MEET YOUR NEIGHBORS:
9 Suggestions for Renting and Creating Performance in a City Park

In June 2016 Conspire Theatre held a 10-day site-responsive devising workshop with guest theatre artist Alirio Zavarce from Adelaide, Australia to create a new play with our ensemble of five women who have experienced incarceration. This year, in response to both the Austin theatre venue crisis and our interest in creating site-responsive performance, we decided to make a new performance piece, “You’ve Been Sold a Lie” in and around a small building in a City of Austin park.

The tiny park has a beautiful green lawn, trees, benches, sculptures, and a former firehouse (now newly renovated community building) with high ceilings and cement walls. In the mornings and evenings it’s full of people walking their dogs, or playing Frisbee. We were the first theatre company to use the building post-renovation, and we were excited about its new accordion-style sliding glass doors that overlook the trees and grass. Logistically, it was ideal because it was easy to find, centrally-located and near public transportation, which was essential for our performers and audience members.

The following suggestions are based on the joys and challenges we experienced working with the City of Austin and neighbors to rent and create a performance in and around a park building:

1. **Start the rental process as far in advance as possible.**

   Due to uncertainty about our guest artist’s visit dates, we started pursuing renting the park building only about 5 months before our performance dates. We suggest starting as early as you can in case of unforeseen complications.

2. **Talk to artists who have used the space before.** *Are you the first theatre artists to rent it? Ask around, and get in touch with anyone who’s used it before. What did they learn? What are the quirks of renting and creating in this space? Who do you need to talk to?*

   While other theatres had used the park before, we discovered that it had been closed to rentals for a couple of years for remodeling. Another theatre company suggested we contact the neighborhood association for information.

3. **Know your stakeholders.** *Who owns and maintains this venue? Who else has a stake in it, and why? Develop positive relationships with them.*

   This is when things got interesting. For a couple months we emailed back and forth with folks from the neighborhood association. We had an in-person meeting, and they were thrilled to have us be the first theatre company to perform in the newly renovated space. But they cautioned us that the space was still under construction, so our reservation was tentative, as the rental process had not yet
been established with the City of Austin.

At at some point we were told we needed to talk with the parks department at the City instead. We suddenly found ourselves in the middle of confusion between the neighborhood association, who had raised the money to renovate the park building and felt ownership over its cultural programming, and the City, who owned the space, and wanted to control the rental process, as they do with their other venues. This back and forth went on for weeks, but in the end we were told we should be able to rent the park building.

4. **Have a backup plan.**

About a month before our scheduled project start, we still didn’t have a rental contract from the city, and all email and phone communication had stopped. We had a couple of backup plans, but there were so few venues available, and none we liked as much. At this point, we were invested creatively in doing the play in the park. We also needed to start marketing the performances. Where was this project going to happen?

5. **Develop relationships with city workers in person. Understand their scheduling system and help them understand how theatre schedules work.**

We were about to move the performance elsewhere when we finally got a reply to our email. We could rent the park! We went in person to sign the rental paperwork, and were surprised to find that the huge, busy office we’d pictured was a quiet space with just three workers.

“You need the space for 8 hours a day?” As we listed the dates and times we needed, they were a little befuddled. This parks and recreation office doesn’t typically handle theatre rentals, and were used to renting rooms out to community groups for a couple hours at a time. We explained how our project worked in terms of rehearsals and performances, and they explained that their archaic scheduling system made it challenging for them to schedule multiple hours at a time. We sat with them while they painstakingly scheduled every hour with needed, a half hour at a time. It took about an hour before we had it all correct. They were curious about our theatre company and project, so the time was a good opportunity to make connections. (And when we returned the keys at the end, they were interested to hear how it went.)

6. **Befriend the dogs (and their owners). Invite them to your show.**

After the project began, and we were in the park, we realized how many neighbors walk through the park every day with their dogs. They were often interested in our project and theatre company. As we chatted with them, and petted their dogs, it gave us a great opening to talk about our mission and invite them to the show. If we did this again, we would consider setting up informal
open house times for the neighbors to come meet the performers.

7. Let the quirks of the space inform your work. What does this space have that no other space has? Consider all the possibilities.

Using the park informed the creation of our performance creation in every way. We explored the building’s relationship to the park surrounding it. At the beginning of the piece, the performers took on the roles of the intimidating prison officers they had met in the past. As the audience arrived outside the building, the “officers” marched them inside and treated them as new inmates at a Texas prison. They were told how to stand, where to sit, and what they could and could not do. After the audience was in place, the performers covered the glass accordion doors with brown paper to symbolize the outside being taking away.

Over the next 45 minutes, each performer used a different part of the building to tell her story. One performer used the glass doors as a blackboard to describe being a prison math teacher and all the statistics that landed her (and thousands of other women) in prison. Another performer climbed catlike along a back counter, onto a windowsill, into a sink, and on top of a refrigerator as she remembered what it was like to be released from prison into homelessness and drug addiction. The piece ended with another woman describing what it was like to lie in the grass after 20 years of being incarcerated and being denied that pleasure. In the final moment, the ensemble slowly opened the sliding glass doors, and the sky, trees, and fresh air rushed in. The women invited the audience out onto the lawn so we all could lie on the grass together, finally released.

8. Invite your stakeholders to the performances. Who helped make the project happen? Make sure they know they’re welcome.

One of the stakeholders we invited was a neighbor who helped oversee the park building’s renovation, and who helped us secure the venue. After the show, he emailed us, taking special note of the way we used the space: “My friend and I absolutely enjoyed ourselves tremendously last night. We were very impressed with the production and it’s thought-provoking nature. When you opened up the accordion walls to the park it really made my heart soar. That was one of my dreams - to join the building to the park.”

9. Be good stewards - Pave for the way for other theatre companies. Share what you’ve learned.

Since we were the first to use the renovated space, we followed the curfew rules and sound restrictions carefully, and minimized our impact on the neighborhood to pave the way for other companies to use it. Since the project, we’ve shared information with several theatre companies who are interested in renting the park. Hopefully it will be an option for Austin companies for years to come.