Acting out to help communities see within[1]
[2]

A troupe of actors from CU Boulder makes a habit of appearing in front of audiences across the state without a script in sight, without a clear idea of what they might be saying or doing. Yet the artists are well-prepared to achieve a performance that goes beyond ordinary entertainment.

CU Boulder's Impact Playback Ensemble[3] practices what's known as playback theater – an interactive, improvisational form of theater that begins with members of an audience telling stories from their lives. Actors then bring these stories to life on stage, aiding in the sharing of insight and community building that might not otherwise come about.

Jim Walker, Norlin Scholars Teaching Associate Professor and director of the Playback Ensemble, has practiced playback theater professionally since 2006, and helped launch CU Boulder's troupe in 2018. In performances, workshops and residencies, the experience begins with the "teller," the audience member sharing an aspect of their life.

"Playback promotes listening as a whole-body activity," Walker said. "As a Playback actor, you are 100% engaged when listening to a teller's story. They might laugh their way through a fairly traumatic story. So it sounds like a funny story…but is it? Is that laughter a coping mechanism?

"It engages so many parts of myself. And it's community building."

Upon hearing the story, Playback actors and musicians improvise a theatrical response to whatever is shared.

"The guiding principle of Playback Theater is to honor the teller," Walker said. "That's the spirit in which we're doing this. By honoring the teller's experience, people find connections and insight."

As an audience member, Walker said, "When I'm witnessing a good Playback, I'm seeing part of my own story in the story being shared. I'm discovering insights about my experience while finding myself in the other."

CU Boulder's Playback Ensemble performs at a variety of campus and community events, including individual classes. A grant last year from the President's Fund for the Humanities helped make possible performances in support of the Boulder JCC, Donna Mejia's Fumble Forward Initiative, and the College of Engineering's Academic Success team.

"The nice thing about Playback is that it's really malleable to the needs or requests of whatever the group might be," Walker said. "There's no agenda; it's just a modality that has proven to bring people together."

Another key aspect of the Playback Ensemble's mission plays out in rural communities across Colorado. The Critical Conversations[4] project visits areas where rapid changes may have brought about cultural divides and tensions between community members. Residents of Paonia were first to approach the theater program, asking about ways to address those struggles. It led to the department's Ondine Geary securing a CU Outreach and Engagement grant, which enabled a four-day residency just before the COVID lockdown.

"We had listening sessions with representatives of different parts of the community: old-timers, business owners, ranchers, self-described hippies," Walker said. "It was such a success, we have returned there every year since 2020. Each time we go, we've expanded a little further."

The list of towns where Playback has visited now includes Hotchkiss and Cedaredge. A collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution helped add visits to Walsenburg and Trinidad.

Through the theatrical interactions, Playback's presence is helping to promote listening as a practice of democracy, Walker said.

"As a social body, we clearly need this right now," he said. "After one of our recent residencies, a community partner

said how refreshing it was to have people in the room sharing and listening, not yelling and throwing chairs.

“Witnessing a Playback performance offers opportunities for boosting empathy and connection across differences. These are skills that can be developed. They are needed. And they can be fun.”

Though based in the Department of Theatre & Dance, CU’s Playback Ensemble includes faculty, staff, graduate and undergraduate students from several departments.

Tania Guzman, an undergraduate majoring in integrative physiology, found Playback via a leadership course assignment. With no theater background, she believed the experience would push her out of her comfort zone. She met with Walker shortly after completing her EMT training.

“Surprisingly, I found parallels between my EMT experience and CU Playback, particularly in the aspect of improvisation,” Guzman said. “The prospect of using improvisation to initiate conversations and connect with communities intrigued me.

“Being a part of CU Playback has brought immense joy to my life. I’ve acquired valuable skills in understanding diverse emotions. A standout memory for me was the first time I was cast as the teller’s actor. Portraying someone I’ve known for three years while hearing their story in a new setting was a unique experience.”

She calls her participation in Playback a “profoundly humanizing experience.”

“Allowing individuals to share their stories in front of an audience helps forge connections and uncover shared experiences,” Guzman said.

Unlike Guzman, Franklin Chilaka, a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Education, always wanted to be an actor.

“What I love about Playback is the body high I get from it and being able to tell stories with our bodies,” Chilaka said. “We get to tell real stories about resilience, fear, strength and love, to name a few, that speak to our true existence as human beings. It allows our audience to fully engage with our work and not just be passengers in a larger experience.”

The troupe numbers around 10 members, with new participants joining on a rolling basis. Anyone who’s interested in taking part and would like to learn more can visit the website[3] or contact Walker: James.F.Walker@colorado.edu[5]. [6]

CU-led legislation aims to improve college affordability[7]

A newly introduced, CU-led bill at the Capitol aims to make college more affordable for Colorado students through different incentives.

As proposed, House Bill 24-1340[8] creates a student incentive tied to the top jobs identified as in- demand jobs by the state of Colorado and creates a framework for an incentive around rewarding student transfer of college credit from Colorado high schools or public two-year institutions to Colorado four-year intuitions.

The bill creates two separate incentives. The first incentive is available to a graduate of any Colorado institution of higher education with a credential required or supported by certain jobs identified by the 2023 Colorado Talent Pipeline Report[9], defined by the bill as "top jobs." The incentive would be $250 for the completion of a certificate less than one year in duration, $500 for the completion of a certificate taking between one year and two years, $1,500 for graduates of an associate’s degree program, and $3,000 for graduates of a bachelor’s degree program. This incentive would apply to income tax years 2024 through 2030.

The second incentive would be available to Colorado students who transfer college credit earned from a Colorado high school or a public two-year institution to an eligible four-year institution, after accumulating 15 credit hours at the four-year institution. The incentive is $50 per credit hour, and assuming a student transferred 60 credit hours would result in $3,000. This incentive would apply to income tax years 2026 through 2030. The incentives for transfer component has a two-year delayed implementation start date to give higher education institutions time to work with the Department of Higher Education on the data validation necessary for the transfer incentive.

To protect the state's budget, the incentives are dependent on available state revenues. The incentive is fully available in any year in which there is a TABOR surplus of $750 million or greater. It would be reduced by 50% if the forecast is between $750 million and $500 million, and is not in place if revenue is below $500 million.

Lawmakers have begun considering the bipartisan bill, which was introduced Monday, assigned to the House Education Committee, and is sponsored by Reps. Shannon Bird and Rick Taggart, and by Sens. Barbara Kirkmeyer and Rachel Zenzinger.

Reminder: University guidelines affect political campaign activity, expression[10]

With Colorado's March 5 presidential primary approaching, the University of Colorado reminds employees of guidelines regarding political campaign-related activity and expression.

A variety of state and federal laws and regulations govern political expression, activity and conduct in the university workplace. Application of the law depends on the particular facts of the situation, and legal counsel should be consulted when questions arise. However, the following guidelines may be used when trying to determine whether particular conduct is appropriate in the university setting.

General principles:

Employees have the right as private citizens to freedom of expression and participation in the political process.

When expressing personal political views, university employees should be clear that they are not representing a university position and endeavor to maintain the principle of university impartiality in political campaigns.

Private political activities must be conducted on personal time and without using university resources (computers, copiers, email addresses, promotional materials).

Employees should refrain from the following activities while at work:

Sending or forwarding emails from university-hosted email accounts in support of or in opposition to candidates or ballot initiatives.

Using university office supplies (including computers, copiers and fax machines) to create or disseminate campaign materials.

Making calls on university phones in support of or opposition to a political candidate or ballot initiatives.

Using university computers to make monetary contributions to political campaigns.

Placing campaign materials in locations not designated for general signage.

In general, employees may engage in the following activities while at work:

Discussing political issues and political campaigns with one another while on break.

Wearing buttons or clothing promoting a particular candidate or issue, provided that the employee does not regularly interact with the public as part of their job duties.

Placing a bumper sticker on a personal vehicle.

Participating in campaign-related activities on personal time.

Because university email addresses are generally public and published on various websites, employees may receive electronic mail messages on their university-hosted email accounts from candidates and campaigns. Such emails are not illegal. The university cannot know or block every campaign- or candidate-related email account. Installing restrictive “spam” filters would have limited success with such messages, which originate from many different sources. It is important to remember, however, that the transmission of such emails to you does not constitute University of Colorado endorsement of any candidate or campaign. Employees should refrain from using university email accounts to forward candidate or campaign-related messages for the purpose of expressing opposition to or support for the relevant candidate or campaign issue.

University employees should always be aware that, as public employees, their activities may be subject to heightened scrutiny by the media and members of the public. Accordingly, they should take care to ensure that their private activities do not compromise their ability to carry out their official duties.

2024 Colorado Capital Conference seeks participants[11]

U.S. Sens. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., and John Hickenlooper, D-Colo., together with Colorado Mesa University, the University of Colorado, and Colorado State University invite all Colorado residents to apply to the Colorado Capital Conference[12] to be held June 11-13, 2024, in Washington, D.C.

Some 100 Coloradans from a diverse cross-section of the state will be selected through a highly competitive application process to participate in this bipartisan conference. During the event, they will have an opportunity to hear from and interact with our nation’s leaders in an informal setting.

“The Colorado Capital Conference?exemplifies the best of American democracy,” Bennet said. “It’s a time for Coloradans to come together to?share?ideas – and out of that, form a stronger, more reflective Colorado. I’m?pleased to co-host this conference?in person once again?with Sen. John Hickenlooper, Colorado Mesa University, the University of Colorado, and Colorado State University.”

"Our office represents Coloradans’ seat at the table. It belongs to everyone in our state,” Hickenlooper said. “Welcoming the Colorado Capital Conference is a great way to involve folks with the work we’re doing.”

“Colorado Mesa University is honored to host the Colorado Capital Conference along with both of our U.S. Senators and our partners at CU and CSU,” said Colorado Mesa University President John Marshall. “It’s never been more important for Coloradans of every stripe to learn more about our federal government and engage in conversation with one another. The Colorado Capital Conference is unique, and our nation is begging for citizens to get engaged and find common ground. No matter your party affiliation or geography, we hope all Coloradans apply to join us in Washington, D.C., next summer.”

University of Colorado System President Todd Saliman believes the conference provides numerous benefits to Colorado residents.

“CU is excited to partner with Sens. Bennet and Hickenlooper, Colorado Mesa University and Colorado State University again this year to offer this unique opportunity,” Saliman said. “By providing insight into our democratic process and making space to engage around our shared values as Coloradans and Americans, the Colorado Capital Conference goes a long way in bringing us together.”

CSU System Chancellor Tony Frank agrees: “CSU is proud to participate in the bipartisan Colorado Capital Conference and help bring together citizens of our state with lawmakers in the nation’s capital. It is a unique public forum that gives voters of Colorado the opportunity to voice their ideas and concerns directly to lawmakers, and it gives lawmakers an opportunity to speak directly to citizens about the legislative process and how policy is — and sometimes isn’t — enacted. It’s a benefit for everyone involved including CSU, and we’re grateful to Sens. Bennet and Hickenlooper for making it possible.”

All applications must be received no later than March 22, 2024. Conference participants will be announced by April 18, 2024. Participants are responsible for their own accommodations (at a group rate) and airfare. There is a $750 registration fee, which covers most meals and conference materials. Guests are welcome to participate in evening events for a prepaid fee of $200. For more information about the conference or to apply, visit www.coloradomesa.edu/capital-conference[13] or call 251-767-5687.

Reminder: State resource available for reporting occupational fraud[14]

The University of Colorado Principles of Ethical Behavior[15] and the systemwide Code of Conduct[16] reflect the university’s commitment to creating and sustaining a work environment in which university affairs are conducted ethically, professionally and according to applicable laws, regulations and university policy.

Members of the CU community are expected to report known or suspected violations of law or policy to designated offices or through available mechanisms.

Among those options, which are detailed here[17], Colorado’s Office of the State Auditor maintains a Fraud Hotline to receive reports about occupational fraud, a situation in which a state employee or contracted individual may be using their position or access as an employee or contractor to commit fraud against the state or others.

Reports made through this resource are referred to the affected state agency – in this case, the University of Colorado – which is responsible for determining and taking appropriate action to respond to the reported concerns.

As always, under university policy and applicable law, any university employee or contractor who reports known or suspected violations of law or university policy in good faith is protected from retaliation.

Ways of reaching the Colorado Office of the State Auditor Fraud Hotline are:
File a report online: https://leg.colorado.gov/content/osa-fraud-hotline-form[18] File a report by email: osafraudhotline@coleg.gov[19] Call: 303-869-3020
For more, including a downloadable poster, go to: https://www.cu.edu/doc/internal-auditstate-auditorfraudhotlineposterpdf[20]

‘Climate contrarianism’ is down but not out, expert says [21]

GRIT Resiliency in Action Conference 2024 [22]

CU Denver's affinity groups focus on creating strong sense of belonging on campus [23]

Celebrate Women's History Month at CU Denver [24]

Addressing health inequities in the Black community [25]

Jackson to share life story in interview with HistoryMakers[26]

Gary Jackson, a CU Boulder alumnus and former Denver County Court senior judge, has been chosen to tell his life story as part of The HistoryMakers, a series of video interviews whose archives are permanently housed in the Library of Congress.

Jackson practiced as a lawyer for 43 years and served as a county judge for eight years until his retirement in 2020. The Denver native earned his undergraduate and law degrees at CU Boulder[27].

Jackson expects to be interviewed in March. He was chosen because of the significance of his life, work and accomplishments, which include co-founding the Sam Cary Bar Association, the Sam Cary Scholarship Endowment Fund, and Colorado Criminal Defense Bar.

The HistoryMakers[28] is a national 501 (c) (3) nonprofit research and educational institution committed to preserving and making widely accessible the untold personal stories of both well-known and unsung African Americans. The HistoryMakers collection has grown to over 12,000 hours of testimony with over 3,600 video oral history interviews recorded in 451 cities and towns, Mexico, the Caribbean and Europe.

Parra-Medina named executive director of Center for Health Equity [29]

English is CU Denver's new program director for Black Student Services [30]

For some people, their genes and their cancer drugs don't mix. This CU center is trying to fix that. [31]

‘Everything has changed since Apollo’: Why landing on the moon is still incredibly difficult in 2024[32]

3 Ways to Ensure English Learners Benefit From the Science of Reading[33]

Links
[1] https://connections.cu.edu/spotlights/acting-out-help-communities-see-within[2] https://connections.cu.edu/sites/default/files/1-cu_playback_at_jcc_2023-1_1_playback_theater_lead_option_one_02-22-2024.jpg[3] https://www.colorado.edu/theatredance/playback[4] https://outreach.colorado.edu/program/critical-conversations-project-playback-theatre-in-rural-colorado/[5] mailto:James.F.Walker@colorado.edu[6] https://connections.cu.edu/sites/default/files/4-cuplayback-cedaredge2023-2_1_playback_theater_02-22-2024.jpg[7] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/cu-led-legislation-aims-improve-college-affordability[8] https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb24-1340[9] https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pH0aGwQWVeC7yImnfOiTCV0uMxZUQE_-/view[10] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/reminder-university-guidelines-affect-political-campaign-activity-expression[11] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/2024-colorado-capital-conference-seeks-participants[12] https://www.coloradomesa.edu/capital-conference/[13] http://www.coloradomesa.edu/capital-conference[14] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/reminder-state-resource-available-reporting-occupational-fraud[15] https://www.cu.edu/regents/policy-8[16] https://www.cu.edu/ope/aps/2027[17] https://www.cu.edu/internalaudit%20/fraud-and-fiscal-misconduct-awareness-and-reporting[18] https://leg.colorado.gov/content/osa-fraud-hotline-form[19] mailto:osafraudhotline@coleg.gov[20] https://www.cu.edu/doc/internal-auditstate-auditorfraudhotlineposterpdf[21] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/climate-contrarianism-down-not-out-expert-says[22] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/grit-resiliency-action-conference-2024[23] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/cu-denver-s-affinity-groups-focus-creating-strong-sense-belonging-campus[24] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/celebrate-women-s-history-month-cu-denver[25] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/addressing-health-inequities-black-community[26] https://connections.cu.edu/people/jackson-share-life-story-interview-historymakers[27] https://www.colorado.edu/law/2023/02/27/gary-jackson-70[28] https://www.thehistorymakers.org/[29] https://connections.cu.edu/people/parra-medina-named-executive-director-center-health-equity[30] https://connections.cu.edu/people/english-cu-denver-s-new-program-director-black-student-services[31] https://connections.cu.edu/itn/some-people-their-genes-and-their-cancer-drugs-dont-mix-cu-center-trying-fix[32] https://connections.cu.edu/itn/everything-has-changed-apollo-why-landing-moon-still-incredibly-difficult-2024[33] https://connections.cu.edu/itn/3-ways-ensure-english-learners-benefit-science-reading