

NURTURING NEW WORK THROUGH INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

When Triple Shadow decided they wanted to tour internationally, they asked Philip Arnoult of the Center for International Theatre Development for advice. Arnoult saw their request as a chance to do what he does best: build connections between artists. “I focus on putting people together,” says Arnoult, who travels the globe with theatre professionals in the hope that collaborations will result. “I’m a matchmaker. It’s very simple--. I just trust that whatever will happen, will happen.”

Arnoult introduced Triple Shadow to the artists of two Central European performance companies: Artus of Hungary, which began as a dance company and now bills itself as an “art laboratory,” and Toaca of Romania, which works in state theatres in Bucharest but also makes theatre on a smaller scale to “create a space where art, politics and social issues can interact.” What all three companies had in common was an interest in productions built collaboratively and with innovative use of sound and technology. “You guys should sit down and talk about your art and where and how you make it,” Arnoult suggested. He introduced the project to CITD’s major funder, The Trust for Mutual Understanding. All three groups were willing to meet.

Their first encounters moved between the three countries: Triple Shadow and Artus to Bucharest, Triple Shadow and Toaca to Budapest, Toaca and Artus to the U.S.

Finally they all met together in Romania. For four days the leaders of Triple Shadow, Artus and Toaca walked together in the mountains where Hollywood’s COLD MOUNTAIN was filmed. They tried to find common ground. All agreed that they did not want to collaborate in a formal theatre setting. What came harder was finding a structure or process in which the three directors, various designers, a composer and nine performers could work together. For three nights in a row, their discussions ended with at least one person saying, “If we do that, I’m not interested.” Once in agreement, they stumbled upon two ideas that interested them all: time and shadow. The particular inspiration related to Mayan time in which past, present, future, dream-life, and the underworld exist simultaneously. Here was rich territory to explore in performance.

Through connections that Triple Shadow had in Chiapas, Mexico--and with financial help from National Endowment for the Arts, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, and the Trust for Mutual Understanding--the companies arranged to spend three weeks together in the Mexican jungle and mountains. All participants assumed that immersion in a Mayan culture, self-direction and a strong aesthetic would guide the process.

Once gathered, the company members felt unsure of how best to collaborate. Though the participants explored the landscape together, each company found a separate space to work and shaped a separate

project. Triple Shadow researched the history of conquest in Mayan culture. They experimented with the haunting images they could create with a Plexiglas “mirror man” and with how sound traveled amidst Mayan temple ruins. Toaca worked with local actors to translate Jacques’s “seven ages” speech from AS YOU LIKE IT into the local dialect. They integrated the speech into a ritual that included a falling curtain of corn, an image inspired by Mayans’ view of the underworld. Artus gathered willing participants to carry cinderblocks on their backs. Within the hollows of each cinderblock were lighted candles, and the group made a late-night march toward a woman suspended on an adobe wall--still and aware as a tiny lizard. Another evening Susan Prins, former Triple Shadow performer now living in Chiapas, was seen sprawled on the ground, outlined by candles. The image of her body and candlelit outline evoked both a religious ceremony and a crime-scene chalk line. In her summary of the retreat some time later, a member of Toaca said, “We had plenty of accidents.” When asked if they were happy accidents, she replied, “If we were in front of an audience, they would not be happy.”

After this workshop, the companies determined that they would benefit most not from shared criticism but from shared expertise. They began to tap each other’s talents. Artus asked Triple Shadow to travel to Hungary to create sound for a production that had grown out of the retreat in Chiapas. Toaca’s and Artus’s innovative use of moving images led Triple Shadow to ask them for advice on using video within live performance. Artus sought permission from Toaca to perform one of the scenes that the Romanian company had created in Mexico.

By the time the groups gathered again last fall for a residency at the Santa Fe Art Institute, a growing trust characterized their work together. Their experimentation became more interactive. Artus invited members from every company to participate in a project that required each person to disrobe and submit to partial burial in a dry riverbed. Triple Shadow asked members of Toaca to help them enact scenes from ALICE: END OF DAZE, a piece then in an early stage of development. Toaca integrated members of Triple Shadow into their further experimentations with light, shadow and Mayan images for an exercise that combined ancient symbols with state-of-the-art technology.

While the groups now talk of performing jointly at a European festival one day, their interest in continuing to build trust and collaboration through periodic get-togethers is stronger than their wish for a culminating event. Triple Shadow in particular appreciates the chance to create new work without pressure among such gifted and innovative peers. “We’re creating a group that supports and sustains each other’s work,” says Beth Skinner of Triple Shadow. “new work always... needs nurturing. We need some places we can go and just hum together.”

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