

Belongings - A Neighborhood Search: Creative Alliance at The Patterson

By Luisa Bieri de Rios

In a neighborhood with litter-ridden sidewalks marked by rows of marble steps, black youth in hoodies pass a young Latina mother chatting in Spanish with her small child alongside a bundled stroller. An elderly white woman emerges with her roller cart, presumably going for groceries — all are on foot, from school to the store to home in Highlandtown, Southeast Baltimore. “Belongings” began here, with a question: Do people have a sense of belonging to this neighborhood, or is a shared place the only thing they have in common?

I work in Highlandtown, and in 2006, with an Open Society Institute Community Fellowship, started *Por la Avenida* (On the Avenue), a neighborhood art series at an arts nonprofit called Creative Alliance. As part of the art series, I proposed directing a play based on stories from the neighborhood. In their book “Performing Communities,” Robert Leonard and Ann Kilkelly articulate the concept that I had yet to put into practice: that a stronger sense of community “may be made through acknowledging and/or celebrating a sense of common heritage or place that emerges in the event of live performance” (29).

The neighborhood is flanked on the west by Patterson Park, once a family ballpark, later consumed by drug dealing and prostitution and more recently being reclaimed again by ball players, strollers, swimmers, even fishermen. Seen as an increasingly desirable place to live just north of Canton, with its waterfront condos now ranging in the “upper 300s,” the neighborhood is gentrifying. The area farther north of the park reflects much of the rest of Baltimore City, predominately black communities struggling to make ends meet on blighted blocks with dilapidated public schools. To the east, past “Greektown,” is Sparrows Point, home to a large steel mill industry that now lies virtually abandoned. Generations of immigrants have made their homes in and around Highlandtown for well over a century. German breweries, Polish delicatessens, the golden domes of the Ukrainian Church, basement Italian wineries — these neighborhood ethnic markers range from disintegrating remnants to active communal spaces that manifest many languages and cultures.



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The question of belonging to a nation, culture or neighborhood is intrinsically linked to notions of community — what does one share with others to form a common identity or common bonds? Is there room, as in the case of Highlandtown, for vast differences? Only after embarking on the performance project that I entitled “Belongings” did I find that Leonard and Kilkelly point to the

very essence of community as creating (through art) or deepening (through dialogue) a sense of belonging. “In this sense, ‘community’ is that coherence, that belonging, that specific social and aesthetic reality which is produced intentionally by the people coming together in acts of imagination” (29). A performance by, for and about the neighborhood would offer a multitude of voices and perspectives to learn from, but would we find “coherence”?

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As I got to know more and more folks in the neighborhood, I heard, over and over, nostalgic stories about the close-knit community of yesteryear, and increasing uncertainty from all kinds of people about the future of the neighborhood as “new” people (sometimes referring to upper-middle-class whites, or working-class Latinos, even African refugees) moved in. Was there at the heart of this tension a resistance to change, a reflection of larger gentrification shifts in urban America — or a backlash against newest waves of immigrants of color “flooding” in?

I began collecting oral histories to create a community-based performance with neighbors of all backgrounds and ages. My only goal was that we get to know each other better and explore some of these uncertainties collectively. In the U.S. people complain of increasing isolation. Despite the ready availability of communication technology, Americans getting to know each other is rare, and when you consider bridging differences — of race, class, age, gender, language and background — rarer still. It takes a kind of border crossing — trust in others, courage to share one’s own story, breaking taboos, confronting assumptions and, if you’re lucky, arriving at a deeper understanding of commonalities and differences among people.

From 25 interviews, I distilled a script and invited the original storytellers’ participation in workshops, rehearsals and performance. Having worked with Theater Action Group (TAG) for two years using theater for dialogue and social change, I asked members of TAG to join the neighborhood performers. Working in Spanish and English, through games, discussions and improvisations, we used Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) and other techniques to bring the play to life. TO differs from traditional theater’s one-way communication from the stage to the audience by creating the “reciprocal possibility of communion, of dialogue (sympathy)” between performers and audience. Crossing that divide brings more meaning to both worlds, with one (the stage) often representing the other (the audience) (27). In this case, as often with TO, the aesthetic space of the stage, containing life stories of the neighbors themselves, spills out into the audience of more neighbors, and beyond into the neighborhood itself. The strategy: Ripples of conversations and action onstage follow the same pattern resonating outward.

After a few weeks of workshops exploring neighborhood themes, ten individuals emerged committed to performing; they ranged in age from 17 to 60 and represented five different nationalities. Some had already shared their stories, which had been written into the script, others were cast representing people of similar backgrounds to the storytellers who did not perform. A couple new characters were created. The stories are as diverse as the neighbors and include first- to third-generation immigrants, the gentrifying middle-class and the longstanding working-class in the neighborhood, whites and blacks, a political refugee, an immigrant who crossed the U.S./Mexico border illegally, and one actor who is blind.

The differences among the ensemble were great, yet theater became the tool to forge alliances between individuals who might not otherwise, even in the same neighborhood, get to know each other. In a TO session, Boal explains,

“where the participants belong to the same social group (...residents of the same district...) and suffer the same oppressions...the individual account of a single person will immediately be pluralized: so the oppression of one is the oppression of all. The particularity of each individual case is negligible in relation to its similarity with all the others. So, during the session, sympathy is immediate. *We are all talking about ourselves.*” (45).

In this case, the particularity of each individual in race, class, gender and age, is pronounced and significant, as well as occasionally completely overshadowed by the clear similarities in the experiences related in their stories. Thus, a second-generation white Italian immigrant can find sympathy with a first-generation undocumented Latino by connecting to historical similarities of economic hardships and hunger leading them — or their fathers — to look for work in a new land. Similarly, black and white working-class residents sympathize about how the rising cost of housing is forcing poor families into more economically precarious neighborhoods that limit their opportunities. Rather than exacerbating divisions as mass media so often does, pitting “minorities” and others against each other, “Belongings” became an attempt to model the possibilities for understanding and solidarity across differences for all the residents of the community.

My role as a director and playwright in this process was one in which I continually deferred to the knowledge of the community. Boal envisions the role of the TO playwright, or “joker,” not to offer a message or political statement, not even to “interpret, we explain nothing, we only offer multiple points of reference” (45). Using this as a guiding principle, my role was one of asking questions rather than attempting to provide answers. This was particularly acute given my place as an outsider to the community. Although I have worked there for two years, I am an educated white woman with working-class parents from Ohio, coming to Highlandtown via the homeland of my husband, Argentina.

My transparency with everyone involved regarding my own background and deep listening without interpretation or judgment is what I believe allowed for trust that is essential to this work. Peter Pennekamp, a supporter of Dell’Arte Company, describes this as key to the community artist’s craft: “Over time they have built a trust that allows people to talk with them, to share private thoughts. This accomplishment represents a set of skills equal to those required to construct a play” (Leonard & Kilkelly 35). I found myself caring deeply for each person, even in their “flaws” of relying on prejudices or stereotypes to shape their understandings of their neighbors. This care I felt and demonstrated also modeled the interactions among the ensemble, which had started the process as mostly strangers.

Constantly negotiating the differences among the ensemble exercised our wills and abilities to listen, respect and learn from each other. As performer Courtney Weber said of the process, “Even when we weren’t talking, everything was a conversation. It was hard. ...I’ve never been in a process that honors everyone’s needs so much.” Rather than tiptoeing around each other, encounters were face-to-face, eye-to-eye, which sometimes led to tears or frustrations. But people kept showing up and coming back, despite working two jobs or leaning on their families for childcare. Cast members later described this collective experience as a challenge that required trying on, discovering, honoring others and oneself, trust in oneself, risk taking, and the receptiveness of feeling another person in your own body. People talked of the discomfort, the support, the need to ask for and receive help, but also participating in an experience where everything seemed possible.

Diversity is an aesthetic principle of community-based performance that leads to dialogue, both in language and in the interaction of diverse bodies onstage. Jan Cohen-Cruz reflects on grassroots ensemble performance: “There’s something aesthetic about the variety of ages and body types and life experience, a diversity that is part of the fabric of the work, and that’s what makes it powerful” (Leonard & Kilkelly 17). She adds the example of Jump-Start Performance Co., which models another important aspect of diversity as the practice of “inclusion at once reflective of participatory democracy and an aesthetics of taking risks...to include the community’s dialog with itself in the script, which calls for opposing voices and layers of meaning and a vital richness” (Leonard & Kilkelly 19).

When “Belongings” performed for the neighborhood at Creative Alliance in Highlandtown, we were awed to find the theater packed to overflowing, and amazed at the audience’s emotional responses to the stories. They shared an overwhelming sense of gratitude to partake in such an intimate, moving experience. During the talkback, audience members shared: I, too, was forced to move out of the neighborhood because I couldn’t afford to stay. I, too, came as a child speaking another language, said another: It was 1940 and we were Italian. My mother, also, crossed the border on foot, said someone else through tears. Rick Citrano, an original storyteller, neighborhood barber and audience member said, “You put on that stage what people felt in their hearts. ... You spoke for a lot of people. It made me feel good, and it made them feel good, like they were a part of the neighborhood.”



During the talkback after the performance, audience members shared: I, too, was forced to move out of the neighborhood because I couldn't afford to stay. I, too, came as a child speaking another language, said another: It was 1940 and we were Italian. My mother, also, crossed the border on foot, said someone else through tears.

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I was astonished by the palpable response. How often does a collective experience elicit this level of compassion, reflection or dialogue across difference? We all agreed that this was rare, so rare that it was practically new. One actor, community member and original interviewee, Gamaliel Portillo, shared his story of crossing the desert during the performance, and his torn shoes — the shoes he had worn on his trek from El Salvador through Guatemala and Mexico and then on to Arizona — hung on the wall at the entrance to the theater. There was an intensity emanating from these shoes, from his story, which people felt. One of his lines in the play concluded, “It was like a movie, but it was real. I was there.” To hear this “real” story from his own mouth, seeing his real belongings was something extraordinary — this was not spun, not forced, not prescribed.

In all my interviews, only one person used the word “community.” And he used it only once. Terry Barnes, a 17-year-old who was six when his family — the first black family to live on the block — moved to the neighborhood, used the word to describe a sense of family. He explained that in a community you “watch each other’s back,” even if you’re not a family member because, in his example, “My mother, whenever we bring over friends, my friends are like her children in a way, she’s going to look out for all my friends, she’s going to look out for her friend’s children. ... We’re going to help each other if we need help.” We are born into our family, our skin color, our culture and class. Can we really then choose a community? Can we build it? Why should we?

My current reflections lead me to wonder if we, as community artists, ask these questions enough, and engage in the very definition of community, which is wrought with complexities of power and privilege. Are we able to challenge ourselves and others to bring new meanings to “inclusion” as a principle in the practice? Are our efforts honoring the wisdom of the people we represent? I envision facing this challenge as the visionary Audre Lorde articulated: to “develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives” (115-6).

Just before going onstage and sharing our work with the public, I looked around the circle of this ensemble. I saw a reflection of the diverse neighbors living in this small part of the country, which could be a reflection of many other neighborhoods in the nation and possibly abroad. We were a small group, a microcosm of larger social structures. We were hugging. We had prepared a meal for each other, were taking care of each other. Somebody whispered, “Thanks for being my family.”

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