

Community Artist Partnership: Building Community Power, A Conversation with Linda Parris-Bailey and Cristal Chanelle Truscott

This is the full transcript of a conversation that was facilitated by Joe Tolbert on February 8, 2016 with Linda Parris-Bailey, Executive/Artistic Director of the [Carpetbag Theatre, Inc.](#) – one of Alternate ROOTS' founding companies – and Cristal Chanelle Truscott, Artistic Director of [Progress Theatre](#).

JT: What are the commonalities between the Carpetbag Theatre, Inc. and Progress Theatre?

LPB: I certainly see intention in terms of producing that has significance in the community and speaks to community issues. I see a parallel in terms of form and the use of music and story are parallel intentions and practices. As I observe the work that I have seen, the deep questions that are being asked and the exploration of those questions. The quality of the work with Progress, and I think the willingness to engage collaborators and community, these are the things that easily come to mind. There is the connection through the history of Black Theater here in this country.

CCT: I would echo almost everything that Linda said. One of the exciting things, being a young person entering ROOTS space, meeting Linda, and learning about Carpetbag, was seeing a woman who was at the helm of this work...a black woman. As a young person that was really empowering. To see that and to know that there was practice and longevity, and all these things that went into the work, but that it was a black woman led and spirited. I feel that there is a grace and a magic that comes along with that, and so often, I think historically in black communities, it can be very male centric or at least male dominated, even if female identities are a part of the conversation. My experience is that people still often are victims of the black male gaze or that perspective. There is a balance and a gift that womanhood can bring to a theatrical space, but certainly for me in seeing another black company. That really stood out for me and is a really important connection.

Joe I think you are a testament and example to this, there was such an openness to intergenerational dialogue, support, empowerment, and value, and I will say, for me, has been another dynamic to starting out as a young African American artist is that often times I would be so excited to meet people who have been doing this work for a long time and elders, and there wasn't that idealistic embracing. I dare say sometimes you encounter people with a bit of founder's syndrome and clinging so to the work that had been done, which I loved and valued, but to the extent of either not extending a hand, opening a conversation, or really just being there to "amen" the efforts of the next generation, so that for me, the example of Linda and Carpetbag, of being rooted in the work, the processes, the experience, the history, and the longevity, then taking the extra step to reach forward and to nurture the next generation, has always been important and impactful to me.

LPB: First of all, thank you. I would also say that was a gift to me as a young artist. I remember visiting Barbara Ann Teer in New York and sitting in her office when I was a young artist. I don't think she was that much older than I was, but she was such an inspiration to me. She gave me, what I would like to call, words of permission to use my art to claim a space in the movement for Black Theater. I had mentors who...womentors, I would say, who really practiced that and taught it to me. I value it so much. I value young artists. How can we not support?

JT: Can you talk about your shared aesthetic practice of black woman centered storytelling?

CCT: When you were asking this question, the term that came to my mind was unapologetically black. I think for me that duality of blackness and femaleness is inseparable, right? I have to add to that unapologetically female, and I think so often, women of all races, but speaking from where I stand as a black woman, we are subliminally, subconsciously taught to apologize for ourselves, for our strength, for our power, for our feistiness, for our beauty, for all these things. That has always been an entry point to express what was unapologetically female about me, my community, and about what I love. When I think about the women who nurtured me when I grew up, I was raised to find value in women-only spaces. Sometimes from the outside looking in, people will look at Muslim communities and gender segregation and say gosh, these poor women they are separate from the men, and they never stop to think that there is power often times in women only spaces and that there is something about being in a women's only space, that I learned as a child, is really beautiful and certainly as I became an adult.

Obviously there is a magic in mix gendered space, gender fluid spaces, but there is something about the universality and particularity of women only spaces, so when I think about this idea of being unapologetically black and unapologetically female, that was really the kind of impetus for the first piece I created with Progress Theatre called *PEACHES*. Even going back farther, the first time I read Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Was Enuf*, monologue about being sorry and not being sorry, you know? Coming into that voice and thinking I know I have the words for what is being imposed on me in terms of being an angry black woman. How can I unapologetically represent myself and stand in either claiming it or not claiming it? The art and the practice of art was kind of like a literal, physical, and metaphorical way of stepping into that light, or stepping into that practice as an artistic practice, but also as a lifestyle practice, when you get to that point in life where you are like oh, it's not my job to apologize or to shrink for anyone's benefit, my only job is to bring the fullness of myself and to be present in the space.

LPB: What you made me think about Cristal is the access that I grew up in and with. My own personal history with movements and people, and what I've learned about women and practice, and the dynamics that are there, because I grew up as a teenager in the 60s and the early 70s and the questions of race and gender, and questions of faith and

direction, were all quite prevalent. Because of my own personal experiences, I was in women spaces, my sister is a Muslim, so I grew up on the edges of that community, and a diverse set of practices there, so I've always been comfortable in working with women in a deliberate way.

The story of *Speed Killed My Cousin* is rooted in an old family story. I didn't feel like I could tell that story from a man's point of view. When the opportunity seemed to arise, when things changed in the military, we were looking at vehicular suicide of women and how the war has impacted them. I then began to feel like I had access to that story, because it could be told from a woman's point of view. It has always been important to me to explore women's voices in my work, that's who I am. As you said, I don't apologize for it. We are artists, and we have a point of view. We have experience, and we are not afraid to use those experiences to explore issues. You mentioned Ntozake, and it's funny, because what I've said in post show dialogues from *Speed*, is that our community hasn't talked about war since poor Willie Brown dropped the child out of the window. These pivotal moments in our culture impact us and how we create, as women artists and black women artist, these moments that we create. That's significant in talking about how we find our way as women in this work.

JT: ROOTS has a history of intentionally pairing artists with community to address community needs, what is your practice around community artist partnerships?

LPB: I think our practice is diverse, because we don't enter community with a particular formula, we enter the community with questions. We enter with the tools we have learned over the years, but our practice is to enter the community as learners and people who share a body of work, but then we have to enter the community as learners. There are particulars to communities and then there is the overarching American experience, if you will, and I think that our work in sharing those, as we call them, untold stories, it's really about how we can help the community dig deeper into its own story. I'm always talking about what Jo [Carson] and others have called reframing. How does the story become useful? That's very much central to our practice. If we are working in community, if we are working, even on our own ideas and issues, we have to figure out what is the reason to share a particular story in a particular time, in a particular way. That exploratory process involves the ensemble in conjunction with the community. That's kind of the root of our practice.

CCT: Similarly, I would say the practice is diverse, because it has to be. It at least has to be open to diversity in order to make sure you really are listening and learning from the community and engaging in that call and response space with the community that you have been invited into, or you belong to. I think my entry point into community collaboration and practice has always been one of depth over breadth and really trying to make sure that I am and we are speaking with and listening to the community before we even get there. I'm speaking particularly to the case of traveling and doing residencies and touring, because there is a different process when you are in the

community. Same principles, but that there is a luxury to having time and access for different approaches to cultivating that relationship, but when I was first starting out, my work had been commissioned and we were going to perform, and I realized immediately that the theater didn't know how to get the people I wanted into the theater, into the theater. They didn't have any way of helping me connect, and it was almost a bit like, *What the hell? How does that happen? How do you not talk to the community?* I didn't understand that, so at that point our base was in New York, because we were all undergraduates at NYU, but by virtue of that, the campus community and the local community of New York, we would go somewhere, the first thing we did was reach out to our local community and say, *Here is where we are going. Who do you know? Who do we need to know? Who do we need to talk to and listen to?* We made sure that these conversations were starting before we even hit the ground.

I always really want to respect the artist that were already doing the work in the cities that we were going to. I never wanted it to seem like gosh, this theater is bringing in this group, and we've been doing this all along. How do they not know? That pre-residency work, for me, has always been really important. There was a staple to our performances called the Open Stage, where in every city that we toured, local artists who have been doing the work, and who were going to be doing the work after we left, would open our show, respecting them, but also requesting permission, from them, to engage with their community, to join that conversation. Then really making sure there is a call and response there. There's nothing to go to a different city, and I'm doing research before hand and think that means we'll get there at the beginning of the residency, and I'm giving actors new lines, because we have to talk about this. This is what's going on. This is a part of the community's conversation, and we're guests. The main thing is making sure that conversation and that depth of interaction, as much as possible, is even more important than the performance. The performance, in a way, is there to enable further dialogue as opposed to the other way around. I really just want the principle of depth over breadth and that the conversation happens before anyone is handing out postcards about a show.

LPB: It's always funny to me when people begin to name practices and move forward the discussions about breaking down silos, or doing the work across practice and profession. In our communities there really isn't a theater audience. There's an audience that wants to hear its story. The audiences come from very different parts of the community. There are very few African American companies that have season ticket holders. It's not like people come just to be a part of the theater, people come, because this speaks to who they are, and it shares their story. You have to let them know that in so many different ways, in so many different arenas and areas to get them to come and participate in the performance, post show discussions, and all those things. That outreach some of the larger more mainstream theaters are not accustomed to doing and having to do, has to be a part of our practice, because we know that our communities live in the silo of educational institutions, social services, and all of those components, so reaching out to the components is essential. The only time I've seen a theater going audience has been for that period of time when Tyler Perry and gospel

musicals and things that it could market as an event, an experience, but we have to break down the “silos” in our community.

CCT: I love that silos is in quotes too, because it's almost--for African Americans there is this idea of, *What silo?* What do you mean? The art better not only be about the art. There is an expectation of this intersectionality from the door. What are you doing? What are you talking about? Who does it appeal to? Why? What are the connections? Again, I think it's one of the things that can be taken for granted, because it's not articulated in that way or articulated in art speak. Right? But it's just a part of the way the community historically and aesthetically functions, because that type of cross pollination is necessary for survival, revolution and for freedom. It can't be done in these barricades. It has to be done with having all hands, all limbs akimbo, stretched out, so they can reach as far as possible.

JT: You all did a good job about talking about how you enter into a community and the practices you use to engage with different communities, but can you talk about how you exit a community, and how you leave them with tools so that the work can continue after the period of engagement is over?

LPB: My first and immediate answer is that it's all about the connections you can facilitate in a community. You're there for a short period of time. We like the week long residency, but we know that that is a temporary time period, so the event needs to facilitate interaction between the residents of the community, the people who are dealing with a particular issue, and the more you can build that connection, the longer the impact is felt in that community. That's not to say that people aren't impacted by the performance itself, people connect and tie into that, but what do they do with that afterward? If you can provide a space for people to do something with what they are feeling, or experiencing, then you have that longer term impact.

JT: Can you give us a story when that was at its best?

LPB: The most recent example would be the work we've done in Tampa, Florida. Tampa was unique in that we had a direct connection, through our director, to a university, to the Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Centers (PRRCs), which enabled us to connect with PRRCs in other communities, so that connection, I'm talking about *Speed Killed My Cousin* now, that connection with recovery groups in Tampa and connecting those recovery groups to nursing students at the University of South Florida (USF), to Sacred Grounds Coffee House, where there continues to be a monthly Veterans Open Mic. There continues to be a connection between the PRRC and USF students. Students are by nature transient. They're going to be there and gone, so rooting something in a four year college is really sprinkling water. That is an example of how it continues to expand. We are now working with Arts and Health in the Military, health providers, psychologists, so that the impact of our being there has multiplied and continues to expand and multiply.

There is one example in our community in the American Festival Project, which enabled us to do a long term collaboration in our community around community knowledge, what we know, what we share, and how we share it. That was a five or six years of work, so that's the kind of local, longer term impact that we saw and people creating new work, not just artistic work, but also community learning.

Then there is the work we did with Rural People Rural Policy with the Kellogg Foundation. I hadn't really been thinking about public policy. I can tell you I don't spend a lot of time thinking about public policy, but when we worked with Rural People Rural Policy, I began to understand national organizing around the issues that impact people on a day to day basis and how we could provide services to that idea, we should be talking, not just about locality, but about the policies and practices nationally. That was a kind of educational process for me, because that wasn't how I was thinking about the work and the impact it could make. What we built with that community with digital storytelling and how that reaches out to all of the communities involved in the project is how you multiply the impact.

CCT: I don't know if I would embrace the word exit as a finite point of...you know, this is the end of our engagement with the community and that's it and you're gone, but part of the dream is that, as Linda said, you go into the community as learners, there's an exchange as well, and we are leaving with relationships that are important for us to maintain and cultivate, and to remain in contact with people and see what they are continuing to learn grow, and do as a part of their practices, as well as sharing. One of the things that I've been pleased and grateful for with Progress Theatre experiences is that most of the time, we get to go back to cities where we've toured, so there are cities like Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, New York, Baltimore, and San Francisco that have seen our entire repertoire of work to date, so that over the course of these years, I'll get to see someone that I've known for 10 years, because they were there the very first time we did *PEACHES* there. The relationship has been maintained. When possible, I find it really valuable to think about creating ongoing and long term relationships with communities and really making it an intention for us to come back and visit as we grow and evolve. In some ways it is easier to do that now, because of things like social media, but I would say, back in the day, when social media was newish, there was a much deeper, more urgent effort that had to happen to make people connect. This is why the workshop and exchange space is important, so that you're giving your best tools and receiving the best tools of the community. The dream is that when you leave, the community is able to do that work, or to do some formation, or iteration of it, whatever their remix of what you brought into the space and vice versa, so that we can go to the next place and we can go here is a song that we learned from these people, from this place, about this this moment, and I'm bringing it into this space. It is also a way of exiting and not exiting, that it becomes this circular ongoing practice.

The example that I'll give is...there was a time when Progress Theater was based in New York then based in Atlanta, and now based in Houston, and when we were in New York, Baltimore was our closest sister city in doing a lot of work there, and it was

amazing, because as the base of Progress Theatre moved from the North to the Southwest, every time we left a city, there was a Generation Progress program, which is our youth program, left in its wake. It would usually be spearheaded by a company member. We had a member that was from Baltimore, and as the base moved to Atlanta, her way of making sure this work still happened and that we were still connected to Baltimore was to start this Generation Progress Program. The same thing happened in Atlanta, and now that we're based in Houston, we are establishing a Generation Progress here as well, but to be able to look back and see that trail of those types of things as even a way of making sure the youth and young people know that they have to be a part of this exchange, that we want them to be a part of this exchange, and that they can see the benefit and value in connecting with other young people who are out of their local environment.

JT: When I think of artist community partnerships, how do you see art as a tool of building community power? Cristal, you talked earlier about how art for art sake has never been a part of the black aesthetic, so how do you see art as a tool and not just art for art sake?

CCT: Joe you sent us a quote from Augusto Boal...

JT: I can read it for you if you want me to? "Theater is a practice of (not for) the revolution."

CCT: I think the answer lies in the semantic. One of the things that means for me is that the revolution comes first, or the desire for it, or the movement toward it, and that the art comes out of it and in response to it. The revolution necessitates the art. It makes it so that...the circumstances are so extreme that the tools used to engage them must also be extreme, and art at its best, and theater, is an extraordinary practice. We don't necessarily go to see theater about waking up and having and having dinner with the family...there's something different about that day in order to make it...that's the day someone gets news, or if I'm thinking historically, that's the day the \$10,000 check comes to Walter Lee and his family that changes everything. Something is different about that day, or about the moment, so theater is born out of those extreme circumstances and the urgent responses and need for voice and for survival, and ultimately for freedom. When the stakes are that high, there has to be something that aesthetically and viscerally rise to the occasion of those stakes and become the voice of what the people need and want. That's what art is. Those things that are characteristic of effective art, those are also characteristics of revolution. I remember being in the theater school, at a predominantly white institution, and teachers having to teach people about stuff like high stakes and urgency, and myself and the other African American and people of color in the room would look at each other like, what is this? I can skip this day. I'm clear on high stakes. That's not something I need to learn as an aesthetic, because the intention behind the work already requires that I have a relationship to high stakes.

LPB: When I think about Boal, there's this necessity to change the way people think for long term systemic change. His practice of being able to practice different points of view and a different relationship to power, that seems to be a primary role to the practice of storytelling and the theater. When he puts people in different positions, he changes the relationship to power. Then you're changing the way people see themselves and their role. To say that this is a part of, not for, when I think about it, it's like you can't have revolution until people think differently and to enable them to do that is a part of our practice. It is a part of reframing the story, and a part of all of the things we do to get them to look at their situation in a different way and to become empowered. I'm old school. When you talk about what community power looks like, it's control of your own resources and control of your own ability. That's power, and how we are a part of that practice that enables people to grasp that power. When I think about what my experience has taught me about community power, it is about those things people do or don't control. Whether it's about economic resources, housing, or education, how do we gain the ability to say what happens where? That's my definition of community power.

I think we are, as theater artists, we have a role in not only exposing the underlying reasoning behind certain practices, but also how do you envision a different future? Right? That's not tied to the lack of. I think all of us tries to look at how to practice this idea of abundance without leaving reality, but the reality is that we may not have the resources to do what we like, but how do we use creative practices that enable us to think differently about our communities?

CCT: I just want to echo the importance of thinking differently, and how art can cultivate and nurture that. I think Linda gave a beautiful example of that. In Boal's practice it was all about physicalizing a different mentality, so actually putting someone in the position of power and having the physical impact the mental and emotional, even as people are witnessing it as well. It's almost like the theater allows this holistic approach to, in the words of Bob Marley, emancipating our minds. It's a process where we are attacking the process of thinking differently, not only from an intellectual standpoint, because it's easier to understand people intellectually, but translating it into action and actual belief, and something you see and feel in your body and create a memory for, that is one of the greatest gifts that the theater can give to this sustainability of creating opportunities for people to think differently, and then to never go back to thinking the other way again. That seed is planted, and there's no going back, because now it's a physical memory, a visual memory, an emotional memory, not just an intellectual concept.

JT: how do you see community partnerships in helping to build community power?

LPB: Partnerships provide an opportunity to service the diverse needs of our community. There aren't enough of us to really respond to any of the challenges we face. If you can create an opportunity for people come together to just respond to one, I think you're building power. People always talk about relationships, they are essential to

any effort, and the longer term relationships you build, the better those relationships are in responding to some of those needs.

CCT: My favorite part of Linda's answer was that the partnership guarantees that we stay engaged to the diverse needs of our communities and the diverse needs of the work. There is such a thing as getting to a space where you have your own tunnel vision and miss the opportunity to engage the multiplicity of the community or of an experience or of efforts. My husband teases that I can only be superwoman on Halloween. I love this, because it always reminds me to collaborate, and that I can't do it on my own, shouldn't do it on my own. I'm just speaking on the individual level, so when I think on a larger level the principle still stands. We cannot do it alone, shouldn't do it alone, and we're not supposed to do it alone. If that were the case, every community and individual, for that matter, would have their own planet, but we were put here together to work it out together. It's a way of self care, a way of community care. Partnerships can come along with support. It can expand the reach of the work. It can expand the vision of the work. There is no scenario where I can see a downside. The evidence speaks loudly that people want, I would dare say, need connection. To do this and to make it happen, I certainly think its sustaining. It sustains each partner and each person that has been impacted by the work of the partnership or the work of the community. All of those things are necessary for power. There has to be sustainability. There has to be accountability, which partnership can do as well. There are these whole checks and balances that partnerships demand that makes power possible.