American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of "dramaturgy" as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright's viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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SUP
Maison de la Recherche
Sorbonne Université
28, rue Serpente
75006 Paris

tél. : (33) (0)1 53 10 57 60

sup@sorbonne-universite.fr

https://sup.sorbonne-universite.fr

PART III

The Pursuit of Community

PRODUCING COMMUNITY: A PROCESS-ORIENTED ANALYSIS OF PING CHONG + COMPANY'S *UNDESIRABLE ELEMENTS: GENERATION NYZ* (2018)[1]

Diana Benea
University of Bucharest

On January 13, 2018, Ping Chong + Company's *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ* premiered for a sold-out audience at the Duke on 42nd Street, the New Victory Theater's smaller venue, conveniently located in the heart of Manhattan. Despite its relatively short run consisting of only ten public performances, the piece gained popular as well as critical acclaim, being hailed as "an inherently political show that arrives at a time of fervently uncivil discourse,"[2] or as providing audiences with "the very best reason for resisting the current administration"[3] by looking at the actual lives affected by recent policies. Co-written and co-directed by Sara Zatz, the company's associate director, and artistic collaborator Kirya Traber, playwright and cultural worker, the piece marked the 25th anniversary of *Undesirable Elements*, the ongoing series of interview-based, community-specific theatre works conceived by the award-winning, interdisciplinary artist Ping Chong, one of the most prominent voices of American theatre and performance of the last five decades. The show explores what it means to be a teenager in NYC in the current political climate through the lens of seven 18- to 21-year-old teenagers of different backgrounds—Mexican, Puerto Rican, Pakistani, Jamaican, and British-Bosnian—who address their own experiences of bullying, depression, undocumentedness, and gender fluidity, highlighting the ways in which they have carved out their niches of resistance. Celebrating the 25th anniversary of a nationwide journey of community engagement, the production consolidates the status of *Undesirable Elements* as one of the most enduring series of this kind, while "turn[ing]

1 The author would like to thank Ping Chong and Sara Zatz for their kind support in documenting this article. Research for this article was supported by a Fulbright Senior Scholar Award at CUNY—The Graduate Center, Martin E. Segal Theatre Center (2017-2018).

2 Laura Collins-Hughes, "Undesirable Elements, Documentary Theater for Uncivil Times", *New York Times*, January 15, 2018.

3 Michael Feingold, "Meet the Seven Extraordinary Individuals of Ping Chong's *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*", *The Village Voice*, January 20, 2018.

the storytelling over to a new generation: Generation NYZ."[4] Tellingly, four other productions in the series have been presented on American and international stages in the meantime, *Aan Yatx'u Saani: Noble People of the Land* (2018), in Juneau, Alaska, *Undesirable Elements/ Dearborn* (2018), at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, *(Un)Conditional* (2019), at Profile Theatre in Portland, Oregon, and *Undesirable Elements: Difficult Lives* (2019), at Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre East, in Japan. Furthermore, *Generation NYZ* was revived at the prestigious La MaMa ETC in early 2019, while *Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity* (2015) continues its successful touring engagements throughout the US.

Originally meant as a one-time performance at Artists Space NY in 1992, *Undesirable Elements* has become an ongoing series with over sixty site-specific pieces to date across the US and several other countries, such as Japan and the Netherlands, which have been produced in collaboration with a wide range of partners, including theatres of all sizes, performing arts centers, colleges and universities, festivals, museums, and community organizations, and supported by an equally diverse, multi-layered network of funding bodies, combining public as well as private sector contributions.[5] Centering on the lives of "outsiders within the mainstream community,"[6] the series explores the multiple facets of cultural otherness and socio-political disenfranchisement in contemporary America (and a few other spaces) through works created in and with marginalized communities. Conceived as a choral meditation on "the metaphysics of culture and history and its effects on the lives of individuals within a society"[7]—the overarching themes of Chong's prolific career—the show has relied, from the very beginning, on an adaptable structure which interweaves the dramatized stories of the performers, most of whom are non-professional actors, with relevant historical events serving as the background against which these life-worlds unfold. The series continues, in this unique community-based format, Chong's career-long interest in critically engaging

4 Ping Chong, "Creator's Note", *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ Playbill*, The New Victory Theater, 2018, p. 4.

5 The list of long-standing company funders includes the National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, The Ford Foundation, The Fan Fox & Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Howard Gilman Foundation, The Hugh and Jane Ferguson Foundation, The Hyde and Watson Foundation, Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, The Shubert Foundation, The Leon Levy Foundation, The Lucille Lortel Foundation, as well as numerous individual donors. See *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ Playbill*, *op. cit.*

6 Ping Chong + Company, "Undesirable Elements", *Ping Chong + Company Website*.

7 "Playbill for *Undesirable Elements: New York (a work-in-progress)* at Henry Street Settlement's Nations of New York Arts Festival", Ping Chong Archive 1971-2008, NYPL.

with official History with a capital H, either by retelling it from an absolutely unusual perspective, for instance, through an aliens' reconstruction of the racial history of the US in *Collidescope: Adventures in Pre- and Post-Racial America* (2014), or by excavating long-forgotten/ invisible/ suppressed histories, such as in *Alaxsxa/ Alaska* (2017), which explores the little-known history of intercultural encounters in that space, to name but two of the company's more recent non-*Undesirable Elements* productions. Ever since the 1980s, prior to conceiving the series, Chong had been recognized as an influential *auteur*[8] of the US performing and visual arts scene on the strength of his aesthetically spectacular, multidisciplinary works bringing together text, movement, sound scores, and a distinctive visual stagecraft, in their prismatic explorations of the intersections of history, culture, technology, and the media. While the sparse format of the series at hand departs from the stunning *mise-en-scène* of Chong's other works, his signature subject matter—with a focus on the dynamics of sameness and difference, individual and community—nonetheless infuses and shapes the community-based pieces as well. This is precisely what distinguishes them within the wider spectrum of theatre projects of this kind, which have been traditionally produced by community-based companies and professional ensembles primarily or exclusively devoted to this kind of work, such as Roadside Theater[9] or Cornerstone Theater Company,[10] to name only two of the most prominent contemporary examples. Created by an *auteur* whose oeuvre has ramified, over the past five decades, in multiple artistic directions and media (theatre and performance; visual arts and multimedia installations; and video works), *Undesirable Elements* is a *rara avis* of this field.

Based on the oral histories of the performers, the pieces in the series bring their own specific contributions to this continuum of historical reflection, given that they themselves are very much about time, about chronology, about the unfolding of personal histories against the backdrop of the march of entangled political histories. Over the years, this flexible interweaving of micro- and macro-histories has enabled the series

8 See, for instance, Chong's inclusion in Frank Rich's "Auteur Directors Bring New Life to Theater", *New York Times,* November 24, 1985.

9 Founded in 1975 in central Appalachia, Roadside Theater has documented the cultural identity of this region in plays created for, by, and with various local communities; their more recent work also includes "intercultural" plays produced in collaboration with other culturally specific theatres such as Pregones.

10 Founded in 1986, the LA-based Cornerstone Theater Company has created a broad spectrum of works ranging from adaptions of the classics in rural communities across the US (1986-92) to multi-year play cycles exploring, from multiple angles and within diverse communities (of age, geography, culture, workplace etc.), such topics as *Faith* (2001-5), *Justice* (2007-10), or *Hunger* (2011-17).

to function in a variety of contexts, accommodating a plethora of community-specific issues and a broad spectrum of communities, ranging from immigrants who shared the condition of cultural and linguistic in-betweenness in the "cultural" productions of the first decade, to individuals with different types of, and experiences with, disability (*Inside/ Out...voices from the disability community*, 2008), to African American women from the same Pittsburgh neighborhood (*The Women of the Hill*, 2009), to survivors of sexual abuse (*Secret Survivors*, 2011), or to Brooklyn-based activists (*Brooklyn '63*, 2013), in more recent pieces. Replicated and adapted from production to production, this format—which includes an introduction in the participants' native languages, a mix of historical and personal entries, an occasional "What Do You Think Of...?" section, and an outro in which the cast members reintroduce themselves in English—is, to my knowledge, a unique phenomenon within the landscape of community-based theatre in the US.

Famously defined by Richard Owen Geer as theatre "of the people, by the people, for the people,"[11] community-based theatre distinguishes itself within the larger field of applied theatre practices by privileging the role of the community at all the stages of developing and producing the work. To quote from Jan Cohen-Cruz, community-based theatre is premised upon an understanding of the community as "a primary source of the text, possibly of the performers as well, and definitely a goodly portion of the audience."[12] This description suggests an underlying philosophy which not only grants access, but also invests the community with varying degrees of authority over the finished product. Cohen-Cruz's three-fold account calls attention to the ways in which this type of theatre facilitates a process whereby individuals with stakes in that community-specific issue are offered the opportunity to respond to it in a public space, while also allowing other community members to participate in the *sui generis* agora created within the frame of the performance. While the ambivalent status of community-based theatre (is it art or social work?) continues to be a matter of critical debate and while the practices within its wide spectrum remain quite diverse—in point of dramaturgy, development, production (collaborations with other institutions), and performance (aesthetic modes and forms)—what nevertheless connects such different strands is a shared vision underlining the importance of process and a

11 Richard Owen Geer, "Of the People, By the People, and For the People: The Field of Community Performance", *High Performance*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1993, pp. 28-31.

12 Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States*, New Brunswick/ New Jersey / London, Rutgers UP, 2005, p. 2.

similar conception of the political labor and the intended (if not always guaranteed) outcomes thereof.

In this regard, Petra Kuppers discusses community-based performance as resting "in process rather than product, in the act of working together, allowing different voices, bodies and experiences to emerge." [13] This might lead to imagining and enacting certain types of group dynamics and forms of reciprocity and collaboration predicated on the equal value of all participants and their respective contributions to the collective project. Ultimately, the processes at work in the collective creation of community-based theatre (from interviews, story circles and workshops, to rehearsals, to performances, to follow-up activities) provide the participants—practitioners and non-professionals alike—as well as the audience with "models of how we live together, suggesting something bigger than our individual selves." [14] One productive strand of analysis has examined the political function of such processes by establishing an analogy between their core principles and those of participatory democracies. For instance, Cohen-Cruz argues that community-based theatre is informed by the same principles of "call and response" inherent in empowered democracies, i.e., first of all, "practical orientation" towards specific concerns "narrowly enough defined to be achievable," secondly, "bottom-up participation," ensuring that the voice of those affected by the aforementioned concerns is heard, and, finally, a process of deliberation and collective decision-making predicated on listening to each other and leading to sensible "group choices." [15] Embedded within such models of working and living together, and investing the community with the function of the "dramaturg," community-based theatre seeks to build "an avenue to individual empowerment and community development," [16] thus not only responding to social realities but aiming to positively change them. Such intended social outcomes are inextricable from its process-oriented nature, as Susan Haedicke argues in a seminal article on the dramaturgy of this format:

> These performance texts give the community a voice and help establish bonds that create "community" largely because the "text" is not just the finished product, but also the process. It is a process that enables the community to look at its history, its

13 Petra Kuppers, *Community Performance: An Introduction*, New York, Routledge, 2007, p. 4.

14 Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 2.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

16 Susan Chandler Haedicke, "Dramaturgy in Community-Based Theatre", *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, no. 3, 1998, p. 132.

> contributions, its successes, and its failures. It is a process that allows the community to experiment with strategies to solve their particular problems. It is a process that encourages a sense of identity and fosters pride. [17]

Starting from the same premise that community-based theatre should be analyzed not only through the lens of the finished product, but rather as process and praxis, this essay engages in a multi-layered account of *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*, zooming in on the dramaturgical development of the play in the first part, exploring the thematic concerns of the text in the second, and finally offering an insight into the reception of the production, based on a number of audience questionnaires as well as reactions within the frame of a talkback discussion.

THE DRAMATURGY OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORAL HISTORY PERFORMANCE

A brief retrospective look towards the beginnings of the series is instrumental in understanding what has meanwhile become the formalized development process at the core of *Undesirable Elements*. In the fall of 1992, Chong was commissioned to produce a theatre piece meant to accompany an installation he had made at Artists Space in NYC. Entitled *A Facility for the Channeling and Containment of Undesirable Elements*, the installation was based on the dynamics of exclusion/inclusion encapsulated in the image of a quarantine facility. Both pieces—the visual arts installation and the subsequent performance—revolved around an exploration of such questions as: "Who is doing the channeling? What, or whom, is being contained and why? Who/ what is undesirable? And according to whom?" [18] Without providing any settled answers, the two pieces aimed instead to open up a space of critical reflection in which the audience could grapple with such ambiguities in a productive way. Within the frame of the performance, it was the figure of the immigrant Other that became the vehicle for an exploration of such issues. Wishing to create a piece based on the play of possibilities inherent in bringing together a medley of languages and cultures on stage, Chong gathered a group of friends and collaborators at his apartment in NYC, who were hailing from such places as

17 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

18 "Program Notes for Ping Chong's *A Facility for the Channeling and Containment of Undesirable Elements*, Installation, Performance and Video", Ping Chong Archive 1971-2008, NYPL.

Ukraine, Japan, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Germany, Lebanon, and sharing the condition of cultural in-betweenness. They became the cast of the first production, entitled *Undesirable Elements I (a work-in-progress)*.

Based on the stories shared that evening at Chong's place and developed in collaboration with the cast, that first piece offered a journey through the diverse political dislocations of the twentieth century, as embodied in the individual and collective acts of remembering performed by the interviewees themselves in the space of the quarantine facility at the gallery. These acts delved into stories and histories from different cultural spaces, spoken in different rhythms and registers, converging and diverging in their concerns, enhancing one another, and adding layer upon layer of meaning to what was starting to emerge as the co-created history of a community in the making—one that would later incorporate so many other communities and stories, with each new piece in the series. They were stories about the colonial legacies in the Philippines, the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, escaping from Ukraine during WW2, the sterilization of Native American women, or the Civil War in Lebanon. Above all, they were stories about the ambivalent condition of selves necessarily inscribed at the intersection of multiple subject positions, allegiances, and affiliations, stories about the challenges of forging sites of belonging while engaging in a process of renegotiating the boundaries between past and present, as well as those between ethnic, national, and cultural identities. While the focus of the pieces has expanded in more recent productions, the overarching questions of belonging and of negotiating shifting landscapes of identity while navigating various power structures and social matrixes have been the red threads circulating, in different shapes, throughout the series.

As more and more productions were commissioned, the development process itself acquired a more rigorous, multi-step structure. It now begins with the company reaching out to its partner organization(s) with a view to finding potential participants who fit the focus of the production and are willing to share their personal histories on stage. The candidates first complete an application form designed by the company, which, in the case of *Generation NYZ*, included questions about their background and family history, the groups and communities they identify with, the challenges they see as currently urgent within such communities, their experience of living in NYC, with a focus on memories of "feeling like an outsider," and the spaces where they have found "a sense of belonging or support." [19] The questionnaires offer a first significant insight into the model of living together promoted by this project and the

19 Ping Chong + Company, "*Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*", *op. cit.* The application form was available on the website in the fall of 2017; it has since been deleted.

types of communities it hopes to engender. Such requirements as willingness "to make critical observations about one's culture" and "to allow others to express contrary opinions or political views"[20] anticipate the political vision supported by the show itself, suggesting a praxis premised upon critical distance towards one's community (as opposed to mythologized celebrations thereof) as well as an informed and respectful openness towards diversity and otherness. Based on these questionnaires, the company then selects a number of people for the in-depth interviews. As Sara Zatz explains, for the production under discussion, the company reached out to over fifty schools and community organizations in NYC, hoping to find a group of teenagers of diverse backgrounds and experiences of coming of age in the metropolis; twenty of them were selected for the interview, and, ultimately, seven stories made their way into the show.[21] As stated in the application forms for the productions, the selected participants receive stipends for the rehearsals and performances.

While the process has become more formalized over time, the germs of *Undesirable Elements* have been located, then and now, in the act of sharing stories about oneself—to company members in the interview sessions, to fellow performers in rehearsals, to audience members in performance. Then and now, the text of the productions has grown out of these interviews. Thus, as Chong explained in a personal interview, in that first moment of text development, the interview sessions, the goal of the artistic team is to create a safe and productive listening and narrating environment, so as to help the interviewees "get at the truth of their stories,"[22] as layered, storied, framed as that truth might be. This process of getting at the truth also implies that the performers have to do some background research into the histories of their families as well as the larger political histories of their home countries. For the cast members, this veritable learning process turns them into historians digging into their family's past and their respective countries' histories, confronting the gaps and frictions of narratives whose meaning is not always immediately decipherable. Naturally, weaving their memories about specific events around the memories of family members necessarily reshapes and complicates the performers' original accounts.

It is intriguing to think about the ways in which the company then translates these poignant fragments—interview and research entries—into dramatic forms, especially in light of negotiating "the power and the responsibility of making public what had

20 *Ibid.*

21 Amy Zhang, "Creating Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ", *The New Victory Theater Blog*, January 5, 2018.

22 Ping Chong, "Interview conducted by the author", New York City, November 30, 2017.

been told in private."[23] Worth emphasizing here is the fact that this is no verbatim theatre, but a dramatization of the interview material that ensures thematic and stylistic coherence across the series, while aesthetically heightening and harmonizing all the individual contributions in the emerging play. Of course, this two-fold dramaturgical orientation carries a potential for tension, setting in motion, on the one hand, a certain negotiation of authority and "voice(s)" between the interviewees and the facilitators,[24] as well as one between the individual "monologues" shared in the interviews and their orchestration as intersecting fragments of a "dialogue" in the play. As has been noted, theatre projects of this type, whose purpose is "to give a voice to the voiceless," or to create a platform through which previously unheard voices can be amplified, often run the risk, in Janet Gibson's words, of speaking "*for*," rather than speaking "*with*," which suggests an "appropriation" rather than a "negotiation" of voices.[25] To address the tension delineated above, the creative team makes sure each voice and each story has equal weight in the production, and all the performers have full editing rights over their parts, including the right to change their mind about sharing certain stories or details throughout the development of the piece. A comment made in a talkback by one of the cast members of *Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity*, currently the most successful piece of the series, is instrumental in understanding the principles underpinning this stage of dramaturgical construction. Describing it as "an inclusive process" whereby the practitioners had to rewrite her lines multiple times until she could hear her own "voice,"[26] the performer thus offered an insight into the ethics of collaborative practice at the heart of the project, into sharing authority over representation, and, ultimately, into a process of collective decision-making and a sense of mutual recognition.

23 Della Pollock, "Telling the Told: Performing Like a Family", *Oral History Review*, no. 18, 1990, p. 15.

24 The term is widely used in social justice and community development projects in various fields, including applied theatre / theatre for social change, "to connote commitment to certain principles—of *enablement* and participant-centredness—and *processes* that involve equitable *negotiation* between those involved." Theorists and practitioners working with such tools have called attention to the necessity of developing self-reflexive practices of *critical* facilitation, with a view to "uncovering the complexity of the dynamics of facilitation and seeking to understand the power relations that exist within and beyond a workshop." Sheila Preston, "Introduction to Facilitation", in Sheila Preston (ed.), *Facilitation: Pedagogies, Practices, Resilience*, London, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016, p. 1, 4, emphases in the original.

25 Janet Gibson, "Saying it Right: Creating Ethical Verbatim Theatre", *NEO: Journal for Higher Degree Research Students in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, no. 4, 2011, p. 5.

26 "Talkback with the Cast of *Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity*", City Lore, New York City, November 15, 2017.

This account of the process by no means assumes that the performers' voice is invested with authenticity, whereas the theatrical dramatization necessarily alters that authenticity, but rather looks at the process of turning the interviews into the performance text as the result of negotiating (equally constructed) representations.

What emerges at the end of this process of rewriting, editing and restructuring the raw interview material is a script arranged chronologically into a predetermined yet adaptable structure, common to all the productions in the series, which interweaves the personal and family histories of the cast, on the one hand, and significant events of global political history with an impact on those micro-histories, on the other, in a collage of intersecting testimonials. Finally, the text is infused with the artistic signature of the creative team, including phrases that circulate from one production to the next and a formalized visual, auditory, and movement-based framework that is repeated, with variations, in most of the pieces, giving coherence to the series. This design underscores the act of making memory and history on stage *together*: sometimes the entire cast repeats a word, phrase or sentence from one performer's account, uttering it in a collective voice and investing it with shared meaning. At various other times, the performers become characters in their colleagues' stories, giving voice to family, friends, co-workers, or authorities, thus covering the entire spectrum from allies displaying solidarity to antagonists embodying all kinds of obstacles. This polyphonic rendering is reinforced by a choreography of ritualistic gestures performed in unison, such as clapping or changing their seats several times during the show.

When the parts are dramatized and interwoven in what will become the provisional text of the play, the performers finally meet each other in rehearsals and get acquainted with their partners' histories. Thus, the oral history process already taking shape in the interviews comes to engender, in rehearsals, a reflexive space of re-membering one's history while encountering the histories of others, a space in which one's history acquires new significance in conversation with different voices and perspectives, a relational environment in which everyone is, in turns, storyteller and witness. As Della Pollock has noted, oral history is "a process of making history in dialogue, a cocreative, co-embodied, specially framed, contextually and intersubjectively contingent, sensuous, vital, artful in its achievement of narrative form, meaning and ethics."[27] Mohammad Murtaza, one of the performers of *Generation NYZ*, talks about the process of co-creating this history as one of his major takeaways from the project: "I wouldn't get the same experience if I wasn't working with these people and really

27 Della Pollock, "Introduction: Remembering", in Della Pollock (ed.), *Remembering Oral History Performance*, New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 5.

trying to understand their backstories and how NYC has shaped them."[28] Another performer, Porscha Polkahantis Rippy, discusses her participation in the project along similar lines: "I'm with people I've never met and we're all coming together to tell our stories. I've never heard of something like this, so just being part of the process is exciting."[29] As demonstrated by the "community agreements" that the participants decide upon on their very first meeting ("respect each other's boundaries," "be open," "ask questions" etc.),[30] the rehearsal stage of the project is also informed by an ethics of responsibility and a desire to address any tensions that might arise in the process, including that between the interview "monologues" and their juxtaposition as a "dialogue" in the play. While community-based drama is certainly fraught with a wide array of anxieties inherent in the not-always-formalized power relationship holding between the participants and the facilitators, by negotiating and abiding by some specific principles and guidelines regulating the collaboration with the communities throughout the stages of the process, the *Undesirable Elements* series might serve indeed as an antidote to alleviate such concerns.

THE POLITICAL STAKES OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE

In the talkback following the performance on January 20th, 2018, co-creator of the show Kirya Traber discussed one of the goals of the production as that of creating a critical intervention in the reductive representations of NYC youth in the media and public discourse, which most frequently portray this category as either "Upper East / West Side fancy" or by association with "the hood, and cops, and guns."[31] As Traber argued, the stories of NYC teenagers are much more complicated and diverse than these two rather stereotypical narratives which have come to dominate the mainstream imaginary. Interested in giving voice to a wide array of stories illuminating how particular individuals live and make sense of their multiple positionings, the play foregrounds stories of coming of age scattered across the five boroughs, from East New York to West Harlem, and from Far Rockaway to the Bronx. As such, it expands the tropes of representation by bringing to the fore the seldom heard voices of young protagonists facing multiple deprivations and vulnerabilities in a city portrayed, from

28 "Meet Generation NYZ", *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ Playbill*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

30 Amy Zhang, "Creating Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ", art. cit.

31 Kirya Traber, "Talkback with the Cast and the Creators of *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*", The New Victory Theater at The Duke on 42nd Street, New York City, January 20, 2018.

the very beginning, in a balanced manner, as a site of "diversity, acceptance, culture, and opportunity," but also as a space of "cops, capitalism, gentrification, homelessness, and inequality."[32]

Just as in the previous productions, the narrative arc goes beyond the personal stories of the performers to consider the wider historical forces that have determined the paths of their ancestors' lives and, in particular, their decision to settle in NYC. From the very beginning, this contextualization suggests the ways in which the stories of the protagonists are embedded in and framed by multiple layers of re-membering and re-constructing, preserving the traces of all those who have interacted with them in one way or another. This historical arc includes, on the one hand, the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the cities in the North, and, on the other, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, which eliminated national quotas that privileged immigration from Western and Northern European countries in the hopes of attracting skilled labor from other parts of the world to the US. The first migration path brought Porscha's grandfather to NYC from a Tennessee farm, while the second policy allowed Mohammad's parents to leave Pakistan for NYC after winning the visa lottery, and Syl's mother to flee war-torn Yugoslavia and arrive in the US as a refugee. Other performers' families have come to NYC in the wake of more recent dislocations: Monica's mother fled a life of poverty and violence in Mexico, crossing the border into the US as an undocumented immigrant, while Rafael's mother and siblings fled the high crime rate in Puerto Rico for a better future on the mainland. However, for none of them did the city prove to be as welcoming and full of opportunities as they might have expected. For example, Mohammad's father, a lawyer in Pakistan, was not licensed to practice law in the US, so he had to work two jobs at Wendy's and 7-Eleven to support his family. Throughout his high school years, Rafael and his family had to live in a homeless shelter, as they could not find any affordable housing. Not being able to apply for a computer science program open to US citizens only, Monica realized not only that her family's undocumented status involves no legal protection, but also that "not being a citizen is holding [her] back from [her] dreams."[33] Overall, the play

32 Ping Chong + Company in collaboration with the performers Edwin Aguila, Monica Victoria Tatacoya Castañeda, Syl (Andrea) Egerton, Mohammad Murtaza, De-Andra Pryce, Porscha Polkahantis Rippy, Rafael Rosario, *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ,* Performance, The New Victory Theater at The Duke on 42nd Street, New York City, January 20, 2018. All subsequent references and quotes from this show are excerpted from this performance.

33 *Ibid.*

succeeds in dramatizing the ways in which the performers negotiate their experiences at the intersection of two narratives—one that they and their families have created for themselves as residents of the US, driven by the promise of opportunity at the core of the myth of the American dream, the other perpetuated by the political and media discourse, which frames them as ethno-racial and / or cultural Others, or as "illegal," in the case of undocumented migrants.

A prominent strand of the piece gravitates around the ways in which the performers have grappled with various forms of discrimination and social marginalization, learning to negotiate their places within a landscape dominated by boundaries of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. In this regard, the narrative works by accumulation of detail: Monica was called "a dirty Mexican" by her schoolmates, who refused to sit next to her in class; Syl was ostracized by his classmates in Strasbourg due to his unconventional look and clothing style; Edwin's school years were similarly marked by bullying on account of his weight; in the post-9/11 climate of Islamophobia, Mohammad was constantly harassed and called "terrorist"; finally, the examiners at a college acting program audition found Porscha's Shakespeare monologue unexpectedly "articulate" (for a girl from the Bronx, she adds).[34] As young as they might be, the performers understand the paradoxes and contradictions of living in a metropolis like NYC, especially in what concerns law enforcement and police brutality—the most striking aspect of everyday life that Syl noticed upon moving from France to the US. The security protocols at Porscha's high school in the Bronx make her "feel like a criminal" every day; however, as Edwin remarks, even if the police are everywhere, they will do nothing to fix the problem of shootings in his neighborhood.[35] This observation illustrates one of the strategies frequently employed in the play, namely shifting from personal experiences and individual discontent to a critique of the larger structures perpetuating certain forms of violence, precariousness, and structural insecurity. Significantly, the play references several times the shooting of Mike Brown and the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement, and even stages at one point a moment of protest in which all the performers chant "Black Lives Matter, no justice, no peace!"[36] raising their arms and clenching their fists. While the show certainly serves as an arena for staging one's identity and as a vehicle for individual empowerment, it nevertheless achieves its most nuanced commentary when gleaning the social and political matrixes in which these

34 *Ibid.*
35 *Ibid.*
36 *Ibid.*

individual lives are rooted, by contextualizing their struggles against the background of hegemonic forces that limit their agency and their claims for empowerment.

In full awareness of such limitations, the audience is positioned, throughout the play, as a witness to the seven protagonists' quests for identity and community. "Will I finally find a place to belong?,"[37] Rafael poignantly asks at one point, giving voice to a concern shared by all his stage colleagues. It is worth noting here that most of them first turn to their mixed ethnic and cultural background as a potential site of belonging. In giving an account of such rich backgrounds, the performers occasionally engage in deeply subjective, synesthetic descriptions of the sights, sounds, and tastes of their ancestors' countries, emerging at the intersection of different layers of perceptual, cognitive, and emotive experiences. As in the previous productions in the series, especially the "cultural" pieces of the 1990s, the narrative weaves into its structure a Muslim tale (of a young man's brave deeds), a poem in French, and a wealth of references to the Bosnian and Jamaican cuisine. Yet, as most of them learn, their hybrid lineages do not necessarily serve as a matrix of belonging and community, nor as a source of comfort. For instance, Mohammad finds it difficult to reconcile the gender norms in his Muslim upbringing with those of mainstream American society; furthermore, he realizes that his struggles with depression are "untranslatable" in his parents' culture. In one of the most stirring scenes of the play, we see Mohammad's father crossing into English so that they can finally talk about a subject like depression in a language that allows for such conversations. Embarking on her own quest for belonging, De-Andra comes to acknowledge that "Jamaica is home but it's not; when I'm in New York I feel like a Jamaican, but when I'm in Jamaica, I feel like an American."[38] While she is interested in celebrating her heritage by representing her island at the West Indian Day Parade, she nonetheless feels disconnected from her roots, "like [her] own people hate [her]." In the wake of Hurricane Maria's devastation of Puerto Rico, Rafael muses about the difficulties of negotiating a sense of home in similar terms: "I worry about my sister and nephew; they're okay, but it's so hard to be so far away. My heart belongs to Puerto Rico, but I'm a New Yorker now. My life is here, the life I made for myself despite everything I'd been through and I don't know if I could ever go back."[39]

Such more or less fragile ties with the cultural background of their ancestors are not enough for these bold New Yorkers, who have to create their own voices and forge their own communities despite the setbacks outlined above. Having struggled with depression

37 *Ibid.*
38 *Ibid.*
39 *Ibid.*

for most of his high school years, Mohammad finds his community in the world of theatre and performance. Edwin starts to embrace the blackness in the Puerto Rican mix of cultures, while also becoming aware of the power of music as a tool to advocate for social issues, especially after he performs at the famous Nuyorican Poets Café. In an effort to show that she is "not just another girl from the Bronx" and "more than the stereotypes,"[40] Porscha becomes a musician and gets to play a solo at the prestigious Carnegie Hall; she also learns American Sign Language and plans to become an interpreter for the deaf. For Syl, NYC becomes an environment in which non-binary individuals can feel comfortable, a space in which gender identity can be expressed in one's preferred personal pronouns. Finally, as a Latina feminist, Monica discovers that she has a voice "and it feels good to use it,"[41] especially when it comes to dismantling pervasive assumptions and damaging stereotypes about Mexican immigrants and feminists.

> Every day people make assumptions about me. As a Mexican immigrant, people assume, "Oh you must clean houses." I do, but there's no shame in that.
> As a Christian, people assume, "Oh you must be homophobic." No, I believe in actual Christianity, not judging others.
> As a feminist, people assume, "Only ugly girls who can't find a man are feminists." Well, I am here to say I choose who I date, and I don't need anyone else to tell me what beauty is.[42]

As stressed in Monica's part, finding one's voice should not be regarded merely as an act of self-expression, but as a critical response to the dominant discourses about the categories with which she identifies. In her inquiries into the process of "coming to voice," with particular reference to women within oppressed groups, bell hooks draws attention to its potential as "an act of resistance" whereby "speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject."[43] Coming to voice, however, is more than the act of telling one's experience; as hooks makes clear in an earlier text, moving into the position of the subject also allows for a "strategic" use of "coming to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects"[44]—about undocumentedness

40 *Ibid.*
41 *Ibid.*
42 *Ibid.*
43 bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, Cambridge, South End Press, 1989, p. 12.
44 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 148.

as a condition of being, in Monica's case. Not only does this strand of the play humanize statistics about undocumented youth, thus problematizing the simplified representations in the media, but it also imagines a performative vision of citizenship for the undocumented non-citizens. The ethical and political stakes of the play's engagement with undocumentedness lie, in fact, in disrupting Monica's legal identity as a "non-citizen," and bringing to the fore the urgency of a performative notion of citizenship enacted by "exercising, claiming and performing" rights and duties that are otherwise unauthorized.[45] As Monica herself explains the precariousness of her status, "to remain eligible for DACA, you can't have any criminal record, not even an arrest at a peaceful protest marching for your own rights, so I have to look for another way." This performance becomes that other way – not only a space of existence for a category mainly defined through its legal non-existence, but also a space in which she can make rights claims that are otherwise unavailable and contested, thus calling into being a broader and more generous understanding of citizenship.

hooks' comments might be extrapolated to all the voices in this performance and the ways in which they are strategically employed in order to give a nuanced account of such topics as gender fluidity, poverty, or bullying, which are often underrepresented, if not squarely silenced or suppressed, in mainstream discourses. "Occupying" a mainstream theatre space with their stories and bodies, and doing that in front of a diverse audience which also included their peers, i.e., individuals for whom theatre is hardly accessible otherwise, further reinforces the political manifesto of this young generation.

AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND THE ETHICAL DEMANDS OF LISTENING AND SPEAKING *WITH*

What is remarkable about this play and the other productions in the *Undesirable Elements* series is that this manifesto does not end when the show ends but actually bleeds into the talkback discussions which follow many of the performances. *Generation NYZ* thus creates an ethical space of encounter in which the audience is invited to reflect upon these stories and invest them with unexpected layers of meaning by placing them in conversation with their own experiences and worldviews. As a perusal of their history of productions and events clearly shows, Ping Chong + Company has always stressed the importance of audiences for their artistic practice, demonstrating

45 Engin F. Isin, "Performative Citizenship", in Ayelet Shachar, Rainer Bauböck, Irene Bloemraad, Maarten Vink (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2007, p. 502.

their commitment to enriching their work by adapting it to site-specific contexts and audience-driven agendas. As such, in addition to innovating in matters of theatrical form and content, the company has supported a long-standing goal of diversifying and expanding their audiences through various strategies, such as organizing related programs (workshops, presentations etc.) meant to enhance and extend the impact of the productions or making their shows available to members of the community by subsidizing tickets.[46]

That audience reception is part of the process and of the "text" of *Generation NYZ* is also suggested by the performers themselves in a series of one-minute video interviews produced by the company for the 2019 revival of the play at La MaMa ETC. As brief as they might be, these interviews show the performers' marked interest in prompting public debate and in pushing the conventional boundaries of the play so as to include the audience in its fabric. Notably, as part of their introductions to the play, the cast found it important to talk about "people in the audience who can relate" (Syl), about reaching "as many young people as possible" (De-Andra) and telling their story "so that other people can listen to it" (Rafael), and even about "help[ing] other people who have gone through things, or things similar" (Porscha). What seems to motivate the performers is the fact that their message "will not echo, but is gonna go to all the people in the audience, when they leave, they're gonna take it with them" (Mohammad).[47]

Listening and responding to the stories being testified to on stage thus becomes an integral part of the theatrical experience. According to D. Soyini Madison, embedded in the genre of personal narrative performance is the permission to respond, for, as she argues, "the stakes of the stories are often both intimately imagined and communally constituted,"[48] both individual and inextricable from a shared history of social processes. Madison further notes that this permission to engage with the stories on stage results in a shift from "notions of narrative ownership to an act of sharing—from the narrative as commodity to the narrative as commons—for the circulation of a wider public of listeners and receivers"[49]—or, in other words, from an act of speaking *to*, to one of speaking *with*. The act of speaking *with* (as opposed to speaking *for*) is therefore

46 Ping Chong Archive 1971-2008, NYPL.

47 Ping Chong + Company, "Meet Syl", "Meet De-Andra", "Meet Rafael", "Meet Porscha", "Meet Mohammad", *Interviews with the Cast*, *YouTube*, January 11 and 25, 2019.

48 Soyini D. Madison, *Performed Ethnography and Communication: Improvisation and Embodied Experience*, London and New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 136.

49 *Ibid.*

not only a major principle of the dramaturgical process, but one that expands to the process of audience reception.

Of course, the meaning-making processes in which theatre audiences engage have often been regarded as beyond the (full) control of theatre professionals, hence difficult to (fully) anticipate. In the case of the testimonial performance of stories of vulnerability and trauma, questions of reception are further complicated by what Julie Salverson has called "an aesthetic of injury"[50] or even "an erotics of injury"[51] that might prompt a dangerous combination of superficial empathy and voyeuristic identification on the part of the audience, while reinscribing a narrative that works to perpetuate the status of the protagonists as victims. To quote Salverson, the ethical conundrum at the heart of such theatre practices is: "how do you guard the Other against the appropriation that would deny difference?"[52] Moreover, how do you guard against turning the traumatic stories presented on stage into "an object of spectacle" to be consumed by audience members? Recounting her own experiences with an arts project about the lives of refugees in Canada, Salverson wonders whether, to what extent, and how such performances might "invite an encounter that does not dismiss empathy, but rather challenges the terms on which it is negotiated,"[53] creating, as she argues elsewhere, "an ethical space in which a relationship between detachment and contact occurs."[54] How can this type of performance prompt an audience that has not been affected by the issues at stake to better understand those who have? How can it help an audience for whom such experiences of vulnerability and violence are relatable? Ultimately, in light of the social change aspirations of community-based theatre, how can such works contribute to creating and cultivating a sense of responsibility towards the Other, as "active, caring citizen[s] in a collective world"?[55]

The public talkback after the performance on January 20, 2018, coupled with the audience questionnaires I designed and administered to several audience members of diverse ages and professional backgrounds, offered an illuminating case study for the

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50 Julie Salverson, "Transgressive Storytelling or an Aesthetic of Injury: Performance, Pedagogy and Ethics", *Theatre Research in Canada/ Recherches théâtrales au Canada*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1999.

51 Julie Salverson, "Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Injury", *Theater*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2001, pp. 119-125.

52 Julie Salverson, "Transgressive Storytelling", art. cit.

53 *Ibid.*

54 Julie Salverson, "Change on Whose Terms?", art. cit., p. 119.

55 Kathleen Gallagher, "Responsible Art and Unequal Societies: Towards a Theory of Drama and the Justice Agenda", in Kelly Freebody, Michael Finneran (eds), *Drama and Social Justice,* London / New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 57.

multi-layered reception of the play. While the limited number of questionnaires and talkback reactions to be discussed in what follows cannot account for larger patterns of reception, such responses are nevertheless instrumental in shedding light on the many different ways in which the audience wove its own tapestry of stories around the stories they had just heard on stage. In many ways, "the chamber piece of story-telling," [56] as the company describes the *Undesirable Elements* series, opened up to include the stories of the audience members themselves. As prefigured in the video-interviews with the performers, some of the responses were galvanized indeed by questions of relatability and identification. For instance, one audience member who identified as a Puerto Rican non-binary youth still in the closet asked Syl for advice about coming to terms with their own quest for identity. This young spectator was so inspired by the show that they decided to come out and acknowledge their gender non-conforming identity, for the very first time, in a public space. "I have never seen myself represented on stage before," [57] they added, which speaks to the company's achievement in urging others to "come to voice" themselves. Another audience member asked Rafael about making it through the years of living in the shelter, which positioned the performer as an "expert," investing him with the authority of lived experience. [58]

Further reactions from the questionnaires I conducted highlighted that the performers were "so brave to tell their stories which hurt them so much," which prompted that particular audience member to feel "happy for them that they can finally face and solve these problems, because the most important thing is they can be someone they really want to be." [59] This last response emphasized the affective landscapes generated by the show even in the absence of any identification processes at work, suggesting an interpretation of the play as a narrative of survival and resistance, of "facing" and "solving" problems, which skillfully escapes the dangerous cycle of violence and victimhood warned against by Salverson. While acknowledging the obstacles inherent in the performers' journeys, this audience member chose to focus on their agency in building their identities, on the ways in which they carved their own sense of selfhood in accordance with their desires and aspirations, as a major takeaway from the play.

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56 Ping Chong + Company, "Undesirable Elements", *op. cit.*.

57 Audience Member #1, "Talkback with the Cast and the Creators of *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ*", The New Victory Theater at The Duke on 42nd Street, New York City, January 20, 2018.

58 Audience Member #2, "Talkback", event cited.

59 "Audience Questionnaire Filled in by Y.L.", *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ,* Performance, The New Victory Theater at The Duke on 42nd Street, New York City, January 20, 2018.

Furthermore, besides being jolted into an awareness of their position as witnesses of these lives, other questionnaires indicated a new or enhanced understanding of key issues that the play facilitated. One spectator wrote about the ways in which the play shed new light on the degree to which "life is so segregated in NYC and minorities are very disadvantaged in every aspect of life."[60] For such audience members, the performance became an arena where new understandings of racism, discrimination, and social exclusion were allowed to emerge, and a space which creates the conditions for the otherwise invisible stories of these young people to finally pierce the public discourse. In Madison's words, such performances function as "pedagogies of what we did not know or feel before, in this way,"[61] which serve to expose the audience to the un-common and the not-yet-imagined, the still-not-known, yet not-fully-knowable either. Still other spectators were inspired to think about the personal histories brought together and given dramatic shape in this performance, and, ultimately, about the writing of any history as implying a process of selection, editing, and organization, which necessarily privileges some figures and voices at the expense of others. To quote one such response: "The power of these narratives induced me to think about other issues—perhaps not directly raised in the play. For instance, why do we consider these stories worthy of selection and performance. What is achieved and what is silenced?"[62] Beyond the emotional burden of identification, such reactions testify to the ways in which the show can produce a type of historical insight emerging from this collective weaving of memories, words, and gestures into a performance. What kinds of stories, emotional landscapes, and "comings to voice" would have been amplified had there been a different selection of the performers? What other elements of this generation would have been "given voice?" As such, the staging of oral histories is not only a way of bringing "'the storied experience' of the uncelebrated into public conversation and debate,"[63] but also a space of reflection about the making of such histories, calling attention to the potential of performance to serve as "a means to express, to explore, and vicariously to experience history."[64]

60 "Audience Questionnaire Filled in by S.S.", *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ,* performance cited.

61 Soyini D. Madison, *Performed Ethnography, op. cit.*, p. 137.

62 "Audience Questionnaire Filled in by D.V.", *Undesirable Elements: Generation NYZ,* performance cited.

63 Jacquelyn D. Hall, "Afterword: Reverberations", in Della Pollock (ed.), *Remembering Oral History Performance*, New York / Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 188.

64 Natalie M. Fousekis, "Experiencing History: A Journey from Oral History to Performance", in Della Pollock (ed.), *Remembering Oral History Performance*, New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 178.

What this selection of audience feedback demonstrates is the wide range of possibilities for responding to the performance, the many ways of learning from the acts of remembrance performed on stage, and, finally, the many ways of contributing to and sharing in the act of storytelling. Emphasizing the role of the audience as witnesses and interlocutors to these life-worlds rather than spectators per se, the show extends an invitation not only to communal reflection on the topics raised by the play, but, more importantly, to the type of involvement in civic life exemplified by the cast. If performance is indeed significant because it *does* something in the world, then audiences share just as much responsibility in doing their part and continuing the work begun by the creators of the show—both performers and theatre practitioners—in their communities. Beyond the "ethical demand"[65] of listening to and opening oneself up to the testimony of the Other, as Amanda Stuart Fisher fittingly describes it in Levinasian terms, there is another, subtler demand placed on the audience of community-based, personal narrative performance, that of re-envisioning oneself as a more thoughtful and more involved citizen of the world. Predicated on an ethics of inclusivity, collaboration, and responsibility at all stages of its development and production, community-based theatre seeks to model the same values in its audience members, who are given an opportunity to practice ways of being listeners and tellers, and, ultimately, ways of engaging with and responding to each other in a communal setting, within the frame of the performance events and especially the talkbacks. From the collaborative dramaturgical processes of creating the play whereby the participants and the practitioners become partners in conversation, to the performance event which emphasizes the collective act of "coming to voice" together as part of a community in the making, to the reception processes which incorporate the audience into the fabric of this community of storytellers and witnesses, community-based theatre thus creates the conditions for a re-imagining of ways of living together within a turbulent social and political context where such models are not always foregrounded.

65 Amanda Stuart Fisher, "Bearing Witness: The Position of Theatre Makers in the Telling of Trauma", in Tim Prentki, Sheila Preston (eds), *The Applied Theatre Reader*, London and New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 114.

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Notice

Dr. Diana Benea is Lecturer in the English Department at the University of Bucharest, Romania, where she teaches courses in 20th and 21st century American literature and contemporary American drama. She was a Fulbright Senior Scholar at the City University of New York –The Graduate Center, with a research project on the politics and aesthetics of contemporary American community-based theatre (2017-2018). Her current research looks at the relationship between politics and performance, with a focus on the theory, praxis, and pedagogy of applied theatre formats.

Abstract

In conversation with recent theoretical explorations of community-based theatre and oral history performance, this article offers an analysis of *Generation NYZ* (2018), the 25th year anniversary production of Ping Chong + Company's *Undesirable Elements* series (1992-), one of the most vibrant and enduring theatrical projects of this kind on the contemporary American stage. Relying on a wide array of source materials, including interviews, archival material and audience feedback, the three-fold inquiry looks at the dramaturgical processes at work in the creation of the play (within the context of the whole series), its main thematic concerns and the stakes of "coming to voice" (hooks), as well as the politics of audience reception. This approach shows that the format of community-based theatre transcends the primacy of the text and its performance, encompassing instead a broader range of processes, from dramaturgy to reception, which could all be regarded as working towards and rehearsing "models of how we live together" (Cohen-Cruz).

Key words

community-based theatre; oral history; youth theatre; dramaturgy; reception; social change

Résumé

En dialogue avec les récentes explorations théoriques du théâtre communautaire et de la performance fondée sur l'histoire orale, cet article offre une analyse de *Generation NYZ* (2018), le spectacle qui a marqué le 25ème anniversaire de la série *Undesirable Elements* (1992-) de Ping Chong + Company, l'un des projets théâtraux les plus durables et les plus vivants dans son genre sur la scène américaine contemporaine. À partir d'un large éventail de sources, d'entretiens, de documents d'archives et questionnaires aux spectateurs, la présente analyse vise à déplier d'abord le processus dramaturgique à l'origine de la pièce (dans le contexte de cette série) ; puis les thématiques les plus importantes et la « découverte de la voix » (hooks) ; enfin les enjeux politiques de la réception. Cette approche montre que le format du théâtre communautaire met en question la primauté du texte et de sa mise-en-scène, et comprend une gamme complexe de processus, de la « dramaturgie » à la réception, qui peuvent être conçus comme une façon de répéter et de s'approprier des « modèles du vivre ensemble » (Cohen-Cruz).

Mots-clés

théâtre communautaire américain; histoire orale; théâtre pour les jeunes; dramaturgie; réception; changement social

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

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