CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

MULTICULTURALISM AND DIVERSITY IN COMMUNITY ARTS EDUCATION

A conversation with Chike Nwoffiah, Executive Director, Oriki Theater (Mountain View, CA) and Liz Lerman, Founding Artistic Director, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange (Washington, DC)

By Heather Stickeler, Marketing and Communications Manager, National Guild

At the Conference for Community Arts Education in Los Angeles this November, Keynote Speaker Chike Nwoffiah and National Guild Leadership Award Recipient Liz Lerman called for a paradigm shift in the way community arts education providers perceive art, education and their relationship to community. Their speeches focused on issues of diversity, multiculturalism and accessibility, and also our need to continue to examine new approaches to these issues. In December, I reconnected with Nwoffiah and Lerman to discuss their perspectives in more detail.

Heather Stickeler: Why do you feel it is imperative to address issues of multiculturalism and diversity in the community arts education field at this time?

Nwoffiah

Chike Nwoffiah: If you look at the changing demographics of this country, we're looking at a new America where about one in ten Americans are foreign born. This is an America where people have come from all corners of the planet, bringing their different cultures with them and preserving these cultures. This is an America of transnationalism, where people are rooted in their past cultures or ancestries. For us to move forward and create a society where there is some sense of mutual understanding, respect, and tolerance, we need to affirm one another, honor one another and validate what each of us brings to the table. The thrust of my speech was really that we need to recognize the face of this new reality called "America" and challenge the institutions, infrastructures and relationships that have been dictated from the old America.

There is power in the exchange and transaction that arts education institutions are engaged in when young minds come before them. We need to begin to understand the profound nature of this transaction. Are we telling these young minds, directly or indirectly, that, because they are studying classical piano, they belong to some elite culture, a "high culture" of sorts, and that anybody outside of that culture is culturally inferior? Sometimes the work coming out of our own traditions habituates some of this thinking unintentionally. But until we begin to call it, challenge it, and educate the educators themselves, we're not going to get anywhere. Certain art forms that are centered in European cultures have historically been defined as the "classical," as the "high art," as the "thing to aspire to become," as the "real stuff." Everything else has been defined as peripheral. This needs to change because everyone ought to be validated. Everyone ought to feel that what they're doing is as important as the other.

Liz Lerman: If we start with some of what Chike said about affirm, honor and validate, there are ways that arts and culture are the absolute best places to lead the country in how we're going to make this work. But we also have to address some of our own past indiscretions around this. One of our dilemmas in art is that we tend to think that genius springs from the individual. You get an Elvis Presley who springs up "all of a sudden," when of course we know he was borrowing from all kinds of traditions. We are not good at acknowledging where we got our culture from, so this notion of affirming, honoring and validating might actually take us towards understanding. One of the things we need to learn to do is let people in on where I got that little rhythmic shift in my dance. From whom did I borrow that? So that then, people can observe how cultures sometimes absorb each other, sometimes live side-by-side, sometimes build something new together.

Lerman

CN: Often when these issues of cultural pluralism come about, institutions rooted in traditions begin to feel threatened, thinking we're talking about this tsunami of thought, of a revolution–and that's not what it is. I think people are perhaps afraid of the "other." They're sometimes afraid of who they don't know. Dr. King put it so well when he talked about how people fear each other because we don't know each other and we don't know each other because we don't talk to each other. We spend time in monologue rather than in dialogue. Fear is often a symptom of ignorance. Anglo-culture based institutions that are afraid or feel threatened by the suggestion that the time has come for self-examination are stuck in the past and will not survive. Students that come out of these institutions will be ill prepared to face the reality of a multicultural America. The idea is not for a ballet institution to switch its focus to tap, flamenco, gumboot dance, etc., but that the language used in describing "the other" should not suggest "cultural inferiority." A culturally imperialistic worldview has led to some of the darkest moments in our history. Luckily, the United States of today is not the United States of the 1800s and the early 1900s. The train of cultural pluralism has left the station. It is time for everyone to get on board or be left in the dust of history. It is only pragmatic for these institutions to wake up to the reality of the present and build foundations for their long-term survival. This should not be perceived as an abstract notion; we can and should start today. All we need is dialogue.

HS: If one of the biggest barriers to dialogue is fear, then how do we begin to move towards the path of understanding? How do we, as artists, educators, and administrators begin to make that shift?

LL: One solution, as Chike outlined, is that we actually cross over to each others' worlds and spend more time together. I would add that whenever there is change of any kind, there is loss. It isn't that America can be the same. It will not be the same. And I think that's thrilling. We're going to lose some things that were beautiful, but look at what we're going to gain. We need to help people through their sense of loss. There's something about the fact of acknowledging all the things that happen when things change and then moving

through all of that and presenting a way that it can be, and all the good that comes. With all the waves of immigration that have happened in the past we have lots of images and ideas to draw upon about how to do this.

CN: I think the Guild can be a vanguard in this. We've talked and talked. Now it's time for action. This conversation we're having is one action. But more importantly, from a strategic point of view, how does multiculturalism and diversity factor into the Guild's own mission statement? How does it factor into the Guild's own strategic plan? How do you, as the Guild, begin to help members understand the complexities that are going to be involved? In understanding the complexities, in giving members more information, in creating a safe place for them to air their fears and perhaps *address* their fears and exchange ideas with those that are moving forward, I think you can begin to have this thing percolate all over the country.

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LL: It's a real challenge for the Guild because you're dealing with cross-disciplines and then the disciplines all have their own issues. You're also dealing with different cultures and then even different kinds of organizations with different kinds of missions. What can we learn by bringing these disciplines and cultures in relationship with each other?

HS: The Guild's mission is to advance high quality arts instruction so that all people may participate according to their interests and abilities. As we embrace diversity, the question of what is "high quality" surfaces. High quality opposed to what? This question of quality can provoke a great deal of anxiety, especially in an age of assessment and evaluation, of fierce competition for funding. It also provokes anxiety when we talk about the survival of the "classics" at this time in US cultural history.

LL: That's why I raised the point about standards in my keynote. In my own work as a choreographer and teacher, I have three:

1) that people are 100% committed to what they're doing;

2) they know why they're doing what they're doing; and

3) something is revealed.

Now that last one is a little more subjective. What is revealed? It could be that the performer goes through a transformation; it could be that something about the world is revealed; or something in the institution is revealed. But something has to unfold that makes things different from where you started. Dancers might be able to get their legs up high but they don't have a clue why they're doing what they're doing. Whereas I can bring in a bunch of sixth graders who are just learning and they'll know exactly why they're doing what they're doing and they will be 100% committed and the room will be totally transformed by their presence. But that's where I think we could do some serious digging to try to get the classicists to address some of this. Studying modern dance in the 60s and 70s, I was raised in a tradition in which the individual's ability to create an absolute new movement vocabulary was the standard by which you would be judged. When I started to spend a lot of time with a particular group of African dancers, the work had nothing to do with advancing a particular movement vocabulary. It was all about the way they stayed connected. So a dance critic who comes to the theater—who would have been educated the way I was educated—*could* write about that company that they were terrible when in fact they were brilliant at what they were doing. This idea that a dance form could be about how people are connected, not about how an individual makes something brand new is spectacular for this country at this moment. Which of those two values might help us more at this moment in time? I've thought about how this question of quality can start to be the massive obstacle and I don't think that can be an option. It's almost as if you would like to wipe that argument off the table for five years or ten years. Let's come back to that in ten years. Meanwhile, let's go and see what happens!

CN: In cultural pluralism, you're allowing for all the forms and definitions of aesthetics to coexist. I do not subscribe to this notion that something will be "lost." I am not advocating a zero-sum game but a win-win approach that honors and respects all members of our world orchestra so we can all play our part in making the best music possible. In a space where we value each other, you wouldn't have that critic writing badly about the African dance form you were referring to because for them to critique they need to put on the lens through which that culture values dance. I come back to the fundamental question you are asking: how do we move forward? First we get the Guild to *practice* what it's preaching. If the Guild values these things, the foundations are going to catch on. It's just a question of beginning so we can get people comfortable with diversity and change. We tend to talk to people without allowing them an opportunity to respond and say, "You know what, I really would love to do what you're saying but I am scared to death! I think I'm going to lose my funding." We have to create a forum for people; we have to affirm their fears and give them the support they need to move forward. Some are going to need ten years to get there. Some are going to need tomorrow to get there. There's no one-size-fits-all process.

WHAT IS YOUR PERSPECTIVE?

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