

Transcript: ICPP Interview #2 with Kaneza Schaal

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Guest Artist

Kaneza Schaal

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Sarah Wilbur 0:47

[...] Yesterday when you talked about the Westbeth example, I was so interested in how the performance that you put up there forged another pattern and policy for future artists, so sometimes modeling a different example sets up a new possibility for other artists to then follow ...

Kaneza Schaal 4:56

I think now, Westbeth's leadership has changed and things are moving, but there was this maybe four year period between GO FORTH being that first piece that pursued that space and then a couple other shows, the festival put in there. I also then got to keep my space as a studio for my partner, who's my design collaborator, dramaturg, thinking partner on all of these projects. We got to keep that as a studio space, and then the Collapsible Hole for anyone knows Radiohole, really great artists who are not very organized, so they never really became one of the like, great white American ensembles in the way that...group did, but they really are. They're amazing. Anyhow, they had a space that was two theatre companies, the Collapsible Giraffe and Radiohole, and that space had fostered a lot of artists. And then they took over another space, at Westbeth, and then a bunch of folks -- Okwui, bunch of other artists kind of around that network -- used that space.

What you were just saying made me think about even a more recent and specific example, that sometimes it feels like simply naming the abundance is part of the work of it. I just premiered a piece [Maze] at The Shed, and we want to get folks there who would not go to Hudson Yards, and certainly would not feel welcome if they showed up, so that's a conundrum. They have actually some brilliant people there who used to work for NYCSHA, New York City State Housing Authority, and who are getting people into the building in amazing ways, and the fact that they hired someone who had actually been working at NYCSHA with everyone before was a stroke of brilliance on their part. But for us, we have all these incredible dancers who live in all the neighborhoods of the folks who we want to come to the show and who are in the community of people who want to be there, and that is this hugely abundant resource for thinking about this thing. And they have enough people sitting on them, so I'm not saying this to disparage their efforts but to give an example towards your point of like, here we have the most abundant resource in thinking about how to welcome people into that space with free tickets to kind of expand cultural knowledge, exchange, joy, beauty, possibility, and there are different structures that work well for them. For me, the thing that I have found is negotiating a certain number of comps upfront and then taking on responsibility for that because institutions withholds and ticket releases ... and dealing with that you get a phone call 12 hours before, 6 hours before: "I'm getting off work today, can I come?" or "Oh, there's no way I can come my childcare fell through." Whatever it is, there's an amount of labor to tend to the needs of the folks who you're trying to get to the show that the administrators at the theater are not equipped to do, both literally because of their time and what they need to do and also culturally or socially, you kind of have to have a way to talk to people. And so one of my tactics has been to say this is how many...like at NYLA, I had 30 tickets a night, and I was like, "I will raise the money for those 30 tickets with you, but I will have 30 comps at every show, or will not sign this contract." And I knew that in order to like work with Fortune Society, which is the big reentry services provider in New York City, there's no way that Fortune was going to be able

to talk to NYLA to get people there. We had to have a container ourselves to move those tickets and to deal with the ins and outs and to release them when we could but to also know we needed to hold a few and to have a sense of who had had conversations with who that day and who might show up late and who probably wouldn't show up. So I tried to propose a model like this. And I've been talking about it for a long time with their huge marketing team, their huge press team, and their huge development team, saying, "I think the best way to do this is for us to have a community pot of tickets that we care for, and then there would be my assistant and the kind of company manager would handle that ticket list." And we said, "We'll release 24 hours in advance if we don't use the 12 comps, let's make this the structure." And that got digested through the administrative systems. And there were so many so many fishes to fry on that project that not all of them could get cooked. But that got translated into "Each individual performer has 12 comps to give away with a 48-hour release." And that doesn't do the same thing, particularly because of the collective responsibility we would be taking and the...if you make that an individual effort, it's so different than those dancers having the backup of us dealing with contacting people and following up on text messages and the kind of collective investment in "Let's get people out! We got them to give us all these tickets. Who do we need to get out? Who should we call? Should we go? Should we all go to this community center one day and talk to people?" And In fact, the abundance is in the collective effort, but when that gets individualized through how ticket structures work and...obviously, the advance RSVP thing is very, very hard on communities that have a lot of other pressures on them. But that feels like an example of there's so much abundance and here's a proposal of how to care for it, and then that gets kind of chewed up. And people think they're doing the same, people genuinely are like, "Yes, we're about it. This is what we want to do." And then eventually that gets translated and never really communicated to you and then you're like, "Wait, what? I thought what?" and then it's too late to change it.

But that feels like an example of...the abundance is there. People want to see work, that's the other thing. All these stories of "Oh, bring the king to the people, people don't have to come to the king." I hear that argument, but also theater is awesome. People like to see performance, people like to get dressed up and go to a cool place. Like, if you can manage to make that a welcoming proposition, tell that to those little Salvadorean kids, tell the king-castle argument to the guy who just got out and brought his daughter to the show in Seattle because we got those releases for people to come and knew they were at the center of the piece. If I didn't think that spending 60 to 90 minutes together in a theater was worthwhile, like, that an argument that I feel like often comes up about like, this could be so radical. How can we be radical now? I'm like, "Talk to somebody, talk to somebody and tell them, I'm gonna give you and your woman a ticket to come to the theater tonight."