

CREATING THE SCRIPT

Barbara Carlisle & Julie Avery

The script was envisioned as a way to raise issues of sustainability within modern farming to a variety of new audiences in a lively, in-the-flesh medium. The material for the script came from video interviews Cynthia Vagnetti had collected over the years with farmers, mostly women, and mostly engaged in aspects of the sustainable agriculture movement. Julie Avery, Barbara Carlisle, and Cynthia Vagnetti reviewed transcribed interviews and published materials (print and video) to identify themes, situations, conflicts, and significant statements as a foundation for the creative development of a performance piece. The initial script was distributed for input to select professionals in sustainable agriculture, agricultural history, theatre, and playwriting. Reviewers provided thoughtful and experienced comments for Barbara Carlisle, our playwright.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

From the start the intentions were:

- To embody the issues in the actual words of real people: the interviewees.
- And, by thus humanizing the many sided issues, to diffuse some of the polarization that exists in the organic/sustainable/commercial/corporate/traditional farming politics.
- To provide a vehicle to bring about real conversation and discussion about farming and food production, both within agricultural communities and among general consumers.
- To increase awareness of the issues of sustainability in farming.
- To make the general public more aware of food production in today's world.

Significant aesthetic and political decisions were established as guiding principals:

- Be true to the language and experiences of the interviewees.
- The script would be in a more accessible Readers' Theatre format, requiring no long rehearsal, memorization, trained actors, or formal staging.
- The script would be created in segments so that it could be done in shorter and longer presentations.
- The script's purpose is to open up issues and generate discussion and follow up.

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

A structure evolved that included three sets of dialogues, sets of short "choral" pieces, and two monologues.

- *Dialogues.* (1) A central pair of older women discussing what was going to happen to "Bertie's Farm" is the

core of the piece. These two old friends had taken different directions in farming over the years; (2) a pair of ten-year-olds, just learning what farming issues are, are pleased with their new-found wisdom; and (3) two college students, one from a big production wheat farm, and one just learning about small, organic farming, argue the issues and get to know and like one another.

- *Choral pieces.* Sets of short 'choral' pieces, each from 20 seconds to a minute long, present actual quotes from interviewees, edited and gathered around themes such as: money, a farmers vacation, spirituality and the land, work and sustainability.
- *Monologues.* One, a rather comic statement as a young new public agricultural worker prepares to face the complex issues and politics of farm groups; the other, a true story of how an egg co-op found a big natural food grocery and blossomed.

GOING PUBLIC

Before going public, a number of insiders reviewed the piece. This group included playwrights, community theatre folks and individuals involved in both the history and contemporary practice of agriculture. The first public reading of the draft script took place

at the MSU Museum with 22 people representing: Extension, agriculture faculty, Michigan Department of Education, a woman farmer from Clinton County (who had just put her farm in a trust), Michigan Oral History Association, Ingham County Fair, and museum staff. The readers were drawn from this audience. Written survey and talk-back comments primarily addressed specific word changes—not made because of our intent to stay true to the language of the original speakers. Several questioned the validity of the science behind two segments, and though we knew the speakers believed in the accuracy of their reflections, we agreed that these items had to go because we could not back them up. One person asked persuasively for globalization, energy

“In a world that is increasingly polarized, explorations such as we have experienced here provide a safe place to open up that dialogue.”

Weindy Weiland, cast member, multi-generational family farmer, and MSU Extension educator

use, and regionalism to be included particularly as they generate conflicts for the future. This feedback inspired new dialogues for the script.

Three presentations with agriculture groups were a part of the pilot development phase. These were with sustainable and organic focused groups: the Michigan Organic Farming Conference, the Iowa Women, Food & Agriculture Network annual conference, and Ohio Ecological Food & Farm Association Conference. One major goal was to be sure the script rang true to this audience, and sparked their interest. Their feedback sharpened the end product. None of these groups saw the same script as the script was evolving with changes and updates. Audience feed-

back (written surveys and talk-backs) told us they were interested in all parts of the reading, learned new ideas about sustainable agriculture, and encouraged working with the piece as an educational tool.

These four presentations also demonstrated that the script was too long, and some elements needed to be rearranged to hold interest. Another re-write preceded a presentation to a general public audience.

Traverse City Old Town Playhouse (OTP) provided a public community theatre experience. The theatre collaborated on the publicity and gave us a volunteer producer who handled casting, scheduling, staging arrangements,

rehearsal space, and other general production details. Open auditions produced a wide range of readers, with theatre and farm backgrounds, people willing to commit to a day of rehearsal and a day of performance. One-hundred and nine people attended the performance—occupying all available seats. The entire audience stayed for a theatre style talk-back and discussion that followed.

The day after the Old Town Playhouse performance, the Grand Traverse County MSU Extension Office was host to a focus group of farmers, agricultural extension agents, and OTP and project staff. The farmers were from small organic farms, large commercial farms, and middle-sized mixed-uses farms. A

humanities scholar planned the agenda and led the discussion.

A number of issues were raised. The Extension agents discussed using the piece or parts of it with 4-H groups. Several people talked about getting outside the farming community and using the piece with church groups and other community organizations. The discussions resulted in concrete suggestions for the piece. Everyone agreed that it could not be any longer, and that we could not put into it everything that we had discussed.

The Traverse-area audience response and focus group discussion resulted in another rewrite that strengthened the script. This final script was presented in Minnesota at Pride of the Prairie, a joint program of University of Minnesota, Morris and the Minnesota Land Stewardship Project.

AUDIENCE SUPPORT

At the six presentations a total audience reached was 529. At each site audience surveys and talk-backs provided input on content, authenticity, interest, and the potential for community/public education. Audience responses demonstrated the potential of this piece as a community conversation starter. Strong affirmative responses were consistent across the distinct audience groups of sustainable, agricultural, and community theatre audiences.

Overall:

- 80% stated the piece presented the issues of modern agriculture
- 79% stated the piece presented ideas they had of sustainable agriculture
- 37% felt the piece gave them new ideas on sustainable agriculture

- 71% were interested in all parts of the reading
- 83% believe that this is an effective tool for public education

THE RESULT

- a viable, practicable script
- a script adaptable to different sized groups
- a script that presents a range of issues and captures peoples’ attention
- people remember what they have heard
- the piece can generate discussion with a variety of people around major farming issues
- it raises the question of sustainability in thinking about the future of modern farming

A statistical summary from audience

feedback is presented below for more statistics and a chart which breaks apart audience responses.

STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF AUDIENCE FEEDBACKY

Written audience surveys were used with audiences at each of the six pilot presentations.

- 40% (213 of 529) returned written surveys
- 43% were female, 47% male
- 33% identified themselves as farmers, 54% as educators, 49% as “other”

The Traverse City Old Town Playhouse as the only community presentation is especially interesting. The audience was a good mixed audience. Farmers—both sustainable/small and commodity/pro-

duction farmers—made up one-third of the audience. This is the only pilot venue where production/commodity farmers were present in numbers. This community audience supported strong and positive responses to the key issues of authenticity and use for public education. Survey responses were also similar to focused sustainable audiences:

Old Town Playhouse audience responses:

- 73% stated the piece presented the issues of modern agriculture
- 68% stated the piece presented ideas they had of sustainable agriculture
- 26% felt the piece gave them new ideas on sustainable agriculture
- 79% were interested in all parts of the reading
- 79% believe that this is an effective tool for public education

SURVEY RESPONSES

QUESTION	MSUM	OTP	SUST	ALL
Farmers returning survey	37%	31%	34%	33%
Piece presented the issues of modern agriculture	74%	73%	85%	80%
Piece presented ideas they had of sustainable agriculture	74%	68%	87%	79%
Piece gave them new ideas on sustainable agriculture	37%	26%	37%	37%
Were interested in all parts of the reading	74%	79%	67%	71%
Believe that this is an effective tool for public education	84%	79%	85%	83%

MSUM: first public reading (campus and community ag-interested audience); OTP: Old Town Playhouse community theatre presentation; SUST: sustainable/organic audiences; ALL: all audiences combined