PULLproject

ENSEMBLE WORK with Non-Artistic / Grassroots Entities

--and--

USE of Circus / Aerial Apparatus Elements

(photo credit: Jenny San Angel) CHORUS members of “Tales of Clamor” watch Kennedy Kabasares during aerial choreography scene. CHORUS: Greg Watanabe; Jully Lee; Ken Narasaki; Junko Goda; Takayo Fischer. PROJECTED VIDEO: Dr. Mary Oda testifies at the 1981 Los Angeles CWRIC Hearings.
Things to Keep in Mind When Working with a Non-Artistic Entity / Grassroots Activist organization

PULLproject Ensemble worked in the Exchange with NCRR (Nikkei for Civil Rights & Redress). NCRR is an elder, activist grassroots organization, made up of Sansei (Third generation Japanese American) and veteran community organizers. They entrusted us with the rights and access to video footage of the 1981 Los Angeles Commission Hearings that led to Redress. Here are some of our take-aways:

- **FLEXIBILITY** - In working with a non-arts organization who has a set structure (monthly and daytime meetings) and a particular way of working (with a small and highly dedicated core group of people), we found it important, respectful, necessary and ultimately most efficient to adapt to NCRR’s usual practices. For instance, it wasn’t realistic to have late night workshops or meetings with them and it was difficult for them to come out, on a regular basis, all the way to L.A. to the circus school where we rehearse, when most of them live east of Los Angeles.

- **TIME** - We needed to make a lot of time to have a series of conversations to thoroughly communicate what exactly we want to explore with them and the video footage they granted us access to. Even if at times we felt we had to reiterate points that are familiar to our practice in art-making (e.g. theatrical exploration/experimentation vs. draft of a script), it was worth it in the long run to make sure everyone was on board with the process, each step of the way.

- **VARIETY and UNDERSTANDING** - To the point of flexibility and time, we found it necessary to engage with NCRR in a variety of ways. As with any collaboration, we as artists have to engage with each other in various ways. In working with another group that is not made up of artists, we
found it useful and enriching to process through history and personal memories in many different avenues throughout our Exchange. For example - we had conversations with the NCRR members we were closest to at the beginning, before attending their monthly general meeting to thoroughly explain the project and Exchange. From that point, we arranged myriad ways to have conversations - structured meetings, a large group writing workshop, a viewing of Commission Hearing footage with facilitated discussion, phone calls, emails, time to sit around, eat and talk story, etc. This allowed each of them to talk with us in ways that worked for them, individually and as a group. We also needed to be mindful of their time and level of energy - we made it clear we were always available, while not expecting them to be at our beck and call.

**Things to Keep in Mind When Working with a Group and Their Personal Stories and Archival Material**


- **RESPECT** - During this Exchange, we began to work closely with a group of people who are very close to the material we are “researching” and utilizing as an inspiration point to our work. In this case, we are asking them to relay deeply emotional memories as well as archival footage that is a major part of their life work and journey. So, we feel it necessary to be very respectful and mindful of the stories and memories we ask them to share. This includes giving them time to process the questions we are asking of them and understanding they may need to approach us later with a response.

- **CLARITY** - To involve any kind of “outside” group from the beginning of a new, development process can be both fruitful and tricky. In working with a non artistic entity, we were hyper aware of this. Traci found it necessary to communicate on a vision-in-process. That we do not intend to
make a theatre-documentary piece about the “story of Redress” or even about the “Commission Hearings” (video footage) per se. Likewise, that the ideas they come up with throughout this process and scenes we develop at one point could change drastically within the following weeks or months. For example, we initially thought we would project the video footage throughout the show. But by the recent staged reading we held, we ended up only showing a few minutes in an edited version, as we felt that actually did the material justice (within the context of our piece). We had anxiety about it, especially with what NCRR might think. But because of the constant communication of the direction of the show, as well as the experimental nature of our development process, NCRR was not blindsided by the time we held the reading. Overall, we found it necessary and respectful to be as clear as possible - from the times we had a strong vision or opinion about an aspect of the piece, to when we were completely Experimenting and unsure.

**Things to Keep in Mind and Communicate to Partners When Incorporating Circus / Aerial Apparatus Elements**

- **TRUST and COMMUNICATION** - Since we were using NCRR’s material and personal histories as a launching point for our work, we had to be very clear with them about how we were going to present this piece. For NCRR, most members were used to traditional, narrative theater. In fact, during our first work-in-progress presentation, one member stated “I am a very literal person,” and indicated that sometimes she needed things laid out for her in order for her to understand. During this meeting, we had to describe what the different apparatuses symbolized in the context of our piece, and how we would interact with them. Their feedback helped us understand how our interpretations were coming across, and, in turn, helped us look at how we presented the material.
we had. Time and again, TRUST was important to have from the beginning and essential to keep building throughout. Showing how we utilize feedback helps communicate the level of listening and understanding necessary to build trust.

- CONTEXT - Any added element should add to, not pull focus from, the central theme of the piece. This becomes especially important when adding elements of circus, since, in its original form, circus was dependent on spectacle, and can easily become a distraction if the intent is not clear. Make sure the circus work is an extension of what is being said. Much like in a musical, where the numbers are a singing and dancing expression of the scene, so too must circus work function. Our aerial consultant, Eric Newton, was sensitive to make sure certain moves did not look too “circus like”, and focused on expressing real human emotions and experience, rather than a showcase of skills.

- GO A LITTLE BIGGER - Any acting can get lost beneath any circus type activity. Kennedy found that any intentions, expressions, and dialogue (or sounds) have to go a little larger, especially in aerial work, in order to be noticed.

- DROP IT - If it does not feel organic to, or enhance a scene, it may not belong there. If it didn’t feel right to bring in an aerial apparatus, we didn’t use it.