

NET/TEN Shareback: Albany Park Theater Project and Third Rail Projects – Building an Immersive, Site-specific Production with Youth Ensemble

Albany Park Theater Project (AFTP) and Third Rail Projects (TRP) conducted a week-long artistic exchange in August 2018 to continue their mutual exploration of new ways to engage audiences. This exchange built on the two companies' work together from 2014-2016, during which they created the world premiere of *Learning Curve*, performed by the AFTP youth ensemble. The two companies used the August 2018 exchange to embark on a second creative journey that explores a new thematic point of inquiry.

Shareback description: The exchange intertwined TRP's immersive theater practice and AFTP's ethnography-based theater practice, with the ultimate goal of a new world-premiere production, titled *Port of Entry*, which will premiere in 2020. This exchange was the beginning of that journey, and the Shareback provides a description on how the two companies shared their knowledge with each other—TRP artists teaching immersive and site-specific performance techniques to AFTP ensemble members, and AFTP ensemble members teaching how to ethically and effectively collect interviews and stories from community members.

June 8, 2018

Kick-off planning phone call of the *Port of Entry* directing team: David Feiner, Stephanie Paul, and Maggie Popadiak from Albany Park Theater Project; Jennine Willett, Roxanne Kidd,



Marissa Nielsen-Pincus, and Edward Rice from Third Rail Projects. Our first conversation is guided by “Life in Big Red,” a seminal essay from performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood based on the three years in the 1980s that he lived and conducted ethnography in “Big Red,” an apartment building in Albany Park. Conquergood describes the inner life of an Albany Park apartment building and the geopolitical forces we want to explore in *Port of Entry*:

“During the 1970s and 1980s the ethnic composition of Albany Park shifted...from white to an emergent third category in the racial and ethnic geography of Chicago, ‘immigrant’ or ‘diverse.’ ...The human quality of life in Big Red eludes outsiders....From the inside, one gets a detailed experience of the building’s deterioration, but that is complemented with a complex understanding of how people maintain human dignity within difficult

relations....Its deteriorated structure overflows with a mix of poor Third World refugees and migrants alongside working-class African Americans and Appalachians. It stands as a document of the geopolitical and political economic structures – of violence and oppression – that caused such a heteroglot group of people to ricochet from their multiple respective homelands and re-collect themselves in a dilapidated tenement side by side with this country’s socioeconomically displaced and marginalized people.”

Port of Entry will explore, bear witness to and celebrate more than a century of immigrant home-making practices in buildings similar to Big Red, where migrants displaced from all parts of the world resist violence and oppression to make vital and vibrant new homes together. As Albany Park struggles with gentrification, we envision setting *Port of Entry* inside an actual former apartment building, with audiences experiencing characters and stories in bedrooms, hallways, stairwells, kitchens, living rooms and more.

Jennine identifies one of the key questions we hope to answer when *Third Rail* is in Chicago in August: *What identity do we give to the audience when they enter this immersive world?* This question is essential to determine how audiences “earn” the ability to be inside the homes of the play’s characters. The audience needs to have more familiarity than “guest” so we can explore things that are perhaps more private to a family that would not be shared with a guest.

July 17, 2018

The *Port of Entry* directing team meets in New York so that we can tour the “Under One Roof” exhibit at the Tenement Museum. We identify ways that the Tenement Museum has recreated not only environments but ways of living, including: the importance of both popular and religious music; the relationships that developed between children from different ethnicities living alongside one another; the role of children in maintaining the household for working parents; the incorporation of work spaces into already tight living spaces; the centrality of radio and then television.



Following the Tenement Museum, we have our second planning meeting. Our overarching goal for August is to devise 6-8 scenes and test them with invited audiences. The key question today is how we will gather the source material for our August work. We agree that we want *Third Rail* to experience first-hand APTP’s ethnographic approach to story gathering. Inspired by our immersion into the recreated living spaces of the Tenement Museum, Maggie proposes we kick off our August week with visits to the homes of several APTP youth ensemble members. In addition to collecting source material, Jennine suggests that these journeys will also help us explore the question of how you earn your way into someone’s home. This will be an immersive moment for all of us as artists: being invited into a home will be a perfect mock up of sorts for what we want to do eventually with our audience.

August 5, 2018

Third Rail arrives in Chicago. We celebrate with Polish dinner for the directing and design team hosted by Maggie's mother, Alicja Januszewska, in the Albany Park apartment where she has lived for 20 years. This gives our non-Chicago team members an experience inside the kind of building that is at the heart of our vision for *Port of Entry*, the kind of building Conquergood wrote about in "Life in Big Red."



Over dinner, we plan for tomorrow's visits to the homes of seven APTP ensemble members. We create a series of writing prompts that everyone – directors, designers, ensemble members – will do to prepare, and we create an "Ethnographer's Worksheet" that everyone will use to guide the home visits.

Preparatory writing prompts

- 3 songs you would hear in your home
- 3 sounds that aren't songs you hear in your home on the regular
- 3 sounds that might wake you up in the middle of the night in your home
- 3 foods that get eaten in your home on the regular
- 3 things there are LOTS of in your home
- 3 things there aren't enough of in your home
- 3 ways to get into your home
- 3 ways to get out of your home
- 3 places to hide in your home
- 3 things that have changed in your home since you lived there
- 3 common smells in your home
- 3 most prominent colors in your home
- Where do you go for privacy in your home and why?
- Where is the space that EVERYONE hangs out in your home? Why?

Ethnographer's Note-taking Worksheet

- What do you see on the walls?
- How would you describe the colors of the home?
- What sounds do you hear? Sounds from inside the home & from outside the home.
- What are the smells of the home?

- Draw a floor plan of one room in the home. Where is the furniture? Where are the entrances/exits? Windows? Hiding places? Photography? Art?
- Where does light come from?
- Pick a favorite spot in the home. Describe it. What do you like about it? Imagine you live here: how would you inhabit this part of the home?
- Describe the process of entering the home (how many gates / doors? buzzer? stairs?)

August 6, 2018 – Day One of Residency

7 directing team members, 8 design and production team members, 30 youth ensemble members. All of the teens have devised and performed at least one show with APTP; half performed in Learning Curve, the first immersive collaboration between APTP and Third Rail Projects.

11am – 12:15pm: Welcome and warm-up exercises to convene the community (Maggie and Stephanie).

12:15pm – 1:45pm: Immersive Skills Part One (Jennine): Partnering with audience members through invitation, cueing, and leading audiences in completing a task within a scene.

2:45pm – 3:15pm: Preparation for home visits: writing prompts; brainstorm what make for a good interviewer and good ethnographer; brainstorm etiquette for visiting someone's home.

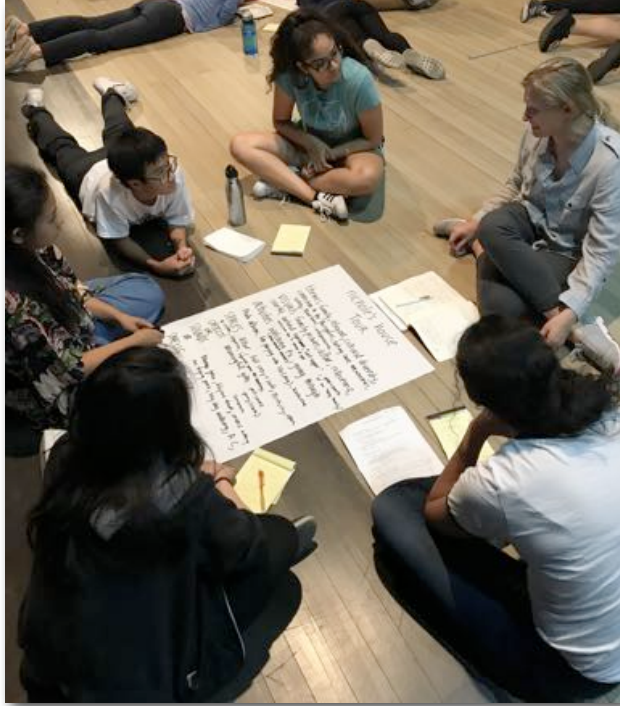
3:30pm – 6pm: We divide into seven groups, each of which visits the home of one teen ensemble member. In the homes, we get a tour from the teen hosting us, interview our host (and in some cases family members), and take time to observe and reflect on the space and environment.



August 7, 2018 – Day Two of Residency

11am – 11:30am: Warm up (Maggie).

11:30am – 2pm: Immersive Skills Part Two (Edward): Proximity and awareness of our bodies and those of others in space; seeing/sensing the landscape of a whole room (eyes in the back of your head), finding and fitting into spaces



3pm – 4:30pm: Home visits debrief. Returning to our teams from yesterday, we talk about what we learned and observed, and we prepare reports to share out with the whole group on key themes, images, sense experiences, and potential stories.

4:30pm – 6:00pm: Creating and negotiating space with objects. Our objects designer, Ellie Terrell, has assembled hundreds of pieces of furniture and other household objects along the perimeter of our big, otherwise empty rehearsal space. The directors parcel out a series of rules by which ensemble members build four distinct spaces using the furniture and objects available.

Next is a guided movement improvisation in which the bodies of performers now share the space with the furniture and objects. Then we

add directors and designers to the spaces as audience members. The youth performers apply what they've learned from the immersive skills workshops as they now move through spaces filled with furniture and objects and peopled by audience members.

August 8, 2019 – Day Three of Residency

11am – 1:30pm: Immersive Skills Part Three (Marissa, Roxanne and Edward): Using the furniture-filled environment we created yesterday, Third Rail Artists lead the youth ensemble in a workshop Third Rail calls “Soft Bodies/Hard Surfaces.”

11am – 1:30pm: Brainstorming/Planning (Jennine, David, Maggie, and Stephanie): The directing team distills the youth-led home visits and debriefs into a series of questions:

- What is the scene that happens around the dinner table?
- What is the scene that reveals a private “home” or “sanctuary” within a home?
- What is the scene that tells a story about being in charge as a child and being responsible for siblings, the home, yourself?
- What is the scene that shares what it means to lose someone from the household?
- What is the scene about the imprint and legacy of people who lived in this home before?



- What is a scene that shares a cultural tradition or celebration?
- What is a scene that reveals a family's connection to their homeland?

1:30pm – 3pm: The directing team converts our set of questions into seven bare bones ideas for scenes, assigns directors to scenes, divvies up the ensemble into casts for each scene, and matches each scene with one of the seven spaces we have carved out for this workshop.



3pm – 6pm: Scene Work begins. The directors share the plan with the ensemble and designers. We break out into our scene groups. First, we imagine our spaces. We claim furniture and objects from the theater and brainstorm wish lists with our designers: Mikhail Fiksel (sound), Izumi Inaba (costumes), Elizabeth Mak (lights), Scott Neale

(scenic), and Ellie Terrell (objects). Next most groups do a space exploration exercise as a way to start devising. By the end of the day, most groups have the wireframe of a scene sketched out in their spaces.

August 9, 2019 – Day Four of Residency

11am – 11:30am: Warm up (Edward and Stephanie)

11:30am – 2pm: Continue Scene Work

1:30pm: Jennine and David visit the scenes that are ready to share, serve as test audience and offer feedback.

3pm – 6pm: Scene work continues. Directors visit one another's scenes. Ensemble members take breaks from their scenes to serve as test audience for other groups. Designers flesh out the spaces as rehearsal swirls around them.

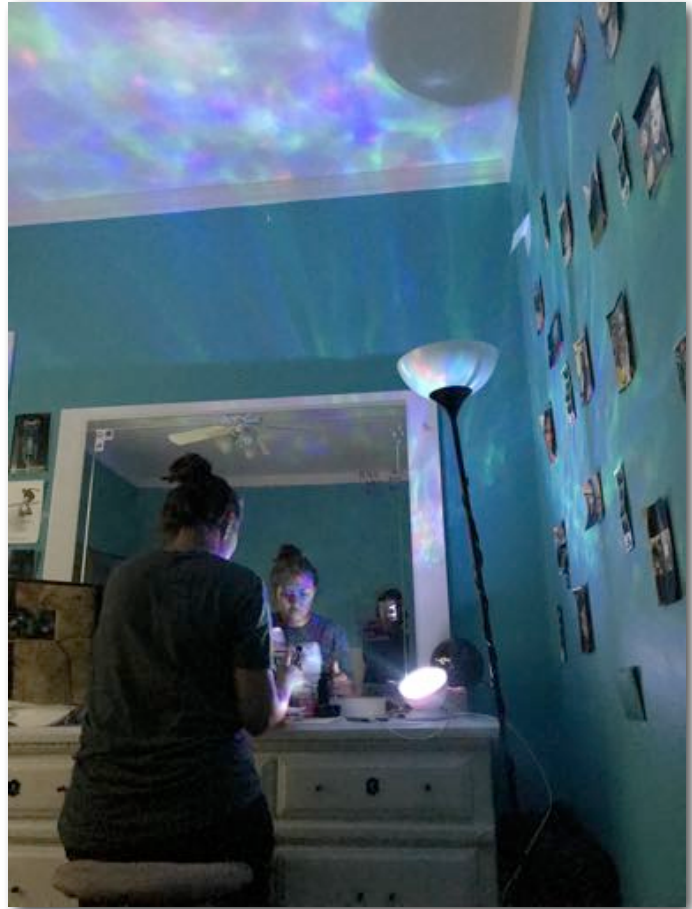
August 10, 2019 – Day Five of Residency

11am – 11:30am: Warm up (Stephanie and Marissa).

11:30am – 1:30pm: Scene work continues.

2:30pm – 4:30pm: Scene work continues.

5:00pm – 7:00pm: We are ready for our first run through, with directors and designers as audience. Jennine has designed a simple structure that will rotate audience through the scenes; it has a couple either/or branches where audience will get one scene or another but not both. Elizabeth and Misha have created light and sound plots for each space, using mostly practicals, and, for most scenes, taught the performers how to trigger the cues within the scene. Izumi has made a costume plan with each performer, drawing mostly on items from their own closets. Ellie has plotted space resets that can be accomplished by the performers during transitions between each repetition of their scenes. Monica, our stage manager, has made a plan with the directing team for moving audience from scene to scene.



August 11, 2019 – Day Six of Residency

1pm – 1:30pm: Warm Up and conversation about safety protocol (Marissa)

1:30pm – 2:45pm: Scene work

3pm – 4pm: Cast into costume; set spaces for first work-in-progress showing with a live audience.

4pm: First showing for 24 invited guests. After each showing, we have a structured conversation with the audience to gather feedback, then a notes session with the cast.

7pm – 8pm: Costumes & Preset

8pm: Second showing

August 12, 2019 – Day Seven of Residency

11:30am: Warm Up

1pm: Third showing



4pm: Fourth showing

6pm: Company Sharing Circle,
Celebration, Dance Party

~End of residency~

Contact Information

Albany Park Theater Project

<https://aptpchicago.org>

<https://www.facebook.com/albanyparktheaterproject/>

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Third Rail Projects

<https://thirdrailprojects.com>

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