

**Documenting Kiki Family: The Explosion of Ballroom**  
**Panel discussion featuring Twiggy Pucci Garçon, Sara Jordanö, and Christopher Udemeze**  
**April 28, 2022, 6-8pm**  
**The 8th Floor, NYC**

George Bolster:

Welcome to the 8th Floor, those of you who are here for the first time, and a huge welcome back to those who have already been here. It's really nice to see some familiar faces this evening. I will read a little about the exhibition that inspired tonight's and our upcoming events that were meant to take place in concert with it. We have Larry Krone here tonight who's going to be doing a performance for us soon. We'll also have a performance from Kalup Linzy and Carlos Martiel.

"Kindred Solidarities: Queer Community and Chosen Families" was the last exhibition to share the stage here at the 8th Floor, and you can see a 3D version of it on our website. It reflected on family in the context of queer culture beyond the constructs of heteronormativity. Exploring the idea of the familial structure based on allyship rather than genetics, the exhibition addressed how family is defined through gender, sexuality and the collision of global identities, social conventions and community experiences.

The artists included mined the politics of representation, history, soap operas and popular culture to examine some questions surrounding the importance of safe neighborhoods, the depiction of queer love and happiness and intergenerational supportive relationships. Queer solidarity is as important as ever, perhaps even more so with new prejudicial laws passed in countries around the world, and the ever pervasive acceptance of violence against LGBTQIA people. I was really struck by statistics I read on the True Colors website, which we'll hear a bit more about later. In this country alone, 4.2 million youth experience homelessness each year, with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transgender, queer and questioning LGBTQ youth being 120% more likely to experience homelessness than non-LGBTQ peers.

"Kindred Solidarities" set out to demonstrate how acceptance, belonging, authentic living, and ultimately being loved for who you are is essential for everyone, and that it can be found outside of the biological ties that we're born into. Before we begin the conversation this evening, I would like to introduce Charles de Agustin, the Foundation's new Events and Communications Manager, as you may not have met him yet. It's wonderful to work with him. Also it is my very great pleasure to introduce the new Artistic Director of the Foundation, Anjuli Nanda Diamond. She's seated to my left there. So congratulations and good luck.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Thank you, George, and thank you all for being here tonight for "Documenting Kiki Family: The Explosion of Ballroom", a conversation on the formation of chosen families through Ballroom culture, filmmaking collaboration and fostering international LGBTQIA+ solidarity. It is my pleasure to introduce you to our three panelists for the evening.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon is a non-binary healer and ballroom participant who has collaborated with artists, filmmakers, academics, and policy makers to increase visibility for queer and trans people of color in both creative and sociopolitical spaces. In their current role as chief program officer at the True Colors United, they empower youth voices, but also create spaces for partnerships with young adults to lead the movement to end youth homelessness. Her mission is to elevate the authentic representation of the house ballroom community worldwide, and she co-wrote the Sundance selected documentary, Kiki, which we'll learn more about tonight and served as a consultant and runway choreographer on the FX series Pose, by Ryan Murphy and Steven Canals.

Sarah Jordenö is a filmmaker, visual artist, researcher, and assistant professor of film and video at the Rhode Island School of Design. Their practice resides at the intersection of art, activism, visual sociology, and documentary cinema. Jordenö directed the documentary feature film, Kiki, about a youth-led social movement for LGBTQIA youth of color in New York City, which has been shown in over 200 film festivals around the world with theatrical releases in Sweden, United States and the United Kingdom. Jordenö collaborated with Twiggy Pucci Garçon on the community public art projects, the reincarnation of Rockland Palace and PASSÉ-PRÉSENT-FUTUR. Their film and video installations have been shown at venues such as Kunsthall Charlottenborg in Copenhagen, Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, The Kitchen and MoMA PS1 in New York City.

Christopher Udemezue utilizes his Jamaican heritage, the complexities of desire for connection, healing through personal mythology and ancestry as a primary source for his work. He is the founder of the platform's RAGGA NYC and CONNEK JA, both of which we'll discuss this evening. In 2018, Udemezue was on show in The New Museum's Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon for the 40th anniversary of the museum. Udemezue has shown in a variety of galleries and museums, including The New Museum, the Queens Museum, PS1 MoMA, Bruce High Quality Foundation, Mercer Union, Recess Gallery and Anat Ebgi Gallery.

So I'll take a seat as a co-moderator, and I was wondering, Christopher, if you could start us off having been an artist that was featured in Kindred Solidarities, and give us a little bit of an introduction to your practice, particularly the works that were in the exhibition.

Christopher Udemezue:

Yeah. Hello, can everyone hear me?

Audience:

Yep. Yes.

Christopher Udemezue:

Hello. Hey!

Audience:

Hi.

Christopher Udemezue:

Hey! My name is Chris and this is Selene and my friend Cory and my friend Rylance's hand in the corner. Can you see it? This is one of the pieces that was in the show for Kindred Spirits-

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Kindred Solidarities.

Christopher Udemezue:

Solidarities. My practice is a lot of community based work and also visual work. I use photography, installation, sculpture and video to create pieces that tell the story of people who have often been have their histories taken away from them or not to the front. So I could see myself through that, whether that be community or my blood family or my chosen family. The programming work I do is I am the founder of a project called RAGGA NYC where I highlight and center queer Caribbean people and their

allies here in the city, and I have extensions in Toronto, in LA, and now in Jamaica, which is great. I'm actually going to Jamaica tonight. Through that connection to Jamaica, I also am the co-founder of a project called CONNEK JA where we highlight and celebrate queer Caribbean people in Jamaica. We throw parties in Jamaica. It's safe. It's fab, and we highlight the people doing amazing work there.

We'll get to that, but in Jamaica right now, there really is, and I encourage everyone to look into it, there is a movement that is reminiscent of what was happening here. We always talk about the late '70s and the '80s in New York City where people weren't taking it anymore and standing up for their rights. And if anything, solidarity across borders is necessary to help our sisters and brothers there get to a beautiful place where they can be free to be themselves. So I am in allyship working with them and making thangs.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Amazing. Thank you so much. We wanted to talk just a little bit more, we can play the clip that's introducing your organizations. The clip can do the talking best.

Recording:

[Excerpt] CONNEK is a charitable project and a platform dedicated to connecting queer folks and our allies across cultural borders through online media, storytelling, and events.

[Excerpt] With the power of travel and in-person gatherings, CONNEK works to build community by hosting inclusive events throughout the year. Against all odds and trivial media, Kingston is about to have their fifth Pride.

[Excerpt] At this critical moment in Jamaica's queer liberation, the next mission is to help develop often shortsighted perception of what queerness is in the Caribbean.

[Excerpt] There is no time like the present to bridge the gap of connection and aid in this country's already courageous movement towards the future.

Audience:

Woo!

Christopher Udemezue:

That's a little short introduction. So as you can see, there's so much work to be doing and there's amazing programs in Jamaica, one of them being JFLAG, another one being TransWave that are doing amazing work in the island. But what we wanted to add to the conversation was creating a time that brought the conversation for allyship from outside the country and also brought joy. I think often when we think about third world countries, we're thinking about resources. We're thinking about sending money so people can have X, Y, and Z. But for CONNEK, we're working with these institutions in the community there to foster happiness. I mean a prime example being Jamaica has been on curfew for the last two years plus meaning no one can be outside their house past 12:00.

I was there during 2021 for this kind of trip, and seriously, you could not leave your house. There was a lockdown during the weekend when we got there. So we were going to either resorts so we can move about. We got stopped by a police officer with a gun like this big. "Where are you going?" "We're going to a resort. Don't hurt us." People cannot move and have a life. Obviously, to keep people safe, the island did not have resources to withstand a huge outbreak, but I think that where CONNEK tries to [inaudible 00:11:10] resources is when we find each other and keep each other safe and find joy. I think

that is so important that we often aren't thinking about when we're thinking about other places, especially third world countries and especially black countries.

So next CONNEK party, if we can, is going to be this summer and we're hanging out with a bunch of hosts and DJs and it's all queer hire, queer venue, queer everybody in Jamaica, Kingston. It's going to be lit because everyone's been on curfew forever. I'm excited to see everyone go into [inaudible 00:11:44] and mostly relax and just really foster joy. I mean, everyone's going through so much. COVID's been really intense and I think that a precipice like this is a way to, even myself, open up my eyes to the privileges that I have as an American born in this country, but to connect to not only a black country but obviously my family's [inaudible 00:12:03]. Often assimilation destroys those ties. I think a lot of people specifically in the city, a city made up of immigrants and understand the connection of what it means to look back and to connect in real life through joy.

George Bolster:

Excellent.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Thank you. Yeah.

George Bolster:

Christopher, I was hoping we might go back to one of your pieces and then tell us the narrative story, the scenario for this is quite important for both of the pieces.

Christopher Udemzue:

So this piece, that's me on the corner right there. I'm in all the work because [inaudible 00:12:38] talk about it. These are some of my friends, Corey, Markavel, and Lorraine. So a lot of the pieces from this collection where I looked into the history to find my queer self. Often, when we hear about queerness in the Caribbean, someone was attacked. There was danger. It's a very sad story and there is no on record storytelling that's centered around queerness when it comes to the Caribbean. So what I did is I found stories that I thought were inspiring in general or where I could see the line to queer history.

If we actually go to the previous piece, the story of this piece is telling the history of William Thomas Beckford, who was a slave owner and a queer man himself who fled London because they were going to kill him because he was outed. And he went to Jamaica, this is a white man, went to Jamaica, created one of the largest plantations to date and was safe obviously because he was there away from the dangers of the British empire. That was the only time that I saw in Jamaican history where queerness is mentioned outside the buggery law that still exists and placed by European nations. I thought I could make an image about him, but what would it be to tell the story of that clearly queerness existed and always has, but to remind of that, what would it be to tell the story about these queer boys and queer girls and non-binary people who existed in Jamaica that loved, lived, danced, found each other, and after a long day did go sit in the grass and hold each other.

I didn't want to center violence. I did want to make it honest that they do have scars and they are watching out for what is beyond the bushes, but really center compassion and love and romance because I do think that's important that, again, my work like I was just talking about, the CONNEK project where we see the full community of people, especially around queer ancestors that they weren't just workers or people in danger. That they also have love, and I think that that makes me feel wholesome that I wasn't just someone who built the empire that we have the advantage of today, that

my queer ancestors were more than just their labor, more than just their pain. They had love, had connection, had sisterhood.

So I centered them in the picture and actually that's Thomas in the bushes over there, and you don't even really catch him unless you're looking close at the image because I wanted to center these unnamed boys, these unnamed queer people, who so many of them are unnamed, but what is their story, and to open that up with beauty and majesty.

George Bolster:

Yes. They're very compelling. I mean everybody who saw the show was just obsessed. And especially with the scary hand in the corner-

Christopher Udemezue:

This scary little hand in the corner.

George Bolster:

Yeah. Very foreboding. So before we play a clip from Kiki, I was just wondering if Twiggy and Sara, you could tell us how you met and how you became co-writers essentially.

Sara Jordenö:

Yeah. Twiggy go for it.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Yeah.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

You go.

Sara Jordenö:

It's 10 years ago. It's really crazy to think that it's been 10 years. It's more than 10 years ago that we met in Harlem. I was doing field work up there for a very unrelated project and borrowed room in the community based organization that Twiggy worked at the time. And then just, I don't know, it was this energy. There was this light somehow coming from Twiggy's desk. I don't know. Somehow we found each other. I mean, how the hell? How did it happen? But, do you want to fill in how? Okay. No, okay, okay. I'll do this. All right, all right.

So basically we found each other and then it was Twiggy and other members of the Kiki scene had told me about the Kiki scene leaders in the Kiki scene. They took me to, I was in practices and visiting houses and was just led into the space. There was this amazing gift that's saying let's make a film. Let's collaborate. So this terrifying gift, I usually call it this terrifying gift because I was so amazed by this community and by the leaders and I felt terrified as an artist to be able to do it justice and was I the right person to do it.

The only way that really it could have happened is our connection and that it was a truly, a collaboration and a co-writing process. We met every week. It was a long process, a lot of hard work.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Four years.

Sara Jordenö:

Yeah. Yeah, four, five years to make the film. So it was a journey. I should also say though that it was us, of course, but then it was also the people that are in the film and also the people that we worked with, the cinematographer, the sound recorders. It's like this kind of became a community that we built and I think that really made a huge impact on the kind of film that it became that we were really... and there were choreographers. Yeah.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Should we jump in? All right.

Recording:

(singing)

Everything is a transition, and I feel like a lot of people can relate to that experience. People dressed me up to be something else. I was socialized to be something else and now I have to deconstruct all of that to get to where I was supposed to be. If it was left up to me, I would have done it different. I was four when I said I was a girl.

In a hetero society, everyone's the same. That's what they promote. The Kiki scene was a space for youth development. Everyone's unique and the Kiki scene is a place for young people to explore that uniqueness.

(singing)

All right, bitches [inaudible 00:21:39] up in here, and I see the legendary Chi Chi. I'm dreaming about dick bitch. I'm dreaming about dick bitch.

Not everybody's going to understand the dynamic and concept of what ballroom is, what the Kiki scene is especially. But for me, I relate it as a safe haven, as a place that allows youth that haven't been fortunate to get an opportunity to have their family, their friends or have that support or network in place to find that. It's a safe haven.

Audience:

Woo!

Recording:

We'll start with a moment of silence.

Our community is on very intimate terms with death and that comes from complications from HIV. It comes from police brutality. It comes from all sorts of health issues. It comes from suicide. It comes from hate crimes. It comes from a lot of things. Obviously, we've gathered here to honor Travis. It was something about him from the very first time I saw him, and it was just this light about Travis, and just like all these candle lights here. Travis was a friend. He was a son. A brother, a sister to many. And I know it's a sad occasion when anyone passes, but you have to think about it from the perspective of his last month here he was in a lot of pain, and Travis isn't in pain anymore. The guiding light that so many of you speak about, he can still continue to be.

So today, I salute Travis. Travis lives on through each and every one of you who showed up today, and Travis is here today.

(singing)

I used to get abused when I was younger. I kind of went through it all. I went through the emotional abuse, like the verbal. I went through the physical. I went through sexual, not with my family, but I was molested at eight years old. When you're so young and something like that happened to you, you don't really know how to handle it. I didn't open up about it till I got older. So even to this day it's kind of hard for me to deal with it. So I lashed out, and I also [inaudible 00:26:10] with my family. That's why I used to get suspended a lot. The voguing scene really did help me because when I vogue, that's why I give so much when I vogue because it's more of an emotion. Voguing is not just a dance to me. Voguing is an art. It's like an outlet to me.

I don't see our story being told in history. What does it mean for the black LGBT community for our story and ballroom is a part of that story to not be anywhere. Rockland Palace was a space in the 1920s and '30s where the original drag balls were held. Thousands of people gathered at Rockland Palace to see these drag balls, and it was a space in which black and brown LGBTQ people in Harlem were able to be who they felt were their true selves and to express themselves.

I'm Twiggy. This is Sara Jordanö. January of this year, we started a project to expose the Kiki scene to mainstream society. While we were doing research we discovered this place, which in the 1920s and '30s was Rockland Palace where the original Harlem drag balls were held. So tonight, we're going to reincarnate this place and have a Kiki ball here. Many of you know Travis [inaudible 00:28:11] PUCCL, rest in peace, who we lost earlier this year. So I want to thank someone special that's in the crowd, Travis's mother.

Who's coming? Hold on. Somebody come with me.

When people step onto the ballroom floor, they're not just competing in a category; they're telling their story. So someone who walks is telling you I am beautiful. This is who I am. I'm lovely. No matter what you say, no matter what you think, I am beautiful.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Yes.

Audience:

Woo!

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Just to prompt another question. Thank you so much for that. I think it's very illuminating for everyone to see the work that you both put into it and also the community, that you really were, as you said, exposing. But I think there's so much kinship between all three of your practices, both individually and collectively in terms of, again, histories that aren't necessarily written in the way that we view them today and being the pioneers of documenting that for mainstream society. But, Twiggy and Sara, just I wondered if you could expand a little bit on some goals that you had when making the film and the impacts of it being released both personally and for the ballroom scene in a larger sense, and whether there were any unexpected outcomes for you from that.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Yeah. I mean, I think that there are many goals, but some of which were articulated in that clip, but I think those shifted and changed, I think, over the course of time. Obviously, we were documenting the Kiki scene, but I think for me, I always say hindsight is 20/20, and I think it wound up being a sort of

memoir of sorts, a love letter to the community to not just tell the stories and explain how it all works, but really to capture a moment of the folks' lives who were in it, and to your point earlier, to really visually articulate the beauty and the joy in the midst of so much sorrow and so much pain, so much death.

Sara Jordenö:

Yeah, I mean the film is a lot of things, but we chose this in parts, too, to show the... and the clips actually are from pretty early in our collaboration. And, you know, as a documentarian, the little shifts like your approach mean so much, and part of being in the film world is to pitch the film. I can't tell you how many times I had to meet with these, sorry, like cis gender film dudes who are like, "Well, what's special about this," and "Haven't we seen this before?" I'm like, "Oh you mean 'Paris is Burning' like 25 years ago and 'The Queen' 20 years prior?" And had to really fight for it, and they really wanted to make it like a brand and spec the goal, and that was a real fight. That's where I felt like we were so strong because we were just like-

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

No.

Sara Jordenö:

No. No. Fuck no. Then to really push forward and carefully think about the approach and... So that was really important. And then I think focusing on the community and activism back home of ballroom. But in the film world, they would be like, "We want to see dancing beautiful black bodies," and then it was so great to have... that we were there and we're like why do you want that?

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

What is that about?

Sara Jordenö:

Yeah, what's that about? So it was just really a wonderful collaboration in that way.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Yeah. I mean, I think that speaks to the nature and the power of collaborative work in that way. I mean, Christopher, too in your artistic practice and in your photography, you feature your friends and people that you know, and in our conversations you make the sets. Your friends are doing the makeup, that it is this kind of collaborative process. I think there's that strength that people find in community. I find it so interesting that you're saying when you're pitching it in a more mainstream sense that people want to do it through a lens of commercialization that doesn't always allow for nuance and it's hard to retain who you're telling that story for. Are you telling it for the people whose community it is or are you telling it in this... You want to resist that otherization that can happen so often with marginalized communities. Yeah.

Christopher Udemezue:

I really love this idea that we're just sending a love letter. A love letter to come from within the family. And the meeting we had before this panel, we mentioned the importance of we have to tell our own



stories because we know that we may want to expose this community but we know we're doing it with love.

Christopher Udemezue:

Sometimes you don't hit the marker, but if it's coming from within the community then there's you'll understand the nuances you'll have to show all the pieces from all the sides, not just bits and parts that people would enjoy, which I why think love is so necessary.

George Bolster:

I mean it felt like you were an intrinsic part of the community, right. It felt like there was a massive sense of trust between you and the people who were participating in the film, both of you. I mean, but also that, I mean, was it challenging at times working with people who are vulnerable or going through different phases of their life that are quite traumatic, perhaps?

Sara Jordenö:

Yeah, well, can I... Yeah. I do want to say, and this is important in my work and my background, I have an enormous amount of privilege of course, and I don't see that I have a membership in the Kiki scene I do want to say, and this is important in my work and like my background, like I have an enormous amount of privilege of course, and was I don't see that I have a membership in the Kiki scene, but I am a lover of the scene. I love the scene.

But that said, I do have some sensitivities that I... Let's face it, my background partially growing up in the foster care system in Sweden, and I'm not privilege or money. I do think that that affects my work and my ability to connect with people that are going through... I think that makes it easier to have a dialogue there, and also I think that makes... you know. But it was crucial still because we would talk. We were like, "Can we use this clip?"

I do want to say there was this moment, because that was like the second day, second film day for this process. We were first talking and talking and talking and planning, and then there was this first day and we'd become close, but Twiggy was just talking about this person that died. I realized that death was a big part of your life and then you told me about the vision, and I was like can we do this if people know me yet? I remember a moment, and I don't remember if I fabricated this, but I felt like you challenged me because it was like this is happening. Don't look away. It's important that it's also documented and that we don't... It's actually important to go close there. If you do it in the right way, you can do it in a collaborative way, like a loving way and respectful way. So that was conversations that we had, but then we had to make decisions on footage.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Yeah.

Sara Jordenö:

Yeah.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Yeah, I mean to make a film this real you have to face the facts, right? And Travis died, that's a fact. The house got together and put on that vigil for him. His mom was there. Everyone was there and no one documented it but us for this film. So they wouldn't even have that piece of-

George Bolster:

Memory.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Memory had we not, right? So it was important to be... People throw around the word authentic, but really, really here for the shit. This is what's happening, so we have to get it.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Absolutely. It's almost like the world that the film documents, as you said, it's happening. It's happening nonstop. It doesn't just turn on for the cameras and turn off. These are actual people's lives, and I think that is such a crucial part when you're working with people who are at risk, at risk of violence or of homelessness or of a myriad of things in their daily lives that, yes, the visibility that can come with mainstream success and through film and through television, but at the same time, I'm sure there are complications to that.

I wondered what both of your approach was to, like George said, gaining trust in the community. I know that you were an active member before that. But for people to feel comfortable having their face, their name, their stories, people are extremely honest in the film about all of the struggles of their life and the joys of it, too. But I just wondered if you could talk about that.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Yeah, I think that they... It's like the Kiki scene is a community and it's a scene, and house is a family. So all of us are family. So that trust is intrinsic and implicit. And I think because of our approach, and actually the cowriting process and editing process, I don't know of other projects that were as thoughtful as we were. We had community screenings. We had actual sit downs with people in the film like are you okay with us using this.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Yeah.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

And that's not [inaudible 00:41:00]. So I think that we intentionally did it differently and we know the standard to meet. So...

Sara Jordanö:

I mean it's a big problem. It's important to understand how films are made and how little power sometimes directors and writers have.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Mm-hmm.

Sara Jordanö:

So we had meetings with HBO. They [inaudible 00:41:28]. They keep final cuts. So, that would've taken [inaudible 00:41:33], and that was not acceptable. It was just not acceptable. So this is also where, I'm

from Sweden, so we were able to move to Sweden to be able to finish the film because if you move there, you can get funding for the editing.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:  
Seriously.

Sara Jordenö:  
That was insane. And then meetings constantly with Twiggy-

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:  
From Sweden.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:  
Pre-Zoom, right?

Sara Jordenö:  
From Sweden-

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:  
Skype was it?

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:  
It wasn't Zoom.

Sara Jordenö:  
It's just, oh, you're here. Can I introduce... Shantel's in the film.

(applause)

Shantel:  
Hi.

George Bolster:  
Hi.

Sara Jordenö:  
Well, do you want water?

Shantel:  
No, I'm all right.

Sara Jordenö:

Actually, if I can quickly since Shantel came... So here's one choice. So Shantel, this was the meeting where I had gotten to know Myeshia through Twiggy of course. And then Myeshia messaged me and said, "Oh, do you want to come and meet my friend, Shantel?" I had like a crew there. I had our crew there, but then I was like, "I can't meet Shantel with film crew." This is not how the... We need to have a meeting first and get to know each other. You can't just come with a camera like, hi.

But it was a really amazing meeting with Shantel who I admire very much and you saw in the last clip one [inaudible 00:43:36] category there. But yeah, so that was it happened kind of organically also in terms of the trust, but there were actually films... We were filming when Myeshia... We were filming that part with Shantel's meeting, and then I was like we can't use this. We need to cut it because it's not right. The cinematographer was like, "But this is the money shot." I'm like no. No. It's like it's not right to film it here and to do not use that footage, okay. I didn't even bring it... I just cut it. I was like this doesn't feel right. So yeah. That was one of those moments.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Yeah.

Sara Jordenö:

If that makes sense.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

It does, and further to that in terms of branching out further, Twiggy, I know on the prep call you talked about the Haus of Commes Des Garçon and branching out internationally. How does it, in terms of community, moving from a local to a international scale, and I think, Christopher, you could also talk to this, how does that work in terms of not ownership per se, but how do you maintain a structure and a kinship, especially you were saying with countries that maybe you've never been to? How do you foster those relationships and keep them alive?

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

I can only speak for my house individually. Every house has their own approach, but our approach is very anti-colonial. So we won't start a chapter in a place we haven't been at all, and I've cut ties and connections to those who are interested. Like there are folks in houses that are just like, "Oh, we should have a chapter there," and that's not our thing. Ballroom's global. That's just a fact. It's been global for a very long time now, whether most people know that or not. And people recognize your house and the attributes of your house and decide or reach out if they want to be a part. So that oftentimes starts the conversations. Lots of travel a lot for work. So I'm able to go a lot of places and meet people in that way.

But houses are extremely, extremely, extremely meticulous and organized. The structure of the house, like my house actually is a nonprofit. But even prior to us attaining the nonprofit status, that's just how structured the house is, and most of them are. So there's executive teams. There's leadership teams. Each chapter has leaders. It is extremely organized. So to replicate the model is not very difficult.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Wow.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Yeah.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

I mean it's important to have that organization, but I... Yeah, sorry, I just I think that's an interesting part for people who know of ballroom, but myself not being a part of that community, I think that organizational structure is so interesting. I know we talk about these houses coming out of real need of vulnerability and necessity of needing to find kinship in other ways outside of say biological ties, but it's amazing that they form in such an official way that you can really have a global reach.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Mm-hmm.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

And I think, Christopher... yeah.

Christopher Udemezue:

And typically with the work that I'm doing with RAGGA and CONNEK, I started the project because the story of RAGGA is that I was seeing all these amazing people in the dancehall being like who is that girl? And I would find out that they were Caribbean and that kept happening time and time again, realizing that, oh yes, there's such a huge Caribbean community in the city and there was obviously a huge queer community in the city. Those things overlap. So time and time again, I was seeing someone who was Dominican or has Haitian parents, et cetera, et cetera.

So I created RAGGA because I'm like well we must have a space to celebrate that. I know through my own personal experience that I feel divided in those two identities of my cultural roots and my queerness. Is anyone else going through that? Where can we find a space to celebrate that [inaudible 00:47:52], et cetera. So it started very personally with very close friends and people I would see. Then to extend it was through, in some ways, very official ways. I got a show for RAGGA in Toronto, but also in unofficial ways where I just went to Jamaica because I had been afraid to go for so long. I literally got on the plane and was terrified, fully realizing I was letting trauma and media creep into my own psyche.

Got off the plane and was fine. I met a bunch of queer people and it was [inaudible 00:48:20] "If you don't come sit down and smoke [inaudible 00:48:26] sit down and [inaudible 00:48:28]. "What's up? What's up?" And everyone's like you need to take the New York City energy down and relax and take a shot. I was like, "Cute," [inaudible 00:48:40] and really building an intimate relationship with these people, these people who are my family in a very real way. So I met with [inaudible 00:48:50], partied with a lot of the family there in Jamaica for a year plus before we even thought about doing CONNEK. I wanted to do something to... I felt this huge weight realizing the privilege that I have as an American with an American passport of guilt that I realized there's no sense in me having this guilt and not doing anything with it in a very constructive and beautiful way.

So we build CONNEK in a way where we can center joy but also bringing an awareness [inaudible 00:49:20] to all of these things that's happening in Jamaica and kind of pull more people into my experience. And we just hopped on a plane. It was [inaudible 00:49:30] everyone to have meetings and a panel. Sat on the plane, got off the plane, had some dinner, went to a party, met people and just like chilled. Found joy in a space where I was told it was danger. I found my family. I found a whole new family. And I've seen that happen with... The two trips we've had so far would come inspecting the works. They'd come but they realized, after it's a long weekend that they realized in the first two hours that we're just here to celebrate and to connect. That's why we called it CONNEK.

And really, I've had so many testimonials that kind of mirror my own experience where people like, "Oh, I never..." There's one attendee who came and she's like, "I've been longing to see and meet other trans people from Jamaica," and she's from Jamaica. She left when she was a child. She was like, "This is something I would never have access to if I didn't come on this trip." And not in a very structured way, but in a way we're just spending time together in a very real way. So sometimes it's set up and sometimes it's just let's just be with each other, which I think happened both [inaudible 00:50:36] depending on what [inaudible 00:50:37] doing.

Sara Jordenö:

Yeah. Can I ask this question about that because I've been thinking about this notion of a counter-hierarchical space, and I would just say that... Because what Twiggy described is like I mean ballroom is like the most effective activism I've ever seen. It's super organized, and I see that it is hierarchical, but it's not in that horrible way that I hate. There's something, and I've been thinking about this notion of a counter-hierarchical in these spaces. So maybe that is in that. I don't know. What do you think about that?

Christopher Udemezue:

Yeah, I think the thing, for at least what I've noticed, a lot of the dolls and people that I've met in Jamaica, there already is so much I think obviously always need more support, but there's so much support and organizations around sex education and resources. There's not a lot of... When we were talking to [inaudible 00:51:37] "What can we do that's actually going to mean something to people souls?" She was like, "A lot of the work that JFLAG and TransWave are doing are so important that they... people need joy. That's the one thing that's missing. Like you're a New Yorker. [inaudible 00:51:51] New York, come back. I just want to drink water for months. I want to go out." You get to live your full life, full loves. People need that here, and everyone throwing a party... There's parties that'll pop up in Jamaica, but the bigger parties like Pride are thrown by the people who are also doing panels. So they're not the club kids. They're not the lovers of the scenes. They're the organizers. So where's the fire? Where's the passion? Where's the like who wants to make love tonight, girl? They need that, and I'm like well then let's do that and partnering with people who are doing the organizational work to have a combination. So where it was split and we would have done something different. So it's really just, again, finding [inaudible 00:52:38] and [inaudible 00:52:38] so it's not just, well I think you need this or you should do this. It's like they're missing or need more spaces for joy and happiness and passion and that's where hopefully CONNEK is adding to that story and that's already happening.

George Bolster:

Just two observations really. One, we were both really struck by the film in the sense that it was very for you know, firstly, when you do a documentary about an ax murderer, you get an eight part series and no one ever questions why you're actually making this.

So it says a lot about society really. And another thing that we noticed was that there was a quietness and a poetic quality to this film that it felt almost like a piece of art as a documentary in documentary forum in a way. But also, that the way it was paced was really very poetic and beautifully done. I think you can actually tell that it took that amount of time to make that film. So I would advise everyone to watch it because it's wonderful.

The... Ooh, I've completely lost my train of thought. Oh yeah, so could you talk a little bit about True Colors and your involvement with that organization?

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Sure.

George Bolster:

Thank you.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

True Colors United, which was created as True Colors Fund is an international nonprofit organization co-founded by Cyndi Lauper maybe 15 years ago. Initially, it was created to raise awareness about LGBTQ youth homelessness and all of their work were sort of public campaigns. Then my mentor, Dr. Jama Shelton came onboard and created the Forty to None project, which was a research project around the intricacies and nuance of why. Why is it 40%. So I came into True Colors at 2014, so I would say eight years. Now our work is four-fold. So we do advocacy and public policy domestically and abroad. We do technical assistance to communities so that they are working with young people with the expertise to be meaningfully involved in the strategies and the plans to aid homelessness at the community level.

We do training and education with service providers. So shelters, transitional living spaces, permanent supportive housing around LGBTQ identity, and we work with young people directly in our action program area. So we have a program called the National Youth Leadership for Homelessness. 20 young people from around the country of varying identities, the one thing they have in common is at some point they had experienced housing instability. So they come up with a national policy agenda. They go on the Hill and they convene with people in different ways to make sure that they're engaged in the work at the local level.

Audience:

Wow.

Anjali Nanda Diamond:

Amazing.

Anjali Nanda Diamond:

Yeah, amazing. Well, we do want to have time to open it up for audience questions. So I'll just ask just a few more talking points because we had a long prep session where we touched on so many different things. But one thing I wanted to talk about, we've kind of covered, but in terms of as we talked about, the mainstream visibility of historically marginalized communities and what it means to, one, be a face of that for both you too as co-writers, but also in terms of the people in that film, what are some of the downsides that can come with that and lessons learned or things that we can take away? I mean when we were talking previously, I feel like there needs to be more space for mistakes. I mean it's not like you're writing the only narrative that there is, but often it can feel that way, and I wondered if you could expand on that.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

I mean, from my perspective, it's been a lot about the assumptions that people have made about us, about what it means to make into a film, about the festival tour that happens. It was [inaudible 00:56:59] festivals. But people assume, make so many assumptions specifically around money, like that because it was successful, because it's a good film that it made a lot of money, and that's just not true.

And assumptions that people make around your humanity and how it all impacts you and affects you and the weight of a project like this just on an individual basis, it was like we don't have a choice but to get this right, and how heavy does that feel and what if people still don't think we did it right, right? But yeah.

Sara Jordenö:

I mean there isn't just one story. I think that was also the struggle with those film dudes. I mean I can be very pissed off easily. So I was just unable to say like, "We've seen this before," and I'm like, "How many times have you seen a growing up story, coming of age story about white cisgender male and all that." I'm like, "That story's repeated over and over and over again, and there's nuance to this." But still, I think it becomes a weight of then is it the film 's there's but so, but still, I think it becomes a weight of then, is it the film about this. That was not our intention or it couldn't be. We couldn't do that, but this is also part of document. This is a relationship now. The film exists and we have it and I think that what defines a document filmmaker or an artist is your relationship to the community that you're working with before, during production, and then when you finalize a film in editing and then after. This is a relationship that will never end. I had a really beautiful conversation recently because there's two of the characters in the film. We don't call them characters. I call them participants, transitioned during the... The film documents their transition-

George Bolster:

Wow.

Sara Jordenö:

And we did have conversations with them seriously, "Do you want to have this documented?" It becomes, this is now a document that exists in the world and there was... They said yes, and there were a conversation around that. But I recently talked to, very recently talked to... The reason for that, of course, is that then... Sariah that I talked to recently couldn't be stealth. There will always be an account of her transition. And actually, I talked to her and I asked her, "Do you have regrets?" She said, "Well, it was weaponized against me actually." But she's like, "But I still am happy about the film experience. It was powerful. It was good. You created a community around it and I'm happy with it, but it was weaponized. Someone who found some image and did something on Instagram or whatever."

I was so grateful that we could have that conversation that I was like... She wasn't worried that she would hurt us or, you know. It's reality. That's how it is. Does that make sense?

George Bolster:

Yeah.

Sara Jordenö:

That was super important that we could have that honest conversation that it's, no, it's not always... It's not easy. It's not either like a super successful film that captures everything in an ethical perfect way or it's like an exploitative film that is bad. It's a process.

Anjali Nanda Diamond:

Totally.



Sara Jordenö:

Yeah.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I think the word that keeps coming to mind for me is nuance and so often there's this like flattening of history and of stories. As you said, this isn't the documentary about... You're not writing an anthology about this. You're trying to show a snippet, a moment in time of community as it's existing and trying to celebrate that as it is. I think it's so important for people to give room to nuances, right? That it can be an absolutely successful film and partnership and foster wonderful relations and understanding about a community and broaden visibility, and at the same time, there can be negative reactions. And I think a lot of times in our day and age, we don't give enough room for that flexibility for that criticism, right?

There's a healthy space of criticism that can exist that doesn't automatically mean that something was bad or was a failure, right? And just like I've been thinking about this in terms of curatorially speaking and in the arts that we operate on this good or bad binary whereas in, say the sciences, the scientific method is all about failure. Failure is actually proving your point or, you know, oh, then I'm going to try something else. It's like how do we shift our way of evaluating success in a better sense that everyone can have a buy-in or equity to that less blame, less finger pointing. I think people often want to criticize or blame, call out in a way because they don't feel like their voice will ever be heard otherwise. It's like how do we open up discourse so that people don't feel like this will be their... Their only chance is to take down someone else that they can tell their story authentically in the future, I guess.

Christopher Udemezue:

[inaudible 01:03:28] I've been thinking about that a lot too in relation to my own personal life. With art there are many... I mean I've thought about this and until it happens in your direct life like, oh yes, this is very real. When you're making work of art about marginalized people and you're a part of that group, you know the trauma and the pain because you feel it in your bones. You go to bed with it. You wake up with it. You talk to your parents about it. It's very real and present.

So when I'm working with people who have experienced this said trauma and they say to me, "Take that picture down," or "Actually, I don't feel comfortable with that. Can you talk about this or I changed my mind because I just changed my mind," I get it because I'll be in one place today and be [inaudible 01:04:14] conversation just because this healing process is not just absolute. It's lifelong, and I think that if anything the work we're making is trying to make space for that conversation and for that joy and healing because it is always moving and turning. I mean not to jump in all the things, but even within my own personal family, like my blood family, there was so much chaos and trauma that happened in the last year that reminded that, oh right, what that trauma even looks like, because trauma is such a big word that people use often, it can look like many things, especially when it comes to people of color, when it comes to queer people and immigrants.

So to move with empathy and also move with an energy where you can be open for change and for a conversation and for it to not be absolute is the best because we're all just trying to figure this out. And to attack is not the best. I think that this work that we're doing is opening up the space for that conversation. I think that's all we can do.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

I wanted to see... Oh sorry, Sara. I wanted to see if anyone in the audience had any questions for our panelists. I'll pass to you.

A:

Good evening.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Good evening.

A:

I'm [inaudible 01:05:37] also known as [inaudible 01:05:38].

Audience:

Ooh, yeah. Hey.

A:

[inaudible 01:05:41] I used to [inaudible 01:05:44] balls back in the '90s. I have a page of old school ballroom and me and Doug [inaudible 01:05:48], we're producing, in the beginning stages of producing a documentary on the history of ball. So listening to you speak is that journey we've just started. So if you have any advice. I mean I know that we could be here all night, but do you have one thing that you could tell us in the beginning of our journey, what would that be? Because I know that a lot of the struggles that you went through to create this documentary is what we're going through also.

There's so many stories, so many angles that we can tell the story and we just want to listen to what you have to say, because again, there's a lot of meetings that we're planning on having with a lot of people that are not necessarily going to get what we want to say. And we need funding, so there has to be a game that we have to play in order to get that. So what advice can you give us?

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

My number one is transparency and even I would go as far as to say teaching about the documentary process with the people you're working with. I think that the assumptions that I mentioned before that happened post the film could have been avoided if everyone knew the process. And obviously, that the process is not linear, but just some of those milestones like what does it mean to make a documentary and what happens in pre and end production, post production. When the film gets released what happens? What are those conversations that happen if you take the customer route, if you take the buyer route?

So I think as much about the process that you can articulate to whomever is participating, please do it.

Sara Jordanö:

But wait, what? You have an archive of videos from the '90s.

A:

Yeah, I call it a page.

Sara Jordanö:

That's amazing.

George Bolster:

Major.

A:

Yeah.

Sara Jordenö:

Oh my god. I'm like, wait, what? I so want to see that documentary.

George Bolster:

Old school ballroom.

Sara Jordenö:

Oh my god, we need to talk. But I mean it's just, again, this is where I think there's been a lot of progress made also with Pose and a lot more... The film world has opened up both the documentary and more like the mainstream that there needs to be a lot of different stories. I think it becomes, as Twiggy talks about, if you become the weight that you're making the record, that's a very difficult, impossible position to be in. But I would say watch your funding. Choose your producer very carefully. We stopped these producers that I trusted and that we had amazing producers in Sweden. And do co-production in Europe. Sorry, I'm afraid of American funding sometimes, but you can do co-productions there because it's... There's a lot of strategies in terms of looking at the strings attached and keep your final cut.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Don't be afraid to say no.

Sara Jordenö:

Yeah.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

I'm sure we... Yeah, I won't [inaudible 01:09:07], but yeah.

George Bolster:

It could have been a two year project is what you're saying if you had [inaudible 01:09:14].

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

That's an interpretation of [inaudible 01:09:18].

A:

Thank you.

Fred:

Hello.

George Bolster:

Hi.

Anjali Nanda Diamond:

Hi.

Fred:

Hi, I'm Fred and I'm a producer with BRIC which is a [inaudible 01:09:27]. How are you? She's a good friend of mine. Recently in 2019, I also executive produced on the TV team a short documentary about the ball scene dating back to the '60s called Werk, W-E-R-K. It was only about 13 minutes, and we worked with Lisa and some of the OGs of the movement at this point and took it back to [inaudible 01:09:57]. So I really can appreciate the work that you're doing, but this is done under the guise of, and in support of your organization. That said, it goes to the independent route which, of course, you all are taking or have taken.

So with regard to content that reflects, whether its photography or film, people of color globally, the conversation continues, and even at the meetings I'm in about where budgets go, what's our next project, what happened after the premier, I'm struggling with, and I wonder if this came up with the idea of who decides, right? And also, did you go, in terms of owning the narrative and being both the creator of the narrative, how important is that right now about being on the inside telling your stories versus having the outside telling your stories? I think the narrator talked about lanes. Where are we with that and what do you think is going to happen next in the industry?

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

Go ahead.

Sara Jordenö:

Okay. There's a lot to unpack-

Fred:

That was a lot.

Sara Jordenö:

-In that. I think that authorship is a myth. Film is inherently a collaborative process. It can be really a lot of it is who you collaborate with and the kind of space or platform that you can create with that. I think that it's nuanced. I don't know if I can answer in terms of telling your own story. I wish I could cite this. I was just reading something about it and I was thinking about this notion like you can only tell your story that you have experience, direct lived experience from or can you make a film that's a conversation? But also, in this particular situation, in ballroom I felt everyone, or I was communicated to, everyone has a role. Everyone has like what can you give? That was something that I, at the time, responded to. I was like, okay, I'm going to throw everything I got at this be I'm so impressed and I feel so much love for this. So that's what I did, and I think that if films can be conversations and there are people that want to do that in an honest way, but who decides, oh, you keep your final cut? That's your main question, right? Am I addressing this in [inaudible 01:13:11] way?

Fred:

Oh yeah. Yeah, no you are, but again, ownership also in terms of you also mentioned words like authenticity. Am I taking the picture or is someone taking the picture of me?

Sara Jordanö:

Yeah.

Fred:

Am I telling the story or is someone else's lens deciding what makes the final cut or not? So I just wondered with the success or the buzz around LGBTQ or queer programming that we're all experiencing, is there a point of exploitation that needs to be talked about or considered? Is there a point where all this becomes bad? Where do we go from here?

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

I genuinely think it's about the team that you compose because there are folks whose ego tells them that they get to make that decision and there are teams that just make decisions together. We were a team that made many decisions together and I'm working on a project now with a really great team that we decide together and if something's off, then no one person, even the director included, is moving forward. So I think it's about the team. It's also about having these types of conversations with said team to say what is our line in the sand on this, on this, on this, on this.

We are working with a streamer, and it's been, they're really invested in the project. They've proven that they're really invested in the project and they're great with the vision and, because of the nature of the project, we know that they have given bigger budgets, you know what I mean? So it's just like what is our line in the sand here? Do we want to get this project on this platform because it will reach so many people guaranteed or is it the... you know what I mean? So it really is, at least for my experience from that project to this project, even on Pose in my very limited capacity, it was about the team and who got to... I didn't have deciding power. In a lot of those calls I wasn't the director. I wasn't the producer. I was an AD. It was about the team. So I think, yeah, it's the team.

Fred:

Assembling a team.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

It is. Absolutely is.

Anjali Nanda Diamond:

That's super important.

George Bolster:

I have a quick question. So how much money actually came from Europe for the film?

Sara Jordanö:

A lot, but a lot of the funding came from Scandinavia. Yeah. And-

Christopher Udemezue:

Check those opening credits.

Sara Jordanö:

Yeah. And it was co-production with Laura Cheadle, Hardworking Movies, and this company called Story that made... And the reason that when I pitched this, I'm like I think we want these producers because they made that film The Black Power Mixtape, and I felt like that they did that in a... Swedish people making films about black power movement. Like how on earth did they do that? I felt like they negotiated. They had some experience in negotiating position and also to carve out funding. It's a fight to get funding.

Christopher Udemezue:

Mm-hmm.

Sara Jordanö:

But yeah, a lot of it was European funding and some grants and some whatever scraps you can get. Yes.

Helene:

Well how many years did you use... Hi. My name is Helene. How many years did you looking for the funding?

Christopher Udemezue:

[inaudible 01:17:07]

Sara Jordanö:

Yeah, so as you know, right, you make a documentary. You start shooting and the beginning is just me and my camera. Then you show materials and you get funding and, you know. So it's continuous. So it took about five years to do that.

Helene:

And how many scripts did you make from the beginning to the end? I mean, the first time you see is we are going to tell this story this way, this is going to be my lead actor, and how it transformed over the years?

Sara Jordanö:

This I have a good story. You know what I'm going to say.

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

I think.

Sara Jordanö:

So I'm talking. We're meeting, and we're in the beginning buying process. So I'm like [inaudible 01:18:19]. We need to think what do you focus on, and you need to find some kind of structure, right, and there's so much. Then I was like, "Twiggy, maybe this one's about you."

Twiggy Pucci Garçon:

No.

Sara Jordanö:

No. It was such a clear no. This was right at the beginning, and he was like, "No. This is about the community. It's not about me." We had to fight this convention for documentary film, like no more than five characters or participants like I like to say. In the beginning, there were 12, and I'm like they're all really important. And then there's you need to get down to those 90 minutes. So we were fighting. So there's seven, you can say, seven people that we're following in the film, but we had to fight for those two people. Does that answer-

Helene:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And I was curious because you said you were pitching this story and I was curious well what's your pitch because you have a very short piece for sure. Did you remember it?

Sara Jordanö:

Sorry, the pitch?

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Yeah. I think she's saying the pitch for the story-

Sara Jordanö:

Oh that's part of to get funding, this is-

Helene:

No, no. I know what it is.

Sara Jordanö:

Yeah.

Helene:

I was wondering if you remembered the pitch you used to sell the story, if you can share it with us?

Sara Jordanö:

I mean it changed, I would say. So I can't, because it was such a long process. So no, I don't remember the pitch. A lot of it was resistance. People would say, those white film dudes, again, and they said, "Why would anyone watch this? It doesn't relate to me." He actually said that, and my producer was like... He's like, "Why should anyone care about this? This doesn't mirror me and my experience," and I'm like, "I need it. We really need it." I mean it's a broadcaster. You need a broadcaster on, and it was like I was so angry. And then the producers were like let's diffuse. They saw that I was about to explode. Yeah. Because he was so rude. But you just fight for it, and I don't know, it's all about also I feel like eventually when we had more and more material, people started seeing the power in the material. Then it was just like, you know.

Helene:

Thank you.

Sara Jordenö:

Yeah.

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

I think for now we'll wrap it at that. I mean, if people have individual questions, the participants will  
around afterwards, but I want to thank each and every one of you for being here. Yeah. This is our first  
in-person program since the pandemic happened. So it's really, really... [crosstalk 01:21:40] Yeah. I  
thank everyone for coming. It's so nice to be doing this again.