PEACOCK REBELLION: A ROUNDTABLE

By Tyrone Boucher

Peacock Rebellion is a queer and trans people of color–centered, Bay Area–based crew of artist-worker-healers shifting culture toward social, economic, and environmental justice. Their first show, a cabaret called Agen(c)ly: Nonprofit Dreams and Disasters, premiered in November 2012. Twelve performing and video artists shared their work with 400 audience members. I talked with artists Indira Allegra, Vanessa Huang, Jen-Mei Wu, and Manish Vaidya (also Agen(c)ly’s co-producer and Peacock Rebellion’s coordinator) about the show.

TB: Agen(c)ly was about the nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC). Could you each share a bit about your piece for the show?

IA: I used to work in the domestic-violence field, shelterside, as a youth advocate. Working in that field was emotionally akin to being in a domestic-violence relationship for me. My piece was a performance of emotional song and poetry about that dynamic.

VH: I showed a video in which liberation workers living in Georgia, North Carolina, New York, New Jersey, and California shared reflections on what feeds their “courage heart,” a term that came to me when writing a poem upon the transition of activist Marilyn Buck. To me it speaks to the depth of presence and vulnerability we need with each other to continue showing up in the work of liberation, and to live as human beings in this world of ours. I’d met most of the people in the video through movement-building work facilitated by the nonprofit industrial complex.

JW: I’m part of the Comrade Lover lion-dance troupe. Lion dances are a way to clear away evil spirits, and we did a skit about confronting an evil spirit representing the NPIC and chasing him off the stage, followed by a celebratory dance.

MV: My computer crashed the first day of the show. I lost the script for my piece, the program book—everything. I ended up just getting onstage and improvising about how my mom only started supporting my activist work once I had a job with a fancy title, the contradictions given that she was opposed to the issue I was building support for, and how in that job I saw so many types of harm playing out by people committed to social justice. I asked the audience a question Indira had asked me when she joined the Agen(c)ly project: What kind of ancestor do you want to be?

I’ve wanted to do this show for about eight years. Originally, I was burning out on an NPIC job in D.C., on the road doing “field organizing,” and I started writing a musical comedy about a march on Washington. I didn’t have the language of the “nonprofit industrial complex” until the recordings of INCITE!’s “Revolution Will Not Be Funded” conference came out [in 2004]; I listened to them like they were meditation tapes. And then the book came out. Oh my goodness! I kept buying copies for jaded friends. Folks from INCITE!, Left Turn, and POOR Magazine gave me massive amounts of support over the years, especially when I worked at a fundraising training nonprofit—which, incidentally, got slammed in INCITE!’s book. That was such a tense tug-of-war between are we subverting the NPIC or are we building it? But that job gave me space and access to tons of folks at nonprofits in the U.S. who shared stories that revealed some scary patterns. Over the years, I collected interviews and stories, and eventually I realized I wanted the show to be a cabaret, to bring more people’s voices in and get different interpretations.

TB: Was the show influenced by the NPIC even as it was critiquing it?

MV: I researched all these different organizational models for Peacock—worker cooperatives and other things. As I talked to people, the model that seemed the easiest to set up and be able to get donations and pay lots of people without the IRS breathing down my back was, you know, another arts organization that’s fiscally sponsored by a nonprofit. The nonprofit (Fractured Atlas) is in New York, so there’s some breathing room, but there are still many layers of administrative bullshit. Most fiscally sponsored social-justice groups use a model where their sponsors technically own the sponsored group’s material. [We used] the most common arts fiscal-sponsorship model, which is [different]. The upside is the artists retain all the rights to their work. The downside: even though it’s fiscally sponsored by a nonprofit, Peacock is technically considered my for-profit sole proprietorship: I get personally taxed on all the money that comes to Peacock, even though I’m not paying myself for my work.

I haven’t applied for grants for Peacock, and fundraising and ticket sales didn’t cover costs. I made tough choices about how to allocate resources. Each artist got paid $300, which is much higher than most cabaret shows I’ve been part of. My co-producer was paid well, but my work was all volunteer and full-time. I hustled modeling gigs on the side and asked my parents for help paying the bills, which was class-privileged and unsustainable. I ended up going into about $2,000 of personal debt. I got pushback about that from both sides—some people said that the producers should not be getting paid at all, that it really should be the artists who are paid and all the administrative stuff should be done volunteer. I think there’s an assumption that admin work = NPIC. And to some degree, yes, a lot of my time went to dealing with the IRS and the fiscal sponsor and setting up the finance and fundraising and communications systems . . . but there’s this ranking of roles, like the art making is the “real work,” which is ironic because artists often are devalued and asked to share our work for free at nonprofits’ fundraisers by folks who are getting paid to plan those fundraisers. And then there was other pushback that my labor should have been compensated too.

So, I’m negotiating those questions while holding my privileges. I’m the only upper-middle-class cisgender male involved in a leadership role in this organization. And even though I asked tons of artist and producer friends for advice and got a core group together of eighteen folks to launch Peacock and the organization is heavily shaped by audience feedback, Peacock isn’t collectively run yet. I’m taking this next year to work with people on smaller-scale projects to get a better sense of how we work together before I invite them to join the collective. I’m making subjective calls: What are that person’s conflict-resolution styles, community-care practices, workshop-facilitation skills? What needs to happen before these two exes can be in the same group? For now, I pick and
choose who to work with and what projects we take on. It feels a bit unsettling.

JW: [Some of the NPIC parallels in Peacock] reminded me more of what consultants or volunteers for nonprofits experience, where you're working hard for a nonprofit but your work isn't fully recognized or compensated. I feel like Manish's role was like that, with the rest of us and the audience being the nonprofit.

And also the scarce resources. A lot of time in nonprofits, you're playing sustainability Tetris. We want our resources to be sustainable, but you only have a small basket of resources to divide up. You're doing your best, but you know you're going to lose the game, just like in Tetris. And Manish in particular is gonna be crushed under a bunch of falling blocks.

IA: I'm thinking also about what privileges allow me to centralize creative production in my life right now. Often when I am asked to show work or perform, many of the audience members who are buying tickets are people who are participating in the NPIC in various ways. These are audiences interested in art and literature that speaks on social issues. So even if the money supporting the event isn't coming directly from a granting board or foundation, I still benefit from the nonprofit labor of the audience (and their social interests).

I'm partnered with someone who works for a nonprofit 9-to-5, Monday through Friday, and that kind of financial stability increases the opportunities I have to work on creative projects. When I left the nonprofit world for the world of double shifts in retail management, temp work, and coffee sling, I was not able to dedicate significant energy toward positioning myself to be paid for creative work. My days were too exhausting, and health issues that had developed for me in the nonprofit world forced me to budget my energy. I prioritized my ability to participate in paid work over unpaid/underpaid opportunities for creative production. And I believe creative production to be necessary for my emotional growth and survival.

It would be interesting to see a dialogue between artists who have left the NPIC and artists who are still working in it. For those who have left the NPIC, I think it is important to share information about how they were able to do it, how they support themselves now, and what kind of economies they are involved in. It's something I think about a lot. Backstage information shared between artists about economic survival is always a crucial support. How are we able to centralize artistic production in all our lives and still have a place to come home to month after month because the rent has been paid? I know many people in our audience were hungry to know how to make this happen in their own lives.

TB: Did you experience backlash from people who were offended by the critiques of the NPIC?

MV: Some people decided not to perform in the show out of fear of retaliation. One volunteer asked that their name be changed in our promo, because they were worried about losing potential job opportunities. A celebrity activist told me, "Your critiques of the NPIC are basically saying that everything I've done for the last twenty-five years has been a waste of time." And that's really powerful, the ways that critique is silenced. If we can't critique our movements (lovingly), then how can we grow?

I understand that hearing critique, especially about something you're so passionate about, can be hard. I've taken a lot of hits for this show... everything from "WTF!! I couldn't get into the show because it was sold out by the time we got there!!" to "You're a sellout because you didn't talk about the party system as the solution!!" I got a lot of critique. And I got some vicious personal attacks.

But almost all the feedback was positive. And we launched an organization; had a show about the NPIC featuring an all-queer and trans people of color cast plus a volunteer crew of almost entirely queer and trans people of color (fifty-six people total); sold out both nights; and made space so everyone in line could get in (400 people)—and we did it without any foundations. But the critiques are so much easier to take in,
especially in the Bay’s activist culture of “the only way I can prove myself as an activist is by tearing down other activists.” I want compassionate critique.

JW: There were a couple big controversies: one was the giant Facebook explosion [on the show’s event page] over people asking, “Why are there so many white people in the audience?” I didn’t expect that. To me, the show was never supposed to be people of color only. It was queer and trans people of color performing, but it had never occurred to me that only those people were invited to be in the audience. I viewed it as a public performance, reaching beyond our immediate communities, so that people could learn from the show. But that was a big deal for some people.

MV: I can understand that critique; I think there are a lot of spaces in the Bay labeled “people of color” or “queer and trans people of color” that white folks are... hmm, how to say this... gentrifying in a way. Certain parties at clubs, housing co-ops, activist events that used to be entirely or mostly people of color are becoming mostly white. It isn’t malicious, but it isn’t just a coincidence; I think lots of white folks—whether or not they identify as antiracist—aren’t considering all the different ways their white entitlement plays out in these critical community-building spaces. With our show, I think there was an added layer of scarcity: many people of color told me they couldn’t come to the show because we ran out of tickets. I thought only like 100 people would show up; we had 400 people... who knew? So I think there was this sense that lots of people of color who may not have access to funds to get tickets in advance couldn’t come because white folks with access to credit cards bought so many tickets. Then, something really interesting happened: after the first night’s show, a white person who read a person of color’s critique that so many white folks were in the room posted to our Facebook page that she gave her ticket to a person of color and encouraged other white folks to do the same. Lots of white folks did. There was this part of me that was so excited about this. But you know what? The white folks who gave up their tickets were the white folks I wanted in the room for the show: they used their privilege to help shift a dynamic. And some white folks who have uniquely complicated relationships to the NPIC’s violence came out of solidarity. But I sensed that many came because this show was where they thought the cool kids were going, because it was a spectacle. I don’t want Peacock to turn into a majority-white organization. But you know... one of the artists said, “What a luxury we have in the Bay. We can have a show and have 400 queer and trans people of color show up. When this show goes on tour, it isn’t going to be like that.”

JW: There was also controversy because there was a perception that there were no trans women included in the show [which wasn’t true]. On one hand, I appreciate that comment, but on the other hand, it’s like, how should we do this? Should we hold up a sign labeling people who are trans?

VH: One of the things that I tried to resist in my video was the way that the NPIC’s use of labels can encourage shiny rockstar activist identities for people to worship, rather than a lib-

eration church choir where everybody’s supported in singing. We do need to name how all of us are impacted by systems of oppression and/or are privileged in complex ways. And I think it’s important to acknowledge we all can and do play different roles, often influenced by access. In the video, though, I ended up just using people’s first names and geographical locations to introduce them. We’re human beings, and even within the current conditions, we don’t need the fancy titles (and culture of ego boosting and deflating) that the NPIC and capitalist economy rely on. This feels more fluid, vulnerable, honest to me right now.

JW: Another critique was that we didn’t provide an alternative to the NPIC. I think that that critique is legit, but that wasn’t necessarily the goal of the show. I think that just going to a show, laughing, and finding something in common with other people—and maybe having this unspoken thing inside of you made real on the stage—that in itself is very powerful.

It’s entirely possible that Peacock Rebellion is part of a series, and maybe another part of the series will address alternatives to the NPIC—

MV: We’d have to charge way more for that though.

JW: Right!

MV: It could be funded by the Ford Foundation... [Laughter]

VH: This reaction reminded me of conversation dynamics I was immersed in while engaging in campaigns and movement building to abolish the prison industrial complex. Every day we had people asking, “Well, what’s the alternative if we don’t have prisons?”

Clearly it’s not a simple answer. Both prisons and 501(c)3 status are parts of a whole ecosystem running the capitalist economy here in the States. Change requires transformation within and all around us. I don’t know anyone with the perfect solution in this moment. What I know was reminded of by Mary Ann (m.a. brooks) while filming her for the video is that artists fuel social movements with our songs, dances, poetry. And it takes all of us to agree that many of the practices these systems encourage are harming our spirits, bodies, and communities, and that we need to build other ways of living and loving and breathing together, creating something new together.