"Arts *for* the queer community": Creating Queer Theater for a New Generation with Adam Odsess-Rubin,
Artistic Director of the National Queer Theater

Interview by Xavier Lemoine in New York City, November 29, 2019, Cafe Amrita, Harlem.

Xavier LEMOINE: Can you tell me about your background?

Adam ODSESS-RUBIN: I grew up in Berkeley, California. I'm 27 so I grew up there in the early mid-1990s. Even though Berkeley is a very progressive area, I went to a very conservative high school. I was bullied a lot and called "faggot" and beat up and all this shit. It was called Athenian [Danvin, California], it was a private school outside of the Bay Area. When I was in high school was also when California was debating same-sex marriage and Proposition 8 so LGBT issues were in the news a lot. So you would hear these political commentators debating whether queer people should have the right to get married. And it has a psychological effect on you as a kid: do people even recognize your basic worth? Especially when I was 14, 15 years old and reckoning with my own identity and my own self-worth, and feeling really isolated and I didn't know any other gay people, it really took a toll on me. When I was 16 my high school drama teacher decided to do a production of *The Laramie Project* [by Moisés Kaufman and the Members of the Tectonic Theater Project], which was pretty daring for my high school. I was cast in it and doing that play really changed my life in a lot of ways. I realized I was part of a bigger community, that my community had a history and a culture that was distinct. It wasn't just this weird thing about me that it wasn't a sin or a disease or anything like this but that it was an identity that I could hold on to and that I could be proud of.

XL: Did you fully realize you were queer thanks to the play?

AOR: I knew I liked boys before doing the play but I saw that as a sexual desire and not as an identity. I grew up Jewish that was my identity. I saw my attraction to other guys as a fetish, another thing about me but not as a part of who I am in a deep way or in a historical way. So the play really blew my mind and really changed the environment of my high school to be much more accepting. The bullying stopped after we did this production because the Westville Baptist Church, the people with "God hates fags" signs came to our opening night to protest. So I think that the homophobic students in my school they really saw "oh when I say faggot or that's so gay," it's actually part of this larger homophobic structure that they did not recognize and, then, they were like, "Oh this is not cool, I can't say this shit."

So after that I came out of the closet. I came out to my dad. And he told me he was bisexual when I told him I was gay. And that really was pretty mind-exploding. I thought he would maybe kick me out of the house and instead he told me he was bisexual. He told me that if he hadn't met my mother in the late 1970s he would have been dead from AIDS. And so, it got me thinking about my place in the queer community and in the historical context. When I, later, got more involved with queer theater, thinking about the place of my generation in relation to those who came before me. I think part of growing up as a queer person is you're robbed of your history. You're not taught your history in school. My family taught me Jewish history. I went to a Jewish school as a kid. I learned Jewish history. Nobody ever taught me gay history, right? So I had to teach myself about Stonewall, about Harvey Milk, about the AIDS epidemic, the memorial quilt.

XL: How did you teach yourself queer history?

AOR: I used to go to Barnes and Noble bookstore and I'd just sit in the gay and lesbian section and I would sometimes open a gay book inside of a larger other book so that people didn't see what I was reading. I really had a lot of shame. I was very secretive. My high school had a really small gay and straight alliance club during lunches. Before I was out of the closet, I would sneak around the cafeteria to go to this club in secret. But coming out just opened the whole world before me and I felt like I was, "Oh I can explore this part of myself." I had something to be proud of. I used to volunteer at the Pride Parade in San Francisco. It was super exciting and, then, Prop 8 passed banning gay marriage in California. The same day that Obama became the first Black president. And everyone was so happy and I was so happy for Obama's presidency but I was really pissed off about Pride err… about Prop 8. I think it only fueled my activism.

XL: You slipped by saying you were angry about Prop 8 do you think that you also felt or feel there were limitations to Pride marches?

AOR: No, I mean… as a teenager Pride felt a little distant from me because it was so much about sexy guys drinking alcohol and festive and about a lot of straight people (straight teenage girls). I was trying to figure out what Pride meant to me in terms of the activity that happens in June. I was more interested in the political activism rather than the celebration. After gay marriage was denied I was wondering what's there to celebrate, we have a lot of fighting to do.

XL: Is that why you started the National Queer Theater?

AOR: I think it was the seed of it. Doing the *Laramie Project* as a high school student and seeing the change it had on myself and on my school, I recognized the power of this kind of theater to create political change. Growing up in Berkley my parents were hippies and

activists from the 1970s so I grew up with this political mindset. I didn't necessarily connect the political counterculture movement to my queer identity until doing this play. Then, I felt like theater could be my vehicle for creating political change. Maybe it's not leading a protest maybe it's doing a play and that could be just as powerful.

XL: How did you end up coming to New York and getting involved in creating theater programs?

AOR: After college in San Francisco, I worked for two years as the personal assistant for Cleve Jones, who'd started the AIDS memorial quilt and had been the assistant for Harvey Milk in City Hall. So I was very involved in political activism in the queer community in San Francisco in demonstrations. During the night, I would be directing mostly queer plays in the basement of bars and in weird theaters around the city, working with young queer playwrights. I worked a few jobs doing educational work in different non-profit theaters but I was reaching a ceiling when it came to my career. I decided to apply to grad school at NYU. I went to NYU for applied theater practice, studying the Theater of the Oppressed. So I came to New York for school. When I got here I got a part-time job working with a friend at this HIV-AIDS non-profit that was using storytelling as a form of creative therapy. And for me storytelling and theater are very connected. I started developing this play called *Speechless* based on interviews with HIV+ people in New York and Jackson, Mississippi, which has the highest infection rate in the country mostly affecting young queer black gay and bisexual men. Through developing that play, I started thinking about opening my own theater company. I went to a lecture about the National Black Theater which is here in Harlem. The speaker was talking about how the National Black Theater was this hub for Black thought and Black culture and his community and his family. So I wondered if there is a National Gay Theater, a National Queer Theater, that I could be part of. I was part of the queer theater in San Francisco, the New Conservatory Theater. I miss that community. So

I was sitting and googling on my phone during this lecture and I was like, "Oh there's no Queer National Theater", that's just such a good name. So I went online that night and I registered the website for $20. I was like I guess this is a thing now, you register the website and now it's an organization. We registered as a non-profit in the next few months. I had worked in a lot of bigger theaters and did a lot of education work and activist work, so I felt I had a vision for what I wanted this theater to be and how we could be involved in supporting the community while also producing new queer plays.

XL: So how did you go from the website registration to actual productions? Did you meet people or groups who helped you? So far you seemed to have been alone.

AOR: We had a lot of enthusiasm from artists, especially younger artists. The thing I heard over and over again from young artists and especially young artists of color was: that there isn't a big queer theater in New York. The queer plays that are happening in New York are like *Boys in the Band*, *Angels in America*, they are very white and old, a few decades old. Not old, old, but where is the new queer theater and why is queer theater not showing the full diversity of our community? So, can National Queer Theater be a platform for queer artists of color, for queer immigrants, for HIV+ people, for trans people, the parts of our community that have been largely ignored by queer art? Where I met the opposition was usually from people of an older generation who said, "Oh you're never gonna get the funding! It's hard starting a non-profit!" Now I would say "ok boomer!" -- a response to condescension for the millennials and for generation Z from the baby boomers. I was just constantly met with older queer people telling me, "Oh you're never gonna do it, you'll never make it. It's too hard to start a new organization."

XL. No one from the older generation felt excited by the project?

AOR: They liked the idea and they offered their advice, but they were very dismissive.

XL: How did you meet the older and younger queer groups?

AOR: Graduate school is a great network. I met a lot of people at NYU.

XL: Could you name a few that were important people and who contributed to the National Queer Theater?

AOR: My friend Abe Johnson was an early supporter and he was our music director. Charlie Gershman was our first board member. Andrea Prestinario joined our board and she is the leader of this group called Ring of Keys, which is a network for queer women and trans women in musical theater. We realized early it could very easily be a gay theater, but we wanted to make sure to be equally responsive to queer women and trans artists and *not* just be another gay theater.

XL: Did you reach out to artists involved in previous queer theaters like the WOW Cafe?

AOR: Someone I talked with early on was Jason Jacobs. He was the founder of Theater Askew, which was the previous "large" queer theater in New York City. I got dinner with him and he talked me through the history of Theater Askew and why they fall apart. I think one reason they disbanded after a while was that the founders fought with each other. It has been difficult at times feeling it's on my shoulders, alone, but I get to have my own vision for the company and make decisions based on that with a lot of people's advice and input.

XL: What is this vision?

AOR: The vision is to be the cultural hub for the queer community and for queer artists to feel like they have a space to express their stories so that there is an outlet and a place where they can have a family and support for telling stories. Hence, theater can be seen as an intrinsically important part of the movement for greater human rights for queer people. I think that certainly has been true for the past fifty years in terms of plays, TV, movies that have pushed forward queer rights in general from *Angels in America* to what we're seeing now, *Pose* for the trans community. The real world on TV.

XL: Are there specific productions that were especially important for you in relation to NQT?

AOR: Yeah, *The Normal Heart* was a really big influence. The fact that Larry Kramer was a political activist who came to theater to get people to understand this important message about people dying of AIDS and how this was a political issue for the community. He was using theater for a political purpose rather than art for art's sake but did it in a way that was very artistic and powerful. I think that was very moving to me. It showed me what political activism through theater could look like. It charted a path for that. I directed a production [of this play] for my college thesis and people were sitting there crying, both older generations, who lived through the 80s, and my college students, some of whom were HIV+, and they felt seen maybe for the first time on stage. They felt represented. More recently, I've been thinking a lot about *Slave Play* and what it means to have a play like that on Broadway by a young queer playwright like Jeremy O. Harris, producing really radical work and the fact that it's so mainstream to be on Broadway. It's kind of amazing! It's displaying nuanced difficult conversations about queer about interracial politics. I saw *The Inheritance*, for me that's so surface level, there's nothing new that

contributed, but you see *Slave Play*, it's really pushing forward the conversation about what it means to be a queer person. Certainly, *Fun Home* for representation for queer women. I wish I could say that there's more transgender theater that's really pushing things forward but it's been so marginalized. There's Taylor Mac and a handful of other downtown artists but nothing really getting major significance. There's *Hedwig*, which was a big influence for me, but that's just the seeds of transgender theater, which I think is just emerging as its own movement.

XL: Did you get in touch with other LGBTQ theaters like The Other Side of Silence?

AOR: Yes, I reached out to them early on but I don't think I ever heard back from them. The impression I got was they were mostly in their 50s and 60s mostly white, mostly male and that's what I came from, from the queer theater in San Francisco and I really wanted to do something different and I thought: we're the next generation? I wanted to start something fresh and new.

XL: Did you experience the same thing with your collaboration with Stonewall 50.

AOR: I would go to the Stonewall 50 meetings at the NYPL that Eric Marcus was leading and they were wonderful meetings but I was always the youngest person there. There are plenty of other young queer people involved in the queer movement and in queer arts. I would say the majority are my age or a little bit older and yet everyone at these meetings was over 50. Clearly, there's a problem with the outreach that's happening, it's stuck in these old power structures. The meetings were very male and very white. That's not the community

I'm a part of or that I see in my friends and my networks when I go to events. There's a disconnect.

XL: However you tried to get involved, did you manage to bridge that disconnect?

AOR: Yes, kind of. I was part of it. We got funding from New York City Pride, which was amazing for us as a small organization and to have Pride's logo and Pride's name on our Criminal Queerness festival, which was an event that we did for Pride. It showed support from the older power structure of LGBT organizations in New York. But I think the older generation still looks down on us and don't take us seriously. Yet they complain: where are the young people who are the activists? We're right here, we're in front of you, but you refuse to see us and recognize us because you think you're better than us or smarter. That young people don't understand the culture of the history, where we come from. People don't give my generation enough credit. We do have a very strong sense of our history and are very involved politically and culturally and we are bigger and more out of the closet than any previous generation.

XL: Stonewall 50 was criticized by many queer groups and there were more radical organizations like *Reclaim Pride*, so do you think you could you have turned to other groups?

AOR: It's a tricky question because we needed funding for our projects and we were sponsored by Pride. So it was in our best interest as an organization to align ourselves with New York City Pride and Stonewall 50. We still were able to push back from the inside and push Pride to be more accountable to the community. I think for them to give us funding was part of their commitment to be more accountable and to support smaller projects, more grassroots, more activist projects

coming from the community rather than the traditional institutions. But certainly a lot of our artists were involved with Reclaim Pride.

XL: How did Stonewall and Stonewall 50 change your perspective on theater and queer activism? More generally what does Stonewall represent for you, does it still matter?

AOR: I think for me it is not that Stonewall doesn't matter. The Stonewall uprising is a central turning point in our history as queer people. Where I find a problem with Stonewall 50 is that out of the maybe 50 or 60 organizations that were part of the Stonewall 50 group, 90% of the activities were historical and focused on 1969 and the Stonewall uprisings in New York City. And for me it's not like gay rights is in the past. We're just at the beginning, there are still so many issues that we need to focus on, like the murder of trans people of color, the detention of queer migrants at the southern border with the Trump administration. This is a very critical time for queer rights with the current administration. So to use all these resources to only focus on photography exhibits, and historical statues and plaques and art exhibits, it was frustrating for me. Maybe for the people in their 60s it's really time for them to reflect on their history. There's still so much to be done. Let's use the resources to talk about what's happening now. In terms of our movements and how the arts and the cultural sector play a role in this?

XL: What about the Brooklyn exhibit that could be considered as political and included trans perspectives for instance?

AOR: I didn't see the Brooklyn exhibit, the hard thing was that all of us were so busy doing our own events that it was hard to see the others. The general sense I got was that the bigger institutions were putting out historical content. They did an opera about Stonewall,

they did a photography exhibit about Stonewall. Ok, Stonewall is important, but what's the next Stonewall? Why are we not putting our resources into that question?

XL: There seems to be a tension between theater and activism, is it irreconcilable for you?

AOR: I don't see it as a tension; I see it as a synergy. Theater is the tool that fuels the activism. When we produced a play for National Queer Theater, the hope is that the audience leaves feeling inspired, empowered, that they wanna contribute more to the movement and they wanna get more involved. That we are able to connect them with resources so that they can donate and volunteer or march. Not that every play has to be didactic and beat you on the head with a message, like it should be artistic and creative. I meet so many young queer artists who wanna do more, they wanna be more involved in the community and they don't know how. So we're building community partnerships with LGBT organizations, using theater as a tool to get more people involved in the movement. Our formal mission statement is: "To foster and support LGBT communities through social justice in the performing arts". The key word is "through," so the arts *for* the queer community and not queer community for the arts. If we get a great review in the *New York Times*, that's wonderful but that's not the goal. The goal is that we're building the movement.

XL: Can you share a little bit about your own work. For instance, how did you work on the play *DREAMers: An (Un)Documentary Play*? How did it happen?

AOR: So *DREAMers* was a project that I helped create in 2012. It's an older project. I was an artistic intern for a theater company called The Civilians, which used interviews and journalistic method to cre-

ate new plays for social consciousness. At the time my boyfriend was a DREAMer. The DACA program (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) had just been announced by the Obama Administration. I witnessed him coming out of the closet twice: coming out as an undocumented immigrant to his gay friends and coming out as gay to his conservative family—that were immigrants. Supporting him through this struggle and watching him reconcile this, I found it really inspiring and heartbreaking. I felt that people who were not part of the immigrant community and certainly not the queer community were not focused on this issue of immigration in a way that was really important. So, I got together with a group of NYU acting students. We partnered with Make the Road New York, which is an immigrant justice organization in Queens. We interviewed a group of DREAMers, of young undocumented immigrants. Then, I put together the transcripts from the interviews and created a play out of it. It turned out a lot of them were LGBT. It wasn't necessarily the intention going in, but a lot of them were queer and talked about that in the interviews. We did a reading at Theater for the New City back in 2012. I produced the play a few times in California. We did a production last year [2018] at NYU. The play ended on a very hopeful note because we wrote it in 2012 and things were getting better for undocumented immigrants. Now obviously the things are the opposite with Trump. So it was interesting to view this play in 2018 through the lens of these interviews of 2012. So that's the story of that play.

XL: Was your use of "interviewing technique" connected to this genre made famous here by Anna Deavere Smith?

AOR: Yes, Anna Deavere Smith and *The Laramie Project* were definitely influences as well as the work of The Civilians where I was doing my internship. But yes it was in the style of Anna Deavere Smith and *Laramie*. The choice of basing the play on interviews was partly because of the style of The Civilians Company. The original

intention was that the people we were interviewing would also be the actors. They would tell their own story and tell each other's stories but they were too afraid to get on stage. They didn't have any acting training and they were afraid of being deported. So they said, "I'll tell you my story but I want you to change my name and someone else can play my role." So, the interviewers also were the actors playing them. Part of the goal was that their stories were important and people needed to hear stories of these DREAMers and they weren't being told. Maybe they'd been interviewed a little bit on the news but only in a very narrow context in a way that wasn't personal or intimate at all, it was just commenting on the politics. I felt with my boyfriend at the time that once I knew his story and knew him in a very personal way my political opinion on migration changed a lot. I became more sympathetic. If hearing his story made *me* more empathetic so that can be true for other people as well through theater.

XL. So for you the heart of theater is to achieve transformation?

AOR: Yes, I really want people to have the experience that I had when I was 16 doing the Laramie Project and it was this turning point, like this light bulb went on. It changed my life and it saved me in so many ways. If I can give that to other people, that's a wonderful purpose in life.

XL: How do you factor esthetic questions in your work?

AOR: A lot of my work comes out of the San Francisco style of political theater, which has roots in the late 1960s and the movement against the War in Vietnam. Specifically with the San Francisco Mime Troupe and also El Teatro Campesino, the Farmworkers Theater, with Luis Valdez. Their work is very *agit prop*, hitting you over the head with a message but it's really meant to galvanize people towards polit-

ical action. The work of El Teatro in the grape fields with the Delano grape strike in the 1960s with Cesar Chaves was to get the workers to organize against the oppressive bosses and they did their plays in the back of their trucks with signs around their neck that said: "union worker" or "boss" with a pig mask. It was very obvious but it was working with non-actors, the audience was not the traditional theater audience, it was workers. So I think these tools, these ideas of how to create social change through theater came from studying that kind of work and also Anna Deavere Smith and Tectonic Theater. Then, moving past that, I'm thinking about a play like *Angels in America*, helping me wondering how do we take these political tools, this *agit prop* style, and create more nuance and build character development, and how do we support playwrights to create this change through more artistic storytelling—what more people would call *real* theater— that is beautiful, that is nuanced, that is complex and not so black and white because I think it's more digestible, people listen a bit more.

XL: You talked about the history but did you see their work in SF? Were you also interested in the work of ACT UP or Queer Nation?

AOR: I was really too young but certainly when I was working for Cleve Jones I was in the middle of a lot of AIDS activism history. So I was very aware of ACT UP and Queer Nation. My work is about finding queer activism in theater versus the theater in queer activism. ACT UP was theatrical; they used theatrical means for political protests, so kind of the flip side of what we're doing but connected. Queer activism has been theatrical; you have the die-ins in front of St. Patrick's Church is a piece of guerrilla theater. I think the connector has been the Theater of the Oppressed and August Boal's work that used both theater in political protest, but also political protest in theater and creating theater with communities. I've been participating in and leading Theater of the Oppressed in different settings for the past five or six years, working in Juvenile Hall in San Francisco, working with refugee youth here in New York, working with Israeli

and Palestinian teenagers. That's been hugely informative in the kind of work I've done.

XL: What about the future perspective for you and the National Queer Theater?

AOR: The most gratifying work that we've done has been *not* the plays that we've produced but that's the work we've done in communities. Every month we do workshops with SAGE, which is Services and Advocacy for LGBT Elders, working with queer people over the age of 60 doing acting and improvisation classes, with the aim of hoping to build community and eliminate some of the isolation that older queer people are experiencing and also working with Homeless Queer Youth with Ali Forney Center and with New Alternatives and doing improvisation classes with them. And also helping young people write their own stories, because they can go watch *Boys in the Band* or *Angels in America* on Broadway and they don't see themselves reflected even though we are all queer, they have totally different experiences. When I go to these homeless shelters for queer youth, almost all of them are black, a lot of them are transgender and a lot of them are dealing with substance abuse, prostitution. You know issues that, even as bad as gay people have had it in the past, that a lot of people didn't have to deal with because of economic privilege.

Looking forward I want to expand these community programs, involve more artists as teachers and facilitators for these classes. Maybe start a queer youth theater troupe. And really champion young queer playwrights who maybe don't have another platform because their work is too queer for the mainstream theater. How can we really bring trans playwrights in the mainstream and have their work produced at the Public Theater and on Broadway because that will create wider acceptance in the larger community.

XL: What about working with the ball scene that deals with queer trans issues? Would you work with them?

AOR: As a white gay guy myself that's not for me to go into that community, that's for another group of people but we certainly welcome artists from that community to come work with us. In terms of working with nightlife, because it's such a big part of queer culture, we did a show last month at the Eagle, which is the leather bar in New York City. They invited us to do a performance there. We did seven short plays that took place in a leather bar. We had 200 people in the Eagle for these plays and worked with 40 artists. It was really fun working in that queer space that normally doesn't have traditional theater there and to give artists an opportunity to create work for queer spaces like that. So we definitely would love to do more work in queer nightlife.

XL: That's such a great connection with Doric Wilson's *Street Theater*, which was also produced at the Eagle.

AOR: Yes, absolutely. We're all in conservation with each other. The New York theater community is big but it's small, especially when you're looking at New York City downtown queer theater. So we're always borrowing and stealing from each other and inspiring each other. That's good for everybody.