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The Playbuilding Process, an Interview with *Yes I Am...* Director Ron Gilliam

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1 Comment

Yining Lin is a Ph.D. student in Asian-Western Comparative Theatre at UHM, specializing in Jingju and Western dramaturgy. She has frequently worked as a dramaturge in Honolulu, San Francisco, and Milwaukee.



I sat down with *Yes I Am...* (Stories from Honolulu's LGBT Community)'s director, **Ronald Gilliam**, and we chatted about Playbuilders' newest project, which opens on May 31st

HTS: How did this project start?

RG: About a year ago, I started working with [Artistic Director] **Terri Madden** on the Playbuilders website with my company Colordrop. From doing that, I was able to learn more about her company as I was not very familiar with community collaborative theatre. I've done devised work before, but this is my first community collaborative project where you choose a particular community and then work with members of the community with the goal of helping them share their identity and culture through theatre. It is somewhat different than traditional theatre in that the performers interview other community members and use these collected stories to write the script.

HTS: Why did you specifically choose the LGBT community?

RG: I always felt that the LGBT community in Hawai'i was somewhat divided, and I think most people from that community will talk about how it continues to exist as a divided entity. I mean, there's no gay-borhood here, there's no one official gay bar. There's Hula's, Bacchus, and a few others, but from my perception, the majority of local LGBT community members don't go to those establishments as they're mostly touristic venues. Partially, I think it's because Hawai'i's culture is such that gay people can hang out with their straight friends in a straight club and not feel unwelcome or unsafe. So, if safety is not the focus as it historically was in other major cities with formal gay-borhoods then I can understand why there is no official gay area. Even though I just mentioned safety, this idea is somewhat conflicting since our play actually engages with safety issues. In general, many people believe that Honolulu is a safe place for LGBT individuals when in fact the opposite is true. Even though my two statements clash, I do believe there is truth in both which explains the complexities of this community.

I approached Terri and asked if she had ever considered doing something with the LGBT community. I sent her a proposal, she liked it, and the rest is history. With this type of community-based work, there isn't much pre-planning compared to performances that already have a script. My role as director is not to take a text, interpret it, and then prescribe that onto the characters who perform it. Instead, the first step is coming together and learning what the group would like to talk about and then build the production from there.

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HTS: What can audiences expect when they come see this piece of devised theatre?

RG: Let me start by talking a little about what is devised theatre because I think there are multiple ways people can talk about devising an original show. In the past, the first step I did when devising a performance involved taking a text and then dividing that text in order to deconstruct the major play themes. The Wooster Group in NY often took a classical text and modified it to create a new performance based on fragments of that text. My previous work was highly influenced by this methodology. The performers and I looked at a classical text and noted what fragments stood out to us. We took those fragments and then built a theatrical piece out of them. The end effect was an new work with an extra layer as if you were invoking the ghost of the original text. That's what I've done in the past. *Yes I Am* is a little different because Playbuilders is very interested in giving a voice to the voiceless, or to communities who don't necessarily have a voice. Using theatre as our medium, we're creating a means of communication so performers can reflect on issues especially pertinent to the LGBT community.

What we initially did with this play was something Terri calls "story circles," but with my own variation of her methodology. In her previous work, Terri organized a meeting where community members would discuss issues in a group setting. It's often like a "talk circle," where one learns what themes can lead to the development of a script. Since we went off the premise that the LGBT community is already fragmented, we were only able to work with a limited population within a much larger group. We initiated a small story circle in our own group and interviewed each other one on one. Then we took those interviews out to the public, because maybe some gay men didn't have any lesbian friends, or maybe some lesbians never met a transgender person. From the beginning I strongly felt that you can't say you're doing an LGBT community-based play without engaging all members of the acronym. We truly tried to obtain a large diverse population for these interviews. Each interview was informal so the participants could learn from each other's stories in a relaxed setting.

After about a month of collecting stories, we came back together and decided on the play's major themes. We asked ourselves, "What did we learn from these interviews?" Then, we went into a somewhat deconstructing process. With our minds still thinking about the original themes, we worked with large sections of each interview and took out paragraphs that applied to those themes. This was followed by building a performance "section" based on those fragments. Overall, the fragments were very poetic when read together. After deciding on the major sections, we created transitions that led to an overall production map

In the end, we'll have a performance that utilizes original stories—which tend to be more emotional for performers and audience because it's someone's real life—and then including other stories, movement, dance, and projected images that aid in performing the stories. In one scene we will project an environmental video and the collected stories will be combined with dance. It's still going to be artistic, not just a talk story event or spoken word performance. It will have other elements because our collaborative group already has so many skills. We're just going to utilize these skills to create an atmosphere that best tells the stories we collected.

HTS: What were the auditions like?

RG: Wow, they were really emotional. The way I handled the audition was not typical because we were trying to engage with people who were not performers. We didn't want to intimidate them by sitting behind a desk and having them present a traditional memorized monologue. For this production, I wasn't interested in working with people who consider themselves a trained actor. We wanted to engage with the local community, so there wasn't any preparation for the audition. So, when interested parties arrived at the audition they were given excerpts of three interviews that occurred from the early 2000s to the present day. One interview was very scholarly and intellectual, another was a woman who was trying to reconcile her strong Catholic beliefs with the idea of two people of the same sex marrying, the third was about a blogger trying to deal with his own experience of trying to fit in. I asked auditioners to choose one which they emotionally responded to. "Don't think about it too long, just pick one." They sat in a chair in front of me and we just read the interview response because I didn't want to scare them. It was more about engagement between them and me. They read the material aloud, and then we went through a series of questions like "Why did you choose this particular piece?" or "What appealed to you?" We held a mini interview from that process. Depending on how they answered, we asked them additional questions. If they started talking about love, we would ask them questions such as, "What does love mean to you?"

The amount of raw emotion in that room was amazing. A lot of people cried, my eyes were wet, Playbuilders staff got teary-eyed because these are real stories and people are opening up to you. It was an amazing process. Overall, the audition was emotional because everyone has their own stories and, to be honest, they are all worth telling and hearing.

HTS: Are the actors from or associated with the LGBT community?

RG: The audition notice stated specifically that it was for people who were engaged with the current marriage debate, and we used that as our starting point because the play is not necessarily about marriage equality. *Yes I Am...* is more about showcasing the struggles and triumphs of people who are trying to survive and thrive in their own relationships. It will somewhat encompass the gay marriage debate, and some of the discriminatory laws currently in the United States, but these themes are not the focus of the performance. It isn't really a political piece at all, in that it's not just pure politics.

We did have a few people who are considered "straight allies" audition and after being cast they chose to perform stories from the LGBT community members they interviewed. One of the questions in the audition was "How do you engage with this community?" I mean, it's very large, we're adding new acronyms almost every year it

seems. Some people said "I'm heterosexual, but because of my experience, I feel a devotion to working within this community to understand more." Some people were interested in equal rights, equal treatment, and in getting to know the community better. We even had some who came to the audition just to listen. They asked if it was OK; they just wanted to hear people's stories, there was no secret motive behind that request. It seemed from the beginning there was a general desire to understand other people's stories and to learn about the issues currently affecting this community.

HTS: As a dramaturge I always ask myself, "Why this play now?" You mentioned the marriage debate, which is such a hot-button issue, politically. Do you have an overarching goal by creating this great piece of theatre?

RG: Great question. I think the big thing is that there's a huge disconnect between Hawai'i and gay marriage debates in general. Most people on our island forget that DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act) was written in 1996, because in 1993 the Hawai'i Supreme Court ruled in favor of a case that would possibly lead to the recognition of same-sex marriage. This precipitated a national scare because the collective conscience of the American people—if there is such a thing—was not ready at the moment to accept something the majority felt was too fringe. It was just too foreign for them, and most people at the time associated gay people with gay men who had AIDS, because we had just come out of the AIDS scare in the 80s. It took Reagan forever just to talk about AIDS, a disease to which people remained uneducated about in the 90s.

I'm more interested in engaging the history of Hawai'i as an initiator of equality; which is interesting because we live in a very progressive state, but also one that is very religious. There are multiple religions that historically persecuted homosexuals and many have deep roots on the island, so it's a peculiar state to have all of these pro-gay/anti-gay dialogues. Right now some members of the Hawai'i legislature are working on full marriage equality even though we have civil unions. Equality is always a process and I think we should remember that the US marriage equality issue was ignited here. Because this conversation started so early in Hawai'i, there have been community stories either forgotten or not heard. When Terri and I were discussing the purpose of this play, our goal was to bridge both the gay and straight communities. This notion of bridging communities is one of her main interests, and one that the company prides itself on. Our initial goal for this production was featuring voices of LGBT members in the present, those that have come before us, and those who are considered elders in the community now. We wanted to use these strong voices to create a play that shows that LGBT individuals are just like everyone else. The struggles of someone in a same-sex relationship are exactly the same as someone in an opposite-sex relationship. The difference is what you're doing in the bedroom, behind closed doors. For some reason, that's a hot button issue. Our goal is to show that we all are just human trying to survive in everyday struggles of love.

HTS: We've talked about how the voices of the LGBT community will be communicated, how will these stories affect those who are not part of the community?

RG: We're not marketing this as a "gay play", because the people who are part of this community are already familiar with common LGBT struggles. We are creating a performance for people who possibly don't have any gay friends, who may not understand why these people are asking for rights, or why this community is having difficulties "fitting in." Hopefully, these types of individuals decide to attend our play to understand more, and afterward they will discover, "Wow, the lives of these people—these true stories—are quite amazing." If we get past this idea of not peeking into other people's bedroom, but instead looking into their soul, then we can create some sort of effectual change. I don't know how that will happen exactly, but the biggest goal is to create mutual understanding while developing a stronger bond within the LGBT community itself.

HTS: How do you hope this play will affect Hawai'i? Will it change people's minds about the marriage debate or other LGBT issues?

RG: Overall, this is a monumental year for the LGBT community. The Supreme Court is currently hearing the case against DOMA, and the constitutionality of Prop 8 is being decided upon in June, shortly after our play opens. Hopefully gay people will have the right to get married and have recognition across all aspects of government. Gay marriage will be a part of this production because it is something that currently affects the community on a day-to-day basis, but we are not producing a gay marriage play. It's a play about the difficulties of love. We are trying to understand the experiences of this community to hopefully create a better environment for straight and gay people across the islands.

Yes I Am opens runs Friday, May 31 to June 9 at Fresh Cafe on Queen Street. Go to www.playbuilders.org for more information and to purchase advance tickets online.

Tags: [LGBT](#), [Playbuilders](#), [Ron Gilliam](#), [Yes I Am](#)

One Response to *The Playbuilding Process, an Interview with Yes I Am...* Director Ron Gilliam

Issue #46 — Strength and Beauty | Hitting the Stage May 22, 2013 at 9:26 pm

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