

## INTERVIEW SERIES: ABE RYBECK

Founding Artistic Director, The Theater Offensive (Boston, Massachusetts)

December 2018

Interviewed by Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, coordinator of NPN's Knowledge Building Initiative



*Abe Rybeck*

In December 2018, the National Performance Network team sat down with NPN Partner representatives whose work is deeply rooted in community and creative placekeeping. Videos of the interviews are available at [www.npnweb.org](http://www.npnweb.org).

**Paul Bonin-Rodriguez:** *How and when did you come to the National Performance Network?*

**Abe Rybeck:** I first started hearing about NPN very soon after starting The Theater Offensive [in 1989]. When we started bringing touring shows in, every great artist we would bring would say, "You should be involved in the National Performance Network!" .... Lots of folks who I was working with would say "National Performance Network – that's your people." And then finally, maybe 1999, when the Annual Meeting was in Providence, it was a very loaded get-together...and there was a lot of

turmoil in the organization. Steve Bailey from Jump-Start and some other folks invited me, since Boston's not that far away, to come down to Providence and take part in the Annual Meeting. So I was a colleague at that get-together.

On the one hand it was a really great snapshot of what were the issues at play in the field. On the other hand, it was a fucking mess of a nightmare. I just thought, "Why would I ever want to get myself involved in this bickering?" It seemed like a really difficult situation.... But from the inside people knew there was really something worthwhile at stake in a way that, from the outside, was hard to tell. I have to say, looking back on it, that I wish I'd gotten more involved then, because I think there was so much conflict but there was a lot of learning going on....

So it was a couple of years later that The Theater Offensive decided we really should get more involved and we applied to be a Partner. It was such an experience filling out the application even, because the questions that they asked in the application to become a Partner were so clear these were our people! This is who we should be with! They so clearly stated that. These people care about what we care about. And we were invited to be a Partner.

**PBR:** *What did NPN seem to care about that you care about?*

“ It wasn’t our original impulse to be a presenter; it was our original impulse to support our own community in making art. And we thought a way that we could inspire that was by bringing great artists in to engage with our community.”

**AR:** At this point, you couldn’t assume, in the early 2000s, that a presenting organization would be deeply involved with its community. That was a rare exception, not the rule. Even now, today, of course we know that it’s an exception but people kind of have a way to talk that game, at least. But it was so clear when we were dealing with NPN that we were dealing with people, all of whom were fully committed to being part of the community that they were in. And when they brought folks in from outside – artists in from outside – it wasn’t just like they were on tour around the country. [The artists] are here, now, with you. And you’re going to benefit from that, not just by enjoying the performance, but you’re going to find out about their art-making. You’re going to learn real methodology. Every artist that every one of these folks

were bringing to town was having an authentic engagement in the community. And to me, that was the reason we were bringing people into town in the first place. It wasn’t our original impulse to be a presenter; it was our original impulse to support our own community in making art. And we thought a way that we could inspire that was by bringing great artists in to engage with our community. So we felt right aligned with that.

The other thing is that queer artists and artists of color and women artists were at the center of what was going on [at NPN]. And that was what we were trying to do, and we felt kind of alone in our town. People in Boston were like, “Ooh, exceptional!” And we thought, “That should be normal.” And at NPN, it was. We were part of a giant group of people that all cared about that, and you didn’t have to make a case for it. You know, you were with people who already understood, and that was terribly important in this historical moment.

### Safe-sex educational theater

**PBR:** *What kind of impact has The Theater Offensive had in your local community?*

**AR:** Impacting our community with our work is right smack in the center of our mission. There’s not really work that we do that isn’t held to that standard, but there’s a few things we’ve done that just really turn me on. I love them – sometimes because they’re just experimental and I



*"The Missing Generation", by Sean Dorsey Dance. Photo by Lydia Daniller.*

think important experiments, other times just because they worked really beautifully. So a few impacts I really treasure: One is that for 20 years we did safe-sex educational theater in the neighborhoods where we work, in gay cruising areas. So on Saturday nights, in warm weather, from midnight to 3am, we were putting on shows. Sometimes it was invisible theater – people didn't know it was a show. Other times it was very clearly a show – it was song and dance and drag and everything like that. So we had different tactics we would use, but every

Saturday night when we were performing there, it was between 200 and 300 guys who would see the shows every time, which is more than we ever got in the theater, right? So it was really powerful. And it's interesting because we *had* to measure the impact of it, because we were working with the Fenway Community Health Center on bringing people into treatment. And it was really powerful because we were literally saving people's lives. We were their strongest program for bringing in new people referred to the clinic. These were people who hadn't been tested for HIV before, weren't getting any treatment from medical professionals, and for a lot of them English was a second language or not a language they spoke. And so bringing them in to get free treatment was really exciting, and knowing we were having that impact was really powerful. Also it was just so much damn fun! It's a scene that was not my home base; it's not where I went for sex. But being in the middle of this park late at night where my people, our community, were meeting each other and enjoying connecting with each other in this kind of outlaw way – I just loved that! And at first people were scared, because they thought we were going to draw the police. We were making noise, we lit our shows. But over time we learned to just work with much less lighting. And I remember just a few months after we started doing it, we heard police sirens and some people were scattering, and a bunch of guys came over to us and said, "Can we say we're with you?" And I thought, "Yes, that is impact!" You know that when people see you as the folks that they can say they're with to feel secure, that felt great.

### **Fighting to stay**

Another area where I know we've had a lot of impact is with displacement through gentrification and other market forces, especially along with built-in racism in Boston, [that has had] a really negative impact on our neighborhoods where we work. But we're able to work with organizations and neighbors to combat the downward spiral of quality-of-life people experience that results *from* displacement and also results *in* displacement. If you think about it, if there's nothing for you in the neighborhood anymore, how hard can you fight to stay there? If your rent is going up or if you have

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to find another place to live, there's not a culture there for you anymore, you're just going to give up and go. And this is something that people tell us a lot, is that "You make us understand why we have to fight and stay here." Also we do work with the organizations that are fighting the gentrification of the neighborhoods. When I say "fighting" I mean there are market forces that are much more powerful than we are, but our government does have a role to play in this. It can stem the tide of displacement and also even the market forces can be influenced, if not stopped. So that's the realm in which we're struggling now. It's great to hear from the neighbors that they feel a stronger sense of community and are willing to stand up for the community more because of the work we do with them. One example of this that I would cite is that "Out In Your Neighborhood" is kind of our strategy: "out" as the basic tenet of queerness, just being yourself, your full self everywhere you go, and choosing who to talk to about it, because you know not every situation is safe, but making a conscious choice about that instead of assuming you're in the closet. And with us, we've really concentrated on supporting people in the neighborhoods in their out-ness, however they're choosing to be out.

We had a show once with the phenomenal artist Daniel Alexander Jones. He was in residence with us and he did a day in someone's home in Dorchester where all day people just hung out with him, cooked together family recipes – they all shared family recipes, and then wrote and shared stories about queerness in their families. And he collected the recipes and the stories and turned it into a song, on the spot, that he performed at a party that night. The party was packed with people, in this house in the neighborhood, and I was there watching, I was so excited. I was sitting by a window and I looked outside and I realized all of a sudden, "Oh my God, there are people gathering outside and they can tell this is going on, they can see this drag show happening inside. Is this going to be a problem?" And then I looked closely and I saw people were out in the yard in November cheering on this drag show happening in the house. And I just thought, that's worth having a theater company for, right? It was really powerful for me.

" [O]ur long-term commitment was...to our relationship with the community, not the specific vessel. We let go of the festival and we deepened our relationship with the community."

**PBR:** *Talk about your ideas about duration and long-term investment.*

**AR:** Duration and permanence are really interesting issues, because I believe so deeply in depth of commitment to the folks that we're working with, and at the same time I really deeply believe in letting go when something isn't working any more and finding the new thing that does. I say I believe in that, but it's hard. One of the hardest things is deciding to not do something that you've had a habit of doing. Our "Out

on the Edge" festival has presented some of the world's greatest artists and was our cornerstone program. When people thought of the Theater Offensive, they thought the "Out on the Edge" festival of queer theater is the Theater Offensive. For two decades we did that



*Neighborhood Pride Tour at Haley House. Photo by Ivy Maiorino.*

festival, and we had taken a look at the work we did and looked at it on a three-dimensional scale – this dimension being [makes a horizontal line], “Is it meeting our mission?”; this dimension being [makes a vertical line], “Is it drawing support towards us or is it bleeding support from us – money and people and all that?”. The third dimension was size, because a little thing that we lose money on is okay, but a big thing that we lose money on is hard. When we took a look at it, the festival actually was big, and it was not losing money – it was breaking even.

But it wasn't meeting our mission, it wasn't doing that grass-roots impact that we wanted all of our work to have. And maybe one of the toughest decisions we ever made was to decide to stop doing the “Out on the Edge” festival, which people thought was...that was how they knew us. And you know, we didn't make a big announcement; we just stopped doing it. And then the season came around when we would normally be doing it and then the calls and letters came. And I say “calls and letters” plural, because there were two – but that was it! I had tortured myself over this and two people cared enough about it to say, “Where's the festival?” Everyone else was like, “Was there a festival before?” And I was like “Oh my God!” We had tortured ourselves, like we don't exist without that. And you know, what you *do* do matters a lot. And it's okay to choose to not do something. So I say all that because, where our long-term commitment was – and I'm really glad we noticed this – was to our relationship with the community, not the specific vessel. We let go of the festival and we deepened our relationship with the community. With the “Out In Your Neighborhood” approach, ironically, we gave up things that theater companies like a lot, like theaters or roofs or places to go the bathroom or reviews in the newspaper! We haven't gotten a review in a newspaper since 2009. Our shows are almost always sold out. They call it the media because it mediates; it's in the middle. We don't need someone in the middle. We know our audience; we work with them every day.

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**PBR:** *Tell me about victories, challenges, learning moments.*

**AR:** Our largest and longest running program is the True Colors Out Youth Theater. And in 1993 when the Massachusetts “Safe Schools Program” asked us if we would create something to support LGBT youth in the schools, they wouldn't even say LGBT – the program wouldn't – because “bisexual” had the word “sexual” in it and they didn't want to use the word “sexual” so they would just say “gay and lesbian.” And trans was off their radar. But when we started

that program, and we eventually started it in 1994, there was almost not a school in the state that would even answer a phone call from us. The idea of lesbians, gays, trans folks working with kids was so terrifying to people. The thought that the young people themselves had their own sexuality and their own creativity, and it was an adult's job to support them, was "Whoa!" They weren't even considering that.



*True Colors Out Youth Theater presented with the National Arts and Humanities Youth Programs Award.*

We got death threats. We got all kinds of hate mail. There are articles and articles in right-wing papers attacking us for starting that program. Twenty-two years later, in 2016, True Colors Out Youth Theater won the National Arts and Humanities Youth Programs Award and received the award from Michelle Obama in the White House. So, that felt like a big victory, right? Was it a challenge along the way? Yeah. Did we ever question if that was worth it? No. Are we lucky that we found the right allies to support that work? We're very lucky. But now also we operate out of our office in Boston the Pride Youth Theater Alliance – thirty queer youth theater and trans youth theater

groups across the U.S. and Canada. And it feels amazing to have been chosen to do that by the other groups, that they asked us to start that program. By the way, I should mention, over half of those programs are in states that voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. So this is not some bubble – we're talking about Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, North Carolina, Nebraska, Wisconsin... There's a group in Wausau, Wisconsin. There's a group in Waterville, Maine. So that feels – not just like a victory – like a triumph!

**PBR:** *How did NPN impact your work moving forward after you joined? What did it offer to you?*

**AR:** You know, I said that when the Theater Offensive came to NPN we were already really fully committed to community engagement. And while that's true, these things are a journey, and when I think back on how much we had to learn, it was giant. I thought what we were doing was important – we were the only organization that was specifically queer and trans, LGBT. But there were a lot of groups in NPN, including groups of color, that were doing profound year-round fully committed queer and trans work, cutting edge, that we had a lot to learn from. And also how they were engaging with communities, we learned so much. I'm so proud of where we were then, but NPN has this way of spiraling upwards everybody's game. We're engaging with each other, we're finding out, "Oh, you're trying out that practice; tell me how it's going" – "Oh, we could integrate that this way!" There's a lot of sharing like that, plus sharing of work itself. Our work that we supported the creation of in Boston toured to other cities, and visa versa, often and that was the idea. And those artists who toured became experts at engaging with their communities. Each one added to the repertoire of what a

presenter like our organization or the other ones could do, like “Oh, wow, that’s a new tactic! That’s great!”

Sometimes it's painful to look back on your own work from long ago with affection. It's hard to find that affection because, you know, you've learned so much since then. Is that really the best I could do? But all of us are just on our journey, and I am so grateful to the community of artists and arts activists who are involved with NPN because we as a community have really upped our game, we've really gotten better at this and taught each other, and it makes it easier to feel good about where we were. I brought something to the table, you brought something to the table, we all did. And look how far we've come with it. And the new people coming in – wow – some of these dynamite newer groups coming into NPN I learn so much from still.

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**PBR:** *As NPN repositions itself, what possibilities do you see?*

**AR:** In the time that I've been involved with NPN – a little under twenty years – the field has changed a lot, and we've changed it. Not all of the changes are helpful and not all of them are our doing, but we've had an influence in the field and that is something that we have to make sure we are paying close attention to. There's a lot of work still to be done and NPN has an important role to play in influencing our field. Financial

support for touring, which was such an enormous component of the formula for NPN's participation in the early days, may not be as big a part of the future because the funding trends aren't going in that direction.

On the other hand, the Theater Offensive has been lucky enough to be part of the LANE program – Leveraging A Network for Equity – and this is a fucking groundbreaking program. And put that language in there because it's revolutionary! When you talk to artists and arts activists and organizers about the problems with the field, LANE is actual change. It's actually addressing those problems head on, and it's iterative – finding out how to do it every year, getting better at it. And this kind of experimentation, this kind of clout – NPN had earned the respect of funders in the field and was able to get substantial support to stand up for organizations of color and rural organizations to make sure they were supported in existing and thriving, despite the fact that the field is set up against them. Let's just say it plainly. It's unfair the way that it's set up now, and NPN is taking bold leadership through the LANE program and saying “let's change that.”

What I'm working on right now – as someone who's been lucky enough to get the concentrated support of LANE – is, how can we interpret that support so that it can be of everyday use to the rest of the network and the rest of the field? There is not one day at the Theater Offensive that we don't look at each other wide-eyed and say how lucky we are to

have taken part in this learning. Wisdom can't be sold in pennies and dollars; it can only be shared. True wisdom. And that's what I feel really committed to making sure we do.

#### **ABOUT ABE RYBECK**

*Abe co-founded The Theater Offensive in 1989 and served as the Executive Artistic Director until 2019. He collaborates with artists, residents, community groups, and local businesses to create OUT performances in Boston neighborhoods. Programs Abe started include True Colors: OUT Youth Theater; the safe-sex-activist group A Street Theater Named Desire; OUT on the Edge Queer Theater Festival; and the band Adult Children of Heterosexuals. As a playwright and community activist, Abe has won the numerous honors including the Jonathan Larson Award for the book to Melissa Li's musical "Surviving the Nian". He was declared one of the "Heeb 100" progressive Jewish world cultural leaders. Abe served on of the NPN Board of Directors, including as Board Chair 2014-2016. He was recently named Honorary Drum Major by South End Dynamite girls drill team.*

#### **ABOUT THE THEATER OFFENSIVE**

*TTO's mission is to present liberating art by, for, and about queer and trans people of color that transcends artistic boundaries, celebrates cultural abundance, and dismantles oppression. One of the nation's oldest LGBTQ theater groups, The Theater Offensive's grassroots movement has been a voice for the LGBTQ community in Boston and beyond, raising awareness, fighting bigotry and hate through performing arts, and providing LGBTQ performers with a safe space outlet.*

#### **EXTERNAL LINKS**

National Performance Network: [www.npnweb.org](http://www.npnweb.org)

The Theater Offensive: [www.thetheateroffensive.org](http://www.thetheateroffensive.org)



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