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# A Versatile Group of Investigative Theater Practitioners: An Examination and Analysis of "The Civilians"

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A VERSATILE GROUP OF INVESTIGATIVE THEATER PRACTITIONERS:  
AN EXAMINATION AND ANALYSIS OF “THE CIVILIANS”

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Theater Arts

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Kimberly Peterson

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

A VERSATILE GROUP OF INVESTIGATIVE THEATER PRACTITIONERS:  
AN EXAMINATION AND ANALYSIS OF “THE CIVILIANS”

by

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## ABSTRACT

### A VERSATILE GROUP OF INVESTIGATIVE THEATER PRACTITIONERS: AN EXAMINATION AND ANALYSIS OF “THE CIVILIANS”

by Kimberly Peterson

This thesis analyzes The Civilians, a New York-based theater company that creates interview-based cabaret/theater works, specifically examining the group’s organizational structure and creative and administrative processes. The goal of this thesis is to provide insight into how this organization functions, and the lens of organizational structure and processes is used because, as business scholars have noted, structure and process are fundamental elements of any organization. Additionally, this study is framed using Gaétan Morency and Jane Needles’s analysis of Cirque du Soleil, François Colbert’s analysis of the Piccolo Teatro of Milan, and Celia Wren’s article, “Dissolving the Barriers,” which investigates eliminating the barricades between administrative and creative realms of theater companies.

Through interviews with associates of The Civilians and research of the group’s online presence (e.g., blogs and websites), this study finds two main themes within The Civilians’ organization: a strong and diverse network of collaborators, and flexibility that infuses all aspects of the organization. Individual artists and theater companies alike could use this study of The Civilians as a model for how alternative documentary theater/cabaret is produced, and artists could also use the methods described herein to create accessible, educational, and thought-provoking new works.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### *I. An Overview of The Civilians*

The Civilians, an investigative theater group, has created eleven original shows since its founding in 2001. The Civilians' work, which can be described as "documentary cabaret" (Estvanik 24), has been produced at well-known theaters in New York (such as The Public Theater), in California (such as The Center Theatre Group and La Jolla Playhouse), and on tour to over forty national and international cities (thecivilians.org). The group uses interview-based techniques to gather material and often uses music and original songs in its shows. Additionally, the group's work ranges from comedic (such as *Canard, Canard Goose?* about a Hollywood film and a lost flock of geese) to more serious issues of social change (such as the recent work, *The Great Immensity*, about climate change).

This project details how The Civilians operates, first by investigating The Civilians' organizational structure and then by discussing the group's administrative and creative processes. This research was conducted with the goals of providing a model for how alternative interview-based theater can be produced and of documenting methods that others could use to create accessible, educational, and thought-provoking new works. This research is particularly useful given the rising trend of documentary theater as a vehicle for social change and awareness (Stoller, Forsyth and Megson).

Research on The Civilians is significant in the context of successful nonprofit theater in general as well as in the context of creation of new works in a time when theaters seem nervous to produce works that have not already proven successful. For

example, out of the twenty-two shows on Broadway as of September 29, 2011, nineteen are either revivals of older shows/music or are based on movies or books (Internet Broadway Database). Although Broadway is undoubtedly different than many nationwide nonprofit theaters (including The Civilians), the trends on Broadway are useful gauges of the state of American theater because, as scholar Jill Dolan asserts, regional theaters often mirror Broadway in their selection of shows:

A glance at any issue of *American Theatre*, the trade monthly that reports on trends and issues in regional theaters around the country, indicates that most producing organizations devise seasons that mix a few classics with the most recent Broadway hits and sometimes a musical. These seasons rarely reflect their geographical location, aspiring instead to the homogenous texture of the standard Broadway or off-Broadway New York City fare. (51)

Dolan presents a controversial argument when she calls Broadway fare “homogenous” and “standard,” but her point is logical and important to consider. Although The Civilians and Broadway are markedly distinct, The Civilians creates new, alternative theater and interacts with specific communities and geographic locations, which, as Dolan asserts, is vital to the state of American theater in that it fosters geographically relevant material that helps counterbalance the “homogenous texture” of mainstream theatrical productions.

Additionally, it is no secret that the nonprofit theater community suffers during times of economic hardship. In the December 2008 National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) report, NEA Chairman Dana Gioia states:

The only area for concern in the healthy financial profile of the nonprofit theaters is their historical vulnerability to large economic downturns. During both of the last two major recessions, total revenue and contributions fell markedly. This vulnerability could create issues for the nonprofit theater community in the current recession. (2)

In times of recession, when some theaters may be even more hesitant to produce new works, this study of The Civilians provides tactics for creating and mounting interview-based productions.

## II. *Terminology and Theoretical Perspectives*

In this study, the term “documentary theater” is used to describe interview-based theater works. Although many other terms have been used to describe interview-based performance, including “grassroots ensemble theater” (Leonard and Kilkelly 4), “Ethnodrama” (Campana 1), and Emily Mann’s “theatre of testimony” (Gussow, Dawson xiv), documentary theater is an accessible term, and it is understandable even for those outside of the fields of theater and performing arts. Other terms such as “alternative” and “non-traditional” are used to describe many theater artists in this study. These terms are applied to any group or production that considers itself outside of mainstream culture and society. The term “fully-fledged production” is used specifically for Civilians productions that have been performed as world premieres and that the group considers to be completed projects, as opposed to reading and/or workshop productions that may be in various stages of development. Throughout this thesis, The Civilians is referred to as a singular group, following the style and word choice of Civilians Artistic Director Steven Cosson ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)).

The term “interview” is used in this study to describe conversations between the primary investigator and associates of The Civilians and conversations between members of The Civilians and the subjects for the group’s works. Other terms such as “oral

history” or “personal testimony” could also be used, but the term “interview” clearly describes the act of asking someone questions and recording his or her responses.

Additionally, as Lynn Abrams describes in her book *Oral History Theory*, oral history is rooted in interviews: “[Oral history] refers to the process of conducting and recording interviews with people in order to elicit information from them about the past” (2).

Although this study does not focus on oral history theory, theories in the field of oral history are useful to mention because they help frame this study in two main ways; first, they help contextualize The Civilians’ own interview processes, and second, they help acknowledge the primary researcher (Kimberly Peterson) as an embedded part of this project. Performance studies scholar Della Pollock explains the complex and overlapping subjectivity of interviewer, interviewee, and performer in the book

*Remembering: Oral History Performances:*

The interview involves its participants in a heightened encounter with each other and with the past, even as each participant and the past seem to be called toward a future that suddenly seems open before them, a future to be made in talk, in the mutual embedding of one’s vision of the world in the other’s. The interviewer is her/himself a symbolic presence, standing in for other, unseen audiences and invoking a social compact: a tacit agreement that what is heard will be integrated into public memory and social knowledge in such a way that, directly or indirectly, it will make a material difference. (3)

Pollack’s perspective, specifically that a “future made in talk” is created when people interview or are interviewed, is important when looking at The Civilians’ creative interview processes, and it is especially relevant when considering the interviews that inform this study. The performances of the interviewer (Kimberly Peterson) and interviewee cannot and should not be ignored; the “mutual embedding of one’s vision of the world in the other’s” is unavoidable, whether desired or not. As Pollock also says,

the interview process (including the presence of a recording device) makes present the “power of shifting relationships among tellers and listeners (and listeners who become tellers to tellers who become listeners) near and far” (3). In this study, where an interview-based theater company is examined through interviews, and in some cases the interviewer becomes interviewee, it is especially important for Pollack’s observations to be acknowledged.

Finally, it is necessary to explain the theoretical background and terminology regarding the lens for this particular study: investigating the creative/administrative processes and the organizational structure of The Civilians. Although many other lenses could be used to investigate this theater company, the aim of this study is to look specifically at how The Civilians operates in order to provide detailed models for other artists, and focusing on structure and processes is a legitimate way to analyze how an organization functions. As authors Cheney, Christensen, Zorn and Ganesh argue in their book *Organizational Communication in an Age of Globalization*, “two of the most basic dimensions of any organization [are] structure and process” (17), and the structure and processes of The Civilians are dissected in this study in order to gain a better and more thorough understanding of this investigative theater group. This thorough understanding could provide other theater artists with methods and practices for creating new, geographically relevant, thought-provoking works.

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions will be used: structure is “those aspects of an organization that are prespecified for a given situation; these become a substitute for spontaneous or unplanned communication,” and process is “the ongoing

flow of interaction” (Cheney et al. 41). It is important to point out that although structure and process are examined separately in this thesis, the two are undoubtedly intertwined: “[Process] exists in an interdependent relationship with structure” (Cheney et al. 41). Although the topics discussed in this study are categorized under either “structure” or “process,” there is overlap between the two, and topics are categorized under the section that they pertain to most.

### III. *Methods*

The methods for this study include interviews, which were conducted through email correspondence, phone conversations, and/or in person. If the interview was conducted orally, the interview was recorded using an iPod/microphone and GarageBand (a music recording software), and relevant parts of the conversation were transcribed. The duration of each interview was approximately one hour. The interviews were conducted at the subject’s home or office (in the case of phone or email interviews) or at The Civilians’ offices in Brooklyn, New York (in the case of in-person interviews). Interview questions changed depending on the subject and were intended to be open-ended prompts<sup>1</sup>. The interviews followed the pattern of the conversation, and topics/perspectives that the individual subject found important/interesting were encouraged. Each subject was welcome to request that all or part of his/her interview be confidential, and some pseudonyms are used to protect those who preferred confidentiality. Occasionally, multiple pseudonyms were used for one research subject in order to ensure confidentiality. Interview methods were approved by the San José State

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<sup>1</sup> A list of interview questions used is included as an appendix to this thesis.

University Institutional Review Board (IRB) before research began.

The subject population consists of people involved with The Civilians, including current and former staff members, interns, and performers. Five subjects were interviewed for this study. Inclusion criteria included anyone who was affiliated with The Civilians and had an interest in being interviewed for this study. Exclusion criteria included anyone who was not interested/not comfortable in participating in the study, and/or anyone who was unavailable to participate in the study.

The procedure for selecting subjects occurred primarily through email communication with Rosalind Grush, the Development and Communications Associate for The Civilians. The primary investigator, Kimberly Peterson, sent Grush an abstract highlighting this study's research question, and Grush then forwarded the abstract to people associated with The Civilians asking if they would like to participate in the study. Grush then emailed Kimberly Peterson with contact information for subjects who responded that they were interested in being interviewed. In order to obtain interviews with a diverse cross-section of the organization, the primary researcher requested two interviews with people who inhabited certain roles (i.e. an intern, and someone who had experience with the process of conducting interviews for The Civilians' shows) in order to gain perspectives from multiple levels of the organization. The primary researcher requested these interviews knowing that they were likely feasible, and Grush facilitated these requests. All five of the interview subjects live in New York City, the home base of The Civilians.

Other primary sources include blog entries from The Civilians' weblog, information from the group's email "blasts," and information from The Civilians' website. Literature from the field is also used to support this study's findings.

The results of the interviews are interpreted on a qualitative basis. Interviewee responses were transcribed and sorted into three main response categories: organizational structure, creative processes, and administrative processes. In-depth coding was not used, but a general organization of responses into these three categories informed the structure of this project. Interviewees were asked about all three of these categories, regardless of his or her position with The Civilians, in order to gather perspectives from all angles of the organization. It is the intention of this study to provide insight into the processes and structure of The Civilians, and interview responses (whether contradictory or not) help describe how the group's creative and organizational processes work. Multiple perspectives about the group's processes provide deeper and more complex findings, but it should be acknowledged that this study cannot and does not include all perspectives from members and associates of The Civilians. A cross-section of Civilians associates, however, does provide a layered and useful picture of how the group works.

In addition to the aforementioned text *Organizational Communication in an Age of Globalization*, two scholarly projects were useful in providing framing for this research: Gaétan Morency and Jane Needles's article on Cirque du Soleil, "Creative Management – Focus on the Creation Collaboration," and François Colbert's article on the Piccolo Teatro of Milan. Although both Cirque du Soleil and Piccolo Teatro are much larger organizations than The Civilians, these articles nevertheless provide useful



and relevant guides for examining the structure and processes of arts organizations. Morency and Needles argue that Cirque du Soleil is an excellent example of an organization that is structurally divided between administration and creative production, but whose creative elements infuse the entire organization, “ensuring an unbroken link between all aspects of the operation and leadership roles” (64). Additionally, Morency and Needles suggest that Cirque du Soleil excels in exemplifying shared power throughout the organization, and encourages a culture where “everyone is listened to and all ideas are put on the table for general discussion” (68). Although these goals sound almost utopian and perhaps unattainable, Morency and Needles assert that Cirque du Soleil has excelled at putting these goals into practice in their international head office as well as in their five regional divisions. This study investigates to what degree The Civilians implements these elements (namely an “unbroken link” between artistic and administrative roles, and shared power amongst all levels of the organization) in its structure and processes.

Colbert’s research on Milan’s Piccolo Teatro is applicable to The Civilians in a few ways. First, Colbert argues that Piccolo Teatro achieves the “near-impossible” feat of appealing to audiences while also “pursuing high artistic objectives” by:

...offering a variety of shows and events, thus appealing to several different segments of the population; in addition to offering various types of theatrical productions targeting diverse groups, it produces events not specifically linked to theatre, thereby extending the consumer’s range of choices even further. (69)

This tactic is also present with The Civilians, which embraces variety in its productions and seeks support from non-theatrical institutions (such as the National Science Foundation) when producing shows that extend beyond the boundaries of theatrical

entertainment (thecivilians.org/support). Furthermore, Colbert argues, “because of the Piccolo Teatro’s ability to attract different segments of the population, its audience profile strays from the typical one for performing arts institutions,” and he provides quantitative data supporting his claim. Although The Civilians is too young and too small to have amassed a great amount of data regarding the diversity of its audience, one of the group’s goals is to reach a new, younger audience and to “get people interested in the arts and theater who might not normally be” (Grush, thecivilians.org). Finally, Colbert explains that the Piccolo Teatro, which encompasses three physical theater venues, regards its Internet site as “a fourth theatre of sorts” (71). Regarding the Internet as its own “theatre of sorts” is a method that is also present within The Civilians, which uses media in particular to attract a more diverse audience.

Finally, an article in a recent issue of *American Theatre* magazine also frames this study. The special report by Celia Wren entitled “Dissolving The Barriers” discusses how connected artists feel to theater organizations, citing roundtable discussions and polls that Theater Communications Group (TCG) distributed to more than 8,000 individual artists. A few specific points are especially applicable to this study on The Civilians: 1) many roundtable participants extolled the benefits of “long-term relationships between companies and artists” (41), an aspect that The Civilians upholds; 2) the perception that “theatre organizations choose to invest in administrative salaries...instead of dedicating more resources to artists” (42), a perception that is at least somewhat accurate within The Civilians; and 3) many have voiced “calls for dissolving some of the boundaries that may traditionally have separated the field’s administrative

and artistic sides” (44). This last issue is especially interesting in the context of *The Civilians*; *The Civilians* follows an organizational structure that for the most part falls in line with the typical administrative/artistic barriers, but the group also works to dissolve barriers in many aspects of its processes, methods and productions. Analyzing *The Civilians* through the lens of dissolving boundaries could provide particularly useful insights.

#### *IV. Literature Review*

Although the work of *The Civilians* is aesthetically distinct from other documentary and/or non-traditional theater in that it often takes the form of interview-based cabaret, the group still can be contextualized within the following categories: documentary theater, community-based documentary theater, and non-traditional theater companies. This literature review highlights particularly relevant research from these fields in order to provide both a historical and contemporary backdrop for *The Civilians*' work.

In his review of the book *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, scholar Terry Stoller of the CUNY Graduate Center observes that American documentary theater in the twentieth century has experienced a few notable surges: “in the 1930s with the Living Newspapers created by the Federal Theatre Project,” “in the 1960s and 1970s [when] politically committed playwrights turned to the form to explore such issues as racial prejudice in the United States and the protest against the war in Vietnam,” and in the 1990s, when “oral history has been transformed into theatre pieces by Emily Mann, Anna Deavere Smith, and the Tectonic Theater Project” (589). In their 2009 book *Get*

*Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, editors Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson point towards a recent surge: “it was not until 2006, with the publication of a special issue of the academic journal *TDR* [edited by Tisch School of the Arts theatre scholar Carol Martin and entitled “Documentary Theatre”], that theatre scholars turned with systematic focus to the ‘new’ documentary revival” (1). Indeed, the trend of documentary theater has become more and more popular, especially as a vehicle for social change and awareness.

University of Otago scholar Stuart Young looks at the complex question of “truth” in documentary theater, beginning one of his articles with Oscar Wilde’s quote “The truth is rarely pure and never simple” (72). Scholar Jacqueline O’Connor also investigates the transformational aspects of “truth” from initial interview to performance in Anna Deavere Smith’s documentary theater works, arguing that Smith’s one-woman plays “embody a transformation of facts into a new text, one that recalls the truth of the oral interview while also highlighting the story-telling or fictional elements of that interview; then, in the move from script to stage, the text is transformed again into a character performed as part of a community identity” (155). *Civilians* founder Steven Cosson similarly acknowledges the transformative obliqueness of “truth” in performance, stating, “We are saying that there is in fact no absolute truth, but at the same time, you must commit to the truth” (Zinoman A7), and Cosson also acknowledges *The Civilians*’ subjectivity: “[The work of *The Civilians*] is a work of culture and not an objective window into reality. It’s subjective. That’s a part of it” (Kozinn 203). Although concepts of “truth” are impossible to define or prove, the use of verbatim interviews in

documentary theater performances is an intriguing and popular way to communicate the often-contradictory feelings of a community.

In the aforementioned issue of *TDR* on the topic of documentary theater, Carol Martin discusses the combination of modern technology and oral history in the documentary theater genre: “While documentary theatre remains in the realm of handcraft – people assemble to create it, meet to write it, gather to see it – it is a form of theatre in which technology is a primary factor in the transmission of knowledge. Here the technological postmodern meets oral-theatre culture” (9). Martin’s assertion relates to the work of *The Civilians*, whose interview tactics, especially concerning the use of recording devices, have evolved throughout the group’s ten-year lifespan: “Though the *Civilians*’ interviewers now use recording devices, the actors still perform their interviews from memory as part of the rehearsal process” (Kozinn 190). This method of performing interviews from memory echoes the methods of professor Amy Steiger, who cites her successful use of “exercises in which [student] actors re-membered the bodies of other people through performance: they interviewed people from the local community, and combined sections of those interviews with other texts in the framework of solo ‘character study’ compositions” (21). Techniques for performing “real” people are undoubtedly important to consider in any documentary theater production.

Because *The Civilians* sometimes creates works based on its own members, such as *You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents’ Divorce*, the group can also be contextualized within the genre of community-based documentary theater, which involves members of a specific community “before, during, and after productions”

(Leonard and Kilkelly 4). Although *The Civilians* does not fit this genre in the typical way – often community-based documentary theater occurs when a theater practitioner enters a particular community and encourages/extracts a performance where non-actor community members portray themselves – the genre has enough in common with *The Civilians* that it merits mentioning (Leonard and Kilkelly, Nagel). In her book *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*, Jill Dolan makes an important argument for the necessity of community-based theater, especially in universities:

What would change if theater departments tried to reach the communities in which their students and faculty live? What would happen if they created multiple kinds of knowledge through theater, rather than considering their programs a delivery system for the ‘real,’ ‘true,’ ‘only’ knowledge, and for productions of canonical, authorized plays already popular in regional theaters? (53)

There have been other experiments with community-based theater within the university context as well, such as Jillian Campana’s doctoral dissertation on creating an original documentary theater play, *The Puzzle Club: Brain Injury Survivors Talk*. Campana discusses the techniques she used to interview members of *The Puzzle Club*, explaining that she avoided treating her interviewees as “research subjects:” “I framed this project as an Ethnodrama, a form of contemporary performative ethnography, and I viewed the participants not as research subjects, but as my co-collaborators...[which] privileged the voices of the participants and treats them as experts” (1). There are similarities between Campana’s approach and that of *The Civilians*; one of the “primary tenets” of *The Civilians*’ interview process is to, “let the interviewee go on and on if they want to” (Grush, [thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)), which is a way of privileging the voice of the

interviewee rather than trying to elicit a specific response.

In their book *Performing Communities: Grassroots Ensemble Theaters Deeply Rooted in Eight U.S. Communities*, Robert Leonard and Ann Kilkelly bring to light the importance of giving a voice to those who may feel silenced by mass media. Ron Short, a member of the Roadside Theater company which creates community-based theater in remote Appalachian communities, explains: “When you live outside of those boundaries you don’t even have any of that political control, that economic control, even the control of your own image. Somebody else is controlling and telling you who you are. Then the only thing that you have is your own story” (30). Although *The Civilians* is distinct from Roadside Theater in that the group has professional actors perform verbatim interviews rather than having community members perform their own stories, the idea of “being heard” is undoubtedly a theme that unites *The Civilians* with other community-based documentary theater practitioners. As *New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley observes regarding interviewee responses to documentary theater practitioner Mike Daisey<sup>2</sup>, who interviewed workers in a Chinese factory as part of his one-man show *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, “[Daisey] was surprised to discover how much [the interviewees] wanted to talk to him and how delighted they were by the prospect of an artist using his voice to give an international microphone to theirs. In other words, they were pleased that, finally, attention was being paid” (Brantley “The 99%”).

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that in March 2012, a scandal emerged regarding the veracity of Mike Daisey’s one-man show in the context of the journalistic program “This American Life” that specifically speaks to the issue of truth in documentary theater. For more, see O’Hehir, Williams and Miller (2012) and This American Life “Episode 460: Retraction” (2012).

Leonard and Kilkelly also shed light on many of the difficulties intrinsic in community-based documentary theater, one being the issue of giving equal weight to multiple, often-contradictory community perspectives: “One particularly challenging reality for all of these ensembles that each one has discovered is that it must struggle to find balance between speaking truth so that it can be heard and not alienating people or segments of their communities” (37). This struggle for balance is an issue that The Civilians has also faced, especially when interviewing members of polarized communities such as Colorado Springs, the evangelical hub that is the basis for The Civilians’ show *This Beautiful City* (Katz, Grush, thecivilians.org).

Finally, Leonard and Kilkelly’s discussion of the diverse methods of community-based theater companies is significant in comparison to The Civilians’ creative methods. Proving that there are many different ways to execute interview-based theater, the authors cite companies that use techniques such as workshops, focus groups, advisory committees, individual and group writing, improvisation, collaborations with universities, and incorporation of music and poetry in both the creation and performance of their shows (32-43). Additionally, Leonard and Kilkelly point out some techniques that companies have avoided, specifically the tactic of trying to force a certain political agenda or affect change in a community. Echoing the sentiments of Jillian Campana, Steve Bailey of Jump-Start Performance Company responds in the following way when asked how his theater company “affect[s] the community:” “...I don’t even like that terminology. There is a way to make an exchange with the community. And for me that is what it is about, because we are learning as much as we are teaching” (42). These



responses are in line with those of Civilians founder Steven Cosson, who states, "...the purpose of doing an investigation at the beginning of the show is more to discover what we don't know or what we can't know or the limitations in how we think rather than going out and getting a particular story or fact" (Kozinn 196).

Although these intentions of learning from a community (as opposed to changing a community) are understandable and even noble, the outsider status of artists who enter a community to write about its inhabitants is a complex issue that deserves attention. In her book on the community-based Cornerstone Theater, Sonja Kuflinec critiques both "outsider" and "insider" approaches to interview-based theater. With "insider" ethnographers, those who "emerge from within a particular group to consider and document its cultural practices," Kuflinec acknowledges both potential advantages, such as the insider's ability to gain trust more quickly, and potential disadvantages, such as the insider's lack of objective perspective (12). With "outsiders," Kuflinec acknowledges the benefits of having an unbiased observer who possesses "critical distance," but she also acknowledges the danger of outsiders being perceived as "cultural colonists, imposing a point of view, a way of working, or a set of values of which they may be unconscious" (12). Although these complex observations and questions are potentially unanswerable, they are nevertheless important to consider when looking at community-based theater and its impact, and specifically when looking at the creative processes of The Civilians.

In his book *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre*, Theodore Shank investigates a number of alternative theater companies that are useful in comparison to The Civilians, including The Living Theatre, The San Francisco Mime

Troupe, and The Bread and Puppet Theater. In discussing these groups within the context of pre-1980 alternative theater, Shank makes two arguments that are especially applicable to The Civilians' work. He discusses two main approaches in the "new" theater of the 1960s and 1970s: outward-focused and inward-focused.

There were those who looked outward, exploring human beings in society, analyzing social institutions, considering political issues, and sometimes advocating social change. The other perspective was inward-looking and involved a consideration of how we perceive, feel, think, the structure of thought, the nature of consciousness, the self in relation to art. (Shank 3)

This argument is particularly applicable to The Civilians because, according to Shank's above definitions, The Civilians' work appears to look both inward and outward; some shows like *Gone Missing* are primarily inward-focused, looking at how humans cope with loss. Other shows like *The Great Immensity* are primarily outward-focused, looking at climate change and activism (thecivilians.org). Although it seems as if the work of The Civilians encompasses both of these perspectives, it is interesting that founder Steven Cosson asserts that his focus is "outwards-looking" theater; in naming his group after the vaudeville term "civilians," referring to those outside of "show biz," Cosson explains: "I wanted a name that would suggest an outwards-looking theater company, one that would go beyond the familiar to investigate the world (Cosson vii).

Shank also argues that a new method of theatrical creation, "autonomous" collaboration, became popular within the alternative theater companies of the 1960s and 1970s: "Instead of the two-process method of the conventional theatre – a playwright writing a script in isolation and other artists staging it – the autonomous method involves a single process wherein the same artists develop the work from initial conception to

finished performance” (3). These autonomous methods undoubtedly paved the way for the collaborative creative methods that The Civilians uses today, where the same artists that conduct interviews often also participate in workshops, readings, and final productions (Grush, Scott).

Two alternative theater companies that Civilians founder Steven Cosson has referred to when describing his own group are The Wooster Group (New York City, 1975-present) and the Joint Stock (London, 1974-1989) ([thewoostergroup.org](http://thewoostergroup.org), Ritchie, Freeman). In a 2006 *New York Times* article, Cosson remarked that The Civilians is “somewhere between ‘up and coming’ and The Wooster Group” (Zinoman A7), and, perhaps most importantly, Cosson has explained that much of his inspiration for founding The Civilians came from his graduate instructor Les Waters, and Waters’s former theater company, Joint Stock (Kozinn, Zinoman, Estvanik).

Theodore Shank describes the Wooster Group in a way that is particularly relevant to The Civilians’ refusal to assert a particular message (Kozinn, Estvanik): “The productions of the Wooster Group present no overt point of view; nonetheless they embody a direct expression of our culture, which is made up of contradictory ideas, events, and images that exist side by side, layer upon layer” (341). Additionally, David Savran asserts that the Wooster Group “questions from a position of doubt,” and “refuses simply to illustrate a political position or a predetermined theme” (222). These observations are relevant in looking at interview-based theater, and The Civilians undoubtedly participates in a movement towards theater that challenges audiences to see complexity rather than one particular message.

Artistic Director Steven Cosson has described The Joint Stock Theatre Group as the most direct influence for *The Civilians* (Kozinn, Zinoman, Estvanik). In his book *The Joint Stock Book: The Making of a Theatre Collective*, author Rob Ritchie remarks: “[Joint Stock’s] organisational structure attempts to give the individual company member, whether actor, designer or administrator, a unique part in the creative process of play-making” (2). In this spirit of democratic collaboration, Joint Stock is well known for its ensemble method (or, as Shank describes it, the “autonomous method,” i.e. creating shows as a group), but Ritchie brings up some important questions that the group struggled with: “was Joint Stock to be a fully democratic body in which the majority ruled or, in the final analysis, was authority to rest with the directors?” (21). *The Civilians* is not a fully democratic body, often Artistic Director Steven Cosson makes executive artistic decisions for the group, but *The Civilians* undoubtedly depends on collaboration amongst its Associate Artists in a way that is similar to Joint Stock’s process.

Joint Stock’s non-traditional method focuses on group collaboration and “maximising the involvement of each [actor]” (18). Rob Ritchie describes this process succinctly, and in a way that is useful to quote at length:

An extended preparation period, typically ten weeks, is divided into a four-week workshop and a six-week rehearsal. During the workshop, actors, writers and director explore the subject matter, each contributing ideas and undertaking research. Improvisation, talks by experts, ...interviews with character models, research trips, reading sessions, group discussions, a vast assortment of games and exercises (for analytical purposes more than diversion), crash courses in professional skills – all are used to generate material for the play. In the second stage of the process – the gap between workshop and rehearsal – the writer composes the play. This is not, as is sometimes assumed, a question of scripting improvisations or following instructions drawn up by the group. The writer’s

work remains an independent creative act and the result may have no obvious relationship to the material yielded by the workshop... (18)

Although *The Civilians* does not follow this model exactly, this method bears similarity to that of *The Civilians*, and Joint Stock member Les Waters (now Associate Artistic Director of Berkeley Repertory Theatre and an Associate Artist of *The Civilians*) undoubtedly passed on many of these techniques to Steven Cosson when Cosson was a graduate student under Waters's tutelage (berkeleyrep.org, Kozinn, Zinoman, Estvanik).

The Joint Stock's methods, though innovative and undoubtedly exciting, were not without critics. Ritchie explains, "Accusation of elitism, of writing plays by committee, of perversely pursuing a method of its own sake, have surfaced from time to time in the press and in theatre bars" (11). Although there is no evidence that critics have similarly attacked *The Civilians*, Ritchie's mention of these accusations does highlight perspectives on the process of creating new plays. More recently, scholars have looked at what has become a "typical" system for writing new works. In the 1995 book *Scriptwork*, David Kahn describes the workshop process of writing contemporary new plays, which often begins with a completed draft of a new work:

The majority of contemporary American theatre successes begin with development in regional theatres and other workshop venues, where the playwrights benefit from the interaction between their work and the creative contributions of theatre artists and audiences, who help bring the plays to a point of completion. (xiii)

In his 2006 dissertation on contemporary new play development, Brian Haimbach points out that many now accept the workshop method as an industry standard for getting a new play developed, but that some writers feel stifled by aspects of this process – especially when the writer is eliminated or silenced from giving feedback during rehearsals and/or

workshops (2). Haimbach also investigates the ensemble method of writing plays, where instead of starting the workshop process with a completed draft of a play, the drafts of the play are composed during a group's work together (4). *The Civilians* uses aspects of both the workshop method and the ensemble method, often altering this process depending on the project.

One of Haimbach's conclusions is when a playwright and director work together (e.g., in a workshop scenario), that "a shared perspective on process is at least as important, if not more so, as a shared perspective on the material" (148). This conclusion provides further support for the importance of looking at *The Civilians'* processes in order to analyze the group as a whole, instead of (as many scholars have done thoroughly for countless theater companies) focusing on analysis of the group's material.

Another ensemble method that is similar in some ways to *The Civilians* is that of Split Britches Theater Company. Sue-Ellen Case explains that Split Britches often generates ideas for shows by starting with a "structure of polarity" or a "shell of contradiction" (8-9), descriptions that could also be applied to the topics for *The Civilians'* works. On *The Civilians'* website, under a section aimed at educating others on how to create *Civilians*-esque investigative works, the group describes a similar method of seeking issues that involve polarity and contradiction: "...it's important to find a topic that is really intriguing to you: people are saying lots of different things about one issue, or reacting to a particular event in a lot of different ways, or behaving in a way that seems surprising to you" ([thecivilians.org/education](http://thecivilians.org/education)). This description highlights a part of *The Civilians'* process that is intrinsic to the group's mission: investigating topics that

include many differing perspectives and then presenting a cacophony of contradictory viewpoints rather than positing one “right” answer.

Finally, a review of existing literature about The Civilians provides a useful backdrop of what has been examined about the ensemble thus far, especially regarding aspects of the group that distinguish it from other theater companies, genres and methods. The group, founded by Steven Cosson in 2001, is named after “old vaudeville slang referring to people outside of show business” (Eisler). In the Winter 2010 issue of *TDR*, which includes the first and, so far, only scholarly article dedicated solely to The Civilians, Tisch School of the Arts doctoral candidate Sarah Kozinn remarks, “Since making their first show with only ‘six dollars and a pack of gum,’ the company has expanded ambitiously” (190). In the same 2010 issue of *TDR*, T. Nikki Cesare places The Civilians (along with a large handful of other New York-based theater companies) within the avant garde tradition of “Jarry, Marinetti, and company” (7), and as part of the December 2004 *American Theatre* magazine feature called “Hot, Hip and on the Verge: a dozen young American companies you need to know,” Nicole Estvanik names the genre of what The Civilians “more or less invented:” Documentary Cabaret (24).

One thing that makes The Civilians unique is the group’s aesthetic difference, namely: the inclusion of cabaret-style music in many of its interview-based works. In response to interviewer Sarah Kozinn’s question, “How does [music] forward the artistic project, and how is it part of the process?” Cosson remarks that music can steer the entirety of the show: “In the development of the show, sometime the music and Michael’s [founding member/composer Michael Friedman] songwriting can really start

pointing the way to what the show is really about. If a song comes to him, it can really push the show in a strong direction” (Kozinn 203). Composer and founding Civilians Associate Artist Michael Friedman is an essential ingredient to The Civilians and has been warmly described as “a politically engaged satirist with the ear and curiosity of an investigative journalist” (Holden). Cosson continues to discuss another equally important aspect of including music in The Civilians’ shows: that music distinctly separates performance from reality:

I think the reason why I’m interested in including music in the first place, especially for shows that do engage with reality and larger social questions, which overlaps with what is being done in documentary theatre, is to use very different aesthetic strategies. The theatricality and the performativity of our shows put the emphasis on the performer and the creation and not just the reality of the show. It reminds the audience that this is a play. This is a work of culture and not an objective window into reality. It’s subjective. That’s a part of it. (Kozinn 203)

Cosson also mentions how the inclusion of music in The Civilians’ shows helps to “snap the audience out of the play into something else,” similarly to Brecht’s *verfremdung* (Kozinn 196). It is important to note that although many of The Civilians’ shows are cabarets, music is not a requirement for all Civilians shows. Above all, The Civilians proves to be flexible in defining its works, and the group defies barriers of genre by creating productions that fall into multiple categories.

Additionally, as mentioned previously, Cosson rejects the idea of positing one right answer in The Civilians’ socially conscious works. Nicole Estvanik succinctly reports Cosson’s perspective in her 2004 article: “For the Civilians, it’s not about answers. ‘It’s more about encountering the limits of your own perception,’ says Cosson” (24). In Sarah Kozinn’s recent interview, she also asks Cosson about presenting a



particular message in The Civilians' work, to which Cosson responds, "I don't think of it in terms of messages or arguments, but more of changing perceptions in the audience," (Kozinn 196). Cosson then asserts, "my mission as an artist is to encourage people's doubt and curiosity" (Kozinn 197). This refusal to commit to one message could lead to more subtle, nuanced, and thought-provoking works.

The Civilians' non-traditional interview process, particularly the process of performing interviews from memory – a technique inspired by the Joint Stock Theatre Group – also sets the group apart from other documentary theater practitioners (Zinoman, Kozinn, Estvanik). Estvanik reports that for the work *Nobody's Lunch*, The Civilians "transcribed these encounters without notes or recordings – the Civilians' method allows for, even depends on, the idiosyncratic filter that is the human memory" (24). Kozinn elaborates on the technique of using memory in place of recording technology: "The aim of the interview process was not to find an answer to a particular question, but rather to get to know the person on a somatic, psychological, personal, and instinctual level without the obstacle of a recording device" (190), and The Civilians' website further details this goal: "[Not writing anything down] forced a close listening from the interview subject as they also took in personality and broader mannerisms" (thecivilians.org/education).

As mentioned previously, although The Civilians now uses recording devices, the group still uses this original technique of performing interviews from memory during the rehearsal process (Kozinn 190). Cosson explains this change in process on The Civilians' website: "For more recent shows (beginning with *This Beautiful City* [about

the Colorado Springs evangelical movement]), artists began tape recording the interviews as the subject matters involved enough controversy that an exact replication of a person's words (and the recorded backup to prove it) became necessary" (thecivilians.org/education). Cosson also explains that time constraints factored into the decision to begin using recording devices: "Now we use recorders because we do so much in a concentrated amount of time" (Kozinn 200). The Civilians' flexibility and willingness to change methods is a theme that permeates the organization.

Although The Civilians has received much critical acclaim from reviewers at the *New York Times*, *Variety*, *Time Out New York*, and international publications (Cote, Grathwohl, Holden, Soloski, Thielman, Zinoman, Pellegini, Mechling), Cosson expresses frustration with the troublesome dichotomy of "big/small" theaters in New York City, and how the dichotomy relates to public understanding (or misunderstanding) of The Civilians:

I don't know if this is justified or not but my wish for the company is that we're never referred to as a troupe *again*...It makes me think of Renaissance fairs and actors in the town square. The commedia tradition is perfectly respectable but it's not what we do. It links all of our identities together – the idea of "The Civilians" as a group of performers. And New York wants to have its downtown troupes. It's not unique to the Civilians that as a group we feel misunderstood and somewhat invisible, in that theatre in America is theatre institutions. You're either a small theatre or a big theatre. (204)

Cosson also clarifies that the group is "a creative company, not a producing company" (Eisler), which can present difficulties in securing partnerships, gathering subscribers/followers, and seeking funding. The group, however, forges ahead despite troublesome economic times. In the *Variety* article "Off Broadway Civilians marshal fresh force," Sam Thielman correlates the critically and financially successful run of

*Gone Missing* to other Civilians successes: "...since a critical mass of people checked out *Gone Missing*, there are now enough grants and donations for the Civilians to stretch a little, including a three-week stint at the Sundance Theater Lab and \$150,000 from the Rockefeller Foundation's prestigious NYC Cultural Innovation Fund" (34).

The Civilians' creative successes and the group's innovative yet flexible approaches make it an interesting company to study in this examination and analysis, especially in that some of the group's methods can be used in other contexts to enable and encourage accessible, educational and thought-provoking new works.

## CHAPTER TWO: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The Civilians is made up of people in one or more of the following groups: full-time staff members, part-time staff members, interns, Associate Artists, other administrative or artistic partners who are hired on a contractual and/or consultant basis, and the Board of Directors (thecivilians.org, Grush). Like many theater companies (as noted in the articles of Morency and Needles, Colbert, and Wren), the organization's structure is primarily separated into two realms: artistic and administrative (Grush, Katz, Scott, Keyes). Artistic Director Steven Cosson describes the benefits of following this kind of two-part organizational structure:

I think the most important is actually being able to separate the producer from the artist. And so I'm only able to do that because I have a staff, and when we produce, we are almost always working with another theatre, so often we're a coproducer but we have a producing theatre that's doing the heavy lifting of bringing the show into being. I might produce the development of the show but when it gets into production there are other people making it happen, which is a lifesaver. (Mitchell 1)

The separation between tasks on the artistic and administrative side clearly helps with division of labor, but as Morency and Needles point out, an "unbroken link" between artistic and administrative realms can be beneficial to ensuring that creative elements infuse all aspects of an arts organization. With only three full-time staff members, The Civilians is still a small enough group that there is undoubted overlap between artistic and administrative tasks, but as the data in Wren's also article suggests, there may be further benefits (especially regarding strengthening a company by uniting company associates and encouraging creative solutions to problems) in intentionally dissolving barriers between administrative and artistic realms.

Before describing how each of the aforementioned groups fits into The Civilians’ two-part structure, it is useful to visualize the structure with the following organizational diagram.

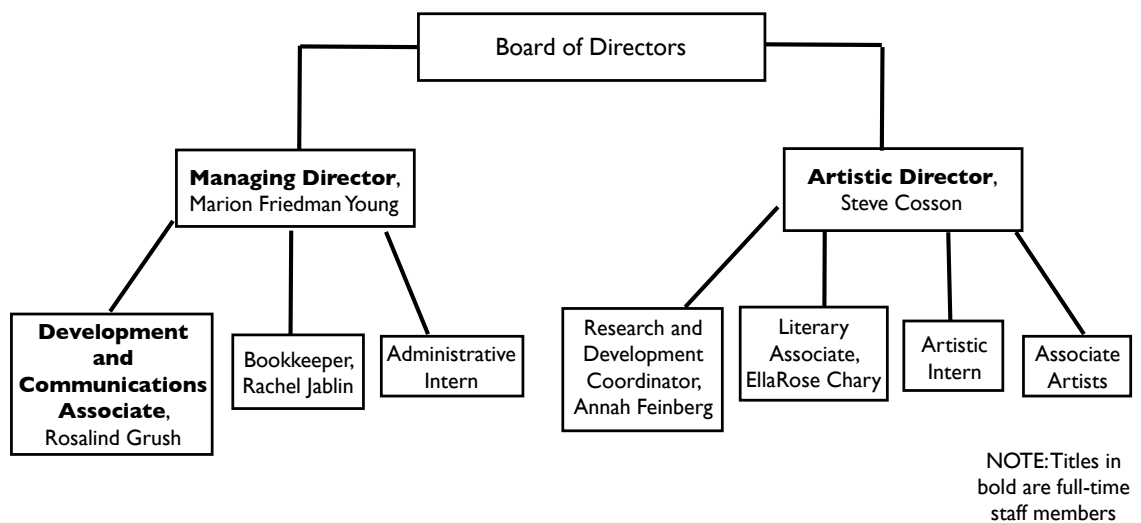


Figure 1: Organizational Structure of The Civilians

The shared level of responsibility between Managing Director Marion Friedman Young and Artistic Director Steven Cosson is structurally similar to that of the Piccolo Teatro, whose general and artistic managers “occupy the same hierarchical level,” a distinction that diverges from many theater company structures where one director holds the top hierarchical position (Colbert 67). Some sources suggest that this shared hierarchy is a trend now exemplified by many arts organizations. In their book *Performing Arts Management*, Tobie Stein and Jessica Bathurst report that the Pennsylvania Ballet, the Opera Company of Brooklyn, and New York City’s Melting Pot Theatre Company all follow an organizational structure where the artistic director and the managing/executive director hold the same hierarchical level directly under the Board of Directors (10-14),

and in their 2010 book *Stage Money*, Tim Donahue and Jim Patterson assert that this shared hierarchical structure is “typical” for not-for-profit theaters (116). Although Artistic Director Steven Cosson is the founding member of The Civilians and therefore holds a level of gravity and importance that is unmatched by any other staff member, he works on the same hierarchical level as Friedman Young to make decisions regarding the future of the company, falling in line with what some may argue is a “typical” theater company organizational structure (Scott, Grush, Donahue, Stein).

### *I. Full-Time Staff Members*

The Civilians currently has three full-time staff members: founder and Artistic Director Steven Cosson, Managing Director Marion Friedman Young, and Development and Communications Associate Rosalind Grush ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org), Grush). As mentioned previously, Cosson founded The Civilians in 2001 after receiving his Masters of Fine Arts in directing from the University of California, San Diego where he studied under Les Waters of the Joint Stock Theater Group ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org), Kozinn, Zinoman, Estvanik). Marion Friedman Young joined The Civilians in May 2008 after working as both a professional stage manager and as a development associate at various theater organizations ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)), and interestingly she is Civilians co-founder and composer Michael Friedman’s sister (Scott). This familial relation is important because it highlights one of the themes of The Civilians: that many of the company associates are friends, family and colleagues of Artistic Director Steven Cosson. Rosalind Grush notes, “[Steve] finds people that he likes working with, and that’s kind of the big way that we pull people in...Kind of simple, and yet strangely ambiguous” (Grush). Scholar Sarah

Kozinn also points out that “Cosson began the company by ‘collecting’ artists he enjoyed working with” (190). The Civilians’ strong network of associate artists is in line with Wren’s findings that “long-term relationships between companies and artists are key to harmonious art-making” (41); Cosson does indeed seem to find ways to hold on to a network of good partners and collaborators, which has become a distinguishing feature of his group.

Rosalind Grush joined The Civilians in January 2010 after completing her Bachelors Degree at Columbia University. She was the first person to be hired by The Civilians in the full-time role of Development and Communications Associate; before Grush was hired, the only two full-time staff members were Artistic Director Steven Cosson, and a Managing Director (Grush, Katz). Decisions to hire new staff members are made by The Civilians’ two directors, and these decisions are often influenced by budget (e.g., whether the company can afford to support another staff person) (Grush, Katz).

Grush found The Civilians in an atypical way: she interviewed for another Theater Company that resides in the same building as The Civilians (the Brooklyn building is operated by The Alliance of Resident Theatres/NY, and all of the office and rehearsal space is reserved for nonprofit theater companies), and that initial theater company referred her to The Civilians (Grush, A.R.T./New York). Grush’s path to getting hired at The Civilians also highlights another one of The Civilians’ themes: coincidence. Kozinn points out, “...in many ways the art of the coincidence has defined the company’s methodology in their research-driven shows. Rather than force a theme,

the company trusts that themes and commonalities will naturally emerge from their topical investigations” (189). This theme has emerged numerous times, such as when The Civilians traveled to Colorado Springs to investigate the evangelical movement and the Ted Haggard scandal coincidentally broke while they were there (Pellegrini, Katz), and this theme of coincidence is also evident in the company’s hiring strategies and structure.

Grush explains that The Civilians’ hierarchal structure is in some ways clearly delineated, and in some ways flexible. Grush points out that Cosson and Friedman Young are the two heads of The Civilians’ structure with administrative staff and tasks falling under Friedman Young and artistic staff and tasks falling under Cosson, but that there is undoubted overlap:

Marion and Steve work together on strategic planning and stuff like that, and, you know - Steve as the Artistic Director...he makes the artistic plans and Marion is kind of about, like, budgeting them and executing them, but they work together on what is going to be realistic and what is feasible, and...defining what the pie in the sky dreams are...And then, yeah - there’s a lot of overlap, though, definitely in the office if Marion needs something...and I’m busy or something, the Literary Associate will certainly step up, and also – some of the artistic stuff ends up overlapping in terms of producing, so sometimes if there’s like something like contacting a bunch of artists to see who can do the cabaret, that might fall under the Artistic Intern. (Grush)

This trend of flexibility is one that appears in both The Civilians’ structure and the group’s artistic products. Although there is a clear idea of who is in charge of what, it is useful to be able to easily communicate and share tasks across borders of specific titles or departments within The Civilians’ relatively small organization. As evidenced by Morency and Needles’s work on Cirque du Soleil, and by Wren’s findings on dissolving barriers between administrative and artistic realms of an organization, these overlaps in



responsibility may be assets to ensuring a consistent organization, both artistically and administratively. Efforts to encourage these overlaps intentionally could prove fruitful for The Civilians. As Wren notes:

The notion of barrier-shattering turned up again and again during the roundtable conversations. Some people suggested bringing artists into strategic and season planning, administrative day-to-day routines and board meetings. For instance, one managing director said that including actors in company planning “really changes the way everyone views everything and makes the company much stronger.” (Wren 44)

Allowing and encouraging “barrier-shattering” could be a tactic especially useful to The Civilians as the group grows and adds new staff members.

Although the separation of “artistic” and “management” duties helps generate a general idea of the separate roles and responsibilities of Friedman Young and Cosson, it is useful to explain these roles in more detail. Friedman Young manages all contracts with artists (including travel) and contracts with co-producing theaters as well as managing finances and development/fundraising, marketing (including branding of the company), and educational outreach (thecivilians.org, Grush, Scott, Katz). Grush explains Friedman Young’s excellent capability of keeping many projects running at once:

Marion is really, really great (*laughs*). Like, she’s really good with lots of things going on. She’s really able to do a lot of different things and do them well...A big part of her job is being the kind of the producer of things...bringing casts together, putting together all the logistics of getting everyone together in the same room in [whichever] city [The Civilians is in], having somewhere to stay, maintaining all the contracts, it’s a big thing, but when I have a question she’s always there and always happy to answer it. (Grush)

To use Grush’s word, The Civilians is indeed “lucky” to have such a capable Managing Director; the management role at this small, non-traditional company encompasses

countless areas of expertise, not the least of which is juggling all of those different areas at one time. Rosalind Grush's role directly supports the Managing Director, especially concerning development and marketing. Artistic Director Cosson is in charge of all new artistic ideas and productions (sometimes acting as director and/or writer), and he also oversees the Research and Development Group as well as working directly with the Literary Associate (Grush). Regarding *The Civilians*' two director roles, performer Jeff Scott remarks:

I feel like Steve is the creative side and Marion is the business side...I think [Marion] thrives on keeping the engine going and making sure that Steve has everything that he needs. I feel like they have a really cool relationship, too...Marion is also one of these ivy league super smart people...She's very hands on and she's very warm, and she's the one you go to for all the questions...all the non-creative questions. (Scott)

Although more perspectives would have to be found to make any generalizations or conclusions, it is interesting to note that both Scott and Grush feel supported by Managing Director Friedman Young, describing her as "always happy to answer [questions]," "very warm," and having a "really cool relationship" with Artistic Director Steven Cosson. These interactions could potentially add to maintaining a strong network of collaborators and fostering what Wren calls the "long-term relationships...[that] are key to harmonious art-making" (41).

Rosalind mentions that *The Civilians* may also hire a full-time Director of Development sometime in the near future:

...to help a lot with some stuff that me and Marion don't have time to quite devote enough energy to, so they'll probably be someone who helps a lot with event planning, and individuals, and cultivating major donors and stuff, that just does take a lot of time and there's no way to have it not take time...no shortcut. (Grush)

As will be further discussed in the next chapter, The Civilians overall has innovative methods for seeking and receiving funding from both institutional and private donors, but a staff member who is dedicated solely to seeking out new funding opportunities (which, as Grush explains, is extremely time-intensive) is a logical step to take for growing company. The decision to hire this full-time administrative staff person, however, is a complex issue that correlates with what Wren describes as “the perception among some people that theatre organizations choose to invest in administrative salaries...instead of dedicating more resources to artists” (42), an issue that will be discussed further in the next section.

## II. *Part-Time Staff Members*

The Civilians currently has three part-time staff members: Bookkeeper Rachel Jablin, Research and Development Group Coordinator Annah Feinberg, and Literary Associate EllaRose Chary ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org), Grush). Grush explains that the Bookkeeper comes into the office twice per week to help keep thorough financial records, and that the Jablin also prepares records for The Civilians’ annual audit (nonprofit organizations are required to go through annual audits as 501(c)(3) organizations).

The Research and Development Group Coordinator is a relatively new addition to The Civilians’ part-time staff; Feinberg started her position in the 2010-11 season, around the same time that Grush initiated the Development and Communications Associate role (Grush). Although the Research and Development Group will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters, briefly the group’s function is to incorporate “emerging and

established theater artists interested in creating investigative theater” into The Civilians for a nine-month period (thecivilians.org). Grush explains that Feinberg mostly works remotely, organizing and running biweekly Research and Development group meetings, and vetting applications for upcoming Research and Development groups (Grush, thecivilians.org). Although Artistic Director Cosson attempts to attend as many Research and Development group meetings as he can, Feinberg often runs these meetings autonomously due to Cosson’s busy schedule. The delegation of the Research and Development Group is an example of a trend Morency and Needles point to in their analysis of Cirque du Soleil: “To ensure that each unit can run efficiently, all are being decentralized, which will ultimately enable them to function as independent and fully autonomous systems” (65). To be sure, Cirque du Soleil is distinct from The Civilians in that it is now a huge international institution with thousands of full-time employees, but this delegation of The Civilians’ Research and Development group is a small example of enabling a “unit [to] run efficiently...as independent and fully autonomous systems.” As The Civilians grows, it will become less possible for founder Steven Cosson to be involved with every aspect of the organization. This autonomous Research and Development group is a step towards becoming a bigger, efficient organization.

It is also worthwhile to point out that before becoming the Research and Development Group Coordinator, Feinberg held the role of Literary Associate at The Civilians. Additionally, Feinberg is a close friend of Abigail Katz, a previous Literary Associate of The Civilians (Grush, Katz). Although it could be argued that the world of New York nonprofit theater is small, and therefore intersections like these are

unavoidable, The Civilians does a particularly efficient job of recruiting associates from its circle of friends, family, and collaborators. Using Wren's article as a guide, this method of recruitment could have both positive and negative effects. One potential benefit is that this recruitment of friends and family could help add to the aforementioned "long-term relationships...[that] are key to harmonious art-making" (41). Alternatively, this model could also encourage another problem that Wren points out: artists often feel like they can only get jobs if they "know the right people:" "68 percent of all respondents [of the TCG sponsored State of the Artists survey that received nearly 1,600 responses] feel that their creative potential is hampered by the difficulty of getting jobs without knowing 'the right people'" (43). Although it is understandable that The Civilians depends on its strong network in order to recruit new associates and staff members, it is also possible that the group could rely too heavily on this method, missing out on collaboration opportunities with new artists who would like to get involved with the group. The addition of the Research and Development Group, however, is one way to balance this friends/family networking method by structurally enabling a system that introduces new artists into the group each season.

The final current part-time position is that of the Literary Associate. EllaRose Chary currently holds this role, but previous Civilians Literary Associate Abigail Katz also shared her experiences for this study. The Literary Associate is an artistic role that directly supports Steven Cosson (Grush, Katz). The role includes research of historical events and current events, and also organization of transcripts, recordings, and research for the large number of interviewees that The Civilians speaks with; there can be upwards

of one hundred interviewees for each Civilians project (Katz). The Literary Associate role is one of the most difficult within The Civilians. Because Cosson is so busy, he can be hard to track down and/or collaborate with on a regular basis (Grush, Katz, Scott). Additionally, it is unknown whether the Literary Associate is now a salaried part-time position or if it still is compensated with a stipend, but Katz expresses some discomfort regarding this distinction:

It's not a secret that I felt this way because I did express it...but I would say my one thing that was a little bit troubling to me was that when they did hire new staff...it was always management and development, which I understand...but they felt that they needed a regular artistic person for support but they didn't want to actually come up with a salary for that person...That was my one thing that I thought could be improved, and that they would have more artistic consistency if they were able to pay that person an actual salary, even if it's part time. (Katz)

Katz points out an important and difficult problem: that few people are willing to do logistical and administrative tasks for little/no pay, but that people are sometimes willing to do artistic tasks for little/no pay. Katz is not the first to point out these issues; as mentioned previously, Wren cites that this trend can be seen in many arts organizations, who potentially become their own worst enemies by financially prioritizing administrative tasks and roles over artistic ones: "...the perception among some people [is] that theatre organizations choose to invest in administrative salaries, say, or buildings, instead of dedicating more resources to artists" (42). One roundtable participant elaborated on this perception: "There's a fundamental imbalance in power, authority and voice between individual artists and the theatre organization...over time, it affects the allocation of resources. And we're under-investing in the art because the artists don't have enough voice in the theatre organization" (Wren 42-3).

Although these perceptions are undoubtedly understandable, Wren points out that this seemingly imbalanced allocation of resources might be less problematic than it first appears. One theater leader explains, “In the attempt to pay the actors something close to living wage, you have to have marketing and development personnel that are on full-time staff” (Wren 43). Katz’s point, however, isn’t that The Civilians does not pay actors enough, it is that the group seems to prioritize administrative staff over artistic staff. Although allocation of staff/salary resources remains an issue as The Civilians grows, the balance of artistic and administrative roles may have evened out in the years since Katz held the Literary Associate position at The Civilians. There are two full-time administrative staff people and only one full-time artistic staff person, but the group now has two artistic part-time staff members (the Literary Associate and the Research and Development Group Coordinator).

Continuing in this vein, Grush points out that The Civilians is considering hiring an Associate Artistic Director to support Cosson. The Associate Artistic Director, however, would not be placed at the same financial level as the potential new Development Director: “Director of Development will be full time, [Associate] Artistic Director will start as part time thing, just to kind of see how it shakes out” (Grush). This distinction could be interpreted in at least two contrasting ways: 1) as evidence that artistic jobs may indeed have lower financial priority than administrative/fundraising jobs or 2) that the new Development Director could specifically seek money to allow more funding for the addition of artistic staff members.

### III. *Interns*

The Civilians has two unpaid intern positions, an Administrative Intern and an Artistic Intern, and both intern positions are appointed for three to six months (Grush, Keyes, [thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). The Administrative Intern works with Grush and Friedman Young primarily on “grants, and fundraising, and helping with letter writing, and getting mailings out,” and the Artistic Intern is “support for Steve, which ranges a lot depending on what they’re working on. Right now they’re doing a lot with working on our new Occupy Wall Street project, and they’re helping a lot with the preparation for the [Occupy Wall Street Joe’s Pub] cabaret next week” (Grush, [thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). The associates and interns from both sides of the organization (administrative and artistic) sometimes help with interview transcriptions, too, although it is preferred that the person who conducts the interview completes his or her own transcriptions (Grush). The job description for the Administrative Intern also clarifies, “as a small arts organization, there will also be lots of overlap with the artistic side of the company, including assisting with project planning and interview organization” ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)), once more highlighting the overlap between the artistic and administrative sides of The Civilians’ structure.

Because the intern positions are unpaid, The Civilians is particularly flexible with intern schedules and availability. Previous Literary Associate Abigail Katz started her work with The Civilians in the context of a “titled internship,” and she discusses the benefits of working with The Civilians in this capacity: “I had to do [an internship] as part of my graduate requirements anyway, and I ended up doing masters thesis on [The



Civilians’] work...that was sort of the idea when I wanted to work with them...So I ended up doing a case book on *Paris Commune*.”

The Civilians’ most recent summer Administrative Intern Sarah Keyes also extols the benefits of her intern experience: “I think it is invaluable for any actor to work an internship at a company like The Civilians, because you learn first hand all the work it takes for a small company to function on a large scale (and it isn’t all grunt work – it is a lot of fun stuff too).” This reflection again echoes the findings in Wren’s article, which call for dissolving barriers between artistic and administrative sides of a theater company: “Many people [participating in roundtable conversations] suggested that greater transparency on the part of theatres would help artists feel more comfortable with organizational processes” (43), and furthermore, “In a figure that may support these calls for financial transparency, 61 percent of artists responding to the survey said that, when working on a show, they would like to know the full production budget” (44). These findings may also provide solutions to the issues that Abigail Katz found “troublesome,” namely, that administrative salaries were placed at a higher priority than artistic ones. With greater transparency, it is possible that different sides of the organization could understand with more clarity why certain financial decisions are made.

Although Katz calls her experience with The Civilians a “great opportunity,” she also describes the hardships of surviving in New York on small stipends: “I was working anywhere from three to five jobs. It was a struggle...a real juggling act” (Katz). Administrative Summer Intern Sarah Keyes, however, was grateful for the travel stipend that The Civilians provided: “The internship was unpaid, but they did provide me with a

free unlimited monthly MetroCard, which was great! Each MetroCard costs around \$104 a month, so that gift turned out to be more than most of the ‘monthly stipend’ internships my friends had” (Keyes). It is clear that there are pros and cons to these intern positions; they provide excellent opportunities, especially for those who are working on degrees that require internships, and the work that these interns do is invaluable to The Civilians. Alternatively, however, the interns may struggle financially during their short time with the organization, and consequently may not be able to focus as much on their Civilians projects as they would be if they were paid for their work.

When Abigail Katz became a titled intern a few years ago, she saw the position posting and then “actually kind of harassed Steve Cosson (*laughs*)” in order to speak with him and get hired (Katz). This process has evolved now; on the website, the Artistic Intern applicants are directed to email Marion Friedman Young, and the Administrative Intern applicants are directed to email Rosalind Grush ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). The Civilians also publishes postings for their internships on external websites such as “[playbill.com](http://playbill.com),” which is how intern Sarah Keyes found out about the position (Keyes). This system seems to be more efficient, especially since Cosson’s busy schedule prevents him from answering emails quickly. This evolution is a logical effect of The Civilians’ growth and it points towards a structure where, like Cirque du Soleil, each “unit” can “function as independent and fully autonomous systems” (Morency and Needles 65). As the organization grows, Cosson relinquishes control to his staff members in order to focus more specifically on his duties as Artistic Director.

#### *IV. Associate Artists*

As of January 2012, there are sixty-four Associate Artists listed on The Civilians' website ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). This group is comprised of actors, writers, dramaturges, directors, and other associates who collaborate with The Civilians. Grush explains, "We don't really have a traditional group/ensemble; we have around sixty Associate Artists that we often work with depending on the project" (Grush), and Grush also explains that some of these artists now reside in cities across the globe – a trend that could be beneficial for The Civilians in particular since the group co-produces its work with theaters worldwide. Although Grush explains that Cosson often pulls from the group of Associate Artists to create The Civilians' shows, she clarifies that this process is flexible, and that Cosson also looks for other, non-Associate Artist collaborators, depending on the project.

Both former Literary Associate Abigail Katz and performer Jeff Scott expressed how honored they felt at being given the title of Associate Artist. Katz explains, "And they offered me the Associate Artist inclusion, which I was really very pleased that they did, you know – flattered!" and Scott describes, "I feel like [the Associate Artist designation] is what I've always wanted, which is a place that's a theatrical home... You know, it's like going back to kindergarten, you want to feel like you're part of a group, and [The Civilians] are a great group to be a part of" (Katz, Scott). The Associate Artist structure is perhaps The Civilians' best method of enabling Wren's finding that "long-term relationships between companies and artists are key to harmonious art-making" (41). Feelings of honor and excitement at being offered a permanent link and/or "home"

with the theater company are evidence of one way that The Civilians keeps talented, strong collaborators included and excited about upcoming projects.

As far as what the Associate Artist designation means in practice, it is flexible, if not a bit ambiguous. Katz describes what her role as an Associate Artist looks like now:

I don't think there's anything they would need me specifically for in terms of production, but what I am still involved with is that Steve will often ask me about writers that I'm encountering in my current job, and if there are any that he should be thinking about, and in fact that just happened last week where I sent him a whole list of writers that I thought would be a good match for Civilians. And you know - just to be a little bit of a cheerleader for the company, and to support and spread the word when they're working on stuff...as of now, that's I guess what you could say my role is...I don't have, like, an official role...I think as an Associate Artist you're expected...maybe expected is a strong word, but I think the idea is that you just support the company in whatever way you can, and if that means, you know - coming to the gala, or helping with the gala if you can, or offering that kind of information if you have it available to you, so that's what my particular role is at this point. (Katz)

Although there is indeed ambiguity in what the Associate Artist title means, Katz is undoubtedly happy to have received the title and is eager to help in whatever way she can. Jeff Scott describes similar feelings of being happy to have received the title of Associate Artist, but also conveys a bit of vagueness in terms of what the title specifically means in practice: "I know that Steve and the other people at The Civilians will consider me and will think of me when something comes up, and I also in turn know that they are going to want me to instigate work and to help them with projects" (Scott). Perhaps, however, flexibility and vagueness are assets to the group. Cosson and The Civilians intentionally create an atmosphere where there are few rules and/or boundaries; this flexibility could allow for a greater flow of creativity, and could also even allow the

aforementioned theme of “coincidence” to flourish in terms of the artists that create, inspire, or execute each of The Civilians’ projects.

#### *V. Contractors and Consultants*

The Civilians also works with people who do not fall into any of the above categories, and instead are hired on a contractual or consultant basis. Some examples of these people on the artistic side of the organization are actors who participate in a specific show (but are not Associate Artists), casting directors, professional transcribers who are hired if the group is in a bind and needs to get transcriptions done quickly, and project coordinators who work on one specific project (Grush). Grush describes an example of a project coordinator who was contractually hired for an in-development work about “the annual beauty pageant in Bogotá’s national women’s prison” ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)):

We have a project coordinator for our Bogotá project who was in part time as well. I think she’s about done with her contract with us, but she was great to have around because she spoke Spanish, which was fantastic...so I don’t know if we’re going to be asking her to stay longer or if we’re going to be asking someone else who can help us with that coordination. (Grush)

Although it could be potentially confusing to have part-time contractors working on specific projects (which could add to the feeling of quick turnover in The Civilians’ offices), this aspect of the group’s structure undoubtedly allows The Civilians to have flexibility in hiring on an “as-needed” basis. Also, The Civilians certainly possesses a strong track record in keeping a strong network of collaborators, and if a contracted individual worked exceptionally well within the group, there is potential for The Civilians to find a way for that person to participate in a more permanent way. For

example, there have been cases where actors who were initially contracted for only one production were eventually offered an Associate Artist title.

Some examples of contractors who are hired for the administrative side of the organization are development contractors – for example, people who help with grant writing during especially busy fundraising times, and event planners, who mainly help plan The Civilians’ annual benefit (Grush). When asked whether The Civilians uses the same contractors multiple times, Grush responded: “We do have a couple of people in our network who we’ve worked with before in various capacities who come in and help out, which is great” (Grush). The Civilians’ ability to keep collaborators in its network, whether those collaborators are long-term employees or short-term contractors, is a component to the group’s structure and processes.

## *VI. Board of Directors*

Finally, the Board of Directors is a necessary component to any nonprofit organization. Grush explains that the board is “a big part of the company, definitely. We do have a big board for a company of our size, I think we have 20 members on our board, which is pretty large... They’re really involved in thinking about what the company is, and what it should be in the future, and how we’re going to get there” (Grush). Again, The Civilians prioritizes keeping a strong network of people involved in the company over sticking to specific rules (e.g., the minimum number of people required for its Board of Directors). By keeping this group of board members involved (all of whom are volunteers, which is a requirement of any 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization) The Civilians

works to ensure that board members will stay intellectually challenged and interested in the theater company.

Again, pointing to Wren's finding about the benefits of long-term relationships within theater organizations, numerous board members are long-term acquaintances of Artistic Director Steven Cosson; some of the board members were undergraduate classmates of Cosson at Dartmouth College, some were graduate school associates of Cosson at the University of California, San Diego, and some were founding Associate Artists of The Civilians ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org), Kozinn, Zinoman, Estvanik, Kim).

Additionally, there is a clear correlation between private donors and board members. It is unknown which direction this correlation goes (whether donors who make large gifts are invited to be board members or whether board members make large gifts after being invited to the board), but all of The Civilians' board members are listed as donors on the group's website: three board members are Supergenius Donors (\$5,000 or above), five are Mastermind Donors (\$1,250-\$4,999), and the remaining ten board members have donated at least \$100 ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)).

Michael Kaiser, former executive director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, explains that one thing he found necessary when he first joined the dance company was to rebuild the organization's board and "set a board giving level:" "And we set [the giving level] at a level that the board approved of – they approved the plan, and created the plan with us – but half the board could not meet that level or chose not to..." (Webb 162). It is unknown whether The Civilians sets a board giving level, but it is clear that board member gift amounts are diverse; the board's Secretary has donated at least

\$5,000, whereas two board members who are Dartmouth alumni have not donated more than \$249 (thecivilians.org). That various gift amounts are evidently welcomed may encourage diversity amongst board members; because each member is not required to give the same amount, The Civilians' board may be more fiscally diverse than other organizations' boards that set high board donation requirements. This fiscal diversity could enable what arts management consultant Duncan Webb calls a "good" board:

There are very few nonprofit boards, and almost no successful ones, made up of people who are all alike. Good boards are diverse in many ways – in terms of demographic characteristics, resources, views of the world, and patterns of participation in the arts. That's a good thing because the board should represent all constituencies who might be affected by the organization, help the organization reach and make connections to those groups, and raise funds from as many different sources as possible. (Webb 161-2)

It is clear that The Civilians' Board of Directors is indeed "diverse in many ways;" in addition to The Civilians' board likely including fiscally diverse members, the group also includes members with many different personal backgrounds and occupations. As mentioned previously, some members are Associate Artists (such as Civilians composer Michael Friedman and Civilians founding member and writer/actor Jennifer Morris) (thecivilians.org), but many board members hold non-theater related jobs. Other board member occupations include NPR radio host, President of a private investment company, Business Affairs Executive at Creative Artists Agency, freelance fundraising consultant, magazine editor, university alumni relations Vice President, and art historian/museum curator ("From Scratch," bluemountaincapital.com, linkedin.com, "Elizabeth Angell," pace.edu, "The Civilians' Paris Commune"). Again, this diversity factors into what Webb calls a "good" board that represents "all constituencies who



might be affected by the organization” (161). Because The Civilians consistently works to expand its “constituencies,” it might not be feasible to ensure that the board represents all constituencies that the group might affect, but the diversity of The Civilians’ board members likely represents many demographics, encourages creative and diverse problem solving and strategic planning, and may help the group “raise funds from as many different sources as possible” (Webb 162).

## VII. “Arms” of the Organization

The Civilians’ organization can be broken down into the following “arms:” The Civilians’ productions, the Research and Development Group, educational outreach, and media presence (including blogs, podcasts, Facebook, etc.). This section will briefly describe each of these groups.

Like all theater companies, The Civilians’ productions are the primary reason behind the group’s existence. The group’s creative processes will be discussed in subsequent chapters, but the structure of The Civilians’ productions is also important to note. Because The Civilians does not inhabit a theater or performance space, the group often co-produces its shows with other theaters around the country (thecivilians.org, Grush, Mitchell). One example of a series of co-productions is in the context of The Civilians show *This Beautiful City*:

An initial presentation took place at Colorado College in February, 2007 with the title “Save This City.” The company premiered the play in 2008 at the Humana Festival for New American Plays [at the Actor’s Theatre of Louisville] and *This Beautiful City* has since been seen in Washington DC [at the Studio Theatre], Los Angeles [at the Kirk Douglas Theatre] and off-Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre in New York. (thecivilians.org)

The variety of geographically diverse performance spaces makes for an interesting path for the group's works. This variety can foster flexibility and creativity, but it can also pose challenges; Grush explains that because The Civilians' shows are not performed in one location, the group cannot have stable offerings such as regular season subscribers.

Some of The Civilian's productions fall into specific programs and/or groupings, such as the ongoing cabaret series, "Let Me Ascertain You," at Joe's Pub in New York City, which features a variety of Civilians shows. Some of these Joe's Pub performances are live-streamed and can be watched from any location with Internet connection, and additionally the group has started a "Let Me Ascertain You" podcast series through iTunes, which is available and free to anyone. The Civilians also has a program called the "Next Forever Initiative," which aims to develop new Civilians shows that specifically deal with the environment, and a program called "Occupy Your Mind," which calls for anyone to investigate the Occupy movement using The Civilians' investigative method ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org), Grush). These specific programs help categorize The Civilians' works, and could make the works more accessible to Civilians followers. These methods of reaching diverse audiences through media are comparable to the Piccolo Teatro, which considers its website a "fourth theatre of sorts" (Colbert 71), though The Civilians reaches even further than its website using new media outlets such as blogs and podcasts.

The Research and Development Group and the Educational Outreach programs are also important to note when describing The Civilians' organizational structure. As previously mentioned, the Research and Development group is a relatively new "arm" of

the organization, and it focuses on creating new ideas for Civilians shows (Grush, [thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). The Educational Outreach “arm” of the organization comprises three main areas: producing and performing a Civilians play at a school, studying a Civilians play at a school, and bringing The Civilians to a school ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). The first two areas, producing and studying The Civilians’ plays, are primarily online resources that provide tips, articles, excerpts from plays, and information on licensing plays ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). The third area, bringing The Civilians to a school, involves getting artists from The Civilians to host a workshop, master-class, or residency at a high school or college ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). The Civilians ensemble has taken a particular interest in reaching out to schools in its neighborhood; since 2010 the group has done workshops at both the Brooklyn Community Arts and Media High School, and the Brooklyn High School of the Arts (Grush, [blogforthecivilians.blogspot.com](http://blogforthecivilians.blogspot.com)).

Finally, The Civilians has a diverse media presence, something the group is hoping to expand in the upcoming year (Grush, Katz). The Civilians participates in the following media outlets: an email mailing list, a Civilians weblog, podcasts, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo, and Flickr. As Grush explains, The Civilians ensemble has a “really active interest in how new media can be bolstering for the performing arts,” which attests to the group’s curiosity, flexibility and creativity. Again, comparing The Civilians’ use of media outlets to the Piccolo Teatro’s website being its own “theatre of sorts,” The Civilians’ media presences could be especially important specifically because The Civilians does not have a physical theater location. The group’s website and media

presence could act as its main “location,” namely the place where audience members come to investigate and stay connected to the group’s new works and projects.

### VIII. *Organizational Culture*

Before discussing the administrative and creative processes of The Civilians, it is important to discuss the group’s organizational culture briefly: The Civilians evidently understands and employs a relaxed efficiency that fosters warmth rather than panic.

Rosalind Grush explains how The Civilians is an exceptional group in this way, especially because the culture of New York City can be extremely “busy:”

Everyone [at The Civilians] is very respectful of your time and your energy and what you’re bringing...I personally have problems with the busy culture, that I think is very present in New York and sometimes very present in the arts, where you just need to seem like you’re doing a ton of stuff and you’re so stressed out and you have so much to do, and if you’re not stressed out then you’re clearly not doing enough...it’s not like that at all [at The Civilians]. Which isn’t to say that there isn’t a lot going on, because there is and there’s a lot to do, but you just do it. It’s not about being the busiest, it’s not about being the most stressed out, which is great, which is so great, because that’s an office culture that I don’t think I would thrive in. (Grush)

Intern Sarah Keyes also expresses gratitude towards The Civilians’ ability to be simultaneously efficient and relaxed and she conveys appreciation for The Civilians’ close network of associates:

The Civilians also keeps a good relationship with former interns and staff members. They see one another in shows, check in for updates, and hold gatherings. This may sound lame, but they had an envelope stuffing party to get out some mass mailings, [and] it was one of the most fun times that I have had in the office. The Civilians has a good balance of working extremely hard, but finding the joy in all that they do. (Keyes)

This combination of joy and hard work adds an atmosphere of lightness to the productive and active ensemble. Performer Jeff Scott also mentions the accessibility and warmth

that he has experienced, particularly from Managing Director Marion Friedman Young, and former Literary Associate Abigail Katz discusses the pleasant experience of remaining in contact with Cosson even though she no longer has an active role with the ensemble. That The Civilians continues collaborating with so many Associate Artists is also a testament to the success of its organizational culture. When strong relationships flourish over time, such as the artistic relationship between composer Michael Friedman and Steven Cosson, these relationships could undoubtedly add to the group's potential for "harmonious art-making" (Wren 41). As Cosson explains, getting to know an artistic partner over time can be extremely useful: "You tend to repeat who you work with, and develop your process with each individual. You know how their creativity works, and you figure out a way yours and theirs can blend" (Mitchell 2). In a respectful, healthy atmosphere, it seems more likely that these artistic partnerships can survive and thrive. Perhaps more than any other structural or process elements, The Civilians' warm yet efficient culture is a crucial element to the group's success and longevity.

## CHAPTER THREE: ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES

This chapter will explore The Civilians' administrative processes with regard to development and fundraising, marketing, and productions. These processes are currently managed and executed primarily by Managing Director Marion Friedman Young and Development and Communications Associate Rosalind Grush, with the assistance of an Administrative Intern. As mentioned previously, however, there is overlap throughout The Civilians' small organization, and associates from the artistic side of the organization may help with administrative tasks when needed. As evidenced by Wren's article, this "accidental overlap" as a result of being a small organization could be an asset to The Civilians and could strengthen the company through "boundary-dissolving" (44).

### *I. Development and Fundraising*

The main sources for development within The Civilians can be separated into two main groups: grants/institutional donors and individual donors (Grush, [thecivilians.org/support](http://thecivilians.org/support)). Grush explains that grants/institutional donors can be further broken into two main subsections: private foundations and government grants. The Civilians' website lists twenty-one "institutional funders," including the Dramatists Guild Fund, the Jerome Robbins Foundation, the JPMorgan Chase Fund for Small Theatres, the Edith C. Blum Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Science Foundation, and the New York State Council on the Arts ([civilians.org/support](http://civilians.org/support)). The diversity of these groups, including the relatively equal breakdown between private and government funders (both on the national and state levels), attests to The Civilians' flexibility and openness when looking for funding opportunities. This approach can be

compared to the Piccolo Teatro, which excels in “offering a variety of shows and events, thus appealing to several different segments of the population” and “produc[ing] events not specifically linked to theatre, thereby extending the consumer’s range of choices even further. Because of this strategy, the Piccolo has captured over 25% of the market share in Milan” (Colbert 69). The Civilians differs from Piccolo Teatro in that it does not attempt to capture a percentage of the market share through ticket sales (as will be discussed in the next section), but the method of embracing variety and flexibility both with productions and with fundraising strategies and processes is a common element between the two arts organizations.

Associate Artist Abigail Katz effectively argues that The Civilians’ flexibility, both regarding the group’s work and its funding, is something that sets it apart from other American theater companies:

The one thing that I think [The Civilians] do exceptionally well is to reach out beyond the theater community to get support, and to branch into media...they got a huge grant for *The Great Immensity* project that was from a science foundation...and I thought that was fantastic and...I think speaks to the heart [and] function of the company which is yes, they’re a theater company and it’s the artistic expression that they’re creating, but they’re talking about things that are universal things...whether it’s the environment, whether it’s the evangelical movement and role of religion in our society, whether it’s...you know, something as whimsical as *Gone Missing*, which is just about missing objects, which everybody in the world has experienced on some level, or *Paris Commune* which is a specific event, but the questions that are raised, interestingly, in the show are exactly what’s been going on down in Zuccotti Park [the location of the Occupy Wall Street movement] for the last two months...and I think that is something they do better than anybody else, or at least better than many other companies...I was in fundraising for many years, and just from what I observed, people do tend to go to the same types of places over and over again...same types of foundations, same types of individual donors, because they know that those donors are interested in funding theater. And with The Civilians, I think because of the nature of the work, they had to get very creative, and had the freedom to be very

creative with where they would reach out to, to get some significant funding for their projects. (Katz)

Katz makes a clear connection between The Civilians' approaches to fundraising and the group's approaches to its creative projects: the two are not mutually exclusive, and the techniques used for the group's investigative theater work are also used to meet its fundraising goals. Indeed, The Civilians' multidisciplinary approaches infuse all aspects of the ensemble's work. Instead of setting barriers among art, science, musical theater, political activism, comedy, etc., the group works to blend these worlds together.

Katz cites another example of The Civilians' ability to attract non-traditional funding in context of the group's Brooklyn Atlantic Yards project about development and gentrification, which "got a large grant, I think it was from the Ford Foundation...and The Ford Foundation hadn't been funding theater for a long time" (Katz). Civilians Associate Artist and composer Michael Friedman echoes these multidisciplinary ideas in a different context when discussing "musical theater form" at the 2007 Theater Communications Group annual conference: "I think we end up with this idea that there's musical theatre over here and there's 'theatre theatre' over here. And for those of us who write music that gets very sad...there's a big spectrum in between and so to not find yourself trapped in between these polar opposites is really important" ("Artistry in a New Century"). The goal of not getting "trapped in between polar opposites" is essential to The Civilians, both in the group's creative works and in its process for seeking funding.

The process for applying for these diverse grants usually starts with Managing Director Friedman Young who "prospects" for grants that seem like potential fits for The Civilians, although Artistic Director Cosson also presents innovative grant proposal



ideas, and Grush also assists with the prospecting process (Grush, Katz, Scott). Friedman Young presents these grants, along with a proposed annual budget, to the Board of Directors, who votes to either approve or deny the proposed budget (Grush).

Once the decision is made to apply for a certain grant, there is a collaborative feedback and revision process between Grush and Friedman Young:

Often what will happen is I'll do a first draft of a grant and send it to Marion, and she'll send it back with tons of comments...we'll work together until we're both happy with it. It's really helpful to have that second pair of eyes, and Marion has many more years of experience with this kind of stuff, so it's also great to be learning from her. (Grush)

The collaborative efforts of The Civilians are evident; Grush is happy to be learning from Friedman Young, and Friedman Young is undoubtedly grateful to have an apprentice who can help with the heavy workload of grant applications. Additionally, Grush expresses that one of her favorite parts of the current role is grant writing, a goal that Friedman Young and The Civilians seem to encourage and support (Grush). This collaborative process echoes that of Cirque du Soleil, both in that Grush and Friedman Young are free to work as an autonomous “unit,” and that “the essence of the organization lies in the fact that shared power must dominate” (Morency and Needles 67). The Civilians’ culture, namely the strength of relationships and “shared power” between associates, is an important aspect of Grush and Friedman Young’s collaborative process. Furthermore, that Grush describes the grant writing process as “work[ing] together until we’re both happy with it” is telling; clearly, both parties’ perspectives are welcomed and even essential. As with Cirque du Soleil, this process could be an asset to The Civilians, “as each participant in the course of action strongly believes they are an

integral part of the success...and, as such, are much more inclined to take an interest in what transpires within the planning operation” (Morency and Needles 68). This process is likely to change if/when The Civilians hires a full-time Development Associate, which Grush mentions is in the plans for this year, but as evidenced by the success of “shared power” within both The Civilians and Cirque du Soleil, this open collaboration is an aspect that should continue to be considered with the addition of new staff members.

Another way that The Civilians seeks funding is through “matching grants,” which combine institutional funding with individual funding (Grush, thecivilians.org). The most recent example of this type of fundraising occurred at the end of 2011, when The Civilians announced that any donation made before January 1, 2012 would be matched by the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust (Cosson “Thank You”). Additionally, the group sent three follow up emails regarding the matching grant, and the last follow up email on December 29, 2011 announced that the group was only \$1,000 away from meeting its goal (The Civilians “We’ve Got a Secret”). Grush explains that The Civilians’ goal was indeed met, and that this type of “matching grant” fundraising is understandably “a really great tool to motivate new gifts” (Grush). The Civilians’ method of gently but persistently contacting its mailing list seemed to work in this instance, and humorous and/or catchy email titles were likewise used to attract attention, such as the title to the aforementioned December 29 email: “We’ve Got a Secret and We Want to Tell You.”

Individual donors are also a necessary aspect to The Civilians. The Civilians’ website lists various levels of individual supporters, cleverly named after stages of The

Civilians' creative process: Apprentice, Researcher, Interviewer, Investigator, Sleuth, Mastermind, and Supergenius ([thecivilians.org/support](http://thecivilians.org/support)). All of these supporter levels coincide with various donation amounts, from under \$99 to over \$5,000, and they also include various perks that range from advance notice of upcoming events to recognition at a Civilians show of the supporter's choice. The group lists nine "Supergenius" supporters on its site, thirteen "Mastermind" supporters, and well over one hundred supporters in the other categories. Donations come from some who are clearly associated with the organization (e.g., Steven Cosson and Marion Friedman Young/Brian Young), but many who have no outwardly apparent affiliation with the group ([thecivilians.org/support](http://thecivilians.org/support)). By asserting themselves as a fresh, funny, and innovative investigative theater ensemble, The Civilians evidently attracts a diverse group of people who are willing to make tax-deductible donations to keep the theater company thriving; one search into a random sampling of Civilians donors included some individuals connected to the entertainment industry (including a documentary filmmaker, a playwright, and a dancer), and some in other fields (including a marketing specialist, an insurance company underwriting specialist, and a Rabbi) ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org), [linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com), [plus.google.com](https://plus.google.com), Krock, "Weddings").

Additionally, The Civilians works to keep donors interested and involved. Grush explains that the end of each calendar year is a time when the company sends special letters to "lapsed donors," or donors who contributed in the last fiscal year but haven't yet donated in the current year. Although this method is undoubtedly one that many nonprofit organizations use, that The Civilians dedicates time to keeping previous donors

interested is further proof of the group's ability to keep a strong network of supporters in addition to a strong network of associates, and to foster what Wren describes as "long-term relationships" (41).

The Civilians closely follows the rules associated with being a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization; most donations are 100% tax-deductible, but some perks cannot be included in the tax-deductible bracket (e.g., a "Mastermind" donation is "tax deductible in the amount exceeding \$75") ([thecivilians.org/support](http://thecivilians.org/support)). The Civilians accepts donations both through paper check mailed to the group's offices in Brooklyn or through an online site called "Network for Good" that is accessible through the group's website ([thecivilians.org/support](http://thecivilians.org/support)). This online donation tool is especially important in that it helps make The Civilians' website what Colbert calls its own "theatre of sorts;" because The Civilians does not have a physical theater location, the group's website acts as the theater company's home base, and the easy facilitation of donations through the group's Internet "home" is an important way to assist with the ease of gift-giving.

In addition to soliciting donations through grants, The Civilians also hosts an annual fundraising benefit which is held at a different New York City location each year and features food, drinks, and original performances (Grush, The Civilians "Benefit X"). Although Rosalind Grush admits that she does not know the exact "numbers" (she explains that Friedman Young is more well versed in the specifics of The Civilians' finances), Grush estimates that the last annual benefit raised around \$55,000, approximately the same amount of money that the annual fund raises (Grush). The benefit raises money by selling tickets and through corporate sponsorships; the 2011

benefit was sponsored by Ozwell Vintners, Crop Organic Vodka, and Chatham Imports, three liquor and wine companies whose products were served at the event (The Civilians “Benefit X”). Similarly to the group’s individual donor levels, the Civilians also cleverly categorizes various benefit ticket levels: the “Gucci Pump” ticket level (inspired by the 2003 show *Gone Missing*), the “French Goose” ticket level (inspired by the 2002 show *Canard, Canard, Goose?*), and the “Schrodinger’s Cat” ticket level (inspired by the 2004 show *(I Am) Nobody’s Lunch*) (The Civilians “Benefit X”). Again, The Civilians’ focus on long-term relationships is apparent; this clever marketing device is likely to attract long-time Civilians supporters, who may have witnessed each of these shows as it was created.

Regarding logistics and workload, The Civilians’ annual benefit is one of the most difficult events of the year. Grush explains, “The most stressful time for me is definitely around the benefit. It’s a lot of things that need to come together. It’s like planning a wedding every year, if you can believe it” (Grush). Associate Artist Abigail Katz also mentions that even as a Literary Associate (on the artistic side of the organization), she helped with fundraising for the annual benefit/gala event. As mentioned in the previous chapter, The Civilians did hire a contractor to help plan last year’s benefit, which Grush explains was “wonderful.” The contractor was an event-planner specialist who helped organize the staff members and reminded them of their tasks and responsibilities for the upcoming event (Grush). The benefit is a particularly good example of “dissolving boundaries” within The Civilians; the event involves both

artistic and administrative elements, and many associates of the group come together for a common goal: to help The Civilians raise money for future projects.

## II. *Marketing*

Rosalind Grush describes marketing as “defining the presence of the company,” which includes aspects such as media presence and ticket sales. The Civilians faces a unique challenge in defining itself: it does not have a permanent theater/performance space, so instead of producing a typical New York City-based theater season, the group performs its season around the world in co-production with other theaters. Grush further elaborates on this challenge:

Marketing is much more about defining the presence of the company, and making it known that we are a presence that is here all the time, not just a group of people that pop up whenever we do a show and then we go back into anonymity. We’ve been producing more regularly in New York, and that has been something that the cabaret series has helped with a lot – having that more regular presence, but we still end up with shows in different places, going to colleges throughout the nation, it’s kind of just about keeping people engaged with the work and the topics in between those actual “you can come to the theater and see us!”...So I think that’s an interesting challenge. (Grush)

The Civilians does indeed face “an interesting challenge” with promoting its geographically diverse works, but the group is open to various ways to address this challenge. As Grush mentions, The Civilians’ Joe’s Pub cabaret series helps root the theater company with a New York audience, but it is apparent that part of The Civilians’ mission and “presence” is to extend beyond New York City intentionally. These challenging and sometimes contradictory issues of defining presence, however, do not slow the company down; this past year both rooted the ensemble more strongly in New York with the aforementioned cabaret series, and also took the company to far reaches of

the globe, especially with the Bogotá women’s prison project and *The Great Immensity* project (which included travel to two environmentally distinct locations: the Panama Canal and arctic Canada) (thecivilians.org). Rather than limiting its work to a more narrow scope, The Civilians embraces these identity challenges by continuing to expand its geographic borders.

Artistic Director Cosson points out that The Civilians’ model, specifically the company’s lack of a physical theater space, is unique in the United States: “It’s interesting being an American theatre company because, for whatever reason, this country isn’t organized the same way that many other countries are organized, in which a theatre company creates work and may not have a building for it” (Mitchell 4). Perhaps drawing on the aforementioned Civilians theme of coincidence, Cosson’s observation is especially interesting in that the research for this study found comparable studies mostly on theater companies outside of the United States: Italy’s Piccolo Teatro, Canada’s Cirque du Soleil, and England’s Joint Stock, in addition to research on companies that did not specifically influence this study, but helped provide a contextual backdrop: Alves’s work on the Circle Theater in Paris, Boerner and Geothe’s comparison of German theater company processes with the processes of scientific institutes, and Zeltina’s investigation of the Baltic Theater. This coincidence may point to yet another distinction – that although The Civilians is undoubtedly American, it diverges from a typical American theater company structure, which may affect the company’s fundraising, production, and marketing methods. To be sure, in-depth comparison of The Civilians to theater companies outside of North America is outside the scope of this project; as Duncan Webb

states regarding international theaters, “the way those theaters operate is fundamentally different, given their economic structures, the role of government in the arts, tax laws, marketing practices, administrative skills, and the role of theaters in society and culture” (x). It is interesting, however, to at least acknowledge the parallels between The Civilians and some international traditions, especially in the context of “defining the presence of [The Civilians’] company” (Grush).

Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director of New York’s The Public Theater, echoes the argument that The Civilians links distinct international traditions: “The ethos of their work combines the best of the British Joint Stock tradition of collective creation with the rawness and immediacy that is so characteristically American” (Cosson, *The Civilians* v). That The Civilians brings together aspects of different traditions, both nationally and internationally, is important creatively and administratively; as Cosson suggests, the model of collaboration and co-production (a model that is atypical in the United States) is one of the most important aspects of The Civilians’ identity:

The greatest thing [The Civilians] have to share is the model of many successful partnerships. And the idea that partnership isn’t just about producing. We’re able to develop and create a kind of show that couldn’t be created just by commissioning one writer. When we team up with an institutional theatre, then the work that we’re doing may satisfy for further things in their mission as well, or accomplish things they want to do as a theatre. Working together, we can create, ultimately, a kind of work that otherwise wouldn’t be possible.

And I think the trend at the moment is toward more of this, and that more and more theatres are recognizing the value of having those kinds of collaborations. (Mitchell 4)

Interestingly, although this “model of many successful partnerships” may be atypical for American theater companies, it has led The Civilians to create collaborative productions that could easily be described as “melting pots” of ideas, a description that is, using



Eustis's words, "so characteristically American" (Cosson, *The Civilians* v). These multi-national influences and trends may make it more difficult for The Civilians to "define the presence of the company," but once again, The Civilians evidently embraces these difficulties rather than shying away from them, as exemplified by global projects and co-productions such as *The Great Immensity*.

Cosson also points out that it is difficult for The Civilians to be defined and categorized regarding size and reputation in a typical way:

I think for us, a big part of the story that doesn't get told is that we're not limited to Off-Broadway, and that we're working with major theatres around the country. And sometimes that's a challenge – how do you make that correspond to you, the size of your staff? Or the size of your budget? Or the usual markers? (Mitchell 4)

The Civilians, in both its creative works and organizational structure/processes, defies typical definitions. The group could be considered a small "downtown" theater company, but as Cosson points out, The Civilians also works with major playwrights and theaters around the world. These challenges could be especially difficult for Managing Director Friedman Young, who makes many decisions regarding size of staff, budgets, etc. In these circumstances, it is especially important that The Civilians holds onto a strong network of associates, such as the large and active Board of Directors who might be especially helpful in brainstorming innovative solutions that are unique to The Civilians' particular goals and challenges.

Once again attesting to the flexibility of The Civilians' organization, these challenges also seem to inspire creative ways to reach audiences using nontraditional tactics. As mentioned previously, one nontraditional approach that The Civilians focuses

on is the use of media (Grush, Katz). Grush argues that one of the most successful aspects of The Civilians is the group's flexibility, and specifically its openness to new media as a way to communicate with a new theater audience:

[The Civilians has] this really active interest in how new media can be bolstering the performing arts. I think it's easy to look at new media stuff and say, "that isn't live performance, and therefore...it's devaluing live performance to tape [record] something." I don't think that's the case in our current climate, I think it's really great that The Civilians are looking at that, trying to find ways to take advantage of that, get people interested in the arts and theater who might not normally be, by trying to reach them in the way that they receive information. It's a really simple concept, but I think it's one that's kind of easily dismissed, maybe, or undervalued. (Grush)

That The Civilians tries to reach people "in the way that they receive information," namely through new media outlets such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and podcasts, is important, especially when trying to reach a young theater audience. As many have observed, the Internet has facilitated simple worldwide communication, but it has also facilitated infinite entertainment at one's fingertips; people no longer need to leave their homes to see performances. As Michael Kaiser, President of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, succinctly states, "Many people have simply chosen to stay home rather than to bear the expense of going to the theater. So the challenge of reaching out to the potential audience for any venue must be constantly met" (Webb viii).

Although a theater company could be discouraged by this trend, The Civilians accepts it as a new challenge. The group participates in many new media outlets, including live web streams of performances that anyone can view, free of charge, from his or her home (thecivilians.org). Like the Piccolo Teatro, which views its website as a "theatre of sorts," The Civilians does not view the Internet as competition. Instead, the group views

the Internet as another separate way to reach audiences. This open-minded and innovative thinking is especially important for a theater company that strives to inspire creative, new thinking, and that depends on the Internet (rather than a physical location) to draw new followers.

One potential downfall to The Civilians' participation in many new media outlets is that the organization's projects can easily appear splintered. In addition to co-producing projects with many different theaters across the globe, The Civilians also participates in multiple social networking sites, video-sharing sites and blogs, in addition to its main website ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). For an audience member trying to follow the theater company's progress, it can be difficult or confusing to track what is happening in which location. This confusion is exacerbated by the various stages that the group's productions go through. For example, the current project that involves collecting interviews about the Occupy movement is referred to by its Joe's Pub cabaret name, "Let Me Ascertain You: Occupy Wall Street," by its podcast name, "Occupy Wall Street Parts I, II, and III," by its initiative name: "Occupy Your Mind," and if it develops into a fully-fledged production, it will likely gain yet another name ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org), Grush). As Grush states, one of the company's greatest attributes is its flexibility, but a great amount of organization is necessary to make the group's flexible and creative production process easy to follow from an audience member's perspective.

Although The Civilians undoubtedly appreciates ticket-purchasing audience members, it should be noted that the company does not and cannot survive on ticket sales alone, which affects the group's marketing:

This is a big thing in the nonprofit administration world, you can't live on ticket sales alone, you can't do it, it's not possible. Especially because one of the big things for us is keeping ticket prices relatively low...when we do have control over that kind of thing...When we were doing *In The Footprint*, our Atlantic Yards show, we did...community discounts...free performances, sent people like arts organizations discount codes...We were working really hard to keep things affordable and get a diverse audience into the theater. I think we did a good job of that...But it's a challenge. I think if we did break even on that show – it was barely. I mean, the repercussions of doing the show were obviously great. Like, no regrets – obviously, but as far as ticket sales versus production costs, it was not where the money was coming from. (Grush)

The Civilians is an attractive organization for charitable foundations since the group's work is often related to social change and activism, and this charitable financial support is clearly necessary because, as Grush states, the company cannot survive on ticket sales. That the company does not depend on tickets sales for its annual budget also makes it easier for the group to experiment with new media; if The Civilians does not depend on sales from a particular performance, then the group is more apt to offer, for example, live web streams of that performance free of charge.

Finally, a major part of The Civilians' marketing process is "email blasts" that are sent to The Civilians' email mailing list regarding upcoming projects, productions, fundraising goals, etc. Rosalind Grush is in charge of this process and she describes it as one of her least favorite parts of her job:

I do like writing the [email blasts]...the problem is that we don't have a good interface to create them. We're using a service where if you're a nonprofit you get a certain number of email credits free every month...like, two or three free email blasts a month, which is awesome! But, they just don't have really great technology set up to make it easy to put together. (Grush)

Accepting the "perks" of being a nonprofit, such as this free email service, is undoubtedly important when trying to keep production costs low, but unfortunately some of these

“perks” are flawed and/or cumbersome to use. When asked whether Grush thought that The Civilians should abandon the free service in order to save time and effort, she responded, “Yeah...I might be really pushing for that in the next couple of months” (Grush). Again, that Grush seems confident in approaching The Civilians’ Managing Director with suggestions is beneficial to the organization as a whole; the time saved by using a more up-to-date email service could free up Grush’s capacity for higher level, more important tasks. This openness in communication is also reminiscent of Cirque du Soleil’s model, where “[everyone] knows that they can be part of the method of finding solutions to any problems, which ultimately enriches the planning procedure” (Morency and Needles 68). Using Cirque du Soleil as an example, it is apparent that an organizational culture that fosters collaboration and suggestions from all levels is beneficial to an entire company’s progress, especially in the context of arts organizations that should (according to Morency and Needles) thrive on creativity in artistic as well as administrative realms.

### III. *Productions*

Lastly, there is an administrative element to mounting The Civilians’ productions. Grush explains that most of these administrative production-related processes are managed by Civilians Managing Director Marion Friedman Young, but that production coordinators are sometimes hired on a temporary basis to assist with a specific show, and that she or another associate is always willing to help with individual tasks if necessary. Most importantly, however, it is important to point out that because The Civilians co-produces its productions with other theaters, each production’s process is distinct and

many production-related tasks are handled by the producing theater. As mentioned previously, Cosson describes that this transfer of production tasks from The Civilians to the producing theater is a “lifesaver.”

When we produce, we are almost always working with another theatre, so often we’re a co-producer but we have a producing theatre that’s doing the heavy lifting of bringing the show into being. I might produce the development of the show but when it gets into production there are other people making it happen, which is a lifesaver. (Mitchell 1)

Especially regarding administrative aspects of production, The Civilians depends on the “producing theatre that’s doing the heavy lifting of bringing the show into being” to manage much of the workload. This aspect of The Civilians’ co-producing model may also enable The Civilians to function with fewer full-time staff members; because The Civilians divides production-related tasks between its own staff members and the staff of a partnering theater, the group may be more able to manage with only three current full-time staff members.

Because Civilians shows are co-produced with other theaters, one process that is crucial to The Civilians’ productions is networking to find co-producers for shows. When asked whether The Civilians seeks out co-producers or whether co-producers seek out The Civilians, Grush responds that both of these situations occur: “sometimes it will be them being like, ‘oh we have a slot – do you want to come do this?’ and sometimes it’ll be like us being like, ‘oh we have this [show]!’ It depends...on the project, on their timing, on the season...” (Grush). Grush further explains that Friedman Young and Cosson often seek networking opportunities at national theater conferences. During a panel at the 2007 Theater Communications Group annual conference, Cosson joked that

co-production relationships are formed “by just going to the right bar at a TCG [Theater Communications Group] conference” (“Artistry in a New Century”). There is truth within the humor of Cosson’s statement, however. Fellow conference panelist Jessica Hagedorn reported that she did indeed coordinate the production of her musical *Most Wanted* with California’s La Jolla Playhouse at a bar during a Theater Communications Group conference in Portland, Oregon. In addition to The Civilians’ organizational and artistic flexibility (e.g., being open to meeting future co-producers at a bar), The Civilians’ ability to keep a strong network of collaborators also could be beneficial in securing current and future production partners.

Grush points out that one benefit of the ensemble’s ten-year lifespan is that co-producers are now often familiar with The Civilians’ plays before working with the group: “It’s kind of to the point where a lot of the theaters that we’re working with know our work before we work with them...we have an established relationship with them, which is great” (Grush). It is clear that The Civilians has worked with many theaters multiple times, such as The Public Theater, the Barrow Street Theatre, and Playwrights Horizons ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). Having an established relationship with many theaters is undoubtedly beneficial for The Civilians – the group likely does not have to “pitch” itself to potential co-producers for each production, but this benefit could also be a double-edged sword; The Civilians probably wants to avoid the trap of creating the same types of shows in order to appeal to co-producers with whom they have existing relationships. As Associate Artist Abigail Katz explains:

I would love to see [The Civilians] just continue doing what they’re doing. I also think it would be interesting to see how they change it up. Because there is a

point where...it could start to feel like another Civilians show with just a different topic, and I think if anything they're not a formulaic company, and...I really want to see it stay that way. (Katz)

Finding the balance between the security of an established reputation while simultaneously creating new, innovative productions is indeed important to consider in the context of The Civilians' future. Wren's findings suggest that further incorporation of The Civilians' Associate Artists into the group's strategic planning might be a way to combat "formulaic" processes or productions. Grush explains that one show this past season, *You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents' Divorce*, was indeed spearheaded by Civilians Associate Artists rather than Artistic Director Steven Cosson, and the show followed a different process than some other Civilians shows in a few key ways: 1) it did not include music, and 2) it was produced at colleges where students from that college performed a "coda" to The Civilians' production that was based on their own interviews and experiences (Grush, thecivilians.org). Including Associate Artists in artistic and strategic planning could ensure that The Civilians continues to experiment with these new types of forms and ideas.

Once Friedman Young and Cosson secure a co-producer for a Civilians production (and more specifically, a theater and performance dates), The Civilians casts actors either from its pool of Associate Artists or from casting calls held by a contracted casting director (Grush, Scott, Katz). If The Civilians uses actors from within its pool of Associated Artists, often Steven Cosson will contact the performer directly, especially if the casting represents a change from a previous production (Grush, Scott). For example,



Associate Artist Margaret Cruz describes the experience of being cast in a workshop and then replaced:

Steve emailed and said, “I’m just letting you know, we’re doing another workshop, and I’m going to use this other actor because I originally wrote the part for her, and she’s now available, so I wanted to see what she does with the role. It’s nothing personal, you were fantastic.” (Cruz)

Cruz was then cast in another version of that same Civilians project and she was thrilled to find out that she would be working with the group again. In this case, Cosson answers what Wren describes as individual artists’ “calls for transparency” (44). By sharing the casting process with Cruz, Cosson enabled transparent communication. Cruz felt respected, and was happy to work with Cosson and The Civilians again when the next opportunity was presented to her.

From Abigail Katz’s account, it appears that The Civilians’ casting process has evolved throughout the years since she was The Civilians’ Literary Associate. Katz describes that although she wasn’t directly involved in the casting process, it seemed confusing from an outsider’s perspective: “We had interim people who would come in and work with casting, which I didn’t really get because they weren’t actually casting [directors] – they were management people who were sort of coordinating casting” (Katz). The process that Katz describes is less transparent than the process that the group now uses, which actor Roger McLane describes as a more typical casting experience, albeit informal:

Completely by chance, I was auditioning for a TV show and the casting director asked me if I sang, and I said ‘Well, I can carry a tune...’ and he said, ‘Ok, that’s fine. I’m going to bring you in for a workshop that The Civilians are doing,’ because they needed an actor who spoke Spanish, which I do. (McLane)

That The Civilians now uses professional casting directors who seek out actors for its productions even outside of official “Civilians” casting calls is one way that the group brings in new talent, and may avert what Wren describes as actors feeling hindered by needing to “know the right people” in order to get a job (43).

As evidence of The Civilians’ flexibility and perhaps informality, McLane describes his audition with The Civilians as “nonchalant” and “non-romantic:”

[Michael Friedman, Civilians Associate Artist/composer] wanted me to sing a song, but there wasn’t even an accompanist there, so I had to sing a cappella. It was the weirdest thing because I had built it up into this huge thing, and it literally was me and Michael in a room. (McLane)

After this audition, McLane did not have to attend a callback audition; The Civilians simply called him a few days later and offered him the job. The simplicity in The Civilians’ casting strategies may be evidence of the group’s organizational culture, which Grush describes as the opposite of a stressful, “busy” New York culture. The “non-romantic” audition also could be used as a tactic to introduce new artists to the theme of flexibility within The Civilians; that McLane was flexible enough to sing a cappella at an audition perhaps was a sign that he would be a good collaborative fit for The Civilians. Although these informal tactics might appear unprofessional to some performers, perhaps The Civilians intentionally presents itself this way in order to give an accurate picture of the group to potential collaborators.

The Civilians also contracts stage managers, especially when producing a reading or workshop when a co-producing theater is not providing a production crew (Grush, Scott). These stage managers also must embrace some degree of flexibility; performer Jeff Scott describes one experience where a stage manager had to make last-minute cuts

during the performance of a reading: “Whatever went wrong, we would incorporate... we were going way over time...and the stage manager was coming backstage and saying, ‘ok we’re not going to do that one, cause we don’t have time.’ So it was all sort of happening in the moment and I think we all had a good time with it” (Scott). Again, this flexibility that permeates The Civilians’ organization is apparent at multiple levels of the group’s processes and structure, in this case at the level of last-minute performance changes. That The Civilians keeps a strong network of collaborators who work well in the flexible but “fun” environment is also important to the group’s progress, both creatively and administratively; as Wren points out, these long-term relationships are “key to harmonious art-making” (41).

Once a cast is assembled, Managing Director Friedman Young arranges travel, lodging, rehearsal and meeting times for the performers (if the production is outside of New York City), in conjunction with the producing theater (Grush, Scott, [thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). The Civilians also abides by the rules of the Actor’s Equity Association, and Friedman Young manages the contracts associated with hiring actors for productions (Grush, Scott). Performer Jeff Scott remarks, “Marion Friedman Young...she’s great, she’s fantastic. She handles all of the logistical things” (Scott), and, as mentioned previously, Rosalind Grush explains that a big part of Friedman Young’s job is being the “producer of things...bringing casts together, putting together all the logistics of getting everyone together in the same room in [whichever] city [The Civilians is in], having somewhere to stay, maintaining all the contracts, it’s a big thing...” (Grush). That multiple associates of The Civilians report warm, efficient, productive

experiences with Friedman Young could be a testament to The Civilians' organizational culture. Additionally, Friedman Young's efficient productivity could be analyzed as proof of her working as an autonomous unit, as described by Morency and Needles. The processes and logistics of The Civilians' productions could be an area where perhaps barriers should not necessarily be dissolved; in the case of production logistics, Friedman Young's autonomy beneficially averts the type of confusion that results from having too many staff members working on the same task. If The Civilians grows significantly in the next few years, however, Friedman Young may be forced to delegate tasks to other members of The Civilians in order to keep the organization running smoothly.

Finally, it is worth noting again that many of The Civilians' production processes occur within the producing company/theater that The Civilians partners with for a particular production. An opportunity for further research would be an in-depth examination of The Civilians' interactions with producing theaters: how exactly are processes managed, and how are administrative tasks divided between The Civilians and the producing theater? These questions are especially important in light of Cosson's assertion that "the greatest thing [The Civilians] have to share is the model of many successful partnerships" (Mitchell 4). The Civilians presents a unique model of being "a creative company, not a producing company" (Eisler), and the group's success with co-productions is an area for further inquiry that could likely benefit many American nonprofit theaters, which may follow different models of production.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CREATIVE PROCESSES

The Civilians' creative process starts with the idea for a show, which often comes from Artistic Director Steven Cosson, then moves to the interview stage, where Associate Artists interview people from whichever community The Civilians is investigating, then moves to readings and/or workshops before culminating in a fully-fledged production, which may include verbatim interviews or may be a fictionalized play inspired by interviews (Grush, Katz, Scott, [thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org), Mitchell 3). Cosson explains:

[The productions are] all developed in phases. They're not all the same, but there's a writing process, and then you workshop, and it goes back and forth between workshops and writers and revisions...usually by the time we're in the workshops, we have a goal date of when it's going to be produced. (Mitchell 3)

Although this process is often a guide for the creation of Civilians shows, again one theme that appeared many times throughout this study of The Civilians is the theme of flexibility. Furthermore, The Civilians employs aspects of both "mainstream" new play development, where rehearsals begin with the completed draft of a play, and "ensemble" new play development, where the creative process begins without a drafted script (Haimbach 4). Grush elaborates on this flexibility in process: "[The creative process] depends a lot...this is one of the things that I think is really cool about working the way that The Civilians does is the kind of development process is really pretty flexible...sorry so many of my answers are 'it depends!'" (Grush). Grush's comment highlights one primary tactic of The Civilians: each project is approached individually, and details change depending on the show. This chapter will elaborate on the variety of processes involved in each of these creative stages.

## *I. Ideas for Civilians Shows*

Ideas for new Civilians shows often come from one of the following sources: Artistic Director Steven Cosson, The Civilians' Research and Development Group, or an Associate Artist of The Civilians. Grush explains that the more "traditional" process for The Civilians is that "often Steve has a topic that he wants to investigate more," and then the group seeks funding to be able to start delving into that topic (Grush). Grush witnessed this approach first hand with the Bogotá Prison Pageant project, which is currently in development: "Steve started talking about [Bogotá], and then we ended up getting some money from the NEA, so he started building his creative team, and he went to Bogotá. And he did the interviews and now it's...a real project," as opposed to only a potential idea (Grush). Cosson further explains that topics involving polarity, where "people are saying lots of different things about one issue," are especially intriguing to The Civilians ([thecivilians.org/education](http://thecivilians.org/education)). This model of idea-generation, specifically that one person presents an idea to a company that usually involves the investigation of contradiction within present-day society, can be compared to Split Britches theater company, whose shows often grew from one member's idea of "polarity," "obsession," or "frustration" (Case 8). Although issues involving polarity and complex contradiction are certainly appealing to many (if not all) playwrights, that Cosson investigates ideas that "respond to our changing cultural landscape," and then depends on support from The Civilians' associates to further investigate these ideas, is an important element that infuses The Civilians' "traditional" creative process (Grush, [thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)).

A few of The Civilians' associates expressed that they are impressed with the sheer number of ideas that Steven Cosson and composer Michael Freidman create. Abigail Katz remarks, "I think Steve and Michael just have tons and tons of ideas that they have floating around and it's a question of which one they decide to pursue" (Katz), and performer Jeff Scott echoes, "I don't think there will ever be a time when [Steve] doesn't have an idea for a show, or an idea for a project, or an idea for a grant...I just think he's inexhaustible" (Scott). That Cosson has many ideas for new shows, and yet he still pursues more ideas through the Research and Development Group and other Associate Artists is interesting to note. The impetus for inviting other collaborator's ideas is evidently not that Cosson hits a "writer's block," but more that he values other voices entering the conversation of what The Civilians' next project could be.

Another way that new show ideas are generated within The Civilians is through the relatively new Research and Development Group, now in its second season. This group consists of seven theater practitioners, each of whom "develops a new work through a creative investigation of a subject. The process may include interviewing, community engagement, research, or other experimental methods of inquiry" (thecivilians.org). The members of this group meet biweekly to discuss "their methodologies and the resulting work," and the group is led and facilitated by Civilians Research and Development Group Coordinator Annah Feinberg (thecivilians.org). The methods of this group involve aspects of both "mainstream" and "ensemble" new play development (Haimbach); the creative methods are "mainstream" in that one writer works independently on his or her own project, but they involve aspects of the

“ensemble” method in that each writer begins this process without a finished draft of a script, and the writers meet with a recurring group twice a month in order to share and/or receive feedback on their projects.

One description of the idea-generating process within The Civilians’ Research and Development Group was posted on The Civilians’ blog under the title “Meet the R&D,” a blog series that gives “insight into [the R&D group’s] processes: what they’re thinking about, what material they’re working with, how their research is informing their writing” (Kern). Jon Kern explains that his current Civilians project investigates Internet addiction in conjunction with perceptions of self, or “how to get to know yourself in an age of anonymity” ([thecivilians.org/programs/rdgroup](http://thecivilians.org/programs/rdgroup)). Kern describes one way that the Civilians theme of coincidence factors into his research: while looking for “any chance to distract [him]self” from “reworking an older play,” he found an interview with actor Peter Sellers that tied into his current Civilians project:

Understanding the constructed quality of self-presentation doesn’t stop us for searching for something unconstructed. I’m pretty obsessed wondering if there is something in humanity that is like what Georg Simmel called “an unknowable core.” Compulsive behavior I imagine forces a reckoning with at least the uncontrolled aspect of personality. This in turn leads people to be very honest about their faults, their past, while perhaps never truly putting that past behind them.

Peter Sellers himself represents this question. (Kern)

This creative process ties into Case’s description of Split Britches, specifically in that ideas for shows were sometimes fueled by the “obsession” of one Split Britches company member; in this case, Kern’s “obsession” with whether humans possess an “unknowable core” likewise fuels his creative idea for The Civilians. Kern’s blog post also ties into both the “mainstream” and “ensemble” methods as described by Haimbach. Kern’s



process is “mainstream” in that the writer works alone finalizing a draft of his script, finding inspiration on his own accord. Kern’s process uses aspects of the “ensemble” method, however, in that his public blog posting is in itself a type of workshop. In addition to sharing his ideas with the Research and Development Group at their biweekly meetings, Kern also has an arena to share his ideas with followers of The Civilians through The Civilians’ blog. Although no comments were posted in response to Kern’s blog, the opportunity for collaboration through this online media outlet was indeed available.

Kern’s blog posting also exhibits aspects of the “ensemble” method by posing a question that is relevant to another Civilians project. In an “unrelated addendum” to his blog, Kern describes witnessing a small Occupy movement demonstration in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and states: “It makes me wonder, Internet: what is the most obscure town where the Occupy movement has set up camp?” (Kern). In providing a first-hand account of the Occupy movement, another topic that The Civilians is currently investigating, Kern contributes to a collaborative, “ensemble” method of creation using the Internet as a tool for communication. Research and Development Group Coordinator Annah Feinberg also points to aspects of the “ensemble” method within the Research and Development Group, pointing out that although each member of the group works individually in his or her own project, that the topics discussed at the Research and Development Group Meetings exhibit “unity within diversity:”

While these [topics] all seem to come from vastly different corners of our contemporary consciousness, they are all strung together by projects that are questioning social perception of sanity and what has changed or is changing in our world that has lead or is leading to these changes in sociological awareness.

The R&D group is an incubator for the bouncing of ideas among investigative theater artist; it is a collective creative exploration of investigation. (Feinberg “Unity”)

Although the writers in this group focus on individual and diverse topics, the group’s techniques of “collective creative exploration” add aspects of collaborative methods to each person’s individual writing and research projects.

The third way that The Civilians generates ideas for new shows is through Associate Artists of the group. The most recent example of this method involved four Associate Artists, including founding Civilians Associate Artist and board member Jenny Morris, approaching Cosson with their idea for the show *You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents’ Divorce*, which is currently in production. Grush describes this process as: “Some Associate Artists had an idea of something they wanted to investigate, and kind of came to Steve [asking], ‘do you want to help us out with this?’” (Grush). Cosson did not end up being involved in the show artistically, however, aside from giving notes and attending workshops, and the show was “pretty much entirely the product of the four actors and director, and a dramaturge” (Grush). This idea-generation process is an example of the “ensemble” method, and it also provides evidence that The Civilians is able to support a production that is created without Artistic Director Steven Cosson. That Cosson “gave his blessing” to the creative idea, but did not take a major artistic role with the production, is also evidence of The Civilians’ structural flexibility. Similarly to Cirque du Soleil’s model, where units are “decentralized” and “function as independent and fully autonomous systems” (Morency and Needles 65), The Civilians Associate Artists in the case of *You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents’ Divorce* acted as an

autonomous creative unit, from the seed of the show's idea through the show's production.

## II. *Interviews*

Artistic Director Steven Cosson explains that The Civilians' interview process is one of the most important aspects of the company:

One very important thing that informs every aspect of our work is our conception of the company. Our [interview] technique was something that I learned from Les Waters, who was a member of the Joint Stock Company. He was my grad school professor in San Diego, and he would do a Joint Stock interviewing class for the grad school. That's what got me hooked on the whole idea. (Kozinn 200)

The Civilians' interview technique not only "informs every aspect of [the group's] work," but it was also the inspiration for Cosson starting The Civilians in 2001. It is understandable then that Cosson would place a high level of importance and priority on how The Civilians' interviews are executed. As former Literary Associate Abigail Katz explains, a large number of Civilians associates are interested in conducting interviews, which poses some issues: "I think (*laughs*) a dilemma that Steve faces is that everybody wants to do interviews...[and] because so many people want to do it, it's a little hard for Steve because he has a certain way that he wants it done" (Katz). She continues to explain that Steven prioritizes training actors in how to conduct interviews using The Civilians' methods (as opposed to other Civilians associates or staff members), because "they're the ones who are going to be portraying those people...so it made the most sense" (Katz). However, attesting to The Civilians' flexibility regarding creative process, Cosson recently abandoned this approach when he encouraged all Civilians Associate Artists, in addition to friends of Associate Artists, to interview people who were

participating in the Occupy Wall Street demonstration (Katz, Scott). Depending on the project, even the group's important interview techniques can be altered in order to suit a particular investigation.

The Civilians' interview techniques grew from four main rules that Cosson learned from Les Waters's Joint Stock interviewing class:

1) avoid value statements; 2) let people talk about what they want to talk about; 3) try to get them to talk about what is most interesting to them; and 4) get people to talk past their "scripts." Then Cosson adds a fifth rule: Learn to practice your "neutral empathetic," which he otherwise calls being a "good listener." (Kozinn 190)

These rules echo the techniques of Jillian Campana, who explains that during interviews for her ethnographic art-based research she "viewed the participants not as research subjects, but as my co-collaborators...[which] privileged the voices of the participants and treats them as experts" (1). All of the rules above privilege the voices of participants, making the interviewee the most important member of the conversation, rather than the interviewer. Further supporting the methods of Campana that "privilege the voices of participants," Cosson also states, "It's also important to allow yourself to be neutral so that you allow the person who is being interviewed to really feel like they're in charge" (Kozinn 200).

Some techniques that Cosson describes in the "How We Work" section of The Civilians' website are generally accepted by many interview practitioners, such as "ask open ended questions" and "be respectful" ([thecivilians.org/education](http://thecivilians.org/education)). Other techniques, however, might not be as obvious. Cosson guides interviewers to "resist the temptation to verbally react to what [the interviewee] is saying," and "don't feel like you

have to get the whole story” (thecivilians.org/education). In regards to resisting the temptation to verbally react to the interviewee, Cosson explains that there are “little tricks of things *not* to say in order to *not* normalize the situation” (Kozinn 200), such as the following example that is useful to quote at length because it explains a Civilians technique that might at first appear to go against empathetic human nature:

One example that I often use is that if someone tells you that his or her parent died recently your natural impulse might be to say, “Oh, I’m so sorry. That’s terrible for you. What a great loss.” It might in fact be the right thing to say and you might know that you should say that in another circumstance, but in the interview it might limit the conversation. The person might just respond with, “Yes.” In reality they might hate their mother, and might be glad that she’s dead. If you can allow yourself to be empathetic and you listen, show that you care, and are not disconnected then maybe instead of, “I’m so sorry. What a tragedy,” you find a way to ask a question. You ask a follow-up question so they talk more. In many ways you can get to the complexities by staying out of the interview. Mostly it’s about shutting up and not saying too much and letting people just talk...” (Kozinn 200)

Although at first it might seem cold to not outwardly express grief when a person reveals that he or she has lost a parent, Cosson’s point is actually in line with Campana’s method of “privilege[ing] the voices of the participants,” and with what both *New York Times* journalist Ben Brantley and community-based documentary theater practitioner Ron Short describe as giving a voice to those who feel silenced by mass media. As Short points out, sometimes “the only thing that you have is your own story” (Leonard and Kilkelly 30), and The Civilian’s method of empathetically “shutting up” and letting that story be told could be a way to empower the voice of the interviewee.

The logistics of gathering interviews often involves the Literary Associate, who frequently recruits interviewees for a Civilians show. Former Literary Associate Abigail Katz explains, “[at] the beginning of a project, I would say what we would do is make a

list of all the various organizations, all the various individuals who would be interesting to contact for the purpose of interviews...the first step was to identify who those people are, who are the players” (Katz). As an example, Katz uses the Civilians’ show about the Brooklyn Atlantic Yards Development project:

You sort of have to make your dream list from the very top, whether it’s getting [real estate developer and head proponent of the controversial Atlantic Yards development project] Bruce Ratner to agree to an interview, you know – which was a very unlikely thing to happen, but that doesn’t mean we weren’t going to try, all the way down to the tenants who were affected by that whole thing that was happening. And we also made a list of politicians, and business owners, and government officials who could explain certain things to us that were very confusing, like the ULURP process, which was the...land use review process, basically, for when you’re proposing an idea for developing a piece of land...and in that particular case they skipped that whole process, and no one could understand why. (Katz)

By making an intentional effort to gather interviewees from different sides of a certain controversial issue, The Civilians aims to present a complex view of “under-explored” subjects (thecivilians.org). This approach can be compared to the techniques of Anna Deavere Smith, who similarly presents contrasting opinions in order to convey the complexity of an event or issue, such as the 1992 Los Angeles race riots (Smith *Twilight*).

Katz explains that this tactic of gathering a diverse group of interviewees with contradictory views and perspectives was also used for what is perhaps the most well known Civilians show, *This Beautiful City*. The Civilians performed an initial reading of the show for a Colorado Spring audience of around 2,000 people (including around 100 interviewees) in 2007, and *New York Times* journalist Alexis Soloski reports that although there were “lively talkbalks” featuring many perspectives, most interview

subjects thought that *The Civilians* was balanced: “Some accused the show of overly sympathetic attitudes toward evangelicals, while others said it mocked the faithful. But most praised the show and pronounced the portrayals fair” (“One Troupe’s”). Cosson explains that one of the most meaningful moments of his career was when *The Civilians* returned to Colorado Springs in 2009 to perform the fully-fledged version of *This Beautiful City* (that had been revised and performed across the country) for the diverse community of people who had provided their stories for the project (Mitchell 3).

Current Literary Associate EllaRose Chary explains that the current interviewee-gathering process involves her doing research on a particular group (e.g., scientists and conservation psychologists for *The Great Immensity* project), and then Cosson or other Associate Artists reaching out directly to these potential interview subjects. Furthermore, Chary explains that *The Civilians* uses a “snowball” method of gathering interviews: “For example, for *The Great Immensity* we reached out to scientists, and for *Pretty Filthy* we reached out to porn industry people. We often then use our initial interviewees as resources to suggest other people in the field who we should talk to” (Chary). Scholars Nissim Cohen and Tamar Arieli point to the snowball sampling method as an “answer the challenges...[of] research conducted in conflict environments,” succinctly explaining:

...in conflict environments, the entire population is marginalized to some degree, making it “hidden” from and “hard to reach” for the outsider researcher. The marginalization explains why it is difficult to locate, access and enlist the cooperation of the research population, which in a non-conflict context would not have been difficult to do. Snowball sampling method directly addresses the fears and mistrust common to the conflict environment and increases the likelihood of trusting the researcher by introduction through a trusted social network. (Cohen and Arieli 423)

Cohen and Arieli's research is especially interesting to note because although The Civilians has not yet investigated a war-torn environment, the group often investigates issues of conflict and polarity where "people are saying lots of different things about one issue" ([thecivilians.org/education](http://thecivilians.org/education)). Sensitive issues, like the Ted Haggard scandal in Colorado Springs, could make interviewees feel vulnerable and unsafe talking to outsiders. That The Civilians uses the snowball method to recruit interview subjects could be one way that the group works to put interviewees at ease; perhaps, as Cohen and Arieli assert, subjects are more likely to trust The Civilians if they are introduced to the group through a "trusted social network" (423).

The current Civilians project on the Occupy movement provides further insight into The Civilians' method of gathering interviewees, although Chary points out that the methods used for The Civilians' Occupy project are not typical:

The Occupy project has functioned a bit differently, as we started by actually just going to Zuccotti Park and other Occupy events and going up to people "who looked interesting" but this isn't the typical model, and we've started to more traditionally identify people we want to talk to and reach out to them as that project has developed. (Chary)

In the case of the Occupy movement project, each Civilians associate uses his or her own approach for choosing interview subjects. Performer Greg McFadden explains that he avoids "usual protest subjects," and that he wants "a human being, not a soapbox" (Marks). Research and Development Group Coordinator Annah Feinberg expresses a contrasting tactic for choosing people to interview; she is drawn to those who stand out and might even be described as the "usual protest subjects":

I will arrive at the event and kind of walk around and listen for about half an hour to see who seems interesting to me, who's having fascinating conversations,



who's yelling the most interesting thing or has the most interesting sign, and then I will rev myself up with courage to approach them to have a conversation. And I have really never had anyone say no. People have been very warm and it's been very easy, and friendly, and fun. (Feinberg "#1")

Literary Associate EllaRose Chary describes her process, which is similar to Feinberg's, but also adds the aspect of "snowball" sampling. Additionally, Chary uses an alternative approach in that she contacts the interviewee at the event, but then sets up a specific meeting time at a later time and date to conduct the actual interview:

I found people by going to the event, trying to figure out who seemed to be leading things, and then going up to that person after they were done speaking, introducing myself and getting their contact info. Then I would email them later to set up an interview. I also have had people send me emails saying "oh you should talk to this person!" and I'll get in touch with them. (Chary)

Once again The Civilians exhibits flexibility, this time regarding interview tactics and the methods of choosing a diverse group of interview subjects (which is gathered by a diverse group of Civilians Associate Artists). By embracing variety, like the Piccolo Teatro, The Civilians is in a position to create productions that appeal to a wide range of audience members.

### III. *Writing, Readings and Workshops*

Although it is clear that The Civilians' specific techniques change depending on each production, an initial reading and/or workshop is often included as an element of a show's life cycle. The workshop/reading of three Civilians shows will be discussed in order to provide an overview of the diversity of this stage of The Civilians' artistic process.

One way that The Civilians creates a show is by enlisting a playwright who may or may not be an Associate Artist of the group. In the case of *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*, described on The Civilians' website as "Anne Washburn's riveting vision of post-apocalyptic America based on a group of Civilians' artists trying to recreate an episode of *The Simpsons* from memory" (thecivilians.org), the interview and workshop phases of creation were somewhat combined. In 2008, Associate Artist and playwright Anne Washburn collected interview material from Civilians actors about one lens of pop culture: "In one of the [workshop] week's activities, Anne asked the actors to try to retell the "Cape Fear" episode of *The Simpsons*. This has sparked what has become her new play: *Mr. Burns*" ("Mr. Burns"). In July 2011, Seattle Repertory Theatre hosted a "one-weekend workshop reading" of the play and in November 2011, Washburn and many of the original actors who provided initial interviews participated in another "typical" workshop and reading at Playwrights Horizons, a New York theater institution that describes itself as "a writer's theater dedicated to the support and development of contemporary American playwrights, composers and lyricists, and to the production of their new work" (playwrightshorizons.org, "Mr. Burns," Kiley). *Mr. Burns* will have its official world premiere at Washington D.C.'s Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in May 2012 and will include a script by Anne Washburn and original songs by Michael Friedman (thecivilians.org).

Although this example of a Civilians work is interesting in a few ways, including the length of time from inception of idea to production, the collaboration with multiple theater institutions, and the actors' methods of portraying "fictionalized" versions of

themselves, *Mr. Burns* is perhaps most interesting because it combines both mainstream and ensemble methods of creation as described by Haimbach – a trend that appears in multiple Civilians productions. Specifically, the initial 2008 workshop where Washburn collected interviews from actors is similar to the ensemble techniques and workshops of the Open Theatre. Robert Pasolli describes the writer’s relationship to these Open Theatre workshops as “elusive”:

...the writer participates in the workshop before writing anything down. The writer is defined not by the fact that he has written a script on which the work is based, as in the case of traditional production, but on the fact that he *will* write a script related to the work which the troupe is improvising. (36)

Although The Civilians actors were not “improvising” during the initial 2008 workshop, they did indeed provide material to a playwright who had not yet “writ[ten] anything down.” In contrast, the two “traditional” workshops in 2011 and the fully-fledged 2012 production follow the “mainstream” workshop structure, where various members of the production team work with “a completed draft of a play written by one playwright” (Haimbach 4). That The Civilians fully participates in multiple methods of creation during the life cycle of one show is further proof of the group’s flexibility.

A show that displays stark contrast to other Civilians works is *Paris Commune*, a documentary cabaret based on the 1871 socialist revolution in Paris. Because this show is a historical work, it does not include any first-person interviews conducted by The Civilians, which most clearly sets the work apart from other Civilians productions. Additionally, *Paris Commune* is written by Artistic Director Steven Cosson and Associate Artist/composer Michael Friedman (as opposed to being written by an outside playwright), and the show relies heavily on the historical research work of dramaturge

Abigail Katz (thecivilians.org, Katz). It should be noted that the dramaturge is undoubtedly important in many Civilians shows, such as *The Great Immensity* where each actor receives a “huge binder” filled with climate change scientific research (Grush), but *Paris Commune* differs in that the verbatim “interviews” used in the show came from historical documents, a process which involved the dramaturge more directly at the writing phase of production than other Civilians shows. Similarly to the combination of workshop and interview phases for *Mr. Burns*, *Paris Commune* combined workshop and rehearsal phases of production. Katz explains that the writing, research, and rehearsal processes were frequently simultaneous: “often what [Steven Cosson and Michael Friedman] are looking for will change depending on what happens in the rehearsal room” (Katz). Katz further describes her work on *Paris Commune*, which involved collecting music from the time period, translating original documents, searching for images of posters used during the uprising, and putting together information for actors regarding the individuals they portrayed. She reflects positively on the experience: “That was the most dramaturgy I’ve ever done on any show, and it was a *great* time” (Katz). The theme of in-depth investigation that runs through all Civilians productions is also present in *Paris Commune*, but it is interesting to note that in the case of this historical work, the investigation revolves around preserved first-person accounts of an event rather than face-to-face first-person accounts.

Bearing further similarity to the *Mr. Burns* production, *Paris Commune* was then presented in what Haimbach would call “mainstream” workshops at multiple different theaters across the nation; composer Michael Friedman notes that “The piece has been

through more revisions than I think we ever expected when we started working in 2002,” and it awaits a potential world premiere sometime in 2012 (Cosson *The Civilians*, thecivilians.org). In the workshop/reading stage of production, *Paris Commune* has been performed “as a workshop at The Mazer Theatre, NYC; [as a] Summer Residency with New York Theatre Workshop; produced as a “Page to Stage” workshop at La Jolla Playhouse; and showcased in The Public Theater’s New Work Now! festival” (thecivilians.org). The Civilians’ collaboration with many diverse and well-known theaters across the country is a testament to the group’s strong network at both the individual and institutional levels.

A third example of The Civilians’ writing/workshop/reading phase of production is the show currently titled *In The Footprint: The Battle Over Atlantic Yards*. This show deals most directly with The Civilians’ geographical community; the controversial Brooklyn development project that is the basis for *In The Footprint* is centered within one mile of The Civilians’ main offices. Like *Paris Commune*, *In The Footprint* is also written by Civilians Artistic Director Steven Cosson, and includes songs by Associate Artist/composer Michael Friedman (thecivilians.org). An initial reading of verbatim interviews collected for this project titled *Brooklyn at Eye Level* was presented at the Brooklyn Lyceum theater in December 2008 (thecivilians.org). Unlike other Civilians productions, however, *In The Footprint* did not participate in “mainstream” workshops; it progressed from an initial reading to its world premiere at the Irondale Center in Fort Greene, Brooklyn in 2010, and has since been produced as a fully-fledged production in both Boston and Philadelphia (thecivilians.org). Further differentiating the show from

other Civilians works, the group has commissioned playwright Lynne Nottage and composer Kirsten Childs to write “a musical about the changing face of Brooklyn, sparked by the controversial Atlantic Yards development project. The play will be drawn from the raw materials gathered during the in-depth investigation process of *Brooklyn at Eye Level* in Fall 2008” (thecivilians.org).

The initial 2008 reading of this work is especially interesting to investigate in the context of this section on writing, workshops and readings of Civilians works. While assembling *Brooklyn at Eye Level*, Artistic Director Steven Cosson instructed Civilians members who were working on the project to participate in background research:

We were sort of all charged with reading Jane Jacobs, the urban planner – she was a very famous urban scientist, and she wrote about cities and would talk about the ecosystem of a neighborhood. And so we really had that in mind, you know - what was the life like in this neighborhood? What was going to be ruined and what was going to be changed, and what was going to be made better? (Katz)

This method of “charging” Civilians members to participate in their own reading and understanding of the topics that the group investigates is one way to “dissolve the boundaries” between typically separated fields (Wren). Although this tactic does not necessarily dissolve boundaries between administrative and artistic realms, it does dissolve boundaries between dramaturgical and performance realms, which could make the interviewers/actors more able to understand their subjects, and could contribute to what Wren calls “harmonious art-making” (41).

Another distinguishing feature of *Brooklyn at Eye Level* is that The Civilians sought out artistic collaborators for the writing/workshop of the piece (Katz). On The Civilians’ *Brooklyn at Eye Level* website, four individuals/groups are listed as “lab

artists,” a title which could be defined as artists who helped turn the verbatim interviews into an artistic production but who do not necessarily participate in the production. This group of “lab artists” includes Urban Bush Women (a women-centered dance company from the African Diaspora community), playwright Lucy Thurber, Carl Hancock Rux (an “African American poet, playwright, novelist, recording artist, and essayist”), and blues musician Michael Hill ([brooklyneyelevel.org](http://brooklyneyelevel.org)). That *The Civilians* seeks these “lab artists” is another testament to the group’s strong network of collaborators, but it also speaks to a potentially more important aspect specific to this production: writers Cosson and Friedman, two white men, collaborated with members of the African American community on a project that undoubtedly featured many African Americans in the Atlantic Yards neighborhood. Additionally, two African American female artists, playwright Lynne Nottage and composer Kirsten Childs, have been commissioned to write the next incarnation of this work. Once again the parallels between *The Civilians* and the group’s inspirational predecessors are evident: *Joint Stock* dealt with similar issues of diversification. Author Joyce Devlin argues that ethnic diversity within *Joint Stock* clearly influenced the group’s productions: “diversification made a significant impact on the content of their scripts, the actors’ ethnicity, the audience composition, and the organizational and artistic policies” (63). Similarly to *Joint Stock*’s efforts to diversify, *The Civilians*’ efforts to seek diverse African American collaborators in the context of *Brooklyn at Eye Level* could significantly affect the production’s impact.

It is also interesting to note an actor’s perspective on the process of *The Civilians*’ initial verbatim interview readings. Performer Jeff Scott explains that readings are

presented as, “this is going to be fun, we’re going to have a great time, this is low pressure” (Scott), and further describes this process as happening very quickly:

We had a half an hour of rehearsal; it was really thrown together – in a good way, not in a bad way. But, it all just came together so quickly. Steve got the interviews together that he wanted, he assigned them to actors...and then it was like “show up on Friday, and we’ll go through the order, and then we’ll do it!” It was very quick and very unstructured in a way. (Scott)

This method of “throwing together” a reading quickly is one way that The Civilians jumps into the process of getting audience feedback, and potentially avoid the trap of “Uglyville,” which David Kahn describes as “the place [during script development] where your judgment departs, you lose sight of everything, you do not like your work, the script, or the actors, and there is no health in anything” (92). Although there is no guarantee that The Civilians does not hit this roadblock later on in the creative process, the tactic of putting material in front of an audience quickly and without too much rehearsal could at least avoid reaching “Uglyville” early in the creative process.

As has been mentioned many times, each of The Civilians’ shows follows a different process, and the group embodies flexibility in its methods. Rosalind Grush points out that for one of The Civilians’ most recent projects, *Maple and Vine*, the playwright “wrote a first draft from interviews and, according to his notes, ended up chucking the first draft and writing a completely fictional play” (Grush). In this case, the work became associated with the playwright (instead of being associated with The Civilians as a group), and The Civilians was listed by the credit “inspired by” (Grush). For *You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents’ Divorce*, the workshop/writing process included reaching out to The Civilians’ online community to gather stories from



the public (Marshall). Clearly, many different creative processes occur during the writing/readings/workshops phase of Civilians productions. This chapter has given examples of some of the similarities and differences between three distinct Civilians productions but is not an exhaustive account of The Civilians' approaches. Further research could be conducted to examine the creative process of each show, especially concerning the writing/readings/workshops stage, and to compare and contrast which methods (if any) seem particularly successful.

It is clear, however, that the diversity of The Civilians' writing and workshop processes is proof of a few Civilians themes and patterns of development. First and most obviously, this diversity points to the group's theme of variety and flexibility both in the content of its shows and in its creative processes. This tactic of specifically seeking variety is similar to that of Piccolo Teatro, which offers "various types of theatrical productions targeting diverse groups." Colbert argues that this diversification tactic is one reason why so many patrons have attended the Piccolo Teatro; as of 2005, "approximately 600,000 people in the region [of Milan, Italy] have attended at least one event at the Piccolo" (Colbert 69). This idea of "targeting diverse groups" is also important to The Civilians; in his "Letter from The Artistic Director" posted on the home page of The Civilians' website, Artistic Director Steven Cosson explains that diversity and complexity were primary reasons for creating The Civilians in 2001:

I wanted to imagine a theater that...could engage real life in its full scope and complexity. And I wanted a theater that could be flexible enough to respond to our changing cultural landscape to experiment with how a play is made, new models of collaboration, and new ways of connecting with audiences. Taking inspiration from various sources – political and experimental cabaret, Brecht/Piscator's epic theater, and the socially-engaged British theater company

Joint Stock being key influences, I started The Civilians in 2001 to make this kind of work possible. (thecivilians.org)

As evidenced by the diverse processes and shows described in this section, The Civilians has indeed displayed being “flexible enough to respond to our changing cultural landscape” (thecivilians.org), which could be one way that the group attracts a larger and more diverse audience.

The Civilians’ flexibility also exhibits another Civilians theme: the group refuses to assert one “right” answer or message (Estvanik, Kozinn). By remaining open and flexible to many potential methods and creative processes, The Civilians embraces multiple perspectives both in its processes and in its productions and avoids claiming that there is one “right” way to execute interview-based theater. Even regarding Artistic Director Cosson’s relatively strict interview process guidelines, the group has recently embraced new methods: for the “Occupy Your Mind” project, instead of trained Civilians artists executing interviews, The Civilians has charged members of the public with interviewing participants of Occupy movements in their own neighborhoods (thecivilians.org). This continual experimentation with new methods exemplifies The Civilians’ goal of fostering complex understanding through “encountering the limits of your own perception” (Estvanik 24) rather than asserting one particular message.

Finally, the diversity of The Civilians’ writing and workshop processes also exemplifies another of the group’s themes: maintaining and growing a strong network of collaborators. The Civilians’ ever-expanding network, both on individual and institutional levels, helps the group “encounter the limits of [its] own perception” (Estvanik 24); by collaborating with many different artists, theaters, universities and

communities throughout the group's writing and workshop processes, new perspectives are continually introduced, which likely also contributes to the diversity and scope of The Civilians' audiences.

#### IV. *Fully-Fledged Productions*

The Civilians' fully-fledged productions, or projects that have been performed as world premieres and that The Civilians considers to be completed works, take many different forms; sometimes they consist of re-worked verbatim material from readings and/or workshops (e.g., *In The Footprint: The Battle Over Atlantic Yards*), sometimes they are a fictional play based on interviews (e.g., *Mr. Burns*), and sometimes they mix verbatim material with fictional material (e.g., *The Great Immensity*). Because the Civilians' productions are co-produced with other theaters, each fully-fledged production process varies. This section will discuss three distinct Civilians fully-fledged productions to provide examples of the diversity of The Civilians' works: *Gone Missing* (world premiere 2003), *The Great Immensity* (world premiere 2012), and *You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents' Divorce* (world premiere 2011) ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)).

*Gone Missing*, now listed on The Civilians' website as a "past production," is a documentary cabaret about things that have literally "gone missing." As Artistic Director/writer Steven Cosson explains, there were two rules for the company when they went out to collect interviews: 1) "no stories of lost people were allowed," and 2) "the thing had to have truly 'gone missing,' meaning that there was some question or mystery connected to the loss. A sock that disappeared in the laundry could count. An apartment that was destroyed by fire wouldn't" (Cosson, *The Civilians* 38). In *The Civilians: An*

*Anthology of Six Plays*, published by Playscripts, Inc., the creative credit for *Gone Missing* reads: “Written by Steven Cosson from interviews by the company, music and lyrics by Michael Friedman,” and then the specific company/interviewer names are listed (35). In addition, Cosson clarifies that for *Gone Missing*, the group used its initial interview technique that was borrowed from *Joint Stock*: “We didn’t take notes or record anything during these interviews. Whatever’s spoken is committed to memory and written down later, and the words are inevitably altered somehow by the listener. So we don’t identify anyone by name, as the character is not exactly them” (Cosson, *The Civilians* 38). Although other *Civilians* shows also follow this model of not using recording devices, it is interesting to note that the fully-fledged production of *Gone Missing* presented its interviews in this way, namely mixing both fictional and interview aspects into one production. This technique could be seen as a methodological predecessor to the most recent world premiere of *The Great Immensity*, which mixes a fictional mystery story line with verbatim interviews (Grush, [thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)).

*Gone Missing* had its world premiere at The Belt in New York City in 2003, and then also had fully-fledged productions at The Gate Theatre in London in 2004 and at off-Broadway’s Barrow Street Theatre in 2007; all productions of *Gone Missing* were directed by Steven Cosson (Cosson *The Civilians*). The Barrow Street Theater production of *Gone Missing* stands out from other *Civilians* productions because of the length of its run; *Gone Missing* ran for over six months, from June 14, 2007 to January 6, 2008, and the run was extended twice ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). Often, *Civilians* productions are slotted into a co-producing theater’s season with set production dates, and the run is not

longer than one month. For example, *The Great Immensity* had its World Premiere engagement at Kansas City Repertory Theatre from February 17 through March 18, 2012, and *In The Footprint* ran at Philadelphia's Annenberg Center from January 18 through 28, 2012 (thecivilians.org). That The Civilians produces both types of productions, namely open-ended runs and runs that fit into a certain theater's season, is further evidence of the group's openness to various creative processes and types of productions.

The fully-fledged production of *Gone Missing* is also unique in that it is more accessible to the public than other Civilians productions; in addition to being published in The Civilians' Playscripts anthology and in an Oberon Modern Plays publication, it is also the only Civilians show that has a CD recording available through Sh-k-boom Records, Amazon.com, and Apple's online iTunes music store (thecivilians.org). This accessibility could make *Gone Missing* a popular show for production outside of The Civilians' Associate Artists, including university or regional theater productions.

*You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents' Divorce* received a "developmental showing" at New York's Galapagos Arts Space in November 2009 before having its world premiere at the Williamstown Theater Festival in August 2011 and a five-day fully-fledged production at ArtsEmerson in October 2011 (thecivilians.org). As mentioned before, *Tales From My Parents' Divorce* was conceived and written by six Civilians Associate Artists (not including Artistic Director Steven Cosson), and each of the productions was directed by Civilians writer/director/Associate Artist and fellow University of California, San Diego Masters of Fine Arts graduate Anne Kauffman (thecivilians.org). That Kauffman is also a graduate of the University of

California, San Diego's Masters of Fine Arts program (along with Steven Cosson) is another example of The Civilians' tight network of collaborators.

The two fully-fledged productions of *Tales From My Parents' Divorce* are unique because they combine education and professional theater: in addition to The Civilians' performance, the writers/actors from the show also presented a workshop to college students in the week before the production, and the college students then presented their own "divorce tales" as a coda to The Civilians' performance (Grush, "Tales"). The collaboration of Williams College and Emerson College with The Civilians is an innovative way to combine higher education, outreach, and professional fully-fledged productions.

Finally, *The Great Immensity*, written and directed by Steven Cosson, is unique in that it mixes interview material with a fictional story line; on The Civilians' website, one description of the show states that it is a "continent-hopping thriller following a woman, Phyllis, as she pursues her twin sister Polly who disappeared from a tropical island while on an assignment for a nature show" (thecivilians.org). The script for *The Great Immensity* was developed during The Civilians' 2009-2010 residency at the Princeton Environmental Institute and Lewis Center for the Arts, and the show has received readings at The Public Theater's New Work Now! festival, the Barrow Street Theater, The Manhattan Theatre Club's 7@7 Series, and CUNY's Graduate Center Earth Day event. *The Great Immensity* had its world premiere at the Kansas City Repertory Theatre in February 2012 (thecivilians.org). That The Civilians has readings and productions both at theaters where they have an existing relationship (such as The Public Theater and

the Barrow Street Theatre), and at theaters where they are initiating a new relationship (such as the Kansas City Repertory Theatre) is evidence of the group's ability to simultaneously keep a strong network of collaborators and co-producers while also seeking new artistic and theatrical relationships.

Each fully-fledged production of The Civilians is distinct, and these descriptions are not an exhaustive list of the similarities and differences of Civilians productions. These examples do, however, show how The Civilians overcomes the process that some have called "workshopped to death" (McKinley) to ultimately reach the group's goal of presenting a complete theatrical production. *New York Times* journalist Jesse McKinley describes "Workshop Hell" as "an all-too-crowded netherworld where shows are not quite produced but also not quite forgotten" (McKinley). Civilians staff member Rosalind Grush points out that The Civilians, although undoubtedly flexible with its diverse production topics and processes, does not often get stuck in this "Workshop Hell;" impressively, the group achieves the fully-fledged production stage with nearly all of its projects:

One of the things that I think is really cool about working the way that The Civilians does is [that] the development process is pretty flexible. But in as much as it's flexible, the company doesn't take on many projects that don't actually get produced. Which is unlike a lot of commissioning programs that are out there...one way or another things end up coming around [to production]. (Grush)

Grush makes an important distinction between more typical "commissioning" programs, which Haimbach might include in what he calls "mainstream" new play development, and The Civilians, a group that uses variety in its methods, but always aims towards (and most often succeeds at) fully-fledged productions. Like The Civilians' non-traditional

fundraising tactics (e.g., seeking and receiving a grant from the National Science Foundation for *The Great Immensity*), the group's flexibility might enhance its strong track record of receiving fully-fledged productions. Perhaps because The Civilians intentionally uses loose definitions for its work, group members are more open to alternative methods and models for fully-fledged productions. As Cosson states in his "Letter from the Artistic Director," "My leadership of the company is rooted in my beliefs about the potential of theater, a term that we purposely define broadly. Theater, as we imagine it, can mean a theatrical production, a cabaret, a televised play, or a concert among other possibilities" (thecivilians.org). By remaining open to many definitions of "theater" and embracing various types of fully-fledged productions, The Civilians may escape the trap of "Workshop Hell;" if one type of production seems momentarily impossible, The Civilians' flexibility and openness may enable the group to envision an entirely different type of production solution.



## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This research project finds that the most prevalent, overarching theme of The Civilians' structure and processes is flexibility. Another important aspect of The Civilians is the group's strong network of collaborators, and other themes include a respectful, trusting organizational culture, and humor. This conclusion will discuss each of these themes, using the theoretical perspectives outlined in earlier chapters.

The theme of flexibility is one that infuses the creative and administrative sides of the organization. As Artistic Director Steven Cosson states, flexibility is a primary tenet of The Civilians that factors into the group's mission statement: "I wanted a theater company that could be flexible enough to respond to our changing cultural landscape to experiment with how a play is made, new models of collaboration, and new ways of connecting with audiences" (thecivilians.org). The group exhibits the most flexibility with its artistic processes: each show is approached individually and different tactics are used for each production. In addition to the shows taking different aesthetic forms in their final versions (such as interweaving fictional mystery and interview-based material with music in *The Great Immensity*, which can be contrasted with *You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents' Divorce* where actors portray their own parents in a non-musical production), there is great flexibility throughout the lifecycle of each project. Many ideas for shows originate from Artistic Director Steven Cosson, but ideas also come from The Civilians' Research and Development Group or from The Civilians' Associate Artists (Grush, Scott, Katz, thecivilians.org). The interview process, which is especially important to The Civilians' mission in that Artistic Director Cosson aims for interviews

to be conducted in a particular way that is influenced by the British Joint Stock tradition, still remains flexible depending on the project (thecivilians.org, Kozinn, Estvanik). For projects such as *In The Footprint: The Battle Over Atlantic Yards*, only actors who had been trained by Cosson and who would be portraying a particular subject conducted interviews, but for projects such as “Occupy Your Mind,” any Civilians Associate Artist, friend of The Civilians or member of the public is invited to conduct interviews with members of the Occupy movement in their own neighborhoods (Katz, thecivilians.org). This flexibility influences the variety of The Civilians’ shows, and could also affect the diversity of The Civilians’ audiences; similarly to Italy’s Piccolo Teatro, which offers “a variety of shows and events, thus appealing to several different segments of the population,” The Civilians works to maintain variety in its offerings, thus undoubtedly appealing to many different “types” of audiences.

The Civilians’ writing and workshop process also varies greatly depending on the particular show. Using Haimbach’s definitions of new play development, sometimes a “mainstream” workshop method is used (as with *Maple and Vine*, a show that is inspired by interviews conducted by Civilians Associate Artists, but has evolved into a more typical narrative play written by one author and “workshopped” at locations such as New Dramatists and Playwrights Horizons in New York), sometimes shows are created using an ensemble method (such as *In The Footprint: The Battle Over Atlantic Yards*, which was created using verbatim interviews and involved collaboration with “lab artists” but did not go through the typical “mainstream” workshop process), and sometimes shows combine both “mainstream” and ensemble methods of development (such as *Mr. Burns*

or *Paris Commune*, which evolved from ensemble methods of creation and then received “mainstream” workshops at theaters such as the Seattle Repertory Theater and The Public Theater in New York) (thecivilians.org, Haimbach, Grush, Katz). Writers of Civilians shows include some who compose scripts independently, such as Associate Artist Anne Washburn, some who compose scripts in pairs, such as Artistic Director Steven Cosson and Associate Artist/composer Michael Friedman, and some who write as a group, such as the six Civilians Associate Artists who wrote *You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents’ Divorce* (thecivilians.org). Other times, artistic collaborators outside of The Civilians are recruited for participation in a particular show, such as the Urban Bush Women dance company that participated as “lab artists” for *In The Footprint: The Battle Over Atlantic Yards*, and the Colombian rock band Aterciopelados that is creating music for the in-development Civilians project currently titled “Bogotá Prison Pageant” (thecivilians.org, Grush, Katz, brooklynateyelevel.org). The variety in The Civilians’ new work development process could enable the group to embrace beneficial aspects of multiple methods of development. As Brian Haimbach states, “what has become mainstream practice in the development of new plays can benefit by adopting some of the techniques utilized during ensemble development” (i); by remaining open to multiple writing and workshop methods, The Civilians is in a strong position to embrace the benefits of both mainstream and ensemble creation.

Additionally, because The Civilians is “a creative company, not a producing company” (Eisler), co-producers must be enlisted for each project, which adds to the variety and flexibility of the group’s productions. The Civilians has some long-standing

relationships with theaters such as The Public Theater in New York City, which has co-produced many of the group's performances and hosts a recurring Civilians cabaret series called "Let Me Ascertain You," but the group also consistently co-produces with new collaborators, such as the Kansas City Repertory Theater, which hosted the world premiere of *The Great Immensity* in early 2012 (thecivilians.org). Many times, The Civilians will co-produce with multiple organizations throughout the lifecycle of a show; *This Beautiful City*, for example, received an initial reading at Colorado College before being performed at The Actors Theater of Louisville Humana Festival of New American Plays, Studio Theatre in Washington, D.C., Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles, and Vineyard Theatre in New York (thecivilians.org). Because The Civilians does not have its own theater, the group is more able to embrace flexibility in its productions; shows are performed in geographically diverse areas, and in theaters and performance venues of various shapes and sizes. This model of co-producing, which Artistic Director Cosson explains is not typical for nonprofit theater companies in the United States, is a model that Cosson extols as one of the best and most important aspects of The Civilians: "The greatest thing we have to share is the model of many successful partnerships" (Mitchell 4). This collaboration with many successful partners does indeed set The Civilians apart from many other theater companies, especially within the United States, and it ensures that the company maintains flexibility in both its new work development and in its fully-fledged productions.

The Civilians also exhibits flexibility with its embrace of new media and its loose definition of what constitutes a “production.” As Development and Communications Associate Rosalind Grush explains:

[The Civilians has] this really active interest in how new media can be bolstering the performing arts. I think it’s easy to look at new media stuff and say, “that isn’t live performance, and therefore...it’s devaluing live performance to tape [record] something.” I don’t think that’s the case in our current climate, I think it’s really great that The Civilians are looking at that. (Grush)

Grush continues to explain that a main component of the strategic plan for The Civilians during 2012 is to find new ways that the group can work with new media in order to reach a broader audience. The Civilians already participates in multiple new media outlets, such as a Civilians weblog, podcasts, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Vimeo, and the group has produced live web streams of productions, such as the recent Joe’s Pub cabaret “Let Me Ascertain You: Occupy Wall Street” ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org)). This active involvement with new media and online social networking can be compared to Italy’s Piccolo Teatro, which considers its website “a fourth theatre of sorts” (Colbert 71). With The Civilians, which does not occupy a theater space, it is especially important that the group’s website and new media outlets work as a “theatre of sorts;” the group’s online presence is the main way that the public can become involved with The Civilians’ productions and projects.

In addition, Grush explains that The Civilians’ active involvement in new media aims to attract a new type of audience, and specifically “get people interested in the arts and theater who might not normally be, by trying to reach them in the way that they receive information” (Grush). This goal is one answer to what Michael Kaiser, President

of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, calls a “trial” of the theater community: that because of wide-spread Internet access and in-home entertainment systems, “many people have simply chosen to stay home rather than to bear the expense of going to the theater. So the challenge of reaching out to the potential audience for any venue must constantly be met: How do you identify this audience?” (Webb viii). Grush explains that *The Civilians* aims to combat this trial by reaching a new audience “in the way that they receive information;” namely through online sources, social networking, and new media. Reaching out to a new audience using that new audience’s preferred method of communication is a tactic that could prove successful for *The Civilians* and other arts organizations as they meet the challenges of this next, electronically enhanced generation of audience members.

On the administrative side of the organization, *The Civilians* most successfully exhibits flexibility with its fundraising strategies and processes. Former *Civilians* Literary Associate Abigail Katz argues that this flexibility regarding financial support is one of the greatest and most unique aspects of *The Civilians*: “The one thing that I think [*The Civilians*] do exceptionally well is to reach out beyond the theater community to get support” (Katz). Katz explains that *The Civilians* receives grants from organizations such as the National Science Foundation and other non-arts organizations that do not usually participate in the nonprofit theater world. That *The Civilians* is able to reach beyond its own community to involve other fields in its projects is a technique that may broaden the scope of the group’s shows even further.

One area where The Civilians could embrace more flexibility is in the separation of administrative and artistic tasks, roles, and responsibilities. Although there is overlap between administrative and artistic tasks within The Civilians' organizational structure, this overlap seems to occur mostly when staff members help each other during times of heavy workload; as Grush explains, "there's a lot of overlap...[like] if [Managing Director] Marion needs something...and I'm busy or something, the Literary Associate will certainly step up" (Grush). Mostly, however, The Civilians follows a typical two-part organizational structure: Managing Director Marion Friedman Young manages administrative responsibilities, and Artistic Director Steven Cosson manages artistic responsibilities. In her article "Dissolving the Barriers," *American Theatre* writer Celia Wren reports findings that support eliminating and/or blurring the distinction between distinct realms of theater organizations: "The calls for transparency are, essentially, calls for dissolving some of the boundaries that may traditionally have separated the field's administrative and artistic sides. That notion of barrier-shattering turned up again and again during the roundtable conversations" (44). One roundtable participant, Artistic Director of Washington D.C.'s Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company Howard Shalwitz (the theater that will co-produce the world premiere of *Mr. Burns* in 2012), reports that this new approach of dissolving administrative and artistic barriers has "help[ed] artists and staff realize 'they're engaged in the same enterprise'" (Wren 44). Cirque du Soleil also follows aspects of this barrier-shattering model; Morency and Needles explain that "For Cirque, the essence of the organization lies in the fact that shared power must dominate" (67), and that the organization "ensures that everyone is aware of the problems

and successes surrounding them, and knows that they can be part of the method of finding solutions to any problems” (68). Although with only three full-time employees, The Civilians is still small enough that there is undoubted overlap between different realms of the organization, the group might benefit from further dissolving barriers between artistic and administrative roles in order to foster heightened flexibility, creativity, communication, and problem solving.

Another theme that appeared throughout this study of The Civilians is that of the group’s strong network of collaborators. The Civilians’ model of inviting actors, writers, dramaturges, designers, etc. to be Associate Artists of The Civilians enables the group to stay in close contact with people who will likely be instrumental in future projects. Both former Literary Associate Abigail Katz and performer Jeff Scott explained that they were exceptionally honored to have received the Associate Artist designation, and that they were looking forward to future work with the company. This Associate Artist model also exemplifies and supports Wren’s finding that “long-term relationships between companies and artists are key to harmonious art-making” (41). The Civilians protects these long-term relationships by following an organizational structure that depends on a diverse group of Associate Artists.

The Civilians ensures that it fosters both long-term relationships and new partnerships by employing a few other structural elements: the Board of Directors (an element that is required by law as a part of being a 501(c)(3) nonprofit), the Research and Development Group, and its model of being “a creative company, not a producing company” (Eisler). The Civilians’ Board of Directors, which includes long-term



colleagues and friends of Artistic Director Steven Cosson as well as New York community members from a wide range of professional fields, exhibits what arts management consultant Duncan Webb calls a “good” board: “Good boards are diverse in many ways – in terms of demographic characteristics, resources, views of the world, and patterns of participation in the arts” (Webb 161). That Civilians board members come from diverse financial and professional backgrounds is important; when many different perspectives have the opportunity to weigh in on strategic decisions, Webb argues that problem solving is likely richer and more creative.

The Civilians’ Research and Development Group, which recruits a diverse group of artists each season to create new show ideas, also ensures that The Civilians’ strong network continues expanding. This group also helps counterbalance a problem that Wren highlights in her article: “In order to get a job, [individual theater artists] feel like they need to know the right people” (43). By creating a system that allows new artists to join The Civilians’ creative team each year, The Civilians fosters diversity in both its pool of artistic collaborators, and in the content of its shows.

The Civilians’ model of co-producing with other organizations also ensures that the group maintains long-term relationships and that it creates new relationships. As mentioned earlier, The Civilians co-produces with some theaters on a semi-regular basis (such as The Public Theater in New York), but the group also continually seeks new co-production partnerships using networking opportunities such as the Theatre Communications Group annual national theater conference ([thecivilians.org](http://thecivilians.org), Grush, “Artistry”). This co-production method embodies one of the most unique, and as Artistic

Director Cosson would argue, successful aspects of *The Civilians*: “The greatest thing we have to share is the model of many successful partnerships” (Mitchell 4). In addition to seeking co-producers, who are necessary for mounting *Civilians* productions, *The Civilians* also works to involve other artistic collaborators, such as the aforementioned groups *Urban Bush Women* and *Aterciopelados* (Grush, Katz). That *The Civilians* consistently strives to involve diverse artists in its productions contributes to the group’s mission of “encountering the limits of your own perception” (Estvanik 24). *The Civilians* works to encounter and then surpass the limits of its own perception by continually seeking new collaborators, which in turn places the group in a stronger position to create shows that encourage audience members to likewise encounter the limits of their own perceptions.

Finally, it is important to note the themes of trust and humor that infuse *The Civilians*’ organizational culture. Overall, *The Civilians*’ culture reflects a calmness that is the result of respectful, trusting relationships among *Civilians* staff members. Development and Communications Associate Rosalind Grush describes this culture as being opposite to many “busy” New York nonprofit theater companies: “[At *The Civilians*], it’s not about being the busiest, it’s not about being the most stressed out, which is great, which is so great” (Grush). Grush continues to explain, “Everyone [at *The Civilians*] is very respectful of your time and your energy and what you’re bringing” (Grush). Jeff Scott also notices that this respect and trust is present between the two *Civilians* directors, Managing Director Marion Friedman Young and Artistic Director Steven Cosson, observing that the two directors work exceptionally well together and

have a “really cool relationship” (Scott). Intern Sarah Keyes observes that Civilians staff members and Associate Artists are noticeably supportive of each other. She explains one situation that exemplified the group’s organizational culture: “This may sound lame, but they had an envelope stuffing party to get out some mass mailings, [and] it was one of the most fun times that I have had in the office. The Civilians has a good balance of working extremely hard, but finding the joy in all that they do” (Keyes).

This theme of “working extremely hard” while also “finding joy in all that they do” is worth highlighting in this study’s conclusion. As Grush explains, many nonprofit organizations become bogged down with a stressful, “busy” culture, but in many ways The Civilians manages to exhibit a different, healthier style of collaboration. One way that the group seems to continually embrace this respectful and trusting culture is with humor. Even though The Civilians writes about many serious social topics, the group’s work often includes humorous elements, and group members remain light-hearted even while describing their own projects. For example, Artistic Director Steven Cosson and composer Michael Friedman poked fun at the early Civilians work *Canard, Canard, Goose?* at a Theatre Communications Group conference. When Michael Friedman explained the show as “a book musical about abandoned geese based on interviews,” Cosson remarked sarcastically and lightly, “It was very important work,” to which Friedman responded, “Groundbreaking” (“Artistry”). In an interview on WNYC radio, Associate Artist Matt Maher describes the interview process for *You Better Sit Down: Tales From My Parents’ Divorce* with similar humor and lightness: “It’s very difficult to just sort of walk up to your parents and be like, ‘Mom and Dad, can you tell us your story

of how you, you know, ruined my life' (*laughter*)" (WNYC Radio). This lightness is apparent throughout The Civilians' culture and reflects the remarkable ability to not take one's self too seriously. Although The Civilians creates work that is arguably some of the most important theatrical work currently in development because it addresses such pressing social topics, the group's work mirrors its organizational culture in that it combines lightness with seriousness. Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director of The Public Theater, echoes these sentiments, stating:

I sometimes think The Civilians are the only necessary ensemble in New York... Their theater embodies what is best in the form: connection to community and the highest artfulness, playfulness and seriousness side-by-side. They make the American theater a nobler profession; if they didn't exist, we'd be struggling to invent them. (Cosson, *The Civilians v*)

The Civilians' ability to combine "playfulness and seriousness" in the content of its shows and in its organizational culture, along with the group's embrace of a strong network of collaborators and flexibility both administratively and artistically, make this organization an important one to study when looking at the future and potential of American theater. These tactics provide models for how other artists can create interview-based works that are thought-provoking, educational, accessible, musical, and comedic. In addition, this research documents methods for how a young, relatively small theater company functions logistically in the financially tough environment of nonprofit theater. Not only does The Civilians create innovative works, the group produces its works in innovative ways (such as co-producing, using live web streams, and drawing funding from diverse organizations) to attract audiences using non-traditional methods. In an era when many fear that audience numbers for live performances are dwindling due

to the ever-increasing availability of at-home entertainment (Webb), *The Civilians* provides methods for reaching out to new audiences that could be useful to practitioners in all areas of the performing arts, and particularly to those who aim to use documentary theater as a vehicle for social change and awareness.

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## APPENDIX: CIVILIANS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Interview Questions in Context of the Study:

#### *A Versatile Group of Investigative Theater Practitioners: An Examination and Analysis of The Civilians*

NOTE: Questions differed depending on the interview subject (i.e. detailed logistical questions were directed towards those who had experience doing administrative work for the group)

#### **Introductions:**

1. Thank you!
2. Review consent form/confidentiality
3. Brief overview of my study – I am looking into The Civilians’ processes (creative and administrative) and The Civilians’ structure to see *how* the group functions
4. What is your background (educational, professional, theatrical)?
5. What is your chronological history with The Civilians? (When did you first hear about the group, when did you join, how has your role changed from beginning until now, etc.)
6. When you first started working with the group, did anything in particular attract you towards working with this theater company?
7. What are your professional goals (both within The Civilians, and outside of The Civilians)? How did your work with the group factor into your goals?

#### **Logistical Questions:**

1. Your Role
  - a. Tell me about your role within The Civilians (responsibilities, “a day in the life,” etc.)
  - b. What are your favorite and least favorite aspects of your role?
  - c. Are there any changes you would make to your role if you could?
  - d. Taking into account that many theater professionals are “overworked and underpaid,” do you feel like you are fairly compensated for your role? Do you feel like other staff members are fairly compensated for their roles?
2. The Civilians’ structure
  - a. How many staff members are there currently?
  - b. Who reports into whom? (Picture of the organization)
  - c. What are the different “arms” of The Civilians (research and development, education, each different show), and who is responsible for each of those arms?
  - d. Do you personally know all of the people currently affiliated with The Civilians? Do you feel like The Civilians is a tight-knit group, or do people work more independently?
  - e. Do you feel like The Civilians’ structure works for your particular role? Do you feel like it works for the group as a whole?



- f. How do you feel like The Civilians has changed since its 2001 inception?
  - g. Are there any changes (organizational or otherwise) that you would make to The Civilians?
3. Finance questions:
    - a. How much do you know about finance re: The Civilians?
    - b. Does The Civilians have an annual budget? Who manages the budget?
    - c. What is the breakdown of your funding (ticket sales/merchandise, donations, government funding, private industry funding, other sources)? Have you ever turned down funding from a donor? If so, why?
  4. Organizational questions:
    - a. Do you have a subscriber base? Do you ever use your subscribers/fans as volunteers (ushers, etc.)?
    - b. How do you secure performance locations?

**Creative Questions:**

1. When people ask about your work, what is your thirty-second “elevator speech” about The Civilians? (Either about your particular role, about the group as a whole, or both)
2. How does The Civilians decide on subject matter for its shows?
3. Tell me about The Civilians’ Research and Development group. What do you think works well in regards to this group? What do you think could use improvement?
4. How do you conduct interviews for your shows? Who conducts the interviews and how do you choose your subjects? Does the issue of the privacy/confidentiality of your interview subjects arise often? If so, how do you deal with it?
5. How does travel factor into The Civilians’ creative work? Do the artists working on a certain show live in the community that the show is based upon? If so, for how long?
6. Tell me about your thoughts on The Civilians and community-based theater. How do you deal with understanding a community other than the New York City community in which you are based? Do you deal with resistance from subjects who view you as outsiders? How do you overcome this?
7. Tell me about music and The Civilians’ shows. How important is music in the vision/mission of The Civilians?
8. How do you decide which artists (interviewers, writers, actors) work on each show?
9. How would a new artist get involved with The Civilians?
10. Does The Civilians have any particular strategies for collaboration when writing scripts?
11. Does The Civilians have any particular strategies for editing spoken interviews into scripts? (i.e. which parts of the interview do you keep, and which do you toss?)

12. Tell me about critical and popular responses to Civilians shows. How much does critical/popular response affect your personal/individual work with The Civilians?  
How much do you think critical/popular response affects the group as a whole?
13. In what ways do you think The Civilians is particularly successful?
14. In what ways do you think The Civilians could use improvement?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share?