

From: Deborah Pollard  
Date: 14 August 2007  
To: Paschal Berry  
Subject: Re: On Cross Cultural Collaborations

Hi Paschal,

Hmm my first Indonesian experience is kind of embarrassing...I performed in a children's theatre show about Indonesian flora and fauna. Yes that's right I played a bear, a gibbon and probably a coconut tree. It toured around East Java and Jakarta. Armed with a two-week crash course in Bahasa Indonesia, and a two-week rehearsal process in an Australian/Indonesian mining settlement in Kalimantan, we hit the road in a truck visiting a new village every two days for a month. Needless to say the Australian cast and crew suffered from severe culture shock, while our Indonesian colleagues wondered what on earth they had done wrong and how they could make it better. We spent a lot of time smiling and nodding at each other. I remember being mobbed by enthusiastic villagers who would touch us and run away laughing and on one occasion waking up to a sea of little children's faces who had been watching me sleep. We were bigger than the Beatles. But enough of this, there is enough mileage from this first trip to fill a novel.

The extremity of this experience was pretty life changing for a white middleclass princess. You can't help but come away with questions, most importantly questions that define your own cultural context. So I returned many times I guess in search of answers and yes like you I found myself in the position of 'untrained social worker' on a number of occasions. Through my initial contacts I ended up working with a youth theatre company in the slums of Jakarta and then with political theatre companies, all the time feeling a great sense of worth but a growing unease of always being on the outer. My artwork in Australia had in truth always been experimental but in Indonesia there didn't seem to be any room for this kind of artistic inquiry. We are talking about the mid nineties when Suharto was at the reigns and censorship was high, so artistic expression in the theatre circles became a form of protest and inevitably many companies were closed down on opening night and in extreme cases carted off to prison. I remember one playwright saying, I have to speak the truth and if they kill me for that so be it. This sent me into a lather of sweat and self flageration. What was I doing there again? Hmm...

But of course there were artists making amazing experimental work at that time, work that was political and well crafted. They were mainly installation artists and they became my collaborators. Was it because they were engaging in a more post-modern western aesthetic? At first yes but the more we worked together the more I learnt about Javanese thinking and the subtle cultural symbolism that separated their work from their western counter-parts. They were highly politicised but their questions around form and process were the same as mine and they like every artist were responding to their immediate environment. We had a meeting point and common ground and it was from here things started to fly. We made four large-scale performance installations together in Java, Hobart and Sydney. My main collaborators were Hedi Hariyanto, Regina Bimadona and Sutanto who are all visual artists.

Which brings me back to Australia and the work of multi-cultural artists and theatre practitioners here. It seems to me that the visual artists are more readily embraced here where as theatre practitioners have more difficulty. Is it partly a clash of aesthetics and cultural sensibilities. How do you accommodate a very particular cultural sensibility in Australia? Does it matter that it only plays to community? I feel we both have a wide experience in this area. What do you think are the main problems that confront multicultural theatre groups here?

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From: Paschal Berry  
Date: 10 August 2007  
To: Deborah Pollard  
Subject: Re: On Cross Cultural Collaborations

Hi Deborah,

It was really clear to me - going back to the Philippines in 2004 with an Asialink Residency and having left the country two decades ago – that this new country I was experiencing was not the country I had manticised all these years. Perhaps I had subconsciously fallen into the trap of believing the old nationalist edict of the Marcos era that somehow all of us Filipinos were part of a monoculture. I was struck by how much I felt like a fish out of water being an Australian-raised Cebuano in the midst of the dominant Tagalog culture of Manila. Somehow, I had underestimated the degree of culture shock I was about to experience. I had also forgotten the subtle differences of our many ethnicities and the implicit politics within a centralised and collective culture that is fractured by linguistic and geographical realities. The archipelago, post independence has been desperate to find a united face while little factions threat to explode out of the surface.

Witnessing contemporary Philippines was like observing a hybrid creature that was born out of the union between the beautiful and the grotesque. And like any Australian who is offered up a vision of a third world nightmare, my little heart became very earnest and my head exploded from the amount of simplistic solutions for helping the impoverished. I think a lot of us artists are prone to earnestness when placed in this position, and the clichés come out because you really start to believe that equipped with a laptop and some drama games, you will be able to solve people's problems. Feed people with your art...and stuff...

Perhaps in my next email Deborah I can include some correspondence I had with my friends from this period. Unfortunately, I have deleted them from my files (probably from self-censoring embarrassment), but I'm sure someone has saved them to haunt me, but from memory they really explain the kind of bewilderment and jaw-dropping astonishment that was becoming my daily reality in Manila. In asking for a residency with Filipino company Anino Shadowplay Collective, I had sought out a collaboration with a group of artists whose operations included significant contact with disadvantaged communities. My participation meant that I was exposed to children and young people who had experienced the worse kinds of human depravity, which often lead me to question wether I aspired to be a social worker. While working with these communities, I found myself wracked with guilt. As though I was the one who got away – or in a very Oprah-Winfrey-consciousness, the lucky one or the blessed one who escaped adversity. As if the fate of these children was going to be my fate (who by the way came from the comfortable end of the middle-classes). I've never really admitted this before, but I felt somewhat uninspired to continue writing *The Folding Wife* while I was in Manila because the inter-generational conflict and tales of migration within the narrative seemed to pale compared to the grand passion play that was unravelling before my eyes. To be honest, I kept reading that first draft and kept challenging myself to be more Filipino and less white. Why do I use poetic text? Why do the characters have to be so tragic? Where is the glimmer of hope? Who am I writing for? Why am I so fascinated by this kind of collaboration?

We will probably discuss all of this later Deborah. However, I want to end with this little anecdote:

When I arrived in Ninoy Aquino International Airport in April 2005, I was very worried about not recognising Teny and Datu Arellano from Anino Shadowplay. Let me stress that I am somewhat

vague in nature and will easily wander into unsafe situations without really knowing it. This time I was extremely cautious, we only knew each other through a year's worth of emails, so my eyes looked for a promised black beret accompanied by a young man with long Jesus hair. I spotted them straight away but they had not seen me, so I waved. And through the thick syrupy air I heard the surprise in Teny's Tagalog, ""Oh, he's very Filipino."

I can only just imagine what that first encounter would be if you are a white Australian meeting your Indonesian collaborators. How was that? And what was the context of that first collaboration?

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From: Deborah Pollard  
Date: 7 August 2007  
To: Paschal Berry  
Subject: On Cross Cultural Collaborations

Hi Paschal,

I thought I would begin our conversation with a little anecdote. About a year ago an old friend of mine who was stationed in Sri Lanka asked me if I was interested in working on a project there. It involved working with young children who had lost their parents in the Tsunami. It was for a touring theatre show. His request was extremely well intentioned and there was a time in younger days I would have gone headlong into a project like that without a single question but now...

Having worked on and off in Indonesia as an artist for over six years in various collaborations with artists, the complexity of the "first world, third world dynamic" is something that has always thrown me. At one stage it paralysed me into inaction, which is not a helpful response either.

I guess what I am trying to relay is my journey from a naïve, almost cultural anthropologist, to a provisional expert on all that is Indonesian, to a questioning artist who goes into these situations with a bit more of an understanding of the potential power dynamics at play and how best not to play into them. The work I did with Indonesian artists is the best work I have ever done and together, over a long period of time, we invested in each-others cultural understandings so that we could work together with a base understanding and from there take it in new directions. In earlier projects I unconsciously took the reins as leader and became an authority on how to make art. They obliged me, because I had the cash to make the work and they wanted to engage in "something western". In retrospect it felt like we had subconsciously tapped into the innate history of first world/third world power play, we carried that thinking into our artistic process and it took many years to understand the complexities of that relationship and to finally usurp it.

I'll leave you with a question? You can take this up if you want to. How was it for you going back to the Philippines as a Filipino/Australian?