

AVENUES OF CHANGE

By Catherine Filloux

A symposium entitled, “What is the Role of the Arts Presenter in a Community in Crisis?” was held in New York City on January 15, 2016. Organized as part of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters annual conference, this one-day pre-conference forum offered arts presenters, artists, academics, arts administrators and cultural workers the opportunity to become familiar with and reflect



The Liberian Women's Chorus for Change, photo by JJ Tiziou

on particular conflict or crisis issues in the U.S. as they relate to the work of arts presenters – those who present theater, music, dance and other performance-based art to the public. In the middle of the day, between presentations of specific artistic initiatives and discussions of challenges and strategies, the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change, an ensemble of dynamic vocalists, took center stage. The presence of the Chorus, and their work as artists and activists, brought home much that was being wondered about out loud during the day-long event, including the fact that alongside (and sometimes as support to) fabulous artists we can often find cultural workers contributing to peacebuilding and the arts in important ways.

In Philadelphia, a non-profit arts and social justice organization the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP) planted what would become the seeds for the creation of the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change (LWCC) back in 2011. The Folklore Project, staffed by cultural workers (a folklorist and two anthropologists), received a National Endowment for the Arts grant to work with Liberian artists with whom they had long-established relationships. Dudley Cocke, consulting on the program from Roadside Theater, facilitated story circles. The material shared at those story circles came from the Liberian artists’ own research. Liberian singers, dancers and a storyteller, equipped with tape recorders, captured words on the street from fellow Liberian immigrants. Their aim was to get a sense of the main current concerns of the community. Over the course of a year, working with what they had collected, the artists developed a new performance piece, involving dance, storytelling and acting. They performed this new creation, focused on the undermining of trust and goodwill within communities, for local Liberians at a small club. After the performance, audience members stood up and gave testimony: women spoke about surviving abusive situations, and about nurturing their children and themselves. These Liberian artists then decided to develop a whole new endeavor, addressing immigrant women’s isolation and abuse in the home.

The two original singers in the project Fatu Gayflor and Zaye Tete brought in two other singers, Marie Nyenabo and Tokay Tomah, and the Folklore Project helped to secure the funding to support the creation of The Liberian Women's Chorus for Change, a group of

award-winning, internationally acclaimed, ethnically diverse Liberian artists. Working with the Philadelphia Folklore Project, they've been using traditional songs, dances and drama to call attention to domestic violence and to connect Liberians in the Philadelphia area with relevant local resources.

Cultural anthropologist Toni Shapiro-Phim is the Folklore Project's director of programs, and the director of the LWCC initiative. In addition to documenting every aspect of the Chorus' work on video and in writing, Toni introduces Chorus members to information, individuals and agencies that can help push their efforts forward. Much of what she has done has served to build the capacities of the individual women in the Chorus, as community leaders and presenting artists in the context of an immigrant community in a large U.S. city. Part of what lends to the depth and potency of Toni's activities as a cultural worker at the Folklore Project comes from her experiences as an ethnologist and program director in Cambodian and Vietnamese refugee camps in Southeast Asia in the 1980s, and similar undertakings inside Cambodia in the 1990s and beyond. Selina Morales, director of the Folklore Project says, "Toni's work has been at an intersection between folk arts and social change, as she has documented and presented art forms that people relied on as they rebuilt their lives in refugee camps and resettled their homeland post-war. She has followed individual dancers through their careers and has watched them transition from star performers to master teachers. She worked as a resident scholar for a dance company in Cambodia and directed an archive of dance. All of these experiences have greatly impacted our work here over the past ten years. Currently, as the director of programs, her Liberian Women's Chorus for Change project is drawing on many of the skills she developed in Cambodia and through her life as a scholar."

The Chorus' singers all have day jobs unrelated to their art, whilst they were full time professional artists at home in Liberia. Their work with the Chorus allows them to take some time from away those day jobs to pursue what they know and love best. The ensemble does pop-up concerts in Liberian neighborhoods around Philadelphia, after church or in a park, for example. Because of their dynamism as singers and their songs' resonance, a Liberian audience of male and female and young and old always gathers. The singers place the traditional songs in the context of life now. As part of their performances, helpful local organizations are introduced and hotline numbers are shared. There's also time built in for questions and discussion. One Liberian preacher told Toni that the community will listen to these well-respected women singers, even when they touch on a sensitive issue like domestic violence, more than they'd listen to him; and a Liberian policeman remarked that such a project importantly offers community involvement before there is violence (which is when he usually has to step in). As immigrants, Liberians are sometimes isolated from services because of a lack of familiarity with the new systems or lack of English language ability; as immigrants with a recent history of war and exile in refugee camps, their traumas and losses are often just under the surface.

Because each of the singers is a famous recording star in her own right, together, their songs and messages command a large following. "Our work as the Liberian Women's Chorus here in Philadelphia has impacted people in our local community as well as

around the world – from Australia to Liberia,” explains Fatu Gayflor, artistic director of the Chorus. “Through YouTube, Facebook and live-streaming, our performances and discussions about domestic violence, ethnic tensions among Liberians and other community concerns have inspired people to look at their own attitudes and behaviors, and to think about ways we can work together so that everyone lives with dignity and safety. This is for the sake of our sisters, and the sake of Liberians as a whole.”

“Peacebuilding connected to treasured expressive means has the potential for great impact. Traditional song is just such a medium for Liberians,” explains Toni.

“If people are already engaged in a cultural practice they value so deeply that, through that vehicle they will be moved to consider positive next steps as a community, it is crucial to support their practice. Avenues of change are possible.”

PFM director Morales talks about Toni as a cultural worker: “Toni’s ability to connect directly with each Chorus member comes from being a keen observer of people’s needs and having a commitment to listen well to what people are saying about their daily lives. Toni recognizes that daily life has enormous impacts on artistic expression, and the reverse is true too. I think because of her decades of experiences working in war-torn contexts and witnessing how people rebuild their everyday life and systems of practice, she has a sharpened sense of how to encourage the chorus members to lean more deeply into their arts practice and to expect more from themselves. I have seen this transform the singers in the Liberian Women’s Chorus, causing members to further commit to developing their artistic practice in ways that can impact their local community in Philadelphia.”

Fatu Gayflor continues: “Toni’s wonderful skill as a listener and her thoughtful questions have brought so much out of us that we didn’t know we had. It’s as if there were all these pieces of stories that have come together over our time working with Toni, pieces that now form a whole. We had never written down the meanings of the songs we were singing; we had never thought so critically about why we were choosing to sing some songs for certain audiences and other songs in different situations. Spending time with Toni has been, like having a new, clear mirror in front of us that helps us see what had been hidden inside. This deepened knowledge of ourselves and our art, and the opportunities Toni has helped us create to be with our own community members in new ways, has led us to appreciate our art and its power even more.”

Cultural anthropologist Toni Shapiro-Phim has made arts and peacebuilding her life’s work. She first encountered the power of the arts in relation to war and displacement while working in a refugee camp on the island of Galang in Indonesia in the 1980s. The United Nations was assisting 10,000 refugees from Vietnam who had arrived on Galang by boat. Though there were few natural resources on the island, Toni noticed that the refugees built coffee shops in huts, recreating the ones they had at home, and did poetry writing and wood carving. On the other side of the island, she met a smaller group of refugees, from Cambodia, which the U.N. was also assisting. She learned they were from rural areas and had survived the Khmer Rouge genocide. Moved that they were teaching their children Cambodian dances and playing music on instruments they had built or

brought with them, Toni was immediately curious why dance would be their priority in such a terrible time in their lives. All her life, Toni had studied dance, mainly western modern dance and ballet, and felt compelled to explore the draw of dance for these Cambodians who had lost and suffered so much, and were still living in uncertain circumstances.

After a year Toni transferred to a refugee camp in Thailand where there were Cambodian, Vietnamese and Laotian refugees, and again she saw that dance was a key priority for the Cambodians. She decided to do graduate work with the end goal of understanding why Cambodian dance was so important in the context of this harrowing loss and on-going hardship, and enrolled in the Ph.D. program at Cornell University, in the department of anthropology. When it came time to do her fieldwork in Cambodia, because Cambodia was communist, and there was no U.S. Embassy there, Toni wasn't allowed into the country. She returned to a refugee camp in Thailand, as an alternative, to again work with Cambodian refugees. In Site 2, the largest of the displaced persons camps, she created a program, giving agency to Cambodian artists to document their own work. They worked together to videotape performances, do oral histories and photography. Site 2 was in a war zone, with various Cambodian political/military factions fighting against the government in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, and against the Vietnamese, who were in charge in Phnom Penh at the time. "Thousands of refugees would watch dance performances in the open air," Toni explains. "When artillery fire started up, everyone would run for cover, look for their children and jump into trenches for safety. When the shelling stopped, the performances would resume."

Because the government inside of Cambodia wanted to document Cambodian classical dance so that this pivotal tradition would not be lost -- eighty to ninety percent of the professional artists in Cambodia had died during the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975-1979 -- Toni eventually got her visa. In 1990, she began her research and documentation focused on the relationship of war and dance inside the country. Toni stayed in Cambodia for two and a half years, and then returned to Cornell to finish her dissertation entitled, *Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia*. She subsequently did post-doctoral work at the East West Center in Honolulu.

Chankeythya Chey (Kethya), artistic director of Amrita Performing Arts in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, tells me, "Toni opens doors for Cambodian art and artists to the world. Her work not only focuses on Cambodian traditional performing art forms, but also is about people, politics and social issues around the art." Toni has worked with Kethya and many other Cambodian artists and producers from Amrita Performing Arts, an international NGO committed to creating Cambodian contemporary dance and theater. Kethya describes Toni's talent as "revealing the unknown and speaking deeply about the individual. Through her work, I, as the younger generation of Cambodian artists, have deeper understanding about my own dance training, my teachers, and heritage." Producer/translator, Suon Bunrith, who has also worked for Amrita, says, "Toni's ability to understand the local language, tradition and live her life with local people has gained her huge respect and appreciation."

After Toni joined the Philadelphia Folklore Project in 2001, she observed that a refugee camp has similarities to certain urban environments in terms of population density, disenfranchisement in distressed neighborhoods, and the coming together of artists uprooted by war. The Folklore Project works to sustain vital and diverse living cultural heritage in communities in the region through collaborative projects, research, documentation and education, prioritizing folk and traditional arts in service of social change. Toni began to work with the Liberian refugee population in Philadelphia in 2002 when Liberia was still at war. It was instructive for Toni to see how art was practiced so far away from the homeland, as, she says, “a way for people to instill beauty where chaos existed, and to make connections despite rupture.” Dr. Laura McGrew, a consultant on peacebuilding and conflict transformation, describes Toni as “a mentor, supporter, champion and much more to a wide variety of artists in Philadelphia, Cambodia, and around the world.”

In November of 2015, the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change performed at World Café Live, a concert venue in Philadelphia. More than 30,000 people from around the world had clicked on the link to the live-stream of the show ahead of time. Liberians, especially, sent comments, hailing the singers as brave, beautiful and the pride of Liberia. At the symposium in New York in January, the Chorus made clear that the conversation about the arts and communities in crisis is filled with potential. The great effort of the Chorus continues, with the Philadelphia Folklore Project’s cultural workers fortifying their commitment to this collaboration and its potential for deepened impact within Liberian and other immigrant communities in Philadelphia and beyond.