



Artist As Leader: Chris Wells

Performer and writer Chris Wells is the artistic director of The Secret City, a non-profit organization that since he founded it in 2007 with his now-husband, painter Bobby Lucy, has been presenting ecstatic community art celebrations featuring storytelling, visual art, guest performers, a live band, a community choir, and playful interaction. Participants with religious backgrounds might call it a church where the only thing worshiped is art. For everyone involved, it is a community of artists, creative types, and conscious people who seek a deeper engagement with the world. In 2010, The Secret City received an Obie award in recognition of its service to the creative community.

Now, 13 years since its founding, The Secret City hosts regular celebrations in New York and Los Angeles and makes special appearances throughout the country. It also hosts an annual summer gathering in Woodstock, NY, where Chris and Bobby now live. Chris also hosts a weekly Secret City radio show in nearby Kingston.

In this interview with Pier Carlo Talenti, Chris discusses how he expanded what had once been a vision for a “church of art” into the community and creativity hub it is today and how he has both married and adapted his artistic practice to his role as an artistic director.

Pier Carlo Talenti: How did you shift from being an actor to developing the idea for *The Secret City* and then implementing it?

Chris Wells: What had happened with my sort of traditional theater career was it became clear that for a variety of reasons the work I was being asked to make was not that interesting to me. I could do it, but I also felt a couple of things. My skills felt outsized for the jobs. I also felt like — and this is not to cast aspersions on anyone or anybody who, God knows, has a career in the theater. I celebrate them — but for me, I felt the work was providing a product to people of a certain class and that it had very little to do with me personally. So I took a break from that.

Then the following summer, Bobby and I were in Santa Monica. I was reminded of this vision I had had in Los Angeles years before to create a church of art. I had been asked to MC a lot in LA, and I felt very connected to a broad community. I always wondered why the arts were sort of isolated from each other. The theater community didn't really deal with the dance community, and that community didn't deal with the visual arts community, which had very little to do with the performance-art community. It really started to seem as if the arts suffered a version of a diaspora such that — owing to a variety of reasons that people smarter than me could identify, but certainly capitalism and the lack of arts support in general — there was really a lack of cohesion and mutual support.

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then found to be true: that art-making has a deeply spiritual component and that creativity for me is where I found my spiritual calling in making things with other people.

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That was the vision I had had. I was reminded of that during this summer where I was on a hiatus and just making house with Bobby. I thought, “Oh my God, maybe that’s what I’m going to do when I go back to New York in the fall.” I remember that night telling Bobby. We were lying in bed, and I said, “What do you think of that idea?” And he said, “It sounds like it’s your calling.” And I was so struck by that because I thought, “How does he know that?” I mean, he didn’t know my career, and he didn’t see my life in Los Angeles. But he had a deep insight into who I was, who I am and what both my potential is and also what my dreams and my values are.

We moved back to New York after that summer, and we started The Secret City that fall. I rented a small studio on 14th Street, and I just started inviting people. We were four people sitting on the floor that first month, and the next month there were, I think, eight people. It was very organic. I presented this idea that I wanted to start this thing and asked people if they’d be interested in helping. And then I think we added chairs the third month. Every month it would just build and grow, and then the crowd started growing. Word started getting out, and the place started filling up. I started curating much more broadly and inviting guest performers to come and adding live music.

At that first or second gathering, I realized if I was going to invite people to gather and I was going to be the leader, I was like “Oh, I’m the leader of this thing. I better have something to say!” And so I

started writing and the theater writing really then came to the fore, and I was like, “Oh, I’m writing pieces to perform for these gatherings!”

My entire creative self then began to blossom with this venture. The Secret City was big enough to contain anything I wanted to do. I wanted to have a band again, so then we had a band. I wanted to sing with other people, so we added a community choir. Then we started adding these crazy costumes, which kind of reawakened or reconnected me to my whole drag experience back in Los Angeles many years before.

The main aspect of it, of course, was that I was building a community around this idea that a) art is crucial, b) artists are worthy and deserving of support and not the kind of support that most of us have experienced, which is, “I want you to come and pay for this thing,” or “I want you to come and sell your thing.” So it was very intentionally a noncommercial space. There was no money charged. Eventually we started taking a collection.

And this thing that I had had experience with in Los Angeles, especially through, of course, Cornerstone [Theater Company]: community, which I always had a bit of an ambivalent attitude toward. I think it was moving to New York and seeing that this city was really brutal on artists and people needed ways to connect. So The Secret City became a generator of community around these principles of art-making and creativity and the spirit that I felt was inherent in art-making that connected people.

Pier Carlo: You’re clearly a leader. Do you also see yourself as a spiritual guide?

Chris: It’s so funny. Shortly after we started what was then called The Church of The Secret City in New York, very soon after we started, we dropped “The Church of.” It had been immediately controversial and exclusionary, and that was not at all my I mean, I very much was like, “Well, if you’re going to build something like this, you want the tent to be as big as possible and to allow for anybody who wants to come.” But it was already a kind of controversial because anybody

who got a whiff of church, religion ... and there's nothing remotely religious about it. I would say if anything it's like neo-paganism. But there were people who got a whiff of that and would never come, because it was sort of threatening, I think.

But it was always very important to me to remind myself that I was not a spiritual leader, that I was an artist making a work of art that happened to be taking this form, which was inviting people to come and celebrate in these what we call services on Sundays.

Pier Carlo: So you've resisted that.

Chris: Well, if I were really going to take it apart, I would say I believe all artists are spiritual leaders. I deeply believe that art unlocks The expression is connected to something that is, I don't know, spiritual, meaning that the connectivity itself has a spiritual quality. Whether artists are coming from that place or not, I do believe that art-making is toiling in that realm of connectedness, whether we call that spirit or whether we call that connection.

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Pier Carlo: When and how did you decide to pay yourself through The Secret City, to make it your primary job? That must have been a decision that came with a lot of baggage.

Chris: [He laughs.] Oh my God, Pier Carlo, the most baggage! Bobby and I floated The Secret City for, I don't know, a year and a half, two years. We paid for the rehearsal studios. We bought the coffee for the coffee hour afterward. We bought the, whatever. But volunteers were showing up by then, and the crowd started growing. I remember having a lot of conversations about how to make that transition. I was terrified to start asking people for money, and Corbett Barklie was helping me think through this. She said, "You have to start asking people for money. It's like part of the deal."

I had this old tin canister that was on my table at home. I brought this tin canister in, and we started passing that around and people would put the money in there. It was really a cool object, but it was such a terrible vessel for money or for passing around. But we did it. We started building a collection, and the collection started covering the rent on the studios, and the studio rent started to grow because then we needed it for more time and we needed it for rehearsal. Then we started renting a separate studio for childcare because we added childcare, free childcare for anybody who wanted it, so we started paying the babysitters out of that.

To this day, our collection does not cover the cost of our events. Sometimes if people aren't really familiar with the idea of nonprofits, they're like, "Well, what's nonprofit about what you're doing?" We are a nonprofit that fundraises to make this work that is of service to the broader community happen. The collection we take offsets those costs, but it doesn't begin to cover those costs.

So I would say that the trajectory from those early days of beginning to ask for money I knew nothing about building a nonprofit. I mean, I had worked for nonprofits frequently, but I had no idea of how to build one. Finally we had a board; we started a board; I knew we needed a board. And then one of our board members brought a lawyer in. She joined our board, and then it started to become more formal. She took us on as a pro bono client through her firm, this major New York law firm, and they did all of our filing for us pro bono. Then it began to be, "Oh right, then you need a treasurer. You need a"

I mean, we had some of that before and I had started paying myself out of the collection, but it was not organized in any way. It was very haphazard and I still was ... Bobby and I were totally scrounging. He was painting, and I was running this organization. But it was my goal to build a job for myself that I believed in, that maximized my skills and that was of service, that would actually replace my acting career. Because I loved acting and loved the theater, but the life of the actor I did not enjoy, and the business of acting I find unappealing. So I saw, "Oh, I don't think I want to spend the rest of my life auditioning, asking people for work."

So now these many years later, I'm an artistic director. I'm on salary. We have a small staff, and this is my full-time job. It allows me to do many of the other things that I've always done, but I don't have to do those things for money because I have a secure salary.

Pier Carlo: Has there ever been a time when your vision or your needs didn't quite match your audience's? Or flock's? What do you call your audience? What do you call the people who come to your services?

Chris: I call them a community. It's funny, because I was intentional. One of the specific things I was reacting against when I started The Secret City was this incredibly harsh line between audience and performer. I thought that has to have been invented by humans. Originally I don't think that's how performance worked. Part of The Secret City's mission was to really soften that barrier between audience and performer, and so I specifically stopped using the word audience. I wanted people to feel that they were not just the thumbs-up or thumbs-down, "I liked it," "I didn't like it" thing but rather, "Oh, I'm here, and I'm an integral part of this event."

But to your question, you may recall my career in LA. A lot of it was trashy, and I loved it.

Pier Carlo: [Laughing] I know what you mean by that, but I'm not sure our listeners know what you mean by that. So please elaborate.

I was always interested in life at the edges and people who lived at the edges and work that sort of vibrated at the edges and occasionally exploring the idea of vulgarity. ... I always wanted that thing that theater can do, which is move toward danger.

Chris: I was always interested in life at the edges and people who lived at the edges and work that sort of vibrated at the edges and occasionally exploring the idea of vulgarity. Certainly in drag you're definitely pushing norms of what's acceptable or what's tasteful versus what's vulgar. But also even in legit theater, when I was making devised work, I always wanted that thing that theater can do, which is move toward danger.

Starting *The Secret City* I have had, and I would say I to some degree still have, this negotiation: How much of that life and that me is appropriate within this container that is more community-based? I certainly have felt like I've gotten to express a full version of myself, but I don't know that I'm as ... I was going to say as radical, but I don't think that's true.

Bobby said this thing many, many years ago when we first started *The Secret City*, that part of what makes it a radical work of art is its sincerity. I remember originally being like, "Sincerity? What? I don't know that I like that." But it's true. There is still, despite how big it's grown and how many events we've had and how many people come, it does have this pure heart at its center, which is well-meaning and welcoming. I think that is radical. Maybe what I felt was radical about me when I was younger has been transformed into a different kind of radicalism, which is trying to access maybe the highest part of myself.

Pier Carlo: And of your community, it sounds like. Because your community also gets to participate.

Chris: Yeah. I do think that there's a kind of modeling of behavior, like asking people to be kind, be welcoming, but also wonder, be curious. All of those things.

But your question's a really good one. One thing, I consciously decided to use language ... like I don't swear a lot in *Secret City*, meaning the story —

Pier Carlo: Because families are welcome, right?

Chris: Well, families are welcome. And I also started to see it as a kind of part of myself that when I would write these stories, like if I was going to say shit or fuck, I would be super-judicious. I might say one every year or one every six months, because in that container, those words are extraordinarily powerful. I mean, you're not at Joe's Pub drinking on a Saturday night.

I think so much about *The Secret City* is this curating, where there's one of each thing in every service. There's one piece of visual art or one artist's work. There's one musician who does the solo. There's a food offering that's like one bite of something. There's one poem read. There's one story told. And then there's one guest performer that is sometimes a dance piece or a cirque performance. There's something about just having these very intentional, singular components that creates a heightened awareness of anything that's added to it, and so I think that gave me a lot more care around how I use language. So that's a way in which it's sort of changed me.

I still can let it rip energetically, but in terms of my expression, I'm definitely negotiating holding a community during these events and being an artist in these events as the writer and performer. But I'm also hosting with an eye toward care.

Pier Carlo: Looking back since 2007, can you identify a moment where you maybe failed as a leader, where you really struggled?

Chris: Oh my God. [He laughs.] Oh my God, so, so many times. This is one of the things about being a leader, Pier Carlo, and one of the reasons I think people are reluctant to step into leadership. You are exposed, and if you're a good leader, you are open to that exposure. You don't necessarily handle it well all the time, but you can guarantee somebody's going to come along and say, "Well, that thing you said

you were going to do, you didn't do that." Or, "Why didn't you do this for me when you said you were going to do that?" People will tell you your failings, I think, much more easily when you are the leader. You become a kind of target.

You also become a kind of — I've become fascinated with this. This is more in the realm of psychology — you become a subject of a lot of people's projections and a projection. I think our nation is suffering from projections right now. Projections are nearly impossible to remove from somebody else. A projection is like a spell! A projection has to be removed by the individual who holds the projection onto someone else.

This whole sort of vortex that you've just entered us into of my full self, does my full self fit into what I'm making, this idea of leader and failing ... it is complicated. I'm not the artistic director of a theater company only; I'm inherent to each event. I make every event, and then I'm the lead artist within the event. So if there's tension, it's there. It's that my artist self is wilder, moodier, more opinionated, less kind maybe, less generous, short-tempered, whereas the leader self often is like, "Oof, I've got to handle this better," or, "Oh, I can't say that in an email. That's not appropriate," or, "Oh, I need to hold space for this person who irritates the hell out of me, but this is my job."

I'm always negotiating that dual role of artist versus community leader, and it's challenging.

I'm always negotiating that dual role of artist versus community leader, and it's challenging. But I also think — I don't know, maybe this is just me. I don't know if other people feel this way, other artists — I think particularly as an actor that this helplessness I spoke about earlier, I did feel like as an actor I was living out a kind of family role that was predicated on me being adored or liked or lovable and then maybe I would get my needs met. That was one of the reasons I wanted to leave it, so I could say, "Oh, actually, I have other things I want and need, and I can ask for them."

But as a leader, you're in a different position than a performer. Most of the failings I can identify quickly all share a lack of patience and generosity with people. I'd say those would be my failings.

Pier Carlo: And what do you think your greatest strength is as a leader?

Chris: Well, this is funny, because I think I'm a better artist than I am a leader. So I would say probably my greatest strength as a leader is my artistic ability. It's really great that they now are woven together, meaning —

Pier Carlo: You couldn't lead well in this position if your artistry were to decline.

Chris: Yeah. I do think that one of the great powers that artists have is that they are modeling behavior that other people hunger for. And so that's why I say as a leader I know my greatest skills are that I can communicate really well; I know I have a good sense of humor; I'm very skilled on stage; I'm quick on my feet; but I'm also making work that is generous and that is of service to people. That comes from my theater career, for sure. Like learning to do commedia, something as basic as direct-address to an audience, which is incredible if you've been doing proscenium theater for all your life and suddenly you're being trained to turn and face out and talk to the audience. That's a really radical breakthrough. And you realize, oh right, theater that actually talks to the people who are sitting there! So I've sort of taken that to its extremes.

I'm not a terrible leader, don't get me wrong, but I have a lot more to learn as a leader.

Pier Carlo: You mentioned that one of your duties as the leader that you are today is holding your community. I love that image and that phrase. Can you talk about in this particular period in our history what that means for you, what your new responsibilities are?

Chris: I was in Los Angeles the weekend before the shutdown. I flew home March 9th. That was Monday. I was putting up a new piece that week in New York City that I'd been commissioned to do, so I flew home Monday. I host a weekly radio show at a community station here upstate, and I did my show. And then Bobby said to me the next day, "You're not going to the city. You're not going anywhere. We're getting groceries; we're staying home." And he immediately saw much more clearly what was about to happen.

So I canceled this performance. I remember I canceled it on that Tuesday; the performance was to be Thursday. The people producing it were like, "I'm not sure it's necessary to cancel. I think people will come." And then by Thursday Broadway had closed everything, so I felt justified over something I had felt mild guilt over.

But furthermore Bobby said, "There are going to be a lot of people stuck at home. Maybe you should do a show online." So I started hosting a daily show on our Facebook and Instagram pages. It's modeled on the service that I host, but it's condensed to a half hour and it's called "Daily Artistic Inspiration for Troubled Times."

It's been extraordinary. It's created an entirely new community that's all online. People have responded so incredibly to it, and it's been very gratifying. I write a new piece in the morning that I then deliver at this 12 o'clock show.

Pier Carlo: Talk about amping up your artistic practice. It's a lot!

Chris: Yeah. It's been extraordinary. I have to say, I have felt like I was in training. And then when this shutdown hit, I was like, "OK, ready to run." And I've just been on this really full-out run ever since then.

What it's meant, though, is that we've built a community online and I say hello to everybody every day as they come in. I see their names and I don't see their faces, but over time this community has arisen, and now they talk to each other and people are communicating outside of the shows.

People are so deeply grateful to be taken out of whatever they're dealing with on any given day. I do think that that's one of the major roles of art: to ask people to focus on something outside of themselves.

I'd say every day I'm showing up with ... there's a little calendar, there's a poem. There's a word of the day that I curate around. I share an object or a piece of art from my home. And then I share this story. I've never been so bombarded with response. People are so deeply grateful to be taken out of whatever they're dealing with on any given day. I do think that that's one of the major roles of art: to ask people to focus on something outside of themselves.

It does a number of things. It gives them the thing they're focusing on, but it also models the idea that moving outside of yourself is a good thing to do. Removing your focus solely from yourself is good; it's asking you to be generous. I think art has that inherent ask in it. That's some of what those shows do for people. Now we've done, I don't know, 125 of them since the start of the shutdown.

Pier Carlo: Wow, congratulations!

Chris: Thank you. I will say, I know that has totally been an example of modeling behavior, because people are like, "Oh right, I can make something!" Or, "I could do this!"

A friend of mine wrote me two weeks ago. I can't remember what the word of the day was. She said, "Wow, that was so great." She said, "I realized I've just been kind of holding my breath for four and a half months, and I'm kind of waiting for this thing to resume. You've just reminded me that a), that's not happening and b), I could make something new." What an incredible moment this is. If you're able. I don't mean to romanticize the hardships and the problems of this moment. But for those of us who are able, it's also an extraordinary opportunity.

Epilogue

One of the gifts we find in this series is the recurring theme of how when artist leaders see a gap or a need, they then fill it with something creative, powerful and effective, just as Chris Wells has demonstrated. Takeaways from our conversation with Chris include:

- **Be playful with figuring out your ‘how.’** From traditional artistic endeavors to community organizing, once you know what you want to do and why you want to do it, be creative in how to deliver on the vision. Explore all your options for how to accomplish your vision.
- **Find your authentic, true calling.** What guides you in one chapter of your life may evolve over time as situations and opportunities change. Stay open to what inspires you as a leader. It will draw others to join you in the pursuit.
- **Expect scrutiny.** Just as an artist comes to expect reviews and feedback, so should you as a leader. It is the nature of being a public figure, artist and leader.
- **Utilize the scrutiny to create change.** The flip side of public scrutiny is the ability to influence others’ thinking or actions. Make the choice to be a positive force for good. It is sorely needed in our current fear-based climate of political and social disconnectedness.
- **Be creative. And savvy.** There is a dance between fostering your creativity as an artist who also leads and as a leader who produces art. Be clear on which hat to wear in what situations.



Chris Wells

PERFORMER, WRITER & ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE SECRET CITY

Chris Wells is an Obie-Award winning actor, writer, storyteller, community leader and performer working primarily in the cabaret form. Wells' acting includes: The Actors' Gang, the Public Theatre, Yale Rep, Alabama Shakes, San Jose Rep, Baltimore Center Stage, Long Wharf, Cleveland Playhouse and more. His original works include "Liberty!, A Fairy Tale," "Nowhere to Run," "Olsen Terror," "Swallow Me" and "It Will All Work Out." In 2007, Wells founded The Secret City, a secular Church of Art. With the motto "We Worship Art," they celebrate art, support the work of individual artists and create community through the arts with ecstatic community art gatherings in NYC, LA and Woodstock. Wells serves as producer, curator and lead artist and since its founding, he's presented an extraordinary line-up of artists and performers including Rosanne Cash, Stew, Michael Cerveris, Taylor Mac, Justin Vivian Bond, Julian Fleisher, Helga Davis, Jennifer Miller, John C. Reilly, Jomama Jones, John Fleck and many more. Since the pandemic shutdown, programming has moved online with The Secret City Daily, streaming weekdays on their Facebook and Instagram pages. Wells leads writing workshops and coaches individual artists to make the things they want to make. He lives in the Byrdcliffe Art Colony in Woodstock, NY with his husband, painter Robert Lucy, and their rescue dog, Sally. He is currently finishing his first book.