Elissa Adams:
I want to welcome everyone to this panel on adaptation, and to thank TCG for arranging this. My name is Elissa Adams, and I'm the director of new play development at the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis. And I'm pleased to be here with my colleague Teresa Eyring, who's our managing director, and two of our fabulous trustees, Karen Bohn and Michael Margulies. And we have a wonderful panel. Sitting next to me is Ellen McLaughlin, actor and playwright, José Cruz González, director and playwright, and Ed Waterstreet, who's the artistic director of Deaf West Theatre. And we've been asked to talk a little bit about the art of adaptation, which as you will soon find out from the experiences in the field of adaptation by these panelists, can take many, many forms and has taken them on many adventures.

The way we'd like to structure the conversation is just to have the three panelists spend a couple of moments telling you a little about themselves and their work, and then I have some questions I'm going to throw at them and have them answer for you and then we would very much like to open it up for questions and comments and experiences from all of you. Ellen, can I ask you to start?

Ellen McLaughlin:
I was hoping that Ed would start.

[laughter]

Adams:
Okay, we'll have Ed start.

Ed Waterstreet:
[I in ASL, via an interpreter] Wow, okay. Oh, I guess we'd better ask the interpreters to do some adaptations, here. Perfect segue into the topic. Because you're only going to be able to understand me if he works.

I'm very very happy to be here. Deaf West Theatre in fact has to engage in adaptation for every production, because we have deaf audience members and it's an obvious need. For our hearing audience members there are different needs, and you'll hear certainly from my colleagues here of those concerns. Let me talk to you about our particular situation. We start with an idea—something that would be appropriate for a deaf audience. And since I am deaf myself, I put that hat on. And I take a look at a script with that in mind. I don't necessarily think about the adaptation into sign language—we know we're going to have to do that. I take a look at a script, and I get a gut feeling if it is the correct work to embark upon as a potential production for our deaf audiences. In understanding the story, is there going to be a connection with our audiences? We have a cultural aspect we consider for our audiences. We also think about how those roles in the work will adapt. We consider works that will incorporate a mixture of people who are deaf and people who can hear and how that would work. We consider if the work is conducive to such an adaptation. So as far as the adaptation process itself—I'm going to use an example—*The Gin Game*, which you may be familiar with. We did that a number
of years ago, and of course, it involves the use of a telephone. With deaf people we really don't use telephones in the way that you think of. So we had to take that and make an adaptation, less on a linguistic level, more on a cultural level—so we got rid of the telephone. These kinds of things which we call "hearing elements," we adjust them or adapt them to more culturally-friendly deaf elements.

I want to use an example of a playwright that's well known and well liked—Neil Simon. The work that Neil Simon does is often out of the question for us. It's so oriented toward English and puns in English that it's not conducive to the sort of cultural adaptations that we consider. It narrows the scope of the works we find appropriate for such an adaptation. We do keep an eye out for what is most appropriate. Funny enough, we've been doing more musical work—and I'm sure you know about Big River—have people in the house seen Big River, anybody seen it? Big River, the production we did? Okay, great, you know what I'm talking about then. We typically did dramas, non-musical dramas. And as we saw the rise of hearing people to our productions go from 5 percent to even as many as 90 percent of our audience, we started realizing that, you know, this is our money base. So, we couldn't ignore it! And we took that in stride and realized that this would influence some of our decisions. So we started embarking on works that were more what we would call "bicultural."

Big River was the perfect solution for this. With Huckleberry Finn, the character being adapted to a deaf person, we thought that would be a wonderful connection to our audiences, with the journeys taken with Jim, who we decided should be an African-American hearing person. Putting the two together made a perfect balance of shared experiences. I myself have experienced, as a deaf person, the frustrations of being in a world that's mostly hearing. And of course, most of those are rooted in communication barriers. I don't always have an interpreter with me, so I have to figure out strategies with people without the use of an interpreter. And of course, we find the one culture we have the least amount of problems with is the Italians, because of the way they use the gestures I'm showing you right now. I'm thinking how can we utilize some of these ideas. These are some of the components we think about with adaptation.

So let me go back to Big River. A perfect choice. And a musical, which puzzled a lot of people, because they wondered how this would appeal to deaf audiences. And of course, even myself, not being able to hear music, it was just a challenge for me to think about: what is it about a musical that appeals to hearing people? I happen to be the only deaf person in a family of hearing people—they all love music and musicals. And I've seen this, I've always noticed this. I've seen the enjoyment and I always experience a sense of isolation in a musical. Seeing that I was the only one not getting it, as you can see. Feeling like I was in my own world, only seeing a bunch of mouths doing these elongated pronunciations—that's all I could see. It looked extremely boring to me, with no life to it. But that created a challenge to me. I kept thinking "one of these days, we're going to create something that adapts to signing in the same way." So Deaf West has been a wonderful vehicle, the perfect vehicle, for us to implement this. It was a little bit unnerving at first. We had a lot of skepticism in the community because it wasn't culturally appropriate for a lot of deaf folks, our deaf supporters. I didn't let that stop me. In fact, we had to do more convincing to our deaf community that we were going to be able to combine these elements. Since the success of this last production, I'm realizing—certainly the financial success as well—the need for this combination of cultural differences that come into one production. Oliver! was another production that
we produced at Deaf West and we had people who could hear, people who couldn't hear, who could enjoy this musical. This was the first one we actually produced. That was the impetus for our doing *Big River* as the big production everyone knows about.

I want to go back to adaptation and how that played a role in this. Jeff Calhoun, our director, considered Mark Twain, the wit of Mark Twain, and what you get when you read Mark Twain; the challenge of adapting that intent. Mark Twain's intent. And that was his goal. And it did require a lot of adaptation on many levels. And I have to tell you, it was a tremendous amount of work to try to get the same sense of Twain's work to the deaf audience and the hearing audience. And I have to confess that with the amount of work, the concern we had was that hearing people got the integrity of the original work, and that deaf people got that same sense of that work.

Keep in mind we're a small theatre, a 99-seat house. And we did some of our work without it being known that we were making our adaptations. And I'm embarrassed to say that a couple of us, we just went ahead and did our adaptations without permission. And we actually faced a lot of success with this, and the Mark Taper Forum actually asked us to bring this one particular production to their theatre. And of course, we were elated, then realized...[laughter]...that the authors had no input in this. And of course, we were terrified that we now had to go back in retrospect and get the permission we should have asked for originally. We weren't sure what to do. So this was another element of adaptation; this is something you have to plan in advance. However, Rocco Landesman, who was the producer of *Big River* originally, is good friends with William, the playwright, and through his connection gave us a good inroad. And Rocco said, "Oh, absolutely, no problem, we had the meeting with him and once we met I proceeded to explain the process and his reaction was, 'this is wonderful, no problem, go for it.'" [laughter] And we were so relieved to see, since we had already proceeded with it. And he did get that this is a challenge for us, that it does require specific types of adaptations because of the languages we're talking about—he actually got excited, he saw the play at the Mark Taper when it was mounted there. And he actually felt that with the adaptation work that the play improved in its own qualities. So we were pleased about that.

So, with that in mind: we are always adapting, that's what we do with every work. We first start, again, with a work that we feel is conducive to the adaptation, and that is the main challenge we face. I do want to throw out the idea that there are two elements to this. There's adaptation—and then there's translation. Translation...and I would say we use a combination of the two and it's not so clean-cut. It's quite a hybrid of the two. I wouldn't say it's ever 100 percent one or the other, so I'd like to throw out that idea. And I believe that's what we do as a practice at Deaf West Theatre. [applause]

*José Cruz González:*
My turn? Okay. Well, I'm an associate artist with Childsplay in Tempe, Arizona, which is a professional theatre company for young audiences, and also an associate artist with Cornerstone Theatre. So the area I want to focus on is theatre for young audiences and also community-based work. I've adapted for both of those areas. With Childsplay, we did a project that was brought to us by a librarian in [Maricopa] County, who brought this book called *Tomas and the Library Lady* to the artistic director, David Saar, a few years back to see if this might be something that they might be able to partner on. So David sent it on to me. And it was this beautiful little true story based on the life of Tomas Rivera, who was one of the first Chicano scholars and a chancellor of a major university
in California. And this book was, you know, illustrated. When you typed it out it was probably two pages on Word. And very simply told, I was intrigued by that book and eventually by what I would have to do in order to adapt this book.

The other project was with Cornerstone in 2004. We spent about a year working with a little community in Lost Hills, California, which is in the Central Valley, about two hours north of Los Angeles. With this community-based work, I spent months interviewing the youngest in the community to the oldest, in different languages and trying to find what that story might be—how that story might be told. So in Lost Hills we ultimately ended up picking *Rip Van Winkle*. And that was based on an interview with a woman named Marta who worked at the local truck stop there, right off of Highway 5. Most people think that's the town, but the town is about two miles inland on Route 46. And the claim to fame on the 46 is that's where James Dean died. This little freeway cuts right through the middle of town. So you've got less than 2,000 people living there—a lot of folks live there in trailers; they're working people, agricultural workers—and trying to create a piece of theatre for that community, by that community and with that community was one of the most enriching experiences I've ever had. But also trying to bring out this story, which Marta sort of helped me finally crack, because she was the one sitting at the Denny's—that was the only local place we could meet—and I spent five hours with her that day. I can tell you, by the time I was done with my coffee I was just like this [shaking] [laughter]. But Marta shared something. She was the mother of four, she worked the graveyard shift there, and this helped me crack into *Rip Van Winkle*. She is a recovering meth addict and her husband is at the state penitentiary, about a mile and a half away from the town. And Marta said when she stopped, she actually woke up. And that suddenly was the perfect pattern for me to finally tell this story. And so with *Waking up in Lost Hills: A Central California Rip Van Winkle*, that project was about and with the community. So it was a constant change in serving this community, because you're writing about this community, it's their stories and they're performing them.

With *Tomas and the Library Lady*, I actually got to meet Pat [Mora], the book author. We met for coffee one morning with David and the librarian, Tim [Watum]. And I sure wanted to prepare myself for that meeting with Pat. So I read everything I could possibly read about Tomas. Everything he had written—researching at the archives at U.C.-Riverside on his life, you know. Because there was so much missing from that simple children's story, and I wanted to try to expand on that. I was just wanting to be prepared so that I could actually ask some of these questions that she hadn't captured in that book. And as I started to ask about these things, she said, "Yeah, you've done your homework." And as a result of that she said "Do whatever you want to do with it." So she gave us her blessing on it and I was happy because we were able to expand *Tomas* in so many other ways.

**McLaughlin:**
I have been adapting Greek plays, sort of by accident. It started 10, 12 years ago, when Brian Kulick asked me—he was out at Actors Gang in L.A.—and he said "we're thinking about doing an *Oresteia,*" which is the *Agamemnon*, *Electra* and *Orestes.* "And we're thinking about having three different playwrights write the three different plays, and we're wondering if you would want to adapt *Electra,*" which was a part that I'd played—I'm also an actor. And in the process of writing that, I began to realize how much as a playwright my work was entirely based on what the Greeks did, because they invented theatre. And I became just very interested in how solid the dramaturgy of these Greek plays was, is.
And I did that and I sort of finished with that and thought, well, that's enough of that. And all of a sudden I got more and more commissions.

I should make it clear that I don't read Greek. That's not one of things I know how to do. So what I have to do—they're not translations—what I do is I read all of the translations I can find in English extremely carefully, and then I start writing. Because I have an absolute horror of using scholars' work as if it was my own.

So, I'll tell you about two of the adaptations—I've done nine now—sort of weird how it all creeps up on you. But when America went to war in March 2003, Tony Randall, the late and wonderful Tony Randall, did this remarkable thing, which was that he cancelled his spring season. And he decided the only play he wanted to do was *The Persians* by Aeschylus, which I'll talk about because Oskar told you the plot. And everybody said "the what?" It's one of the least performed plays—it's the first play that we have that's survived. So it's the oldest play we possess as a culture. And he not only wanted to do *The Persians*, but he wanted to do it as quickly as possible, and he wanted to do it with this Broadway-style production, extremely high production values. But he wanted to go into rehearsal in two weeks, which meant that he hired Ethan McSweeny as the director the day he made this decision and they hired three extraordinary designers the day they made this decision. And they basically said "go as fast as you possibly can." And they did—this is an amazing design. But on a scale that I couldn't believe how fast they worked. Then Ethan looked at the play, the translations, and he started burrowing through—I think there are about six English translations of the play. And he said "this is impossible. It's so old and just feels so dusty and musty and I mean, I can't see the play through the ancientness of it." So, he knew my work, and he called me up and said "how fast can you write?" [laughter]

And I said "I can write really fast when I know what I'm doing, but sometimes it takes me a while to know what I'm doing." And he said "start reading!" And so I went out and I read the six translations. And he was beginning auditions. So he'd come over to my apartment after the auditions every day and say "more pages," and he'd take the pages back and take them into auditions the next day. I never saw a single audition because I was writing the play. And the auditions changed as they had more material to work with. He started the auditions with the translations and apparently it was rather difficult.

What I found was that I was appalled I'd signed up for this as soon as I read the play, because I thought "this is impossible. I don't know what I can do here." But as soon as I started really studying it—it is such a remarkable document for all the reasons that Oskar talked about. It's an extraordinary act of compassion and playwright's imagination and this extraordinary act of empathy. I don't think there's any play I can think of that is similar to it in any way, in terms of just the size of the leap that he takes as a human being, in terms of what he's trying to empathize with. And the fact that it's deeply, deeply sad. It's a tragedy. And there is schadenfreude involved but you move past that because you come, by the end of it, to feel extraordinary compassion for these people. And I just think it's absolutely remarkable. So as soon as I got past my immediate "ugh," I found it an extraordinary play. I wrote it in six days and didn't do anything else except walk the dog occasionally.

What I was trying to do was just lift the thing into...I wasn't trying to change the play, I wasn't trying to update the play. These plays don't need any help. My feeling about the
Greeks is, if it's timeless—and these plays all are—it's always timely, you know? There's a way in which you don't have to do much to make them sing because they are the most extraordinary... And you don't have to, I mean, one of the things I love about the Greek plays is that the dramaturgy is so solid you can't nick them. I mean, I can't do them any harm. Because those plays will be done as long as people do plays.

The other one I wanted to talk about was *The Trojan Women*, which was an entirely different thing. I got a grant from the Wallace Foundation, which is one of the great funding organizations, and the task I was faced with was to do some sort of workshop with people who wouldn't necessarily be affected by the medium, and work with a human rights organizations to do that. It was in 1995 in the middle of the Bosnian war, and I had become very—as we all were—very concerned and alarmed about the things I was hearing about what was going on in Yugoslavia. And there are many refugees in the New York area from the former Yugoslavia—Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims. They all live in Astoria in these very discrete neighborhoods. And I decided what I wanted to do was get a group of people who were recent immigrants from the war and put together a reading of what I thought was the greatest war play ever written—and I don't think I'm alone in this—which is *The Trojan Women*—and adapt it in such a way that it would be done by a group of people, for instance, we had three Hecubas: one was a Serb, one was a Croatian, one was a Bosnian Muslim. And some part of each one of those roles—each actor translated the play, my play, into their own language. So the Bosnian—at that point they weren't calling it Bosnian, their language, they were still calling it Serbo-Croatian, it's now called Bosnian. But each actor would translate it herself into her own language and she would speak about half of her part in her own language, and about half of her part in English. And it was done chorally, so that you'd hear sometimes English done at the same time—I mean, it's interesting to watch *KAOS* because it was a very similar experience, the translation was happening at the same time as the language was being spoken. My idea being that for an audience that only knew Serbo-Croatian, they would be able to understand the entire play as well as an audience of people like myself who only know English. And there were some Macedonians and Albanians and they spoke some of their parts in their own language.

And what it really was, was for me a way of getting people from all the sides of the conflict to stay in the room together. And it was hugely difficult not only to find people who would be willing to do this, but then to create a rehearsal situation that was safe enough so that they could literally sit next to a person who they would have crossed the street to avoid in any other circumstance. And to hear the dialect of a person whom they considered an enemy.

What happened was that I was stunned by the power—I mean, we all know this, this is why we've given our lives to this medium—but the power of this medium to create a community. Albeit an ad hoc community, but it was a community of people who, once you're on stage with somebody, and sharing a part with somebody, and going through an emotional experience with somebody, there is a level of connection that is unlike anything else. And I've come to believe stage fright is the great unifying force. [laughter] You know, I went back before the show one night and my two Andromaches, who had been battling with each other—one was a Serb from Belgrade and one was a Bosnian Muslim, whose entire family had been massacred in front of her. And she said, "I can't even hear you speak because your voice is the voice of the people who killed my family." And the Serb said, "I didn't kill your family. The last time I was in Belgrade was to
protest Milosevic—I did not kill your family. You're just going to have to stick with me."
And they did. They stuck through the project—we lost a lot of people, but they stuck. But
before the show, I went backstage, and the Serb, who was this lanky, gorgeous blonde
model-type, was holding, cradling the Bosnian Muslim, Alma, in her arms, singing to her
like a baby, trying to get her to calm down so they could do the show together. It was an
amazing experience, and it affirms the faith that I didn't really know I had in the power of
the medium and what it can do.

Adams:
There are lots of things I'd like to follow up on. One of them is for Ed, I'd like to ask you—
one of the things I asked the panel to think about was to think back on, were there sort of
"a-ha" moments in their process and when something that might have been a difficult or
knotty problem in the act of adaptation sort of clicked into something that worked. And I
wondered if you could talk a little about—it seems like how to make the music in Big
River work for your audience needed to be an "a-ha" moment. Can you talk about what
that process was or what it was, how you actually did that to make that successful.

Waterstreet:
That is a difficult question. The "a-ha" within adaptation—that has been a lifelong issue
for me. I have always had to adapt my environment because of who I am, thinking about
language, and with my parents and the struggles I had communicating with them as
hearing people and those "a-ha" moments are something I always worked toward.

As far as understanding the play itself, I think particularly with a musical it's a challenge.
With a straight play, I think you read the play, look at it, you think about whether it's
appropriate for a deaf audience. If we were to sign this, would it be easy to sign it in a
more English fashion—would it make sense? But with musicals—I don't hear. It was one
realization that adaptation was going to be a big challenge. Jeff was who we relied on.
And it was his "a-ha"s that I had to live vicariously through. It's quite different than what
we just heard from Ellen and the process she just explained. That is an incredibly
complicated process. We haven't gone to Greek yet. We haven't gone there! That's not
our experience. For me, I am beginning to get an "a-ha" in the adaptation of musicals.
But as far as the process, certainly starting with the reading. I mean, when I look at
notes, and staves and treble clefs, I have no idea what that means or what it represents.
So we have to rely in a partnership fashion with a hearing person who does get what
that means. And they try their best to explain to me what these symbols and figures
mean and how they translate into something that eventually can be signed somehow.
We try to make it as equal an experience as possible, knowing that one is an auditory
phenomenon with highs and lows and pitches that vary and tempos that vary, so we try
to come up with some visual representation of that. Does that kind of answer your
question?

Adams:
Anybody else? José, it seems like your moment with Marta in Denny's, that was sort of
the "a-ha" moment for that. Ellen, in talking about The Persians, which you had to do so
quickly, was there an "a-ha" moment or was it sort of just getting through it, that you
wouldn't phrase it that way?
McLaughlin:
One of the things that happens in *The Persians* is that the queen appears, Atossa, at the very beginning of the play. And the play takes place in a sort of council chamber in Susa, the seat of government in Persia. And all of the chorus are councilors who urged Xerxes off to war. And they're a little bit worried at the beginning of the play, they're thinking "we haven't heard from the boys for quite some time, and hope everything's going well. But how badly could it go—we sent the largest army that's ever been put together in history, so how badly could it go? But you know, I'm a little worried. I just had this terrible dream." And she tells them the dream, which by anybody's standards—you don't need Sigmund Freud to tell you how terrible this dream and how prophetic it is. It's disaster. And councilors are all trying to come up with a nice gloss on it, but all of a sudden there's sinking spirits and then the messenger comes in and tells them about it—there's one of the great set pieces in Greek literature, which is the description of the battle of Salmus, which is the only eyewitness account we have of any battle in the Persian Wars, because we know Aeschylus was there to see it.

And then eventually they call up the dead King Darius, they bring him in, he tells them what idiots they all are. And then he goes away. And then Xerxes comes home. And they yell at him, and he weeps and he says "you know, yeah, I really screwed up." And it's just, it's this huge lamentation, but it's very antagonistic. And I realized that what I needed to do was to bring Atossa back in, who is capable, as his mother and as his queen, of turning chaos and misery and horror into tragedy. And she turns the lamentation into a ritual, which makes it possible to end the play. And the reason I think Aeschylus couldn't do this is because he couldn't do it, I mean he had two actors—the person who was playing Xerxes was also playing Atossa—and he couldn't bring in the third. But I could [laughter], so I did. And that for me was an "a-ha" moment. Because I realized I can't get out of this situation without bringing the queen back on, and I think Aeschylus would be okay with that. [laughter]

Adams:
I'm also struck by how each of you has used the act of adaptation as a way of reaching out to a community. Either a specific audience or a community you're actually wanting to engage with. And it strikes me what a kind of two-sided dialogue the act of adaptation is. You're on the one side talking with what's come before, whether it's a play or a book or a musical, and then also talking with the people for whom you are preparing the adaptation. I wonder if you could talk about—do you find the initial impetus is toward the audience that you're creating for, or toward the work you're going to be in conversation with? Or does that sort of, does that change as the process goes on? Are there times that you're more talking to what's gone before than to the people you're creating the new work for? Anybody want to pick up on that?

González:
I'm still trying to track it. I'll give it a shot and then you can direct me. I think with the Cornerstone project, *Waking up in Lost Hills*, we spent a lot of time talking through different stages of the *Rip Van Winkle* project. I spent months not having any preconceived notions of how to tell the story—it was just to listen—that was the most important thing. And then to begin to look at patterns that rose up from those interviews, those story circles that we did. And again, this town was like any city in America, they're dealing with poverty, with alcoholism, drug abuse, with immigrant issues—all kinds of things. And so that was, once I figured this out with Marta sharing her story and then
going to *Rip Van Winkle* and reading it. And actually taking it to the company, Cornerstone, we actually sat there and read this thing out loud. And where I was thinking about the audience, Cornerstone was talking about the story. So it took me back to the story, thinking about "oh, the story, yeah yeah yeah." And then we went to the community and we read *Rip Van Winkle* both in English and in Spanish with the community, out loud, and got their feedback. So from that, it took me into a different place there, because it was that community talking about that piece, and for them, how it related, how it connected or didn't connect to them.

Then the next step for me was to go back again to see how I might put this together and re-conceive that story based upon the interviews and that community. And then we went through that same process again with Cornerstone in terms of reading the script, then taking that script up to the community and reading it again with the community giving input and then going away and doing another rewrite.

**Waterstreet:**
I think for me—let me just give you an example from a past experience. Of course we start with reading it. We get the story in our mind. We think about its appropriateness for a deaf audience—I've already talked about that. It's also essential that I have a hearing director, a director who can hear who works with me. It's really the input from the director we rely on. I explain the idea I have of why I think this will work. I give my entire vision of what I would like to see happen. The director, Jeff, will look at what I have to say and he thinks about what is doable, what is not doable—what's adaptable, especially from English. He's not really—I mean, he gets the English, he gets the source. In some ways we put the source into his hands and now we have to have a meeting of the minds to see if we can make it adapt. And then he looks for my approval. So it's a joint venture—does that make sense?

**Adams:**
Yeah. Here's a question: Why not just write new plays for all of these situations? Why not do an entire season of plays that are written specifically for a deaf community. Why not write a new play? Why not...

**Waterstreet:**
Yeah, I'm ready, I'm ready with that one. *[laughter]*

Well, *Children of a Lesser God* certainly was written with both audiences considered. It didn't need an adaptation. It clearly is written for both audiences—it's built into the concept level. So you've got signing, it's in the script, it's already there, it's something you can follow and you get this—we have this one play like that. We have one. And if we were to write something in sign language—let's say a play unlike *Children of a Lesser God*, the entire thing in sign language, and we presented it to you and asked you to do an adaptation for a hearing audience, that would be the reverse challenge for you. We haven't done that yet. Perhaps someday we'll get there, we'll write something that's actually originally in sign language. *Children of a Lesser God* is the closest thing we have, that Mark Medoff wrote. That's really all we have.

**Adams:**
So for you, it's just that the literature isn't there yet?
Waterstreet:
That's right, that's right.

González:
I think for me, with the communities I'm dealing with, these tend to be young audiences that may not have been exposed to the literature, or immigrant communities that may not know that literature as well. Going into Lost Hills, the community hadn't ever heard of *Rip Van Winkle*. Doing another Cornerstone project with young people last year in Lincoln Heights in Los Angeles, we decided to look at what's it like to be a third-grader, a seventh-grader and an eleventh-grader in this community of Lincoln Heights? And again, we spent about eight months working with these young people. And I finally, after listening to them and doing story circles and all sorts of exercises with them, the one thing that came out for me was that their lives are like Grimm fairytales. They're really dark, you know? So I went into a class finally with seventh graders—35 of these kids—I mean, it's a tough, tough community, tough school—and said "I'm going to read you *Little Red Riding Hood*." Now, I was pretty scared about going in to read this little story. But you could have heard a pin drop when these kids listened to this story, because they'd heard of *Little Red Riding Hood*, but nobody had ever read it to them or they'd never read it to themselves. And afterwards we had some questions asked. And we asked them "who's the wolf in your neighborhood?" And one of the kids raised his hand and said, "You know, my father is the wolf in my neighborhood, when he drinks." And so, it was relevant, and I think that's why we need to continue to go back to material that has a timeless thing. Because for me, as an artist, it's trying to keep that door open to new communities that have not discovered that material. And it's there, it belongs to them, they just don't know it.

The other part for me as an artist is that I love the challenge of adaptation. It uses different muscles, and I'm so happy to have that opportunity.

McLaughlin:
I have a rather sad admission to make. It's quite personal. I'm a playwright, I write my own stuff where I make up the entire thing. I have been reviewed very badly, occasionally, for things that I've written completely by myself. And whether justly or unjustly. I got snakebit and scared about being a playwright. I became silent for many years. I was completely blocked, because plays that I had really worked deeply on and where I felt that I was showing my soul, like a little raw oyster to the world, they were across the board loathed by critics. And it was very hard for me to write. What adaptation did for me was it allowed me to go back into the shark-infested water which is the creative process in American playwriting, holding the hand of a Greek guy. *[laughter]* Because the Greek guys make me feel safer. Their work is undeniably great. And even if I mess it up, if the critic takes me on, they're also taking on Aeschylus, they're also taking on Sophocles. This is not to say I haven't gotten bad reviews for the Greek adaptations. But by and large I feel safer. And I'm actually at a point in my life where I have to stop adapting Greek plays. Because I have to gain the courage to make my own work, without apology, and just say "this is what I believe, this is who I am, take it or leave it." I have a book out that's eight of my adaptations, and I thought "that's it, that's enough, McLaughlin! Stop adapting." But then I did another one. *[laughter]* It's such a loose adaptation that it's not going to be named *Antigone*. It's really truly my play.
But the reason I'm drawn to the Greeks is all the reasons I said, but for instance, with the Bosnian, that situation, I felt it was important for me as an American not to run off and write a play about the Bosnian war. As if I knew anything. Because in fact, I think that's one of things Americans do often and shamefully. We go in and we tell people, this is what you're suffering! Now, you guys get up on stage and do it. We try to process their grief for them. I don't know, I just really, really wanted to check that impulse to try to define an experience that I had no knowledge of. But I felt like the Greeks always write about war with knowledge. Every single one of the great tragedian playwrights was a warrior, a veteran. And they were writing for an audience that was composed largely of veterans. And they know what they're talking about. And one of the things that happened with *The Trojan Women* is these people said "yes, this is what it's like. This speaks to my experience." And I thought Euripides would be very happy about that. But I felt like I could give them a means to connect with one of the most ancient articulations of sorrow that we have, this specific sorrow of war. And it gave them a way of voicing their own pain. In most rehearsal processes you're trying to get people to the point where they're elevated to the height of the emotional life of the characters, particularly with Greek plays. We spent the entire rehearsal process trying to get them to repress their emotions so they could actually speak, and not just cry on stage. And we had a rule that if you—they were all holding scripts—if you started crying and you couldn't stop crying, you had a buddy you would hand the script to and she would finish out the performance. And we had a couple of times where it almost happened, but the woman just did not want to leave the stage. And she waited until she could speak again, and she went on. I don't know, that was a testament, at least as far as I'm concerned, not to my work but to the power of the Greek plays. And I just couldn't have done what I did any other way than to use a Greek play. Because they're so old and they're the foundation of Western civilization, and they don't belong to any of us. And because of that they belong to all of us.

**Adams:**
Do you think that's the reason—it seems adaptations of many kinds have become so prevalent in terms of what theatres do in this country—does that strike you as the audience entering into that dialogue with an older work, or is it because it's safer in some ways?

**McLaughlin:**
It's safer. In my case. Safer for the playwright, but it's much safer for the audience than to go to a new play by Ellen McLaughlin: "Who the heck is she," you know? "I'll probably hate it." [laughter] But no, there's no question it's easier to program, it's easier to get audiences. The worst thing that happens is they start treating it like vitamins: "oh, gotta go see a classic Greek play." But they come. Because they feel they should.

**González:**
Another project with Cornerstone years ago, which I wanted to do was to study mariachi music. I love mariachi music. In fact, I learned how to play mariachi music. It gave me entrance to this project. Outside of Mexico, the largest mariachi capital in the world in the United States is Los Angeles. There's over a thousand mariachis in this little area about five minutes from downtown called Boyle Heights. So I felt, I'm going to go and learn about mariachis, and so I began interviewing mariachis there and then expanded my research and interviewed mariachis from around the United States, and I sure learned a lot about the music and the form. For me, the thing that was really wonderful was that I
went on what they call a *chamba*, which is a gig. And these guys were called Mariachi Cafetal—mariachi coffee. And you know, they were working guys, and they invited me to this *chamba*, a Quinceañera, which is a young woman's coming out. It's almost like a wedding, everybody's dressed up and everything. In the backyard of the house, and I'm there watching, and people are just singing along with this mariachi. And they weren't the best mariachis in the world—their uniforms didn't quite match and their musicianship didn't quite match either. [laughter] But it didn't matter to the community there, to that family, because they had been transported back to another place, to the old country, if you will. And it came to me there that these musicians had, you know, put on these outfits and become a symbol. At that point, it was another "a-ha" moment, that I began to think about well, what book would that be? And it became *Don Quixote*. And so it was a contemporary retelling of *Don Quixote* with mariachi music, for an audience that didn't know *Don Quixote*. They knew mariachi music. And for an audience who knew *Don Quixote* who didn't know mariachi music. That was the blend.

**Adams:**
So it can provide multiple ways into the piece.

**González:**
Yeah, and what was so cool about it was that when we were workshopping this at ASK Theatre Projects in Los Angeles, Maria Fornes was giving workshops to playwrights and Maria would hear this music and come in going "what's going on? Why are they playing mariachi music?" And she'd sing along with us. And on the other hand, you'd have the janitors, who were mainly Latinos, coming and saying "what's going on?" and we'd say we're doing this mariachi project. There was one time we were doing a run through on stage, and I looked back in the lobby and there were three of these guys with their carts, standing there listening to this thing. It was just the perfect marriage of the two different communities.

**Adams:**
Ed, would you address that at all, as an artistic director?

**Waterstreet:**
Yeah. Being with Deaf West, it is safer for us to make sure everyone is enjoying it. But with hearing audiences, we really don't give as much of a regard. We gamble more with them. We hope they like it, seeing something in sign language. We consider taking safer measures with our deaf audiences. We want to make sure we keep them.

**Adams:**
I would love to open it up to questions, or other ways you guys would like to direct the conversation.

**Audience Member:**
Greg Myers from the Actors Gang. I was lucky enough to see *Big River* in Los Angeles. Truly one of the most brilliant theatrical experiences I've ever had. Thank you for that. I was very excited to hear you're adapting *Sleeping Beauty* into a musical. I wondered if you could talk about that process?

**Waterstreet:**
Okay, sure. I am very thrilled to be working with the group. Rachel Sheinkin, who
wrote the adaptation, is actually writing the show. About three years ago, Billy O'Brien—of course, Bill—he was ours and now he's been stolen to the NEA, as you all know. Anyway, I'm not going to go into that. [laughter] I notice that he enjoyed hearing this music and mentioned this idea. And I thought "this is a good concept, maybe something we can adapt into a musical form." So the idea certainly was palatable and we asked her to write it and she said sure. No title in mind. We had no idea—I mean, can you imagine writing a play for us—asking her to write something and she's thinking to herself, she came up with the idea of Sleeping Beauty—and that's more of a children's story, we're thinking. But it was her idea; we figured we should let her have ownership of that idea. And it germinated at that point. Last summer [when] she did come and started writing, we had a reading with deaf and hearing folks. We got to take a look at this, and we could see the concept was starting to bear itself out. So this really was an example of something that started more from scratch. We're not there yet—we're still trying to incorporate the deaf component, we're trying to educate her, and it's been a process. We're going to do a reading, coming up. December 4 will be our last one at this stage. And a team of deaf and hearing folks, including Jeff, our director, are giving input as it's developing as to how to incorporate deaf characters. It's a very different process. The story is actually taking on a life of its own. It is a true adaptation—I'd say 95 percent of it has taken on a life of its own, so we're kind of excited about it. We'll be performing it in Culver City at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, there, being co-produced with the Mark Taper Forum, and we're really excited to work with them again. This will be coming up in April 2007. Again, another new project, another new adaptation that we're very very excited about and commend her for the work she's doing on the adaptation, too.

Audience Member:

Can we just add that the composers are GrooveLily, and Rachel and GrooveLily's show Striking 12 is [going on now].

Adams:

Other questions? Ed, something you just said brought to mind a question I have, which is, in terms of how closely a play adheres to the original, are there lessons to be learned, in terms of whether a project is more successful the more closely it hews to the original? Or do you find it easier if you're given a certain amount of leeway to move away from the original?

Waterstreet:

Yes, I have to say we do not stay too close to it. In some ways that may be a sad thing to report, and I certainly don't want to controvert anyone's work with these adaptations, especially with the Greeks that you're working on—I hope we get a chance to work with you, actually. But no, we don't adhere. We actually try to move as far away as we can. We just can't be tethered that way. Especially for our audiences, to make them feel connected to the work. And we're careful, we're very careful of what we do. It's not an easy task. It's not like we just pick anything we feel that comes to mind. We pore through a lot of works to find out what's appropriate, and we're thinking well in advance. We're now in that early brainstorming stage. We are, just so you know, we're doing two one-act
plays coming up very soon in winter, *Zoo Story* by Albee, which is going to be no problem—two characters, we can practically just translate that. But the other act is *Krapp's Last Tape*, of course by Beckett, and you all know about Beckett. [laughter] And how true to form you must stay. I'm sure you've had that experience. And we've been alerted to this and how rigid they were about this. With us it's "how are we going to be able to tape?" We're deaf—we don't use tapes, we don't listen to tapes. So we've got a challenge right away before us. So we decided to change the form to videotape, so we got some old tape contraption, one of the old fashioned ones with the big clunky hardware that goes with it, that projects itself onto a screen. So right away we had this adaptation. We weren't sure how Beckett would feel. I was ready to argue that we have a deaf audience to take into account and we were sure he would understand, that the words, of course, we're keeping true to form, and the movements we all know have to stay that way. So the only adaptation we've made in this case is the actual tape itself being referenced. You have to keep in mind that, for us, deaf people are a little put off whenever you're using something like an audiotape. It's so unnatural and artificial for us, and it removes them very very quickly. So making that one adaptation to visual mode really helped us. If Beckett was deaf, we believe he would use videotape. [laughter]

**González:**

With *Tomas and the Library Lady*, there was so much information with Tomas' life, and the archives, and the interviews I did with his wife and his brothers. But I knew nothing about the library lady. Even in the book there's this one reference in Tomas' narratives about growing up meeting this library lady. All she had was an umbrella and tennis shoe. Again, it's the story of a little boy who was befriended by a librarian in [Hampton,] Iowa, and was introduced to the world of books. So I went to Hampton, to the public library, and said "what do you know about the library lady?" And the director there wrote back to me and sent me a picture of who he identified as the library lady—her name was [Berta Gowky]. And there's a picture of her in retirement. First I got her name, but an attitude about Berta that really clued me into this character. Because I didn't know anything about this library lady. He said "you know, there was always this response she'd have when people came in and said, 'hello Berta, how are you today?' She'd say, 'Washington is dead, Lincoln is too, and I'm not doing so well myself.'" [laughter] And that was really helpful to me, because that gave me a clue into what kind of personality she might be. Then I was able to really find balance in that piece with Tomas and the library.

**Audience Member:**

I appreciate this forum a lot, especially coming after Oskar's talk. I'm wondering if you could talk more about adaptation as a risk mitigator. In terms of talking about the risks we need to face to stay relevant and do the art form. And I appreciate a lot the importance of old stories that contain metaphors that speak to our audiences now. But we know a lot of theatres are seeing the wisdom in programming identifiable titles, recognizable, especially in flooded markets. The biggest commissioner of adaptations is the Disney Corporation. They've figured out how to take strong preexisting work and spin it. In our penchant for adaptations, how are we seeding the ground for truly innovative work?
Adams:
Thank you. That's a great question and comment.

Audience Member:
I'd like to hear you speak to it, the politics of programming a children's theatre, I'm sure it would be very [interesting].

Adams:
I personally have worked with a number of playwrights, both on a series of adaptations as well as original work. It was what I was trying to get at with that question. I do think that there's something very valid in that conversation. In that conversation between an extant source material and watching what an artist does with it. And in some ways, while my passion [has been] original work by new writers, I have come to find that there is something very valid in watching that conversation take place. And that, if anything, if theatre is a dialogue, that it adds one more layer of dialogue, between the audience and the source material, between the audience's ability to understand and appreciate and have some way into what the playwright is saying, because they can tell what's been kept, what's been changed, how the focus has been changed. So I do think there are reasons beyond just the programming of familiar titles, that there are ways that can really be a valid way of communicating with an audience. I think none of us would question or dispute that part of that comes from, if you can do a *Sleeping Beauty*, or you can do *The Persians*—that's so not known, but—if you can do *Antigone* or *Rip Van Winkle*, that may bring people into the theatre who might not come otherwise. So I think we just have to watch ourselves and make sure that if we are going to make that decision, that we do the work to make it a rigorous, fresh, original adaptation of that work. So that would be my answer. Does anybody in the audience want to address that?

McLaughlin:
I think adaptations can be highly stimulating and controversial and they really don't have to be these dusty vitamin-taking businesses. This *Don Quixote*, I wish I could see it, because that's a book I need help with. I would love to see something that would make it live for me. I need that. But I feel with the Greek plays, even if I'm not doing a direct adaptation or version of something—I never know what to call what I do, because they're not translations—I find my work is always to some extent about adaptation. Because there are only so many stories, you know? We're always working the same clay, over and over again. And I think that I've written plays where I've suddenly looked back and I think "oh, that's based on the Demeter-Persephone myth. I didn't even realize that when I was writing it." But these myths are part of us as human beings. These are the oldest stories going—they become part of the way we make meaning of the world. So on some level I'm always adapting, whether I think I am or not. It's just degrees by which I'm further away from the source material which are the archetypes for Western culture.

González:
You know, for theatre for young audiences there's lots of titles, and I understand why, and to me I want to hear other voices. And again, sometimes you don't hear it, because of so many other factors in terms of the company, the aesthetics, their ensembles, whether there's playwrights out there who can actually work with them—there's so many other factors. But to me, I think it's risk-taking every time we do something. Or at least for
me, I'm going to lay it out there on the line, because I'm trying to reach, in my area, young people who, you know—you look at this country, you look at the tremendous changes because of immigration, and communities having to deal with these forces of culture or fusions or clashes. And that's where I'm at, trying to, if it's a new play or adaptation that can help that, that's great.

McLaughlin:
The other thing I want to point out is I'm not doing anything different than thousands of years of playwrights have been doing, which is to take stories and work with them and put my own spin on them. Sophocles was doing it. They were reworking myths within the Greek classics tradition—they were reworking myths and contradicting each other and saying "No, for this version of Iphigenia, she doesn't die." We use these stories as we need them, and every generation is going to need a new Antigone, every generation is going to need a new version of this because constantly, we need the help of these stories, we need what these plays have to say to us.

Adams:
We have time for one more question, one more comment.

Audience Member:
[inaudible]

McLaughlin:
Well you're speaking to playwrights, but yeah. [laughter]

Audience Member:
[inaudible]

Adams:
I would actually second that—well, look at it differently—by saying if I look at the work that Children's Theatre Company has done lately, some of the productions that have been the most controversial or have caused the most ruckus in the audience, which I don't necessarily think is a bad thing to cause, have been adaptations. We did a Hansel and Gretel which went back to what those rooted Grimm stories are, which are very different than what we've come to know them to be. It was a dark, difficult production that looked at famine and the effects of famine on a family. On the one hand, people came because they thought it was Hansel and Gretel [laughter], but I think it forced them to see that story for what it really is. And I think that's an opportunity. That's an opportunity again for that dialogue, and once the dialogue happens between what the audience's expectations of a known title is and then that audience being able to see the dialogue between the source material and the artist who's done the adaptation, and then what they feel about that. Because I think that's the next step of dialogue. So I think there are reasons why all of us, and playwrights throughout history, have wanted to continue that conversation.