

INVESTIGATIVE PERFORMANCE

BY JONATHAN TAKIFF

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URBAN RENEWAL is complicated, rife with backroom politics and big-business interests, accusations of class and racial prejudice.

Planners tout lofty goals, sometimes attainable, to win project support. Meanwhile, they're displacing communities that had been intact for decades, even centuries.

Here in Philadelphia, the ever-expanding reach of the University of Pennsylvania has often been at odds with its University City neighbors and even the student body. As a Penn student myself, I was active in Save Open Space (S.O.S.) protests, aiming (with success) to preserve the College Green from Penn's edifice complex.

With all that in mind, I've got to give Penn's Annenberg Center props for bringing in a challenging piece of docudrama (with music) called "In the Footprint: The Battle Over Atlantic Yards," which might reopen wounds with showgoers and participants in companion discussions.

(While the show closes on Jan. 28, the biggest panel on renewal/gentrification happens three days later with participation from former Mayor John Street and developer Bart Blatstein, among others.)

Developed by a new-style Brooklyn, N.Y., theater company called The Civilians, this intriguing (though sometimes rambling) mosaic of a one-act shines a bright light on stuff that's been happening in The Civilians' own backyard. Namely, the transformation of a rundown Brooklyn rail yard and residential/industrial neigh-

borhood with a new sports arena (nearing completion) for the New Jersey Nets basketball franchise, plus enough high-rises (all but one now on hold) to eventually hold 300,000-plus residents.

"Footprint" offers up the thoughts of the borough president who craves another team for Brooklyn, a powerless city councilwoman, community activists who want in on the spoils, and residents who've been dazed and confused by the workings of eminent domain and redlining yet remain resistant to moving even when big bucks are waved under their noses.

For more insights on the process of the play and the company, I turned yesterday to the show's 36-year-old composer, Michael Friedman. A Chestnut Hill native (and Germantown Friends grad) who didn't go to Penn but "has friends who went and teach there," Friedman can certainly see the irony in Annenberg's support of this play, previously well-received in New York and Boston.

The composer's profile also has been growing thanks to his much-acclaimed musical "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson," now enjoying several regional theater productions. And lately, Friedman's been turning sound bites from Occupy Wall Street protests into cabaret songs, crafting shows on environ-

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mental science and the pornography industry, and working on a "great big musical" adaptation of Jonathan Lethem's "Fortress of Solitude."

Q: How should we characterize The Civilians' pursuits?

A: We prefer "investigative theater." We've done a couple shows that were investigations into historical things, not always verbatim but based on research. In this

show, dialogue and lyrics have been compiled almost entirely from interviews conducted with participants. So it's creating a show from a gathering of evidence. Some of the techniques are similar to journalism.

Q: You work hard to express multiple points of view, yet in the end seem aligned with the longtime residents. True?

A: I think it's important to have a point of view. It's become apparent that "fair and balanced coverage" doesn't really exist in any media. We try and tell the story, and if the story from some participants does contradict our point of view, that's exciting and we have to go there, too.

Q: The closing song "The Neighborhood" is the most theatrically traditional of any in the show. Was that one more of your doing?

A: In fact, every little phrase in even that song was lifted from an interview. Everyone mentioned something that had disappeared from the neighborhood. Even the last lines, which sums it all up, was a quote — "You're only entitled to the space you have. You're not entitled to the space all around you."

Q: I'm reminded of another expression — "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer." Do you think anyone at Penn was thinking that, when inviting you to do this show here?

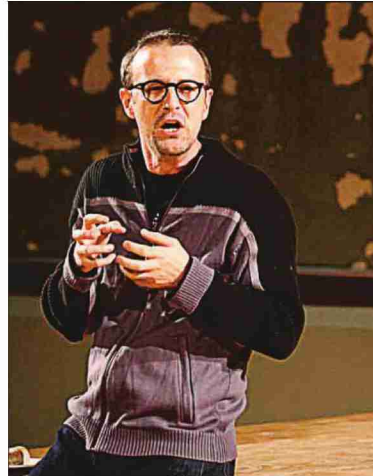
A: We'd brought another show here before, "Nobody's Lunch." So we had a positive relationship with the presenters. It reflects terrifically on Penn and Annenberg that the programming is independent. And our play does deal with how complicated these situations are.

Q: Theater and films used to be really out there in a leadership position, exploring controversial themes and sparking change. Now we've got the blogosphere, where this week's deluge of emails to Congress and website shutdowns have seemingly put the kibosh on those Internet cen-



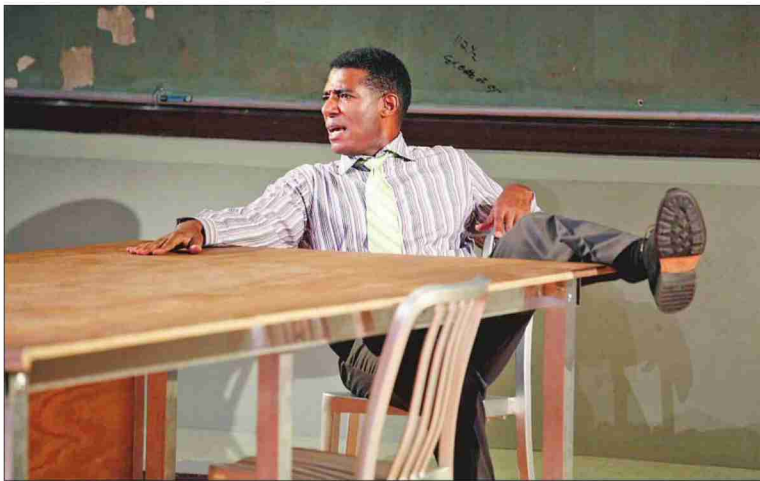
sorship bills. So what's theater's activist role to play now and in the future?

A: This is a story that has not really been well documented, that an audience can respond to. It's less about creating change, more about being a witness, giving voice to people who don't normally have a voice, whose thoughts would not be preserved. This show is being published. It's being performed. These voices are still being heard. ■



Actor Greg McFadden in docu-musical "In the Footprint."

"In the Footprint: The Battle Over Atlantic Yards," Annenberg Center's Hal Prince Theater, 3680 Walnut St., 7:30 tonight and tomorrow, 2 p.m. Sunday, 2 and 7:30 p.m. Jan. 28. Tickets start at \$20. 215-898-3900, www.annenbergcenter.org. The public forum is at 7 p.m. Jan. 31 at the Annenberg Center, Room 511.



Billy Eugene Jones acts in the play, which will be performed at the Hal Prince Theater.