Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Urban Echoes: A Civic Voice Installation

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, April 20th, 2016

Today I digress slightly from ***ScreenDance Diaries'*** usual format of profiling the interface of dance and camera to profile a live event that took place on the streets of Downtown Los Angeles this past weekend. Yes there *was* dance, and yes it was captured on film (viewable on a teaser below), but more to the point there were voices raised in song with a vision of creating a crack of joy and optimism on the streets around Skid Row.

Urban Echoes was the brainchild of Stephen Glassman of Stephen Glassman Studio. Currently working on an eight-story public sculpture that will compliment the main entry of Bjarke Ingels Group's inaugural North American skyscraper – the VIA tetrahedron – on Manhattan's West 57th Street, overlooking the Hudson River, Glassman often works late into the night. Noticing the sounds of agony and anger emanating from the streets around him, he formed an idea: **what if the streets resounded in song instead?** The idea was shared, and through Glassman's studio team he was connected with Leeav Sofer, voice teacher and choral conductor at Colburn School, and director – along with the assistance of Christopher Mack and Kate Richards Geller – of the wonderful Urban Voices Project, who bring music, health, well-being, and community to one of the largest homeless neighborhood in the United States. My company, Sarah Elgart / Arrogant Elbow, came on board to co-produce and create a bit of choreography both for a dancer, Alyssa Allen, as well as gestures for the chorus with whom I was assisted by dancer/artist Zoe Rappaport. Together, with this notable team of vocal & movement experts, and Stephen Glassman Studio's Aaron Slavin, Catherine Menard, Brian Dyer, and Amanda Moret, a remarkable volunteer choir composed of many individuals from Urban Voices and others from throughout the city at large was assembled.

Leeav Sofer leads a volunteer chorus

Inside a little over one month, in addition to recruiting a chorus of over 30 individuals, the team selected 4 songs which Sofer arranged, and designated a trajectory of sites from which the songs would resound. Starting from the rooftop of Glassman's studio the chorus proceeded, singing, to a resonant and empty, mid- building studio space overlooking San Pedro Street, to the corner of 5th and San Pedro proper, and finally back up to the rooftop for golden hour.

From one rehearsal to the next the numbers fluctuated, and some individuals worked through hesitation and personal issues, but their intent stayed strong. In its final iteration, the chorus sang a processional medicine melody while travelling with the words, *"I am, you are, they are, we are,"* as well as Cesar Franck's "Ave Maria," the traditional "Wings of a Dove" inspired by Rhiannon's arrangement, and Otis Redding's break out & boogie version of the spiritual "Amen."

Dancing on the roof

By the time we made our way down from the rooftop it was an unseasonably warm, late Sunday afternoon on the heavily littered corner of 5th and San Pedro. Many people of all ages were seated or lying on the sidewalk, others loitered in the middle of the street or meandered over from nearby corners, and others still ignored us and walked angrily by. Police cars and other traffic drove on undeterred… Just another day in Downtown LA.

Urban Echoes in procession down San Pedro

Yet as everyone sang, looking around I saw heads beginning to slowly nod in rhythm. Little by little people began talking to the singers, singing with them, or offering their own songs. *"You've brought church to the streets!"* said one man.
"A bed is more important than a fighter plane," states a sign on a nearby street corner, and while this installation can offer no solution to the inexplicable and massive issue of homelessness, the assembled chorus *was* able, collectively, and for a brief period of time, to bring some beauty and respite in the form of song and movement to the otherwise hard and cold streets.

The calm before the storm, Alyssa Allen and I in rehearsal

Urban Echoes is a civic voice installation, an art action, a happening that raises human voices in song from Skid Row to echo throughout the cityscape. And as Stephen Glassman said to the volunteer choir, *"If in upcoming days I hear one person walking down the street singing 'Wings of a Dove', I know we will have succeeded*."
Amen.
URBAN ECHOES: A Civic Voice Installation From Skid Row
PRODUCED BY: Stephen Glassman Studio
with Urban Voices Project & Sarah Elgart/ Arrogant Elbow
CONCEIVED AND PRODUCED BY: Stephen Glassman
CHORAL DIRECTOR: Leeav Sofer
ASSOCIATE MUSIC DIRECTOR, VOCAL IMPROVISOR: Kate Richards Geller
CHOREOGRAPHER: Sarah Elgart / Arrogant Elbow
ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR: Brian Dyer
PERFORMANCE COORDINATOR: A. Moret
ASSISTANT CHORAL CHOREOGRAPHER: Zoe Rappaport
COMMUNITY ADVISOR AND URBAN SAGE: Christopher Mack
DANCER: Alyssa Allen
SINGERS: Pat Loeb, Sharon Chohi Kim, Megan Morrow, Fran Hartshorn, Toti O' Brien, Jonathan Gordon, Nima Norouzi, Michellel Sargean, Sarah Briuer Boland, Andre Powell, Kristy Baltezore, Jonas Sills, Catherine Menard, Brian Dyer, Alison Lewis, DeAna Brown, Andre Pittmon, Hortensia Tamayo, Katherine Lansing, Trevor Davis, Emily Hope, Myra Boime, Ilana Summers, Jody Gol, Laetitia de Lagasnerie, Margot Page,Dan Goldman, Christopher Mack,Kristy Baltezore, Kate Richards Geller, Leeav Sofer, Katrina MIller,Emi Macuaga
All music arranged by Leeav Sofer
FILM BY: Kevin Schlanser
STEPHEN GLASSMAN STUDIO – URBAN ECHOES TEAM
Stephen Glassman: Artist, Aaron Slavin: Projects Director, Catherine Menard: Creative Director, Designer, A. Moret: Social Media Production

URBAN VOICES PROJECT
Leeav Sofer: Project Director, Kate Richards Geller: Associate Music Director, Vocal Improviser, Christopher Mack: Community Advisor and Urban Sage
URBAN ECHOES FROM SKID ROW, LOS ANGELES, CA, APRIL 17, 2016
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https://vimeo.com/163629756

This entry was posted on Wednesday, April 20th, 2016 at 10:21 pm and is filed under Film, Music, Dance
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