



Innovation in Action

Three Case Studies from the Intersections of Arts
& Social Justice in EmcArts' *Innovation Labs*:

Featuring: Alternate ROOTS, Hull-House Museum and The Theater Offensive

PREPARED BY:



PROJECT SUMMARY

The Theater Offensive (TTO) entered the Innovation Lab to design a national organizing model to support and encourage Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) youth theaters nationally through the Pride Yourh Theater Alliance (PYTA). PYTA's mission is to "connect and support queer youth theater organizations, programs, and professionals committed to empowering lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and allied (LGBTQA) youth in North America." Through the Innovation Lab process, the TTO team explored these questions 1) how can youth leadership be operationally central to PYTA, and 2) how can the national PYTA network take advantage of the capacities of the locally grounded organization (TTO)?

Introduction and Context

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The Theater Offensive’s mission is to present the diversity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender lives in art so bold it breaks through personal isolation, challenges the status quo, and builds thriving communities.

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ORIGIN STORY, PART I

In 1989, a scrappy guerrilla street theater in Boston, The United Fruit Company, gave birth to The Theater Offensive (TTO), whose mission is to “present the diversity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender lives in art so bold it breaks through personal isolation, challenges the status quo, and builds thriving communities.” The Theater Offensive is part of a global community that celebrates being out—bringing your full, authentic self to your daily life. For many queer youth, this is a dangerous proposition, exacerbated by the realities of race and class: LGBT youth make up more than fifty percent of all homeless youth nationally. The desire to support these young people, wherever they are in their journey of self-actualization, is one of the LGBT community’s most pressing concerns, alongside the urgent need to shift perspectives and attitudes of the general public.

In 1994, under the leadership of founder Abe Rybeck, TTO responded to a state-wide Safe Schools Initiative, intended to educate teachers in Massachusetts about the needs of LGBT students who are at a much higher risk of committing suicide—more than eight times likely than their peers. Rather than focus on educating the teachers, TTO focused instead on the well-being of the students, creating an environment in which the youth could form meaningful relationships and develop skills for resiliency and personal fulfillment. Thus True Colors: OUT Youth Theater was born, one of the country’s earliest troupes of young LGBT people and their allies.

From 1994 until 2001, True Colors was a project of TTO, hiring professional artists to work within specific schools to create an original performance for the student body. Throughout the project’s run, post-performance surveys consistently demonstrated that students better



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understood and appreciated the challenges facing their queer class-mates: 95% of audience members agreed or strongly agreed that they better understood LGBT youth issues, with 17% indicating an increase in their acceptance of sexual orientation and gender identity.

After seven years, TTO realized that True Colors needed a more concentrated focus to be truly effective and be more reflective of TTO's central values, beyond a show-by-show project, and in 2001, True Colors became a formal program of TTO. By establishing True Colors as a core program, TTO was able to pay more attention to youth leadership development and create a more diverse core of participants. Currently, 74% of True Colors participants self-identify as youth of color, 55% self-identify as low-income, and 45% identify as immigrant or first-generation Americans. True Colors joined TTO's regular programming, which included a month-long "Out On The Edge" performance festival, a spring collaborative community production, and an annual Gala (a performance event in its own right).



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- Photo courtesy: Ivy Maiorino

(Re)Evolution

During the financial crisis of 2009, TTO suspended for six months all programming other than True Colors and embarked on a strategic planning process that produced a new vision based on profound change. TTO's adaptive change fundamentally shifted everything about its work. Festival activities became spread out over the year instead of concentrated in one frenetic month, staff positions were eliminated, and programs were reimagined: TTO would no longer create big productions for the whole city of Boston, but instead engage in deep and focused work in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Jamaica Plain and the South End. This new program would be called "OUT in Your Neighborhood."

As a result of this plan, TTO coalesced its programming into three major components:



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- 1 **Neighborhood Productions:** a guest artist, often from outside of the Boston, engages with a neighborhood group, with an outcome of informing his/her own work, in a co-creation, cross-fertilization model. This exchange between national and local collaboration later served as an example to TTO of how the two extremes could be balanced with reciprocity.

- 2 **Cultural Events:** TTO performs at community festivals, parades, etc. generated by other community groups to include an authentic queer presence. This is accomplished through True Colors' Creative Action Crew.
- 3 **Collective Creation:** the creation of original, collaborative works with neighborhood residents and community organizations, leading to full, mainstage works at neighborhood venues. TTO's collaborations with community groups emphasize the idea of art as an organizing tool and are designed to open dialogue across barriers of race, ethnicity, economics, age and sexual orientation.

Gay Youth at the Center

Woven throughout all three components above is the centrality of queer and trans youth to TTO's vision and goals. True Colors is the platform that rests on these three pillars, and has four basic activities:

- **True Colors Troupe** engages youth ages 14-22 year-round in theater skills training, devising, and touring. The Troupe meets 2-3 times per week, 40 weeks per year. Members receive a stipend, and peer leaders, chosen by a competitive application process, receive a higher stipend in exchange for specific duties.
- **The Training Studio** offers a full-range of community workshops, including the Advanced Training Program, which provides opportunities for experienced True Colors members, up to age 29, to engage in a higher level of theatrical training 20 weeks per year.
- **Creative Action Crew** is a troupe of experienced youth that bring workshops, advocacy and performances further into the community.
- **Leadership & Inclusion Council (LIC)**, initiated by the youth themselves, currently advises on decisions about all TTO's youth-related programming. The next strategic step is to have them work alongside Board committees with a long-term goal of these youth to become TTO board members.

ORIGIN STORY, PART 2

One day in 2009, TTO's managing director Evelyn Francis (who at the time served as education director and founding co-chair of PYTA) received a call from a trustee of the Mukti Fund, a private foundation based in Key West who had heard about TTO's work through a panel for another foundation. Several months later, TTO was invited to submit an RFP to Mukti, and their request was funded.

At about the same time, the Pride Players at the Omaha Theater Company asked Mukti to fund a convening of the emerging field of queer youth theaters. Not unlike their constituents who often felt lonely and isolated, these organizations across the county suffered from a profound lack of connection with other groups doing similar work. With Mukti support, nine queer youth theater groups, along with three foundation trustees, attended a three-day gathering in 2010 in Orlando. The gathering was enormously useful, according to Francis, with cross sharing of evaluation and recruitment tools and techniques of devising original work tailored to this population.

The Mukti Fund asked the group if they would like to convene again, and the resounding "yes" led to a 2011 gathering in Omaha. Mukti then proposed an annual gathering, and the nascent group countered with "yes, if you'll pay for a part-time coordinator." Subsequently Mukti issued another RFP calling for an organization capable and willing to host a part-time coordinator. A peer panel selected TTO from among the three respondents.

Hosted by TTO in Boston In 2012, PYTA had grown to 20 members and began to formalize by choosing an official name, officers and committees. When Rybeck learned about the announcement of the *Innovation Lab*, he was curious and eager to navigate another adaptive change in a non-crisis mode, with good outside facilitation and a thoughtful, thorough process: "We wanted to see if we could initiate another major seismic shift, but without the pain."

Process

ABOUT THE LAB

TTO was accepted into Round 8 of EmcArts' *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts* and started the program in February 2013. The *Innovation Lab* is a three-phase program that provides a strong framework in which new strategies can be explored and prototyped in relatively low-stakes environments before a full launch. The first phase focuses on researching and assessing the adaptive challenge at hand, and developing a cross-constituent team to plan strategies for intervention. The second phase accelerates the project by building organizational momentum through decision-making at a five-day intensive retreat. The third phase involves prototyping, evaluating and refining the adaptive interventions. [Read more about the Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts.](#)

TTO's approach during the Lab was deeply rooted in its fundamental values of shared leadership, transparency, and collaboration, values honed through years of ensemble theater making. TTO assembled an Innovation Team of 10 people from 4 states: TTO staff, True Colors alumni, and PYTA colleagues. The team's first step was to conduct a field survey, focus groups, and interviews. When the Innovation Team met in Boston in May 2012, there was lots of data to analyze, but as Rybeck remarked, "The meaning was crystal clear: PYTA groups wanted resources (grants for their work) and peer support and connections."

The retreat week at Airlie proved absolutely indispensable, according to Francis. A strength of the week, and the subsequent work, was the caliber of the assigned facilitator, John Shibley, and the wise use of an assessment tool, the Belbin Team Roles Analysis, which helps team members identify which of 9 key "team roles" that they prefer to play when working with a team. For example, some team members prefer to be a "Coordinator," who has a strong preference for pulling out the best in others, while others prefer to be a "Plant," who loves to generate new ideas. Each team role

makes a unique contribution to the team. Rybek praised Shibley's use of the Belbin tool: "He helped us know what to pay attention to, in terms of our team dynamics." He also appreciated Sibley making sure the voices of the youngest members were included throughout the process.

Daunasias Yancey, Rybeck's assistant at the time, agrees, "For example, during one conversation in the retreat, one member of our team asked a question about another's idea that sounded like they were challenging the idea. In fact, they were just trying to figure out how that idea could be put into action. The Belbin Team Roles Review framed the way we worked together and allowed us to feel safer with each other in what could have been a very tense week." Daunasias Yancey wrote more about her experiences with TTO's *Innovation Lab* on ArtsFwd.org. [You can read her posts here.](#)

In addition to working through the daily agenda developed with their facilitator, the PYTA group met every night and hashed out details around their values, vision, mission, goals, committee charges, and more. This time together not only laid the groundwork for a new organization, but it also allowed the Innovation Team to trust each other and understand what assets each member brought to the table.

Following the June intensive at the retreat center in Airlie, Virginia, the Team began to refine a prototype plan with central questions and expected outcomes that played to TTO's strengths in youth leadership. Through the *Innovation Lab* process, the questions had been further refined: 1) how can youth leadership be operationally central to PYTA, and 2) how can PYTA take advantage of the capacities of TTO?

When the prototype was presented at the PYTA plenary session, it was unanimously approved. The prototype described a strategic partnership with 26 PYTA sites with details about TTO's administration, a shared leadership structure, and the negotiation of separate missions and goals.

PYTA formed A Youth Leadership Committee to guide further research within PYTA (now grown to 23 members), and hired a Youth Organizer to survey 100 youth at various locations. PYTA's leadership accepted the subsequent report on the leadership needs of LGBT youth and their allies, with four key recommendations:

- 1 Prioritize on-going professional development for PYTA members to enable them to work effectively with youth leaders.**
- 2 Develop a method for directors to share information and solicit feedback from their youth about PYTA**
- 3 Restructure PYTA correspondence and meetings to support youth participation**
- 4 Create opportunities for peer leadership in PYTA**

CHALLENGES

TTO accepted the challenge of stepping up its leadership, integrating PYTA into the fabric of its daily existence, and finding ways for the two efforts—hyper-local in four neighborhoods on one hand, and a loose network of diverse sites in North America on the other—to strengthen each other. TTO admits to “past bad experiences with ill conceived attempts,” Rybeck says. “We often misunderstand the size of our own ambitions.” This process forced them to be more realistic and strategic.

Rybeck was concerned how this new program would affect TTO's work locally as it took on this new initiative on a much larger scale. TTO realized that it was “not so much scaling up, as it was scaling different.” For example, because the PYTA coordinator was housed in TTO's offices, it absorbed TTO's culture. It was very important that Rybeck increase his own communication with the PYTA Executive Board, so that they better understood the working conditions of their sole staff member. TTO, which thinks of itself as a family, was challenged to think of its PYTA work more as a business (although it certainly applied business practices to its other programs). Rybeck spent considerable time in conversation with David White, founder of the National Performance Network, which was initially housed at Dance Theater Workshop in New York City. White warned Rybeck that the in-house

program could, if not carefully managed, become a “cyst” within the organizational body. To mitigate that danger, Rybeck guided the staff and board to integrate the PYTA staff person into the fabric of TTO's daily life. Although a separate program, answerable to different people, the coordinator of PYTA was treated like a regular staff member.

For TTO, a critical foundational belief is its commitment to locality. “A shift to include national arts organizing as a priority threatens to destroy all that is most precious to us.” Additionally, Rybeck wondered if TTO could be as courageous with these decisions as they were earlier, when “OUT in Your Neighborhood” was forged from the fires of necessity..

“You take on something, you lose something—it's a departure, but you can't let the fear paralyze you. We created a team that was brave and insightful. The road to change is not always pretty, but it's the only way to liberation,” said Rybeck. Anzel Lee Miller, a member of TTO's Leadership Inclusion Council and a True Colors alumnus agreed. “You have to ask questions every step of the way, and understand the impact of the choices you make,” he said.

One issue was the decision-making structure on the Executive Committee of PYTA. At first there was an impulse to make decisions by consensus, but several dissenting voices made reaching consensus impossible. The dissent arose as a result of the wide range of members—from a youth-initiated, all-volunteer program in Madison, Wisconsin and a Youth Club in Toronto with open mic nights, to school groups and teen centers, as well as other theaters. There was wide disparity in capacity, goals, missions, and funding. After some tense exchanges, the Executive Committee agreed to use a super-majority vote for the decision-making process.

Another challenge is the uncertainty with the funding of the PYTA: Mukti plans to spend down its endowment in three years, and currently PYTA is dependent on this single source. As a “funded cohort,” PYTA has worked to diversify the funding streams that support the Alliance. Plans are in place to make PYTA more sustainable, including charging membership dues, paying member fees for attending conferences, and covering travel expenses. PYTA also has a goal of working towards 10% earned income; the Finance and Fund Development Committees will be working with a consultant to determine the possible avenues.

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Discoveries

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A benefit of a process such as the *Innovation Lab* can be to remind one of what is already known, or make visible the knowledge that is present, but not articulated. Rybeck is now more certain than ever that spending time together on thorny issues creates a very clear shared picture that enables good planning. TTO also (re)discovered the power of a well-chosen team and the benefits of being conscious and scrupulously honest about who brings what to the table.

Another lesson that TTO learned from the *Innovation Lab* process is the habit of setting agendas that always includes coming back to the basic agreed-upon questions. “We’re finding that this doesn’t limit where else we can go, it just keeps us connected to the work done so far. We are already trying to integrate this approach into our agenda setting.”

IMPACT

One internal effect was a clear confirmation that TTO did have the necessary innovation skills. “We thought we had those skills, but knew we could benefit from a conscious approach. We were doing the right things intuitively, but now we have ingrained the practices as a discipline.” These skills involve how to cultivate a carefully chosen and empowered team, which includes intended beneficiaries, skillful facilitation, dedication of sufficient time and space, increased self- and team awareness (using the Belbin Survey tool), and taking the time to look at the group’s balance of advocacy and inquiry. Rybeck reflected, “Perhaps the most profound change in our behavior is greater conscientiousness about bringing the right team together when we want to engage in real change.”

A very important impact for TTO is that they are now more nationally visible. Building on their participation in the Theatre Communications Group’s Diversity and Inclusion Institute and as a National Performance



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Network Partner, TTO is gaining a reputation as a national leader in the field of queer youth theater. That influences their ability to attract funds outside of their home base of New England, and supplements the funds that support neighborhood-based programming. Francis feels that TTO now has more “clout” in the national funding arena.

At PYTA’s meeting 2013 in San Francisco, a new focus crystallized on incubation projects and mentorship. The Incubation Project awards small grants and a mentor to emerging queer youth theaters. The inaugural round in 2014 was a response to the geographic distribution of the current PYTA members. There was a notable lack of representation in the Southeast and rural areas, so the first four Incubation sites were in New Orleans, Memphis TN, Charlotte NC and Burlington VT.

Based on the field research conducted by the youth organizer Karter Blake, Rybeck said, “It became clear that young people were hungry for deeper leadership

opportunities.” TTO saw an opportunity to “up the ante” and help PYTA’s members deepen their understanding and practice of youth leadership. For TTO, this trajectory moves from youth solely in an advisory or consulting role, to youth taking part in decision-making, to organizations being fully youth-led, with adults serving as advisors.

ABOUT EMCARTS

EmcArts works alongside people, organizations and communities as they take on their most complex challenges. Through rigorous workshops, coaching, and labs, we create space and conditions to test innovative strategies and build adaptive cultures. Our practice is deeply influenced by the artistic process, which we believe unlocks entrenched beliefs and opens up new ways of seeing.

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