NET Microfests: Community, Home and Afar

Robert ‘bobbyb’ Martin

Over the last year I had the opportunity to travel to Detroit, Central Appalachia, New Orleans and Oahu, Hawai`i as a MicroFest Fellow with the Network of Ensemble Theaters (NET). Seven other cultural workers and I formed a cohort—an ensemble—that traveled to each site, dialogued with each other throughout the MicroFest cycle and served as local guides and connectors in our home regions. A main goal of this group was to offer a layered through-line to the place cycle as well as to serve as touchstones to reflect on how the MicroFests affected us as practitioners and participants along the way.

More than a year removed from the initial MicroFest in Detroit and months after our visit to Hawai`i this summer, each site has left me with reflections that continue to resonate and inform my life as a theater artist, educator, community activist, land lover, food enjoyer and space holder, among all sorts of other things I find myself up to. As an expression of gratitude and in the spirit of dialogue generated by the MicroFest, I’ve captured some of these reflections for my own remembrance and to share with NET and anyone else who might find them of use.

Detroit

NET chose the four sites for its 2012-13 MicroFest cycle and Learning Exchange with two factors at the forefront: they are places with rich cultural heritage and that have also experienced deep economic and environmental trauma. Perhaps most places in the U.S. fit that description in one way or another. Detroit, though, seems to be the flagship of the numerous, once-industrial boomtowns across the country that are now adapting to a post-boom reality. This was a place where working people of all races migrated for decades, and is now a place with economic red lines that have grown remarkably brighter due to “white flight,” the closing of the factories and auto plants, and the loss of city services to poor communities, often of color. This is also a place, however, where a creative class of artists and cultural organizers are drawing attention to the city’s drastically changing landscape and, in some cases, lifting up creative voices and vision to remake the economy, environment, and community of this place. Or, as Detroit artist, educator, and MC Invincible says in Detroit Summer: “Call Motown a ghost town but the city’s vibrant!”

I witnessed an aspect of that vibrancy during the NET MicroFest at Detroit SOUP, an event where participants came together in a reclaimed warehouse to witness and contribute to several community-based art project ideas while enjoying a locally grown and prepared meal. Each idea was given equal presentation time during the meal and after all the presentations, the audience voted on which projects should receive funding from the proceeds of the community meal. The presentations were creative and served as entertainment while they also made it clear how and why the ideas were developed and offered ways for people to get involved. I appreciated that this great community-
building exercise and showcase allowed us to witness how numerous ideas and projects can live alongside each other in the spirit of abundance. By committing to share and promote them in the same time and place over a meal together, we could manifest plenty of support and sustenance to go around rather than operate from a scarcity mentality that so often keeps us isolated, or worse, in false competition.

**Appalachia**

By commercial standards, there’s not much theater happening in Appalachia. It’s also a huge multi-state and mostly rural region with pockets of community that share certain cultural characteristics but often consider themselves definitively distinct from one another; not dissimilar to what I would later learn about Hawai‘i in that each island in the chain is understood to represent its own distinct, and prior to Hawaiian unification, sovereign culture.

In Appalachia, the economic and environmental history is often defined by these remote disconnected communities and outsider extractive resource practices, and it was these circumstances in which NET bravely ventured into Central Appalachia for the second MicroFest. Beginning in Knoxville, Tennessee, we experienced urban Appalachia including the important work of the folks at Carpetbag Theatre and then traversed winding, narrow mountain passes with over 100 participants in 15-passenger vans to various locations throughout Harlan County, Kentucky and back again over four days. One of our Harlan hosts, Robert Gipe, remarked upon hearing of this adventurous agenda, “That’s a whole lot of cattle to get across the river.” Indeed.

Among other things during this MicroFest in my home region, I drove one of the vans. Once we made our way into Kentucky from Knoxville, we landed at the legendary Eastern Kentucky Social Club (EKSC) in Lynch where we were greeted with famous hospitality and barbeque chicken. Housed in the segregation-era Lynch High School, the Eastern Kentucky Social Club, founded in 1970, is famous for reunion-style gatherings that often draw thousands to cities across the U.S. to celebrate their Eastern Kentucky roots. EKSC held a beautiful space that night for food, fellowship and performances by storytellers, gospel singers, poets, and musicians. Here we experienced an Appalachian cultural space with a history of challenging oppression by upholding the place and tradition of African Americans who created mountainside communities alongside generations of other people who migrated to the mines in the early 20th century. With the EKSC as our first host in Harlan, a deep and appropriate dialogue began between NET participants as outsiders and the people of Harlan as the culture bearers of the place.

As I reflect on those long mountain drives, the experience of EKSC and the variety of local performances witnessed there, I am reminded that it always matters how we enter communities and who welcomes us, and that sometimes, the most efficient choices aren’t always the most effective ones when it comes to cultural engagement. When confronted with the notion that there’s not much theater, not much “culture” to a place, I
am also mindful to look first to those in our communities who have traditionally brought people, food, music, and stories together. These are our rural ensembles.

One such ensemble we witnessed during MicroFest Appalachia is the 200-plus collaborators and community members who have participated in the Higher Ground project over the last decade. They treated us to a potluck meal and performed an amalgam of three community story plays. Two years ago, I was privileged to direct one of their plays, Higher Ground 3: Talkin’ Dirt, so as a collaborator and fan of the work, it’s difficult to be objective. I have to say, though, that witnessing it from the outside as a participant of MicroFest, the work again struck me powerfully, leaving a strong sense of how healing and transformational the project has been for individuals and the distinct communities within Harlan County. I recently had the opportunity to work on a community story play in another Appalachian county in Kentucky, partially inspired by Higher Ground, and found there again how cathartic the process of storytelling and performance is in a place where people have no other such outlet.

As people from neighboring counties in Kentucky have seen or heard of these story play projects, they have been inspired to put together the resources to organize their own small-scale versions. While these plays and cultural projects alone will not provide the necessary economic, civic and environmental solutions for eastern Kentucky, they are clearly providing an inspiration for people from different walks to share their stories, uncover challenges and begin to have dialogue about the things we don’t like to talk about, or don’t know how to talk about with one another. In a place where the land’s natural wealth has been extracted by outsiders and the people have mostly oriented inward for generations, I am reminded that generating this kind of creative space and supporting indigenous wealth is critical to envisioning and enacting another future for our communities in Appalachia.

New Orleans

A glorious and complicated energy—increasingly creative yet potentially destructive—always seems to be on the horizon in New Orleans, Louisiana, which was the third stop of the long-form parade that was NET MicroFest. From Motown to Mountain to Jazz Cajun Carnival and one more still to go. MicroFest New Orleans coincided with Krewe du Vieux, the earliest large parade of the Mardi Gras season, focusing on New Orleans culture and political satire. The fact that we became celebrants of this complicated titillating place—after spending two days closely examining cross-sector explorations of art and community development—resonated in the words of Nick Slie, one of our Louisiana hosts: “Welcome to New Orleans…where we turn problems into parades.”

One of the strongest memories I have from our NOLA experience is convening at Congo Square, a gathering and ceremony space for people of color dating back to legal slavery in the U.S. Here musicians, elders, and hosting community members from New Orleans welcomed us in a ceremony of history, song, drumming, libations, and prayer. After we asked and were granted permission to be in this place, we went across the street to the Golden Feather Café for lunch and a presentation by Stephanie McKee,
executive director of Junebug Productions, about their work in relation to the history and evolution of cultural traditions in community recovery—as had been the practice of the seminal Free Southern Theater, Junebug’s parent company that just celebrated it’s 50th anniversary. Again, as in Appalachia, I was struck by how the message of community transformation through cultural practice was grounded by a ceremony that deeply honored the place we were in, called in the ancestors, and welcomed us as visitors with a community meal.

The intentionality of this ceremony and food space brings into focus what is at stake here—the holistic health of our culture, the lifeblood of our communities. The power of this simple model should not be overlooked in that we have been coming together for food, stories, spirit, ceremony, and community—elements of culture—for thousands of years. It makes sense that when we are working to evoke community transformation—a process and results that are often elusive and by nature constantly evolving—that basic elements of culture, which we understand more readily and intuitively, are a solid place to start. MicroFest New Orleans, as had the previous two stops, also continued to reinforce for me that we can find strong through-lines between our seemingly different places when we break it all down to the basic needs of people in community.

One of the artistic performances we witnessed in New Orleans, Cry You One, reinforced this theme of working with what we know to evoke as yet unforeseen solutions for a community and a place. The piece is described by its co-creators Mondo Bizarro and Art Spot Productions as “a multi-disciplinary site-specific collaboration that uses food, music, spectacle, ritual, and community story gathering to draw connections between coastal wetland loss and the subsequent loss of culture that occurs as fishing villages, traditions, and folkways are washed away with the inundation of salt and flood water.” The work-in-progress was performed on a levee in the Lower Ninth Ward overlooking Bayou Bienvenue, a saltwater-infused, dying cypress swamp and then shifted to become a community meal, Cajun dance, and conversation with project stakeholders. It was powerful to witness theater in such deep dialogue with the whole environment, in this case the land, the water, the culture, stories, food, and dance of the region. It also continues to confirm for me how important it is perform a theatrical act outside of what are now considered “traditional theater” spaces; how this radical act, amongst many non-colonial theatrical outcomes, offers access to those just passing by, to people who would not otherwise experience it. Members of my On the Creek ensemble were able to experience the lessons of Cry You One and MicroFest: New Orleans with me. It has been an important inspirational and educational factor in the creation of new work we are now beginning as well as for our plan to produce the touring version of Cry You One in Kentucky in 2014.

Hawai‘i

On my first trip to this place, said to be the furthest away from any other place on the earth, I recalled a story about my grandmother, Opal Cruise Martin. Her whole life was spent in the rolling foothills and farmland of Kentucky where I grew up. Upon visiting
Hawai`i with one of her sons, she couldn’t shake the overall uncomfortable understanding that nothing was there to keep the ocean from sweeping her and everything else away. Her realization was echoed to me by local host Moses Goods who described that there is an understanding embedded deep in Hawaiian culture that the people, fauna, and flora are innately connected to an ecosystem that rose from the sea and that someday the “big wave” will usher their return. This prophesy confirmed for me what I had been coming to after a week exploring Oahu; -- a beautiful connection between culture and environment in this tropical place that reminded me... of home. The spirit of land is such an omnipresent force in the culture of both places. And yet, in this time, `āina (land) in Hawai`i seems to be even more alive and treated with more respect than in Kentucky. This left me sad and yet, similar to the experience in New Orleans, has informed the work I’m now creating in ensemble.

Among my most striking memories was our opening session when we were taught the Hawaiian protocol of asking permission to enter a space. In this case we asked permission from the sea through a Hawaiian chant that also welcomed the sun. When we began, it was dark, rainy, and hard to hear through the wind. It was also unclear if the sun would in fact break through the clouds that morning. Slowly, as we began to get the intonation of the unfamiliar sounds, the pale sky transformed first into streaks of light and then a few bright orange flares burned through the grey morning atmosphere telling us that permission had been granted—we were welcomed. Euphorically, we celebrated by running into the warm ocean like children, laughing and playing as the waves easily turned us back again and again until we were exhausted. This exaltation was followed by a lei ceremony where I touched foreheads with an elder who looked me squarely in the eyes and told me I was welcome there. I felt imbued with the spirit of this place in that moment, deeply connected to the people, culture, land, and water.

That connection helped me understand in the coming days what’s at stake in Hawai`i as commercial colonial forces continue to threaten the rich indigenous culture and how art, story, and ceremony can play a role in transforming the threat of cultural loss into a rich amalgam of Hawaiian and other cultures that honor and grow the spirit of aloha rather than appropriate it. I was reminded here again that when we operate in the spirit of abundance, there can be a place for everyone and that when we look at understanding and transforming community, we do well to start from the wisdom of the indigenous cultures and move out from there with all who have been drawn to a place.

Another strong memory from MicroFest Oahu is my experience at Halau Ku Mana, a Hawaiian K-12 charter school. When we arrived we were greeted by the school principal and staff members where we performed the protocol of announcing ourselves and asking permission to enter. We were received and began a dialogue with the principal and three students about how the school embodies the spirit of “life-giving water” which flows from the rains at the mountaintops down the valleys and into the sea. The school draws on the community beliefs of engaging directly with the environment and that many hands make short work. Following the water model metaphor, the young people start a process of working outdoors once a week with a community partner situated near the top of the mountain and each year from 6th grade onward, they work their way down
toward the ocean preparing for their self-navigated, self-built canoe journey exhibiting their independence and grasp of multiple skills as they near graduation. We had the opportunity to work alongside the students clearing a creek bed before witnessing presentations by national ensembles highlighting their work drawing from MicroFest’s Art and Environment theme.

The school presentation was especially powerful in demonstrating how their grassroots approach to education embodied the community’s struggle towards transformation by embracing the past and merging a creative educational path forward. As a teaching artist and educator, I was also struck by the school’s policy to challenge its teachers to be both scholars and practitioners in their field while learning in another discipline. Teachers are meant to grow within their craft while also being role models for holistic learning for the youth. This experience reinforced the importance of continually educating ourselves across sectors and places while actively drawing from the culture and history of the place; organically crafting transformative potential without superimposing from a system that seems out of place.

All along this NET MicroFest journey I’ve been inspired, challenged, educated and validated in my belief and practice in the transformational potential of community-based art and culture. Given that the dominant paradigm of “professional” theater is not community-based and that the dominant paradigm of community organizing is not arts-based, there aren’t a lot of opportunities to experience dozens of high-quality theater and cultural works in a condensed period; all driven by and for communities seeking solutions to the challenges they face. Above all, what the NET MicroFest offered me and so many others was the opportunity to witness and engage with people doing the work in place after place in such a way that reflected and validated my own work and opened new insights, ideas, and possibilities that I wasn’t fully present to before. MicroFest underscored how critical it is to engage deeply in understanding my own people and place in the mountains and yet have the opportunity to be in close continual dialogue with others working on parallel paths whether in the big cities, in the bayou, on the islands or elsewhere. In doing so, we honor the work that has come before as well as encourage and challenge one another to evolve and innovate.

Gratitude to NET and to all of the people and lands who welcomed and shared the transformational practice and potential of their art. We have beautiful work to do and I’m reinspired by my community at home and afar.