

Devising Commedia as an Antiracist Theatre Practice

in *The Artful Token*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jordan Rosin (he & they) is a director/choreographer, actor/creator, and researcher/teacher, specializing in applied & ensemble-devised physical theatres. He is a Co-Founder and Co-Artistic Director of the New York City-based physical theatre ensemble, The Ume Group and a frequent collaborator with the butoh/physical theatre company 連翹奏 Ren Gyo Soh. They hold a BFA in Drama from Syracuse University and an MFA in Ensemble-Based Physical Theatre from Dell'Arte International, where their practice-as-research thesis explored the intersection of Clown & Melodrama. Jordan is a member of the Association of Theatre Movement Educators and winner of their 2019 “Integrated Artist-Scholar” & 2020 “Innovation Fellowship” awards; as well as a member of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education; Playback North America; International Playback Theatre Network; Network of Ensemble Theatres; and the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC Associate). From 2019-2021, Jordan was on faculty at Virginia Tech’s School of Performing Arts where he taught Acting & Applied Theatre as a Post-MFA Teaching Fellow in the Dept. of Theatre & Cinema.

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Project Summary

This presentation aims to relay some of my major insights from my recent creative practice-as-research, devising Commedia as an Antiracist Theatre Practice in *The Artful Token*, a comic play collaboratively created and performed entirely on Zoom, which I had the great pleasure to produce and direct for Virginia Tech's School of Performing Arts. The project was supported in part by an Innovation Fellowship from the Association of Theatre Movement Educators and an International Initiatives Small Grant from the College of Liberal Arts & Human Sciences at Virginia Tech. In this project, a team of nine undergraduate student Actor-Creators from across the university, supervised by myself, a Post-MFA Teaching Fellow in the Department of Theatre & Cinema, along with international Guest Artist Fabio Motta and Dramaturg / Cultural Consultant Dr. Devair Jeffries undertook—among other questions—to investigate: “What are the limits and opportunities of Contemporary Commedia as an antiracist/anti-oppressive practice?” We did this over a nine week period in fall 2020 by adapting Carlo Goldoni's *La Vedova Scaltra* (“*The Artful Widow*”) to a contemporary setting using The Ume Group's Devising Methodology, Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process, Theatrical Intimacy Education Best Practices, and Nicole Brewer's Antiracist Theatre principles, including Brewer's challenge to write a *collective* statement of antiracist beliefs in something she calls a collective Antiracist Theatre Ethos¹. We were further supported throughout this creative process by Guest Artist Casting Director, F. Binta Barry; Guest Artist Mask-Maker Tony Fuemmeler; and a talented production team of graduate students from Virginia Tech's Department of Theatre & Cinema.

¹ For more on Anti-Racist Theatre and Conscientious Theatre Training, see www.nicolembrewer.com/ and Nicole Brewer's 2018 article “Training With a Difference” in *American Theatre* (www.americantheatre.org/2018/01/04/training-with-a-difference/).

Contextual Overview: Contemporary Commedia & Antiracist Theatre

Contemporary Commedia. Contemporary Commedia has its roots in Commedia all' Improvviso which means “improvised comedy,” and is often also called Commedia Dell’Arte or “comedy of the professionals”, a form of theatre which emerged from 16th century Italy with roots in pagan rituals such as the festival of Carnevale. Credited with being the first form of professional theatre in Europe, this grassroots theatrical movement was known for its touring troupes of actors, which made their living satirizing current social and political events through use of recognizable stock characters and ribald physical comedy. These troupes were also unique in including women as actors and sometimes managers (Richards 46). Nobel prize winning Italian playwright and actor Dario Fo, in his 1987 book *The Tricks of the Trade*, says Commedia is revolutionary, not merely for its use of masks or stock characters but for “the unique role assumed by the actors” (Fo 13), that is, the role of actor-as-creator. Jacques Lecoq adds that the function of commedia is “to shed light on human nature...” (116) by exploring, through parody and satire, the way that social structures and class impact our society. In the last century especially Contemporary Commedia has been used as a “comic critique of existing power relationships: against war, against racism, fascism, sexism and capitalism itself” (McGehee 10) through its deployment of culturally relevant comic prototypes with clear status relationships and journeys.

In the 20th century, Commedia experienced a revival in Europe and North America thanks to pioneering teacher-practitioners such as Jacques Copeau, Jacques Lecoq, Dario Fo, and Carlo Mazzone-Clementi who recognized the profound value of the form in their pedagogies of actor training. Carlo Mazzone-Clementi who effectively introduced Commedia to North America (Schirle 386-97) went on to found a number of schools such as the Commedia School in Copenhagen, Denmark and Dell’Arte International in Blue Lake, California, where I received

my M.F.A. in Ensemble-Based Physical Theatre in 2019. In the tradition of these teachers, I believe that the study and practice of Commedia is a fantastic tool for expanding the expressive range of an actor and unleashing the power of the “actor-creator,” that figure of tremendous agency, adaptability, creativity, and potential, for which there is increasing demand and popularity in the fast-evolving age of Netflix, YouTube, Instagram, and Tik Tok².

Antiracist Theatre. Anti-Racist Theatre (or A.R.T.) is defined by Nicole Brewer as “practices and policies that actively acknowledge and interrogate racism, anti-Blackness, and other discriminatory practice, while promoting anti-racist ideas, values, and policies that counter the oppression of any people during the education or production of theatre” (Brewer, “Why ‘Equity...’ is Obsolete”). Brewer goes on to say that “anti-racist theatre is not just about racism; it’s about eliminating all forms of oppression and creating authentic belonging.” Throughout our collective creative process in *The Artful Token* we worked with respect to the theories and principles of Antiracist Theatre as articulated by Brewer in her “Anti-Racist Theatre: A Foundational Course” online workshop, which I was lucky to attend the preceding August. As part of that workshop, I wrote my own personal Anti-Racist Theatre Ethos, which I shared with the students in this project—and all my classes this year—via our syllabus:

Jordan’s Anti-Racist Theatre Ethos

(A perpetual work-in-progress last revised 2020/08/14.)

I believe that the stories of global majority people (especially Black & Indigenous folk) should be seen, understood, supported, and celebrated.

² For more on the pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq and the cognitive science behind the formation of the “Actor-Creator”, see Murphy’s *Enacting Lecoq: Movement in Theatre, Cognition, and Life* or my review of her work in *Theatre Topics* (Rosin “Enacting Lecoq...”).

As a white theatre-maker, I **practice** this ethos by producing, directing, and facilitating actor-created theatre which models and promotes shared leadership and collective decision-making, while allowing actors to draw on their own unique cultural resources as inspiration.

I **support** this ethos and practice with anti-oppressive politics and a commitment to self-education around issues of racism, ableism, sexism, classism along with ongoing training in Theatrical Intimacy and Anti-Racism. (Rosin 5)

Another key to our antiracist approach to Commedia was our intuitive decoupling of the practice from its more codified, historical, or original practice variants. As equity consultant and theatre professor Kaja Dunn writes, “One of the keys to white supremacy, or colonization... is codifying everything.” and “Codification keeps existing power structures in place” (Dunn 280). Therefore, while certain characters in our play were inspired by historical Commedia stock characters like Alrechinno, Il Dottore, Columbina, etc. we spent little to no time rehearsing the traditional concetti (scripts), lazzi (jokes), or carattere (postures/walks/prints) for these characters and encouraged the actors to frequently return to their own analysis of the physical masks which Tony had created and the situations in which they found themselves as a way to resist the lure of a more codified—and likely unrelated, if not oppressive—version of the form.

Account of Process

The Story of The Artful Token. As a contemporary adaptation of Carlo Goldoni's *La Vedova Scaltra*, *The Artful Token* follows Rosie, a gifted, Black university Sophomore student, whose major is—at the start of the play—*undecided*. She is quickly courted by four buffoonish professors, most of whom are far more interested in filling their department's diversity quotas than in getting to know who she is or what she has to offer. After being showered with extravagant gifts and confusing microaggressions, Rosie sets off to discover the truth. With the help of friends and a ridiculous disguise, she enacts a scheme to expose the professors' true intentions and find her path.

This plot was largely adapted by me from the Goldoni source material as part of a scenario (outline) and then developed by the student ensemble through improvisation according to the specific interests and boundaries of the group. As Dr. Devair Jeffries writes in her Dramaturg's note: "The cast utilized Goldoni's script to address how inclusive programming must be carefully conceived for long term change that truly benefits people of color in all settings, including universities, rather than a publicity stunt to promote the perception of diversity" (Jeffries 7).

The Ume Group's Devising Methodology. Since 2011 and 2013 respectively, Fabio Motta (our Guest Artist Commedia Consultant), and I have been core members of a New York City-based physical theatre company called The Ume Group. In the last three years, along with other core members, we've retroactively begun to identify and document our Guiding Principles and Devising Methodology. Our Devising Methodology, which breaks a production process into four phases of 1) Training/Research, 2) Creation/Devising, 3) Editing/Organization/Rehearsal, and 4)

Performance, is not all that unusual compared to similar collective creative processes. However, our process is made unique through our commitment to the Guiding Principles of 1) “Always Learning, Teaching, Creating & Performing”, 2) Rotation of Roles, 3) “Open Training”, 4) Play, and 5) Ritual/Ceremony. While all of these factored in our process for *The Artful Token*, Open Training, in particular, felt strongly resonant with an Antiracist/Anti-Oppressive approach. We define Open Training as:

“Frequent time to train as a company. It’s called “open” because the topics are completely open and it’s open to be led by anyone, from interns to senior company members. From specific physical, vocal, and/or acting techniques to dance forms, martial arts, stretching, and self-care, no topic is off the table for Open Training. Often these events are “open” to the general community, though not necessarily. It is also a time for less experienced company members to practice their skill as teachers / guides.” (“The Ume Group - Devising Principles / Methodology” 1)

Accordingly, we dedicated the first two weeks of our rehearsals for *The Artful Token* to a combination of longer workshops in Commedia, Antiracism, Critical Race Theory, and Black Feminism led by Dr. Devair Jeffries, Fabio Motta, and myself, along with these more loosely curated Open Training sessions modeled in the first week by Devair, Fabio, and myself with mini-lessons in mime, Playback Theatre, and Theatre of the Oppressed, then run entirely by the undergraduate student ensemble in week two. The students offered one another experiences/lessons in writing haikus and blackout poetry, aerobic dancing, voiceover acting, freestyle rapping in a cypher, leadership/collaboration styles, how to get reliable voting information, and more. Some of these, like the rapping, dancing and bits of the voicework, fed directly into the final performance, helping to position Open Training as a key tool in cultivating

what Hip Hop theatre guru Daniel Banks might call a “resource-based approach” to teaching and theatre production (Banks 154).

Consent & Boundaries. Throughout this process, we also made extensive use of Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process and two of Theatrical Intimacy Education’s five “Best Practices”—1) seeking consent and 2) establishing boundaries—both of which worked in reciprocity with the Antiracist principles of Harm Reduction and Harm Prevention.

Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process (CRP) is a formal method of giving feedback to made objects or artworks-in-progress which helps center and empower the maker/artist and build community with audience/respondents through a deliberate four-step process³. The four steps are 1) Statements of Meaning, 2) Artist-as-Questioner, 3) Neutral Questions [from the audience], and 4) Permissioned Opinions. In solidarity with Planned Parenthood’s F.R.I.E.S. model, which defines *consent* as “**F**reely Given”, “**R**eversible”, “**I**nformed”, “**E**nthusiastic”, and “**S**pecific” (“What is Sexual Consent?”), in my teaching, I tend to emphasize the ritual of step 4, Permissioned Opinions: respondents identify a category or label which might describe their opinion and use that category or label to ask the artists consent to share (for example, “I have an opinion about your use of space. Is it alright if I share?”); I find this is an especially great opportunity to explore how consent can be more or less *informed* and *specific*. Daily use of CRP to feedback on compositions and improvisations is one way that we helped to normalize seeking consent and establishing boundaries while developing a shared language of craft.

After auditions, but before rehearsals began, inspired by Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE)’s “Studio Techniques, Casting, & Policy” workshop which I attended on September 12, I adapted TIE’s boundary disclosure form (Pace, *Staging Sex* 102-4) to determine with greater

³ For more on Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process, see <https://lizlerman.com/critical-response-process/>.

certainty whether certain behaviors relevant to the content/themes of our show such as racial slurs (real or imaginary), racist/sexist microaggressions, and simulation of sex acts, or nudity, were or weren't on the table for this particular group of actors and crew members.⁴ Since this process occurred after, rather than before casting, I surrendered any sense of “non-negotiables” as part of my own directorial vision and used the strictest of the expressed boundaries as a baseline for the group, announcing at the beginning that we would not be using real racial slurs (imaginary ones were okay) or simulation of sex acts and/or nudity. (Racist/sexist microaggressions were collectively okay in the context of the story.) This further allowed Fabio and I, as director/facilitators, to offer improvisational or compositional prompts which respected the expressed boundaries of folx in the room.

During the first day of rehearsal, I also introduced the company to “Button”, TIE's typical “self-care cue”, which, either spoken out loud or typed in the Zoom chat, could be used to pause any given exercise or improvisation, as well as “Ouch/Oops”, signal words which we could use to mark accidental boundary crossing without necessarily pausing or stopping an activity. The freedom to pause or interrupt improvisations, though never used by the company, may be one of the simpler ways that other theatre practitioners can most easily bring a harm-reductive sensibility to largely improvised theatrical practices like Commedia.

These three boundary-related tools—the Disclosure Form, “Button”, and “Ouch”/“Oops”—along with daily use of Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process helped to lay the groundwork for a consent-based collaborative process, of which I'm particularly proud. The emphasis on seeking consent and establishing boundaries worked in reciprocity with Nicole

⁴ This application of consent and boundary practice to a more expansive definition of Intimacy which includes any and all ways our identities are leveraged in a creative process is what Chelsea Pace, Co-Founder of Theatrical Intimacy Education [www.theatricalintimacyed.com] refers to as the new “frontier” for theatrical intimacy (“Lessons from A Decade of Staging Sex”).

Brewer's Antiracist Theatre principles of Harm Reduction and Harm Prevention by normalizing respect for boundaries and the pursuit of freely given, retractable, enthusiastic, informed, and specific consent.

Writing A Collective Antiracist Ethos. As mentioned previously, inspired by Nicole Brewer's "Antiracist Theatre: A Foundational Course" workshop, as a core part of our process was the creation of a collective Antiracist Ethos. I facilitated this, largely inspired by Brewer's workshop, through a series of individual writing prompts, discussions, and collective editing of a Google Doc. Through a form of "dotmocracy" whereby students added "X"s next to writing by their peers with which they particularly agreed, we found the expressions of antiracist belief and practice with which we most resonated as a group. After 7 weeks, the final version of the collective antiracist theatre ethos the ensemble came up with was this:

We believe it's important to be aware of our own racial prejudice and the harmful effects of racism and to counter those effects through self-awareness, community, and comedy.

We practice this ethos by questioning & ridiculing ignorant perspectives that are destructive or unfounded; raising awareness for how microaggressions affect the people they're targeted towards; reducing harm by honoring folx' expressed boundaries around language.

We support this practice by using tools like "Ouch"/"Oops" & "Button" to help us navigate unintentional boundary-crossing; as well as by practicing open and

transparent communication, seeking enthusiastic consent in our collaboration with one another, taking time off, resting, drinking water, and eating good food. (“Our Collective Antiracist Theatre Ethos”)

Major Insights & Analysis

Opportunities & Limitations of Commedia as Antiracist Practice. The largely improvised nature of this production—each minute of stage time was given probably no more than 5 minutes of rehearsal and there was never a formal script, only an outline, as is standard in Commedia—complicated the notion of dramaturgy and the director’s ability to stand in for and advocate on behalf of the audience. In this regard, it was difficult to evaluate the work-in-progress from a dramaturgical or impact-based perspective since so much was so constantly changing. As productive or negative resonances *were* identified, however, the improvised nature of the work allowed for the actors to respond nimbly. The loose structure and/or ever-evolving nature of the content did also make it difficult to reduce harm to audiences via standard mechanisms such as content warnings, but we did ultimately implement the following, adapted from the content warnings traditionally used as Dell’Arte International⁵:

“Commedia dell’Arte is a centuries-old art form that is uncensored in its delivery. Performances are often bawdy and body-based in humor and involve themes that may be inappropriate for younger viewers. This show furthermore may contain discussion or representation of racist and sexist language and behavior.” (“The Artful Token”)

⁵See *Commedia Dell’Arte - Dell’Arte International*. <https://dellarte.com/event/return-to-oz-dais-carlo-theatre-3-7-2-2/>. Accessed 18 Feb. 2021.

By the end of the process, however, important dramaturgical questions remained such as: Did certain characters' behavior normalize stereotypes about Black people or successfully ridicule ignorant and racist perspectives? Was our exploration of racial and gendered tokenism nuanced or clear enough to inspire viewers to treat each other with dignity or was it a discouraging depiction of Cancel Culture and reactive policy?

On the other hand, from a creator's perspective, the nature of this project as largely improvised—along with the skill of these students at improvising—meant that we didn't need to rehearse all parts of the show equally, or even at all, if we didn't want or couldn't find the time to do so. This helped tremendously with my ability as a facilitator to resist the what Tema Okun calls the White Supremacist cultural tendencies towards urgency and perfectionism (Okun 1-2) and to emphasize mental health and well-being for everyone involved. Our regular rehearsal schedule—3 hours per day, 4 days per week for 7 weeks—was already quite minimal compared to the normal university mainstage rehearsal calendars. We were furthermore able to take additional days off from rehearsal to rest or work asynchronously and dedicated a good portion of the allotted group time to write a collective Antiracist Ethos—only indirectly related to what one might traditionally think of as the work of “rehearsing the play”—in a way that I believe we might not have been so comfortable with if this had been a scripted work or if harm prevention and mental health hadn't been priorities as part of the antiracism practice.

This process also seemed to resonate with the Black Acting Methods Studio's assertion that “devising and ensemble work is especially critical for Black actors so that they may have autonomy over their images, dialogue, and representation” (Lockett & Shaffer 26). As generally seems true for Antiracist efforts, centering those for whom the content was most relevant happened to serve and empower *everyone* since the student actors in this piece, global majority

and otherwise, ultimately all had more authority over the content of the work than students might normally in a more traditional scripted project. The most noticeable example of this is probably the students' collective decision in Week 3 of rehearsal to change the name from my originally proposed *The Artful Sophomore* to *The Artful Token*, in order to specifically emphasize the themes of racial and gendered tokenism which they had committed themselves to explore. In this way again, the style and values of Commedia were an opportunity, since Commedia naturally emphasizes the actor's role as creator and the Commedia troupe has historically stood as an example of grassroots, localized, emergent⁶, and sometimes democratic theatrical creation.

It should be noted that relying on students of color to educate their peers or supply the bulk of the ideas in a devised project dealing with racism could certainly constitute an unfair burden of emotional and creative labor as well as possible source of harm⁷. I'm cautiously proud to say however that I believe we were able to mostly anticipate and counteract this challenge through extensive facilitator-led education including beginner-friendly explorations of Critical Race Theory and Black Feminism led by our Dramaturg and Casting & Cultural Consultant, Dr. Devair Jeffries—whose research specifically deals with representation and stereotypes of Black folx in media⁸—as well as exercises in intercultural collaboration led by Fabio, and lectures on Antiracism and the history of Black Lives Matter / the movement for Black Liberation offered by me. Likewise, it is possible that the specificity of our Canovaccio as originally adapted by me from Goldoni may have relieved some of this creative burden and—as an artifact available to the

⁶ See Richards pp. 43-52, Fo pp. 13, 47 & Fava 19 for examples of locality and emergence in Commedia troupes.

⁷ I'm grateful to F. Binta Barry, Kaja Dunn, Teniece Divya Johnson, & Laura Rikard for helping me to clarify some of the possible risks of this project while it was still early in its development.

⁸ See Jeffries & Jeffries "Mentoring and Mothering Black Femininity in the Academy: An Exploration of Body, Voice and Image through Black Female Characters", "Marxist Materialism and Critical Race Theory: A Comparative Analysis of Media and Cultural Influence on the Formation of Stereotypes and Proliferation of Police Brutality against Black Men", and "Cultural Signification through Reader's Theatre: An Analysis of African American Girls and Their Hair."

potential participants during the casting process—could have helped to create a more informed consent for students during the audition process. In our conversations, Theatrical Intimacy Education Associate Faculty Emily Rollie has theorized that the use of consent based tools might help collaborators, especially actors of the global majority feel the agency to step away when needed. More data would be necessary to confirm the impact of all these efforts, but I take confidence in Maya Angelou’s famous assertion that you “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” Similarly, as Nicole Brewer says “Anti-racist theatre is not about doing all the things to end oppression at once; it’s about doing what you can” (Brewer, para 11). The Emergent Strategy principle of “Small is good; small is all” (brown 41) is another mantra which gives me confidence in the value of this enterprise, however imperfect.

Liz Lerman’s CRP and Freddie Hendricks’ Hyper Ego. It is also possible that our liberal use of Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process—especially Phase 1 “Statements of Meaning”—began to facilitate what in the Hendricks Method, Drs. Luckett and Shaffer in their 2018 book *Black Acting Methods* refer to as the beneficial birth of the “Hyperego” (Luckett & Shaffer 29-32), a type of confidence essential to the development of young actors, especially actors of color. Fabio and Dr. Jeffries’ response to the standard CRP question “What did you find meaningful or interesting?” was almost always enthusiastic and specific, with a positive valence I’ve not observed elsewhere when using this practice. In time, the actors came to exhibit a similar level of confidence, enthusiasm, and positivity when discussing each others’ work. Taking time to employ CRP not only gave space for this, but helped to democratize what might normally be time for “notes” from the director, thereby disrupting my traditionally more analytical or clinical approach, along with my implicit biases. Though a causal relationship obviously remains to be

determined, the correlated increase in the actors' confidence and pleasure to play seems noteworthy.

Mask Play on Zoom. Through the observations of fellow Virginia Tech faculty-member Bob Leonard and our Commedia Consultant Fabio Motta, this project was also noteworthy in our collective ability to develop a technique of adapting the play of the traditional Commedia half-mask to the online Zoom platform. This involved a sort of dilation of the Actor's articular capacity from gestures of the head, neck, eyes and mouth while close-up to the camera—which may not be so prominent in *in-person* performances where the actors may be at a distance from the audience—to more traditionally robust, full-body expressions in the far-away camera frame. Looking for opportunities to do *both* things, by—for example—making an entrance into the camera frame whenever possible and discovering the other characters in the Zoom call, allowed us to disrupt the static tendencies of the platform and justify or earn the audience's attention during the moments of close-up. Play with foreground and background activity for the two actors who happened to be roommates also created opportunities for surprise and creativity. These ideas arose, as much from mine and Fabio's suggestions as from the emergent play and experimentation of the group.

Conclusion

As a part of my personal mission to see, understand, support, and celebrate the stories (and voices) of global majority folk throughout this process, I intentionally took steps to de-center myself, my authority, and my aesthetic as a director. Much of what I experienced in my emergent role of director-as-facilitator (especially in facilitating the creation of a Collective Antiracist

Theatre Ethos, that writing project which took the entire 7 week rehearsal process to complete) was also resonant with the principles and elements of Emergent Strategy. For example, the principle “There is always enough time for the right work”(41) and the elements of Interdependence and Decentralization and Resilience and Transformative Justice(50) felt particularly present throughout this process, especially as we struggled to reduce and prevent harm while staying resilient in the wake of disruptive hate speech and zoom-bombing during our second weekend of performances.

In conclusion, I am grateful for this incredible ensemble of Actor-Creators and for the expert creative team. As my first time implementing an Antiracist Theatre Ethos in my directorial practice, it was an incredibly informative experience, full of individual and collective insights, growth, and transformation. In the future, I believe I may have even more success implementing an antiracist practice by applying this same process and values to content which does not so directly involve racism itself. It is, I assume, possible for example, to see, understand, support, and celebrate the stories of Global Majority folx without necessarily proposing projects so explicitly involving microaggression and tokenism, which risk harming actors and audiences in their creation and presentation. Of course, this also is “a lesson”, not “a failure”, as adrienne maree brown might say (41). Ultimately through *The Artful Token* I believe we succeeded in uplifting and celebrating the voices and creativity of our students and discovering at least a little bit of liberation and joy. And if as Nicole Brewer says “our collective liberation is tied to one another”(Conscientious Theatre Training) those of us involved in this production have most certainly taken a step on the path forward.

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