

JACK, SANCTUARY OF ART AND ACTIVISM: BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER COVID-19

Interview with Alec Duffy and Jordana De La Cruz



We Keep Us Safe Abolitionist Network at work at JACK. Photo: Brittany Williams.

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... On March 12th, due to the global pandemic, many of our theaters closed. Now, ghost lights illuminate empty stages, props lay like abandoned lovers, and costumes hang sad and still. The air, where once we shared breath, is potentially poisoned. I hear our theater community asking ourselves, what do we do now that we cannot physically gather? How do we continue? How do we protect our most vulnerable? What action can we take?

Of all the answers that our community is finding, one is particularly inspiring. Since April, JACK (an experimental theater in Brooklyn), has been partnering with the mutual aid

group, [We Keep Us Safe Abolitionist Network](#), to feed 120 individuals and families in their Clinton Hill-Fort Greene area each week. This direct action has converted the theater from being a sanctuary of the spirit, where nourishment is offered through art, to a sanctuary of the body, where nourishment is given through food.

The seeds for this action were planted since the theater's beginnings. Founder and co-director Alec Duffy knew that starting an experimental theater that was connected to the surrounding community required getting involved with that community, e.g. attending community board meetings, joining the board of a local organization, and going to church. The impulse towards activism also came like a tidal wave from the artists who performed there. Duffy reminisces that "Our artists were sharing work that was deeply personal, often rooted in stories of trauma and oppression, and of trying to find joy and liberation. It spurred us to have more of a 'viewpoint' as an organization—to be an active part of a larger movement towards a better world—and, as a result, we expanded our mission to include activism." Jordana De La Cruz, co-artistic director, also sets this course: "with JACK it has been very important to me that [our] values come first in every decision. That has been a driving force for me."

True to their values, JACK has been an active responder to the realities of the communities they serve. Around the time of the non-indictment of the murder of Eric Garner, when protests filled the streets in NYC, JACK started the series "Forward Ferguson," a monthly performance and conversation series on racial justice. It addressed police brutality and offered an opportunity for folks to speak in public about their rage, fear, and trauma, and also about what liberation could look like. This was followed by "Reparations365: From Memory To Movement," co-created with DeeArah Wright, a series envisioning distributive justice for Black Americans.

Even the way JACK's board of directors is structured reflects these values. They strategically invite artists/activists to be board members, in order to hold JACK accountable to their mission of "fueling experiments in art and activism." There is no minimum give/get contribution; each member contributes according to their own ability. Board member Britney Williams, a dancer who's performed at JACK and an organizer with [No New Jails NYC](#), connected Alec and Jordana with organizer and activist Samantha Johnson, of the We Keep Us Safe Abolitionist Network. It turns out Alec had served with Samantha on the

community board for several years. "This was someone I knew, and we trusted each other...that made it so easy for all of us to say, 'Yes let's do it. Let's start next week'... It really is those relationships bearing fruit", he says, "those connections in our neighborhood and beyond that set the stage for something like this to happen so smoothly."

I ask Alec and Jordana how are you wrestling with the uncertainty of the now? What will JACK become next?

Alec Duffy: We are taking it month by month, right Jordana? We don't have a grand vision laid out yet, because things keep changing. We are doing a lot of listening.

Jordana De la Cruz: We are listening to the complications experienced by other organizations in the community, those of and not of our size. We have postponed all of our spring and summer performances so far...I know a lot of people are not committing to even starting programming till 2021.

Mei Ann Teo (Rail): I think a lot about paradigms and the capitalist system we are under—the way the system might ask you to consider renting out the space to pay your bills.

De La Cruz: This may be naive. But it feels very wrong to rent out the space at this time, when our community is struggling. I mean, everyone is struggling. It just feels wrong to me, morally.

Duffy: This is a period that we are keenly aware of the danger of making decisions too soon. This food effort has given us a chance to build relationships with neighbors, many of whom have never stepped into JACK. What does programming that is developed with input from these neighbors look like? How can we keep that relationship going even after everyone goes back to work?

Rail: Why make art when people are jobless and hungry? Will you turn your space over in the next year and a half if it is needed to feed people? Why make art in such urgent and traumatic times? How do you wrestle with that?

Duffy: I've grown to see the relation of art and life as a very symbiotic relationship and not at all opposed. At its best, art is a driver of human opinion and of thinking about what we are doing as humans on this earth and how we can take care of each other. And of course not all artists are going to be creating work about that, and that's fine. But it's also not a zero sum

game; we don't have to choose between being of service to our community through feeding our neighbors, and presenting a work that may not speak directly to the crisis. We can do all of that...I remember this class that the director Peter Sellers teaches at UCLA...he invited food justice activists to speak to the class. He interviewed them in front of the class for an hour and a half, and at some point I was thinking, "When's he going to start talking about theater?" And then at the end, when the conversation had never turned to theater I came to understand that Sellers's lesson was that life is art and art is life. I draw a lot of inspiration from that fluidity.

Rail: Beautiful, thank you. What do you need? What does JACK need?

De la Cruz: Some of these relief funds.

Duffy: That's right.

De la Cruz: Hey...if you know anybody who is making those decisions...I feel like I need to see the domino effect. I feel like someone does a Zoom reading, and everyone's like, "Fantastic, we're doing Zoom readings," and someone does a Zoom monologue series, and everyone's like, "Okay, now we're doing that." And I would love to see that more on the civic end of things. Because I know the more I see, the more I feel inspired and empowered as well.

Duffy: We know we are going to get through this, but we're not going to do it without help from new sources of support, and deepened support from the folks with whom we are already in relation. We intend to be a part of the city's cultural conversation for many years to come. But for sure, it's a perilous time for everyone, and we're trying to find as many ways as possible to raise financial support, and also to build our community. As they say in meetings of ACRE (Artists Co-creating Real Equity): our goal is to build a net that works. So that we are not alone. We can be in solidarity and interdependence with other arts organizations, with other art makers, with other community organizations—so that when they are in danger, we're there to help out, and vice versa. Either financially, or by just showing up. Advocacy. People power.

Rail: I am with you. I find you both so inspiring and the depth of the net that you have built...it's like a live spinning web that does indeed hold us together. What do you say to the artists of JACK?

De la Cruz: It is okay to not be making art right now. It's okay to be struggling. I want everyone to just take care and to value themselves, because it doesn't make you any less of an artist if you're not making right now. We are not looking for you to prove to us what you have been doing through this time. You need to sleep and breathe. We are committed to people and that includes you. We just want you to be you...I think you are beautiful.

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Lately, I've been thinking about a sutta in Buddhist scripture (Samyutta Nikaya) that compares two actions. The first: feeding 100 people morning, noon, and night. The second: the practice of developing a mind of goodwill, even for a quick moment—morning, noon, and night. It posits that this second action is more fruitful than the first.

JACK is a powerful manifestation of this: their mind of goodwill before the pandemic led to the practices of creating a home for radical artists, becoming a leader in the theater and non-profit community, building a hub for envisioning how we can achieve racial and economic justice, and now also the first action—the feeding of hundreds of people.

JACK's spring programming includes an online candidate forum for the State Senate District 25 and Media Tools for Liberation: a radical virtual laboratory for artists. For more information upcoming events and ways to support visit www.jackny.org