

**Shareback Report for NET/TEN Travel Grant  
Cleveland Public Theatre trip to Mondo Bizarro  
August 16-20, 2017**

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***SHAREBACK: How are your theatre's core values  
illuminated through the way you host?***

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**Mondo Bizarro are incredible hosts.** From the first correspondence with Nick Slie, we felt welcome, honored and heard. Nick worked with us to craft an itinerary, including structured and unstructured time, which would hopefully lead to a meaningful exchange. Mondo Bizarro and Cleveland Public Theatre both wanted the same thing: a profound experience that could potentially lay ground for future collaboration, but in such a short visit, how can depth be found? While we can't force Depth to come, we can create the circumstances in the hopes that she will come.

As soon as our plane landed in New Orleans, we were met with a friendly face. **If you can, pick your guests up from the airport.** Seeing a smile after a long day of travel can mean so much, especially if you are in a new city, and while navigating a city's transit system can be an exciting exploration and a crucial way to get to know a city, it can be an exhausting first experience. Nick received us with open arms and treated us like part of the family. I remember one of the first things he said was something like, "This is a good time to visit because of the heat. You have to settle in and breathe with it. You can't move too fast." It felt like a gentle warning and also an acknowledgement that this was a different climate for us "Northerners." It was wisdom that could help us be more comfortable in this new circumstance.

**The "little" things matter.** We arrived at our accommodations, *15 feet away from Nick's own house*, and were immediately set up with bikes, keys, maps, recommendations for dinner, coffee Intel, and space and time to connect with New Orleans on our own. Nick said, "One of the first things I like to do when I come back home is connect with the water. St. John's Bayou is about a 7 minute bike ride." We went to the water and sat for a moment. As I sat in front of the Bayou and watched a few people bike past, I was present to the fact that this experience was important to Nick, and knowing that, made it important to me, like I was trying to better understand his life and put myself in his shoes. **As a guest, trust your host and remember: this is an opportunity to connect to their pace and that connection can foster a greater understanding of their artwork, which is an expression of their life.**

Over the 4 day visit, connections continued to spark. The **combination of formal and informal time**, provided rigor and focus to the exchange - *it is good to have goals* - and opened the doors for the unexpected. Nick was driving us home after our Catapult Conversation and traffic stopped. A 2<sup>nd</sup> Line brass band funeral procession passed. Nick

smiled as a man danced, jumping on and off the hood of a car that was stopped in front of us. Nick told us how the bigger one danced showed how much they loved the person who had passed. He ended with saying, “**This is life in New Orleans.**” Moments like these can’t be planned, and when you happen upon them, trust that this is just as important as the meetings, the rehearsals, and the artwork, because these unadulterated expressions of life are the bloodline for the art.

Highlights from the exchange that illuminated some **core values** of Mondo Bizarro:

- **Tour: Experience the land and connect with the culture.**
  - Nick took us on a tour, providing historical, political and ecological context for the visit. The tour started with 700 year old Cypress trees, traversed the Lower Nine and ended with the ‘Great Wall’ of New Orleans, a \$14.5 billion dollar flood-protection system. Questions that arose during our tour: What is the impact of relocation? What does it do to one’s spirit to move away from water? How do you preserve a culture whose land is disappearing and sinking into the sea? Mondo Bizarro’s theatre practice is rooted in the ecology of their community.
- **Observe Mondo Rehearsal: Open the space and open the heart.**
  - We were invited to observe a rehearsal for Mondo Bizarro’s new play, *By Way at Midnight*. We didn’t want to overstep, understanding the level of intimacy that theatre practice requires, but Nick assured us that an “open space” was a part of their practice. Their rehearsal was focused, and we gently watched as they worked to refine. This open space demonstrated an open heart and their ability to trust, to assume good intentions, to risk and a deep desire to share. Mondo told us about their Open Trainings, a training model that invites the community, theatre and non-theatre practitioners, to participate in a Mondo Bizarro training and connect with the Catapult space, each other and theatre practice. There are guidelines for participation that protect the people, the space and uphold the values of the company. This Open Training model is something that we hope to do in Cleveland.
- **Dinner and Conversation: Communing is important. Eating is important.**
  - We ate. We talked. It is really as simple as that, but this was an important thread throughout the whole visit. We were never rushed in our conversation or our mastication. Breaking bread and appreciating one’s presence was valued.
- **Catapult Conversation: Ask Questions.**
  - On the third day, CPT, Mondo Bizarro, Catapult and ArtSpot participated in a circle conversation with company members. The purpose of this conversation was to hear wisdom and experience of the artists working in the ensemble theatre practice. The Cleveland Core Ensemble is at a crux moment, having worked together consistently for almost 5 years as an ensemble, and we were curious to hear how the companies were formed and they have evolved to create a sustainable and fulfilling theatre practice. This query opened the conversation to both the practical (How do people get paid? How much time is spent on the admin verses the art?) and the theoretical (What motivates you? What is your core passion and can you do

it? If not, how do you reconcile that or have you made plans to change course? How has aesthetic and culture of company evolved since inception?). It was important to set boundaries for this dialogue: **What is said in the room stays in the room. What is learned in the room leaves the room.** Nick spoke about intimacy, patience, and nurturing softness. In our physical rigorous and sweat-inducing theatre craft, it was good to be reminded of these values. This Catapult Conversation helped to reinforce and recall our own values, and we ended feeling open, awake, a little raw, and not alone.

- **Raymond and Faye led a training with Catapult and Community: Learn.**
  - The culminating experience of our exchange was a 3 hour Cleveland Core Ensemble workshop. We shared a training structure and a storytelling structure with the community. Having the workshop take place on the final big day of our visit felt well-timed as it had given us a few days to meet people and acclimate to the climate. Nick and Hannah helped to prepare the participants for what they might experience with us. They modeled an awesome openness to the work during the workshop and a desire to experience our practice with the intension to learn more about us.

The variety of experiences, from casual conversation to intimate rehearsals, helped us meet each other at different levels, creating space to dig deeper as we sought depth. We didn't force it, but we were open to it happening, and that **vulnerability was core to our exchange and feels integral to Mondo Bizarro's approach and way of being.** Open. Honest. Human. Mondo Bizarro states: "We are an ensemble that creates, presents and produces a wide array of imaginative projects aimed at utilizing art as a tool for understanding what makes us commonly human and individually unique." That desire to understand and to seek multiple entry points for understanding was present in everything we did. I'll say it again, **Mondo Bizarro are incredible hosts,** and something profound happened during our exchange. We learned that Mondo Bizarro are fiercely loving-extraordinarily talented-intuitively connected people, creating artwork in a space of impermanence. With the shifting tides, they must ride the wave, and they have intentionally cultivated openness in their practice and in their community because that is the only way it can be done. Another flood may come. The constants they can stand by are their ethics, the core values that motivate their craft, love, presence, community, vulnerability, and a relentlessness to make great f\*cking art against all odds.