

Praxis Radio 2020 Podcast

Episode 2: Jim Walsh, Romero Theater Troupe, Denver, CO // Elka Schumann, Bread and Puppet Theater, Glover, VT

<orchestral music intro, "Praxis Theme" by Jason Cross continues to play under narration>

Taylor, the host of the show: Welcome listeners—to a new installment of the 2020 season of Praxis. If you're starting with this episode, you can go back and listen to the trailer or last week's episode for some more information on this show. That's all very easy to do if you're subscribed. If you aren't subscribed, you should be! You can do that at all the places you listen to podcasts by going to praxisradio.com and clicking on Praxis. This season is a time travel project—returning to a radio show road trip I took in the summer of 2015. We aren't going in order and this week we will be covering major ground—from Denver, Colorado to Glover, Vermont and back again to explore some projects near to my heart as—confession—both a theater kid and a history nerd.

We'll start in Denver, where my amazing host, Debra, threw me a backyard welcome barbecue so that I could meet many radical activists I might want to interview at once. There, I met members of the Romero Theater Troupe. I went to their rehearsal the next day and was welcomed enthusiastically. I also came home with quite a few files from daughter of the troupe, Lily, learning to use my field recorder and headphones.

<transition to rehearsal audio from 2015, fade in on a child laughing>

Taylor Roseweeds (TRW): Can I take your picture?

Lily Walsh: Yeah...I can't hear myself yet

TRW: Cause you're not talking yet, this is a new one, you just recorded everything here.

Jim Walsh (JW): We'll go through each of them once, except Milka we need to really spend time on...you guys ready to have some fun?

<various troupe members discussing the rehearsal as it begins and fades out>

TRW: This rehearsal gave a sneak peek of the types of stories the Romero Troupe tells —about Ben Salmon, a Catholic conscientious objector jailed during World War I — about Frenchie, a trans man fighting for his rights long before his identity would be recognized in Colorado—about Rita Martinez, who led protests every Columbus Day in Pueblo, the birthplace of the holiday — and about Flaming Milka, a nineteen year old woman who became a labor leader during the coal strikes in Colorado in 1927. Here's my interview with Jim Walsh, who founded the Romero Troupe, from August 21, 2020.

<fade in on more rehearsal audio>

Troupe member 1: So remind me again...el pueblo

Troupe member 2: el pueblo

Troupe member 1: unido

Troupe member 2: unido

Troupe member 1: jamás será vencido

Troupe member 2: jamás será vencido.

Troupe member 1: El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido

Troupe member 2: (yelling) El pueblo! (lowers voice) Should we, should we start?

JW: No, you guys come on later...

<more rehearsal chatter continues and fades out as interview begins>

TRW: Cool, well if you are down to dive in, I guess I'll start by having you introduce yourself and talk about who you are and the work that you do?

JW: Yeah my name is Jim Walsh I'm a professor of political science and history at University of Colorado Denver. I've taught there, this is my 23rd year. I specialize in history and politics of labor, working class organizing, immigration, and Irish American history and politics. About 20 years ago I began using theater in my history classes. I just couldn't stand to teach history in the way it was traditionally taught with forced memorization and testing— students memorize data and take a test on it and sit passively thru lectures— what Paolo Freire calls the 'banking method of education'. And so I, I wasn't teaching small classes, I was teaching classes that were regularly enrolling 150-180, up to 200 students. And boldly decided to throw out exams and asked my students to create and perform short plays about events we were studying, with no idea how that would work or where it would go and without any theater background myself. So, it was pretty bold and it worked. The students, after sort of reacting nervously at the beginning, really embraced the project and made it into a really wonderful expression of the humanity in the events that we're studying, not just the intellectual questions and paradigms, but the humanity. It changed the classroom, it changed my relationship with students, it changed my philosophy of teaching and learning, it changed the way my department viewed my work and viewed how, you know, how history is to be taught. It led to me being essentially fired...

<laughter>

JW: The class size grew and grew and popularity of the class grew, and my colleagues noticed the students were all talking about this class and this theater and some of them were excited and others were, felt threatened by this, so there was an effort to move me out of the department, but the students rallied, formed an organization, brought in some community organizations that we had worked with to support the effort and convinced the Dean to overrule the decision, to discontinue my contract. I wasn't on any sort of tenure track situation so I was vulnerable. The Dean investigated the situation and overruled the decision, forced the department to keep me. Which never happens in higher ed.

TRW: No, yeah

JW: It was kind of a roller coaster. I felt vindication but I also was trapped. I couldn't advance in their department, they sort of stuck me into a corner and you know I was tucked away in this corner I couldn't go anywhere, I felt like I was in a box. So the political science department reached out a few years later and recruited me into their department and I've been there ever since. That's a little bit about how this started. After using theater in my classroom about five years, I thought, 'wow, if it's having this impact in my classroom it would have a big impact in the community' and I was just beginning kind of an activist part of my life and beginning to attend rallies and demonstrations and to think about community organizing. So I thought this would be a powerful way to contribute to the community organizing already happening in Denver, but to bring a sort of organic theater dimension to that community organizing.

So I just called some former students and brought together a small group and our first play was a biography of Oscar Romero and we didn't know, I had heard of him a few times, but I didn't know a lot about him. I knew there was a film made about him, but the more we learned about him the more taken we were with his story and we felt this was exactly what we were trying to do in our work so we decided to name our troupe after him in that moment. Actually it happened, we were backstage about to be introduced to perform this story of Oscar Romero and the host of the night poked his head back in the curtains and said, 'real quick, what do you call yourself?' and I didn't hesitate. I said 'the Romero Troupe'.

TRW: And it stuck.

JW: It stuck. It was just, everyone realized in that moment how perfect that was, so that was, about fifteen and a half years ago, and we were about seven people at that time, and we really knew we had something unique that no one else was doing. There was a lot of professional theaters that were doing— and are doing— social justice related work, but they had hierarchies and directors and budgets and fundraising efforts and trained actors and that was very different feel, so we knew we had something egalitarian, grassroots, that no one else had. Maybe even around the country, cause we didn't have any idea what all-volunteer community theater looked like nationally. We do

now cause we've since connected with a lot of groups, and there's a lot of groups out there isolated and the reason they don't know about each other is because they don't have budgets to travel and go and connect with each other. There's not a conference for radical grassroots community all-volunteer theater. There's conferences for radical theater, that is sort of encased in professional theater circles or universities or institutions, but none for independent grassroots, the way that we do what we do.

So it blew up, it took off, it sailed to a place none of us could have imagined. Within a few years we had over fifty members, regularly participating, we had 200-300 people at all of our shows that we performed, we feel like we formed a niche in the community that wasn't being filled. And that was people, the circles of people who are active at rallies, demonstrations, organizing efforts, educators, circles of educators, and kind of an intersectional coming together of different movements. That all of that sort of energy in those communities didn't have a theater component that they felt was theirs. So we became that. We are very rooted in the immigrant rights movement, very rooted in labor and workers rights movements, civil rights, homelessness, environmentalism, there's a kind of a string, LGBTQ issues, there's kind of a strand of issues that have always united us. I guess you could say human dignity has always been the core. So our membership has always been a cross representation that has tentacles in all these movements. And our performances touch upon these movements because there's always a story being told about this one and that one and this one and seeing that they're actually the same movement. That they're all fighting for this higher place, this king called the beloved community.

And so the Romero Troupe runs itself it's not a structured organization. It's not a hierarchal organization. It's just a circle of people who—anyone can show up and join the circle and jump into the work. No one is expected to show up every week, no one is expected to do x, y, and z. It's simply open for anyone who wants to contribute a little bit of time or a lot of time, do what they can, but there's never an expectation—'this is your responsibility you do this, you do that' and people really like that. People really seem comfortable with that. Sometimes people will come once a month, we have people we see once a year but they keep coming back.

TRW: Yeah, I want to ask just about, just as a history nerd myself, who shies away from pursuing teaching or getting deeper into it because of how it was taught to me, I'm really curious about how what you've learned about teaching history in a popular sense and a formal sense, from this idea that you shared a minute ago around the ways that movements are porous and all kind of interconnected. This is kind of a leading question, but do you think theater is a good way to communicate the holistic nature or history that it's so hard to communicate if you're thinking in this linear model?

JW: Absolutely. Theater is the people's classroom and it always has been. It always has been. One only has to look at the history of theater to see that it's always been a tool of resistance. That's at the heart of the art and there was a place, a time I think in the '90s and early 2000s when going to see a show didn't feel somehow like a form of resistance, it didn't feel like anything was happening that was shaking the tree, that

power structures were somehow being poked and prodded by the show. The history really had lost its radical wings and one of the reasons for that is accessibility. I mean \$75 to go see a show downtown? Or even for the smaller theaters \$30? And so the working class is immediately priced out of this. People that need change, that most hunger for change, dressing up and going out and spending \$50 for an evening is not in their agenda. So that's an important element to all this is that history, theater, must reclaim that and it is now. I would say over the past ten years that's changed, that's shifted greatly. Even professional theater I see really reaching for, especially after Black Lives Matter movement this summer, that's back. To a large degree that's back in both amateur and professional theater. But it wasn't then, in the 90s or early 2000s.

And I'll say too that activism I don't think— has not appreciated the importance of history as much as it should. The way that any kind of structures and systems are reinforced is through a historical narrative. A certain narrative is put out that reinforces the power structures and systems within the society. So a knowledge of alternative history a knowledge of hidden history is always the first step in challenging dominant norms, in challenging injustice, so that's always the bedrock. But I didn't see activism turning to history twenty years ago or even ten years ago. That's changed too. Now you know, public history has been remade. This summer, the statues coming down, we have neighborhoods and buildings being renamed and that's beautiful to watch. People, activists, young activists, realizing that dominant narrative is reinforced through statues and through plaques and place names, that public history is the concrete foundation that the whole empire is built on. So if you can remake public history, you can remake the narrative. And that's what the Romero Troupe has always done is we've always challenged public history. A stage is a form of public history, it's fleeting public history, it's public history for a night and then alternative public history for another night. So it's been lovely to watch that consciousness shift. And because all of our plays offer a kind of historical counter narrative.

TRW: And that's such a good point and I love the way you frame that with things happening this summer with statues... and I hadn't thought of it this way, but I think the right in this country has done a good job, conservatism as a force in general, on claiming the past as theirs and as something— as an event in which they won that they want to continue winning in the same manner into the future. You know “make America great again”. It was great for us, that's history. And when you present, you know the town I'm from is very conservative and it took me years of being an activist before I learned that the Wobblies— the IWW paper was published there all through the 1910s and there were these rowdy street battles of IWW members vs Silver Shirts and Nazis all through the 30s in the town I lived in and just the power of learning those kinds of stories. So I guess I'm wondering maybe what a favorite Colorado version, when I met you in 2015, you all were doing a program on hidden Colorado history and I just don't know if you have a favorite similar story that was hidden that was a 'wow' moment like that for other people who saw it.

JW: Yeah, there are so many examples of that. Yeah, I would look at the treatment of activists in Portland and Seattle today— the way that the media portrays them and

politicians— not just Trump but even mainstream Democrats portray those activists— it's identical to what the Wobs went through in the 20s. That's a hundred years difference, but it's identical. And in Colorado there was a— IWW shut down the coal mines in this state for almost a year in 1927-1928. And up to six or ten people, miners, were killed during that strike, they were you know, it was kind of a private army was hired and brought in because during the Ludlow Massacre fourteen years before, the National Guard was used to crush the strike, so they couldn't do that again, so the next strategy was to go out and hire these private guns and no one knows about that story. I mean the coal mines came to a halt and the IWW this was— the United Mine Workers wanted to organize these men, but they were inept they couldn't do it— so the Wobs stepped in and did it. They didn't just organize the coal miners, they went out in the beet fields and organized the migrant workers because those migrant workers would work the beet fields in the summer and in the winter they'd work the coal mines. The Wobs had this incredible leadership involving people, probably ten different languages, overwhelmingly immigrants. And they did it, they figured it out. So I think that's a model for today.

There's also, you know, stuff like in the '30s the nativism against immigrants was so strong because of the Great Depression, immigrants tend to be the first ones to be scapegoated, so there was this heavy nativism so the governor sent the National Guard to the border, not to the Mexican border but to the New Mexican border. The National Guard to the Colorado-New Mexico border. And their orders were, they declared martial law, and the orders were 'stop anyone who looks poor or Mexican'. <laughter> That's what they did. It lasted eleven days until I think the courts intervened, realizing that this was pretty unconstitutional. So there so many stories and the thing is, to keep those stories hidden is to keep that old guard narrative alive, but to liberate those stories, the arts have to be the way to liberate those stories and so, my students right now their final project for the class is to write a proposal and research a proposal for a piece of public history that they would like to see replace a public history that's being torn down. And it's been fun to throw this out at them and see how they're going to react to it. That's what the Romero Troupe is, it's a mixture of liberating the caged history, the unknown history, and shining a light on the activism that is happening today that isn't understood or known. So the mixture of those two we've found has been a pretty powerful thing to combine.

TRW: I guess just to back up into something you hinted out in your introduction, I'm wondering how that's played out for you personally. You kind of said your entree into activism— sounds like you were a historian first and an activist second— and those have really merged through the Romero Troupe, but I'm just curious about that story and what that journey looked like for you just on a personal level.

JW: I'm sorry Taylor, the journey from a historian to an activist or...?

TRW: Yeah or what that looked like? You said something to the effect of 'when you were starting to dip a toe into activism'? I guess I'm wondering what was the inciting incident for you if there was a single one or?

JW: Yeah, it was sort of a journey from one stepping stone to another, almost like crossing a stream on stones. The first was leaving the east coast behind and moving west and developing an interest in poetry. So the second was deciding I wanted to see other countries and taking busses and trains all the way down to Panama until I ran out of money and then coming back four months later. And the people in Central America educated me about U.S. foreign policy in places like Nicaragua and El Salvador and Guatemala, and that radicalized me because I learned I was lied to my whole life. And that led to a realization that I wanted to learn history. I didn't know any history, so poetry, love for poetry led me to want to see the world, seeing the world led me to want to learn more real history and that led me to graduate school for history here in Colorado. And the more history I learned, sort of real, unknown history the more my appetite to make this matter in today's world grew, and to remake a classroom, remake the way teaching and learning happens, empower students through— Paolo Freire is one of my inspirations— to invite students to essentially co-teach a class and all of that, you know.

I remember when I began teaching, my first form of activism was when 9/11 happened there was... you could feel it, we knew the country was going to war, everybody did, and so a few colleagues and I formed something on campus called the Auraria Peace Initiative and we put out literature and started meeting and we started warning against, you know, sending military to Afghanistan and we went to the capital, we organized a march, and in that march there was probably fifty of us and that march left the capital and we marched through downtown Denver. And just hearing the things that people were yelling at us. I remember the minute that march started, the person leading it started to sing, and she was a colleague and a friend of mine a labor organizer, and she had been, even though she was younger than me she had been an activist for a while, an African American woman who was sort of doing Black Lives Matter work before there was a Black Lives Matter movement. And she started to sing when we started to march and tears just started rolling down my face because it was my first march and I'll never forget the feeling I had, that this is who I am and almost like, I would maybe like compare it to a coming out or something, like I felt liberated and the things people yelled at us from the street I remember being called 'communist' and 'traitor' and all these words were used. Anyway, that was it, once I tasted that I could never go back.

TRW: It's almost more of a coming in, right? Like you're part of something now.

JW: Yeah I like how you rephrase that, yeah, coming in. So that immediately translated into my teaching and still today. So yeah, the troupe goes on, it's been a lot of work, it's been, you know, stressful at times, overwhelming at times, but it's a beautiful community. I used to think the Romero Troupe needed me. If I went away, the troupe would go away, that the Romero Troupe needed me. Now, I believe that I need the Romero Troupe. <laughter> I need that community. It would be just fine if I went away, but I need it, so, that's kind of how it feels now.

<music fades in under narration>

TRW: Jim's story about his first demonstration made me think about my own entry into street protest, also at anti-war actions. I've been to a lot of them, but I came back to one in particular, where we marked the thirteenth year of occupation in Iraq. I remember noticing the war was now the same age I had been— thirteen —when the U.S. invaded. The theme was taken from a slogan of the Bread and Puppet Theater in Vermont: 'resistance of the heart against business as usual' and my dear friend Jan had made a big banner in that troupe's style for the event. Jan was my introduction to Bread and Puppet Theater, sharing perhaps a postcard with me of one of their prints and also, before we knew each other, I had seen the large puppets that she was responsible for bringing to our local anti-war demonstrations in Spokane.

I want to leave Denver and my conversation with Jim for a moment and take you to rural Vermont, much later in the same summer when I shadowed the Romero Troupe's rehearsal. On the east coast leg of my trip, I didn't have a car, relying instead on trains, busses, and in this case—Craigslist ride share.

<music fades out>

I underestimated the size of Vermont and the remote-ness of Glover, the closest town to Bread and Puppet. I had been messaging the one guy willing to drive up there and had started to worry he was going to flake out, leaving me no way to get to the circus.

<audio fades in of a crowd cheering and a brass band playing outdoors, it is the Bread and Puppet performing "The Overtakelessness Circus" in 2015>

Finally, and just in time, he got it together and picked me up in a Burlington parking lot. He was great, talking to me about his own background in radio through our 2 hour drive. He even stayed for the circus. After the show, I eventually cornered the matriarch of Bread and Puppet, Elka Schumann, and talked with her about her family's role in radical theater history—and in the present day.

<performance audio fades out>

There is a good amount of background noise in this interview and it made me surprisingly emotional listening to it. I hope that rather than distracting you, it can remind you of the comforts of a crowded community kitchen, a long wooden table, and the simple pleasure of preparing a meal with a big group—closer than six feet apart. I wasn't able to reach the farm for a follow up interview, but I hope you enjoy this slice of history—here is that interview with Elka Schumann taken August 9th, 2015.

<a brass band plays a fanfare, circus audio fades back in>

Bread and Puppet performer 1: We don't know from whence we came / but we hurry just the same

Bread and Puppet performer 2: Our lives are filled with hope and fear /

Bread and Puppet performer 3: Hurry hurry day and night / is this wrong or is that right?

Crowd, chanting: Hurry hurry day and night / is this wrong or is that right? Hurry hurry day and night / is this wrong or is that right? Hurry hurry day and night / is this wrong or is that right?

<brass band fades out as interview audio begins>

TRW—If you could just intro yourself and a little bit about where we are and how you got here?

Elka Schumann (ES): I'm Elka Schumann, we're sitting in a room, sitting in the Bread and Puppet farmhouse which is the home now of our puppeteers who are in our company and the summer puppeteers in the summertime. It was our home, our family's home, Peter and I and our five children for...the '70s. All the 70s, six years when we lived here until we built our own house, then we moved there. Then this became the puppeteer house. It's in Vermont, the Northeast Kingdom, the most rural and I think the poorest part of Vermont. The most beautiful, we really like it here

TRW: It is really beautiful...and can you just tell listeners who might not be familiar a little bit about Bread and Puppet Theater?

ES: It's a puppet theater that includes many other kinds of performance arts besides puppets of all sizes from little small cutouts, paper mache, masked performers, life size puppets, giant puppets eighteen feet tall and even some larger, and then it includes dance, simple dance, a lively band, brass band playing lively brass band tunes, but also my husband Peter Schumann's special improvised music, he plays the violin so that's used in a lot of shows. Singing is also very strong in our shows, traditional early American shape note music, we also do classical music and also improvise and use the music and lyrics from friends, poets in the area. We used to tour a great deal internationally in the old days in the '70s, '80s, '90s.

We tour a lot less now, do more locally, do residencies in colleges and schools, and every summer, every summer since we moved to Vermont— that was in 1970— we spend all the summer creating a piece. In the beginning, from 1970 till 1998, we had one weekend a summer, we called that event Our Domestic Resurrection Circus. It was a huge event that ended up drawing tens of thousands of people here. After '98, we made it much much smaller, just a Sunday afternoon and actually every Sunday afternoon in July and August and we get our audience in the hundreds and that's fine. Bread—I forgot to mention the bread!—which is how I start the museum tours is by the bread oven where Peter bakes bread for every show and it's given out in the, you saw how it's given out in the field you saw how its given out—

TRW: Yes I ate some

ES: Bread with aioli. A garlic oil spread and in the inside shows, we have a table and serve it at the end of the performance and Peter bakes it with help in the summer when there's such a big crowd here

<phone rings, sound of recorder cutting off and on again>

TRW: So he bakes it and you help in the summer

ES: No I don't help, he gets help because he's baking in the summer at least four times a week if not more often for the performances even though the audience numbers only in the hundreds he bakes gigantic loaves, like four feet long, in a big, big oven...

TRW: Can you explain why that's included?

ES: The bread—Peter jokes that the puppet shows are an excuse for him to bake bread and give it out to people. He learned baking as a child from his mother living in Germany in Silesia which was then German, a part of Germany, and is now Poland. The bread of that region is a very pungent, strong, rough-ground rye sourdough bread and his mother baked and served that bread to her family for all her life, her very long life. Peter learned to bake from her and loved to do it and he just continued doing it as a student, for our family when we started our family, and then when the theater began he wanted the bread to be served. And he wanted somehow the bread and theater to be similar in that they're not froth and fluff and entertainment and sort of superficial things, but that the bread is this very rough-ground sourdough rye and that the shows are... make your mind...you have to chew...the shows are in your mind whether because of the way they're done or the theme. And the themes are often very serious. A lot of our shows were protests against the Vietnam war the Iraq war, political themes...

<audio recorder cuts off, starts again with a click>

TRW: We'll continue...so you have to chew the shows, and they're heavy, they are heavy themes

ES: That's a good way to say it

TRW: The circus I just saw—"the Overtakelessness"

ES: Yes

TRW: So there's a different show every summer?

ES: Oh yes completely and even in the course of the summer since the circus is done for eight weekends, eight Sundays, the show will change, acts will be taken out as people maybe leave or they get boring or irrelevant or something and then new acts are brought in

TRW: So is the writing process collaborative?

ES: It is, for the circus it definitely is. Puppeteers create their own acts often, but they use the puppets and masks they use are mostly...but this whole enterprise with the museum —a hundred foot long museum

<Phone rings again, sound of recorder turning off and on again>

ES: Oops

TRW: So there's a hundred foot long museum?

ES: Two stories of it plus the storage. I wouldn't say the museum is the tip and the iceberg is storage, but certainly the overwhelming bulk of stuff is in storage and the museum has, shows, less than... way less than probably a third of it or so. And that, even though Peter is the artist and directs the shows, he paints, he models the sculpture and paints the scenery or the faces, but work to make these paper mâché forms into puppets into usable figures and so on and the costuming and all the work that is connected has been done over these decades by hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people and their input into shows is very important. So often Peter will start working soon a show by saying 'people, go find a mask and a costume and create a character and maybe in twos and threes show me what you've done, what you have'. He will give the direction, the kind of, the outline of it or in some cases write a very exact text that is then spoken.

TRW: So how has this project, this big undertaking changed over the last, I guess we're talking about fifty years right?

ES: close...well starting in New York City with just a few friends and acquaintances who were willing to join into the, you know, work on projects in a small, a loft that seemed huge when we got there

<Phone rings, audio recorder cuts out, starts again with a click>

ES: How has it changed? We certainly got bigger, in the beginning the shows were, we started with children's shows, *<sound of crashing plates throughout>* a lot of, we did a Christmas story every Christmas for twenty years and then an Easter story. The Christmas story was a mix of hand puppets, masked figures, puppets of different sizes and mostly pretty funny. But the Easter story also called The Passion of the Puppet Christ, was a serious show more like a pageant almost no talking, but serious use of music, but that those two shows have been dropped now for a long time. And Peter I think is getting more and more political, the themes are that way, but its also the input of the puppeteers, all the gun acts...

<cross talk of puppeteers in the background>

TRW: So how have, some of the themes obviously and unfortunately we've had all kinds of nonsense wars this whole time, so that theme has probably remained largely the same but how has that shifted or how do you feel about having done work against war all those years?

ES: Well it's against...oh, I don't know how to answer that, how do I feel? It seems really important to do and using an artistic form instead of writing a speech or holding a sign although that's what I've done, at many many many anti war rallies and demonstrations often with small children at my side, but it's very powerful to see an artistic expression for this feeling, you know, against the war against the participants. But then themes like the gun violence and making it into a joke...I don't know that it's funny but its also very serious

TRW: Kind of showing the irony today in the pageant the life liberty pursuit of happiness section...

<chatter, audio recorder cuts, clicks back on>
<laughter>

TRW: So what do you think, I feel and other people I've talked to feel, that this is a really special moment, the last few years in this country, that people are kind of moving toward, something. What's your outlook on that? You're shaking your head like perhaps no?

ES: I don't... I mean we live in the country, we listen to the radio, we read the newspaper kind of

<Audio recorder cuts off and back on again>

TRW: So anyway...

ES: I don't know, I don't know, I don't have any deep thoughts. I think in a way I remember that last year a lot of the interns, several of them said like 'in my school everybody's into fashion or into celebrity or whatever and I was thinking about more serious things and I felt I was in this little bubble and whatever', and here it's like everybody is on the same page of serious theater, serious themes, putting it together in an artistic context and expression. But I'm aware that we are in a Vermont bubble here, for eight years we lived in New York City and that seemed to be the whole world and now for forty-plus years, we've lived in the country and it's lovely and beautiful and healthy and all that, but it isn't the real world when so much of the world is in such terrible, terrible conditions and we're surrounded by green trees and you know clean air and all these things that isn't, so many people lack, so I don't know.

TRW: Its still real, its just not real elsewhere anymore...

ES: That's true

TRW: Its not more real than that

<dishes crash in background>

ES: But what was your original question?

TRW: just...the time we're in? Is it different or is it always the same?

ES: It's both things because the wars continue and protests against them, the stupidity of the powerful, the cruelty of the powerful, and then it seems like every now and then there's a real uprising. Like a few years ago with Occupy Wall Street that seemed as though that was going to make a difference, but did it? Since Peter and I are both real ignoramuses about modern technology, electronic technology, we're out of a lot of things by that and it's— we're not suffering from that, but we are simply not as knowledgeable about what people are thinking...I'm just rattling on.

TRW: No its good! Is there anything else you want to add just for people? If they want to come here, see the shows?

ES: Come, come, come. To many people, once we suffered from that overload, ending in 1998 when we just stopped doing the huge circus it had gotten too big and too out of control, I don't know...I feel more and more as I get older that both the music we sing—the sacred harp— um, the idea of mortality and finality is on my mind and some of the shows reflect that but not all.

<Loud background noise and talking>

ES: Thats some private thing I have to discuss with Peter *<laughs>*

TRW: Sure

ES: But he's always jumping on the next big issue...

TRW: Well thank you

ES: You're welcome

<music fades in under narration>

TRW: In the Bread and Puppet Museum, and you can see this in the photo gallery that's linked in the show notes below, I saw an entire corner dedicated to a massive puppet likeness of Archbishop Oscar Romero—the Romero Troupe's namesake—with clippings and other art related to the 1980's Christmas pageant, "The Nativity, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador". If you want to learn more

about Romero's life, there are a couple of links in the show notes below for that, too. Now let's head back to Denver, by way of crackly cell phone connection, for the end of my conversation with Jim Walsh, founder of the Romero Troupe.

<music fades out>

TRW: Since we're revisiting, part of why I want to revisit these stories, I had a feeling as someone into history and in movements, that 2015 was like a precipice of some kind and...obviously it was, and I think a lot of us felt that— that big things were going down. How has the work or the mood or the impact of the troupe changed during the Trump years? I guess I'm working with the assumption that everywhere in the country there was kind of an influx of new energy and, you know, a lot to react to, so I'm really curious about how established groups and folks have taken that in stride and how your work has changed or your understanding of your work has changed under these last 4 years, 5 years.

JW: Yeah, definitely a strong sense of urgency and a strong sense of the need to heal, need to have a space where people can vent and find support. People talk a lot about that, about our group, our circle that we always have before we rehearse as a place, a refuge maybe? Where people can sort of let go of all that they're carrying, there's so much. A lot of people talk about giving up following the news and disgust, shock, at this sort of fascist dimension to America that people had not realized was still—mostly, I think, people who identify as white, didn't realize how alive that element was. Cause they didn't have to deal with it, it was hidden, and so the Trump election unleashed that underground dimension, so that shock and disgust and all of what comes with it, you know it's been— a lot of what we do is just help people deal with those emotions and keep telling stories.

But also so much of our work is in the immigrant community and we, like we have a member whose been living in sanctuary for eighteen months in a church basement, we have a member who was, her husband, they're both members, but the husband was just deported six months ago, and his spouse, the other member of our troupe, is a U.S.-born citizen. And they have four children, U.S.-born children. That's how insane this system is, is that he was deported and here he's married to a U.S. citizen with four U.S.-born children, so now she and the younger children moved down there so they could be together. So anyway, we've been through these kind of first hand accounts of how Trump world has demeaned and dehumanized the immigrant community. And that's been you know, something that has been a heavy weight to carry, too, I think emotionally.

TRW: Yeah and I wonder is there any work within the troupe—I'm familiar with the history-based work, but is there an interplay with people telling their own stories? Kind of a Theater of the Oppressed model, like first person?

JW: Yes, we've learned that helping activists see that their stories of struggle today are part of a long trajectory—that's powerful. That's powerful, you know, the majority of

activists not only have been denied access to a real education around history, but don't have the time to go and dive into history books...

<laughter>

JW: So yeah we even often will just tell a contemporary story followed by a historical story that relate directly. And then another contemporary story followed by historical that relate directly. And we're doing that all night. And in doing so, the audience and the members see these struggles are not new, these are old struggles and it's empowering to know that people have come before us who have been through this, you know. So kind of honoring them and making sure that their stories don't die and making sure that people doing important work today are honored and highlighted too. Cause they're making this huge sacrifice and the baggage they carry is unbelievable. I mean I consider myself an activist, but the amount of time and energy and sacrifice and risk that I take is nothing compared to people who are really out there, putting themselves on the line, risking arrest, and their families don't see them often, and all of that. There's also within activism, there's also this emotional sacrifice of— relationships might break down and there's tensions within leadership and within membership and all of that has to be navigated too so it's an unbelievable sacrifice, what activists go through I think.

TRW: And telling that part of it is important too. But so I wanted to ask how—I'm assuming that y'all have gone digital, distanced in some form during the pandemic, and I'm wondering, the arts have obviously— especially performing arts— have been hit hard by this and what's going on with that? What's your adaptation look like?

JW: *<laughs>* Wow. That's such a timely question. We're struggling. We've been meeting for several weeks, virtually. We have stories that people have brought to us, one is a story of, you know, a black man whose children were— had a gun pointed at them by Denver police, and he's seeking some sort of redress. So really important stories, but we've struggled with how to exist in this virtual world. So we started sort of inching toward a virtual show that would be live on Zoom, something like that where we would tell stories and then open up dialogue and discussion, but the energy that we notice comes out of our face to face rehearsals, hasn't been there. The attendance and people stepping up to take on different roles, who has the tech skills to do this and we're starting to discover that even if we did push through and do it, it wouldn't feel like everyone has ownership of it. It would feel like just a few people in their basements edited something and put it together and then we have what we call the Romero Troupe and then we don't even know what the audience experience will be like through a screen.

Or if it is worth the energy in having the kind of impact that we know our face to face shows have. We feel that in the very marrow of our bones. We go to bed those nights and don't sleep. So right now we are struggling with— do we push through and really try to make this work cause we don't know how long its going to be until its safe to gather again? And then there's a faction of the group who just want to get together in an

outdoor location, distanced, and start working and eventually have a show in a park. So there's a bit of a division about where do we go.

TRW: Yeah, that's so hard. Theater is such an intimate medium. And that's so much of what's powerful about it is that its visceral and it's ephemeral. It happens once and then you tear it down and it never happens again. That's what I like about it, a lot, is that it's just—if you were there you were there and if you weren't, I can try to describe it to you but I probably will fail.

JW: Yeah! It's like a concert you know? You feel it and you can't remake it you can't capture it. You have to have been there and I think, you know, the good thing is that we're sustainable. We can outlast this because we don't have payroll or any of that sort of stress to deal with, we don't have to raise money, we have a solid, committed, close group of people and we're not going away so even if we can't solve this, we're at least going to survive it just fine. And I don't think a lot of groups can say that because the financial crisis that comes with this is immense for the arts.

TRW: Absolutely and for you know, the 501c3-model, formal activist organizations, too. I think it's really— there's a lot of parallels there. Well, I want to finish I want to respect your time and I want to finish by asking you some questions that I was asking everyone when I interviewed them formally in 2015 that are just simple but what frustrates you the most, day to day, right now?

JW: In general?

TRW: Yeah

JW: Hmm. *<medium pause>* I think. That's such a great question, my gosh. I don't want to jump to the obvious confinement, quarantine, economic insecurity and all that... I think I would instead—what frustrates me the most is, is how privilege works in a pandemic I guess. In pre-pandemic privilege is also very apparent, but you know I just get tired of seeing—there's this facebook um...maybe its a meme or something that I have seen— even a lot of my friends have it: “ stay the fuck home”. And, yeah, what about the people who have to go work, go to work, who have to be you know, are you gonna say that to them? You know?

TRW: Who's going to pick tomatoes?

JW: Yeah, exactly

TRW: Not who's going to but who is doing that currently...?

JW: Yeah, so I think the privilege that I see that I didn't see in such a clear way around pandemic etiquette has been really frustrating for me. But there is a look in the mirror at your own privilege element to it, that frustrates me to a large degree.

TRW: And then I guess the flip side of that—what is giving you the most hope?

JW: I think for me it's clear. The rallies that I attended back in June, were the first time in my life that it wasn't the same usual suspects. It was, in fact, I saw some of the usual suspects but they were all on the margins and all older. But the heart and the life of the rallies I attended: 16 and 17 year olds. The same people that have been denigrated as lazy and self-centered and all the caricatures of younger generations that we have to hear. And my goodness, talk about a generation showing up. *<laughter>* and essentially pushing aside the usual suspects and saying 'its our turn', 'we got this'. Oh my god. I just felt lucky to be a witness without even feeling like I was contributing anything. I just kept saying to myself, how fortunate I am to bear witness *<laughs>*.

TRW: Mmhmm, yeah, and that they let us come at all, that's how I feel.

JW: Yeah, yeah, so that's... the courage of that movement and all of that stuff.

TRW: Cool. Great, well, thank you so much for taking time to talk to me, I really appreciate it and the work you do. I don't know if you have any last thoughts you want to get out I didn't ask about? And also just plugs, how can people find Romero Troupe, any other projects in your world you want to plug?

JW: We're about to unveil a new webpage, we don't have any shows to plug right now cause were spinning our wheels but you know Taylor, we have so few opportunities—I don't know if you know this, a guy did a documentary about us about eight years ago, and it's available on Youtube— but we have so few opportunities to step away from our work and reflect on it, so I think the work that you've done, the interviews you've collected, are a wonderful archive for us.

TRW: I'm in the process right now of... God... putting my archive online.

JW: Cool, cool. Well, stay in close touch, Taylor.

TRW: I will, yeah, thank you

<music fades in under narration as end of interview fades out>

Thanks again to Jim and Elka and everyone who was hospitable to me at both the Romero Troupe and at Bread and Puppet Theater. Thanks to all of you for listening. If you enjoy the show, please do subscribe, rate it in the store, share, check out the links in the show notes. You can also get in touch with me, find out how to support the project, much more, at praxisradio.com that's p-r-a-x-i-s-r-a-d-i-o dot com.

I also want to say that the day of the release is Indigenous People's Day—talk about reclaiming public history—and I'd love it if you would check out the links in the show notes for more information about ways you can learn about the people whose land you

now live on and also ways you can provide material support for #LandBack and other current campaigns being led by indigenous people around the country.

Next week, we head to South Dakota to hear about the summer before Standing Rock. See ya next week.

<music continues to play, as last note rings out we hear the rehearsal from the beginning of the show>

Taylor: So you can say whatever you want and it will be recorded in there.

Lily: Do you like it?

Taylor: <laughs> yeah

Lily: Do you like it? Can you hear me?

Taylor: So then if you hit stop, if you hit—

<sound of recorder clicking off>

END