



The People Behind the re:Volution

Debi Wong



About Debi

Debi Wong is the Founding Artistic Director at re:Naissance Opera. She decided to start her company after feeling like she didn't belong in the traditional world of "opera or western art music". After receiving a formal education in western art music, Debi set out to "create a new space within the operatic world where people of all walks of life and diverse lived experiences could come as themselves and share their stories, artistic practices and collaborate with a new community of artists." Debi believes that "at its core, opera is collaborative and interdisciplinary; it is a powerful showcase of how imagination, storytelling and live performance can intersect; when Western opera was invented in the 17th century, it was revolutionary." When creating re:Naissance Opera, she "wanted to create and hold space where artists, who have traditionally been excluded or felt unwelcome in the operatic space, can inspire one another, dream of alternate realities together, experiment with different modes of storytelling, share artistic practices and processes, build new communities, and in doing so, change the world."

When asked about why Debi chose her given field of work, she shared her love for working with others and telling stories but especially "how live performance can transport us and immerse us in other worlds.". She believes that performance and narrative-based art forms are more than just entertainment. "when we engage with stories and fictional worlds, we are exercising the imagination to reach for new ideas and new ways to look at and interact with the real world." At the end of the day, Debi explains that she chose this field of work because she genuinely believes that storytelling is one of our most powerful (and human) tools.

Interview

When creating a new project or collaborating with other artists, is there a common theme or message that you're always trying to transmit?

"That the work we do and the stories we create have profound impacts on our communities and the people that make up those communities; that there is great responsibility in being an artist; that with our creative practices and our creative work we are able to challenge the status quo and inspire positive change."

What is a work- opera or not- that has inspired you the most as an artist and/or person?

"I go through phases of inspiration. Right now, the work that feels like it has lodged itself in my rib cage is Gregory Maqoma's 'Cion: Requiem of Ravel's Bolero'"

What drew you to that work?

"It was recently presented at 'Prototype Festival' in New York and I am obsessed with contemporary dance (maybe it's because I am so uncoordinated!!)"

Why has that work stuck with you?

"I'm not sure how to describe the work. I had such a visceral reaction to it; I think the whole audience did. When it was finished, you could feel the impact in the performance hall. The piece is about the shared human experience of death but one of the many layers in this piece is how death and pain are inflicted on people by the actions of others - how greed, power and religion have given rise to unnatural death. It goes deeper and evokes a meditation on how our own identities and actions, and how our own layers of privilege change our understanding of death and how we confront it and /or are confronted by it but what binds the performance together is the communal act of lamenting or grieving and this creates a sense of hope and catharsis. I suppose what I love most about this piece, is that you have to experience it. I can't describe it with words. I can't parse properly or do justice to why the piece was so impactful with my writing. It's worth reading about here:

<http://prototypefestival.org/shows/cion-requiem-of-ravels-bolero/>

What is book, opera, show, movie, podcast, etc. that you believe should be in all of our inner libraries?

Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer

<https://sites.psu.edu/eartharchives/2020/04/16/covenant-of-reciprocity/>