Cultural Daily

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Theatre in Space: Adventures in Cyberturgy

Anne García-Romero · Thursday, September 22nd, 2011

I fidget in my chair as three actors read the first act of my new play Paloma, in New York City. I've never heard this draft aloud so like most playwrights I know, I'm hoping I can truly hear my play. Paloma explores the lives of Ibrahim, a Muslim-American, who falls in love with Paloma, a woman of Puerto Rican descent, while they're studying ancient Muslim Spain in grad school at NYU. The couple soon travels to current day Spain where they grapple with the issues surrounding their religious differences.

I encountered a remarkable fourteenth century Muslim Spanish treatise on love, *Ring of the Dove*, written by Ibn Hazam and was moved by its elegant, witty and intricate considerations of romantic relationships. Inspired by Hazam's text, I wrote my play while living in Los Angeles as a response to the post 9/11 climate of religious intolerance. So it's meaningful to me that my piece is now being read for the first time in New York City as a good portion of the play is set there and these NYC collaborators seem to really connect with the material. I'm also excited about this New York City reading because I'm watching it live…on my laptop while I sit in my dining room in South Bend, Indiana.

I'm part of the LoNyLa Writers Lab founded by J. Dakota Powell, a Eurasian writer-producer based in London. LoNyLa is a rapidly evolving global artists network, creative lab and producing organization named for its initial hubs in London, New York City and Los Angeles. The lab combines traditional writing development models with an online platform that allows audiences in these cities (and anyone who has a decent internet connection) to simultaneously experience readings of new work for theater, film and television. This is writing development for the twenty-first century or cyberturgy if you will. It's a new model that fosters international connectivity and offers artists across the globe greater access to development. It provides a virtual venue where writers can present their work via digital collaborations as well as engage in a platform for receiving feedback.

My own playwriting life is peripatetic. I moved to New York City after grad school, relocated to Minneapolis for a fellowship, landed in Los Angeles for a decade of writing and teaching and am now based in South Bend, Indiana where I write and teach at the University of Notre Dame. When Dakota emailed me about joining LoNyLa last fall, I immediately accepted her offer and agreed to submit my play, *Paloma*, in consideration for their inaugural writers lab. Over the years, I've learned to be open to the unexpected ways in which new play development can occur so this seemed like a promising prospect, especially since I'd just moved to a new city and had yet to

connect with a community of theater artists. While the amazing Chicago theatrical universe is right nearby, at that moment, I had yet to spend much time there. I was attracted to the fact that LoNyLa's lab could swiftly offer me multiple readings of my play in three cities: Los Angeles, New York City and London, with a diverse array actors and directors in each location, plus a dramaturg to work with me through the entire process. And the remarkable part? I'd collaborate entirely from my computer in Indiana. I felt encouraged and freed from my theatrical isolation when Dakota informed me that my play was one of nine works chosen for the lab. The following is a brief chronicle of my subsequent adventures in cyberturgy.

New York City, March 2011 – Digital Collaborations

I trade emails with my New York director, Nelson Eusebio, LoNyLa NYC co-artistic director, and Rachel Ely, my dramaturg, about our collaborative process, their initial feedback on the script and issues of casting. I keep asking Nelson, "How exactly is this going to work?" He reminds me that for this very first reading, the lab is still working out the kinks and that we'll figure it out.

Next, I camp out in front of my laptop in my dining room in Indiana and make a Skype call to join the New York rehearsal of my play. I am greeted by the somewhat grainy images of three actors gathered around a table in a Manhattan rehearsal room. We read through the draft and I participate, joining in the discussion, taking copious notes and answering questions they have.

Two days later, on the presentation day, one hour of each of the three participating writers' work is read in each city. I navigate online to the LoNyLa broadcast channel where my computer screen is divided into four squares: a theater in a church in New York City, a conference room on the lot of Paramount Studios in Los Angeles and a loft rehearsal space in an arts complex in London. The fourth square is reserved for live chatting where posts start with, "Los Angeles, can you hear us?" written by Dakota in London.

London goes first. We watch scenes from *The Writer and the Monster*, a screenplay by Ché Walker, about a working class woman trying to connect with a street kid in London. Next, the first act of my play, *Paloma,* goes up in New York City. There are some echoes and reverb but all in all, I feel good about the presentation. Last, we see scenes from, *Yosemite*, a play by Daniel Talbott, in Los Angeles about siblings coming to grips with violence in the woods behind their trailer. I feel exhilarated after spending three hours connected to three cities with three performance texts and dozens of artists collaborating in service of developing new work, all while never leaving the state of Indiana.

Los Angeles and New York City, April 2011 – Virtual Feedback

A revised first act of my play is read in New York City, again directed by Nelson. But this time, the second act is read in Los Angeles directed by Roger Q. Mason. I experience a similar positive collaborative dynamic, but with one new element: a post reading discussion via Skype, which had just released a new feature where multiple parties can speak and see one another simultaneously. Soon, Dakota links me in and I'm part of some sort of onscreen dramaturgical chat room reminiscent of *The Brady Bunch* intro with smiling faces framed in squares. I join the talking heads in London, New York City, Los Angeles and other locations. The feedback session begins.

In my work as a teacher, I facilitate post-play reading discussions with my students all the time but this takes navigating feedback to a new level as I'm now juggling responses from theater artists scattered across the globe. I'm a huge proponent of the critical response process devised by U.S.

choreographer Liz Lerman so I use her format here. I ask what struck people in the reading (i.e. moments, images, characters, etc.) and if they had questions about the play. I find the experience of gathering simultaneous transatlantic feedback highly useful. People in three cities give me a generous quality of attention for two hours, first as they experience my play and then as they offer feedback and I receive the benefit of this multi-city, transcontinental, transatlantic brain trust.

London and New York City, May – July 2011 – International Connectivity

Each reading of *Paloma* takes place roughly three to four weeks apart so I rewrite in the interim and my London reading benefits from a script that has already been read and considered in two cities. Laura Kriefman, my London director, Rachel Ely, my tireless dramaturg and I have a fruitful Skype call as we discuss how to approach this third reading. Laura expresses an interest in exploring the physical life of the play. I'm taken by the idea because the prospect of seeing this British cast inhabit the three-dimensional landscape of my American play intrigues me.

During the presentation, I learn a great deal about my characters' intensity and passions. The camera follows the actors playing Ibrahim and his friend, Jerrod, in a heated argument and later focuses in on the female actor playing Paloma as she poignantly reads a bittersweet monologue. I feel thrilled to collaborate with the team as I'd never visited England nor worked with British theater artists before. Their distinct talents and European sensibilities especially provide new insights into my script's transatlantic settings. Dakota offers me the opportunity to have the entire play read one last time in New York in July with Nelson directing again.

The variety of feedback I receive from this multi-cultural community of collaborators proves extremely useful. All in all, I gain the opportunity to work with sixteen theater artists with diverse cultural backgrounds including Asian-American, Mexican-American, African-American, Lebanese-American, Puerto Rican and Armenian-Dominican among others. I create six new scenes inspired by this collaborative feedback, which expands my play from eighteen to twenty-four scenes. For example, I learn that I need to further explore the arena of Ibrahim's faith. In between readings, I attend a service at a local mosque and delve again into the *Ring of the Dove* text. I consequently write several new scenes exploring Ibrahim's Muslim beliefs, his father's struggle with his son's inter-faith relationship and Paloma's desire to visit his mosque. In the end, my play has deepened and grown substantially as a result of participating in this global cyberturgical process including these three directors, five casts and one dramaturg in three cities spanning six-thousand miles over a period of five months.

London, June 2011 – Live Connections

I climb the wooden steps to the second floor of the Rag Factory, an arts complex on Heneage Street in London, on a warm summer evening. I'm visiting London for the very first time and am excited to attend a LoNyLa reading live. Dakota greets me with a welcoming smile and immediately ushers me over to her laptop to show me how she's preparing to digitally record and live stream the evening's reading via LoNyLa's website. Soon, I find a seat in the second row with the live audience gathered and the reading of Paul Charlton's Little Fish, a play about three troubled youth in County Durham, England, begins.

As I depart the Rag Factory later that night, I'm grateful for the opportunity to meet most of my London counterparts in person. What began as grainy images on my laptop are now materialized in

the flesh as vital theatrical collaborators. I marvel at this twenty-first century technology and its power to broaden the development of my play and my artistic journey.

Dakota and I take the metro together as we continue to connect in person for a few more fleeting moments. Soon, I hop off at my transfer point while Dakota hurtles away into the London underground. I race to make my subway transfer when I learn that my metro line has stopped for the night. I climb out of station onto the street with absolutely no idea how to return to my hotel in West Kensington. After advice from numerous kind Londoners, two bus rides and hoofing it several blocks, I arrive safely back at my hotel. As I settle in for the night, it occurs to me that my journey in returning to my London hotel mirrors much of what I've learned during my LoNyLa adventures in cyberturgy:

1. Rely on the kindness of strangers in distant cities.
2. Ask questions in order to navigate through the unknown.
3. Trust that you will find your way.
4. Hop on unfamiliar modes of transport.
5. Travel through foreign territories.
6. Be on the look out for familiar landmarks.
7. Transfer between different lines of connectivity.
8. Stay open to the unexpected.
9. Express gratitude for acts of generosity.
10. Discover a new kind of artistic home.

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