

The Evolving Creative Process of the Winter/Summer Institute

WSI is developing a three-phased collaborative creative process: gathering information/accessing material; generating improvisational responses to the material and to participants' own experiences; and then shaping the work into public performance. Although our work is issue-based, we strive to move outside "message" theatre, building our performances through a dynamic, interactive process that weeds out anything that doesn't make us laugh or pull us in or cause us to think.

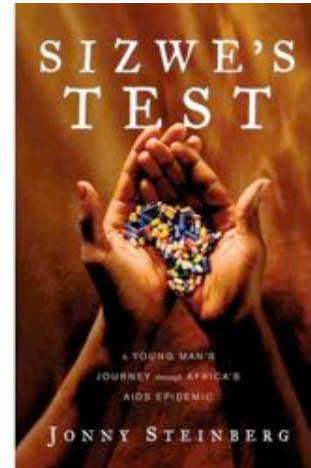


Malealea Valley, Lesotho

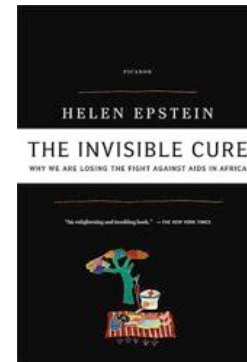
Gathering Information/ Accessing Material

Our collaborative process is set in motion months before we gather in Lesotho. Through the use of shared resources and materials (books, films, articles), Institute participants begin to investigate the agreed-upon focus. Once we all arrive in Lesotho, the exploration continues via presentations by colleagues, community organizers, medical personnel, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and people living with HIV (PLWHA). This enables WSI to establish a shared platform from which our multi-cultural group can work to create fresh, actor-driven, visually compelling theatre.

In 2008, WSI's primary preparation sources were South African journalist Jonny Steinberg's book *Sizwe's Test: A Young Man's Journey Through Africa's AIDS Epidemic* and New York science writer Helen Epstein's *The Invisible Cure: Why We Are Losing the Fight Against AIDS in Africa*.



Steinberg's book looks closely at questions of stigma and denial in relation to why people refuse to get tested for HIV. (see <http://www.number301.com/JonnySteinberg/JonnySteinberg.html>)



Epstein's book highlights "concurrency," a greater tendency for some African people to have simultaneous, ongoing, committed sexual relationships with a small number of partners at a time. (This pattern contrasts with the "serial monogamy" common in the West, or the casual relationships that occur everywhere). With concurrency, people are at high risk from HIV even if they aren't promiscuous in the usual sense of the word. HIV might be introduced into such a concurrent network if only one person has unprotected sex with a casual partner who is infected, or if one of these stable relationships breaks up and a new partner is linked into the network. *The Invisible Cure* doesn't advocate imposing Western sexual lifestyles on Africa, or attempting to dismantle concurrent networks, but it does encourage

making clear the risks involved. (see www.invisiblecure.com)

Epstein's work was provocative and potentially highly theatrical and, therefore, exciting in relation to our creative process. Most people doing AIDS-related work in East or Southern Africa can attest to the number of largely ineffective public campaigns focused on attempts to change individual behavior; unlike efforts that acknowledge concurrency, they are perceived to be out of touch with the realities of people's lives.

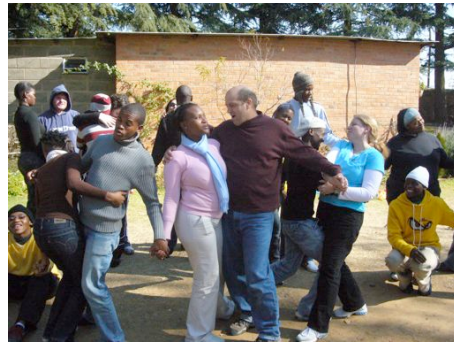
To that end, WSI's first speaker, once the group gathered in Lesotho in June 2008, was Dr. Molotsi Monyamane, co-founder of the country's People Living Positive with HIV. His presentation, "Choices We Make with Regard to HIV/AIDS Testing: The Situation Now in Lesotho", ended with these words: "We like to point the finger at prostitutes and transient laborers, those unlike ourselves, as the ones responsible. But the truth is we must look at how we live our everyday lives. You know, you're out with your girlfriend, and she wants to use a condom, and you say, 'No, come on, it's okay, it's just you and me...and my wife...and your boyfriend...'" Shortly after his talk, we all watched a video of Helen Epstein presenting her work on concurrency.

Generating Improvisational Responses

WSI's creative work is structured and guided by faculty, but the core of the work is actor-driven, actor-improvised and actor-imagined – drawn from a rich and complex cultural interaction of stories, dreams, myths, songs, dances and lived experience. Using ideas and inspirations from our shared readings and presentations as a starting point, faculty facilitators devise improvisational creative "tasks" for the students/actors.

In the case of concurrency, which became the thematic connecting thread of our 2008 performance, we used the Epstein video and Dr. Monyamane's presentation to provide the parameters of the initial improvisations. We began experimenting with staging overlapping, concurrent relationships. And, using a local Basotho folk tale about a mysterious Visitor who arrives one day in a village and leaves destruction and illness behind in the form of his sidekick, the Snake – we found a metaphor for HIV and a way to link our scenes of concurrency, stigma and denial. (For more details of our Generating

Process, along with examples of exercises, games and improvisations, go to the Resources page of our website ([link](#)).



WSI actors improvising concurrency

The resulting performance, **It's Just You and Me...and My Wife and Your Boyfriend**, revolves around a comically chilling scene of Concurrency: a network of lovers coming together, then unraveling in the wake of HIV.

Shaping the Work into Public Performance



Julius Nkosi (South Africa) as the Visitor and Despina Stamos (USA) as the Snake arrive in a village, bringing HIV (symbolized by the red silk streamer) with them

We were careful to construct our theatrical concurrent network using immediately recognizable characters.

The first link in the chain is the sanctimonious married man in the village who claims to be devoted to his wife when everyone knows he's been sleeping with her best friend for years - his wife takes one extended arm, his girlfriend the other. The audience bursts out laughing, elbowing each other and hooting at the actor playing the sanctimonious man.

"That's how it is!" a villager standing at the front of the crowd, wearing a traditional

patterned Basotho blanket and the country's distinctive woven grass hat, exclaims. "That's just how it is!"



Basotho man at the Malealelea Festival Performance

The wife of the sanctimonious man offers her unattached hand, and her lover, a retrenched miner, comes swaggering forward into the chain to claim it. The miner is followed quickly by his other long-term girlfriend (his high school sweetheart), who has also been carrying on for years with her boss at the bottle store. Moments after the miner's girlfriend and her boss and her boss's wife join the chain, the principal from the primary school comes forward and attaches himself to the boss's wife while extending his free hand to the slinky, seductive young intern at his school. The increasing hilarity of the entwined network has the audience in hysterics - their comments grow louder as the chain becomes more complicated and enmeshed. It continues to grow, until the final link appears in the character of the Visitor. He takes the free hand of the last lover in the chain and introduces HIV - the virus symbolized by yards of brilliant red silk whisked in, out and around, infecting the entire network. The audience falls silent and reflective. The next scene begins in a graveyard.

It's Just You and Me...and My Wife and Your Boyfriend was performed on the National University of Lesotho campus in Roma and at the Maseru Sun Convention Centre in the capital city of Maseru. WSI faculty member, Selloane Mokuku, facilitated a post-play bilingual discussions with the audience. WSI then traveled to the impoverished mountains of Lesotho's Malealelea Valley and, after being revised and rehearsed (to translate as much of the play into Sesotho as possible), the show was performed for a Sesotho-speaking audience

of 200 villagers in front of the community health clinic where HIV tests are given.



Malealelea Health Clinic Performance

The performance was the first step in community dialogue and collaboration with village residents. Post-performance, there was again a facilitated, bilingual discussion with the audience. Then 30 participating villagers began work with the Institute actors and faculty. After dividing into three groups, each with enough Sesotho/English speakers to translate, the next five days were spent in rehearsal sessions. During this time, facilitating and directing roles were largely passed from faculty to Institute actors, who in turn then worked with village actors to improvise scenes based on villagers' responses to the performance.



WSI and village actors rehearsing concurrency

In both 2006 and 2008, WSI's final performance took place at The Malealelea Festival, an event co-sponsored by WSI and the Malealelea Trust (a community development organization) and the Malealelea Lodge. The event draws people from the surrounding villages. In 2008, WSI actors along with village performers presented **Its Just You and Me ... and My Wife and Your Boyfriend** for an audience of more than 600 villagers and two chiefs.



Malealea Festival Audience
at WSI's 2008 Performance

Upcoming WSI Events:

Faculty/Alumni Conference in Lesotho,
July 2010
New York City Weekend Residency,
October 2010
Institute in Lesotho, June-July 2011

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