



BrooKenya!

by **Rahul Chadha**

The phrase “global community theater” is one that would not strike Kate Gardner as oxymoronic. The Brooklyn resident relied on that very premise in founding the non-profit arts organization Community Theatre Internationale and in producing what would become the BCAT/Brooklyn Community Access Television special *BrooKenya!* “I want people to realize how powerful community theater is, and how transformative it can be,” says Gardner. “In a way, the main message of the BCAT piece is the successful creation of a network of global theater.”

The seeds for what would eventually become the show *BrooKenya!*, which was made possible through the support from individuals and the New York State Council on the Arts as administrated by the Brooklyn Arts Council, were planted a few days after the events of September 11, when Gardner and several friends fliried the streets of her Brooklyn neighborhood with a call to found a community art project. The overwhelming response resulted in a series of art shows held at the Mark Morris Dance Center that was supposed to run for only six weeks. “It ended up running for eight months,” recalls Gardner with a delighted grin.

That sort of good fortune seems to have tailed Gardner—who has worked variously as an activist, organizer and community theater group member—in her amazing effort to produce *BrooKenya!*. In October 2001 she met Kenyan activist and health educator Kitche Magak at an international performance conference held in New York City. After Magak returned to Kenya, the pair continued a conversation that occurred mostly by email, and came up with an idea for a collaborative soap opera whose plot lines traversed both the geographic and cultural gaps that separate the borough of Kings from the Kenyan city of Kinsumu.

Even in the face of significant communication limitations, dialogue between the groups was unfettered. In November 2003 Magak and an associate producer on *BrooKenya!* made their way to Brooklyn, where they were able to shoot a number of scenes that would link the characters from Kenya and Brooklyn within the show. A team of dedicated volunteers met religiously in Gardner’s kitchen—around what had been dubbed

“the round table”—to hash out plot lines and dialogue. Some of the actors and writers who ended up in the project fell into the fold after walking by shoots occurring in their neighborhood and asking what was going on.

By February 2004 Garner found herself on a plane bound for Kinsumu, Kenya, bringing with her 15 completed scenes written, acted and produced entirely on a volunteer basis.

“First we came up with characters,” says Gardner. “I didn’t know anything about soap operas, so I started reading about them. What I found was that they’re almost like a global language spoken everywhere.” Thirteen months after Gardner’s trip, the Kenyan team had managed to shoot 13 of their own scenes. Gardner and her colleagues combed through many different plot lines that were shot to pull out a few to be included in the *BrooKenya!* BCAT special.

The show represents an artistic endeavor that spans two continents and helps dispel the generational, gender and sexual barriers of both cultures. The varying plots of the BCAT version of *BrooKenya!* are rife with some of the plot conventions one would expect from a soap opera—children born out of wedlock are given up for adoption, decades-old secret trysts are uncovered in tear-jerking scenes—but the storylines have been infused with the voices and experiences of the many people who volunteered that created the scenes between 2003 and 2005.

One of the Kenyan plot lines revolves around a woman whose husband seeks a second wife in a misguided effort to sire a male heir. The deceit and subterfuge engaged in by the character is pure soap opera melodrama, but during one scene



***BrooKenya!*, a collaborative soap opera whose plot lines take place in the Kenyan city of Kinsumu (top) and Brooklyn (bottom), will be cablecast on BCAT this week.**

she also manages to slip in an implicit critique of the misogyny found in Kenyan culture. Other storylines focus on the AIDS pandemic, teen pregnancy and issues of racial identity. Says Gardner, “People ended up writing scenes that touched on social issues that they wanted to explore.”

It’s obvious from her work that Gardner’s definition of community is not bound by geographic or cultural boundaries. She’s found a way to use the tools of globalization to build bridges between the dissimilar communities of Brooklyn and Kinsumu. Separated by 7,000 miles, stretched over the Atlantic Ocean and the middle of the African continent, two groups of writers, actors and show producers found themselves treading on an abundance of common ground to found a truly global community theater. “What I feel like I have discovered with *BrooKenya!* is this strange methodology of bringing disparate people together to create something that can show everyone new possibilities,” says Gardner.

This special presentation of BrooKenya! can be seen in Brooklyn on BCAT on Wed., Dec. 21 at 9pm and Fri., Jan. 27 at 8pm on Time Warner Cable channel 56, Cablevision channel 69 and streaming live online at www.bcat.tv/bcat.