



how small theater companies are transforming Los Angeles

First Responder Tales was a FREE 4-part symposia series for Los Angeles theater practitioners – individuals, companies, ensembles – and stakeholders – artists from all disciplines, advocates, policy makers, journalists, funders, activists, educators. The series provided a place to get together and join in a conversation about the work of cultural First Responders and its place in the greater L.A. landscape.

About The First Responder Framework

First Responders is a new term we offered to the Los Angeles theater community and its stakeholders as a way to reframe and find commonality around the vital work they produce and create. *First Responders* are experimenters, inventors, and trendsetters who often blur the lines between art, education, and activism; they provide essential services and vital programs that sustain their particular community and contribute to its welfare. *First Responders* also provide safe spaces for the creation of human connections through the exploration and representation of the stories, histories, and frontline issues that are deemed important by the community itself.

This report will explore the second half of the symposium series and consider what the next steps are in light of the findings.

First Responder Tales #3 : how to tell the tale Wednesday, September 24 from 7 to 9pm Inner-City Arts

This symposium was an interactive evening of conversation about how *First Responders* can engage in arts advocacy and with policymakers to better tell our tale and featured guest speakers Terence McFarland, CEO, LA Stage Alliance; Charlie Jensen, Communications Manager, Arts for LA; and Cristina Pacheco, Advocacy Manager, Arts for LA. The questions that framed the evening's discussion were:

- How do you speak out in support of the arts?
- What voices are represented in the conversation of arts advocacy?

An excerpt from the First Responder Tales Blog (www.firstresopndertales.com/blog), featuring a wrap report written by Ramona Pilar Gonzales addressed the format and succinctly summarized the subject matter for the evening:

“First Responder Tales #3: how to tell the tale focused on advocacy in the arts and how artists, arts organizations, and individuals – by connecting with advocates and advocacy organizations – can actually affect how policy is created and executed around the arts

“Useful thinking about language- both positive and negative.”

What is your most important takeaway from this evening?

“Importance of language and framing in advocacy.”

“[Discovering] new ways of thinking about how to question the purpose of my organization.”

“Making allies of our representatives.”

“Spheres of influence tool and thinking about how advocacy plays a role in my everyday work.”

“Rephrasing the why – asking better questions”

First Responder Tales #4 : our legacy, our future
Saturday, January 14 from 10am to 1pm
Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles

Our last symposium successfully brought together cultural elders with emerging artists and the general First Responder community in a dynamic and inspiring dialogue that created a highly motivating finale to the series. Each elder invited a compelling emerging artist to join them in a public dialogue to share with the First Responder community stories about their unique programming and how they're nurturing our next generation of local artistic leaders.

Featured Duets:

- Lynn Manning (Watts Village Theater Company) with Donald Jolly
- Nobuko Miyamoto (Great Leap) with June Kaewsith
- Randy Reinholz (Native Voices at the Autry) with Elizabeth Frances & Robert Vestal
- Rubén Amavizca-Murúa (Sinergia and Frida Kahlo Theatre) with Alex Angeles

These duets resulted in robust conversations from a wide gamut of underrepresented artists in the community. To read more about the backgrounds of these artists and to learn about their work, our blogger Ramona was able to speak to them before the symposium and her resulting post provided a comprehensive look into the featured speakers' backgrounds, read her post at www.tinyurl.com/FRT4blog.

The conversations between the cultural elders and emerging artists furthered the intergenerational, cross town, and multi-ethnic dialogue that started at the beginning of the series, and which has created immediate connections and a foundation for future collaborations between First Responder artists and organizations. Following this symposium, there was an energetic commitment to immediately cross-promote current programming between several of the featured companies. The symposia overall provided dialogue that found many shared, as well as unique, aspects of First Responder practitioners and how these aspects could be built upon to strengthen the field.

A brief selection of responses to the survey attendees completed at FRT #4:

What is your general response to this evening's symposium?

"I want to talk to all the speakers about strategizing and next steps to working together."

"What a wonderful, digestible conversation. I was genuinely moved by each duet and I would love to hear/see more."

"It was inspiring. It inspired me to elevate my work. It was inspiring to hear how others are responding and creating art."

"Wonderful way to bridge distances between companies working throughout LA."

"I think this symposium is urgently needed and I hope there will be more like it in the future."

"This is a necessary and powerful conversation to have and continue having"

What is your most important takeaway from this afternoon?

"So many of us with same feelings and shared concerns how we can support each other better and take next step."

"Awareness that dedicated artists are working toward the same goals I am."

"I feel hopeful about our future."

"To come together and support each other in any way we can."

"Theatre creates a sense of community and belonging for those who have historically and currently been excluded from the dominant culture."

"We are not alone. We do not have to reinvent the wheel."

"Although we are all different, we are all the same."

What value do you think this symposium (or the entire series) has brought to the LA Theatre Community?

"Awareness to cultural and social issues."

"Started great conversations that are often missing from the 'mainstream LA Theater' scene."

"Connection. Deeper than the sense of belonging we are all searching for."

"It has opened up a conversation about underrepresented groups in theatre for the LA Theatre community."

"Increased visibility of talent and communities in LA."

"Brought people together and shined a light on all of the good work being undertaken. Honor the work."

"Awareness of the rich history of culturally specific work in the region."

What's next?

One of the ideas we wanted to explore from the impetus of the First Responder Tales symposium series was to see if and how the First Responder framework resonates within the Los Angeles arts community. As evinced in the survey results, there is definitely a place in the current cultural climate for the First Responder term.

One example of the embrace of the concept was experienced first hand at the Los Angeles County Arts Commission's grantee reception on October 7, 2014, when Richard Montoya, one of Culture Clash's founders and an Arts Commissioner for the 1st district, introduced one of the Supervisors as a "cultural first responder." Mr. Montoya's use of this term is just one example of where we've seen the first responder framework resonate within the Los Angeles cultural landscape.

In conclusion, one of the most important lessons that we've re-learned from this journey is that we're not alone in creating theater that responds directly to our target community's needs, and which provides essential services and vital programs that sustain and contribute to their welfare. First Responder practitioners, both artists and organizations, need to focus on building infrastructure that will include the support of other similar theater companies, through reciprocal marketing strategies, information sharing, and open dialogue. In the words of one of our survey respondents:

"This is just the beginning of a conversation that MUST continue."