Collaborative Timelines For New Work Friends

Here is the quick-read version of this shareback:

• Questions are a methodology.
• A methodology is not the same as an aesthetic.
• Every collaboration is served by more time.
• Working with new partners internationally is delicate and powerful and worthwhile if you give it the time and curiosity it deserves.

Here is the longer version and some questions you can use if it’s helpful.

I didn’t appreciate how steeped I am in a very US-based devising and collaborating process until I took my third trip to Serbia to work on my new, NET-funded project Language Reversal. I had been to Novi Sad and Belgrade three times before - once to work on a Serbia-specific remount of an older play called Open House (openhouseremix.org), and twice to do ethnographic interviews and other research with artists, journalists and activists alongside my producing partner Kulturanova (kulturanova.org).

For the December trip, I came with a half-baked (or maybe quarter-baked) script draft that drew on my prior interviews, Kulturanova invited actors in Novi Sad, only one of whom I’d worked with before, and we spent five days in development, reading, discussing and staging. I also met with Serbian director Andres Urban and dramaturge Suncica Miloslavljevic about working on the project as it grows.

The kind of power-sharing in development, common for many of us who work together here, doesn’t happen nearly as much in Serbia. It was amazing to see that everyone in the room, once invited, has capacity to handle a wild, unknowing and curious creative process on equal footing with each other. Purposeful informality - the ability to have an actor do a rough translation of a script passage rather than get precious as the writer about idiom, poetics or intent, for instance, allows people to feel valued for their brains, skills and questions alike, which inevitably makes the piece richer.

We worked for five days at the new Kulturni Centar in Novi Sad, from 4-6 hours per day. Creative Producer Milan Vracar, Associate producers Milica Greda and Uros Mladenovic went to the city of Subbotica to watch a rehearsal by Urban and meet with him. I also met with Milaslovljavic, whom I’d spent time with before, in Belgrade.

Here are a few questions, as well as some possible answers from my experience, which I hope are helpful to you if you’re working in new places, with new or semi-new people. My answers follow and you’re welcome to dispute them or answer them or similar questions for yourselves. I tend to try and ask myself questions I really don’t know the answers to when I’m making something.
For me it was super helpful to be clear about what I didn’t know, more than what I did. I knew I was looking for that hilarious, awkward moment in an interview that is being interpreted live, where the subject, interviewer and translator are all struggling to make sense of each other, no one is sure of the other, and for a moment, power is shared. I had no idea how to make that happen onstage until I started letting the actors try stuff and take charge.

Following are questions and discursive answers from my own perspective. The answers may not be so helpful, but the questions themselves may serve as guides for you.

**When you walk into a room with new collaborators from a different culture and tradition, what do you assume you know how to do?**

My background in ensemble work (as a company member with Elevator Repair Service (elevator.org)) and my time working with The Foundry Theatre (thefoundrytheatre.org) have influenced me profoundly. In both of these approaches, there may be a central decision-maker toward the end of a process, and a guide throughout, but all inquiry and knowledge, all voices, are prioritized as much as possible, especially early on. In Serbia the actors I worked with, though they had a really tuned-in take to contemporary culture and live art, they mostly worked top-down: as actors fulfilling a director and playwright’s expectations.

I also know how to model the value of discomfort. By that I know from teaching and from trying new power-sharing structures in my work as an organizer and maker, I see that when I’m okay being at a loss for words, in an awkward exchange, other people are okay with it too.

I found the process of inviting their co-authorship to be thrilling and unnerving. At first I leapt in with my unspoken assumption that we were all used to working with uncertainty, collectivity and failure. I prepared very well for a Foundry process, an ERS process. They had never heard of either.

Early in the first day, I saw the performers’ confusion and willingness alike, stepped back and explained about where I was coming from, and then very quickly we were working as a unit, deep in hours-long conversations that ranged from the quality of fun that could be had during a bombing, the clichés present anytime you evoke a waiting room in a theater, and whether or not crazy comes with talent. *Language Reversal* was growing and expanding beyond what I would have envisioned on my own.

**What are the bases for this collaboration, now and going forward?**

My first research trip was a week after our 2016 election. *Language Reversal* came out of a desperate need to spend time with people who’d been through fascism before, and Serbia was both a survivor of Milosevic, and was reentering a new dark period under the current Prime Minister Andre Vucic. Art had been instrumental in the
resistance under Milosevic, and I was curious what we in the US could learn as we entered our own dark time of Trump-ism.

I had worked with Kulturanova three years prior on Open House and we’d been trying to find ways to build something new together. On each successive trip, though money and time were relatively tight, Milan and I sat down and said, “Okay, man. What do we want to do.” We set tangible goals, agreed on a schedule, hashed out disagreements and moved ourselves forward.

Each successive trip and exchange brought Kulturanova and I into a more trusting working relationship. We can now switch fluidly among budget, creative vision, and producing choices and challenges within one rich conversation. This has taken about a year of intermittent trips and intervening conversations via skype. After that year and three trips we are ready to move toward pre-production and production.

What does each partner bring to the table that the other doesn’t have (include tactics, skills, biases, resources)? Where is the overlap? Where is the competition, if anywhere?

I came with a history of devising and collaboration that the Serbians weren’t as versed in. Kulturanova had been active in Serbia, specifically Novi Sad, which has been an active political and cultural center for many years, for 20 years; they had access to people I wanted to talk to, and a common understanding of the ways theater can work in Europe and the US. The performers have first hand knowledge of life under Milosevic, the impact of American policy and culture on their country and they are awesome performers. Urban and Miloslavljevic are hopefully going to be fine bridges among us all.

A couple things remain to be worked out as we go. Urban and I both direct, so will have to iron out how we do that together, what decisions we share and where each has final say and we don’t want to rush this. We met twice in December, and I watched one of his rehearsals, and it feels like we both have the urge to do this, but who brings designers, where does the line between dramaturgy and directing fall, and perhaps whose cast in the work are all up for discussion. Because Miloslavljevic and Urban are also eager to work together for the first time, I am hopeful she can act as a bridge and a third eye.

It’s important to say here, too, that we may decide working together is not the right thing. There is a danger, I think, for artists – myself included - working under the pressure of limited funds, eager to make international connections, and simply to make work, to trust that things will work themselves out just because we want them to or we said they would.

For me it’s becoming key to realize that I bring 25 years of experience making lots of different kinds of work. This allows me not to have to prove too much, which lets me listen and respond more confidently and less defensively. I love being tripped up by
someone else’s better idea and also finding my own limits in terms of what to give up, and what to hold fast on. I find that lots of reflection time within and between rehearsals is key.

Where are the gaps in what you can do together?

Right now we are looking for a venue or festival to put their stamp on the project, in order to bring finishing funds to it. In the coming months we are talking to La MaMa, Perforacia Festival and other venues, and starting to work with my producer ArKtype/Tommy Kriegsmann on getting the work up in some kind of final form.

How long does it take to build a shared vocabulary alongside someone for whom there is little shared history?

My experience is this: there’s an initial period of building up trust; then there’s testing that trust with some kind of small deadline; then there’s going for it or not. I also recommend finding the informal ways you can simply be together without having to be in ‘work’ mode. I’m almost as thankful for the Kulturni Centar foosball table and espresso machine as I am for the studio space and working time.

Concretely - make sure break time is built into the process, especially early. Make sure your curiosity about the people you’re working with stays vital.

What is methodology in your work and what is flexibility? Can you bring both into the room and not get held back by either?

Both Elevator Repair Service and The Foundry have a process that is grounded in questions, seeming impossibilities, the humbling nature of big challenges and play. That means I don’t tend to tether myself to a single aesthetic, process or agreement about what something is supposed to be and do in the world. People I can connect with in that open-ended a way are the ones I want to work with, because even if we end up making a play play in the end, it will be informed by this clarity, confusion and curiosity.

What is the timeline for our work together and how does it evolve? This can include the timeline of approach, commitment, production, and more.

I can only speak for myself, but everything I do always takes longer than I think it will at first. I’m just starting to understand that that’s true at every step and it’s good.

So - on a macro level, the working relationship with Kulturanova on this new project took two years to raise money for, and two trips to build trust with on Language Reversal.

On a micro level, my introduction to Andres Urban took two meetings and one rehearsal visit. The first meeting was a get-to-know-you drink, in which we both tried
to simultaneously talk about how iconoclastic we were but also express curiosity about the other’s work and process. The second was the rehearsal visit, which allowed me to see how Andres worked with actors and assistants on new text (very open, improvisational, problematizing in a good way). We went out for another drink after that and talked possible timelines and approaches. Still to come: will he like what’s been made so far, and will he want to collaborate with me as a kind of in-the-room, hands-on writer/co-director?

This means he needs to read what I’m writing or visit a rehearsal next time around, and then we need to talk about power sharing. This all is happening over the course of several months. Kulturanova loves the idea of us working together; I think we both do in theory, and I think we still have to decide, but it’s promising. The people-pleasing part of me wanted to say yes right away because I like Urban, I like Kulturanova and on some level they are the local experts. At the same time, we worked hard to get this far with this project and I want to make sure we’re being as clear and tender as possible as we go.