

# THE NATIONAL OPERA CENTER AMERICA

## ON CO-CREATION: A CIVIC ACTION GROUP INTERVIEW

June 1, 2018 — Leah Barto, correspondent for OPERA America, speaks with Alejandra Boyer, director of community programs, Lyric Unlimited at Lyric Opera of Chicago.

Leah: Today we are talking about focusing on the process rather than the product, and how opera companies can facilitate the process of co-creation. Alejandra, Lyric Unlimited premiered a new opera called *Empower* on May 31, 2018, and I was so excited to see that young people had the chance to tell their own stories. Tell me, what was distinctive about that developmental process?

Alejandra: Anytime that you are devising a work it is distinct depending on the group and the individuals. We set it up to be about these young people and to honor their story and what they wanted to represent about their community, and that was always at the front of everything that we did. It was truly their voice and it was unique to them. It is because of who they are.

Leah: You use a term “devised work.” Could you tell me more about what that means?

Alejandra: Devising a work really means starting from scratch with a large group. In opera, when we talk about creating new works, new operas, we are usually giving that artistic ownership over to a librettist and a composer to drive what that looks like. There may be some parameters from the company, but for the most part we give the agency over to that artist that we have hired for that purpose. When we talk about devised work, we bring in a larger group of individuals who are lending their unique life experiences to mold and shape what that is. The artists that we brought in for *Empower* came in to listen and to understand the group that is sharing their stories, and to take that and turn it into the art that is presented on stage. So when I speak of devising work I am speaking of starting with nothing from a full group and having everyone's input and growing it together.

Leah: I know that this is a tradition in the theater world, but rarely seen in opera. I love that you started in a place of asking young people what they wanted to see represented about their community. I think that is a powerful question. How did you arrive at this project to begin with?

Alejandra: The project came from a framework we had in place from another project, Chicago Community Voices, with the same idea of having them tell their story during a short period. Over sixteen weeks, they created a script and a set of songs.

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So when the opportunity was presented to partner with the Chicago Urban League for a creative youth development program, we saw this framework to not only allow for arts learning with the young people, but have them have ownership over the final product. So merging all of these ideas of what we know about youth development and in devised work with community groups, we thought it would be a great format to match the goals for both Lyric and the Urban League.

Leah: Creative youth development is a whole movement in arts education about instilling leadership and giving creative opportunities to young people to demonstrate that ownership and agency. I think this is a really excellent example from the opera world. It sounds like it puts Lyric Unlimited in the position of creating a really conducive environment for this process to happen. What specifically did the youth or staff need to support the project?

Alejandra: When we are collaborating with other organizations, that is one thing we think through and talk about is what is each organization bringing to the table. In working with the Urban League, which is a social service organization, Lyric has the artistic elements: the understanding of what an art curriculum looks like, the understanding of what producing a work would look like, the connection to the local artists to work with the young people. We looked to the Urban League to be our experts in the culture of these young people, the world they live in, to be the leaders in creating the trust and the bond with the young people and to support us in those areas in which we as Lyric, coming into their space, really needed.

Leah: Was there anything in particular that you were looking for in the artists?

Alejandra: We wanted to make sure we were engaging artists of color to work with the young people. These are high school students that are all African American. We wanted them to be able to see themselves reflected in the artists. We also wanted artists who were comfortable working with young people, who were well-versed not just in the art they create, but also have an understanding of the popular art that the young people are experiencing, things that would allow them to quickly connect to what the young people already knew as art, and to be able to expand on that as we started to create exposure opportunities in a more classical world. So those things were really key.

I am also really keen on working with artists who really understand the challenges of devised work and the challenges of working with community organizations.

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Artists have to be nimble; they have to be flexible and understand the process for creating their own art, their studio practice, is very different when they are working with young people. I am looking for artists who relish being able to share their technique and hand it over to a young person to represent it in a new way.

Leah: What advice would you have for another opera company who is interested in facilitating a devised work process?

Alejandra: I think the best advice I could give is to take time to listen and to pause when you need to. This is really key.

One of the things that I have experienced is that when you are working with individuals who are not professionals, who are not accustomed to a process of art creation, it is really difficult to fully understand how the process leads to a product.

You have to give time and space and pause as they are starting to connect the dots and are starting to understand what is going on. There will be points where, suddenly, whatever kind of agreement there has been at the start, they are starting to rethink it. They may want to change course. Be prepared to create space for change, to be flexible and to adapt. Breathe, pause and really listen to the community or the organization to allow for that.

It can be a scary process for someone coming into it for the first time. If you give that room, and not rush to the final product, but give time into the process as you can, you will end up with the buy-in that you need, and you will end up creating something that is meaningful and true to those individuals which is what you want when you are going into that work.

Leah: Great points about checking in to make sure that you are achieving the goal. If the point is to make sure the narrative is representing their community, it is important to make sure that is built into the process the whole way through. Thank you for sharing those tips. Where can people go for more information?

Alejandra: They can visit us at [www.lyricopera.org/lyricunlimited/empoweryouth](http://www.lyricopera.org/lyricunlimited/empoweryouth).