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Rapprochement of cultures

By Kyoung H. Park

This year is the year the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launches a new initiative, the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, while concluding its Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World (2001-2010).



The first decade of the 21st century was ridden with conflicts that had no boundaries. Terrorism, climate change, and global capital permeated through borders, deeply changing our local and national realities.

Realizing that a much larger world out there can drastically affect the world around us, the UNESCO diagnosed that if conflict prevention is not actively pursued, we could face unbridgeable incomprehension and mistrust, resulting in greater, global tensions. Thus, seeking to address this urgent, humanitarian need, UNESCO launched its new initiative — the Rapprochement of Cultures.

Why culture? Cultures are the manifestation of our values, life-styles, ways of life, as well as the artistic and creative realization of our world views. But cultures are not static — they change and are changed by the constant ebb and flow of knowledge, living, and history.

The dynamic processes through which our cultures evolve depend on our quicker abilities to navigate through the uncertainties globalization causes in our day to day lives. And in a multi-cultural world of interdependent nations and people, more is needed in the practice of living in peace with an "other" and the "otherness" of living with oneself.

According to Johan Galtung, founder and pioneer of Peace Studies, there are three levels of positive peace. The first is the absence of war and violence, which addresses direct forms of physical aggression ranging from armed conflict to domestic violence.

The second is structural peace, or the transformation of socio-economic and political oppression — such as racism or gender discrimination — to prevent the consistent abuse of power in societies.

Yet, according to Galtung, a third and fundamental tier of peace is cultural. Cultural violence is our normative acceptance of structural and direct violence — in other words, our permissive allowance of violence to exist through unjust systems of oppression, or even worse, physical aggression.

In order to address cultural violence, Galtung argued that conflicts need to be addressed through non-violent methods that allow parties in opposition to transcend, or more specifically, transform conflicts in constructive ways.

Diplomacy, innovation and creativity are necessary to ensure proper, peaceful conflict transformation, and this is where the arts — and artists — can play a part.

During the 2009 International Conference of Centro do Teatro do Oprimido (organized by Rio de Janeiro's Theater of the Oppressed, founded by 2009 UNESCO Theater Ambassador Augusto Boal), theater artists from around the world gathered to discuss the future role of artists in their communities, countries, and as citizens of the world.

While Boal's message was clear, "being a citizen is not living in society, it is changing it," the issues tackled in roundtables seemed unwieldy — how can theater artists address gender inequality, political oppression, or global economic injustice? And at a cultural level, how can our understanding of these change?

With these questions in mind, I began writing and directing "The Diamond Trade," an examination of global capitalism through women's point-of-view.

By collaborating with an all-female, multi-cultural ensemble of actresses and dancers, I sought to stage the multi-polar reality behind our current global crisis, and more importantly, focus on the human reality of living under capitalist values that find themselves under ideological and political debate.

Moreover, as diamonds are valued for more aesthetic than practical reasons, my inquiry is concerned with the global trade of diamonds as a metaphor for the role of art in society.

What is the value of art when objective goods are valued monetarily? How can art contribute to the common good? And in times of global financial crises, what are the values needed to create art in a global community?

Kyoung H. Park is a dean's fellow at Columbia University's School of the Arts and writer/director of "The Diamond Trade," a new, multi-cultural dance theater piece recipient of a 2010 UNESCO-Aschberg Award. "The Diamond Trade" is part of La Mama Moves Dance Festival in New York City June 17 to 20 and will be developed in residency at Sanskriti Pratishtan in New Delhi, India (November 2010-January 2011).