

“Refugee State Reportback - Interpretation Nation”

TeAda is so grateful to be able to have exchanged with [IRCO, Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization in Portland, Oregon](#) in May and June of 2017. Our TeAda Methodology takes us deep into community stories, and supports community participants to perform their narratives. Portland is a beautiful place, with amazing trees and roses in full bloom. And while what we saw around Portland was the (English) language of inclusion, diversity, and support for all peoples, what we felt and witnessed was the overwhelming gentrification, one of the highest gentrified cities per capita.



We returned with plans to engage with recent refugees from Iraq and other majority Muslim countries. However, the day we landed was the moment of a traumatic [hate crime in Portland](#), targeting two young muslim women and 3 white male allies, so tensions were high, and Muslim community spaces were working overtime in response. Showing up with flexibility, open hearts, and a bag of community-based ensemble skills, we met the Bhutanese community. We gathered in a

community gym space where we had our first public sharing after several workshops, and filled the room with stories of refugee and immigrants. It was beautiful to see all the recognition of experience in the room that day between language and culture. Refugee communities like our Bhutanese friends have struggled to find jobs and other basic support in racist and English-only environments. Their narratives resonated with the incorporation of their language, songs and movements. Our ensemble found our own connections with their language of Nepali, words that Shruti could communicate in Bengali and elders we can call aunty now.

Something we are always navigating is how to balance multiple languages in the process of developing ensemble work with immigrant and refugee communities. Already in theater, part of our purpose is to find different ways to express and communicate the story, and the feelings surrounding the stories through the aesthetic and content. When you throw in 3-7 spoken languages from around the world, the process may feel more hectic or complex. Each spoken language carries its own music, rhythm, way of making meaning. Even the layers of spoken “English” in the room can be rich and dynamic. Engaging with practices of language justice means creating structures where everyone in the room can be understood, and everyone has the possibility of speaking freely, from the heart. Especially when considering developing theatrical



performance work, and sharing stories that are rooted in trauma.



One strategy in community spaces where there is one or two primary languages apart from English is simultaneous translation. This process is ideal when there are radio headsets available. This technology in addition to a very gifted interpreter can allow for a lot of fluidity. In Los Angeles, some community spaces will have one channel for Spanish and another channel for Korean. It is also possible to set up the room according to who needs interpretation, and grouping participants near interpreters. This can definitely create more hubbub in the room, but also gives the potential for closer community to develop among participants around translation.

This year through IRCO, we connected with the Bhutanese community. This community was ejected from the country of Bhutan to refugee camps in Nepal, a sort of ethnic cleansing around organized around political ideologies. Some families lived in these camps for 20+ years, with limited infrastructure. Our participants came to the U.S. hoping for more, while some of their own family members stayed in Nepal, determined to come back to their homeland of Bhutan one day. We were graciously hosted by our community navigator, Sumitra, who helped to connect us to 2 interpreters, and one enthusiastic community member. Sumitra was able to coordinate interpretation, and IRCO agreed in our previous conversations to cover interpretation costs and logistics. We noticed differences in the ways our interpreters responded to the group. The elder women felt more comfortable with the young woman interpreter, a young wife in their community. This consciousness of gender was important to create a safe space where all participants could speak and perform their experiences. Our role as artists was to speak to the environment of white settler gentrification, while holding healing space for our communities of color. Refugee State played this role, to create a mirror of reflection to Portland, and find deeper community storytelling as a means of resistance.

After our first workshop, we realized in order to move through our workshop most effectively and impactfully, we had to be very intentional about our interpreters understanding of the artistic ensemble process. It was not enough to directly translate words alone, the concepts and the ability to move people was required for the interpreter as well. We realized the role of a Language Interpreter Co-Director, a trusted community member who has the skills of interpretation who is also willing and able to take on a leadership role within the production. Thanks to Januka, our community interpreter, who was able to provide live interpretation and direction during the final showcase.

Here is our list of things to think about in working with a Language Interpreter Co-Director:

- They are from the community group you are working and ideally already have a sense of trust in the room.
- They must be able to hold the different ages and genders in the room.

- They should be able to find emotional nuance within the spoken language, to distinguish certain English language prompts.
- It is most important that they understand the concepts of process and a strong relationship with community participants, more so than perfect English.
- They should feel empowered to support the writing of the script, and development of the stories/scenes.
- During image making exercises, or other workshopping work, they should be able to help to direct the participants.
- Januka, our Language Interpreter Co-Director, performed with the participants, narrating the piece in English and translating the Nepalese lines on the spot.
- Work interpretation into the proposed budget from the beginning, and create a space that this is offered as an in-kind service from collaborating organization. Organizations that already work with immigrant communities probably already have interpreters and systems available.

Thanks to the Bhutanese community of Portland for helping us to learn this lesson! Mahalo!

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