

# Doing Things Differently

Stories from innovation initiatives in the arts.



## The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts The Civilians

### The Innovators

Founded in 2001, **The Civilians** is a Brooklyn, New York-based “theater of social investigation” known for creating original projects that include an examination of real-life experiences and involve deep interactions with the public. The organization operates as a collaborative of artists that includes Founder / Artistic Director Steve Cosson and 58 Associate Artists – directors, writers, actors, designers, choreographers, and composers – who come together for specific projects. It has an annual budget of over \$500,000. The Company tours nationally and internationally, and although it has a core New York audience, its primary audience is geographically dispersed. The Civilians’ audiences are young, economically and culturally diverse, “socially curious,” and do not typically attend traditional theater.

### The Innovation

The Civilians developed a New Media Initiative that uses social media tools both to interact with audiences and to develop artistic content. The goal is to increase the size and engagement of The Civilians’ audience by integrating new media into the theater’s artistic development and dissemination process, creating a compelling continuum of activity that engages audiences before, during, and after a project.



Jennifer R. Morris, Matthew Maher and Caitlin Miller in the 2009 production of *You Better Sit Down: Tales from My Parents’ Divorce*. (Not pictured: Robbie Collier Sublett)

## Starting Conditions

The Civilians' preferred "documentary-style" approach presents unique challenges. Each project involves a lengthy *research and investigation phase* in which an artistic team immerses itself in a community to explore a topic that is "socially and culturally relevant." During the subsequent *production and dissemination phase*, artists cull the raw materials and create a live theatrical work. Challenged to maintain its connections to audiences from the research stage through creation and production, The Civilians wondered, "How might we 'keep our national audience close' by creating a more aggressive media platform? How could we use this platform to increase 'interactivity' with audiences and earn revenue? And how could this help us overcome our image as a 'scrappy' downtown theater and increase our stature as a serious innovator creating sophisticated new theatrical work?" As The Civilians grappled with these questions, the Company received word it had been selected to participate in the Innovation Lab.



Jennifer R. Morris

## The Lab

### Transformative Moments

In Phase 1 of the Lab, The Civilians worked with Lab facilitator John Shibley – who became a "thinking partner" throughout the investigation – to develop an agenda for its work. Shibley met with Artistic Director Steve Cosson and Managing Director Marion Friedman and then with the Innovation Team. Because the fundamental tool to engage its national audience was the website, the team decided that its first step should be to study examples of other websites, and a group met with Shibley at EmcArts' offices in New York where they reviewed 26 different websites. This exercise provoked the imagination of the Team and created a framework for the work ahead. What The Civilians would do with its new ideas and ambitions, what its new website would ultimately look like, and how it would serve the bigger goal of audience engagement were still unanswered questions.

The Civilians' transformative ideas came during the week-long Lab Intensive. The Innovation Team took advantage of funds provided by the Lab to bring a specialist to the Intensive, inviting Jason Seiken, Vice President of Interactivity at PBS to join them in contemplating alternative strategies. In preparation for Seiken's arrival, the Team brainstormed ideas about what it might do to achieve its goals, finally settling on an approach that would take the organization mainstream by creating partnerships with commercial media, making TV pilots, and other similar activities. When The Civilians presented its pitch to Seiken, the Team got an unexpected response: Seiken told them that "lots of people were making pilots, but no one else was doing what they were doing;" that they should not "abandon their strength for a niche that they did not own;" and that PBS might see a non-profit commercial application of their work. During that exchange, Seiken changed the conversation by helping The Civilians understand that it should "stick to what it did best." Seiken's challenge to The Civilians was a critical catalyst in unleashing new thinking.

### Shifts in Assumptions

What did this breakthrough mean for The Civilians? What would happen if The Civilians were to marry its unique artistic sensibility to the participative potential of the web, rather than conforming to the way mainstream, commercial interests had adapted to the Internet? To move forward, The Civilians had to let go of the two key assumptions it held going into the Lab. The first was that the solution to its audience engagement and dissemination challenge (and the method by which it would grow its audiences) would be to create work *specifically* for online distribution. The second was that the online experience (or "technology-mediated interaction") was strictly a tool for distribution of the work.

Instead, the team realized during the Intensive that The Civilians should focus even more closely on its core practice – the development and performance of live theater based on real events and situations – rather than on creating new work exclusively for the online community. At the same time, however, The Civilians understood that it was not

simply creating a discrete live theater experience that subsequently would be mediated or translated for the online community. Under the new model, projects would be imagined and designed with *both* venues in mind. By integrating live and online performance values from creation to dissemination – and by understanding that projects must reach, inspire and engage both communities simultaneously – The Civilians’ artistic team made what the organization calls a “physical shift in thinking” that allowed it to see new media as a tool for creation, not just distribution of new work.

### New Pathways to Mission

The result of these shifts in assumptions was that The Civilians created new practices that are clearly discontinuous from the way it had always operated. The Theater significantly expanded its knowledge of how to apply its unique journalistic art-making practices in a media context. Through the Lab, the organization came to a more nuanced and strategic understanding of how combining its artistic approach with the potential inherent in new media would enable the Company to create artistically accomplished new work and transformative experiences for audiences. Rather than seeing audiences as people who are the subjects of research during the investigation process or as recipients of product in the production and dissemination phase, The Civilians wanted to make the audience part of the creative process. But how could they do this without abdicating curatorial influence and artistic control? They needed a prototype.



Matthew Maher

### The Prototype

The Civilians chose [The Divorce Project](#), a work in progress, to test this new approach. The goal was to bring the audience into the creative process and to connect live and online performances by creating content suitable for both. Actors interviewed their own parents about their marriages and subsequent divorces and then portrayed their parents in a live theatrical event. *You Better Sit Down: Tales from my Parents’ Divorce* – which premiered in late 2009 – was later edited into a series of chapters suitable for online viewing. Through a partnership with Park Pictures, The Civilians filmed the live production in high definition, using multiple cameras. The organization then created a webisode for release on a project-

dedicated website available through New York Public Radio WNYC’s cultural portal. The new challenge for The Civilians was to keep live theater at the core of its artistic practice while also learning how to film it in ways that made the online experience live and three-dimensional for audiences, presenting actors as actors rather than as characters being interviewed for television.

But how would The Civilians use this work to stimulate public involvement in the development of future material, and how would they connect audience-generated content back to live performance? To answer that question, The Civilians took a theme that artists uncovered in [The Divorce Project](#) – the objects people fight over in divorce – and invited people to share their

own stories. They also encouraged them to interview their own parents, asking the same questions used by the artists in their original research. The Civilians plans to use the content generated through this forum to develop a second live theater piece that will be integrated into a new version of *You Better Sit Down* in 2010. It will also feed material from quarterly cabaret evenings, filmed performances, and educational activities back into the project loop. [The Divorce Project](#) is thus a completely integrated effort with a new kind of dramatic arc: it begins with the creation of a live theater event that, in turn, becomes the platform for a much larger project, allowing The Civilians to create multiple layers of inter-related content from a variety of sources.

## Obstacles and Enablers

Because The Civilians is a small organization with little “slack” in terms of time and money, it faced significant obstacles as it prepared to enter the Lab. Since artists in the collective generally came together for a specific project and then dispersed, The Civilians was challenged to assemble a creative team for the Lab. To solve this problem, the Lab provided funds to offer artists paid contracts to attend the Intensive. It proved to be a good strategy, as artists were able to give up commercial work in order to participate. The Intensive was the first time The Civilians had been able to gather this many artists together in the same place to work on something together. It was the principal enabler of their success.

Also important were Shibley’s contributions: He helped the team structure its deliberations, provided ongoing counsel and feedback to team leaders, and helped them develop a series of metrics to measure the success of the project in building audiences and creating more dynamic interactivity.

What did the Team bring to the process? Certainly, members brought a commitment to reshaping the conventions of theater practice, as well as a multi-disciplinary orientation and experience in working with media. The artists themselves had broad experience as researchers, script-writers, and actors, and they will carry forward the experience of the Lab to future projects. The Civilians also has a young, energetic staff that provides strong management and forward-thinking leadership.

## The Impact

The Civilians is completely different today than it was when it joined the Lab. Thanks to its experience in the Lab, The Civilians has a new and more vigorous website that makes it “look like the grown-up organization it is.” In addition to completing a move into new offices that had been in the works before the Lab, people other than Cosson are taking on artistic leadership roles. The Civilians also has developed a new perspective on how media serves mission, and its animating assumption is that exploiting the tools of new social media enhances and extends the theatrical performance by “creating an ongoing and groundbreaking relationship between the online community and the live theatrical one.” One impact of this shift in thinking is that The Civilians is better equipped to connect its national audience to its work on an ongoing basis. Finally, the artists learned new creative skills as they worked to define the relationship between a live theater script and a script for online episodes. Artists describe this challenge as one with “unexpectedly positive results,” saying that the process of creating a live performance as a series of “chapters” that could be divided into episodes improved both aspects of the project.

What does this work mean for the larger arts community? The Civilians is one of the first organizations to come to grips with a “meta issue” in the field – how organizations can effectively engage the new audiences who want to participate in developing creative content. It is an instructive example of how a performing organization can invite the public to participate in (and genuinely influence) the development of content while using its own curatorial expertise to shape that content in ways that maintain a robust commitment to artistic quality.

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All photos by Aaron Wesner.

### The Innovation Team

<b>Steve Cosson</b> Artistic Director	<b>Matt Maher</b> Associate Artist	<b>Jenny Morris</b> Associate Artist/ Board Member The Civilians	Content Expert: <b>Jason Seiken</b> Senior Vice President of Interactivity PBS
<b>Marion Friedman</b> Managing Director	<b>Caitlin Miller</b> Associate Artist	<b>Michael Premo</b> Project Coordinator	Facilitator: <b>John Shibley</b> EmcArts
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