley Cocke, the Artistic Director of [Roadside Theater](#), who will speak to the two questions that frame this Institute: 1) How can arts and culture promote individual voice and collective agency, unbounding a community's imagination and ambition in order to create the conditions for economic development? 2) How can a community organize itself to build an economy that's broad-based and sustainable?

Dudley Cocke: For 47 years [Appalshop](#) has been testing the proposition that from the personal stories of the people – their emotional, intellectual, and spiritual life – art can arise. And the specificity of that art can connect with people anywhere.

Based on our experience, we are convinced that culture has a fundamental role to play in community economic development, and I will speak briefly about the [Community Cultural Development methodology](#) Roadside Theater has developed over three decades of touring across the United States. The knowledge that eventually became codified as our methodology came up through the trial and error of working with rural and urban communities alike for the purpose of helping them develop themselves. A fair share of this development work occurred in

cities. For example, in the mid-1990s in Dayton, Ohio, we helped facilitate a cultural development project with 110 community story circles occurring simultaneously over a two year period. The Dayton folks named the project *The Enormous Radio*. The methodology is always shaped by the local community and its needs, and works equally well in urban and rural settings.

A question I wish to pose for us here at this Institute: How do we tap, activate, and catalyze all of a community's emotional, intellectual, and spiritual assets for the purpose of inclusive community development toward well-being? This begins to answer the question, "What does the end of poverty look like?" When Roadside says "community," we typically think of a geographically bounded group of people, which is not to say we don't understand communities of spirit and tradition that are not bounded geographically.

There's an underlying assumption in our work to tap a community's cultural assets: that every community is culturally rich. [Economists](#) might point out that such assets may be latent and unrealized. So when we are invited into a community, we enter optimistically, believing in [its inherent emotional, spiritual, and intellectual genius](#). The glass is half-full. So our methodology's purpose is to make public in the community its own abundance – its vast well-springs of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual creativity waiting to be tapped.

In our wide experience, the biggest barrier communities face to realizing their abundance is exclusion. Few, if any, communities are whole; they are divided, typically by race, class, sexual orientation, religion, and more.

I have a question for you: Can you name a physical space in your community where everyone feels equally welcome?

In touring around the U.S., Roadside artists and producers have encountered many private and semi-private spaces, but for a community to have a genuinely public space where everyone feels equally welcome is rare. To help a community develop public spaces is one of our method's goals. Here's an example of the problematic. We were working in [Choteau, Montana](#) over the course of four years. Choteau, population 1690, is the seat of Teton County. The area's economy is anchored in cattle ranching and wheat farming. Community members were upset about the loss of their young people to the cities, and the state's Economic Development Office agreed to sponsor our initial residency. We began with a county-wide oral history and story collection project led by youth. Naturally, the young people were keen to hear hidden and untold stories. From these histories and stories the community members began to imagine performances. Scripts were written and music collected and composed. We began to look for true public spaces for performances, and at first landed on several churches, only to learn even they were regarded as semi-private. Then we settled on the city park with its pleasant band

shell. Three weeks before the premiere of the new Choteau musical play, we learned from our Blackfoot partners that the city had built the park on top of their ancestral burial ground. We asked the Blackfoot leaders if this history could be woven into the event, and it was, beginning with a ritual Blackfoot blessing of the grounds. As this anecdote illustrates, our method is not just about public space, but about inclusive community stories performed in those spaces.

Another question I pose to you: Thinking about your own community, do you have a feeling for the full range of stories that individuals tell themselves? Does your community have an official story, and who is left out of that story? Does your community have a cover story, and what's that about? (Of course, being thespians, we're always looking for narrative tensions and conflict!)

An important goal of our Community Cultural Development method is to help a community create the conditions in which it can better listen to itself in all its multiplicity, complication, nuance, and abundance. [Story circles](#), which each of you participated in this morning, are one of our most important tools.

We know from experience that communities of people across the United States wish to believe in themselves and take charge of their economic and civic futures. Our methodology helps them tap and then distill their inherent intellectual, emotional, and spiritual genius into homegrown artistic expression as a public step toward doing just that.

Thank you.

Photo: Scott Peters, Dudley Cocke, and Gladstone "Fluney" Hutchinson at the 2016 Appalshop/Imagining America National Institute. Credit: Lafayette College/Clay Wegrzynowicz '18