



## Ira S. Murfin -- writing, performing, collaborating, and defining a body of talk-based work

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[Ira S. Murfin](#) is a Chicago-based writer, performer, and curator whose work navigates areas between poetry, non-fiction, and theater. His one-act play "Magillicutt's" is being performed during the [Collaboraction Sketchbook X Festival](#). Recently I spoke with Murfin about his influences, his writing and theater projects, working at Arcosanti, collaborating with other artists, and his upcoming projects.

**DG:** *Who would you say are some of your influences, in terms of your writing?*

**IM:** I've always had a lot of anxiety about answering that question. Certainly there are writers who mean a lot to me, largely who I first read when I was younger -- Nabokov, Calvino, and Salinger come to mind. But I don't know to what degree they influenced my work. Certainly some. And playwrights -- David Mamet, Maria Irene Fornes, Beckett, Chekhov, to name a few -- also had a huge influence on me. But in the last few years I've come to start to be able to understand how my strongest influences have been people who are straddling this line of literature and performance in some way, specifically by doing some kind of extended or dense talking as a way of both performing and generating text, in a number of different contexts -- so Spalding Gray, Garrison Keillor, Wallace Shawn (especially in *My Dinner with Andre*, but also as a playwright), the folksinger Utah Phillips, the radio performer Joe Frank.

**DG:** *What do you find interesting about Joe Frank's work?*

**IM:** When I was a teenager I loved this stuff but somehow I got the message that it was not serious as literature or as theatre, that it was somehow too easy, so I got away from it. It wasn't until a few years ago when I made a talk performance and admitted to a friend that this talk-heavy work was secretly my favorite type and she asked why it isn't all I do, then, that it occurred to me that it could be. So I'm starting to work on defining that body of talk based work, and connecting up instances of it in different disciplinary contexts -- finding out about David Antin coming at talk through poetry, or John Cage approaching it through music -- in part so I can more coherently answer this question about influence and define a tradition, or at least a network, around this kind of work.

**DG:** *How did you come up with the idea for "Magillicutt's," which is being performed during the Collaboraction Festival?*

**IM:** It was the direct result of a series of prompts in Beau O'Reilly's playwrighting class when I was getting my MFA in writing at [The School of the Art Institute of Chicago](#) (SAIC). There were several options of phrases to start a monologue with and one was "My first punch..." I thought of this guy I knew slightly who was a neighbor of a friend. He was a career waiter at a touristy steakhouse downtown and I met him on the street one day and he was really pissed off because he'd just been suspended for slamming a chair down in an argument with a customer and he was still really angry, he felt wronged, and it just seemed like a dangerous, out of proportion sort of response, and like he was really minimizing the rage he must have been feeling and expressing in that moment and that was still seething in him. The next prompt was to write the other side of the first monologue. There was this guy at a place where I buy clothes, and he once recommended I go to Gibson's, another steakhouse downtown, solely because it was the highest grossing restaurant per night in the country. I don't know if that's true, but it struck me as such a weird reason to recommend a restaurant.

**DG:** *How did that train of thought about restaurants prompt you to go in a certain direction?*

**IM:** Somehow that thinking intrigued me. I'm very interested in food and in restaurants and in how it's connected to art and performance, and I was thinking about those very expensive places in tourist districts of major cities or in Las Vegas or wherever, where the food is really bad, or at least not very interesting, and about why people of a certain class go there, what they're paying for. The last prompt was to be a dialogue between the two people who had given the monologues, which I didn't do, I brought in the wife so that there is another scene, another thing going on, that calls into question the other parts. I didn't want to concretize the punch that they're all talking about by showing it, I wanted it to be a kind of empty spot in the middle that they're all responding to or anticipating. Plus it was so male, I thought the woman should be there, even though she doesn't get a monologue, which seems really significant to me, that she doesn't have agency in this exchange between these two guys. At first I saw the

three parts as kind of independent units, not even necessarily a play, just units related to each other. A director in India wanted to see some short plays of mine and I put them together under this title of *Magillicutty's* and realized that they could function as a whole thing. There was something about masculinity and testosterone and all this stuff about maleness that I don't usually deal with there. Which was the great thing about working off Beau's prompts, it took me some place really surprising and uncharacteristic.

**DG:** *Did "exponential," which is the theme for Sketchbook X, help to shape your piece?*

**IM:** Yes, when I saw the Sketchbook theme was "exponential," I decided to submit that piece. I thought how there is an exponential set of possibilities around the punch and the possible consequences of the punch, but it could also be exponential in form by rearranging the three sections every night and changing the way the different perspectives are received by the audience, changing the arc, which made sense in thinking about the units as being somewhat autonomous parts.

**DG:** *How would you describe your collaboration with Jamie Abelson?*

**IM:** It's been the most like a traditional production of a play of anything I've ever done. We were paired by Colloboraction as part of the Sketchbook festival. We hadn't met before that, though it turned out he is the next door neighbor of one of my closest friends and collaborators. Jamie and I met and talked about the script and his thoughts and my thoughts and casting, and he took it from there. I was going to come to a rehearsal at some point, but that didn't work out schedule wise -- he was out of town and now I'm out of town, so I haven't seen what he's done. I'll only be back for the final weekend, which is when I'll see it for the first time. So it is this kind of blind situation, where I will see it in production, and late in the run. Even though it's traditional in the sense of a usual theatrical process, it feels almost experimental to me. I usually work in this very holistic, ground up way as a theatre maker, either entirely solo, or with collaborators, but starting from nothing and building everything within the process. So to give this piece of writing I did a while back over to someone else to have their own separate process with it is very new and exciting for me, like I'll get a package in a few weeks and I don't know what will be in it. But I can't wait, I'm hearing very good things.

**DG:** *You've done some curatorial and directing work. How would you say your role as director / curator relates to your work as a writer?*

**IM:** Actually, I haven't done that much curating or directing lately, per se. "The New Tentacle," which was the religious reading in February, was actually something of an exception. I did a lot of producing and curating and hosting when I was at Arcosanti and part of leaving there was to refocus on my own creative output by starting my MFA. Though "The New Tentacle" did make me feel like I should do more curating and presenting, because I do like it and I feel like I know a really good mix of people from different aesthetic and disciplinary backgrounds. I'm living for the summer, and possibly summers for the foreseeable future, in Western Massachusetts on property my girlfriend owns, which includes this enormous barn, so doing something with presenting performance in that space down the line seems possible. I've also stepped back from directing in a theatre context, there is a deterministic sense of control about it that, for the way I like to work, feels like it potentially shuts down discovery. I'm probably being closed-minded or just am wrestling with the definition of the word, but I'm hesitant to position myself as a director or to make new work with a single director in control. Though, again, handing a script off to a director to work on independently is a thrill. But as a collaborative artist, working in proximity to others is fantastic and I think it is where my best work comes from. An organic editing and shaping process starts to happen which is not about intellectualizing product, but about responding to immediate needs, concerns, capabilities, and through that the final product takes on the imprint of the whole process, the conversation, not just its conclusion, and it means much more than it could ever have intended to mean. You get this sense that no one person could have made the work, but also very concretely that it is possible to see how the work could not have been made without each specific person who collaborated on it. This can happen in the moment of performance, too, if the performance is responsive, which is why I like to set up conditions for unplanned conversations as a solo performer. And then as a writer, or making other work in solitude, I am still working essentially with the rhythms and patterns of someone else's voice, either real or fictional, and trying to track that. If I had to come up with one word to describe my working method, it would be "responsive."

**DG:** *How did you come up with the idea for the "New Tentacle" event? That was a lot of fun.*

**IM:** Well, my friend [Alicia Jo Rabins](#), who is a poet and musician, was coming to town. She has a project called [Girls in Trouble](#) that uses stories of women from the Torah as the basis for songs. We wanted to do a reading together, it turned out she was thinking a lot about an unbroken performance, which is unusual in a music or even poetry context, whereas in theatre or performance that is what is assumed, and she wanted to string together some of those songs with some poems while sampling her own violin playing live. So I was excited about this form and also about the topic. I had gotten interested in making poems from religious texts after a project I'd done in Matthew Goulish's "Systems of Writing" class at SAIC, where I'd pulled 19 small poems out of the lyrics to American hymnal music. I was struck by the way this spiritual language became very earthly, corporeal, even

dirty, but that it kept some residue of its source, still. After that I'd heard about a new translation of the psalms by a comparative literature professor from UC Berkeley named Robert Alter; he was translating them for adherence to the original Hebrew, rather than from the King James versions that are familiar to most of us. He wanted to keep the poetic language as close to the original as possible. And in the process he found all these ways that the Christian language had altered the theology of the psalms, that the body/soul divide was not really there in the original, that it was all much more down to earth and pragmatic, in many ways, and he had all of these very specific linguistic examples that I got really into. I work a lot with the idea that language is inherently embodied, that speaking is an action, and I was interested in putting this spiritual language to more earthly uses, to talk about being embodied, which seemed like it was part of the original agenda anyway.

**DG:** *How did you develop your own collection of poems inspired by Alter's translations?*

**IM:** I started the project by extracting poems from the Alter translations. I went through the psalms from the start.

**DG:** *How did you decide to make the transition to organize an event around that idea of using spiritual and religious texts, as a basis for an event?*

**IM:** I'd found this common ground with Alicia's project, and I thought it'd be interesting to see how other people repurpose religious text or narrative in their writing. So I invited a number of people who I thought might use religious text or concepts in writing that might not be solely religious in its intentions. I thought it would be very interesting to see that range of work. And it was.

**DG:** *Several years ago you lived and worked at [Arcosanti](#). How would you say that has affected your approach toward writing?*

**IM:** Living at Arcosanti is one of the most important things I have done in my life, if not the most important. I lived there for nearly 4 years and have gone back a lot and I would say it has effected my thinking a great deal. Arcosanti is an architectural prototype in Arizona, a laboratory dedicated to exploring an approach to urban design called arcology, which fuses the concerns of architecture and ecology to form compact, lively, and environmentally friendly human habitats. For one thing, I was able to use it as a laboratory for my own work as an artist – I directed plays, ran a reading series, and organized a really large-scale spoken word festival for seven years there. So I came out of that experience having been able to try a lot of things independently that I could then develop in larger contexts, like Chicago. But Arcosanti also really affected my outlook, I am very interested in the built environment, in how we contain life, and what that does and doesn't encourage and allow, and a lot of my work touches on that. Paolo Soleri is the founder of Arcosanti, and one of his proposals is that what he calls the urban effect, the dense bundling of diverse functions, is really how all life works, we just see it at a human scale in the city, but that the urban is really the driver of all life. So that has become important to my thinking and also to my approach, in that I think even when my work is not directly about the urban, it involves putting diverse elements face to face and trusting that their interactions will produce something of interest.

**DG:** *Several years ago you were involved with "Impossible Cities: A Utopian Experiment," which was presented at Peter Jones Gallery. I really enjoyed seeing that. How did you get involved with that?*

**IM:** "Impossible Cities" was put together by Seth Bockley and produced by Walkabout Theater. Seth had invited several artists to make work about the idea of utopia, and I was one of the performers. I made my first real talk performance for it, which was a kind of staged reading of a text about my time at Arcosanti and how difficult it is to explain Arcosanti to an outside audience, and also about Arcosanti not being a utopia, even though it is often categorized as such, because it is a laboratory, it changes and responds to actual conditions and uses as it gets built, and that it doesn't really speculate about what exactly life will be like inside this architecture, only that this approach to urban design could maximize interaction and productivity while minimizing waste. The performance ran for a month in early 2007 and was pretty popular and well received, but that was then end of it, per se. But two big things came out of it and have kind of extended its intentions. One is that in the performance I said that I was writing a book about my experiences with intention and community and that the text was from that book, but really that was all I had at that point. After that I started writing the book and worked on it throughout grad school, a version of it was my MFA thesis at SAIC. That text in itself has generated some performance work and it is still this amorphous, unfinished project that I hope to spend some time looking at again this summer after a hiatus from it the last year or so. The other thing was that everyone who worked on that production became interested in Arcosanti and in working together again and we formed a company called the Laboratory for the Development of Substitute Materials (LDSM) and we have started to make work collaboratively and partially in response to Arcosanti. Certainly the urban in general and Arcosanti in particular play a major role in what we do, though we also incorporate other sources, specifically from the sciences and various approaches to narrative, for the kinds of creative intersections and collisions I was talking about. The first performance we made was called Theoretical Isolation: A Post-Atomic Experiment. It drew on Arcosanti, the development of the atomic bomb at Los Alamos, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. We developed it in part at Arcosanti and premiered it there before performing it in Chicago. This summer we are planning to go back

to Arcosanti to start work on a performance about neuroscience and perception, mapping, and folktales.

**DG:** *It seems to me that one aspect of your aesthetic is the intersection between writing and theater, but not in a conventional sense. How would you describe those two interests of yours, how you bring them together?*

**IM:** Yes, that is very astute. I've basically spent my whole life trying to figure that out. I really started in theatre, and that has always been my first identification, as a theatre artist. But I think what always attracted me was declamation, was speech. I love words and I love the act of speaking, so for me writing is aural and oral, it is not this solitary thing on the page that happens inside your head as a writer or a reader. And also my entry into theatre is based in language, it is not primarily visual -- which is not to say that I dislike visual theatre, quite the opposite, but as an artist I tend to focus on words. So I've always felt kind of caught there, loving language, but loving to hear it spoken, and loving theatre, but wanting more talking, which is usually the opposite of what theatre artists want -- less talking, show don't tell, etc.

**DG:** *Was your process with that involved with your interest in the possibility of exploring different careers in the arts?*

**IM:** Yes, I went from wanting to be an actor to wanting to be a filmmaker to wanting to be a playwright to wanting to write fiction and then back to this more generalist position in theatre and performance that I occupy now. I could never really get the sound and rhythm and experience of spoken language out of my head. So I've addressed this in several ways for myself -- when I write for the stage, as in *Magillicutty's*, I tend toward monologue and I tend to be interested in tracking the way a character works through their thoughts moment to moment out loud, because that is how I function, I find out what I think by talking about it. I also have made some less traditionally theatrical performance work that focuses on actual conversation, either setting up the conditions for conversation or approaching the conversations of others as text.

**DG:** *How did you decide to meld these different approaches, in your projects?*

**IM:** In my collaborative work what often happens is that my talk oriented sensibility will come up against a more visual or movement oriented approach from one of my collaborators and in that collision is, I think, where the most interesting work happens -- that those approaches can coexist, even work in tension to some extent, without having to be synthesized or homogenized, I like that a lot. And finally, I am moving into a role as a scholar, researching and writing and thinking about talk in theatre and in other art forms and in the world at large, how we think about talk and how talk's position in performance influences that thinking. That is something I am planning to work out through the academic work I am embarking on as I start the Interdisciplinary PhD in Theatre and Drama at Northwestern in the fall.

**DG:** *What other projects have you been working on lately?*

**IM:** Well, there is the new LDSM project that is just getting started, that I hope will perform in Chicago next year sometime. We are planning on doing our first residency for it at Arcosanti next month. And I've been going toward more academic and critical writing, I just gave a paper on Spalding Gray and the Wooster Group at the Performance Studies International conference in Toronto and I've co-authored a paper on the LDSM's work at Arcosanti with my collaborator Chloe Johnston that is supposed to come out in the journal *Theatre Topics* this fall. I've also started writing about theatre and performance a bit for [Chicago Art Criticism](#). I'm sure this sort of work is almost all I'll be doing once I start my PhD in the fall. Before then, though, *Magillicutty's* is up, which I'm excited about. I'd love to get back to work on the book about intention and communities this summer, and also a full-length play I wrote in grad school that needs revising, also entirely written in monologues. And there is another short play of mine with puppets I'd like to produce. I had done a project with Jen Karmin at the MCA last year using a Buckminster Fuller text and we are talking with a third collaborator about expanding that. There are some other potential collaborations pending, too. There are also three talk performance series that I have going that I'd love to have the opportunity to do more of (two of them you've presented) -- one I call *Extractions*, I eavesdrop on conversations and write down what I hear, then I record that in my own voice and make sound (or in one case, text) installations. Another is *Intentional Menu*, which is a list of instances I've written about in my memoir manuscript that I offer to talk about with patrons at an art show or in a gallery or some other busy context across a table, one on one. The last is *Q & A*, which involves me taking questions from an audience on any subject at all -- sort of a post-show discussion without a show. It'd be great to find more contexts for that work. So, that's a lot. And again, it will all change come the start of school this fall, I'm sure.

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Ira S. Murfin  
ISM

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**Author**



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