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## UC Berkeley goes face to Facebook in 'Continuous City' workshops

By **Robert Hurwitt** Published 4:00 am, Monday, October 1, 2007



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### IMAGE 1 OF 2

From left to right on the large video screens: Rachel Schlessinger, Alicia Bruckman, Sepideh Makabi and Will Austin rehearse a scene for "Continuous City", excerpts from a work in progress by UC Berkeley drama ... [more](#)

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"Did you just type that?" **Marianne Weems** asks from a seat in the audience as the words "I am onstage" rapidly appear on a giant screen on the Zellerbach Playhouse stage. The UC Berkeley student standing center stage, her laptop hidden behind the lectern in front of her, nods as she continues to navigate her Facebook profile. Every swoop and click of her cursor appear enlarged on the big screen as she demonstrates how she uses Facebook to keep in instant contact with friends, "stalk" an ex or keep tabs on classmates from as far back as elementary school.

Weems, artistic director of New York's cutting-edge Builders Association, seems fascinated and sometimes surprised. Though this is a rehearsal for a public workshop of parts of "Continuous City" - her latest large-scale, high-tech creation - it's also a research lab, a learning experience for Weems and the students alike. Which is precisely the point of Weems' semesterlong residency at Berkeley.

"These pieces take forever to make," Weems says in her office in the department of theater, dance and performance studies. "They typically take two years from the first drunken concept meeting to the actual premiere. A lot of that is fundraising, of course, but it's also development. I believe in coming up with a strong core idea and then letting it accrue sediment and momentum over time, getting everybody up on their feet to see if it's going to sing with the technology. And learning more. There's tons of research, so it's great for me to be here. This is a real research university."

The Facebook inquiry is part of that research. "Continuous City," Weems explains, explores "what the new social networking means to us, how we perceive our sense of communicating through Facebook and things like that, and how this technology is interfacing with the developing world."

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Each of the seven student performers - working with Weems, video designer **Peter Flaherty** and Builders veteran actor **Rizwan Mirza** - is developing a perform-and-click monologue about his or her Facebook usage for the workshop performances. Weems professes herself "delighted" with their work. ("These students are extremely subtle and flexible performers," she says.) But that's only part of what she's been working on with the 14 UC departments and interdisciplinary units involved in the project.

"I could only do this at Berkeley," Weems exclaims. "I'm building a Web site with some incredibly smart students that I think of as the real continuous city. It's a way that people in the Bay Area and I hope all over the world can engage in the performance. I'm hoping to create a kind of Greek chorus with thousands of people in a video grid contributing, talking about their cities. You need to have a Webcam, but they're pretty common now, and if you do it and come to the show, you just might see yourself up there on the screen. It's a way for people who might have no interest in or access to the theater to enter into this material, and to make the proscenium a little more porous."

The Web site is one element Weems is sure will be part of "City" when it premieres in about a year at the **University of Illinois' Krannert Center** (where work on the project began). Other elements from the UC workshops may make it into the final product as well, along with film segments to be shot in Mumbai, India; Lagos, Nigeria; and Mexico City and a separate story line - involving a young girl keeping in touch with her traveling father via videoconferencing - developed at Krannert.

"City" will move on to Minneapolis' **Walker Art Center** and many other places - including **Yerba Buena Center for the Arts** next season - on its way to opening in New York at the **Brooklyn Academy of Music** (BAM) in '09. Yerba Buena is where the 14-year-old internationally renowned Builders made its long overdue local premiere a year ago with the impressive "Super Vision."

Though it hasn't been unusual for shows developed here to transfer to New York, our major universities have been slow to get involved with professional theaters - unusually so, compared with their peers elsewhere. But that's changing. Even as Weems is in rehearsal, Stanford is welcoming experimental theater pioneer JoAnne Akalaitis for a two-week residency culminating in workshop performances Oct. 29-Nov. 1 of her forthcoming **Public Theater** version of Euripides' "The Bacchae."

The "Bacchae" project is part of Stanford's new association with New York's Public Theater. Cal's more ambitious effort with Weems is a one-shot affair but represents what **Shannon Jackson**, in her second year as theater department chair, asserts is a new commitment to engaging with arts companies, locally and nationally. Jackson, who has long studied and taught Weems'

work, initiated the residency with a conversation after a "Super Vision" performance at Yerba Buena last year. A grant from UC's **Arts Research Center**, and the coalition of departments Jackson put together, made the residency possible.

"I don't think it behooves us to be attached to any one theater," Jackson says. "The students need exposure to different kinds of organizations and aesthetics. Artists need support and access to rehearsal and performance spaces, and we want to give students pragmatic opportunities to be full collaborators. So I'm working toward creating a kind of open laboratory for artists to develop new work as we help to develop young artists and thinkers."

Meanwhile, Weems is immersed in Web-building and rehearsals. In another scene, students at laptops - their faces projected in giant Webcam close-ups - trade off different interpretations of the same Internet dating dialogue. "That's beautiful," Weems says with obvious enthusiasm as one pair finishes. "Maybe you can do a little more in Farsi."

**Continuous City:** Excerpts from the work in progress by the Builders Association will be presented Friday through Oct. 14 at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Playhouse. A discussion with director Marianne Weems follows each performance.

A related daylong symposium, "Continuous Bodies," on the role of evolving technologies in experimental art and global communication, takes place from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Oct. 12 at the **Berkeley Art Museum Theater** and 4 to 5:30 p.m. at Zellerbach Playhouse. Weems will talk about the project at 7 p.m. Oct. 24 at the **College** of Environmental Design in Wurster Hall, UC Berkeley.

For tickets for "Continuous City," call (510) 642-9925; for information on all these events visit [theater.berkeley.edu](http://theater.berkeley.edu).

### Getting into the 'City'

To become part of the video-grid chorus, engage in dialogue with an actor or contribute pictures to the Builders Association's "Continuous City," go to [www.continuouscity.org](http://www.continuouscity.org). Film clips, photographs, text and information on other Builders Association projects may be viewed at [www.thebuildersassociation.org](http://www.thebuildersassociation.org).

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