Walking The Tightrope: Lessons learned on continuing our partnership with a non-arts, elder, activist organization and facing serious, real-life challenges during the process of creation

PULLproject Ensemble

Background on Project: An Exchange and the Continuation between PULLproject Ensemble (traci kato-kiriyama and Kennedy Kabasares, leads) and NCRR (Nikkei for Civil Rights & Redress) - a grassroots organization of active, elder activists who were instrumental in organizing members of the Japanese American community (and far beyond) to testify in 1981 in the fight for Redress and Reparations, in front of the Commission on Wartime Relocation & Internment of Civilians (CWRIC). The video footage from the Los Angeles hearings are the only known set of video recordings preserved today and they are co-owned by NCRR and media arts organization, Visual Communications.

Developing: Tales of Clamor - a play based in theatre with circus elements.

Story: Tales of Clamor - follows two characters who look at the collective breaking of silence that led to Redress for Japanese Americans and analyze it as a case study for what it took to get people to speak up for justice, self and other. Together, they aim to shine a light on a little-known, much-forgotten moment of American history, and ignite the noise necessary for people to “show up” for others today.

Initial Exchange: In 2015-2016, through the Exchange Grant, PULLproject and NCRR met in myriad ways - general meetings, small group discussions, large group writing workshops, individual interviews, archival footage-viewing sessions, and an early-stage show-&-tell presentation. The Exchange culminated with a staged reading of the first 11 scenes and a long sequence toward the end. NCRR member, Richard Katsuda, followed this Exchange by saying, “We want to work with you two forever!”

Continuation: In 2016-2017, through the Continuation Grant, PULLproject, NCRR, team collaborators and cast went through a day-long workshop, which led to a workshop period of rewrites and the completion of a full first draft and staged reading to share the work. All partners are still committed to seeing Tales of Clamor through to premiere, anticipated for fall/winter of 2018.
Walking The Tightrope: Lessons learned...

1) TRUST is what brought us together with NCRR in the first place. And it is certainly what keeps us on this long journey together to: a) create our show, Tales of Clamor, to draw parallels between past and present needs for collective activism & solidarity and; b) increase the awareness of the archival video footage of the testimonies from the CWRIC hearings that NCRR has entrusted us to utilize in our piece. When we approached NCRR in 2013 with the original idea to create a show utilizing the CWRIC footage, we already had a longstanding relationship with them as individual artists. They granted us legal use of the footage by the time we began working, in earnest, on the project in 2014/2015. So, the first part of the process on this particular project was less about gaining their trust as people and artists, and more about the concept and use of their footage and stories, the requirements of their time, and the aesthetics and approaches to our show. In our previous shareback, we go into all of that a bit more.

Despite having an incomplete script at our March 2016 reading, NCRR was very excited after they got to see all the months of discussion, research and development reveal itself in action. It was also a great opportunity for the workshop cast and all of our collaborators to meet NCRR in person. NCRR members who were featured in the show were like rock stars after the reading - the whole audience wanted to interact with them. After that staged reading, we held a great deal of elevated trust and commitment for the project from NCRR.
By summer of 2016 and with the incredible news of receiving the Continuation Grant award, NCRR was as excited as us to keep moving forward towards a finished first full draft and beyond.

(PULLproject ensemble, “Tales of Clamor” workshop reading, March 2016)

For the Continuation process, we could see it was time to: 1) ask NCRR to join us at the circus school and 2) have interaction between NCRR and our workshop cast and collaborators. Somehow, we were able to get every single collaborator, the full cast and core NCRR members together for an intensive workshop over one single day. All of this equaled ONE BIG DAY.

On Process and Limited Time -

Kennedy’s thoughts: I was a bit anxious about our big day for several reasons. First of all, due to NCRR’s active schedule, we could only get them to commit to meeting with our actors and collaborators on one day, so I wondered if we could achieve all our objectives in six hours.

Secondly, I had no idea how comfortable NCRR would be in the creative process. I knew that they were used to speaking about their experiences and the work they do, and we
had interviewed them in small groups and one-on-one in the past, but getting them to share as a group, to a whole other group, could have been a challenge, especially within a limited time.

But it seemed to me that they understood what we were looking for, and they generously shared their background stories and what it was like being activists in the 80’s. Also, one of our cast members, Takayo Fischer, shared her own story about being a little girl in one of the camps, which affected all of us in the room. Her openness about her feelings of sadness and guilt really helped bond the cast and NCRR members during the creation process.

From that point on, I felt the trust growing between the two groups, and I think that having them open up to each other helped make the next activity (grouping two cast members with two NCRR members to conduct an interview) much easier. From that interview, the cast improvised scenes which eventually made it into the reading.

For the final activity, circus consultant Eric Newton and I taught the cast basic tightrope walking on a 10-foot long practice wire, which was about 2 feet off the ground. This was going to be used in the big sequence towards the end of the piece. Traci and I thought it would be great if we could also get some NCRR members to walk the tightrope as well, for a couple of reasons. For one, it would get them on their feet and doing something performative in a safe environment, as well as have some fun. Secondly, and most importantly, we felt it was symbolic of trust and solidarity, a way of both NCRR and PULLproject to say “we will support you on this journey.”

I think what made the day successful was that, knowing we had very limited time, we stuck to a small amount of activities: a group talk; a simple interview/improv session; a basic physical activity. The activities were few but very productive.

The work we put into that entire day, and of course even more so the entire length of the partnership is what allowed us to walk that tightrope together.
2) FLEXIBILITY - real-life challenges and changes...

As life does stretch us in all ways, we faced some major, unanticipated challenges.

For traci, just days before hearing the wonderful news of PULLproject being Continuation Grant recipients, we found out the shocking news of her diagnosis of breast cancer.

And in September, Kennedy suffered the immense loss of his father, leading him to help his family every weekend up in San Francisco from that point forward.

Dealing with all of these unanticipated and major challenges not only put a pause on a lot of things, traci and Kennedy and NCRR had to make considerable shifts in how they approached this phase of the project.
Fortunately, that’s where flexibility leans hard on trust..and love.

In a nutshell, NCRR always made it clear that health and family comes first, and of course the work will continue as it needs to, when it can.

Kennedy was initially concerned about being away from Los Angeles during the creation period and therefore adding obstacles to working with traci’s cancer therapy schedule. But they learned how to be creatively flexible. Kennedy kept in touch with traci via calls and Facetime, and even when scheduling meant that there were many days when Kennedy could not physically be present with traci, he would send video clips of himself experimenting with circus elements, which traci would incorporate into the script.

On Process...and GUILT -

Traci’s thoughts: I did feel a tinge of guilt at one point the in process. In the beginning months of my diagnosis, feelings of guilt I’d ever held for not doing enough for my community or not participating in “everything” magically lifted. It wasn’t until several months passed and I entered into chemotherapy that I started to feel old twinges of guilt pop up now and again, like a bad habit. Throughout chemo, I wanted to keep working at full speed on the days and weeks that the pain and fatigue were at bay between
treatments. For the most part, I did allow myself to relax, but I so looked forward to being done entirely with chemo so I could dive into the intensive workshop process we planned for the weeks immediately following my final treatment.

Looking back, it seems a bit silly and obviously naive now, but at the time, I didn’t realize that the effects of chemotherapy continue to stream through the body for several months, if not more. And to start in on a nonstop writing and rehearsal schedule right after the completion of chemo was definitely not the most sound thinking on my part!

At one point, I had to communicate with Kennedy that, even though we had scheduled many writing sessions, my overall energy for each was down. And that’s when the guilt started to creep in. It finally came to a head just a week before the public reading: I still had a bunch of pages to write or rewrite; we had an upcoming full schedule of rehearsals to prepare our cast for their scenes; Kennedy and I had barely worked on any scenes that didn’t involve the cast; and many friends had planned a large fundraiser (for my cancer care) including 3 hours of back-to-back performances (for which I’d of course want to give full attention)...and I was exhausted. It might not have seemed like a big deal to others, but I decided to cancel the rehearsal scheduled for the day after the fundraiser and I felt terrible about it. I didn’t want our cast to feel unprepared. I didn’t want to let Kennedy down. I didn’t want to risk losing a day of precious rehearsal time.

But I needed to rest.
And I needed to write.

I ultimately put those two things first so that we could at least have a first full draft to present at our reading.

Of course, Kennedy, our collaborators, our cast, everyone was totally understanding. I mostly learned I needed to trust our relations, everyone’s immense talent, and our commitment to each other beyond the project.
And mostly, I needed to give flexibility to MYSELF.

This entire process spoke massive volumes to the understanding that arises when we need it to...and when we trust the need for forthcoming, honest communication about where we’re at.

We all ultimately understood that these challenges are sometimes a part of the “work” and certainly, a part of the process.

We decided to include personal details in the Shareback, because of the inevitable presence of daily life and ongoing needs for community-self care. And we wonder: How are we all doing with life balance? How do we take care of self, without guilt, resistance or resentment, while working actively on what we love and believe in? Can we communicate with courage, knowing that communication
stands well on the shoulders of trust and solid relationships?
How do we, in all the ways, show up for self and other?