

New WORLD Theatre's Project 2050: A Call to Action

ANIMATING DEMOCRACY

SESSION DESCRIPTION: New WORLD Theater's youth initiative, *Project 2050*, is a multi-year exploration of the mid-century demographic shift, when it is projected that people of color will become the majority in the U.S. Addressing issues compelled by these changing demographics, the project engages youth communities, professional artists, scholars, and community activists in civic dialogue and artistic creation. The project promotes creative imagining of a near future when it will become imperative to not only address issues such as race construction, ethnic balkanization, social inequity, and power imbalance, but to move beyond these traditionally disempowering institutional frameworks. Presenters will recap the history and evolution of New WORLD Theater's youth initiative that began as separate programs in three Western Massachusetts communities and is now one multi-cultural community collaboration blurring the lines between intergenerational art, activism, politics, and culture. Through video, slides, performance, and dialogue, the *Project 2050* team, including three youth, will explore New WORLD Theater's intensive summer program to engage youth communities, the work's impact on year round activity in the various communities served; and how the work has unilaterally inspired the creation of a youth action community coalition.

PRESENTERS: *Roberta Uno, Talvin Wilks, and Uday S. Joshi, New WORLD Theater (NWT); M.J. Donoghue, Jackie Johnson, and Amira Schroeder, Project 2050 youth leaders*

The session began with a video on Project 2050 (20 minutes). M.J. Donoghue, a youth member of NWT, performed an original spoken word piece, inspired by Peter Carlo Recerra.

Talvin Wilks: The video trailer shows the breadth of what happens in a ten-day period. We also have other documentation—slides, videos, youth testimonials. Let's first begin with history and vision. Before Animating Democracy came into the process, there was a history of community activism already in place.

Roberta Uno: In 1979, I founded New WORLD Theatre for artists of color in a very white New England setting. It was about survival, initially. Gradually, over 20 years, the demographics started to change and catch up with us. We started as a student organizer project at the University of Massachusetts, without funding, as a response to a student demand for a cultural center. We started with a little proposal to student organizations on campus. Because we were associated with a university, we could not get state funding. We were locked out of the NEA and State Arts Council, so could not get national funders for 15 years. This idea really ties into Grace Lee Boggs' comment yesterday—this is not about funding, it's about what we do.

Then, eight years ago we started working more deeply with our community, and that's how the 2050 project came about. *Roberta showed slides of the following intergenerational projects:*

Tales from the Flats (dealing with violence, class issues, educational opportunities, sexism, homophobia in the Latino community)

Society UnMasked (dealt with violence in the home)

Project with Vietnamese Refugee Group

Partnership with Cambodian Classical Dance Group

Partnership with African American Group (Southwest Medical)

Roberta: The change in our methods began after a PACT Conference. Confronted with the idea of exploitation of youth, we wanted to give them more agency and use a youth-based aesthetic. So we created the *Simultaneous Histories Project* that put family history in the perspective of the WORLD. Using four dates—two in the past, one in the present, and one in the future—events from the past merged with scenes from that period, and the future. This is where the date 2050 came in.

Uday Joshi: Regarding the growth of the organization, there were only a few people involved in the beginning. Now there are 45. There were only 15 (available) spots last year, and I had 90 applications.

Roberta: It was weird to run a program with different rules for different communities. One would kick out youth for smoking, the other had smoking breaks. We didn't really know what their commitment was for us. We were trying to get scholars to connect with youth.

Talvin (*to youth participants*): How did you get involved?

M.J. Donoghue: I started with a paid position as hip hop drummer. It totally busted my brain wide open into thinking about politics, and the media, and my relationship to the world. I've been involved in it ever since my sophomore year of high school. It's taught me so much, it's opened my mind to different aspects of performance. Taking beat-box classes, taking break dancing classes, the Knowledge for Power sessions. You kind of feel obligated to take from those sessions. It kind of seeps into your work naturally. Once I got out and started doing my own personal writing, I felt a responsibility to share the knowledge I'd learned at 2050. It just infused itself into my work.

Talvin: Would anyone like to talk about the thematic structure?

Amira Schroeder: I joined the third year of 2050. The theme that year was conflict. The Knowledge for Power sessions were about those themes. Talking about Vietnam, Cambodia, Homeland Security, Refugees...Other major themes: Identification, Exploitation, Negotiation, immigration...

Uday: The themes were developed by peer leaders who would talk with artists and scholars about what issues they wanted to investigate. This happened before the ten-day program started, and even before the youth arrived. There was lots of community dialogue, not just top-down structure.

Roberta: We'd have lots of brainstorming sessions with scholars, activists, elders, and artists—well-known and respected people.

Talvin: It is a ten-day process. The themes have already been chosen and scholars have identified what they want to do in the Knowledge for Power sessions.

Uday: We have a development process over 5 days, then the performance.

Jackie Johnson: The day is broken down into workshops—singing, songwriting, soundscapes, writing, beat boxing, break dancing—we also have the solo works.

M.J.: Solo chapters started to encourage youth to continue writing throughout the year.

Uday: After the artistic track, we would get into our scholar sessions.

Roberta: This is really important to bring everyone together. Artists are required to be there.

Uday: It's a great opportunity for intergenerational dialogue.

(Video: Knowledge for Power session)

Amira: *Project 2050*, for me, was my savior. They helped me piece my soul back together, they helped me live. I could identify where I wanted to go, and I had the support to help me get there. I wrote before 2050, but it was definitely random stuff. I would always write about everything but myself. (After *Project 2050*,) writing became an outlet. I turned to writing not just what's going on, but about myself. I was a poser before I came to 2050. I know now that I can succeed. I stepped up into my own skin and saw the world through my own eyes.

Amira performed a poem about striving for academic success:

“My voice, my voice, my voice, will sound out into eternity forever.”

Jackie: About the open mic session: The amount of people who wanted to get on the list was amazing.

Amira: There's so much support. Everybody feels really comfortable about getting up to the mic. I mean, everyone is going to hug you, maybe even a little too much.

QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

Grace Lee Boggs: How do you actually do this?

Talvin: There's a nomination process.

Jackie: We select people based on talents.

Roberta: The youth are all high school students from western Massachusetts, and the scholars are National. We started with Rockefeller money. We now have those kids who can afford to pay. The first year, all participants were paid because it was a project. We now have 20 youth counselors and peer leaders who are paid.

Q: I worked in a teen writing group. It's been hard for our youth to step up to the plate. What's the secret to the team spirit and getting more leadership in the group? How do you delegate leadership roles?

M.J.: I think having the same youth coming back has had a huge impact. They develop a confidence over time.

Jackie: The dynamics have to be really strong. There's this perception that the scholars and artists are not here to teach or preach. They're here to work with us. We're working together.

Uday: It's like a family aging and growing together. Our participants started out with the programs and come back to be peer leaders and artists.

Talvin: It's also about the creation of a product. It's a process, and there is an end goal. New WORLD continues to find ways that we can grow and evolve.

Uday: I've seen a lot of power-structured youth organizations. And for me, there could never be any authenticity or truth with that kind of structure.

Liz Lerman, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange: It's important, in the context of Animating Democracy, to describe dialogue and what that really means. Our project was to create as many types of dialogue. So there's no one model. It's in the art-making, and all of the depth of what your doing. It's our contention that it's a different type of dialogue when you're creating a product. When your ass is on the line—that's where dialogue really happens.

Jackie: A major concept was, How do we do this in the context of Hip Hop? So there's an aesthetic...

Roberta: Challenging the notion of "welfare theatre," I do understand that community-based theatre becomes associated with mediocre art. This is the Hip Hop generation. Let's bring them in and really push to stretch their limits, and go higher.

Q: How do you put together performances at the end of the ten-day period?

Uday: The first 3 days—pumping out knowledge, making sure everyone is on track. The pieces begin forming.

Talvin: It's an amazing, overwhelming process. There are strategies built in at the very beginning. One of the things we experimented with was overlapping artists having collaborative partners, who immediately hit up against what youth are responding to, and started talking and collaborating with youth. My role this year was to be more of a drama curator—getting a feel for things that connected, making lists of ideas: It's a fast process.

Roberta: You have to be nimble. If you come in with a curriculum, it's not going to work. Flexibility is key. It's okay if there isn't a product, or if someone doesn't want to participate: when you open it up like that, everybody does.

Q: I work with Spoken Resistance in DC. I'm wondering if you think you've had an impact on the community, and what is that impact?

Amira: We performed in my school. And my school really respected my work. After my teacher saw my piece, she told me we were going to have to work together more often.

Roberta: And we've performed in schools throughout the area.

Uday: The goal is to move beyond the walls of the retreat. We've performed in Boston and in NY. We opened for Dead Prez and Saul Williams.

Jackie: My goal has been, How can I take what I've learned and bring it back to my community? 2050 really allowed me to be who I am. It taught me how to write. My college essay is based on 2050.

Uday: The next phase of the initiative is called *A Call for Action*. We've invited others to come to the camp and see our process. This needs to evolve to another level—a coalition of youth arts and activists organizations, so we can start the dialogue on a wide level throughout our community. It's not just about communication, it's about the sharing of resources. Finding ways to connect energies. The kick-off is November 2, in Amherst.

Q: Is there any push for national change in policy, for laws that unjustly affect youth, such as Proposition 21 in California?

Uday: *Call to Action* is about specific communities. We're going to form an action plan for youth in different communities. Then, the youth can take these plans to their civic leaders.

Q: This program is such a blend of deep respect for the youth. Obviously there are groups who aren't going to treat the youth with as much dignity. How do you select partners? How do you discern which groups to link up with?

Uday: Any organization that expresses the goals of *Call to Action* is welcome. They have to really follow through on intention.

Talvin: *A Call to Action* does have a mission. It's an experiment, but we feel confident in the core structure that we can bring in others.

Grace: What does it mean that it's done under the umbrella of Hip Hop?

Roberta: For me, it means to acknowledge that this generation is the Hip Hop generation. It's about challenging the assumptions of what the media shows.

Talvin: There is a core aesthetic, and we're creating new work from this Hip Hop aesthetic. That's what makes this work engaging.

Jackie: It's how you interpret the culture. What is it to you? What is it to me? Why is our generation focused on Hip Hop?

Uday: Hip hop is about freedom of voice and speaking to youth and power. That is how I see the aesthetic.

M.J.: Kids who are already doing things on their own... so you bring in artists to engage them and give guidance.

Amira: Youth start expressing themselves through Hip Hop, and later find that they just want to express themselves. People who wouldn't have voice find a voice through Hip Hop, and then are able to use it.