

Tamejavi

by Dudley Cocke

(Originally published in Grantmakers in the Arts Reader, Vol. 16, No. 1, Spring 2005)

To California's great Central Valley they have come from the highlands of Oaxaca, the cities of eastern Pakistan, the relocation camps of Thailand - political refugees and new immigrants from around the world aspiring to build a future for their children, grands, and greats.

For three days in October 2004, these new U.S. Americans gathered in Fresno's Tower District for their second Tamejavi Festival. Everyone was welcome; the historic Tower Theatre's marquis proclaimed, "Tamejavi: It's Still Free."

The word "Tamejavi" pops up in the computer spell check as an error, and it's not found in any dictionary. But make no mistake, it's authentic 21st century coinage, invented by the festival's participants. The Ta is from the Hmong "Taj Laj Tshav Puam," the me from the Spanish "Mercado," and the javi from the Mixtec "Nunjavi." True to its etymologies, the 2004 Tamejavi Festival was a sprawling cultural marketplace of indoor and outdoor performance stages, twenty-odd booths enticing with fresh ethnic food and handmade crafts, tents for educational platicas (forums), screening rooms for media, and galleries for art.

Organized by the Fresno-based Pan Valley Institute of the American Friends Service Committee with financial support from The James Irvine Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, and the California Council for the Humanities, the Festival is one celebratory stop on Tamejavi's year-round exploration of new immigrant and refugee life in the Central Valley. The Institute's process borrows from the principles and methods of Popular Education (Pablo Friere, et al.), which emphasize individual and group learning as the path to political and civic engagement.

In the U.S., neither the arts community nor the organizing community has paid enough attention to the difference between cultural programming and cultural organizing; consequently, the not-for-profit arts has thousands of cultural programmers (also known as arts presenters) and only a relatively few cultural organizers. The two practices are radically different.

Cultural programmers believe that the opportunity for catharsis resides in the performance event, whereas cultural organizers regard any moment in the cultural production process as potentially transforming. Such different assumptions lead naturally to different ways and means, and as this year's festival made abundantly clear, cultural organizers value participation more than spectatorship and consumption. It is also worth noting that whereas the programming model has consistently failed to reach beyond the wealthiest quartile of the population, the participation-based organizing model attracts a diverse audience, both ethnically and economically. In fact, Tamejavi is an important opportunity to see what the Central Valley community in aggregate actually looks like.

For the many artists who regard their artmaking as a series of experiments in which the moment of insight (epiphany) can occur at any time in the artistic process - from research and development to post production reflection - the cultural organizing model is a good match, for it encourages such multiple possibilities for the artist and audience alike.

This October's Tamejavi Festival was a bountiful harvest of the fruits of the year's Tamejavi workshops, trainings, and round-robin community exchanges. There was classical Khmer dance, Eritrean hip-hop, the miraculous appearance of Elvis (who now speaks Hmong fluently), the indigenous Danza de los Diablitos - these imps come in all shapes and sizes, many sporting cow horns and wool chaps. There were world theatrical premieres including "Cambodia the Beautiful" and "Diary of an Endless Journey, Towards a New Dawn," which wove together Hmong refugee and Mixtec immigrant stories with a cast of 40 actors and dancers.

The documentary film screenings included expressions of youth empowerment and the struggle of the P'urhepechas of Michoacan, Mexico to preserve and perpetuate their language. In one of the galleries, there was a photography exhibit, "Beyond Borders/Transnational Communities," documenting migrant families who exist simultaneously in the U.S./Mexico and the U.S./Guatemala. The platicas covered subjects from the often uneasy relationship between California's ethnic and mainstream media to the recent arrival of the last Vietnam War era political refugees from Wat Tham Krabok camp, Thailand.

The dive into such authentic diversity - the excitement of being part of the creation of a new chapter in the history of the United States - was at once exalting and humbling. As the Tamejavi Festival bore witness, it is a chapter full of the details of hardship, of love, and of longing for the justice that democracy promises.