

Legal Name

Epic Theatre Center Inc

Project Title

To support playwright/actor Heather Raffo in reaching NYC's Arab-American community through a series of workshops in story-sharing, playwriting and adaptation of a classic with relevant themes of Identity, Home and Place

DDCF Grant Number

2013022

Project Progress and Successes

The first phase of the Heather Raffo Residency to refine best practices for building theatrical demand among Arab-American communities has been a remarkable success, though its' trajectory has recently bent somewhat away from the original plan. This shift has happened for all the right reasons: (1) a deeply engaged and collaborative first set of partners at Queens College, (2) a detailed assessment plan that is yielding illuminating evidence, and (3) most importantly, an incredible response from the initial group of participants (what we now call the "Core Women").

Planning and training began simultaneously in May of 2013 through Heather's co-teaching of a Courage In The Face of Evil residency at Epic's partner school the Bronx High School for Writing and Communication Arts. Working alongside Ron Russell (Epic's Executive Director and the school's Lead Arts Partner and Site Manager) in four 10th grade classrooms over three weeks, Raffo piloted the storytelling and monologue writing exercises she wanted to refine for the upcoming Phase 1 Residency in the Fall. Raffo also watched some of Epic's proven engagement techniques in action, and she and Russell met every day for an hour to plan an ideal curriculum, discuss potential first partners, and begin shaping ideas for an assessment plan.

Over the summer and early Fall of 2013, four final pre-implementation planning steps occurred:

1) Three meetings were held between the Dean of Queens College, Sophia McGee of Queens College Center for Ethnic, Religious, and Racial Understanding (CERRU), the Artistic leadership of their Kupferberg Center for the Performing Arts, Russell and other Epic leaders, and Raffo, during which a student recruitment, engagement, and employment plan was finalized;

2) As a result of the above meetings, Nashwa El-Sayed, a graduate student at Queens College, was hired to act as a CERRU Fellow and Raffo's assistant (as planned in the grant narrative), thereby becoming the key liaison between Epic, Raffo, and Queens College, and becoming a leader in the recruitment process;

3) Initial conversations were held via phone between members of the Arab-American Family Support Center and Raffo/Russell regarding a Phase I residency at their primary community center in downtown Brooklyn. It was determined that the timeline for this residency would probably have to be after the QC residency, currently scheduled for Summer 2014 and,

4) Raffo and Russell met with Anne Dunning of Arts Action Research to discuss potential

assessment protocols, and decided to hire her for the project. Dunning then submitted a plan for assessment of the QC Phase I residency in December 2013.

The Queens College residency was designed to be solely for Arab-American women (though this definition was later expanded somewhat to include Muslim women from Pakistan and Iran), and planned to take place over QC's "Winter Term" for a total of twelve 6-hour days, from January 8-24, 2014. Participants would apply for the program by December 13, 2013, guaranteeing their ability to participate fully in the January residency, with successful applicants offered a stipend for their full participation provided by the Kupferberg Center. Recruitment included a combination of Raffo, Russell, and El-Sayed attending club recruitment fairs for new students, meetings of the Muslim Student's Association and Persian Club, connections with the leaders of the on-campus mosque, and classroom visits.

The classroom visits were by far the most successful forms of recruitment. Raffo visited seven classrooms in the Political Science and Religion Departments that focused on Arab, Arab-American, or Muslim themes or issues, reaching a total of 215 students and six Professors, including two of the leaders of CERRU. In these classroom visits, she presented a monologue from her own solo piece about Iraqi women, NINE PARTS OF DESIRE, and then engaged students in discussion on the piece followed by a brief writing exercise and share-out session. These sessions ended with a brief survey administered by El-Sayed asking students to reflect on the use of theatre to catalyze discussion on political and religious topics, and finding out who might be interested in continuing the work in January. Professors had a notably positive response (in fact, the two CERRU-affiliated professors have requested that Epic and Raffo build a 4-session in-class residency program for Fall of 2015, which may or may not fall under the auspices of this program, depending on how the partnership with QC progresses). Several students from day one requested to be able to return for sessions on day two or three; all of these women proceeded to commit to the January residency. By December 13, the roster of 11 participants for January (in addition to El-Sayed) was set.

In early January, Raffo, Russell, and Dunning met to create the surveys that formed the core of the assessment model. Because we knew by then that privacy was going to be critical to the participants -- as we moved through the process we discerned it was highly unlikely that we would present any of the participants' work publicly at the end of the residency due to their safety and identity concerns -- Dunning created an ingenious system of online anonymous reporting so that each participant essentially created a file that they contributed to daily, using the material from the daily reflections to then answer the surveys online. There were four total surveys created:

- 1) an Intake Survey focused on participants' self-descriptions, perceptions about the purpose and role of theatre, and expectation of skills that would be developed through the residency;
- 2) a mid-Residency survey focused on changing perceptions of self through the theatrical storytelling process;
- 3) an Exit survey that brought participants back to many of the same questions of the Intake Survey, but also asked (in a component added during a mid-residency meeting between Raffo and Dunning) key questions about what a theatre FOR and BY Arab, Iranian, and Pakistani women would look like; and,
- 4) a Network Mapping exercise focused on who the participants admired or felt were influential, and who of those they might invite to a sharing of their work (by the end of the residency, participants had each developed at least ten pages of theatrical material).

The residency consisted primarily of Raffo, with two days of visits from Russell -- the only male allowed to join the work -- using a variety of storytelling and improvisational writing

exercises to elicit personal stories from participants, including literal stories, dreams, poetic responses to photographs, and interviews of each other and outside family members. Using her own work, *NINE PARTS DESIRE*, as a model, Raffo helped participants shape their chosen stories into monologues, work that they shared with each other daily. Arguments about the political and social identity issues surrounding being an Arab-American young woman (e.g. "how I see myself vs. how others see me", "what wearing hijab means in an American collegiate context") were common, and informed the work, as were emotional outpourings as long-held secrets were shared. While these revelations and the emotional repercussions of sharing temporarily halted the writing process, they proved to be watershed moments for each woman and were crucial in creating an atmosphere of working through issues as opposed to working around, as well as establishing a tight-knit community of trust. As was evident in the survey responses, it became clear to everyone that the primary role of a theatre for and by Arab-American women would be to develop and promote empathy within a community that is internally divided about whether or not to talk about their lives publicly.

There was a campus sharing on February 12, 2014, of the initial student work, entitled *WHAT HAPPENED TO NOURA?* (Noura was one of the participants, whose interview with her mother formed part of her final piece and was framed with her refrain "What happened to Noura?"). The participants each contributed one piece to the final product, and then Raffo and Russell created a dramaturgy that told a potent story of young women struggling to find a place within their Arab community, their American community, and even their family. Much of the material was shocking enough (several of the women are survivors of extreme physical and sexual violence) that several participants asked that their names be changed and neither attended nor invited anyone to the final event. Three participants, however -- Alaa, Nashwa, and Noura -- insisted that their names be used because they felt it was time their stories were told. As planned, we also brought in an additional resource artist for the rehearsal of the final piece, an improvisational Arabic singer named Gaida Hinnawi who worked with Heather and two of the other professional actors we hired to present the work (the participants, in the end, chose not to act out their own work). The presentation was attended by 45 members of the Queens College community who were invited by CERRU and the Kupferberg Center, and an additional 36 parents, peers, and mentors who were invited by participants. It was followed by an intense talkback about the issues raised by the play and a sharing of food and music.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

The bond forged between Raffo and what we now call the "Core Women" is the primary reason the trajectory of the Residency is shifting. The original plan called for a second Phase I project with an entirely different group of people in May of 2014. By mid-March of 2014, it was clear that this group of Core Women wanted and needed to continue to work with Raffo on a new project. The idea of taking the script from the February 12 presentation and turning it into an actual play -- rather than essentially a series of stories and monologues -- was discussed, but there was a sense among the Core that they wanted to challenge themselves a bit theatrically and break out of the straight "storytelling mode." They were concerned, after the participant attrition surrounding the presentation as well as some negative comments at the presentation from Arab-American attendees, that their stories might not be as influential as they desired when presented so bluntly. Russell proposed the idea of considering using Ibsen's *A DOLL'S HOUSE* as a framework, either adapting it, or using its story and questions in a modern context to link the content they wanted to share (could an Arab-American woman leave her husband and children suddenly

without violent consequences?). There were some obvious and exciting links ("Noura" and "Nora" for instance), and so the team went to see a production of the play at Brooklyn Academy of Music. The group has met six times since to read sections of the play and discuss how they might adapt it or use it.

A fledgling plan for the next work period (June 2014 -- January 2015) has now been put into place. Queens College wants to continue their association with the project, so they have decided to collaborate in two ways. First, in the near future, they will provide consistent space for reflection and development meetings with the Core Women, as well as provide a stipend for participant Alaa to become Raffo's assistant for the summer of 2014. Second, they have requested a next Phase I program, with a new group of participants, in January 2015. We believe that this will be an excellent opportunity to test out some lessons learned re: recruitment, marketing, project design, and presentation of work, and so have decided to make this our third Phase I.

Our second Phase I project will be in partnership with both the AAFSC and the Arab-American Association (key leaders of this Association attended the presentation on February 12 and immediately asked to be included), with a projected timeline of July/August 2014. Exact project design is under discussion, but the fundamental plan is to bring together a group of much younger Arab-American girls (ages 12-16) who are in a daily literacy class each summer with a group of older Arab-American women (ages 40-60) who work as volunteers at the community center in exchange for services such as employment consulting and English literacy. Raffo, using the Core Women as teaching assistants and mentors, will conduct a similar storytelling residency for approximately six days with this multigenerational group (of ideally 25-30 women total). Then, the play A DOLL'S HOUSE -- in a new boilerplate adaptation that Russell and Raffo will put together with the help of the Core Women, one which places the story into a contemporary urban Arab-American context -- will be studied by the entire group. Participants will then adapt their own stories to fit into the framework of the play. We have not decided exactly how the dramaturgy will work, or whether there will be any attempt to put together a final presentation that includes the DOLL'S HOUSE adaptation; the goal is generative, revolving around self-expression and empathy, not on theatrical construction or clarity.

In the Fall of 2014, we'll embark on what we call Phase II, where the Core Women (we hope that the entire group will stay together) and a select group of these new participants will work together to create a "Remix" of A DOLL'S HOUSE using Epic's award winning after-school Shakespeare Remix program as a model. In this project, traditional metrics of quality in a theatrical work will be in play, but we will also begin the project knowing an audience WILL be added, ideally in large numbers, at the final three presentations. So we will design our next set of assessment protocols around obstacles this community faces to theatrical presentation, and work closely with the participants to design an event that will maximize attendance.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

As with any pioneering community based artistic endeavor, we encountered challenges to our project assumptions and obstacles to achieving our goals, the learnings from which we are committed to sharing in our ongoing commitment to develop collective artistic best practices. Our key findings include (1) the importance of multiple assessment/reflection moments, which we built into our initial assessment model, as well as active analysis of the assessment findings, (2) the critical need to refine the process to reflect the real-world

emotions, experiences and ramifications of the participants, as well as (3) the value of creating a framework to allow for the potential of participants who desire deeper/ongoing engagement with the goal of building theatrical demand among previously under-served constituencies, in this case, specifically Arab-American communities.

We also learned the value of participant anonymity when giving feedback. Our ongoing surveys yielded more interesting, specific, personal and ultimately more useful information than we believe we would have elicited via recorded interviews, group discussions, or even non-anonymous surveys.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

Rather than describe the lessons learned in this narrative, we are including Anne Dunning's 10-page report on Phase I that captures all the information, learnings, and key quotes (see attachments). While we could pull excerpts from the report, we believe the Doris Duke Foundation and the principals behind the Artist Residency Program would be interested in reading the entire report, as it's not only very informative, it's also quite an engaging read.

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

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