

**The Living Word Project / Youth Speaks**

*the break/s: A mixtape for stage*

Case Study by Anna Alves

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*Don't push me, cause I'm close to the edge  
I'm trying not to lose my head  
It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder  
How I keep from going under.*  
-- Grandmaster Flash from the rap song The Message

*You say break, whatcha 'talkin 'bout is the break of the record, not the person or the dance. The break is the description of the section of the record where you dance to.*

*Called break boy, b-boys. Break on the break.*

*--from DJ Q-Bert's turntablist mixtape Demolition Pumpkin Squeeze Musik*

When one enters the theatre space for *the break/s: A mixtape for stage*, an amiable man with a microphone mingles amongst the milling, squirming, settling crowd, asking jaunty questions that probably require more weighty responses. One of these is: "If jazz is the broom that Africans jumped over to become American, what is hip-hop?" Another is: "Have you ever lost your mind?" Some react with enthusiasm, wry aplomb in their answers, going with the flow of question-and-answer. Others seem wary, put on the spot or a little timid, unaccustomed to being asked about their thoughts before a live stage performance. Then the lights go dark and the spotlight comes up.

Artist / administrator / educator Marc Bamuthi Joseph is in the middle of the image of a vinyl record projected onto the floor from above. He is curled in the center as if in a womb, and then slowly unwinds, his body spinning and turning, restless and reaching, a makeshift human turntable arm and needle making words and movement, extending outward as he propels upward onto his feet.

*Stop contradicting, slipped in the groove of an institution and reparations. Funk and f-f-f-t- and function, equally separating to reveal me, in the break—psychically cycling, patterns to shake, music to make, culture to love, guilt to feel, prayers to say, more and more I'm straddling the line. Don't push me, I'm close. I'm trying not to...*

*--Marc Bamuthi Joseph from the beginning of the break/s: A mixtape for stage*

The Arts Presenters-funded project *the break/s: A mixtape for stage* is an artistic work by Marc Bamuthi Joseph and The Living Word Project (LWP) that "places hip-hop in a larger global context...joining personal narrative and social history in a poetic investigation of identity." Inspired by the seminal book *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* written by journalist Jeff Chang, and based on Joseph's own existence as an artist within an era of hip-hop globalization, the piece explores the discombobulating effects and consequences of hip-hop culture moving from local arts to global consumerism on personal, political and social levels, reflecting one

comprehensive individual story within a more complex experience of the hip-hop generation.

Created in 1999 by Youth Speaks/LWP Artistic Director Marc Bamuthi Joseph, LWP is a theater ensemble made up of about 14 writers and performers ranging from 19 to just over 30 years old who create unique, cutting-edge work that raises social consciousness, even as it generates transformative aesthetics in spoken word and hip-hop theatre. Based in San Francisco, California, LWP utilizes urban hip-hop aesthetics, educational liberation pedagogy by Paulo Freire, a populist theatre framework inspired by Augusto Boal, and a methodology that includes dance, music, and film, with a major emphasis on spoken storytelling. Best stated in their own words, LWP “creates verse-based work that is spoken through the body, illustrated by visual and sonic scores, and in communication with the important social issues and movements of the immediate moment. LWP is the theatre’s connection from Shakespeare’s quill to Kool Herc’s turntables; from Martha Graham’s cupped hand to Nelson Mandela’s clenched fist: a new voice for the new politic.”

LWP is the resident theatre company of Youth Speaks, Inc., a multi-faceted literary arts organization with a \$1.8 million operating budget that serves to “empower the next generation of leaders, self-defined artists, and visionary activists through written and oral literacies” and believes firmly that “the youth can speak for themselves.” Founded in 1996 by Executive Director James Kass, Youth Speaks created the first national teen poetry slam in 1998 that has expanded into what is known today as the annual Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival held in various cities across America, and highlighted in the HBO documentary series, *Brave New Voices*. Serving a traditional demographic of young people 13 to 19 years old, Youth Speaks also presents festivals (including the annual Living Word Festival for Literary Arts in the Bay Area) and literary arts education programs. Additionally, the organization creates publications, conducts youth development programs, and provides mentoring, non-competitive performances, job skills training, theatre development and civic engagement opportunities.

In conjunction with Youth Speaks, LWP premieres new work from nationally established as well as emerging voices, educates audiences and constituencies through master classes, and aims to excavate “missing” histories and stories from within an often obscuring mainstream society and consumer culture. By formalizing programs for Youth Speaks writers of great promise who have moved beyond the 13-19 years old demographic of that organization, LWP provides apprenticeship and guidance to these evolving artist-activists into adulthood and toward sustainable artistic and careers. The theatre company works from an annual earned touring revenue budget anywhere from \$250,000 to \$500,000, depending on the scope or number of shows traveling at any given time. Project budgets for these shows are raised in full from diverse contributed revenue sources for initial creation, and then continual fundraising thereafter sustains creative development and tour operations. Revenue is not sustained beyond the tour(s). The objective is to just get the work out there; touring, at best, allows LWP to break even in their finances.

In relation to Youth Speaks, LWP functions as a program or project of the larger organization rather than as a separate and singular company. The majority of the ensemble members are also full-time employees of Youth Speaks. Thus, their artistic work in the ensemble is an ancillary to their jobs. They each need to step out of their jobs to get funding for their artistic work. Yet in their Youth Speaks jobs, they generate skill sets and professional development that enable them to manage themselves as artists. They also work within an organizational infrastructure that assists them with resource development in fundraising, networking, artistry and technical production to create and mount work. Those artists who do not have jobs with Youth Speaks are supported through LWP residencies to develop work and/or have productions mounted by Youth Speaks/LWP as presenters.

Fuzzy boundaries exist between Youth Speaks and LWP for they are intrinsic to one another as entities. Its members—and projects—are always crossing lines between, sometimes making it unclear if their role or gig is Youth Speaks or LWP. More often than not, it is both, simultaneously. This inextricable dynamic is complicated and difficult to define. The strong Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethic of hip-hop culture and its artistic work—and also of the youthful energy that drives it—requires folks to be entrepreneurs within several overlapping roles, “making things happen” in a loose, organic way that often takes some time, several lessons and infinite patience to evolve. Working to create a community of art-making that is supportive, full of faith and resilient in growth and learning, LWP is dedicated to liberation of mind and art, and endeavors to eliminate borders and boundaries when they can. They seek to re-democratize the spaces they enter, share or invent, empowering deeper levels of aesthetics, language, community and engagement wherever they may create and perform.

### **Building Aesthetic and Community Within and Without**

*Hip-hop’s story is the choice to commit to one side of the line or the other. To get so close to the edge, you can smell the after death. In hip-hop, it smells like Crisco and sulfer, ‘cuz if you don’t commit to spinning on your head, you will break your neck.*  
--Marc Bamuthi Joseph from the break/s: A mixtape for stage

In 2003, Bamuthi and Youth Speaks participated in a national initiative around “Future Aesthetics: The Impact of Hip-Hop Culture in Contemporary Performance,” funded by the Ford Foundation. At an Artist Dialogue in San Francisco and a Community Forum in New York City they helped initiate intensive and far-reaching conversations about hip-hop aesthetics, theatre and cultural activism within the performing arts field and across arenas of grass-roots and institutional social justice work. In these conversations, it emerged that the hip-hop theater aesthetic was more than just an artistic element to be performed, but an energy that incorporates historical and community legacies previously unrecognized and/or subsumed by the “commercial mainstream.”

Moreover, hip-hop aesthetics opened up new and alternative spaces for marginalized and under-resourced communities to revision democratic ideas and practices in a more

diverse world. Hip-hop aesthetics (inclusive of its traditional four elements: DJing, MCing, B-Boying, and Graffiti Art) was considered inherent to social consciousness work and positioned hip-hop culture and arts as more than mere expression but, in fact, as dynamic, proactive energies in building communities. By situating hip-hop culture and aesthetics more firmly within its global origins and influences, the discussions illuminated how these particular expressive arts were intrinsic to social justice movements throughout the world as well as within the United States.

It is within this context that LWP's hip-hop aesthetic emerges from across mediums and disciplines to access multiple intelligences, to "expand a vocabulary, the level of conversation," as Bamuthi puts it, and "find things intersecting across borders and boundaries." The theatre company reflects the changing demographics of American and global society—"We have Puerto Ricans, Koreans, Filipinos, Haitians and Latinos"—and is young. Everyone is under 35 and many came up through the ranks of Youth Speaks. "Generating the means of mining material really begins in high school for many of our core members. We work with them from as young as 13. That gives us an acute sense of their language. And we truly feel we are on the pulse of changing performance language."

The company also includes prominent young artists from other regions, such as Mayda del Valle, a current Youth Speaks Artist-in-Residence and former National Poetry Slam Champion, who hails from Los Angeles, CA and Dennis Kim, former member of the Chicago-based spoken word hip-hop group I Was Born With Two Tongues and also a Youth Speaks Artist-in-Residence. In addition to developing her artistic work with LWP, del Valle visits high schools as part of Youth Speaks' educational activities, to perform and develop poetry with teens. Kim writes grants for Youth Speaks even as he creates his own pieces with LWP. Each and every artist in the ensemble is a writer / administrator / educator and they are always wearing many hats. "We're not just building a company, but a non-profit organization," says Bamuthi. "Sort of a co-op ethic happening. All are invested in the organization and the performing company. Makes it work."

"They're really fresh hats but they don't match all your outfits," states Youth Speaks Manager of Youth Programs and LWP artist Lauren Whitehead, only half-joking, in reference to the multi-tasking and constant code-switching of each company member's role. Originally from Chicago, Whitehead saw Bamuthi perform at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor when she was a student and said to herself, "I'm gonna work for him someday." For her, seeing him expand the idea of what spoken word can do beyond the 3-minute reach and outside of the competition route, where one could actually amplify his/her thoughts and bridge performance into theater, was catalyzing.

Fellow LWP artist and Youth Speaks Program Director for Production and Media Jason Mateo, who has been with the organization since he was 13 years old and is now a father on the closer side of 30, agrees. "Being in this space is inspiring and very moving, consistently." Without the push that the ensemble provides to clarify and elevate the aesthetic and present it, "just my kid reads it. The company helps workshop it so the work can be articulated." He adds, "This safe space for this generation feels good. It feels good

to be with these guys, to set standards for the next generation. It's a lot of hard work, but it's so moving for an artist who wants to tell a story."

Yet even with this motivating energy and environment, several challenges exist. A main one is this: Youth Speaks has never had its own physical space within which to develop their artistic work. They have only had office space -- first, informally borrowing office time at the space of their former fiscal sponsor, Intersection for the Arts, then working out of a larger 1,500 square foot space they leased within a building that housed an artists' loft collective and now, at a much smaller office located at the junction where the Interstate 80 and 101 freeways meet just south of downtown San Francisco.

So there are restrictions on the work and a dependency on outside entities for artistic development space. Rehearsal space is ad hoc in garages, living rooms, and kitchens. They borrow studios from friends and peers or utilize any other space that is conducive and accessible. Work is developed more intently in short-term artist residencies or excerpt performances at other spaces in San Francisco neighborhoods such as the alternative art space Intersection for the Arts and dance-centered ODC Theater in the Mission District or large-scale cultural institution Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in downtown San Francisco, all long-time associates, allies and partners of LWP. "Vagabond venues," Mateo calls them.

The individual work is developed in excerpts, 10 or 20 minutes at a time. "Piecemeal theater," Chinaka Hodges describes the process. Oakland-born and raised, in addition to being a LWP artist, Hodges is the Youth Speaks Program Director for Artistic Development & Performance and has been with the organization since it began in 1996, when she was 12 years old. This artistic development process can take months on end, even years—"3 years for 20 minutes," Mateo inserts wryly—especially with each artist juggling multiple creative and administrative roles, assisting their fellow artists on concurrent LWP projects, and maintaining the daily operations and duties of Youth Speaks as an organization. So a commitment to this work requires patience, fortitude and resiliency.

"Our company is big and small pieces," Bamuthi explains. "It's risk-taking, moving to fit the changes because we work hard on 20 minutes first. Bite-size works first, that involve 1 to 5 people. We develop that over time. So at present, there are a number of pieces we can send out. Folks doing solo, duet work. Work that fits in a box. It's part of how we address this thing. For me, it goes back to being accommodated within the broader ecology by doing 10 minutes of work in the right space. I'm a strong component of strong excerpt work – 10 to 30 minutes. That, more than developing a full piece, is a way to scaffold the development structure and fundraising structure and to manage expectations. For example, Jason, Mayda, Dennis, Lauren, Chinaka – can all go inside a closet and do a 20-minute piece that fits within a festival, at city centers, that works at Intersection for the Arts or at the Kennedy Center. It's very portable work. That's the strategy."

Bamuthi evolved his own artistic practice and development this way, most notably with his one-man show *Word Becomes Flesh*, a series of performed letters to an unborn son using poetry, dance, live music and visual art. The approach is incorporated into LWP, using residency sites in San Francisco and around the country to incubate and develop the work. Bamuthi leverages opportunities and resources for other emerging artists to create and develop their own work and artistic careers in conjunction with his. “The folks today are at the beginning of that similar trajectory. We would like to see them evolve their trajectory in their own way, own style, own voice,” Youth Speaks/LWP Producing Director Joan Osato says. “In the transition from spoken word to theater, some find there are too many rules. And it’s a different process than having complete control (like in the standard spoken word 3-minute space). Theater requires huge discipline. You pick community-building in the ensemble company.”

This community-building includes LWP’s audiences as well. Usually drawing a demographic primarily between 15 and 50 years in age—though its appeal and outreach are not limited to that age range nor by race, gender, sexuality or geography—the underpinning goal of the artistic work is democratization. “We make art for people not usually invited into the traditional theater space, as artists and as the audience,” Osato says. “Audience development also is about acclimating to a traditional space.”

Hip-hop and youth audiences typically arrive late for hip-hop events and are not inclined to purchase advance tickets. Word-of-mouth is heavily relied upon, each progressive show exponentially garnering more attendance, so closing night audiences are often the largest. Bamuthi has developed a large following over the years, especially in the Bay Area, but also has ground crews in different cities through his own network of fellow artists and through Youth Speaks’ satellite partner programs in 36 cities across the United States. These contacts help to market and promote LWP shows when they are touring, using technological outreach through cyber-social networks like MySpace, Facebook and Twitter, visibility vehicles like YouTube, and the usual flyers and announcements. Attracting these audiences to traditional stages, such as the San Francisco Opera House for the annual Youth Speaks’ Teen Poetry Slam finals and high-art spaces like Yerba Buena, *the break/s* also offers a learning curve for LWP.

“There’s a complexity of how they exist in this world,” Yerba Buena Performing Arts Curator Angela Mattox observes. “When we put on poetry slams, there’s an audience protocol and cultural behavior. When we present *the break/s*, we frame how we talk about it at length, how to be in a space. But at the same time, we don’t want to squelch the cultural energy brought to the table. It’s a lovely confluence of folks speaking up during the show. Bamuthi’s work demands that. It’s a nice hybrid—creates a very vital house.” She continues, “This project really served as an exciting platform for Future Aesthetics’ demise or success. The work doesn’t need to be seen through a hip-hop theatre lens. It could stand on its own. It can be presented in multiple contexts. It raised the bar considerably and showed the maturing of an artist. The audiences that have followed (Bamuthi’s) work or other hip-hop projects see an evolving aesthetic.” And, as Osato contends, the work also fulfills its role in “activating space and communities as living, breathing, changing things.”

## Developing Collaborations and Partnerships

*This story begins in the middle...halfway across the globe...  
...halfway across the city...  
...halfway across my childhood...  
...begins in the middle-class black—I'm stumbling my way to the line...  
--Marc Bamuthi Joseph from the break/s: A mixtape for stage*

At the time that LWP received the Arts Presenters grant in 2006, they were already working through the middle of an artistic and organizational process that had begun several years before. In San Francisco, as part of the Future Aesthetics activities in 2003, an excerpt of Bamuthi's developing piece *Word Becomes Flesh* was presented as part of a preview for the Bay Area's 1<sup>st</sup> Hip-Hop Theater Festival, co-produced by Youth Speaks, La Peña Cultural Center, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and the NYC Hip-Hop Theater Festival. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, incorporated in 1986, is a large cultural institution that presents multi-disciplinary contemporary art and performances from the Bay Area and internationally.

Though LWP and Youth Speaks were already within Yerba Buena's roster of community partnerships around youth initiatives prior to 2003, under new Executive Director Kenneth Foster and just-arrived Performing Arts Curator Angela Mattox, the Community Partnership Program was developing into a more dynamic presenting and touring entity. As presenters, Yerba Buena's mission is to nurture Bay Area artists and in this first encounter with hip-hop theatre artists and Bamuthi in particular, Mattox identified him as one of the most compelling artists of the region. Yerba Buena was interested in a long-term working relationship with Bamuthi, so they stepped up to provide expansive support for him in terms of advocating for his work regionally and nationwide to the larger field of performing arts and presenters.

The continuing relationship between Yerba Buena, Youth Speaks, LWP and Bamuthi has been multi-faceted and varied, depending on the projects they engage in. With Youth Speaks, they coordinate the synergies between their programs with youth, inviting them to facilitate forums, operate education programs and present festival activities in their facility spaces. With LWP and Bamuthi specifically, Yerba Buena has served as presenter (*Word Becomes Flesh*), co-producer (*Scourge*) and commissioner (*the break/s*). As the partnering roles have shifted, so has the challenge to keep responsibilities well-defined and to maintain flexible and resilient working dynamics.

As Mattox puts it, "Youth Speaks and the Living Word Project are not a standard theatre operating company. That's not why they exist. They are a youth education organization, primarily. And one facet is the Living Word Project. Then a facet is Bamuthi doing his work there. It's a unique, hybrid model under which the artist wants to create work. So being forced to deal with the larger organization brings some assets—more rigorous ideas around community engagement and audience and youth projects—but at the same time, there's no standardization around a theatre company I'm booking."

Though Yerba Buena served as the primary project partner for *the break/s*, and several institutions and presenting organizations supported its development and production, New York City-based MAPP International Productions (MAPP) served as the project's producer and served as the key liaison with Yerba Buena on the logistical details of its residencies and performances. They also partnered with LWP on the marketing and promotion for tour venues outside of San Francisco. Formerly MultiArts Projects & Productions (founded in 1994 by Ann Rosenthal and Cathy Zimmerman), MAPP International Productions was established in 2006 as a performing arts organization that produces risk-taking contemporary artists, connecting them with presenters and publics to bring their work to stage and into peoples' lives. Their aim is to provoke dialogue and enable deeper engagement with culture and communities for greater change.

Cathy Zimmerman, Co-Director and Producer at MAPP states, "We start at the beginning of a process and see it through to the end, working to develop programs in the community that are inherent in the work, and seed ideas in those communities about the work, prior to coming to a city for performance or during the performance or even afterwards. We like to think of new ways to activate audience and community." In addition to producing *the break/s*, MAPP collaborated with LWP to develop a community education program called *breaks beyond the ballot*, a national youth-based project that took the stylistic multi-media format of *the break/s* to engage young writers, poets and filmmakers—all pre-voting youth—to create spoken word poems and short films that gave voice to their views on relevant contemporary social, cultural and political issues.

At the time of the Arts Presenters grant, LWP and their main collaborating partners had already been put through their paces with earlier projects, particularly in 2005 with the unwieldy hip-hop theatre touring piece *Scourge* which blended the traditions of Afro-Caribbean jazz, spoken word and movement into a historical narrative tracing the social and diplomatic trajectory of Haiti. Moving from an intimate, individual show in 2004 with *Word Becomes Flesh* which toured at most five people and was developed with a budget of roughly \$10,000, *Scourge* secured a larger budget of \$50,000 from a Gerbode Foundation grant, prompting LWP to quickly aim much bigger in scope, casting (its premiere at Yerba Buena showcased almost 25 people) and epic vision.

As a project, *Scourge* provided a steep learning curve for Bamuthi, LWP, Youth Speaks and their collaborators, which included the Latin jazz composer John Santos, choreographer Rennie Harris, director Kamilah Forbes, dramaturge Roberta Uno and first-time producers, Yerba Buena. Unfamiliar with working on such a large scale, ambition outpaced logistic and technical production capacities. Major artistic development for the show occurred during premiered performances with no real studio time to develop it beforehand or at residencies undertaken during the show's run. Working with so many collaborators required better definition of roles and responsibilities. Plus, it was Yerba Buena's first foray into producer territory and they were not as prepared or qualified to mount such a large-scale work at that point, so the process was relatively confusing. When *Scourge* went on tour, the production had to be overhauled and the cast reduced to a manageable traveling troupe, changing so much that

by the end of its tenure, much of the script and several elements were vastly different from its first performance.

But Bamuthi, LWP, and their partners learned several lessons from this process. One, they understood better both the possibilities and limits of project budgets and staff capacity, especially in terms of size and scope, in mounting a performance piece and sustaining it once it goes on tour. Two, they learned that bigger is not necessarily better, that artistic development of a larger piece requires more and deeper lead time before premiering and that technical production issues are key. Three, the roles and responsibilities for mounting large-scale work require effective clarity and focused efficiency. These insights helped to shape their planning and decision-making moving forward. In addition, this process established a better foundation of understanding and expectation amongst the partners involved, especially between LWP and one of its most stalwart collaborators, Yerba Buena.

With *the break/s*, Arts Presenters support helped to anchor a more extended and intensive initial development process, enabling LWP the time and leverage to bring in deeper resources for the work throughout, and allowing the ability to integrate additional educational and touring opportunities into the process. During the course of its development, *the break/s* was created and evolved at: a one month artists' residency at Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, CA; six weeks in residency at Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia, PA; some time at Z Space in San Francisco; a month and a half at the Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival where they first premiered the show, in the round, in March 2008; and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN, which presented its second premiere in April 2008, its first in a full theatre space. The Humana Festival residency gave LWP the singular opportunity of bringing the project's entire cast and crew together for a focused extended period of time to work on one show with full tech support and resources before its first premiere. And the Walker was open to adding the educational program element of *breaks beyond the ballot* when *the break/s* had its second premiere there.

In addition, during an extensive tenure at the University of Wisconsin at Madison—roughly five or six months—Bamuthi was able to develop a hip-hop aesthetics curriculum that intellectually informed his work on *the break/s* and provided an experience to mine creative material for the show. So by the time *the break/s* premiered in June 2008 at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, which originally commissioned the piece, the work was fully-realized and well-rehearsed on several levels. “The team Bamuthi gathered was very professional and aware,” Mattox states. Although slightly more expensive in technical production, “it was the right project, the right team, and he had the professional maturity that he would not have had a few years prior. The piece looked fantastic in the space.” Mattox also maintains that having MAPP in the producer role really helped the process become much more focused and efficient.

By the time they came together to partner on *the break/s*, LWP and Yerba Buena could apply past lessons learned onto this next project in their continuing artistic collaboration. “We resolved a lot of the artistic issues in *Scourge*,” Mattox says of Bamuthi's first large-

scale project. Laughing, she adds later, “Had the implementation of *the breaks* not gone smoothly, I really would’ve questioned the working relationship. But it was a real relief—not only did the artist deliver, but the working process was so much smoother based on clear understanding with roles and responsibilities.”

In addition, the Arts Presenters grant invited broader opportunity for new sources beyond the local (Gerbode and Zellerbach Foundations) and the regional (Hewlett and Irvine Foundations) to support their continuing work, making LWP a more attractive entity to funding from such national entities as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Rockefeller Multi-Arts Production Fund (MAP). It also helped leverage the more expansive partnerships for artistic development with the Humana Festival in Louisville, KY and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN. And it enabled greater touring opportunities to venues such as the Kennedy Center in Washington, D. C. and the REDCAT Theatre in Los Angeles, CA.

This leverage positions LWP well for their next project, *Life is Living*, a national campaign utilizing a series of day-long community events staged in various U. S. cities that focus on eco-equity and “green spoken story telling” that “fuses art and discourse in model partnerships between under-served communities, green action agencies, and the contemporary arts world.” These events over the next two years will facilitate the development of LWP’s next full-length, multi-media theatre piece *red, black, and GREEN: a blues*, a multi-disciplinary work at “the intersection of green economics and black psychology (that) jumpstarts a conversation about environmental racism, social ecology and collective responsibility in the climate change era through groundbreaking contemporary theatre.”

The progression of LWP’s work from the individually intimate *Word Becomes Flesh* to the epic historical narrative of *Scourge* to the seamless blend of personal story and social context in *the break/s* to the ambitious undertaking of linking communities in *Life is Living* that will seed the development of the macro-issue-oriented *red, black, and GREEN: a blues* is important to acknowledge. “The grant didn’t characteristically alter our trajectory, but solidified it,” observes Bamuthi. “We already had a vision in place.” The Arts Presenters grant’s impact “was not make or break,” according to Osato from LWP, “but it was the first acknowledgement ever that we were a theatre ensemble.” For her, this marked a signal from the larger performing arts field that it saw value in LWP’s artistic work, even if it was non-traditional. Also, “the nomenclature—thinking of ourselves as an ensemble—had profound programmatic ramifications,” states Bamuthi. Thinking of the LWP crew as an ensemble working together towards theatre production impacted the framing of their work to and for each other, though not the collaborative dynamic, which was always inherent and integral.

In expanding the aesthetic and scope in each successive artistic project, LWP also built sustaining relationships with artist collaborators, institutional and funding partners, local and regional allies. “It was all a part of the learning curve...and folks in the field had faith in the work,” Bamuthi notes.

## Enabling Deeper Engagement Across Communities

*Grand-mere say, 'How you love is what you do, not what you say. Action is truth.  
--Marc Bamuthi Joseph from the break/s: A mixtape for stage*

As evidenced here, over time and through much negotiation, a productive sense of respect and understanding has developed between LWP and their various collaborators. “The entities make the art happen,” states Bamuthi. Yet LWP envisions beyond just making art, working always with an eye toward deeper engagement of all involved. To that end, and to ensure larger engagement with artists, organizations and communities, “we engage a multitude of different non-traditional partners.” From proscenium theatres to cultural centers and institutions to schools and museums to universities and parks, LWP links across genres, disciplines, neighborhoods, and sectors ensuring these engagements extend beyond the stage. “Arts is not just for art’s sake,” says Osato, “but for educational empowerment, personal transformation and community-building.”

As mentioned earlier, LWP and MAPP collaborated on the educational program *breaks beyond the ballot*, an idea that emerged later in the process as the artistic project evolved. Utilizing their varied contacts, both LWP and MAPP worked to establish connections between each site and affiliated youth constituencies before *the break/s* came to town for its performance. In Minneapolis, it was between Walker and their affiliated youth organizations. In San Francisco, Youth Speaks worked with Yerba Buena and their youth programs staff. In NYC, MAPP and LWP partnered with the NYC Hip-Hop Theater Festival, their satellite group Urban Word New York and a local high school.

The workshops offered a week-long curriculum that engaged youth in creating spoken word and film videos that focused on contemporary political issues significant to them. Bamuthi and media/film artist Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi conducted these workshops as master classes, tying the work generated by its participants to the methods and elements of *the break/s*. In line with both LWP’s and MAPP’s priorities to foster deeper connections between artists and communities, they aimed to create a model of engagement that would jumpstart entrepreneurship and educational partnerships within community neighborhoods. “Engagement is very deep,” says Zimmerman from MAPP. “More labor-intensive. It requires organizations to have capacity to continue the work. Artists can’t come back over and over again. We hoped to create a model for presenting that allows for deeper connections. To lay the groundwork and provide mechanisms. And hope that the work continues once the performance and the artists leave.”

During *the break/s*’ second premiere at the Walker Art Center in spring 2008, LWP and MAPP started the conversation to connect the piece to a larger community beyond the stage, especially since the Walker had lots of connections with grass-roots youth organizations. After trying out initial activities there, they attempted to bring a more intensive pilot model to the third premiere at Yerba Buena one month later. However, since the idea was not proposed to Yerba Buena until too late in the game, it was difficult for them to implement. They pulled it off, running a week-long youth workshop featuring

the show's video designer, Youth Speaks artists and some of Yerba Buena's youth program staff, but the programming was not realized with the depth that was intended. "The project was valuable," says Mattox from Yerba Buena, but it was the most challenging aspect of their collaboration on *the break/s*. "This type of project should be worked out at the time of the project proposal, a year in advance, instead of three months."

LWP and MAPP were more successful in New York City during fall 2008. With much more lead time and methods revised through their first two attempts, they partnered with Urban Word New York, the Brooklyn Community Arts and Media High School (BCAM) and The NYC Hip Hop Theater Festival to implement a more intensive and effective program. BCAM was open to the learning process and its teachers were very engaged in the work. After the students saw *the break/s* at Skirball Center for the Performing Arts at NYU, Bamuthi and media/film artist Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi returned for a week to lay out ideas in meetings with the teachers and met with the students to start the process. When they left, the process continued independently at the school, throughout the fall, and the students produced poetry and video work around politics during a galvanizing presidential election year, which was bolstered by a return visit by Jacobs-Fantauzzi.

The thoughtful and energetic creative expressions that the students generated were performed at a Special Interest Session at the Art Presenters' Annual Conference in NYC in January 2009. The session was designed to share information and encourage presenters interested in presenting *the break/s* to also take on *break/s beyond the ballot* as a way to impact a broader community around an artistic work. The students' work was also part of Under the Radar (UTR) at the Public Theater that same month, showcasing their poems and videos and offering a lively panel discussion hosted by UTR and the NYC Hip-Hop Theater Festival. "It was very influential in the way we thought about this going forward," Zimmerman from MAPP states. "We would like to think about these types of artist-driven community engagements to develop from the very beginning of a project, so that by the time the work is finished, it's a strong component across sectors, not just the arts."

These lessons play into LWP's current project, the green eco-equity-centered *Life is Living*, supported by the Doris Duke Foundation and in partnership with local entities such as parks and recreation, churches, and community centers, linking them with under-resourced, low-income communities in pursuit of environmental health and just living. With this project, LWP re-prioritizes to address where art and performance takes place, identifying under-served parks and activating them with hip-hop graffiti and dance battles, mural creation, action sports and spoken word, programming events that correspond to community activity within the community itself. *Life is Living* has already successfully taken place in West Oakland's deFremery Park during the 2008 Living Word Festival and in Harlem around 145<sup>th</sup> Street in May 2009, working with partners such as Oakland's Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and Riverside Church in New York. Future sites include Chicago, Houston, a return to the Bay Area, and possibly at other interested sites such as Brooklyn, New Orleans and Los Angeles. In facilitating partnerships between local entities across sectors at each site to produce the art and its

ensuing creativities, LWP hopes to cultivate relationships between communities and high profile performing arts presenters that will not only sustain the work into the future, but assist in developing audiences and communities that will participate, appreciate and revel in the arts on multiple levels of experience.

*Life is Living* events serve to incubate and develop Bamuthi's and LWP's next artistic project, *red, black, and GREEN: a blues (rbGb)*. Here, too, LWP strives to create a model for sustainability, this time in terms of artistic work. Bamuthi notes that the performing arts field does not have sustained national laboratories to support an artist's growth over the length of an entire career, to allow diversification of aesthetics and expansion of work that is not necessarily market-driven. There is little consistent focused time and space to allow failure before succeeding, resources and support to try and try again as an artist continues to articulate and re-articulate a vision. This new project is an experiment in strategy to allow for that space. "We've tried to address this with *red, black, and GREEN*. Doing *Life is Living* over the course of two years is part of the development of this piece. It's one way we found to support the development of work—make the process of development itself part of the public presentation. A way of experimenting with process. And time."

Along with the artistic and cultural activities at each *Life is Living* site, material for *rbGb* will be developed from the stories, poetry, visual art and film documentation that emerge at the community events. LWP intends to build the community for *rbGb* at each site before it arrives for its full performance by showcasing excerpts of the work-in-progress, much like a movie trailer is utilized in advance of a film, developing a main communication strategy that works off "word-of-mouth" buzz often characteristic of hip-hop audiences. Concurrently, a convening that brings together artists, community workers, and representatives from major institutions in the foundation, presenting, and civic arenas will facilitate a discussion about deeper relationships between contemporary arts centers and their communities and social and cultural equity for non-traditional audiences. They will also discuss a construction of attractive platforms of discourse about the green movement, new arenas for arts presentation, and innovative branding and fundraising structures to sustain this work and these relationships. "It's a model for creating an artistic work where you use the different types of community engagement for a particular idea," says Zimmerman of MAPP. "To create dialogue and thought that the artist is trying to explicate for his work. Also, to use those opportunities for research for his creative process. So the artist and the activist are living in the same space."

Incorporating a social service component of the artistic production extends from the educational values that ground LWP's work at its core. As seen in *breaks beyond the ballot* and expanded with *Life is Living* and *rbGb*, the goal is to diversify partners, not just in terms of resources, but in terms of collaborators to comprehensively develop the work in all its facets – artistic, educational and community-building. "It's not just about art, but social change," Bamuthi states. "It becomes a circle of giving. The art is a byproduct of the other processes. It's a little less competitive and more about sharing." Osato concurs. "The end point is not the art production. The art is part of a larger cycle."

### **Seeking Sustainability for Future Generations**

The recent economic downturn has impacted LWP in that they adhere to tighter production budgets and individual members feel the crunch of living in San Francisco, a high cost-of-living city and California, a state that could be on the verge of bankruptcy. However, because of the dot.com bust in the late 1990s, a great majority of non-profit organizations that survived—arts-centered ones and LWP included—find that those responses and strategies that they developed during those difficult financial times seem to be helping them weather the current circumstances. Also, since the California Arts Commission (CAC) was slashed in 2003 from \$18.4 million to about \$1.9 million and has only slowly been recovering, arts organizations around the state have been forced to support themselves through different kinds of revenue streams, moving away from a dependence on California state entities.

As a region, ironically, Osato notes that several groups that met for a recent National Performance Network (NPN) western regional meeting seemed more optimistic about their economic situations than those in other regions. Perhaps because the West Coast performing arts organizations for the most part had not been accorded the same status or attention as those on the East Coast, and because the majority of large, national foundations that fund the arts are located in NYC and the East Coast, it seemed as if her West Coast peers were already working within a mindset of being conservative with their finances, with an eye toward intentional regional work to establish themselves as their own center of an art-making movement. An example of this is a new festival in December 2009 that Mattox from Yerba Buena and Bamuthi are co-curating that will showcase performing arts and artists up and down the West Coast.

Osato has also seen local, regional and state foundations take up the slack in a very beneficial way, pointing to the huge capital grants that their partners ODC and Intersection for the Arts received recently from the Hewlett Foundation that is allowing each organization to move to new and larger spaces. Osato also noted this kind of responsiveness during the Arts Presenters grantee dialogues in New York in April 2009. The field reports from Arts Presenters and the Doris Duke Foundation allowed her to hear what was going on at a huge level, what was going on in the larger field, and what the current climate looked like in terms of funding, foundations, the current economy and art-making. She was inspired by the conversation, and by participating in it for LWP. She feels she sees this kind of resource-sharing on many levels, “every day, so I have faith that we’re all in it together.”

This is not to say that LWP does not struggle in these economic times. They have worked long hours and full days, maximizing few resources and minimal budgets for a long time, so it has become inherent in their process; recent grants have alleviated this only a little. Without a home space, LWP has developed a way of creating work for their San Francisco and Bay Area constituencies in regions elsewhere, importing performances and exporting artists continually. As for LWP’s current expansion, Osato realizes the company is doing a lot of producing and has a lot of work in development. They are expanding in terms of national projects, which is new to them. Previously, they have

managed to mount productions with a lot of work and not a lot of money. The nature of support has shifted since then. Major funders on the East Coast such as Ford, Rockefeller and Duke, whose notice usually is a universally-acknowledged mark of doing really good work, have noticed them and provided support for their projects. As LWP moves outside strictly theatre work, crossing into other fields of interest, they hope to attract funding opportunities for support outside of traditional arts and culture arenas. They seek sources that are interested in hybrid community development work or cross-sector investments around arts and education as well as arts and democracy.

To support and sustain LWP's work into the future, general operating support to maintain the infrastructure of their organization as Youth Speaks/ LWP would be significant. Bigger project grants to produce larger-scale projects or longer-touring shows would enable more ambitious scope of vision and outreach. In lieu of a home space, the availability of more long-term residencies to develop artistic work in a laboratory-style setting would be ideal. Partnerships with universities to develop not only the creative aesthetic but the intellectual education that necessarily accompanies LWP's work would provide entrenched institutional support on many levels, with a built-in student audience and community to support it. All of these could perhaps sustain LWP as their artist-activists, audience communities, and evolving partnerships mature and progress toward succeeding generations.

In the larger story that is LWP, a specific artist extends out to a co-op ensemble to a hybrid organization to a cooperating neighborhood to synergistic partners to allied communities inter-linking to possibly transform the world. In hip-hop, the break of a record is where the dancer inserts his or her aesthetic, identity and experience. By extension, if America and the globe is the record, then vibrant art and life -- in all its messy forms, dynamic iterations, and hopeful activity -- happens in the breaks. And with their willful art-making, savvy enterprise and engaged activism, LWP continues to drop its pulsating beats, rhythms, verse and humanity, working through challenge and transformation, building communities that embrace all and everything, boldly striving forward into an ever-evolving future of sound, fury and faith. At the end of a performance of *the break/s*, the image of the record returns, and is projected back onto the floor. But now Bamuthi is less kinetic in his movements than at the start, stands in that middle circle, grounded and still, his turns slow and intentional, with pauses to offer up thoughts tempered by reflection, mediated by experience.

*Cycles to break. Don't instill fear in the boy. Pray with full body.  
Practice faithfulness and faith. Cycles to break. There's more than one way to live.  
More than one way to believe black is beautiful. More than one way to raise kids.  
More than one way to love. More than one way to struggle. More than one answer.  
More than one way to break. Falling in the cracks of commitment. Loving in the margins  
between music and manhood. Embracing the silence in the break between beats.  
In the dream, I am bold, in love and at peace. God help me, I'm falling. Like counter-  
culture cloaked corporate. Like lacking the courage to love you, in spite. Falling. Like the  
Cuban night. I am an American at the edge. Don't push me 'cuz I'm close...  
...I'm trying.*

*--Marc Bamuthi Joseph at the end of the break/s: A mixtape for stage*

*Anna Alves works at the UCLA Academic Advancement Program assisting low-income, first generation undergraduates interested in research and PhDs or professional schools. Formerly the Program Manager at the Asian Pacific Fund in San Francisco, CA and a Program Associate in Media, Arts and Culture at the Ford Foundation in NYC, she generated the national reports “Towards a Cultural Community: Identity, Education and Stewardship in Filipino American Performing Arts” and “Future Aesthetics: The Impact of Hip-Hop Culture in Contemporary Performance.” Alves was a 2006 PEN Center USA Emerging Voices Rosenthal Fellow in Fiction and is working on her first novel.*