

On not being afraid to challenge your audience



Theater maker Modesto Flako Jimenez discusses what he's learned from theater, staging work in his neighborhood, the economics of creating art, and not shying away from difficult conversations in your work.

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As told to Resham Mantri, 2757 words.

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What does theater do for you?

It's the way I learned. I'll get assigned a play and then I have to go and buy 30 books about what that is, what culture, what history. Every book came from a play. The only way I learn is that way. It's like, "Okay, I need to go and find out what the Shakers are because now, I'm going to be in a play about the Shaker history and who are all these people and who was Mother Ann and why did Mother Ann come to America instead of staying in Europe? Oh shit, all of this has to do with religion and she didn't want to be oppressed by all these white Catholic men."

So I'm able to digest a lot because the school system in America blocked a lot of ways of learning for me. I had to create my own ways of learning after being an immigrant and coming from the Dominican Republic. I'm fascinated by the unknown and it calls me.

Theater challenges me to become a better human being and challenges the way society's norms get updated and how newspeak becomes a disconnect around being intellectual. We have built so many new languages around disconnect, around feeling "woke," that then we don't do anything that theater was originally supposed to be having us do. So how do I challenge myself, my art, and my people that I'm collaborating with in this box of theater to remind ourselves that we're following old templates that don't fit us anymore? That's why theater.

What do you feel like you do for theater?

I keep spreading the proper way of it. I still add food to every show I do—either before or after or both, because I know that's part of the beginning of it. I still create places for conversations, to debrief, so we can address the theater we saw.

I make sure that all these kids learn it, not in a disconnected way. I remember when Shakespeare was put in front of me and I was like, "Ew. You are teaching me this? I don't want this in a school setting." Then, a couple of years later, the same play got put in front of me and I was like, "Oh, this teacher is talking about it different. Oh, this novella? Oh, say word."

This is why I started Shake on the Block in 2015. How do I make sure kids have this avenue to just have fun with old novellas, because that's what they are, old novellas. I teach them that some white man stole from other white men because a lot of his (Shakespeare's) work is rewritten. A lot of his work is like, "I'm going to take this story from [Masuccio] Salernitano and [Matteo] Bandello. I'm going to take all these stories and build my new

Romeo and Juliet, the commercial hit. This ni**a stole part of this from Ovid."

I teach Shakespeare at Sarah Lawrence, but I'm teaching them on the reality and not the intellectual disconnect. Yeah, we can talk about the cadence, we can talk about the meter, we can talk about all of that. But that's not what this whole year or class is going to be about, only words. Respect the origins. Respect that Shakespeare did not create *Romeo and Juliet*. This shit was done by other Italian gangsters from the romantic era that was just like, "I just need to get some money and get this woman dripping."

For them, it was all about, "This is my livelihood. To tell you a story that will get you motivated to send me to another house," because that's how we were selling our work back then as artists, the traveling salesman.

I appreciate, in other interviews, your honesty in comparing the art world to the drug world in the ways that everybody's selling shit. You talk about the hustle. What does that hustle look like for you?

Everybody trying to sell shit, right? Everybody got to make a product. It's weird because there's old templates created that people are just lying to themselves about. Because of the hopeful art that we all want to share and put up, we start lying to ourselves about the finances that go behind that production. And certain people sit in front of that other person that has the little bit of capital to start and they feel like they're indebted to that person because they're putting in the first couple of dollars to be able to get their dreams up.

This production cost \$250,000 to put up from beginning to end including, not even really including the development. The development that you did for four years. That's a whole other budget. That's the okey-doke to me. All these companies will sit you down, tell you that we're going to present your work but not talk about, "Is your work ready to be presented?" What is the development needed for that?

They want to come in and just take the final product and not pay.

I've been in developing *Taxilandia* for 15 years not counting the money I spent on gas, insurance, making sure that I take all these pictures of all these customers—all of that is investment. So making sure that you tally and keep all of that for yourself. I'm not saying you're not going to come out of pocket because every boss comes out of pocket. You gotta put up your money first.

The pandemic has shifted so much in theater. There are more plays that people can read now, Brandon Jacob-Jenkins guest-edited the *Paris Review* and it was a sort of theater journal where you could read some plays that were not live due to the pandemic. Obviously we want to see these plays live, but what do we do in the absence of that?

That is the beautiful pandemic moment of how do you devise your writing now? How do you adapt this to be something else? We don't make film. Let's respect that. It's not what we do. Don't try to bring your theater template to a Zoom world. Respect the film world. Don't try to make a Zoom play because that's not what you went to school for. That's not what you do. You can have a conversation around the play on Zoom and then figure out what is the new device? How are you going to adapt it?

Because what do you think having a Zoom play does?

Awful. Disrespects your art bro and disrespects theater. It's not in front of you. What are you doing?
<https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/branden-jacobs-jenkins-on-the-community-of-theater/> You know all the emails of people being like, "Can we do we something together on Zoom?" And I'm like we can have a conversation, I know that Zoom is for *that*.

The battles of showing people samples of *Taxilandia* on the stage for the car, drove those institutions to ask for a stage show. So then the car became obsolete to a lot of people's eyes. It's in the taxi, it is a site-specific show. You're in the car and we're driving around the neighborhood. Me folding to the institutions to show a piece of it on stage, actually fucked me up and made the institution be like, "But why do we need to break our template if you're already doing it in our template?"

I thank the pandemic. Because in the pandemic everybody was like, "Oh shit, we can't deal with the stage show." The stage show was supposed to open in September of last year. So everything gets canceled. I still have a car. I'm able to say, "Taxis are good. Fuck your stages and buildings, I'm out. I'm ready, let's see how we can do it in the car," and then that's what got institutions interested again, because now they needed something to showcase. That's when I became the owner of everything really because I had the power to say, "I don't do Zoom shows. I don't want everybody in my car, so I'm not going to do a million shows, and I want something for my community."

It's again a moment of, we're going to let you have the old theater template whenever it comes back, but for us right now, we're really happy that they're all broken and we're just trying to figure out the new rules for us to play and the artists that are failing forward and jumping into that are coming up with some craziness.

There's the 600 Highwaymen, a theater group, and their phone conversation shit with a random stranger. It's fucking brilliant. You can just call a random phone number and that person is going to engage you and have a conversation. And that became a piece that now is in a lot of theater spaces, and the actor is not exhausted. The new models that are coming up are really on like letting the actor just showcase his art and not be there and actually him eating and not having to exploit his body daily, which usually the numbers ain't right for unless you're on Broadway.

When I see you perform, I see a person who seems to show up the same way in different spaces. How do you think of audience when you are creating a piece?

I think about audience all the time. What am I giving you and what are you gonna give me at the end of this, because there's a trade-off. I usually create places where I could document your voice after. Tell us your story connected to what you just saw, to make sure that we are both giving each other something. My stories are just the Dominican in America trying to tell that story of the immigrant and you don't know this, you should know this. The Immigrant has always been here and you are part of that. The only thing is that you are white, and forgetfulness is real. Constantly pushing all those boundaries of reminding the Latino that they're worthy.

Reminding the white person that we're here together. The bullshit you selling yourself is not real. Wake up. I need you to accept that and then we can have a conversation. If you don't accept that we can't. I like making them uncomfortable but also to the point of wanting to have the conversation and not shut down, so that's my audience.

You have a piece in progress called *Mercedes*, about your grandmother, who came to America from the Dominican Republic. She brought all your family members over. She was the matriarch and now you care for her part of the time, while living with her. She suffers from dementia. What has living with someone with dementia brought to your art?

I'm accepting that because of the changes in my life from 2018 when I was in the public performing and I checked my voicemail and it's like, "I think your grandmom's not home dog. She came and knocked on my door like it was her door and then she just walked away." From then it was like, "How do I stay as close to her as possible?" The office is a couple of blocks away. The storage is right across the street.

My show right now [*Taxilandia*] runs from my house. I just literally walk downstairs and ask you to get in a car that lets me drive only in my neighborhood and then I could drive right back to my mother. I didn't plan it out like that. But also that wasn't unintentional. You created your home and your fucking neighborhood to be the theater for you because you can't leave it right now.

So *Taxilandia*'s new motto is this. I need to do it from the front of my house. I could change in my house. Come downstairs do the 45 minutes show then go right back upstairs. "Mama you good?" "Home attendant you good?"

So it's this weird shit of acceptance and being like, oh you are literally bringing people closer to you. You're writing theatrical moments of your own life. You're giving them your life. Whether it be *Mercedes*, whether it be you in the cab for 15 years, whether it be the story of you as an immigrant in America, as your first book,

you're writing the life of an immigrant in America and around that you add the pain that is, "I got to take care of my mama. If shit happens, fuck this production, cancel this day. We'll do this tomorrow and reschedule those two people."

The regal that is that gangster. She brought all these people over from the Dominican and she was just learning how to do verbs. It's how do you keep that without also showing the hurt, which is going to come across anyway because we all know it. Give out the shine. Make sure that you document her life the proper way and don't just give the bed sores because everybody knows you're going to get bed sores from dementia. So, why would I tell you that? You don't need that.

So I read this last night and I thought of you. Greg Bordowitz, video artist, writer, and activist said this about radical art. "It bypasses social media algorithms and consumer demographics by bringing together groups who wouldn't normally be in the same room together."

This class shit is crazy, the way I look at it with the *Taxilandia* shit right now. How do I just have this conversation with these people in a car because I've been challenging myself a lot to not yell at people in this car because there's a lot of moments of like, "Everybody left. And now you all ni**as want art? You all came back and now you all want some art and now you all are not only renting, you all own now because you all left and were able to stack all your money. Your interest went up bro. If you invested, you came back and you bought land in New York City. You didn't take care of people. You did nothing for us. So now I got to go and dance for you? And make you feel like shit is back to normal while we're all plexi-glassed up and masked up." So it's a moment of putting my shit to the side and figuring out how to continue the conversation because it's hard through a pandemic, but how do we address what happened and create an uncomfortable floor for us to talk?

Because at the end of the day if I'm yelling at you, I'm not letting you talk. So that's really *Taxilandia* there for me right now. That is like, "Hey, look, let's come to the salon and talk about gentrification." But we all know we're going through it with Covid. So if you want to not deal with anything about gentrification or Covid and you just want to take a walk and hear about New York City history, here's a taxi tour. "Hey, do you want to sit in the car with me and feel a little... get there, let's go." We can have that conversation. I'm open to have it and be uncomfortable, but we're both going to challenge each other without shutting each other down.

So that's all three phases, right? Where it's like, I understand if you don't want to talk about it. Because you are in a pandemic right now, you might just need to breathe. The gallery is free for all. You can come to the neighborhood and get to know us. Nobody trying to charge you for that. You want my art? I'm already giving it to you in the gallery in small doses. Do you want the dance with the full art art, then pay for that, you can have the taxi tour. I'm not gonna dance forever. My body has to rest, so you all ni**as do a lottery.

Modesto Flako Jimenez Recommends:

Sleeping 8-10 hours a day (it's a pandemic, get your rest)

Reading *1984* again and again. Remind yourself what we are living.

Going swimming.

Treat yo self. Drop 100 dollars on something your ass wants. But doesn't need.

Read Elizabeth Velazquez' last book *When We Make It* and Roya Marsh's *Daylight*

Name

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Vocation

Theater maker, producer, and educator

□

Crichton Atkinson

