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## Paths to Empowerment: How Theatre Collectives Are Building Equitable Power Structures

Wednesday, August 26, 2020 (0 Comments)

Posted by: TBA Staff

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by **Nicole Gluckstern**

As performing arts venues and companies have been forced by COVID-19 to shut their doors indefinitely, a narrative has emerged that going back to “normal” when the crisis has passed is not only unthinkable, but unconscionable. Even before the pandemic shutdown, theatre companies were grappling with big picture questions, as artists of marginalized and underserved communities pushed against the many structural inequities built into the industry.

Fortunately, we don’t necessarily have to reinvent the wheel. Many performing companies in the Bay Area are already working with different models of cooperative and collective governance. In these institutions, equity and inclusion are not just buzzwords or seasonal initiatives, they are principles baked into the operations and practice of each company. And in speaking with some of these companies, a big takeaway was that there is no *single* model of democratic decision-making and horizontal governance that *must* be adhered to. What’s important is adapting the model to fit the needs of the entity, and recognizing that those needs may change and evolve over time.



*Convoy* by Theatre Lunatico. Photo by Robin Jackson.

For Tina Taylor—the artistic director of Theatre Lunatico—operating the company through a process she calls “leadership through consent” is a way to break the “hierarchical/patriarchal” structures so many leaders base their methods on, regardless of gender. It’s also a way to break through the binary of voting either “yes” or “no” on a proposal. For Theatre Lunatico, the decision-making process is more nuanced, without formal votes being taken. This process is broken down by Taylor—who has an extensive background in conflict resolution and crisis counseling—in detail below.

- We all understand what it is that the group is discussing.
- We feel that we have all the information we require in order to be reach an accord.
- We have listened to the points of view expressed by everyone.
- We have voiced any thoughts and feelings we have.
- We have reached an agreement to move forward.

Taylor freely admits the process is not for everyone. It can be time-consuming, and “scary” for folks more accustomed to “speedy, unilateral decisions.” But for company members committed to “building community around ethics,” and having a voice in company affairs, the challenge of consent-based decision-making is worth the results.



*Superheroes* by Campo Santo. Photo by Joan Osato.

For Mission District-borne theatre collective, Campo Santo, the imperative to collaborate artistically was always a part of their creative framework. Co-founded by Margo Hall, Luís Saguar, Sean San José, and Michael Torres in 1996, Campo Santo has devoted itself to the creation of new works, using an organically-devised system of collaborative development that they have refined over the years.

“What I *love* about Campo, it’s always about the process,” company member Donald E. Lacy Jr. emphasizes in a group interview. “And it never ends, even after you close a show.” This process includes an open-ended series of table reads during which each piece of the script is analyzed, reckoned with, and shaped by the entire ensemble—always with the mindset of figuring out how to best honor the playwright’s intentions.

Other artistic decisions such as programming and co-productions are also up for group discussion, and while Joan Osato and Sean San José are generally responsible for the financial management (“the magicians with the money,” playwright Star Finch calls them), there are few company decisions made without at least some input from its members.

In addition to feeling empowered to weigh in on artistic decisions and development, each company member is able to fully realize their individual potentials by exploring different roles and responsibilities within the company. For A.M. Smiley, this exploration has taken her from assistant stage-managing to production management to assistant directing to playwriting over the past ten years. For her, the realization that she had the freedom to choose and change her artistic path was revelatory.

“The training is that you need someone’s permission, you need your artistic director’s permission, or the director’s permission, or whatever,” she explains. “And it was such a learning curve to have people be ‘if you wanted to do it, you should have just done it.’ In any other company if you tell



them you're not going to do the thing that they hired you for (i.e. production management)...then they don't talk to you no more...but I was able to switch around, and be seen as an artist. That was a really big deal for me personally, but also creatively."

"Any organization that you're dealing with is a reflection of the bigger power structure," Star Finch concludes. "Campo came together as a group of outsiders, and...formed a circle where they weren't going to mimic the way they were made to feel in other settings."



*Seeing Red* by the San Francisco Mime Troupe. Photo by Mike Melynk.

One of the oldest and best-known Bay Area-based theatre collectives is the San Francisco Mime Troupe—which makes both operational and artistic decisions through a “mostly” consensus process. Although the artistic team of their shows resembles that of a more hierarchical company—what is collectively-determined, usually months in advance, is what will the show be about, who will write it, who will be hired to fill the production roles, who will commit to acting in the Summer tour, and who might sit the season out.

Big picture operational decisions are also decided upon by the collective, and although the company is a designated 501(c)(3), with an active board, what collective member and resident playwright Michael Gene Sullivan is quick to point out is that their board is made up of folks who understand and support the SFMT’s mission of horizontal leadership. Famously multicultural and multigenerational, the collective is consciously selective about inviting new members, and even then not every invitee turns out to be a fit.

“Many people like the idea of a collective, but having grown up in a competitive, boss-driven structure they are sometimes actually more comfortable being told what to do,” Sullivan emails. “We’ve had people who crumple under the responsibility of collective membership, and others who

spend their time trying to figure out who is in charge. We've had collective members who insisted that we appoint an artistic director; that the democracy of the Troupe simply did not work. They are gone, and we are still here, working."

"I was really spoiled in a wonderful way by having the Mime Troupe be my first professional experience," collective member Rotimi Agbabiaka reflects. "To be in a room where I could express my opinion and shape things...I don't always get what I want, but there's a forum for me to speak. There isn't a mysticism about a "genius" artistic director...it's my fellow workers and we can do anything."

*Join a conversation on cooperative/collective governance in the arts, featuring the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Campo Santo, and others on Thursday, August 27, at 7PM. Online on Zoom, free Eventbrite RSVP required. [www.eventbrite.com/e/paths-to-empowerment-a-conversation-about-cooperative-governance-tickets-114463810338](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/paths-to-empowerment-a-conversation-about-cooperative-governance-tickets-114463810338)*

**Nicole Gluckstern** is an arts journalist and theatre-maker in San Francisco. You can read her most current work in KQED Arts, or stalk her on twitter at @enkohl

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