

# **CHASING DEMOCRACY:**

## **New Play Development and Utopia at the Network of Ensemble Theaters Micro-Fest: Los Angeles**

**by Karen Jean Martinson**



**The courtyard of Atwater Village Theatre. Photo by Nancy Keystone.**

During the first weekend of December 2010, an energized audience converged on Los Angeles's Atwater Village Theatre complex to partake in the second leg of the Network of Ensemble Theaters (NET) Micro-Fest: USA. From October 2010 through August 2011, Micro-Fest: USA hosted four different weekends of performances, workshops, discussions, and symposia, each devoted to a different theme: in Atlanta, Race, Culture, and Aesthetics; in Los Angeles, Developing New Work; in Philadelphia, Genre-Defying Work; and in Minneapolis, a

summit to bring these themes together<sup>1</sup>. To explore the processes, protocols, and political underpinnings of Developing New Work, the LA Micro-Fest weekend featured two full productions, *Clown Town City Limits* devised by local ensemble Two Headed Dog and *Clark and I, Somewhere in Connecticut* devised by Canada’s Rumble Productions and Theatre Replacement. Additionally, four LA-based ensembles presented works-in-progress, which included The Ghost Road Company’s *Stranger Things*, The Post Natyam Collective’s *SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister*, Watts Village Theater Company’s *Clover and Cactus*, and Critical Mass Performance Group’s *Untitled (Amerykanski) Project*.<sup>2</sup> Finally, two short, genre-expanding “Artbursts” occurred: University of California, Riverside ensemble Buckworld fused Hip Hop Theatre, spoken word poetry, and Krump dancing, and LA musicians’ collective Killsonic performed an excerpt from their avant-garde opera *Tongues Bloody Tongues*. By experiencing and interrogating different models of collective creation offered by all of these participants, the LA Micro-Fest hoped to contribute to the larger Micro-Fest: USA goal to “create a lexicon to better discuss the work both internally, within the field, and externally, to our audiences, funders and supporters” (NET website).



A promotional postcard from Micro-Fest: Los Angeles.

<sup>1</sup> Following this first cycle of Micro-Fests, NET has since completed a second cycle in 2012-2013 on the theme of Theater of Place, with Micro-Fests in Detroit, Appalachia, New Orleans, and a concluding summit in Honolulu.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the works-in-progress have continued to develop since their showing at the LA Micro-Fest and have been produced in other iterations. Ghost Road Ensemble’s *Stranger Things* was produced at Atwater Village Theatre in Los Angeles, California, in 2011. The Post Natyam Collective’s *SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister* was produced at the Miles Memorial Playhouse in Santa Monica, California, in 2011. Critical Mass Performance Group’s *Untitled (Amerykanski) Project* has continued its development under the name *Ameryka* and had a workshop presentation at Studio SCR at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, CA, in 2012.

When creating a new lexicon, it pays to listen for repetitions. In the case of the LA Micro-Fest, democracy – as a concept, as a value, as an ideal – came up again and again, in formal presentations and casual conversations alike. Of course, the linkage of theatre – particularly ensemble theatre – to democratic practice and its related principles of equality, community, and social action is neither revolutionary nor unique to the LA Micro-Fest; countless practitioners note this impulse in their work and many scholarly texts map out the correlation between theatre and democracy. Jill Dolan’s recent critical work, for example, reminds us that “theatre and performance create citizens and engage democracy as a participatory forum in which ideas and possibilities for social equity and justice are shared” (*TJ* 456). We go to the theatre to commune with our fellow human beings, to expose ourselves to new ideas, to debate and discuss and dialogue. More specifically, theatre and performance provide a space in which we can *labor* toward democracy. Equally as important, theatre and performance sustain this labor emotionally by allowing us both to imagine and *affectively experience* a more perfect social configuration – what Dolan has dubbed the “utopian performative.”

As Dolan notes, the utopian performative involves moments that “make spectators ache with the desire to capture, somehow, the stunning, nearly prearticulate insights they illuminate, if only to let them fill us for a second longer with a flash of something tinged with sadness but akin to joy” (*Utopia* 8). These fleeting moments in a performance feature an overflowing of emotion combined with an inpouring of as-yet-unfocused perception. And this is how they sustain us, through the linkage of feeling with thought: there is a profound emotional experience attached to these utopian performative moments, the affect of which carries us through the challenging work of teasing out their theoretical meat. That is to say, the utopic *feeling* compels us to analyze and

elucidate the inchoate *ideas* these moments plant in us, even though this work is intellectually demanding. The utopic feeling nourishes us so that we labor on towards utopia despite the difficulty.



A food truck serves Sunday breakfast at the Micro-Fest. Photo by Nancy Keystone.

Though Dolan's critical explorations focus on how the utopian performative impacts an audience, the workshops, symposia, performances, post-show discussions, and informal conversations of the LA Micro-Fest revealed how a similar encounter with utopia occurs *within* an ensemble through the process of devising, which seeks to make great theatre through collaborative creation, while it simultaneously, and perhaps surreptitiously, realigns notions of democracy-in-action. Aesthetically, ensemble theatre chases the utopia of artistic excellence, hoping to create those transcendent, beautiful moments that take an audience's collective breath away. Yet alongside these artistic concerns sits a utopic belief that these moments are best

created through collective labor. Ensemble theatre, with its non-hierarchical approach to the creative process, its shared authority and responsibility, and its need for engaged consensus, trains its participants in a demanding form of democratic practice. Though, as The Ghost Road Company's Artistic Director Katherine Noon notes, devising is an "unwieldy, messy process where all sorts of lines are being crossed," it is through collective struggle that collaborative creation offers glimpses of an ideal, often elusive form of utopic democracy. In ensemble theatre, moments of brilliance are extremely hard earned yet also sustaining; they emerge through the collective, are shared by all, and keep each participant invested in the process. Moments of utopic feeling motivate the continued commitment to ensemble process. "It's always worth the fight," avers Noon. Devising grants each participant a vital voice and a sense of agency in both the creative process and the product. Echoes Critical Mass Performance Group's Nancy Keystone, "It's not for everyone...and that fact is brought to our attention occasionally, when we bring in a new person who clearly doesn't like/get/care about what we're doing, or (and this is often the case) is afraid of the process, which is a lot like jumping off a cliff, blindfolded, without a net." Devising requires an extreme level of mutual trust, risk-taking, intimacy, and vulnerability, and because of that, an ensemble can be a delicate thing to sustain. Continues Keystone, "We realize what a fragile ecosystem we have when a toxic force invades."

The four companies presenting work-in-progress at the LA Micro-Fest revealed distinct play development processes, distinct ways of shaping of their collective labor to achieve Dolan's aching moments of brilliance. In discussing their work, I will follow Dolan's focus on the spectator's affective experience and occasionally foreground my own memory of being a spectator at these performances. By doing so, I hope to help illustrate the dynamics of the

utopian performative, and to offer specific examples of how feeling during performance links to labor during creative process.

Ghost Road's piece *Stranger Things* exemplifies both the necessity of trust and the uncertainty of devising. Inspired by the works and philosophy of Albert Camus, *Stranger Things* embraces ambiguity and creates in its performance a distinct feeling of unease. The coldness of the characters chilled me to my core, as if they had frozen over whatever trauma lay at the heart of their estrangement. Though this was not a place I wanted to be (nor, it seemed, did the characters), the world was enthralling and immersive, its nearly monochromatic sparseness eerily stunning to behold.



The Ghost Road Company's *Stranger Things*. Photo by Mark Seldis.

As project director Ronnie Clark describes it, he and musical collaborator David O initially did not know exactly what they were making as they began devising the piece with the ensemble. Notes Clark, “it is a play with integrated song and music, but not a musical and not a play.” Moreover, a key aspect of the storytelling is to “not be too on the nose.” States Clark, “David brought us through techniques and methods of devising song lyrics that could still bring us to the emotional cores of the characters without telling us in a literal, word-for-word way.” As a result, the process began with “a plethora of words” and subsequent work revolved around subtraction – stripping away verbosity until only a feeling remains – and trusting in that sparseness. Indeed, the entire ensemble is clearly committed to the starkness of language. In a rehearsal I attended, an actor raised a question of language regarding his lyrics to a song, which struck him as too revealing. After some discussion, the ensemble agreed and collectively altered the line, removing lyrics like “Strange speech / damage done / break the spell / Like a home / home with holes / will we ever stand in a finished house,” and instead opting for the more evocative yet bare “Careful steps / Home with holes.”



Composer David O during rehearsal for *Stranger Things*. Photo by Mark Seldis.

This moment exemplifies how ensemble creation creates unique democratic formations in which all participants share responsibility and authority. Projector director, actor, and composer exist on equal footing and the process compels each to voice concerns, to debate, and to concur or to dissent. A shared commitment to devising and to the emergent piece obliges the ensemble to find an answer together. States Clark, “Every brain in the room goes to work immediately when a problem comes up...The solution is in the room. Maybe not tonight, but it will be in the room.” This trust in the process must be coupled with the willingness toward vulnerability and the ability to make a mistake and bounce back to do it again. Says Clark, “In development, we fail more than we succeed, so having trust, respect, and admiration for our fellow developers is the minimum requirement.” *Stranger Things* makes visible the leap of faith an ensemble takes when developing new work, sharing the belief that a scintillating impulse can lead to a brilliance that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Post Natyam Collective welcomes the audience into the private space of collaborative creations, while the ensemble strives thematically to enable public discourse on topics that too often remain hidden. *SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister*, is a wide-ranging dance-theatre exploration of women’s stories of both oppression and empowerment. The excerpt shown at Micro-Fest, “My Silent Cry,” originated in response to an interview that collective member Shyamala Moorty conducted with a survivor of domestic abuse through her work with the LA-area based South Asian Network (SAN) support group. After gathering “5 minutes of the most compelling excerpts” of a two-hour interview, Moorty enlisted a composer to create sound; out of the sound, she created the dance. She then blended the survivor’s particular story with the historical figure of the courtesan to put domestic abuse in a larger context. That the process featured a collaborative distilling down of the material made it incredibly impactful. My heart

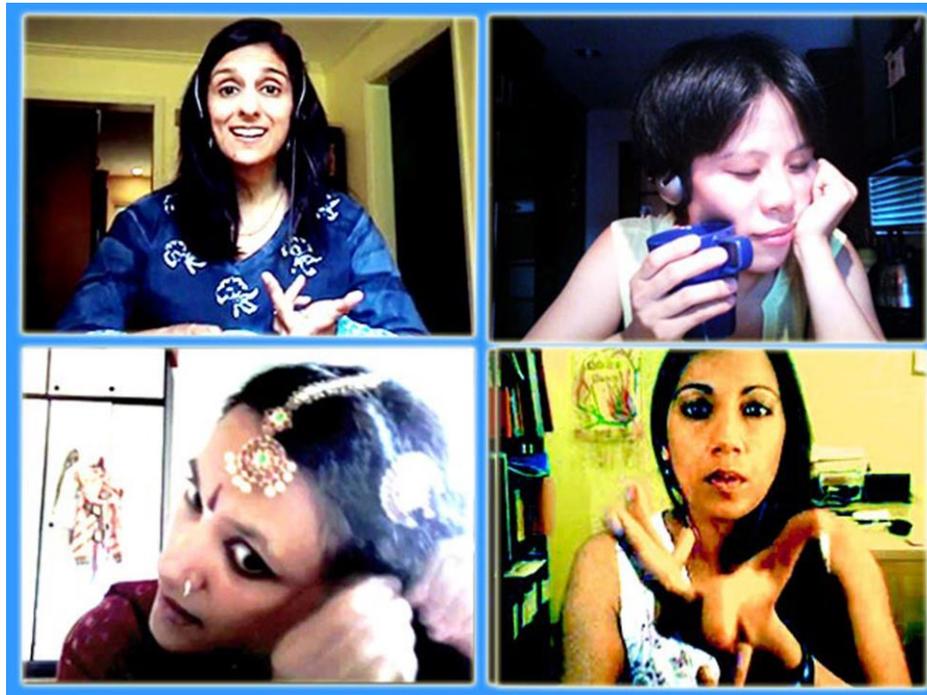
dropped and my entire body tensed as this woman's words filled the space to tell her personal story of violence while Moorty battles to free herself, with evocative and gut-wrenching movement, from a literal fabric that encases her and threatens to suffocate her. Through text, movement, and video, the piece spans time – we hear stories contemporary and ancient as we see the immediacy of live dance set against a backdrop of video that, previously recorded and saved, has a past, present, and future. The piece is brave without being exploitative and heroic without diminishing the weight of domestic abuse. More importantly, it brings to light an ongoing social ill and provides both a space and a means of discussion of a painful, often shame-filled, topic.



Shyamala Moorty in the Post Natyam Collective's *SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister*. Photo by Andrei Andreev.

Post Natyam's work features a transparency of process that extends the utopic democracy of devising to include the audience. The four core members, who reside in Southern California,

Kansas City, and Munich, collaborate online, a process that they developed in “direct response to their geographic dispersal: the need to stay connected creatively in the absence of funding for in-person residencies led to the development of their long-distance internet-based creative process in early 2008,” (NET Micro-Fest Application). To highlight the unique collaborative methodology Post Natyam has developed, *SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister* begins with a video introduction to their members and their process. This short piece, entitled “Cyber Chat,” depicts each of the women logging on to a conference call that becomes a choreographed production-meeting-meets-dance through which we see them embrace and adapt technology to allow for embodied ensemble collaboration despite geographical distance.



An image from the “Cyber Chat” portion of *Sunoh! Tell Me, Sister*.

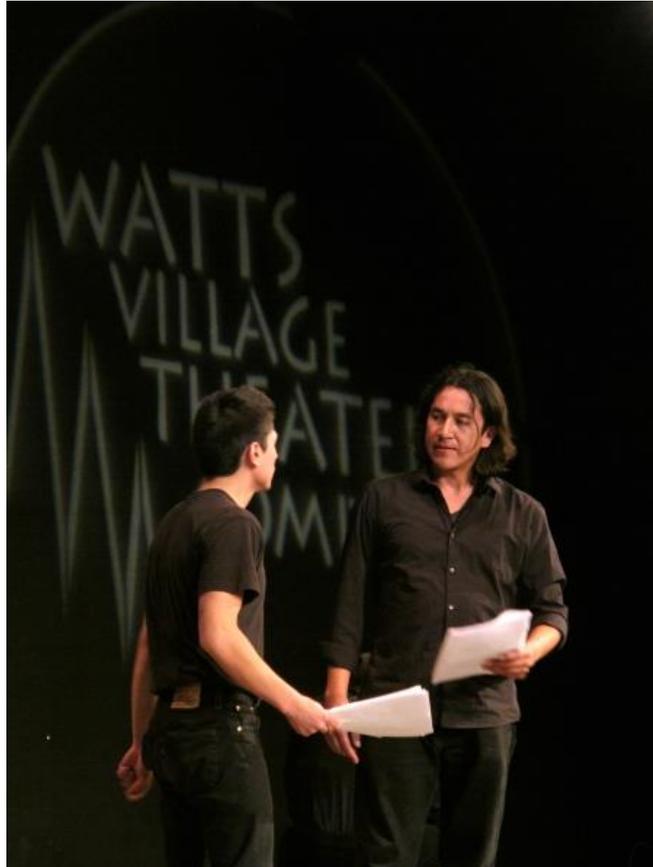
This transparency of process allows the audience access to the often closed space where a company experiments, develops, and rehearses. The ensemble posts their work-in-progress to

their blog (<http://postnatyam.blogspot.com>), which serves as an archive of their collaboration and also tracks the way their creative assignments inspire responses, recontextualizations, and transformations as the ideas circulate among the collective members. Moreover, the blog serves as a public, participatory space: anyone can view and comment on the pieces they post there, and, indeed, Post Natyam encourages and craves the discourse that (might) appear there.

Watts Village Theater Company (WVTC) presented *Clover and Cactus*, a play by Beto O'Byrne about Los San Patricios / the Saint Patrick's Battalion, a group of Irish Americans and other disenfranchised United States immigrants who fought on the side of the Mexican Army in the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. *Clover and Cactus* presents the tensions and triumphs that result from this odd assemblage of individuals as they anticipate their final battle, for which they are horrendously outgunned and underequipped. That they unite to find commonalities serves as a lesson to the audience. As the characters sounded the battle cry in the final moments of the play, I felt the urge to yell out in solidarity with them, with the hope that we can forge such bonds across the lines that currently divide us.

WVTC as an ensemble was unique within the LA Micro-Fest for two noteworthy reasons. As the only ensemble located within and representative of a specific community, the work WVTC creates and the utopic democracy the ensemble envisions is always in dialogue with their core constituency of Watts. Notes then-Artistic Director Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez, "We as a rule always hold dual performances of any work we develop; first in Watts and then wherever else [in the Los Angeles area] our work will be performed." In this way, WVTC brings an artistic sensibility to its South Central LA base as it simultaneously educates the many Angelenos unfamiliar with the rich history and diversity of Watts, a historically African

American community where in recent years Latinos have become the majority. Stresses Aviles-Rodriguez, “It is our community that makes us who we are.”



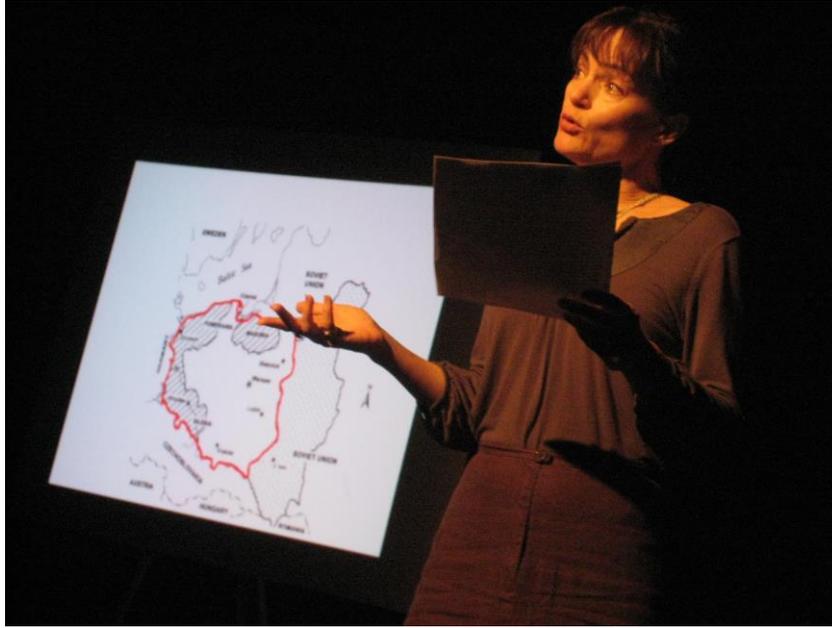
Germaine de Leon (left) and David Guerra in *Clover and Cactus*.

Photo by Watts Village Theater Company.

Secondly, WVTC was the only ensemble at the LA Micro-Fest to use a more hybridized approach to developing new work that melds collective devising with the more delineated structures of traditional theatrical approaches. There was a script, written by a professional playwright; there was music, composed by a musical director; the development began with the director, musical director (interestingly, the musicians were the first collaborators secured for the

project), and dramaturg; and actors were brought in during the later stages of development. Yet as playwright O’Byrne notes regarding the fluidity of the process, “Pages and thoughts have been bouncing back and forth...this play is just as much theirs as it is mine, I feel.” Moreover, O’Byrne links this fluidity to a cultural practice stemming out of the Watts community specifically and Chicano culture more generally. He states, “as a piece of Chicano Drama...this idea of collective thought and ensemble is always there. Improvements, criticisms, arguments, praises and hugs all flow freely in the room and in all conversations...You have to accept, expect, and love that if it’s going to be successful.” WVTC reveals how ensemble theatre brings about democratic formations when rooted in geographic and cultural specificity.

Finally, Critical Mass Performance Group’s *Untitled (Amerykanski) Project* offered an overtly thematic exploration of democracy. Through an imagistic meditation on the intersections between American rhetoric, politics, and popular culture and Poland’s own historical struggle for freedom, Critical Mass’s *Amerykanski* reveals the gaps between the mythic ideal of freedom and the lived, material realities of democracy in both the US and Poland. The piece hopscotches back and forth, achronologically, across historical time and geographical place to explore US-Polish relations during the Polish Solidarity Movement, the Cold War, and even the Revolutionary War. In doing so, the piece offers a sophisticated critique of the embedded inequalities along lines of race and ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality with which our nation continues to struggle. Through its incisive dialogue and storytelling, *Amerykanski* captivated me on an intellectual level, while visceral moments of staggering beauty, including the smashing of teacups, the slow motion entrance of Gary Cooper in his *High Noon* attire, and the exit of Blessed Virgin Mary on a pathway of bricks that were laid immediately before her footfalls, took my breath away.



Valerie Spencer explaining Polish history in scene from *Untitled (Amerysanski) Project*. Photo by Nancy Keystone.

I was fortunate to have visited Critical Mass during an early part of the development process: although much research had been done (each of the actors toted huge 3-ring binders and the ensemble spent part of rehearsal on table work, discussing the multiple Polish Constitutions in great detail), the scenes themselves were only loosely taking form through image and improvisational work. This rehearsal proved highly representative of the Critical Mass process, which involves dedicating an extreme amount of time together for intellectual and embodied exploration. Notes Nancy Keystone:

the research is meant to help the actors fill up with images and context for the later work in the workshops, so that they have specific references and can begin to understand the issues intellectually in order to then understand and express them emotionally and viscerally. When we are dealing with subjects that are so foreign to us, that are based in historical fact, we are obligated to find as many ways in as we can and we delve deeper and deeper throughout the process.

Interestingly enough in a piece that so critically explores the grand rhetoric of our nation – including excerpts from the Declaration of Independence, transcripts from the House Un-

American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings, President Reagan's speech in support of worker strikes in the Gdansk shipyards, and reportage about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, among other sources – Keystone very consciously limits the use of text in the early stages of ensemble creation. She states, "I think actors often want to 'make something happen,' so there is a tendency to just start talking and creating a scene which is usually fairly superficial because there hasn't been a great deal of exploration or discovery, just a lot of motion and activity. So I put the shackles on in order to restrain that impulse."

A particularly powerful scene features an African American jazz musician having late-night drinks with a group of Poles. Though a very human connection is forged between them



A scene from *Untitled (Amerykanski) Project*. Photo by Nancy Keystone.

despite language and cultural barriers, each sees in the other only the idealized view granted from their partial perspectives while the audience is granted a more complete view. Whereas the musician feels free from the racism that so contains him at home, the audience sees how anti-Semitism infects Polish culture; whereas the Polish people speak of the cowboy heroics of Gary Cooper/Will Kane in *High Noon*, the audience recalls his friendly testimony during the HUAC trials presented a few scenes earlier. Says Keystone, “writing the scene started to teach me how the rest of the piece might work in terms of intersecting threads of character, story and idea.” Yet it stemmed from an improv exercise that explored rituals of coming together, in which the actors could only say one phrase of their choosing, as a toast.

As NET Executive Director Mark Valdez so eloquently stated in his closing remarks, the weekend moved beyond a mere festival to become a quest for democracy. In so saying, Valdez affirmed that through our critical examination of ensemble theatre, we as citizen-artists gain training in the workings of democracy. Through our art, ensemble theatre offers audiences the chance to glimpse and to feel a new way of being together through the utopian performative. Through the process of ensemble new play development, those of us involved in collaborative creation catch visions of utopic democracy. And through our discourse, we share those visions with the larger community, inviting outsiders to join us in our quest and granting them access to our center. This, too, aligns with Dolan’s notion of the utopian performative, which coheres and motivates an audience “as a temporary community, perhaps inspired by *communitas* to feel themselves citizens of a no-place that’s a better place, citizens who might then take that feeling into other sites of public discourse,” (*Utopia* 14-15). By the end of this weekend focused on ensemble play development process, we left motivated to share both the feelings and the

strategies that we, as collaborative creators, have to offer to those outside our field and in our world at large.

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