# Being Vulnerable

This writing begins with a story. And then goes on to be quite practical. I am interested in how being vulnerable can help us create better frameworks in which to develop new theatre and new ideas.

It is April 2008. The man driving speaks Portuguese. My co-passenger speaks French. I speak English. There is no conversation. We are hurtling through the streets of São Paulo. The twilight flickers across the city as we set off from Jardim Paulista, whirling past the beautiful MASP, and winding through the twisting streets of Bela Vista. I imagine myself in a foreign film. I have only been in Brazil for 24 hours, it is my first time, I am unbelievably excited and a little apprehensive. My co-passenger and I have been put in a taxi by someone from the British Council. They are sending us to "a cultural experience that we will not forget".

The taxi driver gestures that we have arrived. We are under a motorway underpass and close to a building that has two pairs of large doors. It doesn't look like a theatre. I say Obrigada to the taxi driver, my companion says Obrigado and we smile hopelessly. Someone sitting in a small box office attracts our attention. We secure tickets with an Anglo-Franco-Lusitanic blend of vocab and accents, accompanied by international hand gestures. We turn towards the building. It is not clear what happens next. The show has already begun and the two pairs of doors loom large, feeling more than ever like back stage access. We creep towards them but lose confidence and turn back to our friend in the box office who just grins and urges us on. My anxiety levels rise. We approach the doors again, only to be met by a thunderous roar from the other side. All four doors burst open at once. Ten, twenty, thirty men and women are running towards us, shouting, some are riding on six foot canons, all are dressed as soldiers. The door closest to me crashes against the walls and flies off its top hinge and begins flapping precariously backwards and forwards. One of the soldiers runs up to me gesturing wildly and shouts.

So this is the moment when I could run away. Or perhaps cry. Or both. He's pointing at me, and at the door. He is quite short and I suddenly break away from my mounting fear and realise that he is asking me to fix the hinge. I throw myself at the task as if my life depends on it. I'm not sure what has happened to my French colleague, perhaps he has made a run for it or been run over by a canon. I throw out my left leg to catch the errant door, I grab the massive metal hinge and door and clasp the two together, I bring it under control...the situation is saved. I am a door-fixer! I am a participant! I am a conscript! I have missed one hour of the show, I have lost my French Companion, I don't speak a word of Portuguese, and yet within seconds I feel like I am part of something, part of a moment, part of a show, part of a building, part of a community. The soldiers continue to roll past. I turn to look in to the space from where they are charging. I see a long, thin hall, more like a massive corridor than a theatre, with hundreds of faces leaning out from the sides of the space to follow the army's progress. The hinge is fixed, the door functions again, the show continues. The soldier who has instructed me ushers me up a tiny spiral staircase and points me towards bench seating on the upper deck of three decks of seating in Teatro Oficina. I later realise that this is an act of kindness, perhaps he is returning a favour.

In my first cultural experience in São Paulo I find myself in Teatro Oficina watching one part of Ze Celso's Os Sertões. I sit on a bench with my chin pressed against the railing, like a child, watching in awe of what happens below me, and above me as the rain begins to fall on audience and artists alike. Though I don't understand the language, I am utterly spellbound.

I tell this story because Ze Celso's work and Teatro Oficina remind me that great art and the transformation it can catalyse are founded on being vulnerable. Both on the part of the people who create and partake - artists and audiences - and the things and objects involved - buildings and hinges. Imagine my experience of Teatro Oficina and Ze Celso's work if all the vulnerability and potential risk had been managed out of the experience: if no latecomers were allowed; if the actors were not allowed out in to the streets; if there were ushers and stewards controlling the event; if the very building was so muscular that it stood autonomously, immaterial of whether someone occupied it or not. It is quickly possible to imagine an operating model, an organisational framework and a physical structure that would quickly cramp, quash and deny the possibilities of Ze Celso's work.

In theatre in the UK, my favourite moments are often when something goes "wrong", breaking away from the straight jacket of what is planned or permitted. The "error" usually has the effect of bringing everyone together in the same moment. Perhaps it is why audiences sometimes describe these moments as "pure theatre". A lack of vulnerability is the enemy of theatre. Great artists have always found ways to reintroduce vulnerability or risk in to theatre. In 20th century European theatre, Berthold Brecht criticised a vapid theatre that exists only to entertain and not to challenge its audience whilst Peter Brook criticised a deadly theatre that fails to live in the moment. Great

artists have consistently developed artistic approaches that seek to take more risks and reintroduce a more live and vulnerable quality in their work.

So what can theatre buildings, producing companies and administrative frameworks learn from the artist's art of being vulnerable? Put another way, are there methodologies that can be applied beyond the rehearsal room, to the way theatre is supported, housed and funded that could create a lasting environment which encourages risk-taking and vulnerability? Can we imagine what a systemic solution to being vulnerable might look like? One obvious answer is to develop support structures that are flexible and that can accommodate the independent mindset of an artist like Ze Celso; structures that can nurture the values at the heart of the artist's work. Perhaps others ways to ask the same question are as follows: what does a national theatre for independent practice look like?; how can we create structures that enable independent visions to evolve in all of their glorious vulnerability?; and how can we provide the right balance of structure and flexibility to enable vulnerability as a quality of openness and susceptibility rather than one of weakness and defencelessness.

## Battersea Arts Centre's (BAC's) approach

BAC's mission is to invent the future theatre. I am Joint Artistic Director with my colleague David Micklem.

What follows is a list five practical methodologies that BAC has adopted over its history or has recently begun exploring. Each enables vulnerability and manages risk in different ways. This list is intended as a provocation, a place to begin a conversation, to take these ideas forwards and imagine better ones. It is important to remember that these ideas are, of course, specific to BAC's context, and context is a critical factor when you are managing risk.

1. Testing ideas - Scratch

At the heart of all of BAC's activity is a desire to test new ideas. We do this through a method called Scratch. Scratch emerged in response to the needs of artists, and continues to support the development of new work. An artist will start off with an idea, an inkling of something they want to create. They might work on this idea for a few days and share ten minutes of it as part of an evening of new work. Each piece then goes on its own journey to fruition, but the artists will constantly return to that place of sharing the unfinished work with an audience and responding to their feedback. Scratch creates an environment in which it is ok to try things out, ok to make mistakes and ok to seek a creative response from your audience that impacts on the direction of the work. It encourages work that evolves according to its performance and to its audience. It removes the pressure of a designated rehearsal period with a fixed deadline – until that is exactly what the process needs. It encourages artists and audiences to be vulnerable together by sharing the messy, indecisive, hidden parts of creativity. It encourages an evolutionary approach to making work, where mistakes and lessons are fed back in to the creative process. Its non-linearity means that artists have the space to change their mind in response to the process. At BAC, we are increasingly applying a Scratch methodology to all areas of our work to encourage experiment and change.

2. Supporting artists – the producer

Fundamental to the Scratch process at BAC is the role of the producer. The producer can be the bridge between artist and audience, between rehearsal room and place of performance. The producer is there to support artists and the risks they take. Producers work with artists to map out their journey: from that first kernel of an idea, to the final push towards an opening night; from the splendid isolation of the rehearsal room to putting something on its feet in front of an audience; to finding the right time, place and people for that sharing; to help artists contextualise and respond to audience feedback; to plan their next step; to suggest partners if the process needs a different kind of creative input; to find funds to keep the work in a creative, open space for as long as it needs; and ultimately to find the right context for its performance. The producer is there to encourage risk taking, to make it viable, and make sure the artist never feels too alone or overwhelmed by the vulnerability of the process. And any producer knows that good food and drink is central to managing risk in the process: bringing people together in a social setting to celebrate, discuss and debate at various stages of the process.

3. Physical space – playground projects

BAC, like Teatro Oficina, has appropriated a space not originally built to be a theatre. Our home is inside a large Victorian Town Hall with 80 different spaces. I think these "inappropriate" spaces unlock creativity in a way that formal arts building often struggle. We have recently begun to explore the building's future as a theatre space, through a series of what we call playground projects. Playground projects essentially transpose the principles of Scratch into architecture: it is ok to try things out, it is ok to make mistakes and ok to seek a creative response from

your audience (the users of the building) that impacts on the direction of the work. It allows the architect to behave like an artist - to take risks and make themselves vulnerable by sharing the messy, indecisive, hidden parts of creativity. In that way it is counter-intuitive to so much that the building industry currently represents. In England, playground projects pose an alternative to the rigidity of the formal 13-step process followed by architects, contractors, consultants and clients that is difficult to subvert without ending in the Gordian knot of a legal battle. By introducing greater levels of vulnerability in to the design and building process, the resulting risks have to be managed even more carefully. But by placing the risks in the hands of the users of the buildings, rather than a series of outside experts, we believe we end up with a better understanding of those risks ourselves and therefore better able to be creative in the space we have shaped.

4. Organisational frameworks – project working

The problem with strictly hierarchical frameworks is that they quash innovation. Unless ideas come from the top or are supported by the top of the structure, it is hard to make things happen and fresh ideas, often born and developed by young people, often lower down in a hierarchy, are less able to flourish. The problem with strictly collective frameworks is that it can be very hard to make a decision so that ideas come from all directions but which one should we react to, should we vote on every idea? Neither approach is ideal. How do you create an organisational framework that has both vision and direction and dispersed leadership that encourages great ideas (wherever they come from) to flourish? At BAC, working with Executive Director Sarah Preece, we have recently installed project
working across the organisation which has three core approaches:

i. strong leadership and vision led by an executive team
ii. all activity broken in to projects delivered by project teams
iii. regular meetings across project teams to keep activity connected

We have started using a similar approach across a network of 12 London theatres: where one organisation takes the chairing role for 12 months, effectively acting as the "executive" within project working. I am also interested how this approach might work nationally across arts organisations to better connect organisations with independent artists and audiences. Relinquishing authority, control and decision making power to a broader collective requires leaders to be vulnerable. All to often leaders think leading is about retaining control whereas great leadership is about providing the structures in which others can lead, catalyse and inspire: Open Space Technology is one such example.

5. Development – learning programmes

A core approach to any creative system must be to prioritise development and learning. At BAC we do this through a number of programmes. We have a programme of work for young people both in primary schools and for older young people based at BAC, and a burgeoning intergenerational programme. We run a national programme for independent artists, curators and producers to develop their practice, creating networks across the UK. We have even begun exploring a programme of support across independent venues. We are increasingly interested in how we can share a sense of our own vulnerability, perhaps the opposite to corporate confidence. Instead of fearing or even hiding from our own mistakes, what if we are all willing to share them and learn from them? We are much more likely to evolve our practice and the practice of those around us.

## Universal principles for being vulnerable

The above examples are all practical methodologies that BAC is exploring. They are very theatre specific because BAC's mission is to invent the future of theatre. If being vulnerable is an approach that could be applied more extensively, then what are the universal principles that might lead to greater vulnerability when applied to more widespread frameworks and systems?

I would suggest five.

1. Evolutionary and non-linear processes

Processes are more responsive and flexible when they have feedback loops built in to them. So rather than strictly linear frameworks that seek to control authorship and context, it is better to devise processes that enable a more porous dialogue, that are potentially no less rigorous in terms of managing risk or progress, but more able to feed learning from experimentation back in to the process as you go along.

2. Human-centred processes

It is remarkable how many supposedly creative processes feel inhuman to those whom participate. People thrive on dialogue, exchange, intimacy, gossip and learning. We like clarity in terms of the contribution we can make. Alongside, team working and collective achievement, we thrive on individual praise and achievement. So why not make our creative processes, organisations and structures tap in to all our instincts and pleasures?

3. Questioning industrial models

This relates to both the first two points. If you are adopting a process or structure that was effectively invented for the industrial age, then question it. The post-enlightenment, industrial age created vast intelligence about ways of working together that suited a world of limitless natural resources and potential. In the 21st century we live in a different age, resources are running dry and we need to think and live differently if we are going to survive to the 22nd century. Our making processes should always be suspicious of those structures that were devised for an industrial age in a very different context.

4. Hierarchy vs. collectivism

In any structure we have to strike the right balance between directing and listening, between control and freedom, between rights and responsibilities. Open Space Technology creates a set of guidelines for groups to come together, debate and define actions. As a methodology it has devised highly successful answers to creating a balance in these areas. However, I doubt you could create a very successful piece of theatre using Open Space. But how many people address these specific issues in the way they establish the culture of their rehearsal rooms?

5. Openness to experiment with hybridity

Creative organisations or structures actively experiment. There will be a culture of trying things out. Sometimes experiments will be carried out just for fun, just because it is good to break out of a pattern. Calcifying structures will be distrusted, even if just to reinvest our trust in them once they have been tested. There will be an implicit understanding that as time passes, so a changing context changes everything else, and that we should ask again what we are doing and why. We should seek to connect with different ways of doing things: different kinds of people; different disciplines; different approaches. Hybridity leads to new models and new discoveries.

Each of these principles requires us to be more vulnerable. Arguably each principle increases the amount of risk that we face because we open ourselves to more unknown factors. Therefore we will need to find ways to manage risks but the rewards could be much greater. Perhaps if we deployed as much vulnerability and creative thinking to the way we develop structures and frameworks for making theatre, as we do to the process of creating the work itself, we would have a more sustainable and flourishing creative culture.

## Applying these principles beyond the arts

If we accept that vulnerability has value then I think it is worth considering how it can be deployed more widely.

 In English schools, government policy and a target driven exam culture has encouraged stigmatism around making mistakes. And yet mistakes are the way that we learn and find out new possibilities. How can experimentation and learning from mistakes become part of a school's learning culture?

 In the building industry, laws around planning, design and procurement have done their best to iron out risk from the process, yet thousands of legal disputes occur every year demonstrating the fallacy of the strategy. Human centred building developments are stifled. Lina Bo Bardi, architect and collaborator for Teatro Oficina, would have struggled to have her buildings built in England due to these frameworks.

 Party political posturing and equating vulnerability with weakness has led to little room for risk in the realm of public policy and yet how are we to find the solutions to huge global problems such as climate change or mass migration without experimentation and testing of new ideas?

With good intentions, we are serial risk managers. Yet we often iron out the very human creativity that will enable our growth and development. For all the hand-wringing about climate change we are failing to address $CO_2$ levels in the atmosphere. Is it surprising that we cannot tackle this global catastrophe when our day to day organisational

frameworks and structures fail to connect us to ourselves and to each other? Unless we are vulnerable together, it is hard to imagine that we will come up with a creative and collective answer.

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April 2011