

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
Project Progress and Successes
<p>The second phase of the Heather Raffo Residency to refine best practices for building theatrical demand among Arab-American communities has been a continued success, though its' trajectory continues to bend slightly away from the original plan. In fact, we have even refined our definition of who exactly we're serving and whose demand were researching, which is specifically now "Middle Eastern-American women." Once again, this bend has happened for the right reasons: (1) a collaborative and responsive set of partners at Queens College, notably at their Center for Ethnic, Religious, and Racial Understanding and their director Sophia McGee, the Arab-American Family Support Center, and the Arab-American Association in Bay Ridge (2) a detailed assessment plan that is having a formative impact on Heather's work and the evolution of our project design, and (3) most importantly, an incredible and sustained response from our initial group of participants (our "Core Women"), including their recruitment of new members to this core team.</p> <p>To re-cap our first year briefly (May 2103 -- April 2014), the team engaged in 7 weeks of planning and training, shaped our ideas for an assessment plan with Anne Dunning of Arts Action Research, and built and recruited students for a 12-day Phase 1 program during Queens College's "Winter Term" in January 2014. As previously reported, this was a remarkably successful first program, and laid the groundwork for further exploration with other populations but also caused a radical re-think of our second iteration with Queens College. We had intended to do a second "Phase 1" program in the initial year (Spring), but ended up putting funds toward TWO Phase I programs in the summer of 2014. Nevertheless, we learned a lot from this initial workshop and repeated it in an expanded version as our first Phase 2 program, based on Epic's Shakespeare Remix model using Ibsen's A DOLL'S HOUSE as a catalyst for participant writing.</p> <p>In Summer 2014, we launched two Phase 1 residencies, one with very young girls (11, ages 10-14) as part of the summer youth program at the Arab-American Family Support Center, and one with older women (12, ages 45-65) who were part of an English class at the Arab-American Association. In both residencies, each 12 sessions, Raffo, with assistance from several of the "Core Women" such as Nashwa El-Sayed, Alaa A., and Noura Embabi (lead writer of the QC 2014 script WHAT HAPPENED TO NOURA?) and several days of visits from resources artists like Russell and Epic's Artistic Director Melissa Friedman, used 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 OF DESIRE, as a model, Raffo helped participants shape their chosen stories into monologues, work that they shared with each other daily. In very different ways, each of these residencies proved as effective as the initial Phase 1 with the QC students. All participants surveyed continued to show a great deal of agreement about the role of theatre in Middle Eastern-American women's lives (regardless of age) as a lifter of taboos, a chance to talk specifically, empathetically, and creatively about hardships that are never otherwise expressed; specifically, the hardships that come with feeling that you are "between identities," as one of the older women from the Arab-American Association</p>

put it.

We embarked on our first Phase 2 program with the "Core Women" of Queens College in October 2014, with weekly get-togethers to read the text of Ibsen's A DOLL'S HOUSE. In April of 2014, Raffo took a group of 9 of these women to see the play performed at Brooklyn Academy of Music on Russell's recommendation, and they were entranced, feeling that it was a perfect jumping-off point for their own writing. Raffo and Russell determined that our goals for the Phase 2 program, modeled on Epic's successful after-school Shakespeare REMIX project, were two-fold: first, that the women show dedication to sticking to the project across a much longer time window (8 months rather than 4 weeks), and second, that they put an emphasis on scene-writing in addition to self-expressive monologues. Our hope was to see the young writers (9 vets and 6 new) begin to hold themselves to authentically-professional visions of a script-in-performance. Unlike the first iteration, which was more exploratory, it was made explicit that these participants would write a complete full-length script to be performed by professional actors in a theatre housing up to 200 audience members. Funnily, this is in direct contradiction to what was predicted in last year's Interim Report where it was mentioned that we were planning to explore A DOLL'S HOUSE -- "the goal is generative, revolving around self-expression and empathy, not on theatrical construction or clarity" -- that's how swiftly things change in a residency where the leaders are in such close collaboration and the assessment piece is actually being incorporated in a conscientious and iterative fashion!

In January, the group began a series of 16 writing days, with the new participants doing a "shotgun" version of Raffo's monologue work over the first 2 days while the vets worked with Russell to deeply analyze the moment-to-moment transactions of A DOLL'S HOUSE. Back together in a single group for days 3-16, the original plan was to have each writer create a basic scenario that brings A DOLL'S HOUSE into a contemporary milieu, either American or Middle-Eastern. These scenarios were to be shared, and then the group was to come to a consensus on the single story they were going to work together on to adapt A DOLL'S HOUSE. Instead, because each scenario was so richly detailed (many of which were creatively based on personal experiences), we instead encouraged each writer to choose 2 "critical moments" from the original play and re-write those as new scenes. In the end, all 16 writers wrote at least one monologue and one scene, and Noura Embabi once again led the way by creating an entire new 5-scene, 40-minute A DOLL'S HOUSE, set in Queens with an Egyptian couple failing to adjust to life in America. Raffo, Russell, and the participants (notably Noelle Ghossaini, a graduate student, who was appointed Associate Director by the team) putting together a 2-hour script using Noura's as the base story with other scenes entering as interstitials.

Two weeks of rehearsal with 6 professional actors (and including two of the participants performing monologues as well) culminated in performance on Wednesday, April 22, 2015 at the Colden Auditorium of the Kupferberg Center as part of their "First Acts" Series. Turnout was significantly more robust than the prior year's reading (approximately 130 attendees rather than the 45 from 2014), although interestingly we did not see a significant increase aligned with and increase in the number of invites by participants. Noelle Ghossaini worked with Anne Dunning to meticulously track the invitees of each participant; but while in 2014 11 participants invited a total of approximately 25 audience members (not carefully tracked that year), and had 14 attendees, 15 participants inviting over 80 audience members still only yielded 21 attendees in 2015! We ascribed the difference to a marketing push on Epic's part (separate e-blast, e-blast to Kupferberg's audiences, personal invites to professors). But we do have to admit that there does not necessarily appear to be the same correlation in this community between a writer's participation and the turnout of their closest friends and relatives as there is in Epic's after-

school REMIX program (where routinely a participant will bring in 10-12 family, peers, and community members, 90% of whom have never seen a play).

As of May 2015, the partnership has yielded three Phase 1 programs over 2 years (QC, AAFSC, and AAA) reaching 39 Middle Eastern-American women with a total of 42 5-hour sessions and one Phase 2 program reaching 16 of those women with an additional 28 5-hour sessions.

Raffo, Russell, and Dunning meet regularly to refine the surveys that continue to form the core of the assessment model. To protect privacy and motivate honesty of response, Dunning has created an ingenious system of online anonymous reporting so that each participant essentially creates a file that they contributed to daily, using the material from the in-class daily reflections to then answer the surveys online. There are six total surveys currently in rotation that provide a 360-degree look at the process from the POVs of the leaders, participants, partners, audiences, and performers:

- 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 key questions about what a theatre FOR and BY Arab, Iranian, and Pakistani women would look like, to be filled out by participants following (and often in direct reaction to) public readings of their work;
- 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;
- 5) an Audience Feedback Survey after public presentations, which we initially designed for 2014's WHAT HAPPENED TO NOURA and then refined for 2105's A DOLL'S HOUSE; and,
- 6) a performer feedback survey, administered to the professional actors who come on board for the 2-week rehearsal process, which was useful in beginning to track the questions of "Artistic Quality" that have been emergent in this second year.

As of this moment, Dunning's report for this year is still being prepared and will be sent to DDCF upon completion. Here are some notable quotes drawn from several of the above tools:

"In our culture, girls are seen as subhuman so when a girl dares dream of a better life, a life in her control, a life where she can breathe and run and dance and question and think and desire and screw up and love and hurt and feel, she's seen as arrogant, because even if they don't say it out loud, they're thinking "How dare that subhuman, that penis-less freak, think she's owed the same as men?" They believe we lack: we lack brains, we lack religion, we lack everything. And in varying degrees we buy into this myth. It has been a long journey for me, but this program has helped me realize that I am no better or worse than any man, and that I no longer have to be anyone's puppet." (Reem R., Phase 2 QC participant)

Dear Ron and Heather, I just wanted to thank you for an incredible evening of theater last night. Thank you for all of the work that you've done with the students on our campus, for the extra writing and direction, and for assembling an incredible cast of actors to perform the piece (and please thank them for me! I'm not sure if I was able to catch up with everyone). I hope we can catch up soon and talk about where you see the piece and the workshop going at this point. I know you are busy, so whenever you have the time!
(Sophia McGee - QC Coordinator and Project Partner)

Just a little note to say a very big "THANK YOU!" for allowing me to be a part of the last few week's extraordinary work. I cannot imagine a more inspiring process --beyond grateful to have been involved! (Caitlin Cassidy -- actor, A DOLL'S HOUSE)

I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community so I related to the sense of powerlessness within a familial system, the fear of getting stuck in a lifeless marriage. Thank you! A beautiful exploration of authentic but rarely heard voices. (Anonymous Audience, A DOLL'S HOUSE)

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

The primary challenge we found with our new Phase 1 populations was mobility, a literal inability to travel outside of the immediate boundaries of one's neighborhood for a whole host of reasons. So, when we presented scenes from WHAT HAPPENED TO NOURA? at the Arab-American Association, we had 100% attendance from the women and even their families. But when invited to attend the workshop of A DOLL'S HOUSE at Kupferberg Center, we saw 0% attendance. While the desire for continued participation exists, it fails to transcend barriers like difficulties with transportation (not that it should be expected to be, necessarily -- all of the women asked said they had never been outside of Brooklyn since coming to the United States). We have found that keeping our focus on younger, more mobile women such as college and graduate students (in the sense that they are more willing to use the subway and bus systems of NYC to get places, or to bum rides) greatly mitigates these concerns. Our 12 Core Women travel everywhere, including now becoming regular attendees at Epic's public programming (10 of 12 attended at least one Shakespeare REMIX production in the 2014-15 Season, and the other 2 attended a panel and performance that Heather appeared on at the New School).

As a result, project design continues to bend as it revolves more and more around these young women and their bond with Raffo and Epic continues to deepen and their artistry to expand. Year Three will see us make a fairly massive shift, in fact, from the original design. In the original plan, Raffo was going to participate as a performer in A WINTER'S TALE during Epic's annual Shakespeare production and we were going to build a REMIX based on WINTER'S TALE that would align with (and even possibly integrate with) that production. Instead, our focus is now shifting to remain on A DOLL'S HOUSE, which leaders, participants, and partners agree is a play ideally-suited to explore the particular intersection of gender, political, religious, and civic identity that interest these young women and their communities. Although the particulars have not been ironed out, we are now planning to produce Raffo's own adaptation of A DOLL'S HOUSE - she has been so inspired by this project that she is now creating her unique vision of the play - intertwined with a combination of full plays by "Core Women" Noura Embabi, Reem R., and Megan Casey as well as possibly Nashwa El-Sayed if she remains in NYC and new writing from a new group of Phase 2 participants. The aforementioned "third-years" would also act as assistant instructors and Peer Leaders during the writing residency (likely again centered around a January project at QC that is likely to become an annual event sponsored by CERRU and Kupferberg beyond the timeline of this grant, which is exciting). The exact dramaturgy has not been determined -- will they be melded? Presented in rep? -- but the shift itself evidences a strong desire on our part and those of our participants to continue to write progressively more sophisticated and authentic theatrical material.

Our sense is, if we turn our attention more to production of these young people's work, we will also need to put a bit more attention on bringing in an audience that they help us connect to. So we will do a deeper analysis of the data we have about invitations and attendance, and perhaps conduct a broader focus group to see if we might figure out how to mobilize a college-student-heavy audience to attend a performance. Simultaneously, in response to what is clearly strong demand on the part of Epic's own audiences to hear these young people's voices, we are considering doing performances both on the QC campus AND at one of Epic's partner theatres in Manhattan, such as National Black Theatre. We are considering doing the performance as part of a kind of 5-week "Festival of Young Voices," something new at Epic that would also feature performances by the many students we serve in our Shakespeare REMIX and Epic NEXT programs in partnership with NYC public high schools.

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

Honestly, we don't have much to add here from what we reported last year. 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 and application of the assessment findings, (2) the critical need to refine the process to reflect the real-world emotions and experiences of, and ramifications on, 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 Middle Eastern-American women.

We continue to see the value of participant anonymity when giving feedback, and are happy that our tracking tools allow us to follow individuals through time and growth even though their names are hidden from us. In other words, we feel they give us honest and deep answers by being anonymous, but we don't lose out on the ability to track their changing language or opinions because we are able to follow their avatar, in some cases now for almost 2 years.

We are beginning to apply our commitment to this 360-degree, iterative mode of assessment to our education work generally, and are planning on hiring Dunning to begin laying the groundwork for a longitudinal study where we identify critical 21st century workforce "traits" and begin to build their development into our work with students in a methodical and transparent process that students can self-assess. We hope this process will end up giving our field some useful data on the unique role theatrical projects of depth and rigor can play in youth development. So, in terms of learnings that might be useful to others, we feel that we've learned that the assessment process, when undertaken with a combination of seriousness, creativity, and commitment to measuring outcomes and using those outcomes to inform project design, is a critical component in delivering programs that consistently raise the bar for participants and keep the artist-implementer engaged and excited.

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

Anne Dunning is once again preparing a comprehensive report on Year Two of the project that includes her findings, how the project team implemented this data in a way that

improved program design, quotes from participants and audiences, and etc... Said report will be mailed to Foundation (as well as posted on Epic's website) upon completion by the end of June, 2015.

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).

YES!
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