

Interview Questions for Marianne Weems and collaborators  
4/29/08

Questions by Angela Mattox, Performing Arts Curator, YBCA

James Gibbs (dramaturg, filmmaker), Harry Sinclair (writer, performer, filmmaker) and Marianne Weems (director) tackled these questions from an IHOP parking lot on the border between San Diego and Tijuana.

- 1. Continuous City is in the final months of its development, with the premiere in Fall 2008. Can you speak a bit about how the timeline for your artistic process? How long does it generally take to create a project of this scale?**

JAMES: It's HOW long until the premiere? Somebody get my calendar.

MARIANNE: It's about two years of development ...

HARRY: Then three months of total panic...

JAMES: And we're usually done about three months after the premiere.

MARIANNE: Seriously, these productions have a long gestation period, part of that is admittedly fundraising, and the rest of the time is spent developing the concepts and the design simultaneously through a series of workshops and residencies. This is how the form stays current with the content, and ultimately how the two are integrated. For instance, we had a lovely and fun residency at U.C. Berkeley last fall, in which we explored identity and Facebook with the student performers, and also set up a *real time* network between Builders' performer Rizwan Mirza and his family members in Delhi and London. That material will be rolled into the final production, as one story of three.

Also my experiences and discoveries about the material come into focus as I try to explain the show to people. There's only so many concepts you can cover before their eyes glaze over.

- 2. The Builders Association is known for bringing extraordinary collaborators to bring the vision of the work to fruition. Who are the key collaborators on the piece? Describe the collaborators roles in Continuous City.**

HARRY: James is able to locate coffee anywhere in the world using his iPhone.

JAMES: Marianne drives, and the car goes almost anywhere that she points it.

MARIANNE: I am always grateful to be surrounded by engaged and engaging collaborators, and the process of finding them comes through identifying a shared

sensibility. I've noticed that working relationships deepen over two or three shows – the longer we work together, the more a 'shorthand' is established about what ideas and designs to put where, and why. James and his company dbx worked on three major productions with us, our collaborators Diller + Scofidio introduced us during JET LAG (1998) and dbx contributed specific animations to ALLADEEN (2003). Our last show SUPER VISION (2005) was a full-scale collaboration between the two companies. Since James and I had already worked together, there was a manageable learning curve when we stepped into the rehearsal process.. What we created was a virtual world that could be staged to interface with live performers in a convincing way. The rehearsals were a fluid, interactive process. Every day dbx would design and render new material. We were very privileged to have them and their resources - because we were remaking 3D environments on a daily basis. James also emerged as a major collaborator on the concepts and script for SUPER VISION, and it seemed natural that he would continue this work – this time officially as dramaturg -- on CONTINUOUS CITY.

I met Harry at a party after SUPER VISION showed at BAM in New York. We were replacing one of the performers in the show and Harry gave a spectacular reading the next day. He has had extensive experience as a director and a performer in theater and in film, and he stepped right into the role and the process. By being inside SUPER VISION, he grasped a lot about the way we work, and he came up with some great ideas for the next show. He has been significantly and tirelessly involved in creating CONTINUOUS CITY.

My other treasured collaborators have worked on many of our past productions; Jennifer Tipton (lighting) and Dan Dobson (sound) are founding members of the company and have profoundly contributed to our aesthetic and approach. Moe Angelos and Rizwan Mirza (performers) have both been in several productions and yet have managed to remain warm, hilarious, and utterly engaging.

We also have significant collaborators in different parts of the country – the designers of the interactive website are based in Berkeley, our set designer lives in Glasgow, and our video designer, Peter Flaherty, has been in Hong Kong for most of the past year. But we all come together for those crucial rehearsal and development sessions.

**3. Your work often deals with how contemporary culture responds to and is shaped by technology. How does this new piece continue this exploration?**

HARRY: It's pretty much the same as our other shows.

MW: The last trilogy of The Builders Association's performances have taken "real world" concerns as their subject matter – from travel in JET LAG (1998), to global outsourcing in ALLADEEN (2003), to the datasphere in SUPER VISION (2005.) All of these productions tell stories about the shifting of identity and geography that are brought on by contemporary technologies. For instance, *Alladeen* addressed how the technology of fiber-optic phone lines gives the illusion of bringing people closer together when, in the case of corporate outsourcing, it's driving them further apart. We staged this piece about the call centers of Bangalore before they really became public knowledge – we went to India to observe the training process of how the Indian operators learn essentially

to 'pass' as Americans, and to watch the operators in action, and to shoot video of phone calls from American customers being handled in the call centers by Indian operators often deploying their American personas. This confusion of identities, distance, and proximity, is teased out in each production.

JAMES: in this production w're talking about the impact of technologies in the developing world, and what it's going to mean to be connected. We're talking more emotionally about how relationships are transformed by being connected all of them.

**4. In developing the BAN program, the curators articulated underlying values for the kinds of projects to be included in the triennial, such as; innovation and experimentation, interdisciplinarity, and collaboration to name a few. Another was interactivity. Could you talk about the element of interactivity as part of Continuous City? What are the ways people from around the world can participate in the piece?**

MW: In this project, we want to examine not only how we see what's happening in the world, but how we deliver it to an audience -- using 'real world' events to include 'real world' people. CONTINUOUS CITY will extend theater's reach by providing a space for others to step into the project; this production will tie local city-dwellers to others in many remote locations. The show will reach directly into each city it travels to through a participatory website -- we ask people to relate to a very simple speech about transnationalism (which we are all implicated in in some way.) We are also creating video footage of the Bay Area which will be added to a vast cityscape made up of fragments from many different locations, some virtual, some real, some distant, some drawn from the city the performance takes place in -- each morphs into the next as they become one continuous city. Finally, one of the characters in the production will spend time blogging in each city, meeting individuals and exploring remote corners of the area. This video blog will play an important (and I hope enteritaining) component in each night's production. As always, it's sounds like there are an unmanageable number of threads in this production, but you'll have to see it to believe it.