Collective Creation in Contemporary Performance

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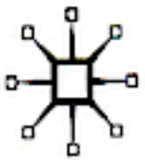

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Collective (Re)Creation as Site of Reclamation, Reaffirmation, and Redefinition

Thomas Riccio

Background

The essay that follows draws on more than thirty years of performance devising and creation. Initially trained as a Western theatre artist, since 1989 my work has focused primarily on indigenous performance. While at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, I served as artistic director of Tuma Theatre, an Alaska Native performance company, for which I developed eight performances based on ritual and traditional performance. My work with Alaska Natives provided a template and evolved into Litooma, an ongoing intercultural project that has conducted research and workshops, and created performances with the Zulu in South Africa and with groups in Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Burkina Faso, Korea, India, Nepal, China, Russia, and the Republic of Sakha, central Siberia. Most recently, I facilitated development of a devised performance, *Andgena* [*The First*], during a four-month residency in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. My work with indigenous groups folds ritual, research, performance, tradition, and drama therapy to create place-specific, post-disciplinary expressions so as to reimagine the role and function of performance in a rapidly globalizing world threatened with environmental collapse.

(Re)Creating Place

The process of creating performance with indigenous people has no set formula. This is as it should be. The variables of creating performance with indigenous people—given the vicissitudes of traditions, politics, personalities, support structures, and outside circumstances—are mercurial, requiring constant adjustment, accommodation, and negotiation. The work is ongoing initiation, learning, improvisation, and dealing with surprises. Working in a foreign culture demands

aliveness and full presence. To work in such a way requires negotiation and flexibility, patience and an even temper, passion and methodical persistence, heightened emotional sensitivity, an integrative intelligence, the ability to read the totality of an environment, and, most important, trusting self and others, for the work is collaborative. The making of the new and uncharted world we are all inheriting demands the most and best of all of us.

Projects I have been involved with have often taken on high profiles, accompanied by much public interest, curiosity, and skepticism. They have also been invested with much hope, which in turn has made me acutely aware of my position and responsibility. I was aware that a betrayal of such a responsibility could easily damage a culture, representing a meddlesome, counterproductive neocolonialism rather than the sincere assistance intended. However, the potential of such projects—the challenge of so many unknowns, the pleasure of contributing, creating, and discovering something—is deeply gratifying. As an artist I have never felt so connected, alive, and fulfilled—the work is personally meaningful, creative, and educational.

The performance traditions of indigenous people with whom I have worked have provided me with a profound and useful insight into the fundamental functions and necessity of human performance, which in turn helped me to develop working principles. These principles have been successfully applied in my work in a number of diverse cultural indigenous settings: among them, with the Zulu, !Xuu, and Khwe Bushmen; in Zambia, Ethiopia, and Kenya; among the Greenland Inuit; with a pre-Christian Slavic group in St. Petersburg, Russia; with Sri Lankan Tamils; in Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Sakha (central Siberia), and Korea. Nonindigenous (those of the decidedly Western cultural context) applications have been as varied as Finland, Italy, England, Sweden, Poland, Denmark, Estonia, and throughout the United States. The work follows no set methodology but rather applies a loose and fluid set of principles communicated by exercises and approaches. True to the notion of indigeneity, the work is shaped by its local social and cultural setting, personalities, and circumstances.

There is always a disconnect between the traditional and contemporary expressions of indigenous groups I have worked with. They live in two worlds with often mutually exclusive views of themselves: one traditional, the other contemporary (i.e., Western). It is as if the traditional and modern do not and cannot mix. While at the Korean National University for the Arts, I was struck by this disconnection. Students were required to take modern theatre and film courses along with traditional theatre, dance, and drumming (a part of a nationalist-inspired cultural preservation initiative). Many felt the traditional forms had little relevance to their careers or expression. There was no connectivity to the modern spaces in which they lived.

I found a similar disconnect at the Sakha National Theatre in central Siberia. All the actors I worked with there were trained in and worked with a Stanislavski-styled acting methodology. Although the content of their performances had been festooned with traditional song and dance, they were, nonetheless, realistically acted dramas presented on a proscenium stage and aspiring to all the values

Figure 12.1. A scene from *Twelve Moons*, a collectively devised performance directed by the author, produced by the Korean National University of the Arts, Seoul, Korea. Contemporary mask characters evolved from the Kamyangkuk tradition: (left to right) Automobile, Policeman, and Businessman.
Photo by Thomas Riccio

conveyed by Western drama. A major part of my work in Sakha was to assist in the creation of a Sakha performance style for a modern context.

Indigenous people everywhere are both influenced and challenged by Western culture. More times than not the influence has been traumatizing and destructive. Today, a combination of rapid urbanization and the influences of capitalism and consumerism, combined with technological connectivity, is forcing indigenous cultures to live in a limbo present—a place between a traditional and assuring past and the alien uncertainties of modern, globalizing culture. The values of traditional culture, rooted in their land and a cosmology evolved from place, seem irrelevant in a world that values the immediate over the long term, development over maintenance, adaptability over balance, individuality over communality, and mobility over continuance.

Between these worlds there is great confluence and conflict with few mechanisms available to decipher what has happened, define who they are, and determine what they should do next. Traditional performance is in continuity with place-based values, which implies an ordering system that is nature-based and responsive, with humans positioned as responsible and active interlocutors. In contrast, the human-centric modularity, fragmentation, and often interchangeability driving globalization all but requires a "nonplace" bereft of any but a superficial place specificity, identity, and interaction. The challenges, indeed the foci of human-centric contemporary life, are fundamentally and conceptually at odds

with an indigenous worldview and beyond the capacity of traditional performance. As a result, to deal with contemporary issues, indigenous groups often resort to the mechanism of the Western performance tradition, forsaking their own cultural perspective for one suited to their other, contemporary self and context. In so doing they betray themselves and their culture and worldview, abetting the demise of their own unique cultural legacy. In turn, they deny themselves and others the insight and wisdom their culture offers. Indigenous performance is not an exotic "otherness" but a living, viable, transformable expression revealing realities the Western mind-set has historically chosen to overlook, patronize, or marginalize.

For whatever reason, for better or for worse, my cultural tradition has had its way for the last thousand or so years. Today, the culture of the West is transforming. There is nowhere else on earth to go. Now the West turns inward, in a funk, recognizing the end of its era, taking inventory, recognizing limits and victories, admitting wrongs, adapting and reinventing—and simultaneously remaining in denial, defiantly unrepentant. Western culture's strongest suit is its adaptability, and the future of the planet and the survival of our species will depend on dialog and consideration of all the best humanity has to offer. The knowledge of indigenous people of the world needs to be a part of the emerging global culture dialogue.

Performance, for orally based and transmitted indigenous traditions, is an encoding, record, and key to their culture—a DNA braid of being, living on the earth, past, present, mind, spirit, and body. Performance holds embodied knowledge. The issue confronting fragile indigenous cultures is that the mechanism and momentum of their transformation (absorption or destruction) is well into play. When an elder passes away, a part of the earth's legacy is lost—a library burns. Much of this rich cultural legacy has not been recorded or passed on, and what remains is increasingly fragmentary. The question becomes, how to best preserve that which bespeaks untold knowledge of living in and with the world?

Chance

Within the indigenous worldview, chance is how the spirits speak. It was a chance that made me aware of the limits of my perception and how I conceptualized and practiced performance. It was my first semester teaching at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. I had inherited Tuma Theatre, an Alaska Native troupe, when the previous director left. If I didn't take it on, the state funding for it would be cut. I accepted, having no idea what I was doing.

There was little research material on the performance culture; what existed was buried in anthropological texts, the memoirs of early explorers, or oral history transcriptions. The first year, before fully taking on the position, I traveled to villages, conducted research, interviewed elders, and immersed myself in Alaska Native cultures and performance to understand it bodily. I went to festivals and learned some of the language, dancing, drumming, and singing.

A year later, during the first class session, I asked the actors to circle for a physical and vocal warm-up. I was trained in the Western theatrical tradition, one that

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viewed the body as an instrument, maybe even machine-like, consisting of component parts. I had never given much thought to how we warmed up the body through a series of isolations: the neck, the hips, arms, legs, feet, and so on; then the vocal apparatus: voice, vowels, consonants, words, sentences.

Around the circle were students, Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimos, and Athabaskan Indians, most from small villages, eager to please and learn. Their compact bodies and broad and fleshy faces—evolutionarily adaptive to their climate—bespoke the land they lived on for thousands of years. They were representatives of the few remaining, and arguably the most extreme, hunting-gathering cultures in the world. Many of the men were subsistence hunters of bowhead whales, caribou, moose, walrus, and seals. They hunted on the same earth and sea, the most challenging hunting grounds in the world, as their ancestors successfully had for thousands of years.

As the students rolled their necks as instructed in an isolation warm-up, I realized something was terribly wrong. I sensed intuitively it was an imposition, a way of looking and understanding the body antithetically to their way of being in the world. I asked them to stop, and after assuring them they did no wrong, I asked them to return the next session with each bringing three movements and three sounds they deemed "traditional."

The next session offered up wealth of traditional movements, gestures, chants, and sounds, many drawn from dance and ritual traditions. Traditional drums were brought in, and over a period of several weeks the group collectively created what would eventually become known as the "Ritual Preparation." Essentially, this was a thirty-minute physical and vocal narrative but also a ritualized warm-up constructed entirely from traditional movements, rhythms, songs, and chants. The Ritual Preparation framed, activated, engaged, and prepared the performers in a way no culturally neutral warm-up could ever hope to achieve. The Ritual Preparation efficiently and effectively—as is the wont of subsistence hunters—served many functions simultaneously. The performed actions became a way to access and express place. For the Inupiat and Yup'ik, place was understood and expressed in the body through the medium of dance—to dance was to tell a story that was both archetypal and particular. Dance was a form and container, immediate and encoded, a braid of the psychological, physical, spiritual, and emotional, expressing a personalized, generational, and environmental continuum.[1]

American philosopher David Abram elaborates on the indigenous conception of community and how performance and the central role of the shaman (one who mediates realities) contribute to the expression, maintenance, and balance of place.

By his constant rituals, trances, ecstasies, and journeys, the shaman ensures that the relation between human society and the larger society of beings is balanced and reciprocal, and that the village never takes more from the living land than it returns to it—not just materially but with prayers, propitiations, and praise.

To some extent, every adult in the community is engaged in this process of listening and attuning to the other presences that surround and influence daily life. The shaman is the exemplary voyager in the intermediate realm between the human and the more-than-human world—the primary strategist and negotiator

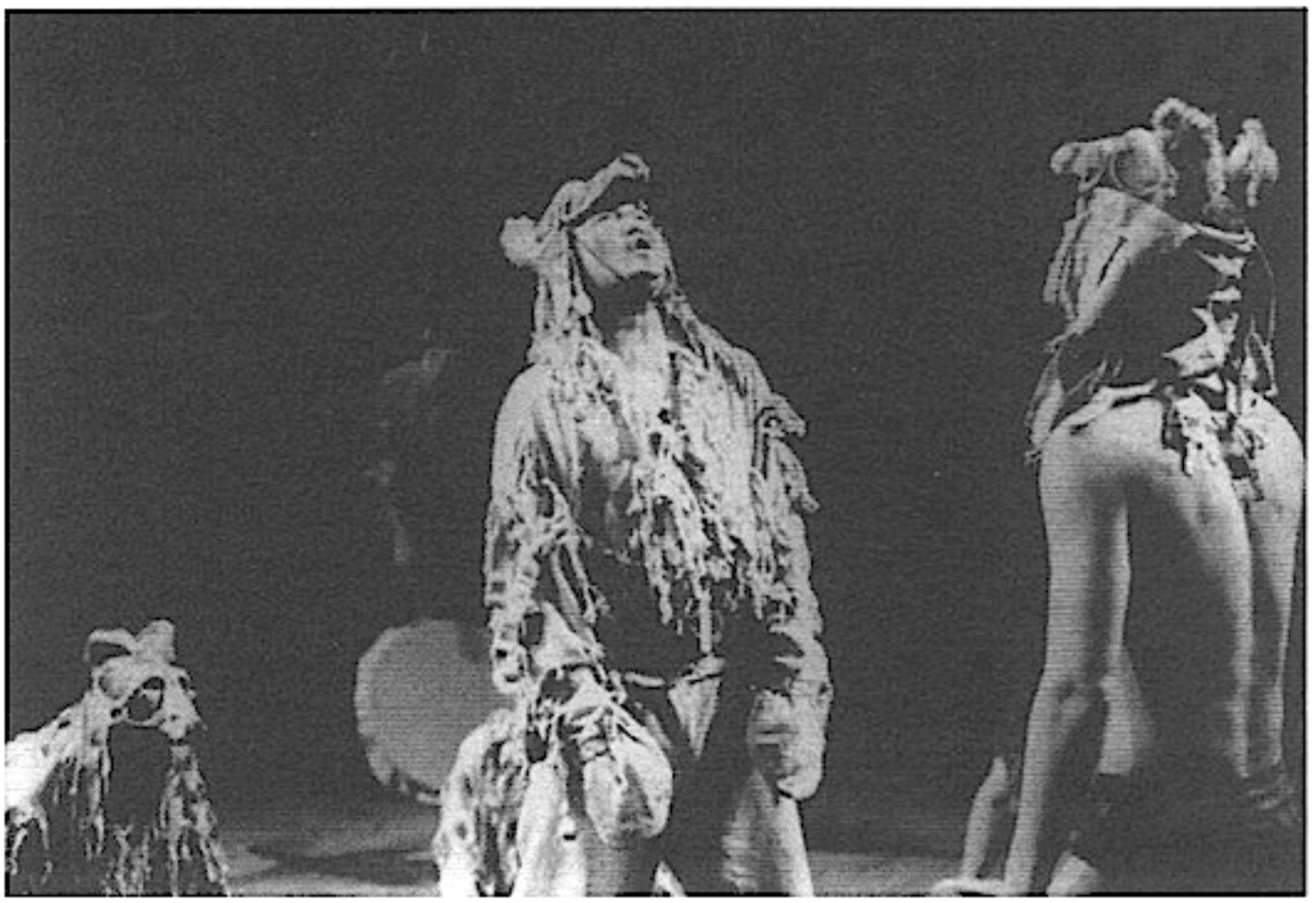

Figure 12.2. *Utetmun*, text by Paul Jumbo (center), directed by the author, devised and produced by Tuma Theatre, Fairbanks, Alaska.
In this scene, the animal-human spiritual transformation of the hunting-gathering Yup'ik Eskimo is taught by grandfather wolf to his modern descendants.
Photo by Thomas Riccio

in any dealings with the Others. The sorcerer derives her ability to cure aliments from her more continuous practice of "healing" or balancing the community's relation to the surrounding land. Destructive influences within the human community are commonly traceable to a disequilibrium between that community and the larger field of forces in which it is embedded.[2]

The performance of Alaska's Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimo emulates the movements, sounds, and personalities of the animals inhabiting their place: the seal, raven, walrus, eagle, and bear, most notably. Intermixed with mimetic animal and human actions are movements derived from the natural environment: the northern lights dancing, distant hills, water, and wind. These coded movements accumulatively create a vast, culturally specific vocabulary from which to speak of and with place. The coded dance movements of the Yup'ik and Inupiat are in many ways practical mnemonics, revealing a way of being in, and with, the world—simultaneously participating, articulating, and celebrating a physical, emotional, and spiritual interaction that exists in the present and in time immemorial. Mircea Eliade observed and understood the dances of indigenous people in a mythic and sacred context:

> All dances were originally sacred; in other words they had an extra-human model. The model may in some cases have been a totemic or emblematic animal, whose motions were reproduced to conjure up its concrete presence through magic . . . The

> dance may be executed to acquire food, to honor the dead, or to assure good order in the cosmos [. . .] for every dance was created in *illo tempore*, in the mythical period, by an ancestor, totemic animal, a god, or a hero. In a word, it is a repetition, and consequently a reactualization, of "those days."[3]

Dance was for the Yup'ik and Inupiat a code that allowed connection with the fullest sense of self and being. African diviners cite performed codes as a medium by which to connect with ancestors and spirits.[4] Jing He Shi, a Miao shaman in southern China with whom I conducted research, performed an extensive vocabulary of hand gestures to "open up and visit and then lock" different areas of the Miao spirit world (Shi). Performance codes and systems, and their application, repetition, and adaptation, are necessary for connectivity to indigenous place systems.

The creation of the Ritual Preparation, extrapolated from their own performance tradition, which was in turn extrapolated from place, somatically demonstrated active participation in the evolution of their cultural expression. This simple act of collective creation affirmed, reiterated, and reimagined their performance vocabulary, providing a bridge between traditional and Western cultural spaces. It opened and created a site where space and place could generate an expression addressing the needs of the present.

The experience in Alaska informed all subsequent work with both indigenous and nonindigenous groups. Ritual Preparations have been successfully created in

Figure 12.3. A section of the Ritual Preparation created collectively by the performers of *Sardaana*, a devised work directed by the author and produced by the Sakha National Theatre, central Siberia.
Photo by Thomas Riccio

a wide range of cultural settings, but it is only an expression of a more significant insight. It established an ethic and working paradigm: rather than unquestioningly adopting or imposing a working methodology and expressive vocabulary, a group establishes its own ways and expressive lexicon, one organic and practicable to the context, the group, and the objectives. Rather than adopting an acting style or dramaturgy, a group reclaims its place-based legacy to speak in its own way, on its own terms. Rather than denigrating or relegating traditional, ritual, and somatic-based performance languages to the past or limiting them to historical contexts, the work seeks to reinvent and reimagine tradition in a contemporary context.

Indigenous cultures codify and carry (to a greater or lesser degree) their culture in the body, and they do not rely on external cultural transmission in the form of books, photos, and film. Indigenous peoples are their own living archive—rhythms, dances, stories, and songs are transmitted person to person and are shared widely and bodily. Culture is encoded and personalized within the mind, body, and spirit. The performers know all they need to know when they begin. The text of the performance lives within the group.

With the Ritual Preparation, we had stumbled on a template that established many fundamental working principles, a shared reference, and, most significant, a model for collective, collaborative performance creation. Here are some benefits and attributes of the Ritual Preparation process and expression:

It is a compact and efficient way of identifying and demonstrating to a collective its own unique cultural performance language.
It frames and focuses the work of the group, providing a lived, tested, and working model.
It is a process-oriented project that is allowed to evolve and change, establishing the foundation for important working principles.
It establishes an embodied, place-based, eco-cosmological perspective.
It activates a performance sensibility that validates intuited, spiritual, and somatically derived expression.
It establishes a process rather than product orientation. The work is part of an ongoing cyclical process. The collective is a medium and venue of tradition and place and is responsible to a larger community.
It establishes a group performance vocabulary and style.
It establishes a forum that encourages open debate, interaction, and creation.
It establishes and encourages innovation and interaction with traditional/indigenous performance culture, viewing cultural inheritance as participatory and malleable rather than simply served and fixed.
It establishes an atmosphere and method of working uniquely suited to the group and the cultural context.
It establishes a performative and critical framework to which subsequent work can refer.
It encourages and develops an ensemble and rhythmic sensibility.
It develops a performance methodology, technical ability, and ultimately a style consistent with the cultural context, needs, and objectives of the collective.

It inspires, empowers, and encourages imaginative, individual, and innovative contributions, building individual and collective identity and confidence.
It develops the ability to create a collective narrative and, in a sense, a collective mythology.
It establishes trust and a collective/creative working relationship between participants and between the director/facilitator and participants.[5]

Workshops

Multiple considerations surround a performance workshop within an indigenous cultural context. In contrast, to conduct or participate in a theatre workshop in the United States is, for the most part, an issue of skills or methodological enhancement. In the United States, an individual actor, playwright, or director participates in a workshop to augment, deepen, or refine skills and/or learn new techniques.

Developing nations in general marvel, study, and emulate the American cultural phenomenon, which has at its beating heart the values of individuality, freedom, merit, and egalitarianism. These are cultural assumptions we Americans take for granted, carry with us and express freely, and want to share with the world. When I conduct a workshop in another cultural context, I am keenly aware of who I am, what I bring, and my implicit objectives.

I have conducted performance development workshops in several countries, most recently in Ethiopia (October–December 2009). Most are one to three weeks in duration and serve as a prelude to the creation of a collectively devised performance. Teaching and exchange of skills, craft, and methods are integral to these workshops, but they are only part of a composite of other considerations understood holistically.

In Africa a workshop is a venue of cultural dialogue. It is an encounter requiring authenticity and the dissolving of external differences of race, tribal/ethnic identity, class, gender, and culture so as to rediscover individual and shared humanity. Within this process we examine the many spaces we inhabit and how the layering of history and culture has shaped identities and circumstances. From this process evolves our performance.

I am a facilitator, an observer, and a participant: a white man privileged by the opportunity of education, resources, and circumstances. Those most advantaged are responsible to help where and how they can. My offering, as a theatre/performance practitioner, is a range of experiences, techniques, and methods to foster discovery and expression.

The work begins with the body. Regardless of who and where we are on earth, except for gender differences, we all share the same human anatomy and its biological cycle. We all are born, mature, grow old, and die. We all feel pain, joy, hunger, disappointment, and hope.

But in many cultural contexts the body is conditioned in such a way that an individual's awareness and expression of their body is severely mediated. An American's awareness and interaction with their body is very different from that of a Zulu in postapartheid South Africa, a Moslem in Tanzania, a sexually abused

Catholic woman in Poland, or an Orthodox Christian in Ethiopia. Bodies in all parts of the world have been conditioned by unique historical narrative spaces, like colonization, sexism, religion, racism (including tribal/ethnic differences), politics, and classism. Body "conditioners" exist to a greater or lesser degree everywhere, but nowhere so explicitly as in Africa, where individual, social, cultural, and personal identity is constructed in terms of body conformity.

In these cultural contexts, the individual is shaped by communal perceptions of self and body, which, in turn, shape the emotional, psychological, and imaginative ways of being in the world. It could be argued that traditional cultures live and are sustained by how the body is encoded. To control the body is to control a society—to control thought, behavior, and the imagination. In this way traditional inheritances cut two ways: they are positive and reaffirming of place and of group identity, but they can also be restrictive, valorizing outdated ways of being that resist larger social and cultural evolutions. In the complexity of our globally evolving culture, all legacies and resources must be identified, considered, and evaluated nonjudgmentally in order to create an informed, just, and practicable future. The workshop is the total consideration of individual and cultural resources—examining and exploring the collective's place-based worldview and all other cultural spaces inherited and occupied. The workshop becomes a site of cultural evolution.

The first task of any workshop is to reconnect the performers to their body and through this reactivate their imaginations and creativity; for many this is a new and startling event. From this foundation a reimagined performer/creator emerges as embodied exemplar and activist, aware of resources and empowered to act. From this seed the collective creates a performance, which ideally, in turn, generates cultural and social change within the larger community.

The workshops are a mix of theatre games and exercises shaped by the needs, context, and experience level of the group. These often include culturally nonspecific trust exercises, body and vocal explorations, partner awareness games, imagination-building games, concentration and stillness exercises, stretching and warm-up exercises (including yoga and meditation), group encounter games, and movement/vocal exercises leading to partner and group work. Often new games and exercises are created or adapted to serve specific needs. Some games and exercises have proved effective across cultures; others work well in one setting and fail miserably in another. However, all push the work forward. For amateur, traditional, educational, or professional groups alike, the games and exercises need to be challenging and entertaining, and provoke collective discussion and a deepening of understanding.

The workshop is a collective-building period with the objective of establishing a common language and experience to identify and break down barriers—personal, bodily, emotional, racial, physical, and cultural—so as to build confidence and courage for the task ahead. Initially there is a sort of awakening among the group members when making contact and giving expression to their own individual feelings—something that is not a part of a traditional cultural experience, which favors group compliance of feelings. After a series of exercises conducted with the National Theatre of Sakha, actors sat stunned, many weeping after an exercise.

They had known in their minds, but somehow, collectively, it suddenly hit them deeply: the Soviet system, what one actor called "our mother and father," was revealed as a lie that had used them, taking their soul, identity, and culture.

Throughout the process, workshop methods and objectives are continually discussed and made transparent so as to empower the group to understand and participate in the process fully as both performer and creator. No two workshops are alike, and participation, monitoring, adjustment, and discussion are vital to the success of the work. There is no set formula. The process remains fluid, interactive, and evolving, each workshop being a unique and temporary autonomous site to which all participants bring their resources in a one-of-a-kind encounter.

The workshop then evolves to focus on more culturally specific work. This is generally when the creation of the Ritual Preparation is introduced. The performance and cultural heritage specific to the group—be it Zulu, Luo, Tamil, Slavic, Ethiopian, or multicultural as in the case of the Shikasta group in Stockholm—is identified so as to establish a database. Once identified, we collectively interrogate the forms, deconstructing and reconstructing them to serve the present needs of the collective.

The Zulu members of the Kwasa Group (with whom I twice worked in Durban at the end of the apartheid era: 1992 and 1993) carried within them a strong dance, song, drumming, and ceremonial tradition. The Zulu "rhythm of resistance," which had been denied free expression under a repressive white rule, lived on in performance. Part of our work was to reclaim, reaffirm, and redefine its

Figure 12.4. A scene from *Emandulo*, a collectively devised work directed by the author and produced by the Kwasa Group, Natal Performing Arts Council, Durban, South Africa. In this scene traditional Zulu dance is applied to the narrative to express the spiritual reunification of Zululand with the end of apartheid.
Photo by Thomas Riccio

function, which held the Zulu spirit. The process and the development of a performance were all coherent to the objective of reimagining Zulu tradition in a postapartheid context.[6]

The workshop and performance work also serves to remediate long-repressed individual, social, and cultural traumas. Cultural identity and memory is braided with abuse, persecution, and hurt. To work with the Zulu, and with indigenous populations in general, is to work with traumatized populations. The facilitator must be prepared to identify and remediate individual, socially and culturally encumbered traumas. The issues surrounding personal and collective history and abuses are best discussed and dealt with collectively when they arise. Each workshop includes a *talking circle*, literally the circled participants creating a nonjudgmental neutral zone, which anyone could call to discuss whatever issue or concern they had.[7] The act of collective creation is, in many ways, also an act of collective healing. Facing, speaking to, and exorcising the demons of the past is a power inherent in the act of collective performance. The identification and transformation of a negative into a positive is an act of collective reaffirmation and redefinition. Personal, political, and historical issues should not be sidestepped but rather contribute to the deepening of the workshop and performance process and expression.

Collective Creation

The most powerful thing performance can do is ask questions. The *Andegna* project—which I facilitated in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, during the autumn of 2009—was all about questions that had not been asked. It was only natural that the development period, rehearsal, and performance would be about learning how to ask and answer questions.

Questions begin within one's self, which means developing the courage to ask questions of one's self and then to present those questions to the larger community. Questions beget questions, setting off a chain reaction that peels away the layers of accepted assumptions to reveal truths. Truth, once revealed, is a monster impossible to control.

We had been working together for nearly three weeks. It was a beautiful afternoon, under the clear blue, cloud-dappled Addis Ababa sky, when I asked, "If Ethiopia is such a great nation and culture, why is life so miserable now? Why is it at the bottom among the world's nations in so many things?" The ensemble members stirred uneasily; although we had developed a friendship, I was nonetheless an outsider criticizing Ethiopia. For an Ethiopian their land is sacred; it goes beyond patriotism and is almost religious. Several ensemble members had their afterbirth buried as a demonstration of their connection to the land. They are not a nation of immigrants but a homogeneous people who have inhabited a land for thousands of years, developing a culture and worldview that is difficult for migration-based cultures, such as the United States, to comprehend. I was bespeaking the monster of truth. I was, as I often find myself, an insider and outsider, able to see and obligated to say what they couldn't, shouldn't, or wouldn't.

For a week, after mornings of performance exercises, we sat under a tree on the soft grass going through the highpoints of Ethiopian history, mythology, and culture, trying to unravel why and how Ethiopia had fallen so far behind the rest of the world economically, in infant mortality, corruption, education, and on and on. These bright, hardworking young people, the future of the nation, looked hard at their past and their grim prospects.

After my initial question, the process of creating a performance took on a life of its own. The group decided on a historical approach outlined by historical high points. By establishing this story arch, the performers were able to structure their thinking and work to unravel and reveal the complexity of the Ethiopian culture, character, and contemporary predicament. Like any culture, history melds with mythology, willing into existence an idealized self-image, which, if not counterbalanced with reevaluation, can lead to delusion and perpetuation of ways of being no longer relevant or functional. Such is the case in Ethiopia.

Ethiopian culture is thousands of years old, one of the oldest continuing cultures in the world, one dating to the time of Egyptian dynasties, and arguably the first in many things, which propagated a sense of superiority, if not arrogance. Ethiopia had given the world "Lucy," the first human and mother of us all; had given us the Queen of Sheba; was the holder of the Ark of the Covenant; had been the first empire to accept Christianity and Islam; was the only nation in Africa never colonized—and on it went. It was this past glory, this inflated self-image, the ensemble wanted to explore and expose. From these discussions the performance developed. *Andegna* means "The First" in Amharic.

The model may in some cases have been a totemic or emblematic animal, whose motions (a blend of animist, ethnic, Islamic, and Orthodox Christian performance languages) that had been established in our workshops to interrogate the hallowed high points of Ethiopian history. We used the language of the culture and land to unbundle the mythos to great effect—for within the performance also lives the mythos. To redefine and reapply the Ethiopian performance language was coherent to the critical issues of the performance itself.

The performance was not a history lesson but rather a thematic journey tracing Ethiopia's willful self-delusion and perpetuation of events. Each scene brought to the fore the threads of a mythos religiously and politically propagated. Ethiopia is a nation that has, and continues to serve, a hierarchical ruling and Orthodox Christian elite rather than the will and needs of the people. The ossified political/religious system is rigged to control and exploit. These thematic through-lines made the performance dangerous—for they revealed the Emperor's new clothes. The performance could not critique the present government as it had Ethiopia's history; to do so would have been too dangerous for the performers. Ethiopia's single party "democracy" would have deported me; the performers would have been threatened, beaten, or jailed. Such a possibility was real and very much on the mind of the performers.

The overflowing audience of nearly five hundred attending the Addis Ababa University performance was charged by the truths spoken, by seeing writ large how their perceptions of self were encoded and perpetuated by their tradition and how tradition was also their salvation. The performance played out the conflicts

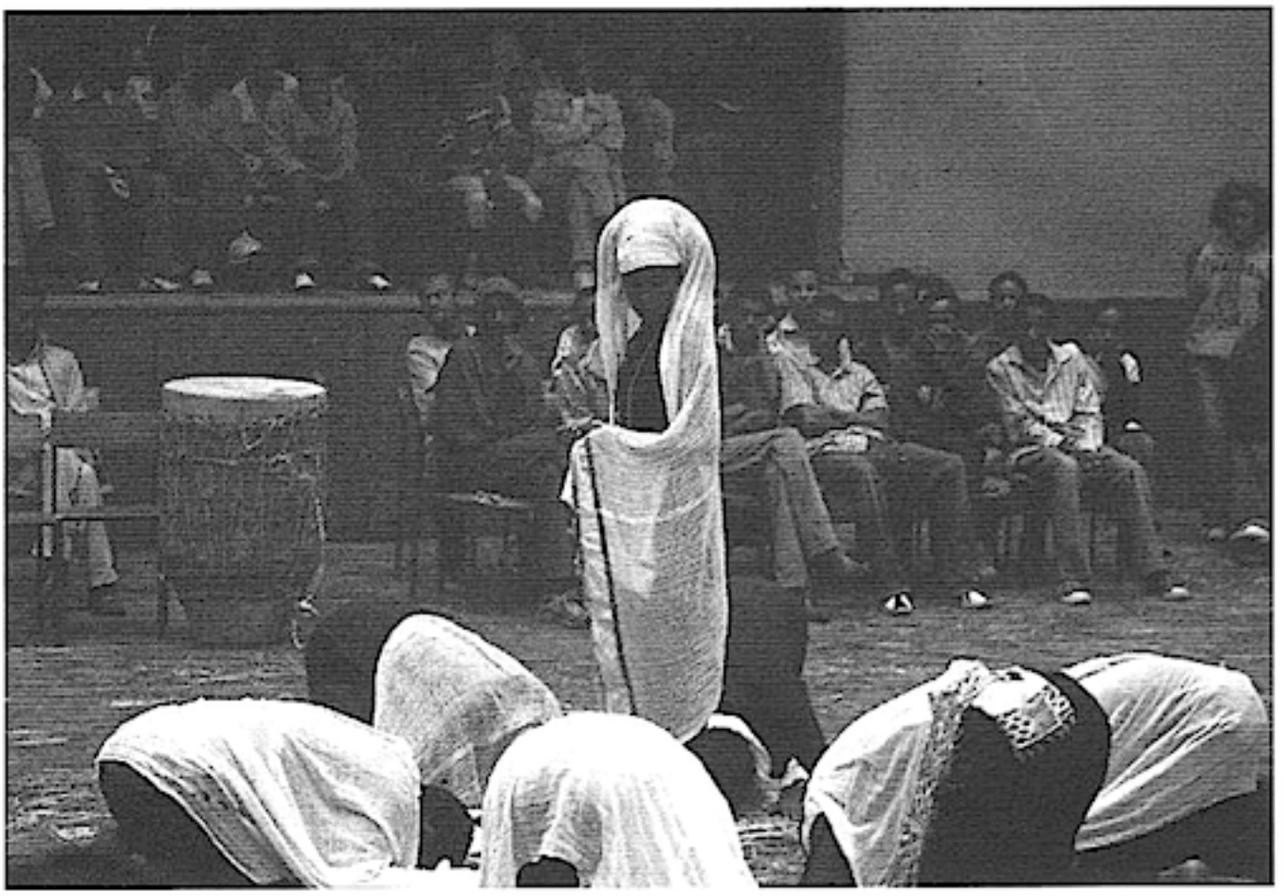

Figure 12.5. A scene from *Andegna*, a collectively created performance directed by the author, presented by Litooma in collaboration with Lul Theatre, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In this scene, Lucy, the spirit of Ethiopia and the oldest human remains found in that country, asks her countrymen to rise up to the many challenges that confront them.
Photo by Thomas Riccio

and contradictions, the complexities the youthful and sharply attentive audience lived within. The spirit of how the performance was created emanated to its larger community, who responded by talking back, singing, and cheering the revelation of their place and space. The performance made visible the invisible in the attempt to rebalance.

The last 10 minutes of the 75-minute performance—after much physical action, singing, dancing, and some hard-hitting critique—resolved itself in a quiet conversation. The ensemble sat in a circle and talked informally about what they discovered through the process of the performance of their mythos. Revealed were what they had discovered about themselves, about Ethiopia, and what needs to change and their hopes for the future. Though the performers avoided any direct criticism of the present government by speaking only of the past and the future, a second performance at the University was prohibited. *Andegna* had stirred up unrest among the students. My payment of $50 to two policemen is what kept the single university performance we did have from being shut down.[8]

During the quiet conversational end of the piece, the audience sat still and attentive. The performers could say whatever they felt with discussions varying according to performance. It was simply an open and free dialogue in front of their community, and that was radical. Performers and audiences alike were all witnesses and participants to something larger than themselves. And that is what performance does so well.

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Notes

1. Thomas Riccio, "Reimagining Yup'ik and Inupiat Performance," 9–10.
2. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 7.
3. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 28–29.
4. Philip Peek, *African Divination Systems*, 84.
5. Riccio, "Reimagining Yup'ik and Inupiat Performance," 11.
6. Thomas Riccio, *Performing Africa*, 43.
7. *Talking Circle* discussions have included, for example, discussions ranging from mundane scheduling conflicts and compensation to issues as heated as sexism and racism, which was openly and frequently discussed when working in Tanzania. Intertribal conflict was frequently voiced while working with multi-ethnic groups in Alaska, Zambia, and Burkina Faso. Long simmering interpersonal differences and favoritism were among the issues discussed when working with the state-employed Sakha National Theatre acting company. Corruption, religion, and national malaise were central to the workshop in Ethiopia, which provided the inspiration and material for the subsequent performance. Even the manner, process, and procedures of conducting the workshop are fair game. Once, when working with the Zulu, my comments to two tardy performers were discussed, the tone of my voice criticized, and with that a delicate subject broached with a greater understanding and sensitivity gained. Open and unrestricted discussion develops and deepens trust, enables expression, and facilitates healing.
8. *Andegna* was performed on four other previous occasions by Lul Theatre at an outdoor compound north of the city center.