

Another World in Progress

A progressive think-tank in Brazil opens the door to artists

As a theatre artist who is also an activist, I'm often troubled by the exclusion of artists in the planning and articulations of progressive actions or movements. When we are invited, it is typically to "make something" that furthers a cause already articulated by others, or to provide the decoration for the rallies and help "get people there." (I

BY MELANIE JOSEPH

think we're too often content to be the decoration, but that's another conversation.) To my mind, this is the mother lode of missed opportunities. It's what artists—especially theatre artists—do, for god's sake: imagine

new worlds and possibilities, draw uncommon connections and bring heretofore unassociated elements together to articulate new worlds. All of which we hope (oh please let it be good enough smart enough finished enough) will provoke or enable people to somehow reconsider the nature of possibility. Not a small task, but one to which many artists are bound. That was the stone in my shoe that motivated the formation of the Foundry Theatre 11 years ago. I wanted to provide theatre artists with public spaces in which they could imagine things together—both new works of art and new worlds for that art to exist within.

When I heard last fall that the World Social Forum, the biggest global assembly of progressive activists in the world, decided to open up space for artists—to invite us as full partners to the WSF annual global think-tank—it got my attention. Was there really going to be enough room for us? The answer was *yes*, and then some. I've just come back from this fifth World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where the imagination, efforts and experiences of 155,000 people from 135 different countries spilled out into the public space that the WSF creates, sweeping thousands of us up into collective global imagining—a vision I can only characterize as a "future."

Operating under the ethos that "bottom line" is measured by what is good for people, not by what is good for markets or capital, the WSF provides open space for progressive thinkers, grassroots activists and community organizers from all over the world to exchange ideas, review innovations in economic, political/civic and social models, and to network widely toward more effective actions. It's a public space for big ideas or proposals to be conceived and organized. The intention is to think together



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They've got the whole world in their hands: the fifth World Social Forum in Brazil.



New planes of vision: youth permeated the forum.

on a global basis, to make room—in greater depth each year—for the search for alternatives to the dominant (and sputtering) world model.

There's been a lot of imagining going on over the past five years under the banner of the WSF, whose maxim is "another world is possible"—polyphonic imagining, across continents, cultures, classes, languages, that has generated unprecedented possibility. And now, after four days, 2,500 workshops, roundtables, panels, parties and tens of thousands of conversations smattered across multiple, sometimes broken, languages, I am left with no doubt that this global, collaborative and collective imagining has already activated "another world in process." And not a moment too soon.

THE SPACE FOR ARTISTS WAS EVEN more generous than I expected. To begin with, there were 400 activities scheduled on 14 different stages: 13 dance performances, 85 plastic art exhibitions/installations, 150 films and videos, and 100 concerts—the opening night event featured Spain's Furia del Baus, Australia's Snuff Puppets and musicians from five continents, including a glorious set from the divine Gilberto Gil, who happens to be Brazil's minister of culture (how great is that?) and, as it turns out, a much better singer than John Ashcroft. There were 41 plays and 7 theatre workshops. I saw only one of them, forgive me! It was a raucous, at times stirring, movement-theatre piece created by

"Was there really going to be enough room for us? The answer was yes, and then some."

Brazilian director Márcio Vianna and 200 performers. Rehearsed over three days and performed al fresco over the course of four hours, *Farra de Teatro* (*Theatre Spree*) was a marvelous, loose baggy monster composed of several familiar theatrical tropes

we've seen before but I was glad to see again. Even in the presence of 155,000 people trying to make the world better, I am still most at home in the company of theatre artists, especially 200 of them running around dressed in white frantically trying to remember what happens next.

Among the 60 events organized by artists, the most unforgettable for me was a panel called "Challenges to Political Art Practices," presented by @culture, a national artists' collective from India, at which Gilberto Gil delivered a deliciously clever, deeply soulful exegesis on art and citizenship that might just be the definitive "art is

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The White Devil, 2003



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Epic stretch: *Farra de Teatro*, created by director Márcio Vianna and 200 performers.

enough” discourse for us to quote from for years to come. In addition to proposing we at last rescue the noun “art” from all modifiers (naming “political” the most dangerous of all),

Gil went on to say: “Art has an intrinsic political dimension.... When it interacts with the public and interferes within the *polis*, then we have the politics of art.” He similarly rescued the

word “politics” from performing the role of adjective, moving on to speak instead about *policies* for arts and culture, challenging governments and citizens, especially those in a process of rebuilding their countries, to embrace art and artists in that enterprise.

I heard Brazil’s and Venezuela’s presidents Lula and Chavez speak about things that were actually important to me—not something I am used to hearing from politicians in power. I attended a panel called “The New Quixotes,” where Nobel Prize-winning writer José Saramago and celebrated Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano engaged in a passionate debate over the relevance of the Quixote metaphor to today’s activists. They had 15,000 people on the edges of their seats. (Hmmm, a passionate debate over the significance of a metaphor for a captivated audience...of thousands...I’m at home here.) Galeano nailed the argument in favor of the power of Quixote as a galvanizing image when he quoted the closing line from Che Guevara’s final letter to his parents before he was killed: “Once again I feel under my heels the ribs of Rocinante.” The revolutionary cited Cervantes, not Marx, Galeano noted: QED.

ONE OF THE MOST COMPELLING ASPECTS of the WSF is that it is entirely the creation of those who attend. A WSF International Council helps define “thematic terrains,” but all events offered are proposed, organized and hosted by the participants themselves. Among this year’s offerings: workshops on organic bee-keeping, food sovereignty, debt relief and how to locally oppose the war in Iraq, and information on a range of alternative practices—in economics (for instance, on the growing Solidarity Economy movement), media (such as the proliferating movement of local community radio) and agriculture (such as land reform and/or anti-transgenics). (Google the MST, Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement. It is the most inspiring and perhaps the most comprehen-

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sively successful progressive movement since civil rights.)

Though the preponderance of forum participants were activists and NGO (non-governmental organization) workers, I was incredibly moved by the numbers of poor and working-class people in attendance from all over the world. Some were sponsored by NGOs, others by their own communities, churches or parishes; still others got there on their own steam. I felt privileged to witness their powerful peer-to-peer exchanges about ways they are solving the devastating problems produced by World Bank and International Monetary Fund policies in such areas as water supply, food sovereignty, health, environment and urban renewal.

Finally, it must be noted that 36,000-plus registered participants this year were under the age of 25. Every year a WSF youth camp takes shape as a temporary city that makes its own decisions about garbage, water, sewage, controlling the camp's environmental impact, etc.

There is indeed another world in process, and it's being built by other cultures, in other languages and along new planes of vision, in which we might hope to find a profound reframing of who we are as artists and citizens of this huge country in this tiny world. There's room for imagining, which means there's room for us. Now we have to show up.

In the meantime, may our lives and work reflect the future we've been invited to help create. Imagine that. **AT**

Melanie Joseph is artistic director of New York City's Foundry Theatre, a member of TCG's board and the president of the U.S. Center of ITI. The 2006 World Social Forum will take place in several countries, not yet announced at press time. The 2007 WSF will be held in Africa. For more information, go to www.forumsocialmundial.org.br.

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