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Cover Page Footnote

Taylor St. John, MFA Education and Engagement Specialist Orpheum Theatre Group-Memphis, TN
Footnotes: 1 Taylor St. John is a theatre artist and educator who currently serves as the Education and Engagement Specialist at the Orpheum Theatre Group in Memphis, TN. He has taught in school, university, and community settings around the country. He currently directs the Orpheum's Teaching Artist Training Program where he collaborates and coaches Mid-South artists to educate and engage with youth and communities. As a teaching artist, he has developed and lead programs for the nationally recognized Coterie Theatre in Kansas City, the award-winning Barrington Stage Company, Florida Studio Theatre, and the Bloomington Playwright's Project . As a theatre director, he works at the intersection of theatre, community, and social justice. He holds an MFA in Directing from the University of Memphis and degrees in Theatre and Education from Indiana University. www.taylorstjohn.com 2 www.repmemphis.org 3 Story circles, as I practice them, are adapted from the Native American tradition, originating with the League of the Iroquois and the Peoples of the Plains and Southwest Pueblos. I learned this method from Julia Taylor at Cornerstone Theater's Summer Institute in 2018. References: Boal, Augusto. Games for Actors and Non-Actors. London: Routledge, 2002. Boal, Augusto. Theatre of the Oppressed. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985. Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York, NY: Continuum, 2009. Rohd, M. P. Theatre for Community, Conflict and Dialogue: Hope Is Vital Training Manual. Heinemann Press, 1998. Zimmerman, Jack and Coyle, Virginia. The Way of Council. Bramble Books, 1996.



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Taking Youth Voices Seriously: Theatre, Storytelling, and Empowerment with Refugee Youth in Memphis, TN

Taylor St.John¹

This project report documents the most recent play-turned-podcast in a multi-year partnership between the Orpheum Theatre Group and the Refugee Empowerment Program in Memphis, TN. Youth from the program have been engaging in From Where I Stand, a theatrical storytelling program that weaves first-person narratives into theatrical performances that are presented for the community. While our third performance entitled, Refugee Portraits, was postponed due to the pandemic, it was given new life in the form of a podcast. This report will explore the process of creating the live theatrical performance, pivoting that performance to a podcast, and reflect on how we can harness the power of storytelling and community-based theatre as a model for youth empowerment and liberatory education.

Preface:

Since January 2019, I have directed From Where I Stand: a theatrical storytelling program born from a collaboration between the Orpheum Theatre Group and the Refugee Empowerment Program (R.E.P.)² where a group of refugee youth grades 6-12 team up with teaching artists who guide them through a process of self-discovery and experiential learning. Located in Memphis, TN, the Orpheum is a Broadway presenting house with far-reaching education and community programs, while R.E.P. is a social services

¹ Taylor St. John, MFA Education and Engagement Specialist Orpheum Theatre Group-Memphis, TN Footnotes: 1 Taylor St. John is a theatre artist and educator who currently serves as the Education and Engagement Specialist at the Orpheum Theatre Group in Memphis, TN. He has taught in school, university, and community settings around the country. He currently directs the Orpheum's Teaching Artist Training Program where he collaborates and coaches Mid-South artists to educate and engage with youth and communities. As a teaching artist, he has developed and lead programs for the nationally recognized Coterie Theatre in Kansas City, the award-winning Barrington Stage Company, Florida Studio Theatre, and the Bloomington Playwright's Project . As a theatre director, he works at the intersection of theatre, community, and social justice. He holds an MFA in Directing from the University of Memphis and degrees in Theatre and Education from Indiana University.

² www.repmemphis.org

organization that provides resources and education to the immigrant and refugee community. Each collaboration has culminated in a play that weaves together first-person verbatim narratives and dramatizes key moments in which the ensemble enact characters and situations from the real-life experiences of their peers.

We began collaborating with R.E.P. (along with five other school and community organizations) in our first iteration of *From Where I Stand*. In this version of the program the goal was to bring together youth from diverse backgrounds to collaborate and hear one another's stories. This exchange occurred throughout the creative process and at a public performance that was attended by audience members from each of the five organizations. Audiences from different communities came together to hear youth tell raw, unadulterated stories from their lives. While having partners and participants from across the city allowed for a rewarding exchange, it also revealed that refugee youth encounter disproportionate barriers to fuller participation in society. In addition to language and cultural differences, refugee youth are systemically silenced by being unknown to their neighbors, classmates, and those that do not understand their lives prior to arriving in the U.S. In short, the process ended with an identified need to provide more platforms for the immigrant and refugee community to tell their stories.

When our performance ended, we started to think about how this need might be served by creating a play exclusively focused with/for/by the young people at R.E.P. In the fall of 2019, we created *Stories of Home* with four youth who volunteered to tell stories about how their relationships to home have impacted their sense of identity, their connection to their homelands, and their new-found homes in Memphis. We met with them twice a week; honing their performances and collaborating to turn them into a play. Following each performance, I facilitated a dialogue with the audience in which many members of the immigrant and refugee community attended. The audience members voiced their support for the youth onstage and

shared their own personal experiences, challenges, and successes arriving in Memphis. We decided to go deeper to see how we could empower more youth from R.E.P. to share their stories onstage.

The Process:

With the success of *Stories of Home*, we had affirmed our commitment to the partnership and both organizations had seen first-hand the impact of the program for both audiences and youth participants. The experience had also allowed youth from R.E.P. to see their peers onstage and get excited about how they could participate in future iterations. Camela Echols-Blackmon is the Executive Director of R.E.P. and believed that *From Where I Stand* was in alignment with the organization's mission "To empower refugees and immigrants in Memphis, TN"². While youth are offered a variety of academic, social, and therapeutic services, Ms. Cam (as she is affectionately called) believed that *From Where I Stand* was providing a necessary outlet for youth to build their capacity for vulnerability and take ownership of their stories and experiences:

Often times immigrants and refugees always have someone else telling their story...It is important for our community to realize how smart, how talented, creative the young people were. They needed a support system to bring out that inner beauty that each of them has.

With this in mind, my co-teaching artist, Santyria Johnson, and I collaborated with R.E.P. to recruit a new group of students to participate beginning in January 2020. Together we designed a process of self-discovery where students would be empowered to speak their individual truth, while also supporting the nuanced and varied truths spoken by their peers. Most of the youth we worked with have never experienced formal theatre training or classes and few have performed or spoken in front of audiences. Throughout the process of sharing, generating, and exploring the stories, we also sought to equip them with the tools to confidently express themselves through their bodies, voice, and imaginations.

In the initial stages of our process, we were especially focused on making the youth co-creators of the experience and avoiding the oppressive system that Freire describes as the “banking concept of education” in which the students would participate as mere containers for information (72). This was a difficult feat because the majority of structures that these young people interact with (from schools to government agencies to their parents’ employers) are still deeply ingrained in systems of domination that are not interested in critical thought or expression. Thus, as outsiders, we had to prove our investment in both the youth and their ideas; we needed to take the time to really learn about the young people and empower them as collaborators with agency in our process. I describe this part of the process as ensemble-building; we play a variety of games and exercises that harness each participants’ ability to make decisions as artists and storytellers, and thus, create for themselves. It is important to note that in this iteration of the partnership with R.E.P., this part of the process was met with less skepticism than in previous sessions. Participants have now witnessed the plays that have been made by their peers in the past as well as have heard strange chants, rhythms, and laughs around the building where the rest of R.E.P.’s programming takes place. Thus, trust is built both within the process and within the larger context of the partnership between organizations.

In the next stage of development, we began exploring a theme that would become the framework to link and unify the narratives as a whole dramatic work. This stage of the process also acculturates the group to listening deeply to their peers (even when they disagree) and models dialogical teaching practices that question further without ever asserting whether something is right/wrong or correct/incorrect. During this stage, we sculpt group and individual images, build thematic machines, write poetry, and brainstorm as a group. The genesis for the play’s title, *Refugee Portraits*, was a word mapping activity in which a large piece of butcher paper was placed on the ground. In the center of the paper were the words, “Who I Am” and participants free associated words, phrases, and images with how they answer, grapple, and negotiate

what you are going to say. In this group of participants, there was an eagerness to begin telling their stories from the start. The sense from this group was that after watching and hearing about the program from their peers, this was the part of the process they had been yearning for. In this way, the previous performances have inspired new participants and stories to emerge.

We sat in a circle of folding chairs in a very small classroom. I lit a candle to act as our talking stick and established the rules: speaking and listening from the heart, being lean, and no pre-planning. The prompt for the circle was: "Tell a story about who you really are". Participants told stories of being bullied at school for wearing a hijab, of memories from their homelands, of the ways in which their parents struggle to provide, of family rituals and jokes, of the promises of America before they arrived, of being separated from their families by oceans and borders. We heard stories of joy, anguish, confidence, pain, nostalgia, resilience, and fear. Tears rolled down faces and deep breaths of relief were released. The story circle functioned as the most unifying moment in our process together; it bound us in an act of trust and unity. It was also the ultimate test for us, as teaching artists, to remain vigilant in holding space for young people to say what they want to say in whatever way it comes out.

During the story circle, we recorded the audio and transcribed the stories word for word. After the storytellers saw their words on the page, they were able to edit, remove, and add information to represent their story. Once we have the narrative outlined, we ask them to choose crucial moments of decision within the story and, with the help of their peers, sculpt images of the moment and allow the images to come to life (as in Boal's Image Alive! Exercise). Once the images are sculpted, they recreated dialogue and physical action that was incorporated into the script. From there I, as the director, weaved them together and added auxiliary material from their earlier generative exercises to create moments of ensemble-action and a through-line for the performance as a whole. In *Refugee Portraits*, we decided that the individual

stories would be broken up by pre-recorded voiceovers of the students speaking the assumptions and mythologies they encounter as refugees:

“The world thinks refugees are not proud.”

“They think we are stupid.”

“Not the people to achieve their dreams.”

“Why did they even come to America?”



Generative Images Created by the Ensemble
Photo Credit: Taylor St. John

In spring 2020, we were entering our final weeks of rehearsal when the Covid-19 pandemic hit; our performance was postponed, and the future of our collaboration entered into unknown territory. At the beginning of the pandemic, we hoped that within a few months it would be safe to gather again and we would be able to present the play as intended. By summer, it became clear that that hope was not realistic.

The Pivot:

After reconciling that the performance as originally intended would not be, we went back to basics: What was the goal of the program? How could we still provide a platform for young people to tell their stories?

How could we honor the commitment and vulnerability of all involved? With these questions in mind and safety at the forefront, we turned our play into an episodic storytelling podcast where youth would perform their stories and we could conduct interviews to delve deeper. This solution offered us the opportunity to expand the program's reach beyond Memphis.

When participants arrived to record their stories, I felt the duality of no time passing and simultaneously the entire world having changed in inexplicable ways. After we recorded each story (that had been scripted verbatim months earlier), we asked them to turn the paper over and tell the story anew—just to see if their improvisation might provide new insights that were omitted from the previous version. Often, what we heard was an entirely new story or the emergence of major events to contextualize what had been previously spoken. Whether this was due to the intimacy of the recording, of being away from their peers, or the quality of the listening, is uncertain. Yet, in a moment of global disconnection, upheaval, and polarization, returning to the fundamental act of providing a space where young people can have a voice to speak, envision, and reflect crystallized how much we have to learn from one another. How, when we teach/facilitate/lead with the goal of learning with and from the students, we are all liberated.

After months of editing, our ten-episode podcast launched *From Where I Stand: Refugee Portraits* on Apple podcasts and on Spotify.⁴ In addition, we held a weeklong live-streaming event on social media and aired all the episodes on a local community radio station WYXR 91.7. These real-time events allowed us to play the episodes and reflect in the moment with special guests from the R.E.P. staff and community. The podcast expanded the reach of who could hear these stories and provided a global platform for the stories of refugee youth in Memphis. However, nothing was able to replace the raw simplicity of sitting in a theatre with other humans and hearing a powerful story unfold directly from the person who lived it.

⁴ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/from-where-i-stand-refugee-portraits/id1539720784> and <https://open.spotify.com/show/6aaqY3R11gakqTp4OQrqmn> respectively.



Stories of Home
Photo Credits: Taylor St. John
and Zack Orsborn

As an artist and educator, I am sometimes frustrated by the limitations of art to make real, tangible change. Does the process of hearing and telling stories move the needle forward at all? Freire tells us that, “to speak a true word is to transform the world.” (87) By collaborating on a play with/for/by refugee youth, we are making space for youth to speak true words that can transform us all. In doing so, we are challenging a dominant culture that views young people as a population whose voices don’t count and

refugees and immigrants as a population whose voices shouldn't count. When we interviewed each young person for the podcast, they reflected on their experiences participating in the program:

"I found it as a family because I never shared my personal stuff to anybody else before. So, being able to talk to this group, From Where I Stand, is amazing. I felt like I had someone who was listening to me. Just like when you are in the living room with your family having dinner. When you are talking to other people and you know they are going to respect what you say, and they're going to listen to you, and even be honest about what you are talking about. It gives you more motivation and makes you more stronger. Every day that I came here, I didn't come out the same way I came. It made me feel like I was ready to take on anything in life." Bertrand (Participant)

"From Where I Stand is a point of view from our perspective—like being a refugee and coming to America. We learned a lot more than we knew about each other...It's important for people to tell their stories because people really assume who you are and what you stand for, but you need to tell them where you direct your life. Instead of them telling you where you should go and what you are. Because your life is not their life." Layla (Participant)

By taking the narratives of refugee youth seriously, my hope is that these young people begin to see themselves as people who should be taken seriously. As people who are not merely objects of the systems they survive within, but subjects that have the autonomy and resilience to shape the world anew.

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