“Glo-cal” Community Engagement:

University of Northern Colorado meets Budhan Theatre from India

UNC Faculty Hosts: Michael Kimball and Gillian McNally

University of Northern Colorado’s School of Theatre and Dance and Department of Anthropology hosted members of the Budhan Theatre, from Gujarat, India, for an intercultural exchange across two weeks in February 2019. This exchange was part Anthropology professor Michael Kimball’s US State Department-funded “Reclaiming Heritage” project, which is a collaboration between UNC, the Immigrant & Refugee Center of Northern Colorado, and Gujarat’s Basha Research & Publication Centre and Budhan Theatre.

Budhan Theatre actors are members of the Charra tribe, a group once criminalized by the British in India until 1953. To protest the continued oppression and negative stigma, the group performs street theatre to citizens, schools, and elected officials to fight for equal rights.

Students in UNC’s Creative Drama class studied Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed techniques. Both theatre groups use Image Theatre (using the body, rather than voice to reflect on social issues), improvisation, and interactive theatre techniques to encourage critical thinking and action for social justice in communities.

On February 12, 2019 Budhan Theatre and Bhasha members, the Reclaiming Heritage project team, and a representative of World Learning, the project’s Washington, D.C.-based grant administrator, visited Gillian McNally’s Creative Drama course to share their theatre practices. McNally serves as the 2019 Faculty Engaged Scholar for the Office of Engagement at UNC. McNally shared the work she does for social change where groups work together to create images using the body to delve into deeper conversations about social issues.
The participants were struck by how similar the methodologies were, despite the vast difference in miles where this Theatre for Social Justice work is happening. Both groups enjoyed doing physical, interactive exercises which encouraged participants to feel comfortable in a group before delving into more serious conversations about social issues.

On February 13, 2019, the members of Budhan Theatre attended *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*, a play produced by UNC’s School of Theatre and Dance. The play by Pulitzer-prize winning Lynn Nottage “tells the story of Vera Stark, an African American maid and budding actress who has a tangled relationship with her boss, a white Hollywood star desperately grasping to hold onto her career.” (TCG.org)

Following the production, students and artists from India and UNC participated in a post-show talk back that examined the role of theatre in social justice movements. The focus of the conversation was to discuss the impact the play had on the audience, looking specifically at how the audience thought deeply about issues of race and oppression in the US.

On February 15, 2019, Theatre and Anthropology students and members of the general public attended a performance of Budhan Theatre. Their street theatre-style presentation included scenes of police brutality, trauma, and oppression experienced by members of the Charra tribe in India. The performance concluded with a conversation with artists and students to discuss how these theatre professionals have made social change through the art of theatre.

At the end of the exchange, the students, faculty and international artists were all inspired and invigorated to continue to use the arts for social justice in their communities. We would like
to encourage other faculty members to find both international and also cross-curricular connections at UNC. One Elementary Education major, Marielle Waller commented, “[This experience] shows that theatre has an impact not just in America, but all over the world.” Additionally, Theatre Education major Madeline Weiss reflected, “This kind of cross-campus and international exchange was meaningful for me to experience while here at UNC because it reminded me of how powerful theatre can be in people's lives. It also made me think about how truly universal theatre is and how theatre is something that can unite a group of people.” Anthropology student, Susan Lucero reflected, “I was truly touched by how these people could turn such a negative and bleak situation … into something so beautiful by simply being honest and sharing their story in an artistic fashion.” This kind of connection to thinkers and activists across campus and across the world is an important way for our UNC students to connect their course work far beyond the walls of our classrooms. If we hope to create the next generation of leaders, we must work to find ways to engage our local and global (glo-cal) communities to create meaningful change in the world.