**Cooperative Working and Living in the Alienated (United) States:**

**Re-Imagining the Theater Industry**

**By Daryanna Lancet**

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## ***Picture: In Full View: Artist Co-op 7: Tribute to Artist Rachelle Mark (https://www.co-op7.org/exhibits.html)***

*“People have for a long time been trying to free themselves from alienation through culture and art. While they die every day during the eight or more hours that they sell their labor power, they hope to come to life afterwards in spiritual activities. But this remedy bears the germs of the very alienation they fight during the day: it is as solitary individuals that they seek communion with their environment.”*

*-Che Guevarra,* On Art and Revolution

In our last class of ‘Performance of Revolution’, we watched the fourth episode of Veneuzualaanalysis’s *In Commune* series, *The Che Guevara Commune.* Among other things, the film highlighted how workers cooperatives in Venezuela stored local farmers’ coffee in a ‘bank’, solving farmers’ problem of needing to sell their coffee all at once; it also showed how workers cooperatives gave options for local young people to learn a trade and get housing. Ultimately, in just under an hour, this short episode gestured towards a kind of humane future that might be possible within agriculture and food production (and other industries as well) if the decision-making power and natural local resources were returned to the workers.

There are two histories, existing side by side, which together form legitimation and grounding for the cooperatives pictured in *The Che Guevara Commune.* The first history is— workers cooperatives and communes have powerful precedents in Venezuela; the normalization of horizontal power structures is the empowering inheritance of Venezuela's socialist visions. The second history, though, is one of economic imperialism—or the exploitative, greedy extraction of resources from Venezuela by the United States; this economic imperialism involves, among many, many harms, the building of large factories, the outcompeting local businesses and farmers, and ultimate exploitation and underpaying local workers who have no other options for employment; it involves the United States imposing crippling sanctions on Venezuela—sanctions which have, in the past, shot their economies inflation rate up beyond 700%, and caused 1 in 3 Venezuelan people to report facing hunger [(1).](https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/study-venezuelans-facing-hunger-69165577) The United States government takes all these measures out of greed and fear that the country they are benefiting from exploiting will find self-sustaining empowerment in a socialist system. The United States people (us) stay largely oblivious and/or largely occupied with issues closer to home, and our tax dollars fund these crimes against humanity. Ultimately, in the midst of these two histories, to form the cooperatives pictured in the *Che Guevara Commune,* to make self-sustaining collaborative groups in which resources and power are shared amongst workers—is a relatively small, but radical and powerful act.

In the last few minutes of our last class, after we finished *In Commune: The Che Guevara Commune*, Professor Marino asked our class—how can we imagine the United States theater industry operating in a more collective way? This question is something I have been thinking, talking, and to some extent, writing about all year, so below are some of my thoughts accumulated from my personal experience as a theater artist, student, theater educator, and many, many conversations with friends also involved in the theater world.

First, in order to imagine a better, more communal theater industry, we have to be clear about where we are as an industry now—the ways we are, as Gueverra would say, “alienating ourselves from each other” and from our own art.

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Currently, the mainstream theater industry in the United States is segregated by race and class. This has much to do with the many barriers there are to accessing and participating in theater, as both an artist and an audience member. As it stands now, the mainstream theater industry is not allowed to be a working-class space. Actors (and many other artists within the theater world, sound designers, lighting, costume designers, any contractor not involved in long- term management or production) are often notoriously underpaid and overworked, with few if any benefits, and little to no job stability.

Actor’s Union membership is low because many actors worry that they will miss out on non-equity jobs if they have an Equity card. This is a sad and revealing irony, because the jobs actors fear missing are offered necessarily with theater projects or companies that can’t, or don’t want to “afford Union actors”; in other words, theater companies which cannot “afford” to treat their artists to regular breaks and a livable wage. To say this is prohibitive to poor, working class actors and artists, or even lower-middle class actors and artists almost feels ridiculously obvious. And, because racial and economic hierarchies are intersectional in the United States, needing access to a certain degree of wealth to participate comfortably (as both an artist and audience member) in a traditional theater space, reinforces the whiteness of the traditional theater space.

You didn’t used to need an MFA in Acting to have a sufficient shot at getting a good acting job; now, influential industry magazines, like Backstage.com and Theatermania say you do, or at the very least, say “it really gives you a leg up!” (Theatermania). Sound familiar? It’s just like how in the United States, you didn't need a college degree to have a sufficient shot at getting a well-paying job with benefits. MFA programs are often incredibly expensive to apply to and attend. There are a handful of fully funded programs like University of California San Diego, University of Washington, and the Cleveland Playhouse. However, many of these programs advertise as all-consuming of the actors' time and disallow their program participants to work while attending. This means that if housing is not provided, working class, let alone poor theater artists are screwed.

And here is the crux of the issue: so many people trained in the theater arts have been normalized into accepting this is the way things are:

1. **As artists, we are constantly told (by society, by ourselves, by each other within the community) it is a privilege and honor to work in the arts.**

It is. To act, (to create in any capacity) to ‘perform’ your human-ness with (ideally) a certain degree of personal agency. The act of ‘being’ human does not keep other people from viewing you as a one-dimensional character, or stereotype; such a dynamic can easily happen in other types of gig work when the person delivering your food, or coming to fix your faucet is thought of as “DoorDash Guy” or “Plumber Guy.” As said above, artistic gig work can give you the opportunity to display your unique multidimensionality, and thereby actively ‘perform’ your humanity for yourself/and or others; many people doing gig work like actors do not work jobs in which they get to ‘perform’ their humanity . However, many actors’ second or third jobs do not relate to art-making—the classic waiter-trope is a reality for many. Some actors do commercial work to make ends meet, which is an opportunity for representation for an accurate diversity of racial, gender, body-type identities to be pictured; also, it is an opportunity for actors to be consumers *Representation is not to be underestimated, however it is not the same as telling a nuanced portrayal of a human experience, while having artistic agency, housing, food, and security.*

1. **As artists, we understand we will always be underfunded, overworked, often underestimated, undervalued, and overlooked**.

Budget cuts for arts programs in schools has been directly linked to inability for arts programs to be “quantified.” Cultural work that deals with emotions and morals also has a long history of being undervalued and under-supported by a ruling body or government that is afraid of what it will do to the people.

These ideas above, 1) and 2) could, I believe, have been stated by many people— anyone who was familiar with the art world in any capacity. But now--speaking again from years of personal experience and conversation—something uncomfortable has happened, specifically over the last several years with the popularization of the gig economy; these two ideas have surreally converged to form the below, seemingly illogical but consciously and unconsciously ‘felt truth’:

1. **As artists, we understand that it is a privilege and honor to work in the arts and be constantly overworked and underpaid.**

This idea that because it is a privilege to work in the arts, we are lucky to get any job we can get—no matter what they pay is premised on the assumption that we can always get another job. A final time for the audience members in the back, with the hearing aids, *this idea is toxic, exploitative, and prohibitive, and reinforces existing racial and classist barriers in the industry*. This cannot continue. As Professor Angela Marino says, this makes “work in the arts optional, and thus the arts too, become optional—demoted as accessory to public value rather than the means and ends to the achievements of society.”

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Finally, we must address how the people who generally come to the mainstream traditional theater—majority white, middle-upper class people— dictate to some degree what and how theaters put on productions, how this dynamic can cause harm to artists, particularly BIPOC artists, involved in the production, and ultimately perpetuate art that does not ‘push the needle forward’ in terms of shaking up the status quo. Because the U.S. does not have a huge (state-sponsored) theater-going culture in the way other countries have— U.S. theaters don’t have funding, so they are largely dependent on people coming to their performances—so they perform what they understand and imagine the people coming to their performances will want. The majority of theater going audiences are majority white, middle to upper class people, in large part because of the spaces theater is happening in and the price it is happening for. *There evolves a feedback loop of cash—money sustaining the theater is from this very specific sector of the community, and the plays being staged are implicitly for that very sector of the community...and on and on.*

But how do we get to this theater that’s better? Things are changing in the industry but not nearly fast or far enough.

**A way forward: a few offered re-imaginings of theater (the start of a living document?)**

What is our way forward? In all honesty, the way forward that all sectors of work are working with/or should be working with right now—those in power, those who are white, those with means, those who already have access to the industry need to literally be abdicating their positions of power and using their connections, privileges, and ‘in-s’ with elite, white dominant spaces to uplift the stories that need to be told, those of BIPOC, poor, queer and/or trans storytellers. In a country separated geographically and emotionally, often along lines of race and class, and with those divisions being reinforced by the mass media and social media algorithms in the information that we consume and produce each day—well-told stories that move people and that circulate easily (through our polarized media) are a huge part of how we as a nation and world can and need to move forward. Climate change is our communal ticking clock.

While we wait (and protest, and fight, and write for) systemic issues and wealth redistribution, I have a pitch for a new theater model---and indeed small-time art production model, for groups of people or for individuals.

\*\*Not sure if this is the right place to put this, but I want to acknowledge that my pitches below are not necessarily the best fit for everyone, nor do they strive to be; they are just a couple of ideas I’ve come up with through many experiences and conversations I’ve had. If you are a person of color, a Black person, or an Indigneous person in the Entertainment Industry, poor, or trans —while those experiences are by no means a monolith—your existence, and climbing the rungs within the Entertainment Industry can be a form of resistance, and form of radical political action in itself \*\*

**Reimagining U.S. Theater Structures: A Living Document!**

1. **Paying Artists Can “Pay It Forward” (Pay it Back to the Community):**

***A Pitch for people who get Grants/Have money/Access to money***

**°**If you pay an artist, or group of artists a *living* wage, and audience members/ crowd, or group of people come to the performance, then you can donate the money from audience members to go towards justice organizations.

° Ideally, the justice organization is local. Let the organization know money is coming its way! Then—if desired and consensual—a relationship can be formed with the justice organization over time---between the artists and the organization, and between the audience members whose money is going to support it; this process of building connection will be individual to organization, each artist group.

°This is not wealth redistribution. But it’s money going in the right direction (not circulating back to fund more performances that majority wealthy/middle class white people attend), and it’s not wealth just blindly given with a blank check. Ideally, the people whose money is going to the justice organization feelings/hearts/memories were affected and shifted along the way--and this process of building connection and relationship can be individual to organization, each artist group. It requires a grant, or some sort of third-party external source funding the artists.

**Artist Cooperatives: A Network of Them!**

***A pitch for all of us to get working on this because \*they’re already doing it in Cuba\*, and it’s cool idea***

°As we have addressed early in Chapter 2, you have to work extremely hard to gain access to theater institutions (theaters, MFA’s) with resources, often for no compensation (again, this is prohibitive and exploitative, and perpetuating of current racial and economic hierarchies of how holds/wields power within theater industry). Sometimes, even once you get into traditional theater institutions (MFA’s, big theaters, film) you don’t even have the kind of agency and empowerment you want and need, as a human and artist, within those spaces.

°So imagine! Artist Cooperatives—a network of them! There could be a website where you connect with the different styles of artists and form housing/working groups ranging from 8-40 people! If you share housing, you always have space to live and create in! You can share much-needed tangible resources (ie: equipment, tools, space, funds, food, rent), and much-needed intangible ones (ie: ideas, constructive criticism, support, community, companionship). Plus, again, in the coming years with climate change, group-resource sharing housing is the most socially-responsible option, for those who can, especially those living in top-resource consuming countries like the United States.

°The Artist Cooperative System could also operate like [Workaway.info](https://www.workaway.info) with options for people to do Artist Co-op exchanges. You’re a freelance writer and never been exposed to visual art? Exchange co-op spots with a person from a painter-themed Artist co-op! Want your work to be connected to direct action and social change? Join that co-op, or exchange with them and offer your services. I use the term “artist” very loosely here—because I really do believe that anyone given the time, space, and opportunity is a creator—of what, and why is the most interesting question.

**3) Partner with Local Businesses, Schools and Cultural Organizations!**

***What systems of exchange can you imagine facilitating with your art making?***

-Can you and your cohort teach a dance class at a bakery for the workers and the customers in exchange for weekly free bread deliveries?

-Can you build an interactive, play-able stage in a park or a local school with students, teach them the tools, help them stage a play on it, and leave it up for enjoyment afterwards?

-Can your work involve implanting tangible changes in your community? Is there a performance to be had around picking up trash, or weekly gardening, or community letter writing?

Please feel free to add your own ideas/dreams/examples!

Please feel free to reach out to me @daryannalancet or message @create4relief on Instagram if you are interested in making any of these/or any other things happen!

Works Cited:

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