



At the Kitchen Table: Dan Froot & Company's Arms Around America and Theatre as an Ongoing Practice

Description

When my kids were born, things really changed for me. I started thinking, "I don't know how to do much, but I know how to do these things. What can I do to make the world a better place for my kids, and for everyone?"

So I started working in my own community, making theatre based on oral histories of people living with food insecurity.

Dan Froot

Salt Lake City, UT As someone who studies theatre as a site of memory and relation, I'm especially interested in what happens after a performance ends—what lingers, what shifts, what continues. That's what drew me to Dan Froot's work.

Froot is a multidisciplinary artist—a saxophonist, dancer, writer, and director—whose work spans over four decades. As the founder of Dan Froot & Company, he creates performances grounded in oral histories, working in collaboration with communities to bring lived experiences—often from across deeply divided perspectives—onto the stage. His practice moves across forms, assembling something closer to a lived methodology than a single genre. As he puts it, each discipline is only "a part" of his voice; his work emerges in the combination.

That combination matters. What Froot is building is not just performance—it's a structure for engagement. His work doesn't end with storytelling; it extends into how stories are received, discussed, and carried forward. Audiences are not positioned as passive viewers but as participants, asked to do the work of listening, imagining, and responding—both during the performance and after it ends.

A group of seven people posing together in a recording studio setting, with microphones and laptops
Dan Froot selfie w/ members of the cast and musicians: Anthony Rey Perez, Isaac Rodriguez, Sola Bamis, Julian Gomez, Tom Moose, Donna Simone Johnson in background,

during *Arms Around America* recording session.

From Food Insecurity to Gun Violence: Building a Practice of Listening

Froot's recent work, *Arms Around America*, is part of a longer trajectory grounded in oral history and community engagement. Before this project, he spent over a decade creating performances based on the experiences of people living with food insecurity, often collaborating with unhoused communities and working through puppetry and live radio plays.

What connects these forms is not just aesthetics—it's audience responsibility. In puppetry, Froot explains, the puppet is never actually "brought to life" by the performer. It is the audience who must bridge the gap between object and motion, who must decide to believe. The same is true of audio drama: what we see and what we hear never fully align, and meaning emerges only through active participation.

This is not passive spectatorship. It is labor. It is empathy.

Four performers manipulate a puppet resembling a young person, dressed in a denim jacket and jeans.

Who's Hungry? photo by Rose Eichenbaum

In puppetry, puppets are not alive; it's the audience that needs to pitch their imagination between the puppet and the puppeteer to bring the puppet to life for themselves. So that's work—empathetic work that the audience needs to do. The same is true in a live radio show or audio drama; the audience has to pitch themselves between what they see and what they hear in order to imagine the full scenario. And that's also an empathetic position. I want people to feel empathetic toward perspectives that they may not share.

Dan Froot

Here, the work doesn't ask audiences to simply watch—it asks them to participate in meaning-making.

And that framework carries directly into *Arms Around America*, a project that took over five years to develop and draws on oral histories from individuals across the political and experiential spectrum of gun-related issues. The project began almost accidentally—at the intersection of food insecurity and gun violence in a Miami performance. Then, in 2018, the Parkland school shooting made the next step unavoidable.

That's next, they decided.

Quote about the importance of storytelling in fostering respect and understanding, attributed to Dan Froot

Arms Around America

The performance in Salt Lake City, *Arms Around America*, is the result of more than five years of research, collaboration, and community engagement. Rather than gathering stories broadly, the work is built through a layered network of partnerships that prioritize trust and relational accountability. Froot and his company begin by working with presenting arts organizations, who then connect them to local community partners. Those partners introduce the artists to individuals and families, ensuring that each story emerges through an existing relationship rather than direct outreach.

As Froot explains:

“We approach each of those partners, and we ask them to introduce us to community partners that might be interested in introducing us to people that they work with who want to talk about guns. Those individuals are being introduced by a trusted person or entity, and that partner remains a liaison throughout. So it’s not just us coming to them cold.”

“Dan Froot

In each location, these partnerships shape the stories that emerge. While the project is anchored in long-term work developed in Los Angeles, *Arms Around America* was built through collaborations across multiple sites, including Los Angeles and Miami. In Los Angeles, the work developed through military and veteran communities; in Miami, through organizations connected to the carceral system; and in other regions through similarly specific local networks. This structure allows the performance to hold a wide range of perspectives—gun owners, survivors, military personnel, and those directly impacted by incarceration—without collapsing them into a single narrative.

Onstage, these methods take shape through a blend of live performance, audio storytelling, and ensemble-driven staging. Rather than portraying fixed characters, the actors collectively inhabit multiple perspectives, drawing on a collaborative devising process in which performers help shape the script and move across roles. As a result, no two performances are exactly the same; each iteration reveals new layers of meaning depending on the cast and context.

What makes *Arms Around America* particularly distinctive, however, is that the performance does not end with the final scene. Immediately following the show, audiences are invited into what Froot calls the “kitchen table”—a facilitated, community-based dialogue that brings together participants from across the political spectrum to reflect on what the performance has raised. In Salt Lake City, this includes voices ranging from gun rights advocates to anti-violence organizers, sociologists, and community members, creating a space where conversation can unfold across difference.

The Ethics of Story: “There Is Violence Involved”

One of the most striking moments in our conversation comes when Froot describes the act of storytelling itself—not as neutral, not even as inherently good, but as something that carries risk.

I think there's violence involved. If we use the metaphor of somebody's lived experience being a whole cloth, you're drawing out a thread when you choose to focus on a particular narrative. And there's violence in that, because you are separating that from infinite threads of context that inform the color and shape of that thread. I never want to say that the stories we tell are authoritative or even that they are true. It's not just Tiffany's story; it's us meeting Tiffany's story. There's consultation and consent all the way through so that she feels like we are honoring the spirit of her story. But a story needs a beginning, a middle, and an end—and that's not how experience works.

Dan Froot

Froot is careful not to claim ownership over the stories he presents. They are not fixed truths, but encounters—collaborations between the original storyteller, the artists, and the audience. The work is always based on lived experience, never equivalent to it.

For someone like me—working on a dissertation that examines performance and memory—this distinction reshapes how we understand performance itself. What Froot resists is the same impulse that structures traditional archives: the desire to fix, stabilize, and authorize meaning—and the violence that can accompany that. Instead, his work keeps meaning open.

A man kneeling on a wooden floor, holding a basketball in a dimly lit space surrounded by musical instruments.
Pang! Photo by John Pemble

The Kitchen Table: From Performance to Dialogue

When most theatre ends at the curtain call, Froot's work explicitly refuses that boundary. After each performance of *Arms Around America*, audiences are invited—not required—to participate in what he calls the kitchen table. This is not a typical talkback. The artists are not even present. The format itself draws from the work of Lois Weaver and her long table model, part of a broader practice she calls public address systems: spaces designed to foster open, participatory dialogue rather than structured response.

Instead, a group of community members—representing a wide range of perspectives—sit together and begin a conversation.

The people at the table just start to talk—not about the production, per se, but about what it raised for them! Their job is to listen to each other and to respond from their hearts. And then at a certain point! Would you all like to join the conversation?

Dan Froot

What happens there isn't about reaching agreement or settling anything. It's about staying in the conversation—listening, responding, and sitting with difference without needing to resolve it.

Rather than trying to measure or fix the impact of the performance, this structure creates space for something to continue. The work extends beyond the stage not by securing meaning, but by allowing it to move—through conversation, through disagreement, through the different ways people carry it forward.

In that sense, the performance is only the beginning. The kitchen table becomes one way the work persists—not as a single outcome, but as an ongoing process shaped by those who take part. This is theatre as ongoing practice, not a finished product. What happens in that space is never uniform—and it doesn't end there.

A musician playing drums on stage while smiling.

Arms Around America behind the scenes with DF&Co.. L-to-R: Dan Froot, Isaac Rodriguez, Johnson/Perez/Alston/Gonzales/Froot by Tom Moose. First two photos by Donna Simone Johnson.

Audience Reception: What Carries and What Resists

Because the work has traveled—from Los Angeles to Miami to southern Utah—its reception shifts in ways that are as revealing as the performance itself. In Los Angeles, audiences were emotionally open—crying, hugging strangers, and engaging deeply in the kitchen table conversations. The performance seemed to create a shared emotional space where vulnerability felt possible, even among people who had never met. In Miami, the responses were more varied. Some audience members were deeply moved, while others resisted the work entirely. As Froot noted, a few responses were sharply critical—evidence that the performance had touched something unresolved rather than comfortably affirming existing beliefs.

In southern Utah, the dynamics became even more complex. Those who identified with gun reform perspectives were often the most visibly frustrated, while participants aligned with gun rights positions sometimes modeled a more measured, reflective listening practice. These moments complicate any easy assumptions about audience, ideology, or response. What you see instead is that reception isn't passive. It is shaped by context, by lived experience, and by what individuals are willing—or unwilling—to sit with. The performance does not determine its meaning. It creates the conditions for meaning to emerge, unevenly and sometimes in tension. And that tension matters. Because if the goal is not agreement but dialogue, then resistance, discomfort, and even refusal are not failures of the work—they are part of its ongoing life.

Ephemerality and the Afterlife of Performance

Toward the end of my conversation with Froot, I return to a question that sits at the center of my own work: temporality. Theatre is ephemeral: it happens in real time, in shared space, and then it ends. But that ending is not disappearance. What remains is carried differently by each person in the room—fragmented, partial, embodied. And in a project like *Arms Around America*, those fragments are not fictional. They are tied to real lives, real histories, and real stakes.

Froot's response shifts the question. Rather than focusing on what remains, he emphasizes what cannot be known or controlled:

“Unless you have a powerful market research machine, you have no idea what impact you’re having and whatever impact it is may just dissipate. You may never know. So we try to create ways for that conversation to continue.”

—Dan Froot

The point is not to preserve the story or secure its meaning. It is to create the conditions for something to continue—conversation, reflection, relation—even if that continuation is uneven, partial, or fleeting.

In that sense, the story does not endure because it was performed. It persists because it was never fully contained to begin with. Performance does not fix meaning; it encounters it, reshapes it, and releases it again into the world, where it moves beyond the control of both artist and audience.

Final Thoughts/What Theatre Can Do

Froot’s work suggests something else: theatre can do more than tell a story. It creates a space where audiences engage differently—asked to sit with what they’ve encountered, to question it, and to carry it forward. At a time when information is constant and engagement is rare, *Arms Around America* offers a way to stay with difficult questions. It is this continuation—beyond the stage, beyond the performance—that gives the work its force. Spaces for dialogue like this feel increasingly rare—but they are where the possibility for change begins.

Event Details:

- **Performance:** *Arms Around America* by Dan Froot & Company.
- **When:** April 9 & 10, 2026, at 7:30 PM.
- **Where:** [Kingsbury Hall](#), University of Utah.
- **Description:** An evening of short audio dramas based on true stories of families across the U.S. whose lives have been impacted by guns, designed to foster conversation rather than debate.
- **Associated Event:** A “Guns to Gardens” event will be held on Saturday, April 4, 2026, from noon to 3:30 PM at the [University of Utah’s Nuh Eeva Garden](#).

[Event Details](#)

About Dan Froot & Company

Dan Froot is an award-winning multidisciplinary artist whose work spans performance, music, and community-engaged theatre. His work has toured internationally and been presented across the U.S., Europe, Africa, and South America. Awards include a Bessie (New York Dance & Performance Award), a City of Los Angeles Artist Fellowship, and a Foundation for Jewish Culture Playwriting Fellowship.

He is the founder of Dan Froot & Company (DF&Co), known for its collaborative, community-based approach to theatre-making. Selected works include *Pang!*, a series of audio dramas about hunger in America; *Who's Hungry*, a puppet theatre project centered on food insecurity in Los Angeles; and *Shlammer*, a vaudevillian gangster farce.

More Info

Arms Around America <https://www.danfroot.com/arms-around-america>

Dan Froot & Company <https://www.danfroot.com>

DF&Co's Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/danfrootandcompany>

DF&Co's Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/pangpodcast>

DF&Co's YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/user/danfrootify>

DF&Co's Twitter/X <https://twitter.com/pangpodcast>

Arms Around America Performance Dates

Los Angeles, CA World premiere

November 15th & 16th, 2024

UCLA Nimoy Theater cap.ucla.edu/ucla-nimoy-theater

1262 Westward Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90024

Presented by CAP UCLA

Miami, FL East Coast premiere

February 21 & 22, 2025

Miami Dade College's Lehman Auditorium miamilightproject.com

Presented by Miami Light Project and Live Arts Miami

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