



Welcome to the first offering of Polycultural Institute's soon-to-be-launched online publication, *The Polyculturalist*. In the coming months, we will be introducing members of the institute's advisory council. These short interviews explore the meanings of polyculturalism and how it impacts the arts, education, social justice, and our communities at large. We hope that you enjoy these initial conversations!

Stay tuned for expanded interview transcripts when *The Polyculturalist* officially debuts on Substack.

The Polyculturalist

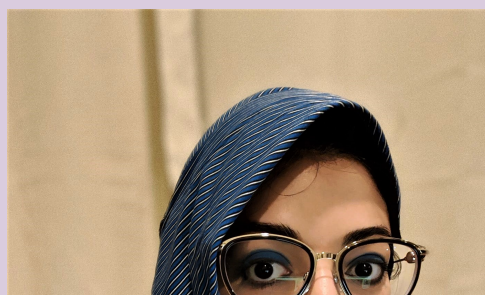
Journeys in Cultural Interchange



Introducing John Clinton Eisner

This interview was conducted on July 22, 2022 by Dr. Tasneem Mandviwala, Polycultural Institute's Advisory Council Coordinator.

Tasneem: As the Founder and Artistic Director of The Lark (an organization that nurtured playwrights and new plays from 1994 to 2021), you have been centering the voices of



historically marginalized playwrights for almost thirty years. What have been the most salient insights that you've gained regarding the importance of hearing each other's stories, particularly stories that have not been heard before?



John: The Lark became a place to see yourself in others' experiences, and to see others in others' experiences. I became conscious of the fact that people relaxed and listened to each other there. It was more like school than school was. When I was in school, we were tested and judged, told what was right and wrong, but the school at The Lark was essentially being in a place where you learned from other people the truth of what they had to say. The Lark became a place where people

could come share stories and not have to worry about translating them culturally instantly. There was an agreement, a mandate, that everyone who comes into the space will do the best they can to see the world from someone else's view.





John and playwright David Henry Hwang during a writing residency at the National Theater of the Philippines (2012)

Tasneem: As an artist who has played multiple roles within the theater, from actor to director to producer to story consultant, how do you feel creativity and art-making strengthen polyculturalism and connect people and communities?

John: There is labor and humility required in seeing the world from someone else's point of view. And what is creativity? It's the question of how we respond. Creativity and curiosity and the capacity for wonder are ways in which we conquer and acknowledge the fear that so many of us feel all the time. Creativity happens in stages: [It] first starts with you and you mastering your ability to see what you see, and then step back and see what you saw. The second part is seeing how these things that come out of you relate to other things. And the third part of creativity, at least in the theatre, is taking your analysis of how you know and feel and have a conversation about it with someone else. This third stage has to do with an integration. You tell me what you understand of my story, and I can say, "No, that's not it entirely." or "Yes, you've gotten it!" Creativity is really feedback.



John traveled to Russia with playwright Katori Hall and translator Tatyana Khaikan when the Lark collaborated with the Moscow Art Theatre to develop a Russian translation of Hall's "The Mountaintop" (2011)

Tasneem: What recent trends make you hopeful for the future of

the American theatre?

John: First, a wider range of communities are seeing themselves and their stories represented on stage. I think this expanding universe of shared stories – local, national, and global – is broadening the public’s appetite for new approaches to managing social challenges and illuminating conversations about power-sharing and reducing structural oppression. Second, as old institutions fail, new leaders rise with fresh approaches. The American theater has resembled a factory assembly line with the goal of cheaply creating commercial content for “big theater” and television. Many theater institutions are crumbling now because of a chronic resistance to artistic risk and ongoing insensitivity to marginalized communities, but many new leaders are refocusing on artistic mission based on community accountability. Another bright spot is the seismic shift in public opinion about the value and purpose of labor. This is the moment when a strong case for live theater must be made – as a mirror for cultural complexity, a vital point of community engagement, and a seedbed for innovation. It’s time to recognize the essential roles of artists and teachers by paying them a living wage.

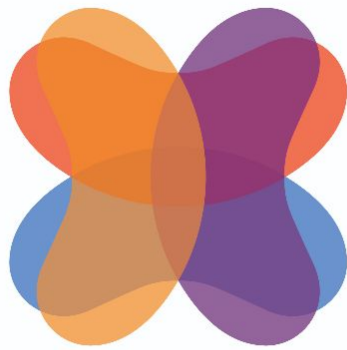


At a panel discussion in the Lark Studio, John and playwright Rajiv Joseph discussed the playwriting process (2008)

Tasneem: Please tell us a story of a time when someone surprised you because they supported you or demonstrated compassion towards you even though you expected otherwise.

John: I was about to be married to my wife of 38 years, Jennifer. One of our few differences was religion. My family was Jewish, from

Wisconsin, and extremely secular; Jennifer's family was Catholic, from the Deep South, with lots of nuns. I felt anxious about them accepting our union, especially as the diocese where Jennifer grew up wouldn't even answer our phone calls. The two closest nuns to Jennifer were her father Frank's sister and aunt, Sister Sally and Aunt Bern. Sister Sally, who was at the wedding in Rhode Island, smiled at me, but I couldn't tell what she was thinking. Several months later we went to Atlanta to meet Jennifer's relatives who hadn't been able to make it north for the wedding. Underneath, I was terrified. We walked into their home, and Frank's family—Jennifer's family, and mine now, too—opened their arms to us and I felt instantly as if I belonged. I don't think I knew how scared I was till then. I remember Aunt Bern saying, "Sally says the wedding was lovely." Sister Sally nodded appreciatively, and Aunt Bern continued, "Sit down, darling, and tell me how you're doing."



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