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why we bow
an autothesis

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ABSTRACT

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<p>I propose this work as my autothesis: a thesis of a subjective self, reckoning with who I am and from where I come. What I wish to address is the importance of self-consciousness in relation to knowledge and power in the highly political and public realm of theatre and theatre leadership. I want to not only argue but put into practice in this writing, awareness and accountability of self as fundamental to releasing theatre's full potential as a means to reframe social justice and make the world a better place.</p> <p>I present here now, in this thesis, as a person, director and a leader, to self-actualize and assert myself. I will do that with the integrity of the feminist epistemology of stand-point theory and with the playful and political mode of autotheory. Both of these theories demand of me that I be present, positioned and accounted for throughout my process of theorizing. They demand self-reflection and self-awareness as opposed to false universals or illusions of objectivity, to enable further integrity and legitimacy to my theory and my work. And that in fact summarizes one of the main arguments I want to make. I strongly believe that in order to be fully deserving of a mandate to create or curate meaning on stage for a public audience where I reckon with society and the world, I must first reckon with myself.</p> <p>In the mode of autotheory, I will throughout this work cite the people in my life as much as the people in my books, weaving them into my self-theorizing. Among them are bell hooks, Brené Brown, my parents, Judith Butler, my friends and my teachers, Kenneth Foster, Jacques Rancière, my therapist, Jack Halberstam, Alok Vaid Menon, my collaborators, Jill Dolan and Peggy Phelan.</p> <p>In the first chapter, How the Light Gets In, I will account for my intersectional identity and origins, my socio-economic background, my wounding, my queerness and my wrestling with it as a projected identity on other peoples' terms. I'll think through these threads of myself personally, politically, spiritually and socially, and ultimately, in relation to theatre and leadership.</p> <p>In the second chapter I will profess my two core Values: Love and Integrity. Interrogating myself into identifying my north star, is not only empowering as a self-made standard to measure success on my own terms. It is also fundamental to living up to the accountability I feel is inherent to leading people and working in a field where meaning and sense are made.</p> <p>Next, I will move on to a chapter dedicated to case studies, where I research how my core values, and my lived experience that illuminates them, shows up in my leadership role as a director. I will firstly account for the Stertabenda Manifesto - my company in Iceland. I will provide notes and glossary of examples to illuminate what might not be transparent to an outside eye. Then I will break the form of the unified text and list my Directors Notes on Vulnerability - the feeling, phenomenon and intricate force of human connection.</p> <p>This written auto-thesis is also companion to my artistic MA thesis: <i>Neptune</i>, which premiered in February 2023 at Teak. To conclude the chapter on case studies of leadership in directing, I will discuss how I practiced showing up in alignment with my core values in a very challenging process. I will explain what leadership and communication tools I applied and how they served and where they might have cracked. I will conclude with my key learnings from the creative process. They take the form of inquiries rather than elixirs that I take with me. In the final chapter I will shed a light on my artistic leadership in an institutional setting. From 2020-22 I was artistic director of two spaces at the National Theatre of Iceland (NTI), both were reserved for alternative programming and reaching new audiences. I will expound how I showed up in alignment with my values for this very challenging, humbling and empowering task. Lastly, I will break form again. By the standards of Nonviolent communication guidelines passed on to me by my mentor Rodolfo García Vázquez, I will I imagine myself having a conversation with the institution.</p> <p>Through this autothesis and its very personal subjectivity, I do not know if I will provide any solid theories or solutions. I am not a finite self. And this is not a finite thesis.</p> <p>I am here to answer a call to courage, to be self-aware in leading from my heart instead of my hurt.</p> <p>In the end, the light comes on.</p> <p>As we bow in recognition of the people of the public who came together to make sense of things with us, our heart ascends the brain.</p>			
ENTER KEYWORDS HERE Autotheory, Stand-point theory, Theatre, Values, Arts leadership, Directing, Healing, Queer, Camp, Social Justice, Feminist criticism, Self-actualization, Self-knowledge, Community, Curating.			

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the end, the light comes on.

As we bow in recognition of the people who made sense of things with us, our heart ascends our thinking head.

“We bow in the end to place our hearts above our heads” is the last item of the Stertabenda manifesto I will discuss in chapter 4.1. Stertabenda is my chosen family of artists. For us, this item of our manifesto is the constant reminder to strive for wholehearted instead of strong headed. It asserts our ambition for conversation to take place in our senses - heart-to-heart - as opposed to the more violent, pre-knowledgeable, head-to-head. It is our reminder to stay humble towards the work, ourselves, and the public we play theory for, whom we desperately need to make sense of it all.

This is also what I try to remember in my own practice, when working with my company or elsewhere. It is my reminder to not get swallowed by fear but instead stay courageous and true to myself. It helps me find my way back when I get lost in my own over-analysing head and remember why I am here.

I am here to create meaning with the community I serve.

I am here to create conditions for people to come to their senses together, to reckon with themselves and the compositions of our reality.

I am here to ask if we cannot come up with something better than reinforcing a reality of domination, dehumanization and exploitation.

I am here to come up with something better.

I am here to reckon with myself, with my artform, with pain and what is causing that pain.

I am here to speak truth and to right wrongs.

I am here to queer what seems self-explanatory to reveal its arbitrary nature.

I am here to fight for a more just, more beautiful, more compassionate world.

I am here to take accountability for my choices and call others to do the same.

I am here to prove that difference is the key to equality, not sameness.

I am here to actively love by nurturing spiritual growth and healing.

I am here because I believe theatre can save the world like it has saved me.

I am here now, in this thesis, to self-actualize and assert myself. I will do that with the integrity of the feminist epistemology of stand-point theory and with the playful and political mode of autotheory. Both of these theories demand of me that I be present, positioned and accounted for throughout my process of theorizing. They demand self-reflection and self-awareness as opposed to false universals or illusions of objectivity, to enable further integrity

and legitimacy to my theory and my work. And that in fact summarizes one of the main arguments I want to make. I strongly believe that in order to be fully deserving of a mandate to create or curate meaning on stage for a public audience where I reckon with society and the world, I must first reckon with myself.

Our knowledge, and the power it can bring, is never objective. By being accountable for the truth and friction of who I am, what my values are and what I want from other people, from my work and from theatre, I can be held accountable in leadership. I am more trustworthy. I am personally enabled further to learn and grow as I follow my purpose - because I have myself set standards to measure by. To fully unleash theatre's potential, I must assert myself in relation to it, and be accountable for the choices that make up my work.

Further, in the mode of autotheory, I will throughout this work cite the people in my life as much as the people in my books, weaving them into my self-theorizing. There are a lot of theorists, writers and thinkers who I have gone to for help in thinking through myself, and they will be present in this work. Among them are my mentor Rodolfo García Vázquez, bell hooks, Brené Brown, Judith Butler, Kenneth Foster, Jacques Rancière, Jack Halberstam, Lauren Fournier, Alok Vaid Menon, Elaine Showalter and a stampede of feminist thinkers like Jill Dolan and Peggy Phelan. Then there are my friends, my collaborators, my partner, my teachers, my parents, my therapist and my healer – they have also profoundly shaped me and influenced me into being who I am, and they have helped me think and feel through my self-actualization. They are also present.

I propose this work as my autothesis: a thesis of a subjective self, reckoning with who I am and from where I come. What I wish to address is the importance of self-consciousness in relation to knowledge and power in the highly political and public realm of theatre and theatre leadership. I want to not only argue but put into practice in this writing, awareness and accountability of self as fundamental to releasing theatre's full potential as a means to make the world a better place.

Firstly, will I further establish my ground in stand-point theory and autotheory. Then I will move on to three chapters in which I account for my intersectional identity and origins, my socio-economic background, my wounding, my queerness and my wrestling with it as a projected identity on other peoples' terms. I'll think through these fabrics of myself personally, politically, spiritually and socially, and ultimately, in relation to theatre and leadership.

I think of these three chapters as the cracks where the light gets in – referencing Leonard Cohen's poetry: "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

The frictions in my life, my trauma, my queerness, my socio-economic background, are all factors that have held me back in life, caused great confusion and pain to me as a person

navigating an unjust society. In reckoning with these truths of my lived experience, in wrestling with them and owning them as my difference, I can forge a self and its theory in the fire. Through my struggles with self-actualization I have accumulated a lot of knowledge and perspectives that inform my approach as a director and as a leader, as well as my hope for theatre. It is through these cracks and contradictions that I have come to see structures as structures that were made and can then surely be made anew. By hitting walls that were supposed to be doors, by noticing seams because the clothes didn't fit – I could feel the cracks and the edges of cryptic structures. This enabled me to recognize that the systems causing pain are arbitrary. Disposable. Susceptible for change.

In chapter 3 I will then profess my two core values Love and Integrity. Wherever I go - to work, to live, to fight, to love – there I am. I am the only constant in the shifting situations I find myself in, whatever project I take on, whatever people I collaborate with. Interrogating myself into identifying my north star is empowering. It provides a self-made standard to measure success on my own terms. It is also fundamental to living up to the accountability I feel is inherent to leading people and working in a field where meaning and sense are made.

Next, I will move on to a chapter dedicated to case studies, where I research how my core values, and my lived experience that illuminates them, shows up in my leadership role as a director. I will steal a metaphor of a tightrope as an image of me navigating the work while living into my values. I will firstly account for the Stertabenda Manifesto, of my company in Iceland. I will provide notes and glossary of examples from our practice to illuminate what might not be transparent to an outside eye. Then I will break the form of unified text and list my Directors Notes on Vulnerability - the feeling, phenomenon and intricate force of human connection. This will be a non-linear web of my thoughts, questions, poetry, learnings and beliefs along with horizontal citations to various people who have influenced my rumbling with vulnerability as a director.

This auto-thesis is also companion to my artistic MA thesis: *Neptune*, which premiered in February 2023 at Teak. To conclude the chapter on case studies of leadership in directing, I will discuss how I practiced showing up in alignment with my core values in a very challenging process. I will explain what leadership and communication tools I applied and how they served and where they might have cracked. I will analyse what I felt went right, and what went wrong in my leadership and lastly conclude with my key learnings from the creative process. They take the form of inquiries rather than elixirs that I take with me.

In the final chapter I will shed a light on my artistic leadership in an institutional setting. From 2020-22 I was artistic director of two spaces at the National Theatre of Iceland (NTI), both were reserved for alternative programming and reaching new audiences. I will expound how I showed up in alignment with my values for this very challenging, humbling and empowering task. Lastly, I will break form again. By the standards of Nonviolent communication guidelines passed on to me by my mentor Rodolfo García Vázquez, I will

imagine myself, in my own subjectivity and alignment to my values, having a conversation with the NTI: a public, state funded and historical institution.

Through this autothesis and its very personal subjectivity, I do not know if I will provide any solid theories or solutions. I am not a finite self. And this is not a finite thesis.

I am here to answer a call to courage, to be self-aware in leading from my heart instead of my hurt. What I do hope is that it can be seen as an invitation for others who also carry the great societal responsibility of making sense of things through theatre, and through curating culture in our communities. I wish to extend the invitation to identify and assert ourselves, articulate our values and investigate what it is we believe in our hearts to be true and just. And then asking ourselves whether the truth in our hearts is reflected in our work and our choices.

In the end, when the lights come on
why do we bow, and to who?

2. HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN: THREE CRACKS

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in*
- Leonard Cohen

To begin, I will make the grounds for my approach and explain what I have learned of and by the feminist epistemology of stand-point theory and the political and more unruly form of autotheory.

In the three following testimonies, *Hurt and Healing*, *Queer and Camp*, and *Reckoning: I'm Not Supposed to be Here*, I will look through the cracks, the discords and the contradictions I have encountered, crashed into and lived through, to position myself towards theatre and theory spiritually, politically and socially.

The three testimonies intersect and inform each other. They are composed of the accumulated, and often subjugated knowledge of my lived experience. They are the threads of my self-actualized subjectivity – which is flowing, shifting and ever un-becoming. Their structure will reflect that innately as they serve to weave my autothesis of theatre's potential, problems and promises.

In the first testimony, I will share how theatre saved my life. I will discuss how I developed strategies to cope with my core wounding, unprocessed pain and cognitive dissonance in theorizing and fictionalizing. With the aid of e.g. bell hooks, Jacques Rancière and my therapist, I will then propose that by reckoning with my original relationship towards theatre, I can begin to shift it from being a hiding place to a healing place.

In the second testimony, I will reveal the cracks and contradictions of Queer as an identity, as criticism, as a source of belonging and estrangement, suffocating projections and autonomy. I will share how I have applied theatre as a means to express my own queerness and how Queer informs my political and aesthetic approach to theatre. I will contextualize my thoughts and experiences with input from a lineage of major queer scholars that resonate with me, and the people I know in my own life. I will also spend some marvelous time with Camp and wrestle with explaining the profound meaning Camp has for me as a queer resource that will not be pinned down.

Lastly, I will call on Jacques Rancière in thinking through the society I grew up in, one where Equality and Opportunity were promised as a birthright, but someone forgot to mention that sameness and privilege were prerequisites of cashing them out. With the sturdy yet gentle hand of feminist and queer theories, I discern and discover the power and necessity of my difference. Because of my difference, I could look from outside and see the system as a

system, the structure as a structure. My lived experience and its autothesis propose that in my latent exclusion from the societal promise of equality and possibilities, those promises became more real for me. While I hustled for my belonging, standing outside the establishments of theatre waiting to be admitted, I could study hidden truths and startling histories of its architecture. By reconciling with my difference, I could revitalize the societal promise of equality. If I am to manage to wield theatre as my means to criticize and reframe an unjust reality, I also have to reckon with the systematic problematics of theatre. Mixing together my own experience and the feminist theories I have rigorously studied, I will critically point out how theatre is a machinery of hegemony that will perpetuate injustice and pain if we apathetically leave it to its historically automated devices.

2.1. Theoretical Grounds: stand-point theory and autotheory

“When you talk about your village, you can talk about the world”¹
- Rodolfo García Vázquez

I deliberately choose to establish and build from my lived experience to honor the integrity of the so-called stand-point theory of epistemology and to also conjoin with her younger sibling, the more unruly and creative practice of autotheory. Thoroughly accounted for, historically and politically, in Lauren Fournier’s book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. (2021)

Both theories in their respective ways, maintain that in order to actually reach objectivity I have to get subjective. If I want universality, I must be particular. I should talk about my village to talk about the world. These theories in fact underpin the whole argument this thesis wants to make: That consciously and critically asserting myself and the origins of my knowledge, result in more transparent, trustworthy and legitimate work than that which hides behind any sort of anonymity or universality. Asserting myself is my prerequisite for being genuinely deserving of a mandate to make meaning of things and lead other people.

Originated in Black feminist thought and rightfully attributed to theorists Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Sandra Harding (1991), stand-point theory is the first and most prominent epistemological theory of feminism, asserting that all knowledge is socially situated and so any research process is affected – from question formation to analysis and presentation – by the researchers own social stand-point (McCorkel and Myers 2003). Stand-point theory unmasks - and frankly abolishes – the irrational notion of universality, alleged neutrality and

¹ Presented in a talk during the course ‘Decolonial Directing’ 25.10.22, led by my mentor Rodolfo at Teak. Origin unknown, but I have no issue crediting this to Rodolfo for now, as it aligns with his teachings and research on decoloniality.

unfounded objectivity in the premises and processes of positivist science. Stand-point theory criticism also reveals how theoretical and actual gate-keepers of positivism and academia have historically excluded and diminished knowledge claims by anyone who is not white, able bodied, cis-hetero and male. The false universal serves a purpose, and that purpose is for the hegemonic perspective to maintain a monopoly on truth, and to cryptically delegitimize any knowledge of the margins, of the body and from lived experience. Stand-point theory thus provides a solid foundation in theorizing about privilege.

According to stand-point theory, unconscious knowledge is the birthplace and feeding ground of bias. Bias should in fact undermine any theory by academia's own standards. Practicing consciousness of one's own biases provides stronger theories. Although it is not necessarily about abolishing bias, we all have unconscious knowledge that keeps it lurking – but one should acknowledge that. Instead of hiding behind alleged and unfounded objectivity, stand-point theory demands that researchers and knowledge producers practice awareness and accountability for their privileges, the transparency of their social positionality and how these factors inform their own knowledge and the contexts of its production. (McCorkel and Myers 2003, Collins 2000, Harding 1991)

The theorist is present in their theories. The knower is present in their knowledge claims. I am therefore present in this thesis. The epistemology of stand-point theory implores me to acknowledge my presence and account for the *I* that claims throughout my process of claiming.

I further align myself in the lineage of autotheory, where radical self-reflection and embodied knowledge meet theory and philosophy. As with stand-point theory, autotheoretical questions of legitimacy are “entangled in colonial, white-centric and patriarchal histories.” And highly critical of them (Fournier 2021, 6. See also 46-54). The pledge of autotheory as a practice is to process and counter the oppressive and exclusive master narratives, epistemologies and discourses, through positioning the self within, beside or around them:

“[autotheory] refers to the integration of theory and philosophy with autobiography, the body, and other so-called personal and explicitly subjective modes. It is a term that describes a self-conscious way to engage with theory – as a discourse, frame or mode of thinking and practice – alongside lived experience and subjective embodiment.” (Fournier 2021, 7)

Both autotheory and stand-point theory are historically connected to social justice struggles and theories of marginalized people thinking their way from the edges of art and academia. That is where I position myself, on the edges and in the cracks. Both autotheory and stand-point theory emphasize self-consciousness as a potent way to engage with theory, reclaiming subjectivity and lived experience as relevant factors to theorizing, knowledge production and

legitimation, without confusing them for necessarily fixed identities. I am not a finite self. And this is not a finite thesis. It is however a thesis of self, that seeks to understand, and hopes to evoke resonance through its deliberate subjectivity. I will not hide behind a false universal but try to make the origins of my ideas transparent. My social situation and lived experience are context, my emotions, values and contradictions are at the forefront. That is how I wish to be in relationship to theatre, to directing and arts leadership.

2.2. Hurt and Healing

*Keep your gaze on the wounded place,
that's where the light enters.*

- Rumi

When we have the courage to walk into our story and own it, we get to write the ending. And when we don't own our stories of failure, setbacks, and hurt – they own us.

- Brené Brown

I was two years old when I had my first experience of theatre. My late grandmother Gógó took me to see the children's show *Dýrin í Hálsaskógi*.²

I wailed inconsolably upon realizing the show was over and I remember not wanting to go back in the house from my grandmothers' car when she delivered me back home.

"I want to go back to the theatre"

Shortly after, my parents got me a recording of the play on a cassette, which was then glued to my ear for months after.

Aside from this fragment, I do not have many distinct memories from early childhood. Life is practically a blur until my late teens, which I've learned is quite normal when you've experienced complex and intense trauma. However, I do remember sitting comfortably alone, hours on end, writing stories and poems and improvising monologues and dialogues on my brown Fisher-Price tape recorder. I remember staging my first plays at school; e.g. an untitled Christmas act featuring Tarzan; and my fairytale-rework titled *Snow-White and the Dwarf Called Seven* (there were not enough willing actors in my class to have a full cast). And I vividly remember performing in the school plays. My first role being an ensemble Flower and my second a leading role, in full drag, as the Viking settler Þórmóður Rammi – Werk!

² Egner, Torbjörn. *Klatremus og de andre dyrene i Hakkebakkeskogen*. 1953. A staple in Icelandic theatre. Egner's works are reproduced at least every 6 years in Iceland. This production was on at The National Theatre of Iceland, premiered 08.11.92. Director was Sigrún Valbergsdóttir.

From as early as my two-year-old's endearing love-at-first-sight encounter with theatre, a narrative of my character started to form in other's identifications of me. I was the "*kid with the wild imagination*," who loved making up stories, plays and theories. Reinforced over time, this became the fabric of my own sense of self – and more importantly; the place where I found vital refuge and means to survive.

During the first 15 years of my life, my segmented family of six children and two parents, moved between two remote towns in the far north of Iceland; Siglufjörður with a population of around 900 people, and Hrísey of around 100 inhabitants. My parents juggled several low-income jobs and numerous side hustles, modeling strong work ethics and integrity of hard work. They did the very best they could with the limited financial and emotional resources they had to keep me, and my mixture of half-brothers and blood-brothers fed, clothed and cared for. I give my parents due credit for the fact that I did not realize how poor we were until in adulthood. I naïvely accounted our "gross food", "ugly clothes," hand-me-down toys and shared bedrooms to an extension of their strict discipline and conscious parenting choices: "*Just because everyone else has new boots, does not mean you should – think your own thoughts*" - little did I know that sometimes they simply couldn't afford things.

Our household was turbulent and periodically plagued by my fathers' alcoholism, accumulative violence and codependency as both the catalyst and consequence of deep dysfunction. It's important to state that my father is now 20 years in recovery, and I have a caring, kind and mutually supportive relationship to both my parents today, thanks to courageous self-work we have all done in our individual corners of healing. But that does not alter the fact that things were not so pleasant when I was growing up. That does not alter the fact that as a child, I was not sufficiently held in my own pain or adequately assisted in processing it. I was instead called, as millions of other children who had to grow up too fast, to ease the suffering of others.

I will not deliberate on generational causalities of my family's socio-economic situation any further, nor will I perform any psychoanalytic breakdown of my trauma or give detailed examples of gruesome events, that does not serve the objective of this thesis. It also contradicts the memo to "*write from your scars, not your wounds*" that my dearest friend Bjarni slid to me at the onset of this writing process. However, my past and my pain serve as crucial context; my lived experience is the catalyst for my visions for theatre directing and arts leadership; and my hurt and healing inform the very expectations of theatre and theory I wish to define.

My therapist calls it complex trauma, meaning it's not so much just the fact that I was sexually abused by a trusted member of my extended family and therefore have trouble being a body, but no less the aftermath and the processing of that original trauma. The way I felt

responsible for the uproar and shock of my caretakers when it was found out by pure chance; how I felt penalized by the new after-school activity of sitting in a room with a formal psychiatrist asking baffling questions I had no answers to; and how, in my caretakers sincerely well-meaning attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable, I felt compelled to forgive something I didn't even fathom - and keep regular contact with the perpetrator. Forgiveness is a simple and sure choice to make for a seven-year-old who feels like they're in trouble, forgiveness simply meant our lives could go on, with the family system intact and unharmed by all this fuss. Notwithstanding the adults' best intentions, I was left to my own devices in massive cognitive dissonance.

My own devices were in the realms of my imagination and the confinements of my books, where I could make my own sense of things. Theorizing about life through writing stories, poetry and plays became my unconscious means of survival. I say unconscious because I never wrote directly about traumatic events and very rarely about raw, unfiltered emotions. And I definitely was not consciously processing pain or trying to heal myself. Enclosed in my 'wild imagination,' I could forget myself entirely. I coded meaning, applied silly metaphors and plagiarized fairytales. I was in control of what was there and what was not. I could make sense of nonsense and nonsense of sense. I was safe.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière might allow me to label my unconscious practice as a "labour of fiction," which entails for him much more than constructions of imaginary worlds in contrast to what is real. For him "[there] is no 'real world'. Instead, there are definite configurations of what is given as our real, as the object of our perceptions and field of our interventions. The real always is a matter of construction, a matter of 'fiction'. (Rancière 2010, 148). My labor of fiction then made my creative imagination vividly real – it served as a necessary "reframing of the 'real'. (Rancière 2010, 141)

Appropriating Rancière in this shameless way does not serve to suggest that I was some sort of child prodigy, in fact my earliest dabbles were not particularly original or even that clever by any standard. They are gloriously stupid, naïve and awkward. What's more important is my reckoning with this original survival strategy as the basis for my way of thinking. Which then in turn informs the foundations for my artistic approach and practice in theatre.

"Any liberation struggle to end domination
is fundamentally about a revolution in mental health."
(bell hooks 1995, 17)

With professional help of my own chosen therapist as an adult, and in the gentle space provided by my Brennan healer, I have finally come to terms with the fact that my childhood creativity and imagination were coping mechanisms I developed out of a dire need. They

were survival strategies. As such, they gave me the power to ration my pain into manageable pieces I could think through and make sense of, all the while demanding that I abandon myself and suppress my emotions. Intellectualizing pain is a highly questionable discipline, a mechanism of disassociating from the body and surroundings and relocating as an observer from above where I could rationalize even the most senseless experiences. But it kept me intact when I needed it.

Much like bell hooks, I too “came to theory because I was hurting” (bell hooks 1991: 2). I am grateful that I found my refuge in rationalizing through fiction, whereas my little brother happened to develop his strategies in more destructive terrains of substance abuse and destructive transgression. There is no inherent hierarchy to soothing or types of coping mechanisms that children grasp onto in desperation, they are just that: coping mechanisms. They serve to an end and can do so astonishingly well. But survival strategies do not ultimately dissolve the “threat” that called for them to be installed, and neither do they ultimately make the pain go away, although we might need to think so.

The guides and tutors I have sought in adulthood on my mission for excavating pain, have all presented me with the same, hard truth - although in different packaging. Be it the professionals and spiritual teachers I see in real life, the gurus I stick in my ears in hope for answers, or the awakened friends that life has gifted me. They all tell me that healing is not about making the pain go away - but allowing it to be there: Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture (Brach 2012); Feelings are for feeling; Name what is here; Ho’oponopono³; Where is it in your body; Compassion kills shame.

I can’t help but wonder if these healing processes – all corporeal/bodily/sensual/inter-relational. All demanding presence, witnessing, identifying, resonating - could be translatable to the modes of theory and theatre. Because there, like in life, we need other people, we can’t do it alone. These processes could e.g. rhyme with what Rancière calls Emancipation and Subjectification. (Rancière 2010, Rancière, 2004). I’m not sure exactly how this might show up in my artistic practice and leadership, I’d need another thesis to dive into that research. But I intuitively feel like this is somehow already inherent to what I do with theatre: creating conditions where pain is present, allowed and named, investigated and felt. And when we come together, to our senses, the pain is held collectively in resonances and compassion. We are not alone anymore. By that we are transformed.

I reroute to bell hooks again:

“When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two - that ultimately reciprocal

³ A profound Hawaiian prayer taught to me by my Healer and mentor in my spiritual practice. It has four steps of internal meditation towards self or others: I’m sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you.

process wherein one enables the other. Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end.” (bell hooks 1991, 2)

If I am to ask of theory and theatre to be healing places, I must be aware of the links between my theorizing, self-recovery and collective liberation. It would be counterproductive to load my pain into a room of unsuspecting colleagues or abuse my audiences as a therapist. If healing is to be a reciprocal process of theory and practice, I must first be accountable for distinguishing between the good and the bad parts of my original coping mechanisms before they can be directed towards liberation. I must recognize things for what they are and find the redemptive space of autonomous and conscious choice.

Some functions of my original coping mechanisms are counterproductive to who I want to be as an artist and a leader. It does not serve me to abandon my body or deny my emotions. It does not serve me to hide, be silent or resort to fawning when in conflict or in the face of fear. It does not serve to enmesh myself in codependent hyper-responsibility for the behavior or feelings of other people and rob them thus of their own accountability and processes. That’s not what bell hooks would call healing, liberatory or revolutionary.

Other parts of my trained mechanisms provide me with potent frameworks for thinking through theatre, where nothing is more real than the ‘labour of fiction’ I call people to commit to; where I can put together and communicate incompatible truths just for the thrill of searching for meaning without necessarily finding it – and learn something unexpected along the way. I also possess the embodied skill of zooming out and bearing witness from above, instead of being engulfed by my emotions in the moment. What I must practice is to not abandon my body in the process but bring my body and my senses to this witnessing.

Through making theatre - sharing parts of myself through fiction - I can also be, in safe ways, seen and held in my pain through other’s recognition of it, even if it’s coded and reframed. And that is in itself healing and liberatory for me. These are among the things that translate and serve me well, both in artistic practice, leadership and in my personal life. But I must continually be held accountable for interrogating and ensuring myself that my theory and practice are consciously applied to the ends I want them to meet.

In his book, *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) J. Jack Halberstam reminds me that “the social worlds we inhabit-, after all, [...] are not inevitable: they were not always bound up to turn out this way.” (8-9) It is from this memo I want to make theatre, for us to come to our senses together, feel, think and negotiate meaning together. Instead of hiding, let’s investigate where the pain comes from and interrogate whether our societal compositions and collective structures that create the conditions for that pain in the first place, are indeed reflective of what we want our reality to be. Is this “real world” of oppression, violence and injustice that

causes our pain the best we can come up with? Can we not enter the ‘labour of fiction’ together and “reframe the real” into something better, with “new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said and what can be done?” (Rancière 2010, 149)

Then there is my favorite part of Peter M. Boenisch’s book *Directing Scenes and Senses* (2015) is when he goes down a delightful yellow brick road of the conjoined ‘thea’ etymologies of ‘theatre’ and ‘theory.’ In the end ‘Theatre’ emerges as a public, cultural phenomenon that mediates the function of establishing that relational culture through thinking and feeling, as the public play of theory. (34,38) We are not in Kansas anymore, and I for one am driven to find the brains, the heart and the courage needed to direct my efforts of theatre towards liberation, revolution and healing.

I want to go back to the theatre.

2.3. Queer and Camp: the revolution will not be normalized

CAMP was a prison for an illegal minority, now it is a holiday for consenting adults.

CAMP is first of all a second childhood. [...]

CAMP is a disguise that fails.

- Philip Core (1999, 80)

Queerness was expected of me from as early as 12 years old, taking many different forms of humiliating name-calling, harassment and bullying in the school yard, and in my parents’ good-willed attempts to support me in being obviously a little bit gay. No matter the intentions, it made me feel taken aside.

In the wake of puberty, my father would take me on drives where he’d make very dad-like analogies of being special and very kindly tell me that he and my mother love me no matter what, followed by open questions of “anything I wanted to tell him.” There wasn’t. “*Are you finally coming out of the closet?*” he asked, a decade later, arms stretched out and tears of joy forming in his eyes, in the parking lot outside of the black-box where he and my mother were about to go in to see the first play I wrote and directed as part of my BA studies in The Arts University of Iceland. On the car-ride there, I had just given my parents the short, elevator-pitch synopsis of the piece.

“*What closet?*” I responded very rudely and walked past my fathers’ hug, into the theatre.

The work, titled *See you in one, two* was about two women stuck in a loop of hope and impossibility - the feelings constantly at war within me at the time. It was a highly coded

processing of the experience of my first relationship with a woman, who was older than me, married to a man and living in another country where queer people are still today persecuted. The relationship had just ended because after more than a year of secret meetings and video-calls, intoxicating letter exchanges and debilitating roller-coaster-rides of high promises and deep disappointment, it had become apparent that she would not spend her whole life, challenge her Christian, homophobic parents, and be with me.

Heartbroken, I retreated to my refuge of thinking and feeling through fiction and wrote a play. I weaved into the text Butler's writing on grief and desire from *Undoing Gender* (2004, 17-23) and Kierkegaard's ruminations on 'anticipation' that I was then obsessed with. I fictionalized the two autobiographical character identities by working them into the temporality of Nina and Treplev's climax scene from Chekhov's *Seagull* (Their names were N and T), while blurring them with verbatim citations to secret letters between separated lesbian lovers from history; Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickock to name just two couples.

*[...] and we'll go to Hampton Court and dine on the river together
and walk in the garden in the moonlight and come home late and have a bottle of wine
and get tipsy, and I'll tell you all the things I have in my head, millions, myriads —
They won't stir by day, only by dark on the river. Think of that.
Throw over your man, I say, and come.*

- Virginia Woolf in a letter to Vita Sackville-West, January 1927⁴

It was an ambitious project, particularly seeing it was the first time I directed professional actors with all the clumsy and awkward learnings that entails. It was very autotheoretical in retrospect, "[integrating] the personal and the conceptual, the theoretical and the autobiographical, the creative and the critical, in ways attuned to interdisciplinary, feminist histories." (Fournier 2021, 7) The project provided me with a sense of poetic closure of the relationship, where I could look at myself and my situation from a distance. It also granted me an alien, comforting admission to a historical lineage of queer love and its complex wounds. I was no less heartbroken, but at least I "took my broken heart and made it into art" like Carrie Fisher said. The take-away for the majority of my audience: my parents, my classmates, friends and most teachers was that this moment was a cause for celebration as my coming out. That was extremely frustrating, and I felt so lonely and unseen in this failed attempt at making sense of myself to my people.

⁴ See Maria Popova's 2014 article for The Marginalian: <https://www.themarginalian.org/2014/02/14/greatest-queer-love-letters/>

For the majority of my life, I resisted connotations of queer in the eyes and words of other people, not because I wasn't obviously somewhere in the realm of "otherwise," or because I internally denied and suppressed my unmistakable desires and inclinations. Without having the vocabulary or literacy to articulate it, I knew I was queer.

In my naivety I actually believed everyone was a little bit gay – and in a way, I still do. But the terms of which I saw possible for me to be queer did not sit right. Butler echoes in my head as I think through this: "The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity." (Butler 2004, 214).

What I needed was for my own queerness to be about me, on my own terms. Which seems consistently impossible, even today. Routes of self-actualization are limited when the only options are to either prove someone wrong or prove someone right. As I grew up and started being romantically and physically involved with other people and had gathered around me my chosen family, consisting mostly of gay men, radically feminist women and a few lesbians and bisexuals, my existential identity crisis just grew. I envied my friends who all had strong, embodied convictions of their sexuality and knew exactly where to position themselves.

"I will not agree to be tolerated. This damages my love of love and of liberty."
(Cocteau 1927, 75-6)

Sure, the liberation is real and the first time I was with a woman I can only describe as finally shifting into 5th gear after being stuck flooring the pedal in 3rd - But "*where are you going with this?*" my friends asked. Nothing resonated as I desperately scrolled through online encyclopedias and predefined criteria for different categories available, looking for something I could pick and stick to. Queer was an identity crisis of an assumed destination and impossibilities were abundant. I did not relate to wanting my queerness to be normalized.

"in relations around the closet . . . ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there as is knowledge"
(Sedgwick 1990, 4).

The incessant imperative of 'coming' out felt completely suffocating to my twenty-ish self. I resisted this obligatory confirmation ritual in the only way I could think of: a performance. My showcase at the end of the mandatory "Staging of The Self" course at Iceland University of The Arts, became the vessel for my sense making and resistance. In the long, endurance performance titled *The Coming Out Party*.

Three weeks before the event, I started telling everyone I was ‘coming out’. I explained that I would do it formally in a performance at school. I did not supply anyone with any sort of identification or credentials but left my identity entirely up to their projections. I invited everyone in my social circles to either come in person to support me or send me a short video-clip declaring their support. Invitations were then sent out along with a program of the event, which had five items: Endorsements, Coming out, Address, Open closet, Catering.

The support videos (Endorsements) of my friends, colleagues and family played; heartfelt, celebratory, congratulating my new, but predictable identity: “*We always knew*” – “*I don’t care one bit*” – “*Finally.*” Then, as Nina Simone sang “I wish I knew how it would feel to be free” I came out of a large closet on stage, in full, alpha-masculine drag fit to walk the category of ‘Executive Realness’ as portrayed in the documentary *Paris is Burning*.

Once out, I gave my Address, which was verbatim copied from a recent national convention speech given by right-wing party leader Bjarni Benediktsson, current Financial minister and still leader of the Independence Party in Iceland. The speech had watered down messages and discourse about culminating and exercising freedom and individuality. After the speech it was time for Open Closet, where I invited the attendees to also symbolically come out of the closet on stage and become “themselves” - with a promise of getting in turn to enjoy the Catering; cider and a large rainbow cake waiting on stage.

Armed and inspired by Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I wanted to address the trouble of performative identity politics at the threshold of the closet. When ‘coming out’ is viewed from the cheap seats of hegemonic cis-hetero patriarchy - which revels in fetishized notions of its own liberalism and tolerance - Queerness is made about them, not me. I am othered to become a vessel for their own self-actualization. It has nothing to do with me. Disguised as “support,” this obsessive liberal request for me to declare myself as something finite and digestible, intricately erases my full humanity.

I wanted to twist my audiences’ expectations of my ‘othering’ and comically point out their self-indulgence and desperate need for stable categorization, and so I came out as something my small demographic all collectively despised; a right-wing neo-liberal populist. I felt like I had definitely shown them.

“*I suppose congratulations are in order?*” asked my theory professor in an empathic smile as a piece of rainbow cake slid off his disposable fork.

I was still in full drag, somewhere in-between myself and my drag-character from moments earlier, my classmates’ act was due any minute.

“*Do you mean that all radical lefties slip to the right as they age?*” I asked.

He just grinned. This was the man who introduced me to Sedgwick in the first place . . .

Did he actually believe that my performance was a real coming out – as what? How?

*“Representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends,
and it is never totalizing”*
(Phelan 2006, 2)

My teacher, along with other members of the audience consisting of my fellow students, friends and teachers in the department, seemed to not get the point I was trying to make. The feedback I received afterwards was mostly variations of deeming the performance annoyingly antagonistic, confusing, confrontational and overly intellectual. People still assumed it meant I was now a lesbian, or “*at least bi-sexual.*” I will not go into a more detailed analysis of this performance here, because the matter at hand is rather the potency of its flat-out failure. I failed gloriously and intentionally at coming out, and I even failed at that failing, in a way that still informs my attachment and affiliation to queerness today, although it was riddled with deep disappointment and frustration a decade ago.

2.3.1. Failure and difficult difference

In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) Halberstam records histories of failure not as a shadow history of heterosexual capitalism, of the ones who didn’t make it, but a vibrant tale of alternative, anti-capitalist, queer and anticolonial struggle. For Halberstam, failure is a “refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming [that] turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.” (88) He further frames queer failure as a practice which “recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities.” (ibid.)

What queer opens up for me is precisely living with perpetual failure. I fail with honorable mention to measure up to patriarchal ideals of womanhood, heterosexual coupling and reproductive maturity, but I’ve also continuously lapsed at redeeming myself with a steady sub-categorical queer identity; and I somehow manage to fail at *being* and *doing* queer “enough”. Maybe I can have the cake and eat it too and embrace my perpetual failure as a way of imagining other goals for life than those set up as standards by hegemonic cis-hetero patriarchy. As Halberstam says, “failure is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well” (ibid, 3)

One of the mighty paradoxical failures of queerness is how it eludes and exudes language. The more I talk about queer, its pledge of antinormativity fails “to live up to its promise of lasting emancipation.” The more I try to explain, rein in and put words on this deep

resonance, the more it is stabilized and disciplined, and ultimately normalized - and emptied of its anti-normativity. (Moore 2020, 89)

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposed queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.” (Sedgwick 1993, 8) This open mesh captures in some ways what queer is for me. It is far more than a fixed sub-categorical badge of identification or an affiliation with a defined criterion, it is simultaneously an aspiration for ambivalence and an anchor of true belonging. I have little control over my queerness corporally, as a flow and ebb of bodily desire, and yet I strive to understand it, know it and shape it as my own, because it feels like home. Butler reminds me that claiming myself queer is a necessary error: “The temporary totalization performed by identity categories is a necessary error. And if identity is a necessary error, then the assertion of ‘queer’ will be necessary as a term of affiliation.” (Butler 1993, 230)

In April 2023, a self-organized troupe of gay and lesbian identifying people in Iceland asked me to sign a petition protesting that the newly formed, trans-hating gay-lesbian organization ~~Samtökin ’22~~ would receive official recognition as a public interest group, which would make them eligible for public funding. The petition they asked me to sign said “*NOT IN OUR NAME: ~~Samtökin ’22~~ is a company of individuals that have nothing to do with public interest. They publicly spread lies and hate about our trans and non-binary siblings and aim to eradicate them from society and cause them direct harm, as made apparent by their recent public objections to at last legally ban conversion therapy for queer people in our country. We, identifying gay and lesbian people of various genders, object that this hateful organization be officially recognized as an interest group, since their interest is only that of polarizing, maintaining privilege and spreading poisonous hate*” (And yes, I crossed their name)

For this dire cause which I wholeheartedly agree with, being perplexed and intellectual about my highly politicized flux of identity is not an option. I’m called to show up and sign my name with whatever necessary error and affiliation. Even if it is just for that day.

“Queerness is not yet here” said Muñoz, (2010, 49) and perhaps it’s bound to stay that way, as an elusive identity that refuses to be identified, and a horizon to strive for without ever reaching it. But the stakes of queerness are high, and they are rising at a terrifying rate around our polarized globe, and correspondingly within myself. I cannot deny that queerness is profoundly present in my body when I see news of the 400th anti-trans, anti-queer bill being passed in the United States, and when I read J.K Rowling’s trans hating tweets. Queerness contracts my muscles when a queer bar in Oslo is attacked. It lumps my throat when my best

friend and his husband are barked at by a troupe of men in the streets of Reykjavík, and it holds my breath when I see strangers goggling as my girlfriend puts her arm around me at the metro station. It rushes through my body in an undeniable way. I cannot deny my queerness – It is very urgently here.

In Icelandic, the umbrella term “hinsegin” extends all variations and categories of queer identity, it is a linguistic place where everyone can meet with their difference and resonate to their own sense of belonging within the larger community the word signifies. The word is a translation of ‘queer’ that has been sanctified in wide, common use, meaning literally ‘otherwise,’ derived from the very casual, common Icelandic expression “svona og hinsegin,” meaning “like this and like that.” The term is then a way of seeing “the experience of difference and dissent as replete with capacity.” As David J. Getsy puts it in queer ruminations of the term “otherwise”. (2016, 15)

In the Introduction to *Queer – Documents of Contemporary Art*, titled “Queer Intolerability and it’s Attachments,” editor David J. Getsy asserts that “difference should be difficult.” I wholeheartedly agree with Getsy that the objective of displaying or even articulating difference should not be “for it to disappear in some fantasy of an expanded and more inclusive ‘normal’ [or to be] admitted to the normal but to question [normal in its] categorical centrality and the clandestine ways in which it is relentlessly enforced.” (2016, 13)

I accept being called out on this, but the truth is I harshly object to gender being assigned to descriptions of my work. I cringe when I hear or see myself referred to as a “female director” or worse, “leikstýra;” the feminine form of the word Director available by my frantically gendered first language. I refuse to be externally pigeon-holed into the variable ‘other’ of woman, whilst my male counterparts are de-gendered and thus perpetuated as stakeholders of the objective universal. I prefer my own subjectivity, thank you.

I find my own subjectivity in deliberately attaching “queer” to myself and my work, any chance I get. It’s not that I don’t hold myself to the highest standard of feminist criticism and consciously strive to make radically feminist theatre that wants indeed to smash the patriarchy. I simply cannot tolerate the hypocrisy of gender prefixes or suffixes only applying to women and non-binary people. If we really want our performances and professional titles to be about gender, then let’s remember that male is also a gender that carries a whole freight train of its own specific variables.

I label my work queer as a political stance towards the history of that work, the processes of production and its institutional frameworks. Hoping the attachment can serve as “tactical modification [...] that invokes relations of power and propriety in its inversion of them” as David J. Getsy suggests.

Getsy further poses queer as an adjective, where in which “its utterance brings with it two operations: First, it appropriates and affects the thing that it now describes (a queer what?). Second, this attachment of ‘queer’ to a noun necessarily cites the standards and assumptions against which it is posed (the presumed ‘normal’ that it abandons).” (13) The placing of ‘queer’ next to ‘director’ or ‘theatre’ can for me raise dynamic questions about what those concepts entail. For me, queering can shine a light on what frameworks are concealed under the coats of custom and create conditions to tactically investigate and reframe them. Compulsory heterosexuality of narratives, characters and bodies on stage is for example thrown out the window as a paradigm, or at least it is made more visible as a dominant paradigm with the attachment of “queer” to the performance. To circle back to Rancière from the previous chapter, Queering can for me be an act of what he terms Dissensus, that unveils the arbitrariness of what normally appears as self-explanatory. (Rancière, 2010)

Queer has never completely added up for me, and neither dare I ask it to. As a political tool or a stance, it enables me to be intolerable, to “demand that the normal, the natural and the common to be challenged” – not as a means for tolerance or inclusion on someone else’s terms, but more aggressively to “refuse to accept any operations of exclusion and erasure that make up the normal and posit compulsory sameness.” (Getsy 2016, 13)

My necessary error of identifying as queer “harnesses something wild, something that only truculently obeys boundaries and borders.” (Pearl 2020) With queer I get to belong to myself and reframe how I relate and belong to something bigger – and I find ample resources and frameworks of thought for my artistic practice.

2.3.2. Camp: wild zone world making

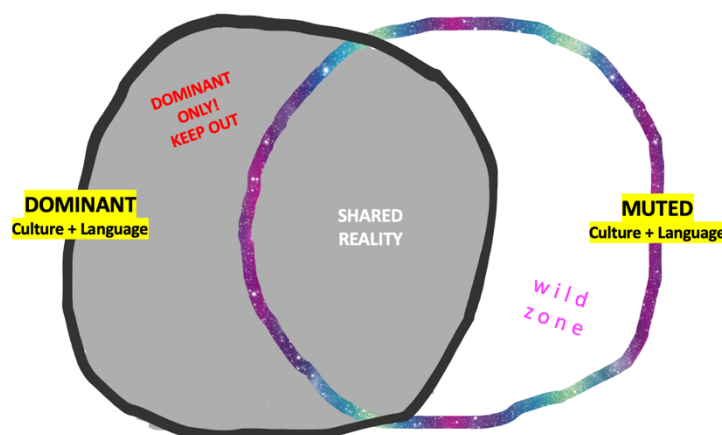
When it comes to queering my practice, I feel particularly revitalized by Camp. Camp is many a thing that refuses to be pinned down, no matter how many queer scholars try. I will not dare try to pin Camp down to a finite definition, but instead I want to share my love for it and paint a picture of how I see it as a crucial element in my nervous system as an artist and autotheorist.

Historically, Camp “provided queer subjects with a necessary clandestine, tactical means with which to forge a relatively secure path through life. Recognizable only to those in the know, clandestine signs, theatrical role-play, and verbalized innuendo functioned in a very specific capacity as an efficient and necessary means of indirect communication amongst queer peers moving through otherwise hostile public spaces in the latter stages of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.” (Howard 2020) It is crucial to acknowledge these origins of Camp before I go any further.

For me, Camp is a queer discourse, a cultural resource of language, aesthetics and style. It is a tool of empowerment and a tool of clever and playful coding that intentionally wants to go over a few heads and nod to others. In this chapter, I want to offer Camp a new frame to try out; Elaine Showalter's feminist rewilding of Muted Group Theory, a frame I am very familiar with. But first - just for the sheer joy of it - I return to my selection of Philip Core's Camp Rules, some of which were cited in the introduction to this chapter:

CAMP was a prison for an illegal minority, now it is a holiday for consenting adults.
CAMP is first of all a second childhood. [...]
CAMP is a disguise that fails. [...]
CAMP depends on where you pitch it.
CAMP is character limited to context.
CAMP is in the eyes of the beholder, especially if the beholder is camp.
CAMP is a form of historicism viewed histrionically. [...]
CAMP is a biography written by the subject as if it were about another person. [...]
CAMP is an ephemeral fundamental. [...]
CAMP is gender without genitals.
(1999, 80)

In my research and teaching feminist and queer criticism at Iceland University of the Arts, I have found footing to feel out Camp in context with Shirley and Edwin Ardener's Muted Group Theory (MGT) and especially Elaine Showalter's contextual rewilding of the theory for feminist criticism. From my learning and co-thinking with my students, I've come to think that our 'shared reality' is found where a circle of dominant culture/language and a circle of marginalized and muted culture/language meet and join in a diagram. The overlapping center is our 'shared reality.'



My version of the MGT diagram

I insert now Straight (cis-het) as the Dominant group and Queer (lgbtqia++) as the Marginalized. within the paradigm, the Queer group has a limited voice and is recognizable only when they appear as deemed acceptable and when they ‘speak the language’ of the Straight group. Muting thus happens in the ‘shared reality’ because the whole framework of what is defined and perceived as ‘shared reality’ in culture, meaning and legitimacy is on Straight terms: It is not truly a shared reality. It is a Straight reality. In the drawing, the strip of Queer within dominant culture could e.g. be thought of as the annual Pride parade, where an understandable fraction of the Queer enters the dominant as the exception to the norm therein, without disrupting the system. The Straight group has a lot of space to itself within dominant culture, where the Queers are not at all admitted but entirely muted and excluded from participation. But Queers can’t very well be heard unless they can make themselves understandable to the Straight, so what knowledge might be lost in translation, when Queer fight to be heard?

Within the frame of muted group theory, the Queer are always (at least) bilingual. They can to an extent translate their “unfathomable” experiences and truths, with a lot of knowledge draining, to be perceived within ‘Straight reality’. Queers speak the Straight language fluently to survive – and in doing so they maintain, consciously or unconsciously, the whole oppressive structure that mutes Queer and amplifies Straight.

What Showalter emphasizes in the MGT diagram is the sphere of being, knowing and communicating that lies outside of ‘shared reality,’ on the muted groups side - called the Wild Zone. She claims that in this paradigm of dominance, we risk the loss of knowledge – when all communication, legitimization and comprehension is on the terms of the dominant, does anyone at all have access to the Wild Zone? She pleads, and I am reminded, that in Queer struggles to be heard, and when fighting to widen the space of shared reality, we not sacrifice the riches of knowledge, experience and even metaphysics of the (Queer) Wild Zone. (Showalter 1981, 179-205)⁵

Camp pours from the Wild Zone for me. It is a force that can pour through and affect the dominant without abandoning its own source – and create communication between the “wild” and muted on their own terms in the limited and oppressive “shared reality” – whilst still confirming an alternative way of being. Whether I frame Camp as a second or third language I speak or an embodied knowledge, memory or even an undercurrent force of metaphysical inside jokes, Camp is something I cannot fully articulate without draining its riches on the terms of the English language I apply in this text right here, right now.

Susan Sontag said in her canonical *Notes on Camp* (1964) that “to talk about camp is therefore to betray it” (1/53). Her text inspired me greatly when I first read it. It soothed my

⁵ This problematizes Rancière’s theories of emancipation, unless it can be solidified that in the “emancipated community [...] of narrators and translators” – knowledge goes both ways, on equal terms. (Rancière 2009, 22)

fears of being presumed amateur by my choices of cheap and obviously counterfeit scenography, where gaffer-tape was always preferably visible and all materiality hanging by a thread. What I once deemed as artistic inadequacy finally gained theoretical backing and some references outside of Brecht's 'Verfremdung'. Through Camp I could confidently explore further my compulsions for mixing estrangement with sincerity; for both showing the traces of the actors work while asking for their whole-hearted commitment to a ritual sacrifice; for both acknowledging the theatre as an event and wanting to engulf in it.

There are in particular two aspects of Sontag's *Notes* that horrifically betray Camp for me. Firstly, Sontag poses it as apolitical (Note 2). Secondly, she defines Camp as a style, sensibility and a taste that peaks when it is involuntary and is at its best when it appears without intention. (Notes 18- 21). This completely erases the political and cultural history of Camp as a social resource of queer survival in a "shared reality" that not only mutes Queer but legally and psychologically oppresses, shames and persecutes people who dare express and embody their sense of self in public. Camp is highly political and even though it can surely take place in the format of queer failure to achieve unattainable goals (of hegemonically defined womanhood, manhood, passing as straight or cis) –failure in Camp is anything but involuntary: Camp weaponizes queer failure.

Posing the Queer Wild Zone to Berlant and Werner's concept of 'Queer World Making', I see how Camp can in fact exceed the limiting confinements of Straight reality. Because if Camp is understood as World Making "it includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped, [more] modes of feeling that can be learned." (1998, 558)

As a world making tool of the Queer Wild Zone, we can see how Camp "indexes a virtual social order" (ibid) and appears as "the concretization of a queer counterpublic." (ibid) The Queer becomes a counterpublic, which then by operating on its own terms enables and establishes what Berlant and Werner call 'counterintimacies' i.e. relations, perceptions and sentiments of the muted and marginalized on their own terms; "that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinds of kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation" (ibid) as defined available and made compulsory by Straight reality. The 'counterintimacies' established by Camp provide "a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation." (ibid)

Camp is for me a Queer Wild Zone claimed as territory, a tool of secret language world making and a channel of defiance where joy and shame, knowledge and experience of queer life can be communicated without jeopardizing our safety in the hostile "Straight reality."

In Camp, it takes one to know one. And that informs the grounds for my aesthetics and queering in practice. Camp is a wild language of the unseen and unheard, where they can be seen and heard on their own 'counterpublic' terms. It creates the "we" that is a necessary

error to be recognized – but only to those who recognize. Camp is hurled and whispered, sneered and winked. The Straight can surely join in the fun, but He laughs at all the wrong moments and takes offense in all the wrong places, He has no means to fully understand why the Queer laugh, why we cry, cheer and roar. We belong to each other in ways the dominant can never understand. Because it takes one to know one.

2.4. Reckoning: I'm not supposed to be here

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes we hope to bring about through those lives
– Audre Lorde

“You are only free when you realize you belong no place – you belong every place – no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great”
– Maya Angelou

I was raised in a society where difference “made no difference.” Where difference was muted and eradicated from cognitive recognition and conversation. Difference was surely there; some of us for example got home-made mittens for Christmas when others got skis. But difference was unspoken, rendered invisible, and ignored to the point that it was impossible to think through what it meant to be in fact materially different from the presumed normal; poor or queer, let alone disabled, black or brown.

“*There is no class division in Iceland*” is a phrase I’ve heard so many people say so many times, I cannot accurately credit it to anyone. The same goes for racism, misogyny, ableism and any form of homophobia or queer-hate: They are declared not to be found in the self-proclaimed liberal utopia of Iceland where everyone is promised equality as a birthright and anyone can be anything they want. Assuming they are all the same, of course.

The community I grew up in exemplifies quite well what is at work in Rancière’s *Distribution of the Sensible*: “the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed. The distribution of the sensible thus produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done. Strictly speaking, ‘distribution’ therefore refers both to forms of inclusion and to forms of exclusion. The ‘sensible’, [refers to what is] capable of being apprehended by the senses.” (Rancière, Rockhill 2004, 85)

I took the promise and indoctrination of equality to heart as a kid. Early on – there were a lot of things to back it up, especially in regard to making art. It’s often jokingly said that everyone in Iceland is in a band, and I believe that’s close to accurate. Theatre was also a public space I had access to growing up, in the amateur community theatres. My mother took an active part in the annual projects where we lived, took courses in acting, directing and sometimes led the clubs. There was no stopping her, and that’s not just to say how ambitious and determined that power-house of a woman is; theatre was possible. My father’s side career was playing guitar and performing music, which he did all over the country for most of my childhood. Art and theatre were then present and accessible, seemingly to anyone who had the nerve and will to participate.

My teachers and parents all diligently upheld and encouraged the narrative of my ‘wild imagination’ and dexterity of stories and theatre. Quite early on, I knew exactly what I wanted to do when I grew up: work in theatre. I was relentlessly and systematically promised equality and opportunity that rendered my dream not only imaginable, but fully attainable in my mind. But I did not live up to the required premises to cash it out.

I was on my own financially from the age of sixteen, when I moved away from my village to go to high school. My family had no means to support me as much as they wanted to. As I advanced and flourished within the school system and extra-curricular activities of theatre, debating, poetry and philosophy, my debt grew, encouragement gave way to worry, and the gap between me and home widened.

This is not a ‘rags to riches’ story. It’s rags to reckoning.

Before I get to reckoning, I must articulate particularly two things at work, interconnected and supporting each other, on my journey to be a professional theatre director.

Firstly: I was unconscious for most of the time and fully compliant to the system in which I was privileged and lucky enough to attune to neurologically, physically and mentally. I could easily measure up as a student and by conforming I could thrive and succeed by the system’s standards. With the dopamine rushes of little “victories,” I bought into it even more and was fully engulfed by the capitalist, hetero-patriarchal promise that if I just worked hard enough, the system would definitely move me forward and grant me everything I wanted – just like everyone else. Difference made no difference.

This brings me to the second force at work, which underscored my compliance. Although not apprehensible: I was not “like everyone else.” Even though my mind was set and I “had everything it took” to move forward in the system – the real, underlying standard to meet was that of middle-class sameness, and its adjacent preconditioned privileges. It was just never mentioned in the contract. A nagging, unuttered sense of inadequacy constantly bubbled to the surface of my consciousness: my unreckoned with queerness and at times dysmorphic struggles with hetero-femininity, but more importantly my socio-economic reality of poverty and my complete lack of reference-points in a last name of esteem, relative backend or

cultural capital. This latent sense of inadequacy of ‘sameness’ propelled me into a cycle of overcompensation where I committed myself above and beyond my actual capacity to prove I was deserving, that I was truly ‘the same,’ that my difference made no difference. In my mind, there was nothing wrong with the system of sameness – I was at fault. I just needed to prove to the system and the world, at any cost, that I belong despite the glaring signs: I’m not supposed to be here.

There were no customers, so I sat down at the sunniest table of the downtown Reykjavík café for my lunch break, scanning through Aristotle’s *Poetics* for a quickly approaching exam in Comparative Literature. A group of young people came stumbling by, roaring with laughter. “*Hey, is that you?*”

I looked up and saw an acquaintance of mine from the Improv all-stars tournament a few years before, a son of a widely famous Icelandic actor. Accompanied by his classmates; the new ‘chosen ones’ that had been admitted to the Theatre Academy that fall. I recognized all of them from the entrance examinations. Yet another of my failed attempts.

“*Yep, it’s me! What are you guys doing?*” I asked with a smile, trying not to look as worthless as I felt.

“*Oh, we’re just group-skipping class. Theatre history is so boring I want to die.*”

I would literally die to go to their theatre history class.

Alok Vaid Menon is one of the sharpest and most generous thinkers and scholars of my generation. I feel especially, and uncomfortably heard and seen when they talk about their experience of making one’s way through a society that was not only not built for you, but a society that erases your difference, and in doing so, your humanity: “the only way to have worth was to be exceptional – top of your class, exceptionally well read – I know everything. But that’s a trauma response. It’s an elaborate form of begging” (Alok 2021)

“*What if I told you that you could not, under any circumstances, enter to work in the performing arts field at all, not even through some back-door entrance, what would you do then?*”

This is a verbatim question the head of the entrance examination board of the Arts University posed during my final interview, on my third try. In retrospect and after having gotten to know the person subsequently, I do realize that it was just a so-and-so phrased inquiry of my B-plan, of whether I had aspirations in life aside from working in theatre. A commonly asked question, in various forms, during such a process. But for my internal narrative, for my ever-growing sense of inadequacy, it was proof that this was as far as I could ever get. It was proof that my inadequacy was a fact, that an out-of-town, infantile working-class tom-boy-but-not-

in-a-cool-way, with cereal box credentials and zero references, did not belong in professional theatre.

I had done everything I could think of and everything within my power to meet their standards. I was serious, committed and passionate about learning and I desperately wanted to do theatre. There was no plan B, everything I did was an elaborate form of begging to get closer to theatre. I needed the societal promise of equality and opportunity to be true, the causality between hard work and success needed to be true.

This moment in the interview was a literal breaking point within me, where it was either forcefully demanding the promise be kept or resigning to cynicism. I responded with a little bit of both, and I do not know where I found the audacity:

“I would burn this building to the ground. Because if you really believe you have that sort of power, this institution should maybe not exist.”

Then we said our thanks and goodbyes.

At his point I had swallowed the red pill in my Gender Studies, which I took alongside Comparative Literature because I thought that would surely advance me onwards to theatre. I was far down the rabbit hole of finally recognizing my own difference, identifying patriarchy as a structure and subsequently its interconnectedness to heteronormativity, colonialism and capitalism. Intersectionality is not just a word for identity politics of the marginalized, the dominant system is also a network. I’ve already mentioned stand-point theory, who’s epistemology supplied me with the language to address my frustrations with the ivory tower of exclusionary thinking and my own preferences for theorizing, along with holding my hand down the trail of examining the concept of privilege.

The alignment of these theories to my lived experience, not just of being an attempted woman, but everything else I’ve already wallowed in, was uncanny. You become aware of privilege when it is not inherited to you. You see the seams of the cloth when it doesn’t fit you. The cracks become visible when you stare at the building for hours, waiting to be let in. The structure reveals itself as a structure, as something that was made - and can then certainly be made anew. The promise of equality and opportunity was also to be found in Gender studies and surrounding intersectional theories, but it called for a reckoning, an awakening to truth of injustice, wounding, and then a willingness to heal:

“We must acknowledge that all systems of domination – racism, class elitism, sexism, imperialism – wound the spirit. Damaged spirits rarely choose liberation. When I first heard the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire declare “we cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to later become subjects,” I realized that to be subjects, we must pay attention to self-actualization. We must be able to use our imaginations to create self against the borders of

the imposter identity forced onto us by those who would keep us in a state of subjugation and dehumanization.” (bell hooks 1995, 271)

Self-actualization, and a materialization of equality was for me earned through laborious overcompensation for my difference. To this day, a sense of inadequacy bubbles underneath the surface.

“Let me guess, you are at home reading the additives?”

My roommate through my BA studies at the Theatre Academy and my still dear friend, the now journalist Margrét Helga, can testify that my social life was non-existent during my studies. She mocked me lovingly for my eagerness and bless my classmates who had to put up with my constant side notes and ‘actually-ies’ in class. I left the parties before midnight or didn’t show up at all because I was sat in my room reading the additives in the curriculum. I was at school, and when the school building closed; I was attending an evening-course; seeing a performance with my student discount; or volunteering somewhere on site, assisting who-ever in what-ever project that might teach me something about anything relevant to advance me. Everything I took on, I took on with the preemptive condition that I excel at it. All my reports, essays, presentations and performances had to be the very best I could possibly deliver, because for me, my presence and advancement in the performing arts field was not at all self-evident or a matter of course, even as I had been admitted at long last. My right to be there had to be verified and demonstrated every day.

Over time, overcompensation forged me a name – my own name. And my own capital, with no references outside itself. What my experience makes apparent however, is the mortality and the frailty of cultural capital. And when you have to hustle for it, the conditions and standards of that capital become apparent.

In 2018 I signed a year contract with the National Theatre of Iceland (NTI), and my temporary employment would be renewed for three seasons. I embodied ‘difference’ in the administrative office of NTI. I was by far the youngest dramaturg and member of the selection committee and the only gay in the village of the office. As much as I had “made it,” I was still internally hustling for my belonging – now among some of the most redeemed and respected authority figures in Icelandic theatre. I had clawed my way to “the top” by my elaborate form of begging; forcefully creating a self against the borders of my imposter identity and claimed my belonging. But what do I do, once I’m there, in the frail possession of that slice of power and privilege? Once I start to benefit from the system that wounded me? Who am I then, in the end, when the lights come on?

What I have reckoned with is that true belonging does not require begging. True belonging does not require me to abandon myself or even parts of myself. Belonging is not fitting in, as Brené Brown has taught me. True belonging requires me to be who I am. (Brené Brown

2017, 40). As bell hooks learned from Paulo Freire, I too must enter the struggle as my own subject. That requires me to step into my difference, own my lived experience and my embodied knowledge. When I am handed the power to make meaning of things as a director and given the mandate to curate public experiences, I must show up on my own terms and do with my power what my true belonging asks of me: Choose liberation. Choose healing.

2.4.1. The Problem and Promise of Theatre

There is no repetition, only insistence.

- Gertrude Stein

I know that historically theatre is a machinery of subjugation and selective dehumanization. I know this, not only through my own lived experience but through my studies, research and teaching of queer and feminist criticism. I've accumulated how theatre has in fact perpetually regulated sameness and reproduced exclusion, erasure, marginalization and othering. It is apparent to me how the androcentric, dominant perspective is The Master of all ceremonies, storylines, characters, processes and paradigms. This Master's perspective is centralized to the extent that he incarnates a universal that we, as both audiences, academics and artists of the field, no matter our differences, have internalized as our own perspective.

Peggy Phelan and Jill Dolan in particular have opened my eyes to the fact that the assumed audience in hegemonic theatre is representative of dominant culture. Meaning widely, though perhaps unconsciously, assumed to be male, white, heterosexual and at least middle-class. The theatre thus historically, and by default if left to its own historically automated devices, addresses this particular group as the only one present. No matter the bodies in the auditorium, and despite the fact that middle aged women tend to be by far the largest demographic of frequent theatre goers in at least all the Western world. (Phelan 2006, Dolan 1991)

Furthermore, our beloved canons are assembled invisibly by the dominant perspective leaving no visual trace of their terms or origin of compositions, so that our libraries of hardcover corpus seem to have always been there. (Dolan 1991, 31)

Even the dominant forms within theatre exemplify systemic subjugation and selective dehumanization. Blind commitment to the reign of realism and character formation derived from psychoanalysis are, from a critical feminist perspective, keys in the chain of "oppressive systems of symbolic closure" that rob the marginalized of subject positions. (Aston 1995, 38-40; Dolan 1991, 14, 10; Case 1989, 126-46; Phelan 2006, 6; de Lauretis 1987)

By demanding identification, reality is not only *interpreted* by realism, but *produced*. And in depending and insisting on "a stability of reference, an objective world that is the source

and guarantor of knowledge, realism surreptitiously reinforces [...] the arrangements of that world” (Diamond 1997, 4)

Ignoring these findings is a great loss for theatres’ true potential as not only the healing place I want it to be, but for ‘the public play of theory.’ For our own potential as beings who need other beings to come to our senses.

Theory can provide a way to take stock, and I expand Gayle Austin’s notion of women to all subjugated people, where theory can appear as “a way of thinking. It means stepping back from the myriad details of theatre production to take a broader view: what are we producing, what is it saying about women, and is that what we want it to be saying?” (1998, 139) What indeed are we saying in our theatres? That we are all the same? That only a fraction of the human beings living, breathing, loving and hurting in our villages and cities are in fact alive at all? That seems to be the case, when we step back and look at what bodies and stories are present on, I dare say, most stages in theatre institutions in the Western world. We have got it all mixed up. We shouldn’t strive for coming together as humans “despite our differences,” but because of our differences: Difference “is not an evil to be abolished, but the normal condition of any communication.” (Rancière 2009, 10) The lie of sameness in essence, betrays the promise of equality and opportunity. It robs us of the riches of our humanity and the potency of human communication.

I want to extend bell hooks’ summoning to artists, leaders, and cultural institutions, she said:

“To arrive at the just, more humane world [...] we must be willing to courageously surrender participation in whatever sphere of coercive hierarchical domination we enjoy individual and group privilege. [...] The fierce willingness to repudiate domination in a holistic manner is the starting point for progressive cultural revolution.” (bell hooks 2006, 8)

Theatre is not lost. The fact that the process of mechanizing theatre to maintain domination took place over time in history - by a stream of conscious and unconscious choices - is in fact what motivates me to keep at it, believe in it – and consciously attempt to wield it ‘otherwise.’

The criticism inherent to my approach to theatre builds on the very hypothesis that theatre itself functions out of ideology, “theatre too, is a show of theory. Performance is the site which performativity materializes in concentrated form, where the ‘concealed or dissimulated conventions of which acts are mere repetitions might be investigated and reimaged.” (Diamond 1997, 47).

Theatre is ‘the public play of theory’ and the representations or manifestations of the performance event have specific material consequences, as I hope those of us who make it believe. If we don’t, history has proof: the hegemonic theatre dominant today was created

over time, and reality terms of that hegemony reinforced and reproduced, in a perpetual weaving of citations. But isn't that in itself a hopeful thought? I circle back to a previous chapter where Jack Halberstam reminded me "the social worlds we inhabit-, after all, [...] are not inevitable: they were not always bound up to turn out this way." (2011, 8-9) There is no law document written and signed in a guild hall of all theatres of the world that strictly says *THIS IS HOW THINGS SHOULD FOREVER BE*. If we believe theatre does participate in our production of reality and that it can reframe the real – why then are we stuck on frames that perpetuate dominance, exclusion and 'wounding of the spirit'?

Stretching Butler's notion of the "gender constitution," I propose that it is primarily by our continuous citations to the "law", that the law is in fact generated and maintained. Which goes to show we must be able "to 'cite' the law, to produce it differently, to 'cite' the law in order to reiterate and coopt its power, to expose the matrix and to displace the effect of its necessity" (Butler 1993, 230)

The moment for theatre constantly resurges, so do the conditions to redefine its processes of production and so do the temporal blanks of sense to make when we come together for a live performance. Theatre is composed, in essence, of our choices and of our attention. Every single theatre production, no matter its genre, contents or context, is paved by a series of choices. From beginning to end, there are nothing but choices. So, what do I choose? Do I choose the ways and means that I know exclude, subjugate and dehumanize? Do I choose apathy and ignorance?

What do I pay attention to?

Theatre makers cannot pretend they don't understand the assignment of paying attention. Our attention is trained in scrutinizing the largest contexts and smallest details in our choice making. From analyzing and curating the works, assembling our teams; from pre-planning, designing, to the intricate finetuning of postures, sounds, light and shadows, movements, the delicate arrangement of words. We apply our full attention to every step of our creation processes, and lastly, we present everything we have chosen to pay attention to, to the attention of an audience.

What have we chosen to present to our audience's attention?

What have we chosen to pay attention to, and what not?

Why?

As I understand Rancière, and as translator Gabriel Rockhill lays out in his Glossary of *The Politics of Aesthetics*, equality is the only universal in politics⁶. It is a prerequisite demanding

⁶ Politics (The Political) in Rancierian terms extends far beyond state affairs, operations of congress and elections. Politics for Rancière is a complex term of interruptions in the Distribution of the Sensible, when the invisible is made visible, the unheard is heard, the impossible becomes possible. See for example the chapter "Ten theses on Politics" in Rancière 2010, 27-45

incessant verification. Equality is neither posed by Rancière as an end-game nor as an attainable goal, but instead found at work when “by treating a wrong, political subjects transform the aesthetic coordinates of the community in order to implement the only universal in politics: we are all equal.” (Rancière/Rockhill 2004, 86) To reach emancipation, liberation, and healing in our sense making, we must speak to each other as equals.⁷

My lived experience and its autotheory proposes that in my latent exclusion from the promise of equality and possibilities, those promises became more tangible for me, more urgent, more real. And while I stood outside the establishments of theatre waiting to be admitted, I could study and discern hidden truths and startling histories of its architecture. Instead of muting my own knowledge to fully comply as the doors open, I strive to bring my Wild Zone and my difference with me as a necessary possibility.

In this project, queerness and Camp energize me to defy “operations of power that police difference and exile the otherwise.” (Getsy 2016, 12) My socio-economic background demand that I fact-check promises of equality and do justice to my own story as I insistently cite equality in my choices. And sometimes my choices are indeed very problematic. I continuously struggle to justify my own position, my attraction and gravitation towards Stanislavsky, Tovstanogov and Knebel’s thought processes originally developed from woman-hating psychoanalysis, and my infatuation with some highly problematic, colonial “classics” that preach the lie of our sameness. But shouldn’t I precisely struggle to justify my position and my choices? Shouldn’t I have to articulate why I should at all be handed a mandate to make sense of things and propose meaning on a public stage, not to mention with public money?

I am not supposed to be here. And neither is anyone else entitled to make the theatre where we come together to make sense of things. Not by generational logic of inheritance, privilege of transmission or by reference to some objective, universal genius. To fully unleash theatre’s potential, I must assert myself subjectively in relation to it, and be accountable for the choices that make up my work.

Sweet nepo-babies and cultural outlaws alike: we must not only reckon with theatre and its historicized operations, we must also reckon with ourselves.

Audre Lorde might be facepalming in the back, furious at my benign queering and allegedly feminist ‘Master’s Tools’ I brace to chop the churning gastro intestines of the ‘Master’s House’ that she knows will devour me. But I keep showing up. Trying again. And again, and again. Out of wholehearted, unshakeable faith in the promises of theatre, no matter how many

⁷ “The process of emancipation is the verification of the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being” (Rancière 1992, 59-60)

times they have been betrayed. I breathe the friction. The friction makes my fire. In reckoning with my own compliance and submission to a criterion that wants to mute me and devoid me of my difference, I am empowered and enlightened to make more conscious choices. And if I fail, at least I fail daring queerly.⁸

⁸ Paraphrasing the final line of Theodor Roosevelt's speech, quoted time and time again by Brené Brown: "It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, [...] who at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails daring greatly." (Brené Brown 2018, xviii)

3. CORE VALUES

“It’s me, hi! I’m the problem, it’s me. At teatime, everybody agrees. I’ll stare directly at the sun, but never in the mirror. It must be exhausting always rooting for the anti-hero”

– Taylor Swift.

“Well leader, heal thyself”

– Brené Brown

Up until this point, I’ve shed some light on the things most important to me in relation to theatre and how my lived experience informs those things: my beliefs, my wants, my drive – my personal values. To recap the ones I find most important, I’ll list Healing, Self-awareness, Accountability, Liberation, Subjectivity, Difference, Equality, Honesty, Justice, Knowledge and Belonging. But these are not what I have identified as my core values.

Brené Brown’s book *Dare to Lead* (2018) is based on twenty years of her research of courage, vulnerability, shame, empathy and leadership. She presents a plethora of tools and configurations to help me think through the project of daring leadership in directing theatre, and I for one am driven to answer her call to courage: “We desperately need more leaders who are committed to courageous, whole-hearted leadership and who are self-aware enough to lead from their hearts, rather than unevolved leaders who lead from hurt and fear” (4) One of the main skill-sets in Brené’s Daring leadership is what she calls Living Into our Values. Values are for her “ways of being or believing that we hold most important.” (ibid. 186) And defining them with clarity is the first step of living into them.

Brown is very strict in pronouncing that for clarity, I should limit myself to only two core values. My two core values are the place where all of the other “second-tier” values I mentioned above are tested. (ibid. 187) My core values should then not be interchangeable depending on where I am, whether at work or at home, in personal relationship or public presence. Simply because I am the same person when moving through different spheres and paradigms. My core values should be so clear in my being and believing, that they follow me wherever I go. (ibid. 184-90). This does not mean that my values cannot evolve and change as I most certainly will, in fact Brené demands that I continue to interrogate my core values and their alignment to my actions and behaviors as I move about life. That is what the skill Living Into Our Values requires.

Kenneth Foster makes a claim in his book *Arts and Cultural Leadership* (2023), that I wholeheartedly agree with:

“Unless you have spent significant time trying to understand who you are, what you want from your life, what your own core values are, what brings you joy, satisfaction, and meaning, where you think you are headed - what your own personal "unattainable ideal" is - you cannot begin to lead others.” (Foster 2023, 188)

For me, interrogating myself into naming my two core values is fundamental to living up to the accountability I feel is inherent to leading people and working in a field where meaning and sense are made. The alternative, not articulating my values but hiding instead behind a false universal, would be in favor of compulsory sameness and muting our difference.

I want my values to guide me in life. I want them to be the standards to which I autonomously evaluate my success, and how I define my success. Naming my core values also exposes me to the criticism, reflection and feedback I need to grow as an artist and a leader. Declaring them openly resonates as the stand-point epistemological prerequisite of subjectivity, and it is an invitation to self-actualize by telling the world who I am.

3.1. Integrity

“Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me”

– Audre Lorde.

The Icelandic word for integrity is the beautiful word ‘heilindi.’ It signifies health, wholeness, sincerity, commitment and healing.

Integrity comes from the Latin adjective ‘integer’ meaning ‘whole’ and ‘complete,’ while its verb form of ‘integration’ suggests will and intention to ‘bring together’ and ‘make whole.’

“The opposite of living in a world of false binaries is practicing integration – the act of bringing together all the parts of ourselves [...] We are all tough and tender, scared and brave, grace and grit.” (Brené 2018, 90)

Integrity certainly signifies morality or moral soundness, honesty, consistency between words and actions. As my core value, Integrity calls me to a spiritual awareness of my being and what is present, to practice a pause to make conscious choices and being accountable for my behavior reflecting how I genuinely want to show up in the world. With a certainty of failure attached, Integrity enables learning, demands my self-awareness and that I belong to myself first.

3.2. Love

*Don't let me think weakly
Though I know that I can break
Keep me away from apathy
While I am still awake
And don't let me think too long
Of the one I'm bound to face
Show me love, show me love, show me love.*
- Hundred Waters

There is one book that I can say dichotomizes my life into two parts: the part before and the part after reading *All About Love* (2001) by bell hooks. At twenty-five, I was shaken to my core by bell hook's sober and sound arguments for how love has been brutally twisted in western culture. Yet I was so profoundly grateful to have been extended her gracious invitation to move forward, and hopefully know love, as we had all been promised from the start. Providing first a resolute definition of the term, hooks then addresses different dimensions of love; in families of origin and in friendship, in community, in spirituality and communion of religious practice, between romantic partners, towards ourselves, the planet, humanity and as the vital ethic to drive forth social justice. It is from hook's definition and teachings that I establish Love as my core value.

Crediting Erich Fromm, she establishes love as a verb, not a noun: "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth. [...] Love is as love does. Love is an act of will – namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love." (bell hooks 2001, 4-5) And so, the cobwebs of culture and the rubble of ruined models must be cleared away to make space for a new journey of giving and receiving love.

The unlearning propelled on by this book is absolutely terrifying, wherein hook's project of defining love is not least to articulate what negates it: injustice, abuse, neglect, deceit, fear. She says "we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive. Love and abuse cannot coexist." (ibid. 6) Calling a rose a rose a rose and facing simultaneously my own lack of love and the collective, cultural distortion of love in which I am enmeshed, stirs up a lot of shit: shame, grief and dread. But bell hooks invites us to acknowledge that "We can never go back. I know that now. We can go forward. We can find the love our hearts long for, not until we let go of grief about the love we lost long ago, when we were little and had no voice to speak the heart's longing." (ibid. Preface x)

Through facing my own pain, I have come to know a liberatory love. With the gentle assistance of my Brennan healer and a therapist I have walked into a seven-year-olds room,

where a terrified child was thinking their feelings behind stacks of notebooks, cassettes and Playmobil tableaux, foraging for safety through non-sensical sense making, and tell her: *what happened to you was not okay. It is not your fault and you don't have to do anything about it. I see you. I will take care of us. Just keep playing.*

I had completely brushed off the notion of self-love as something for new age shamans on Instagram to cry about. Being guided through this excruciating inner child therapy made self-love physically real for me. Once I could imagine my child-self separate from my adult-self and see her/me as a full human being, I could extend to her/me the softest, most radical compassion and a liberating love that healed both of us. Not entirely, of course. Oh, if it only were that easy. But since that encounter, self-love and compassion have become integral to both my spiritual and artistic practice, informing how I show up in the world. The revolutionary act of granting love to myself has most certainly grown my capacity and ability to extend love to others, and to fight for a better world. The objective of Love as my core value professed and practiced, is not only “giving an individual greater life satisfaction; it is extolled as the primary way we end domination and oppression.” (ibid. 76)

The composition of care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust and truth telling are the tangible, measurable skills that make up bell hooks’s definition of love. Recognition and truth telling especially resonate with me, and the sheer revolution of thinking love as an action rather than a feeling “automatically assumes accountability and responsibility.” (ibid. 13) How invigorating it is to have this choice. And how liberating it is to speak truth:

“We are fighting for what is right, what is just, what is beautiful, what is honest, what *is*: Gender and sexual diversity *is*. That’s not a political statement, it’s a factual statement. Human complexity *is*. People can’t see what *is* when they’re living a fantasy of what they think should be.” (Alok Vaid Menon 2021)⁹

Truth is the cornerstone of justice, and “there can be no love without justice.” (hooks, love: 19) This echoes also Brené Brown’s statement that “knowing and experiencing love means calling shame, fear, dehumanization, and injustice by their birth name: lovelessness.” (Brené Brown 2020)

In a love ethic, equality is the universal and a promise kept in presupposing “that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well.” (bell hooks 2001, 87) Love as my core value thus forbids me to have ‘power over’, to dehumanize, oppress and colonize people, places, stories and myself. That does not “nurture spiritual growth.” As for my Love of theatre, living into my core value requires that I act accordingly.

⁹ See also Alok Vaid Menon. 2020. *Beyond the Gender Binary*. New York: Penguin Workshop

4. PRACTICING VALUES IN DIRECTING

In the 2012 documentary, *The Tightrope*, an 87-year-old, western theatre director invites a group of actors to walk across a carpeted studio floor, fully committed to the physical and mental actuality that they are walking a tightrope suspended in great heights, with no safety net below. This particular director garnered his status and fame not least by appropriating rituals and artforms from a variety of Asian cultures, and all I want from him is to shamelessly appropriate this metaphor.

The imaginary tightrope I walk when directing is hoisted between two pillars, my core values: Love and Integrity. They must stay in place, stable and present in my mind if I am to navigate the invisible thread. I must not only profess them, I must manifest them and live them. The point of this metaphor is not to address how I get from A to B, beginning to end of a process, I'd rather bring attention to the suspended moments of walking in and of itself, and what committing to the tightrope requires of me cognitively, emotionally and physically. I must stay aligned, in line, on the line. I must stay acutely aware of myself to maintain the tightrope. I contest for balance by my movement; my actions and my choices, my tilting, adjusting, intuitive flexing and relaxing of muscles – I must feel, listen and respond to the rope as I influence it with my movements. Then there are external factors like the wind, the air temperature, even rain or snow, fire and brimstone or a dragon that I summon on my treading. Some of these factors I can sense and keep under control. Others I cannot. But I keep the tightrope suspended. The pillars of Love and Integrity draw the line as I move. If I lose sight of them, I also lose sight and meaning of what I am doing, wiggling about on a bare floor. If I crumble one of them in my minds-eye, my loss is that of myself, into oblivion below.

In this chapter I will look at some moments, thoughts and learnings from my artistic practice and leadership as a director. How I have navigated the at times erratic tension between Love and Integrity when trying to live into them and found keys and locks to balance in the realm of Vulnerability.

To begin, I will account for the Stertabenda Manifesto, which I made collectively with my company Stertabenda (eng. Perplex)¹⁰ in 2016, at the onset of our collaboration. We have under its name produced three performances: *Sertabenda* (2016), *Insomnia* (2018) and *Góðan daginn, faggi* (2021) all of which I directed. The Manifesto is internal to the company,

¹⁰ See perplex.is

written in our wild-zone, world-making, co-created professional and relational “secret” language (originally also in Icelandic, but I have translated it here). Perhaps it is thus not entirely transparent to an outside eye. Depending on the eye, because it takes one to know one as previously stated. I will attempt to make the Stertabenda Manifesto transparent by providing glossary and some context of its actual manifestations in our practice.

Following the glossary, I will break form and list Directors Notes on Vulnerability, where I collect my own rambling ruminations on vulnerability and provide a non-linear web of my thoughts, questions, poetry, learnings and beliefs along with horizontal citations to various people who have influenced my rumbling with vulnerability as a director.

Lastly, I will account for *Neptune* (2023), my artistic thesis in MA Directing at The Theatre Academy, Helsinki. I will autotheoretically account for how I practiced showing up in alignment with my core values, what I learned about myself as they were continuously tested, and how I might have flunked at balancing vulnerability as I treaded a trembling tightrope.

4.1. Stertabenda Manifesto and Glossary

1. For the people we do theatre.
2. We reflect and renounce our times.
3. We are critical of the compositions of reality.
4. We are curious of constructs of identity - personal & national.
5. We impersonate truth and myth.
6. We flaunt our faults and flaws and we encourage frailty.
7. We're queer, not sure if we're here - don't get used to it.
8. We believe a musical could save the world.
9. We are fearless in mixing things and gaffer tape what doesn't fit.
10. We make sure the cracks are visible.
11. We breathe and bleed Camp.
12. We aspire for the ambiguous and confusing.
13. We aspire for radical tragedy. Grief is our logic.
14. We contradict the possible & stage potential alternatives.
15. We include the excluded and if we cannot, we address absence.
16. We embrace our own privilege, run it a cold bath and hope it can swim.
17. We dance because we are angry, we sing because we are scared.
18. We throw a costume party when doubtful, invite everyone and make it fail.
19. We only make theatre. The Audience produce meaning.
20. We bow in the end to place our hearts above our heads.

Twenty points is definitely a lot, but this is a queer company and excess and grandeur are to be expected, even if illusionary.

Point 1 (For the people we do theatre.) is a chant the cast in *Stertabenda* and *Insomnia* recited to conclude every pre-show warm-up. Original seven members consisted of me the director, four actors (two queer and two straight) and a two-woman lesbian folk-band. Most of us come from humble beginnings, meaning working-class families of origin. Our shared experiences made for a shared ideology of theatre being a site of democracy, for the public. This is also a grounding mantra, reminding us of the generosity inherent to the performance event; what we bring to the stage, when we stand firm in our worthiness, are gifts and offerings.

Points 2-4 (We reflect and renounce our times; We are critical of the compositions of reality; We are curious of constructs of identity - personal & national) and 14 (We contradict the possible & stage potential alternatives.) speak the queer and feminist criticism of our approach and how those schools of thought and experience inform our aesthetics and artistic constructions of characters and narratives. We must both face the current state of the world, while also striving for reimagining them, deconstructing oppressive structures and binaries and noticing the seams of our cloths. This was for example very present in the way *Stertabenda* (2016) was staged. The actors performed under their own names but shifted identities constantly. Eventually stacking up a demonstration of how identities are in fact not the sums of its parts but made up only from continuous citations. Once a character starts cross-referencing and stitching Nietzsche to her own mother, to the Prime Minister to herself to Gloria Gaynor to a Nazi to a Syrian refugee: identity reveals itself as an arbitrary structure.

Point 5 (We impersonate truth and myth.) refers to our unapologetic appropriation of canonized texts and our paradoxical adoration of many a masterpiece. We steal and borrow and give credit where it's due, but maybe in an unflattering light. For example, in *Góðan daginn, faggi* (2021) when gay actor Bjarni performs himself as a ten-year-old singing with gusto the anthem written for his hometown by a renowned composer, revealing its inherent compulsory heterosexuality to a ridiculous degree. And when we partially applied the form of Ovidus Metamorphoses to devised material from the 90's sitcom Friends in *Insomnia*. And when we brutally localized, and I, with fearless discretion and close to zero skills in German, translated Marius von Mayenburg's play Perplexed as the grounds for *Stertabenda* (we did pay for the rights and cleared everything with the agency).

Point 6 (We flaunt our faults and flaws and we encourage frailty.) and 17 (We dance because we are angry, we sing because we are scared.) reflect our love in action; our emotional, supportive commitment to each other and our work, and the shared responsibility of creating trust and maintaining safety by being accountable for ourselves and how we show up. We make space for each other to struggle, and to process what needs processing through our bodies and our voices, we declare and give out the right to be uncertain and insecure. We

choose soft over rough, kind above kicking ass. We have empathy for each other and ourselves in all our awkwardness and power; and that way we have helped each other to move through obstacles and ultimately grow. We cannot demand vulnerability in our rehearsal room, since it is not always productive and not always safe to be completely vulnerable by default. But we accept vulnerability as a given in the creative process and as the basis of our human connection.

Point 7 (We're queer, not sure if we're here - don't get used to it.) demonstrates in short that we are queer people with full and frictional lives whose mission is not to settle any discomfort of queerness or simplify our existence into identifiable, tolerable and digestible pigeon-holed pieces on hetero-patriarchy terms. To callback Gatsby: Difference should be difficult. (2016, 13) and to paraphrase previously cited Cocteau: We will not agree to be tolerated. That damages our love of love and our love of liberty.

Point 8 (We believe a musical could save the world.) we have already proven as factual. *Góðan daginn, faggi* (2021) is our one-man documentary musical created from Bjarni's Hero's Journey reckoning with his internalized homophobia via material from his childhood and adolescence journals and original music by the gay composer Axel Ingi Árnason. It premiered during Reykjavík Pride in 2021, originally in a minimal effort collaboration with and on behalf of the National Theatre of Iceland, with 8 shows planned. Now, nearing two years later, we have sold out 120 shows and made our queer audiences feel more seen than they claim to ever have felt in Icelandic theatres. We have toured Iceland twice with government funding, visiting all elementary and high schools providing life-affirming representation, conversations and education to queer youth, their teachers, parents, allies and bullies. We have travelled to Canada to present our message, gone on national television and radio talk shows and endless panels, discussions and meetings to speak about our mission of visibility, education and healing queer wounds with compassion. Icelandic National Broadcasting Service (RÚV) has bought the rights to broadcast the show in their program along with educational material. We've released an album with the original music and signed a contract with Summerhall Theatre for a full show-run at Edinburgh Fringe 2023, which we believe is only the beginning of our international expansion of the gay agenda for a polarized, violent world that desperately needs it. Yes, we gloat in our unexpected commercial success, but only for the furthering of exposure and distribution of our sensible: Compassion is not a depletable resource. It's what we all require to heal from the shame inherited to us.

Points 9-12 (We are fearless in mixing things and gaffer tape what doesn't fit; We make sure the cracks are visible; We breathe and bleed Camp; We aspire for the ambiguous and confusing.) reflect our aesthetics and sensibility for failure and impossible tasks. The Friends sitcom meeting Mythology, A one-man Hero's Journey musical, and the thoroughly scripted reverse-improvised appearing, materially poor / emotionally excessive autopsy of Icelandic national identity clashing with the German jewel of Marius von Mayenburg's piece

Perplexed that was at play in *Stertabenda*. Camp is then the electricity that rushes through us, ‘ambiguous’ and ‘confusing’ are mere means to an end of multiple truth, but Camp is our nervous system. Apparent in the most common note I’ve ever given to this group: “*show me your work, show me the tracks.*” We wink at the audience through our laborious fictional characters and situations. We acknowledge the theatre in the theatre that we are here reframing the real, in a lie posing as lie posing as truth, but can’t you see? I see you and you see me, seeing you and seeing me; us together making sense of us. The rush of Camp put forth in *Stertabenda* Manifesto intersects with the drive of this thesis: When we recognize and actively point out structures as structures, we learn that they are in fact made and can thus be remade; we learn the structures are arbitrary and thus disposable as sources of our oppression and pain; proving they are not only susceptible to change, but begging us for a makeover.

Point 13 (We aspire for radical tragedy. Grief is our logic) comes from a key learning of struggles to make *Stertabenda* in its nonsensical structure translate-able to the actors’ bodies and to navigate irrational impulses called for by the performance. In chapter 2.3 of this thesis I briefly mentioned Butler’s writing on grief in *Undoing Gender* (2004), particularly pages 17-23. Calling that back I’ll disclose that in the early process of rehearsing *Stertabenda* - at which point we had worked very hard to make groundwork for nearly all scenes - the actors, although wholeheartedly committed, were starting to get swallowed by the imploding complexity of the piece and the highly intellectual reasoning provided by yours truly, the director. We, or to be frank: I, lacked physical language that could transfer and translate all the political, philosophical topics and pressing questions we had cognitively understood as a group. How do you give action to “*the ethical bankruptcy of a Nordic Welfare state,*” how do you embody “*the collapse of your national identity*”?

Then there was a sudden death in my family, and I was jolted back to the frailty of our bonds and makings as people who love and lose each other. Seeking refuge in my favorite passages of Butler - those few, incandescent instances where she gets lyrically personal instead of parading her prize for “the most incomprehensible academic text” – I found Grief as a structure of identified stages that fit, ever so vulnerably to our project of materializing what is irrational for the body and rationalizing what is nonsense to the brain. Grief overlaps and contradicts; you laugh uproariously and the next second you are swallowed by sobs. You wash the dishes robotically and you stare empty for hours. Yet it all makes sense, as a physical process. Grief is inconsequence non-linear, a violent, ridiculous process that reveals our assembling as humans, how we are “undone by each other.” (Butler 2004, 19) This was transferrable as physical and inspiring logic to our illogical work.

Point 15 (We include the excluded, speak the unspeakable and if we cannot, we address absence.) pledges we never assume we have the mandate on truth and knowledge, but instead seek education and interference from the people that know what we do not - and might even share some of our experiences in all their difficult differences. We can only speak on behalf

of ourselves. Our responsibility is to make that clear, referring back to point 5: that truth is complex and multifaceted, resisting commodification and speed. A lie can be made quick and easy with the right preservatives. We kindly decline and instead muster the courage to say what we feel needs to be said, even if it lumps our throat and we don't know the exact words for it. This does not refer to punching up via representation: We fearlessly punch up to power with rhinestone brass-knuckles and disco-ball mallets.

Point 16 (We embrace our own privilege, run it a cold bath and hope it can swim.) refers to acknowledging our privileges and shocking them to cold water, which is to wake up the whole system. All members of Stertabenda to date, though somewhat shifting since the foundation in 2016, are white, cis, able bodied and educated in our field. It might be uncomfortable for us to sit in the cold tub and feel the truth of our bodies, but essential for our health and the integrity of our work. This speaks to point 15 as well, but more internal towards ourselves and what we want to do with the privileges of our privileges: Swim. Move. Act.

Point 18 (We throw a costume party when doubtful, invite everyone and make it fail.) references an internal joke that became a tactic. Actor Bjarni and I once found ourselves present in the midst of a gay couple who loves costume parties and they presented us with their favorite, absolutely random theme for such an event: Lamp and Curtain. Meaning everyone attending should dress up as a Lamp or a Curtain. Posing these kinds of fortuitous premises and rules to our creative exercises proved to bear not only very fruitful results in our research processes, but also some of the best times we had socially. Dressing up is the root of it all, right? Posing as someone or something. Asking for an audience consideration of you as a Flower, A Viking Settler, a human being.

Point 19 (We only make theatre. The Audience produce meaning.) rounds off to Point 1 of the chant, emphasizing that despite our good efforts, beauty is in the eye of the beholder and it is the audience we ultimately seek to converse with and confide in for meaning, creating a community of narrators and translators, to callback Ranci re.

Lastly, point 20 (We bow in the end to place our hearts above our heads.) is the constant reminder to strive for wholehearted instead of strong headed. We wish the conversation to take place in our senses, heart-to-heart as opposed to the more violently pre-knowledgeable, head-to-head. It is a reminder to stay humble to the work, ourselves and the public we play theory for, whom we desperately need to make sense of it all.

4.2. Directors Notes on Vulnerability: ramble/rumble

In this chapter I will break form and collect my own ruminations on Vulnerability. I'll provide a non-linear web of my thoughts, questions, poetry, learnings and beliefs along with horizontal citations to various people who have influenced my rumbling with vulnerability as a director. I choose this form for the joy of rambling on with intertextual and incompatible ideas and revelations, and I am inspired by Brené Brown's concept of the rumble: "A rumble is a discussion, conversation, or meeting defined by a commitment to lean into vulnerability, to stay curious and generous, to stick with the messy middle of problem identification and solving, to take a break and circle back when necessary." (Brené 2018, 10) So instead of me summarizing in uniform text all the things I am so uncertain about when it comes to vulnerability, this can rather be a curious, 'messy middle' conversation where we can take breaks and circle back again.

...

Vulnerability is "the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (Brené 2018, 19)

i.e. = basically, my job description.

What is the creative process or theatre at all without uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure?

Latin 'Vulnus' = Wound. Crack: Where the light gets in.
Painful, profound.

Erinn Gilson's 'epistemic vulnerability'

> our sense of self is inherently vulnerable

Human = "a being who has come into being and is continually evolving, [...]

has been and will continue to be, affected by others."

(Gilson 2011, 326)

vulnerability without boundaries = "manipulation, desperation or shock and awe."
(Brené 2018, 39)

It's vulnerable to share my 'why' with the actors.

Will it resonate how the play is "*about my little brother*"?

Maybe it won't, but I have to tell them. Have to. Have to.

No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.

Do not forebode joy. Practice gratitude.
Remember "it takes strong bones to get through a good day" – María Heba.

CAMP is embarrassment without cowardice.

(Core 1999, 81)

Am I failing at vulnerability by not experiencing the catharsis myself?
Does it make me a sociopath, that I don't sob with my friend on stage?
I can't get emotionally enmeshed in the tragedy we're making.
That risks sabotaging the fragile alchemy, jeopardizes the safety of the actors,
drains the charge for your audience?
Theatre is not my therapist.
Make therapist appointment.

Greek 'Sarkazein' = Sarcasm origin, meaning "tearing flesh"

"The denial of vulnerability can be understood to be motivated by the desire
– conscious or not –
to maintain a certain kind of subjectivity
privileged in capitalist socioeconomic systems,
namely, that of the prototypical, arrogantly self-sufficient,
independent, invulnerable master subject."
(Gilson 2011, 312)
Let's not do that.

You can do vulnerability of it can do you – Brené
(2018, 24)

Anne Bogart's 'Embarrassment'?
"If your work does not sufficiently embarrass you,
When very likely no one will be touched by it" (Bogart 2001, 113)
And: "can we welcome the entanglement of engagement?
Can we allow our sense of authority to be challenged in
the encounter? (ibid. 116)
+ RESIST MASTERY.

RESIST MASTERY

Butler: Vanquishing vulnerability is "a masculinist ideal" that "models itself on mastery."
(Butler 2016, 15-17)

"How on earth could you know something you've never learned?
Ask for help." – Dad

Our ability to be daring leaders will never be greater
than our capacity for vulnerability.
(Brené ibid. 11)

Cowardice is detaching your investment from the show
when you fear it's not going to go down well with critics and cool kids.
Cowardice to abandon a ship you launched in the first place.
Vulnerable to care about something. Brave through.

“Bravo” = Italian for Brave.

Work from your scars, not your wounds
- Bjarni Snæbjörnsson (+ Glennon Doyle)

I must gently and kindly leave my beloved friends for a while and in a way,
as we board the plane to do our work.
Please remember the pilot is also at risk.

Director = the kid on the rowboat, who's back is turned against the destination,
rowing and paddling, forwards, yet backwards.
Unsure but sure.
Can I ever get too comfortable with the ‘not knowing?’
If I embrace uncertainty, risk and exposure in the work,
am I then failing vulnerability?
RSVP, Brené Brown.

I stay calm and collected in rehearsal by the same order of conduct
that leaves the party before it gets messy.

Yes I am sensitive.
But my unfiltered emotions are not my notes.
Laughing and crying are not my notes.
It's my lit and functioning prefrontal cortex
that translates intuition and collected bodily data
from my senses to the notes.

When clutching to control over a situation or another person,
How present am I?
How openhearted? How spontaneous and creative?
Do I even like myself?

Paradoxes elicit vulnerability
see Dheeraj Pandey citation in *Dare to Lead*:
“Leaders must learn skills to hold these tensions
and get adept to balancing on the “tightrope” of life.
Ultimately, leadership is the ability to thrive
in the ambiguity of paradoxes and opposites.”
(Brené 2018, 169)
=Vulnerability the balancing stick for the tightrope?

“we become who we are through openness to others”
(Gilson 2011, 319).

Be ground, be crumbled
so wildflowers will come up where you are
you’ve been stony for too many years
try something different - surrender
- Rumi

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfish-ness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless- it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreak-able, impenetrable, irredeemable.”
- C.S Lewis (in Brené 2018, 22)

“From our mirror neurons to language, we are a social species.
In the absence of real connection, we suffer.”
(Brené 2018, 25)

Directing like learning to drive:
First, I’m unconsciously unskilled.
Then consciously unskilled.
Then consciously skilled.
Then unconsciously skilled.
IS THAT THE BLIND SPOT?
How do I resist mastery?
How do I stay “awkward, brave and kind”
while still remaining a safe and trustworthy driver?

Take heed from the healer, who leaves behind yet brings themselves entirely
to the project of curating time and space for the broken to bleed
the healer does not interfere with her own bleeding.
Take hint from the healer and how their gift is not a rescue mission
but constructed conditions for your own phenomenal findings
the healer does not interfere with her own searching.

Behind the projection of bravery is the assumption of perpetual resilience.
No one can take everything all the time.
Call a friend.

Gutting myself or oversharing to fast track connection
= Manipulative & Untrustworthy
Need psychological safety + clarity of intentions / expectations
+ context of roles and relationships.
Ask: What level of vulnerability is appropriate and productive here?
(Brené 2018, 39-40)

“we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself,
and by virtue of our embodiment, given over to an other: [...]”
We cannot endeavor to “rectify” this situation.
And we cannot recover the source of this vulnerability,
for it precedes the formation of “I.””
(Butler 2004, 23)¹¹

Our bodies are literally built for being vulnerable in community:
Tears of sadness have a higher protein count than other tears.
So that they take longer to drip.
So that other people can see them.
So that we can be cared for.

Let this sink in:
“vulnerability is about the body”
“We might know the facts of racial discrimination and oppression, [...]”
but to allow that knowledge to really “sink in”
means to have it sink into our bodies,
into our emotional responses”
Let that sink in.
(Gilson 2011, 325-6)

Set the temperature for innocence to survive and thrive.
We desperately need innocence.

Icelandic ‘Berskjöldun’ = Vulnerability, literally meaning “no shielding”
Gorgeous.
Scary.

¹¹ See also Butler 2012, 134-51

4.3. Neptune: Deciphering Dreams While Sleeping

“And now I’ve seen war, and death, and destruction, and I wish it was an exaggeration, but it’s not. And I think even after everything, I would still fear you the most. And that’s the most honest thing I could ever tell you.” – Neptune by Vera Boitcova

“The act of memory is a physical act and lies at the heart of the art of the theatre. If the theatre were a verb, it would be ‘to remember’.” (Bogart 1991, 22)

Honoring still the epistemology of stand-point theory, I intend and expect that as the researcher here, I be subjected to the same level of scrutiny as directed at my objects of research. (McCorkel and Myers 2003, 205). In this chapter, I will lay into myself as much as is called for. I declare that I speak only my own truth, from my own perspective, which does not in any way diminish the validity of other truths or perspectives. Experience is not a zero-sum game or a resource that can be exhausted.

Originally, *Neptune* was on a different orbit than the one it was shot into. The playwright, Vera Boticova, MA student in CDPR at Teak, approached me in December 2021 about directing her thesis work the following school year, the early months of 2023. She presented me with the idea of a multi-layered autobiographical piece yet to be written, about a lost love from her recent past, raising questions of ‘lovelessness’ and its presumed impossibilities in queer lives across nations, races, and generations. It should have three planes of narrative: Vera telling her story from her own perspective as an MC of sorts; two performers acting out memories from Vera’s relationship with a black woman from the United States; and then yet another pair of performers that would alternate between coding, resisting, contextualizing or dismantling the themes and topics arising from the MC narrative and the narrative of memories, by slipping into multiple characters from history, pop-culture, politics and literature. So, a cabaret partially, but also a genuine, vulnerable story throughout, tackling both the massive and miniscule, political and personal. This sounded like a dream project for me, and I could not jump on board soon enough. I saw snippets from Vera’s early texts and trial demos in her department and felt an immediate resonance to the material. I was confused and intrigued in the best possible way, so I shortly after decided to have *Neptune* be my artistic thesis.

I was very conscious not to give into the external pressure of the ‘Thesis’ label for this project, as any other it was part of my career which takes me up and down, forwards and backwards. Metaphors can go a long way for me, one of which was gifted to me by my mentor, Rodolfo García Vázquez, of the artists life being much like that of a surfer: Where the waves of the ocean come and go in different shapes and sizes and it’s only up to us to decide if we chase and ride them. We can only grow our skills and strengths by riding, trying

and learning to trust our bodies. When (not if) we fail – or when a wave unexpectedly crumbles in the tide from beneath our feet, there will always be another wave to ride, if we are willing to keep coming back to the water. So, I insisted this project was no make or break for me, I simply wanted to show up in the water with everything I had – and ride the wave of *Neptune* the best I possibly could.

Neptune was a challenge for me artistically and potent with opportunities for me to develop my queering methods, layering narratives, nuance work in temporality and playful, political representation. But my focus for my artistic thesis was on the trajectory of developing my skills as an artistic leader. *Neptune* was not at all my first rodeo. I have directed ten full scale, professional productions, plus numerous smaller productions, radio-plays, staged readings and productions with acting students. I have a strong sense of my artistic and political standpoints as a director, experience, skills and know-how. Although I try resisting mastery consistently, I still know in my body what I want to do with theatre. The only common denominator in the constantly shifting working groups, organizations, premises and context of material I find myself in, is myself. I wanted to make use of the wave of *Neptune* to research particularly how and when I am in alignment with my core values as a leader and where it gets slippery for me to act out of line. Therefore, I will not so much account for the artistic aspect; my aesthetic choices, solutions or even results in this chapter - unless relevant, because it is all intersected - but I'll rather dive into and discuss how I showed up in the processes and challenges of creating *Neptune*, as a daring leader in perpetual training.

Leadership, according to Brené Brown is taking “responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and [having] the courage to develop that potential.” (2018, 4) Vera and I, as the original team, worked together at finding the potential people, at manning all posts in the pre-planning period. She was present in Helsinki and I was still finishing my contract in Reykjavík, so it made sense that she would take the lead in finding the performers. This meant of course that I had to get to know the performers backwards in a way and adjust myself to unknown variables. But what is directing and leadership if not adjusting yourself to unknown variables? And what is a production without some shots in the dark? *You make it work*, I thought to myself.

Neither Vera or I are local to Helsinki and I had not been very physically present at Teak during my studies up until this point, so my knowledge of the acting students, let alone professional actors, was limited and I would have ended up drawing some wild cards if I had seen to casting by myself anyway.

However, I took the lead in filling every post of designers in the working group as soon as I was in Finland. There are a lot of challenges to not being local. Finding people to work with you, as a completely foreign entity, is one of them. I purposefully sought out designers who

were passionate about queer theatre and queer culture - devoted allies or queer identifying. I wound up finding marvelous artists that were fully committed and ripe with inspiring ideas, skills and talents: Sound designer Juri Jänis, costume designer Jenni Sarkkinen, light designer Mari Agge, scenographer Magnús Sigurðarson, make up designers Roosa Leino and Anu Reijonen.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the whole trajectory of *Neptune* changed. The war deeply affected Vera's life in the most immediate way. Her unwavering sense of justice called her to the streets of her city of St. Petersburg to protest. She was already just one strike away from being listed a public enemy in Russia, for her previous and consistent feminist activism and queer rights advocacy. It was clear as day that her life and safety were jeopardized.

In the wake of the invasion, Vera responded to my impotent message of support asking sincerely if I still wanted to go through with the project: "*I completely understand if you don't*" she said, referencing how all Russians were now the "*faces and names of evil*" in the entire world, especially in the countries with borders to Russia. To her, it would make sense if I did not want to be associated with her anymore. I could not have possibly anticipated this juncture to ever arise. In the wake of this horrific global event, I felt an even deeper accountability and calling to the project. As much as I cannot possibly imagine what she was going through, the very last thing on my mind was to abandon ship. I did recognize however that this would obviously affect the work, the mental and material state of the playwright and main character of our performance. I asked in turn if she still wanted to go through with it. She did. And so, it was settled.

The war and Vera's situation crystallized that my role in this particular project was that of an amplifier. I felt I was there to help carry her story, to support and facilitate what she needed to talk about, what she needed to say. Acutely aware that I do not possess the knowledge of living through the kind of displacement and threat that she lived through, being forced to choose between betraying her sense of justice and truth by staying silent or to leave her home, her family and friends – not knowing if she would get to return, or even be safe where she ended up. I still felt in my body the humbling urgency to assist her any way I could in actualizing *Neptune*, now with a completely inverted objective: reconciling with love and pleading for hope during a time when all might seem lost. I felt completely aligned with my core values in this decision.

The script arrived to me in October 2022, and it was indeed a play inhabiting multiple, burning questions, urgency and tension against my own ideas of memory, trauma and love. Vera particularly asked for only three things at the onset: Slow dancing, a liminal space of a corridor or doorstep, and Joy, countering and illuminating the dark and heavy topics.

I wanted wholeheartedly to do right by Vera and her play, facilitate a space to carry the reconciliation with love and the plea for hope, where fear and futility could be faced with joy as a weapon of choice, to rewrite a happy ending - to heal. But could that even be possible from a wound which was not yet a scar? Was it even imaginable, and responsible of me to facilitate, from an autobiographical stand-point undoubtedly somewhat distorted and warped by war and trauma, not just at the time of writing, but at the time of staging? I'm still not entirely sure. In conversations with my mentor in this process, Taylor Mac, I mainly sought guidance on how I could facilitate the conditions for *Neptune* to be an invitation for the audience to join Vera in grappling with hope and love right then and there, as a jeopardized and perhaps, due to the circumstances in her life, an "unreliable" narrator or MC. Taylor further supported me in thinking through the challenge of mediating and negotiating the application of my interpretation of the narrator's positionality, to the person who was entangled in the MC's situation in her real life. There were no easy answers, but I found great comfort in clarity of schedule and frameworks, and at least a verbalization of clear role distribution.

Having worked with Vera before this I experienced trust already established between us, and it was made clear that she specifically wanted me to direct her play, having seen and experienced the way I work and having identified and resonated with my artistic vision and aesthetics.¹² I felt we stood on solid ground and had a mutual understanding for a professional collaboration.

Personal, autobiographical material, even a testimonial format, was also something I have tested myself with before; as dramaturg to director Benedikt Erlingsson and actress/playwright Charlotte Böving in her autobiographical performance about death: *Ég dey* (2018); as director and co-writer of *Ókunnugur* (2019), a performance project commissioned by The Women's Shelter in Reykjavík grappling with harmful masculinity and violence in intimate relationships from the perspective of male perpetrators; and most notably; in *Góðan daginn, faggi* (2021) where co-author and actor Bjarni brought his personal diaries as our main source material in creating a performance dealing very directly with his own reckoning with shame, self-hatred and violence he has been subject to as a queer person. Our creative process was intertwined and corresponding with his own spiritual journey and hard, messy, discombobulated healing process of the wounds we were dissecting. Bjarni literally had a full-blown nervous breakdown in 2019, mid-way into our process; which then in turn ended up being a crucial part of the story told in our performance.

What discerns *Faggi* from *Neptune* is that Bjarni and I were 1) very close friends outside work, with years of trust building, deep love and vulnerability between us. 2) We were mindful and deliberate in choosing exactly what people we trusted enough to join our

¹² We worked together as director (me) and dramaturg (Vera) on *Look What You Made Me Do*, a devised and very queer performance derived mainly from Jean Genet's *Maids*. Premiered at Teak in November 2021.

working group and be invited into our intentionally safe work environment. 3) As colleagues, Bjarni and I share a co-created professional and artistic language built over seven years of collaborating. Lastly 4) we took years to finalize our project. We started writing *Faggi* in 2017 and our production was derailed a number of times before the wound had indeed healed enough, and we felt distanced and secure enough in 2021 to hand the story over to an audience without psychologically jeopardizing Bjarni.

In contrast, the whole premise of *Neptune* was challenging. We had but a few months for the whole production to take place, four and a half weeks of rehearsals, very scattered opportunities for trust and language building as the playwright and I were not in the same country aside from a few scattered days up until rehearsals. The prospect of emotionally and critically distancing from the material, which narrated events and memories framed by the year 2022, seemed utterly impossible. Comparing to *Faggi*, setting sail for *Neptune* feels close to irresponsible of me. But Vera is veracity embodied to me; razor sharp, calm, cool and collected – not to mention, in my eyes, a prodigal playwright. Her juxta-positioning of objects, temporalities, themes and characters is mindbogglingly exciting for a director. Her humor is piercing and troubling, and a sensibility for softness somehow shines through her often harsh and aggressive flow. She oozes professionalism, deep intelligence, and critical distancing.

The ethical questions I was preoccupied with were mainly: How do I negotiate interpretations of memories to the present keeper of those memories? How do I create safety and facilitate autonomous creative departure and collective ownership when the person whose life and experience is the material is present and vocal in the room? How do I address trauma and its effects to someone who is perhaps living through that very trauma? I could not locate answers to these questions and the simple reason might perhaps be that there are none. It felt like an impossible task from every point of view. But I am a sucker for impossible tasks and encouraged to chase the fun by my Mentor Taylor Mac, there was only one way to find out.

For this impossible task, I set out with Brené Brown's definition of a leader as the one who assumes "responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential." (2018, 4) And so I felt: decisive, responsible and courageous, committed to find potential and develop it.

Empowering collaborators and actors in developing the potential on their own merit is fundamental for my leadership role as a director. In doing so lies my alignment with Love as a core value: To intentionally choose and act how I best believe will enable our growth together and the growth of our shared project. Even though I have my own scribbles and notions of 'truth' in analysis of the work at hand, I deliberately leave it suspect and exposed

to influence and findings from the process: I need you and you need me, we need each other to develop the potential and grow.

This exemplified to begin with in a three-day workshop I facilitated with the working group in mid-December 2022, where the objective was to collectively draw the map of the piece, to get a shared feel of the world/worlds we wanted to create and the core of the story we wanted to tell. With everyone's emotional resonance equal, striving for shared ownership of the blueprints and a collaborative consensus about both the work and the way of working. The workshop was also crucial for me to finalize casting; I only had limited knowledge of three out of six performers and needed to get a feel for dynamics before roles could be assigned. What was predetermined was Vera's role as MC and Edit Williams as the character of M, MC's lost lover. Not everyone was able to be physically present in the workshop and that posed me with the challenging task of casting some roles blindly, with nothing but hunches to back me up, and then develop whatever potential was to be found.

For the workshop I was inspired by Saana Lavaste's teachings and learnings about Reading as an Artistic Practice, and I was fresh out of a course so titled, facilitated by her. In the *Neptune* workshop we read the play text in two different ways. The first reading exercise we sat in a circle and read each scene individually (The play is divided into twelve scenes for each month of the year 2022, and two extra scenes with direct audience interaction). We randomly exchanged characters between anyone in the circle for each scene and when the last word was out, I set a two-minute timer, and everyone said what they felt described the feeling of the scene. I wrote down the words and after we had gone through the whole play this way, we had a very vibrant, co-created list of each of the fourteen scenes: An Emotional map. Then I randomly assigned everyone 2-3 scenes and their corresponding Emotional maps to sit with and read alone and return to the group after 30 minutes with their chosen three Keywords from the Emotional map – or optionally create one Key-sentence to describe each scene, derivative of the Emotional map. Next, we gathered these and discussed them, sharing what we agreed with, tweaking or adding to them with great enthusiasm.

For the second reading exercise I assigned everyone 2-3 scenes of the play for themselves and allocated 40 minutes to sit with them reading privately and list all the material things they could find, anything mentioned or described that you could touch. This delivered both very abstract and concrete lists of Materials that we then used for exercises on the floor, where I invited everyone to materialize an 'opening' or a performative image from a particular scene of their own highest resonance, using only the Keywords/Key-sentence and corresponding Material list. Then we discussed what we had seen, how it felt, what resonated and what opened up for us. Turned out, we already had some vital keys to bring with us onward.

Another exercise I facilitated during the workshop had to do with collecting data and opening up conversations of expectations and boundaries; how we would approach the work.

Again, using 2-minute timers, everyone wrote down their own lists of ‘WHAT are we doing – ‘HOW will we do it’ – ‘What are your DREAMS for the end result’– ‘What will you NOT accept.’ Then we all shared, and surprisingly enough, as seems to always be the case with this favorite co-thinking exercise of mine: We had very similar ideas and aspirations already. And that without me taking any earlier charge in saying what I, the director, had visualized or planned.

Vera then facilitated a sharing where everyone was invited to bring two songs to either play for the group or perform it themselves. One song of the many scripted in the play, and one song that was personally important for them. This created wonderfully vulnerable moments of sharing, singing and getting to know each other through music.

What we gathered from this workshop was not only some ignition of content and imagery, but the building blocks for constructing a collective symbiotic working language and the foundations for being creative together in our upcoming rehearsal period.

I discussed openly with everyone in the working group that time was a major factor for us, which we had to define and restrict and make the best possible use of. We only had four and a half weeks of rehearsals until our premiere in February, as well as challenging conditions of other engagements of members in the working group. Everyone had something aside from this project; movement classes, singing lessons, travels abroad for work, filming days etc. And some members are not students at Teak, e.g. Yoandy Jimeno, Jenni, Mari and Magnús – the last three also live far away from Helsinki. I am extremely organized and saw this obstacle only as the creative ally of what Anne Bogart calls Resistance: “How we measure ourselves against the natural resistances we encounter every day determines the quality of what we accomplish.” (Bogart 2001, 138) I am a sucker for clear restrictions and quite seasoned in not thinking of obstacles as problems but rather the restraints that I push against to then in turn create something, so I put together a thoroughly detailed schedule of our work, which should win some sort of an award, to be honest.

As another form of creative ally of restraint, I transparently laid down what was given: There were three different planes of style in acting, which gave way for split rehearsal to a large extent; there were the spatial parameters and material confinements of the scenography created by Magnús Sigurðarson; and lastly, how I suggested we would go about constructing the show.

I asked that we not spend any whole days sitting by a table, in immobile and cognitive analysis, but the majority of our time on the floor, investigating and analyzing through our bodies. I presented my background and derivative understanding of Maria Knebel’s Active Analysis, as passed on to me by my mentor Egill Pálsson, as a point of intentional departure for my approach. Departure meaning that I prefer applying parts that serve on a case-by-case

basis and leave the rest.¹³ I explained that I wanted to plough through the scenes and make so called “sketches” and “drafts.” I transparently explained that it was because I was committed to get, as soon as possible, to a place where we could run through larger arches of the performance, with all our given confinements, for the actors to dive into their work of physical research and creative tests and trials, not to mention for our light and sound designer to start creating responsively against clear parameters.

Neptune is a majorly complex play, in all its multilayers and cross-referencing of realities, topics and feelings. My objective was to create the ideal conditions for the actors to make sense of their journeys, non-linear developments, twists and turns, through their bodily impulses and not through their brains. I wanted to create the groundwork of each scene swiftly, to have more time for growing their potential autonomously within a clear frame. Calling on Bogart again: “the restrictions, the precision, the exactitude, that allows for the possibility of freedom. The form becomes a container in which the actor can find endless variations and interpretive freedom.” (Bogart: 46)

My approach was agreed upon and I had the mandate to get us to work. To begin with, when rehearsals started in early January, everything worked marvelously. We triumphed at accumulating collective sense of complex premises and quicker than I could have anticipated, only a few days into the process, we were doing investigative run-throughs of large parts.

As questions inevitably arose of “*what does it mean*” and concerns of “*where is this going*,” I insisted kindly on the creative power of “not knowing” and that we were in the process of not only figuring that out, but creating something untamed, wild, terrifying and tender, that perhaps resisted our brain logic. I felt aligned to my core value of Love, to commingle bell hooks with Brené Brown: in seeing the potential of these people and our process, and in being courageous enough to develop that potential, i.e. nurturing our growth. Leading is a loving practice for me. And I felt I was truly embodying that, softly but fiercely. I felt aligned with my Integrity and exemplary at my ethical responsibility as a leader in a creative process with its unavoidable uncertainty and fear, as I committed to gently “holding people in discomfort – to acknowledge the tumult but not fan it, to share information and not inflate or fake it.” I felt I was doing very well at daring leadership, not afraid to “acknowledge, name, and normalize discord and difference.” (Brené 2018, 104-5)

I could see, feel and name very promising things happening and brilliant ideas and solutions springing from our efforts. The whole thing accumulated intuitively for me as I responded to gifts, ideas, proposals and questions along the way. There was uncertainty and fear among the actors – but I felt I was properly acknowledging it and allowing those feelings to be present, exemplified in e.g. how I invited them just to try going through it, trusting themselves to solve and know things in the moment - trying is never wrong or right - and I

¹³ See for some context: Egill Pálsson 2022 “Two Methods, Same Origins, Different Outcomes” *Looking for direction: Rethinking theatre practices and Pedagogies in the 21st century*. Uniarts Helsinki Theatre Academy: 54-94

repeatedly asked them to “bring everything you got, and if that is only 40% today, that is all I ask for.”

Communication is one of the fundamental places where I commit to being in alignment with Love and Integrity. One thing I never, ever exert is willful aggression towards people, raising my voice, losing my temper. Even if I feel angry or extremely frustrated, I commit to resolving those feelings in my own time instead of dumping them in the workspace.

Shortly before *Neptune*, I had been introduced to a helpful tool in my mentor Rodolfo’s course ‘Decolonial Directing.’ It is the tool of Nonviolent Communication, based on that of Marshall B. Rosenberg. (Rosenberg 2003) As presented to me in the course, it has four posts for communication, especially potent for de-escalating and solving conflict:

- 1) Make an observation of behavior, something you saw or heard,
- 2) Share your feelings using *I* statements,
- 3) Express a need you have and
- 4) Make a request based on your need.

I took this method with me into the process of *Neptune*, since it felt very aligned with my core values, and I had many opportunities to try, fail and try again at applying it.

It’s never simple or easy for a director to have the playwright present in the rehearsal room, the long-gone ones with all their reception history and canonized expectations can be challenging enough. To my own standards and learnings from the Nonviolent format I set firm boundaries, stated my needs and requests regarding Vera’s presence and commentary in the room and negotiated clear communication guidelines. I insisted on a constantly open line between the two of us regarding director and playwright deliberations. There turned out to be way more non-negotiables on behalf of the playwright than I had anticipated in the beginning. I did not feel, in light of the circumstances, I could justify ‘fighting’ for some of my interpretations and cut suggestions as I would have perhaps done in a different setting. She had leverage on interpretation and when we disagreed on things, I struggled to find my place to contradict her often strong preferences and share feelings, needs and requests.

The other performers were up to the strange task of embodying characters based on the playwright herself, her former lover and various considerations and manifestations from the playwright’s own life. I felt we were playfully and surely navigating this strange task. For the majority of the process, I truly and wholeheartedly believed that things were not only on schedule, but far exceeding any practical and artistic expectations, we were making thrilling progress and discoveries, I felt aligned and confident as a leader. Everything was, in my experience, going extremely well.

One of the actors was most consistent in raising concerns and worries - and was struggling with their health as a cause or result of the undeniable stress of our mission. I responded as kindly and honestly as I could about what we knew and what we didn’t at any given moment.

When I felt their fear starting to bleed into the room and affect others' confidence in the process, I asked the person in question to speak to me privately. I applied the Nonviolent Communication method to our conversation.

I made my observations about what I was seeing: *I see and hear you continuously raising XYZ variations of concerns we have already solved or are in the process of solving together.* I shared how I felt about it: *It makes me feel unheard and concerned for our process. I feel worried that you are not committed to the process.*

I expressed a need: *I need you to be committed and accountable for how you show up.* And a request: *Can we discuss what needs to happen, what can I do and what can you do, so that you can fully commit to the process?*

The person reflected back that they felt better already, had been stressed also due to outside factors and not feeling entirely well health-wise. They wanted to commit and needed just a few moments to gather themselves to think about what they might need.

In this instance I would say that the Nonviolent method didn't work for me. I either overestimated the contagiousness of my own calm presence, misjudged the experience of self-accountability in creative processes present the working group; or I underestimated the fear constantly bubbling to the surface. Whichever it was, two other actors approached me after this and urgently asked to talk to me. It was clear we we're not going to work on any scenes that day, there was a collective meltdown happening in the group of actors. This was a week before the premiere.

We sat down in a circle to address what was going on and I kept on thinking through the lens of the Nonviolent approach, and also Brené Brown's Rumble concept: "a discussion, conversation, or meeting defined by a commitment to lean into vulnerability, to stay curious and generous, to stick with the messy middle of problem identification and solving, to take a break and circle back when necessary." (Brené 2018, 10)

I set the parameters that everyone would speak with "I" statements from their own experience and not with a "we" or what Brené Brown calls "the invisible army" (ibid. 94) Aside from that, I did not facilitate this rumble particularly by posing specific questions. I simply sat and listened attentively to what they shared: Which was that they felt exhausted, unheard and unsafe, and one actor admitted that at this point they were very ill and not in a condition to push forward with the velocity needed.

Our rumble with vulnerability at this point helped in and of itself to establish safety. The actors shared afterwards that they felt relieved, grateful and heard. I did hear them, and I acknowledged their feelings. In accordance to Nonviolent communication I talked 'needs' and 'requests' and in closing the conversation I pledged to present clear and practical options moving forward. For example, costume designer Jenni Sarkkinen and I completely agreed to

cut down the number and complexity of costumes by nearly two thirds – which the actors were in agreement with. I then adjusted our schedule and its mediation according to the requests in our rumble and after getting honest answers that everyone actually wanted to follow it through and finish it, I delayed the premiere for three days.

In my professional life, I have never struggled with asking for help, and I thank my father for instilling that in me. I thought to myself that it didn't really matter if it was external or internal factors causing feelings of unsafety: I needed to establish safety to be able to finish the project. I called on all of our departments, through my professor, and she set up shifts for teachers to take turns being present in the room while we worked. Inserting a higher-ranked authority figure like that is maybe a last resort to some, but in this case, it was definitely helpful. Someone was watching and witnessing the work and that served the work and made it somehow more visible and tangible to everyone participating. I did not mind at all placing myself under apparent surveillance and scrutiny, because it created a stronger sense of safety. Delaying was also a right choice, and a very easy one. Even though it felt like adding 5k at the final moments of a marathon and meant we had only five performances with an audience.

Light designer Mari and I had a good wind-down talk after everyone had left the rumbling conversation, where she mirrored back to me some wise insight. She shared that in her vast experience of working in theatre and dance, when there are high levels of stress and confusion, breakdowns are actually a good thing. At least way better than the opposite; bottling up, buckling down and keeping quiet as the tension metastasizes in silence. I am also now reminded of what director Yaël Farber said in a masterclass I sought with her in 2021, discussing the mandate of constructing the creative space, and how to maintain the parameters you want when faced with different manifestations of fear. She said that it was a gift if our collaborators find the courage to speak their fears in the room, instead of risking to poison the whole process by destructive armoring, mental resignation or even mutiny. She said the best way to respond to a person articulating a major struggle or concern should be *“thank you for not destroying our production.”*

I want to place myself in the lineage of self-conscious, grounded, transparent, loving and inspiring directors who, with clear role distribution and articulated expectations, treat people and their differences with the innate respect and dignity that they deserve as a birthright. I see my leadership role as director as being responsible for seeing people, hearing them, respecting them, creating common language and maintaining horizontal safety. This is fundamental to me in facilitating space and time in which to inspire and push myself and my fellow artists to reach our highest, creative potential on our limited, shared timeline. Leading is loving for me.

The most mind-boggling task for me remains deciphering which of the issues in *Neptune* were actually manageable and which of them were not. What was my responsibility and what was not? What was brewing there, rooted in this particular process, the particular dynamics and perhaps in my way of working? And what were external factors that I surely cannot control but am still responsible for adjusting to?

“You can’t have people without persons”, my partner said to me when I came home one night, scrounging for a diagnosis of what I might have gotten wrong. I have strong professional boundaries and in this particular process it was easy for me not to take things personally. But I take it very seriously that a process I facilitated evoked feelings of unsafety.

In retrospect I am particularly humbled by Brené Brown’s declaration that “leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to fears and feelings or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage ineffective and unproductive behavior.” (2018, 67) What went wrong for me, was in fact the naming and normalizing of what I deem the greatest source of tension and fear in the process. Another key learning is that I lacked courage to be truly vulnerable, as bravely as I was able to lean into the discomfort of what Erinn Gilson terms “epistemic vulnerability” in “being open to now knowing [...] to being wrong and venturing one’s ideas beliefs and feelings nonetheless.” (Gilson 2011, 325)

Analyzing my experience of *Neptune* through the lens of Brené Brown’s teachings, I arrive at a somewhat fragmented self-diagnosis:

- Lack of safety in the room was due to an undeniable, yet unnamed friction between myself and the playwright, of which I am at least equally if not entirely responsible for, as the leader of the process, who is by my definition responsible for identifying potential and being courageous enough to develop it.
- I lacked courage to lean into being vulnerable in the close proximity of the inherent trauma of the story and storyteller, and I felt my own sense of safety jeopardized by putting words on it.
- I could not enter into arguments or fights that some of the conversations steered to, fighting is not a mode of communication that I condone. When my modes of communication failed, I resorted to silence and working around things.
- My own personal boundaries were blurred by my reverence to the project, so I basically became somewhat codependent, which is not a good look on a leader.
- I was conflicted with fear to overstep and force my interpretations on something lived and very real to another person, whom I did not have enough trust established with to be truly vulnerable.

- When I should have spent deliberate time on the emotionally challenging task of building that trust, I instead resorted to emotionally distancing myself and attempting to exemplify professionalism; what I deemed as ‘the solution’ to the problem.
- I honestly thought my professional distance could mask as courage, and I thought my calm and joyful disposition would be enough to establish safety for others.
- I mistakenly thought I could lead by example of seeming unscathed, unaffected, and immune to the feelings and fears present in the room, and within me.

In the name of Love: I will extend grace and compassion towards myself. And if I sit in my Integrity and look back at the process “all things considered” I can surely say that I did my best, given the circumstances and with the resources I had. I went as far as I could go in developing potential – and we got far. All the way to Neptune and back (no animals were harmed in the process) – and maybe the actors weren’t harmed by feeling scared and unsafe. At least they all seemed alright when we met, a month after our last show for a feed-back session that I facilitated.

For that gathering, I sent out the objectives beforehand and explained the format as well. I applied parts of the DAS Feedback method¹⁴ and parts of Brené Brown’s Feedback guidelines of staying open and aligned to your values, particularly the tactic of Turn-and-Learn.¹⁵

Everybody got the same questions at the same time, wrote down their thoughts and feelings on post-it notes. We placed them as anonymously as could be on the wall before having a look and then discussing what was there. In regard to the process, the key findings were the following:

- For the list of “affirmative things that worked for me,” the most agreed upon were: Scheduling; Playfulness; Trying out things and drafting scenes; Discussing feelings.
- For the list of “reflective things that didn’t work for me” the most agreed were: Too little time; School restrictions; Not possible being the dramaturg and an actor at the same time.
- List of strongest feelings in or about the process: Powerful; Frustration; Anxiety; Joy.
- Key learnings about the creative process were among others: If you don’t have trust, you don’t have anything; You can do a massive show in 4,5 weeks; It’s better to talk things through (the earlier the better); Safety is fundamental for creativity; It’s just theatre.

¹⁴ <https://www.atd.ahk.nl/en/theatre-programmes/das-theatre/study-programme/feedback-method-1/>

¹⁵ Turn & Learn controls the “halo effect” created when everyone sees what the person with the most influence in the room wants and follows suit. It also controls the “bandwagon effect” – that very human instinct to follow suit even when you disagree. It’s tough to be the last to share when everyone is one board and getting increasingly excited about an idea. (Brené 2018, 56) See also pages 53-56 and p. 201-5 regarding Vulnerability in giving and receiving feedback.

We all agreed that it was stressful. Time was both ample and too short. Trust was lacking for some and not at all for others. But on the list of “what I am most proud of” The most prominent were versions of: Important subject; We made a great show; Many touching moments; The work we put in paid off; We had fun in the end.

I am also deeply proud of where we got, the collective resolution found after we finally rumbled with vulnerability and the groups’ committed solidarity to delivering this important story to our audiences. I committed to creating conditions where, first the working group, and then the audience, would be invited to think and feel through memory and a myriad of questions about love, fear, memory, war, history, trauma and – in the end: healing.

“When we have the courage to walk into our story and own it, we get to write the ending.
And when we don’t own our stories of failure, setbacks, and hurt – they own us.”
(Brené 2018, 240)

My professor, who generously helped me navigate this turmoil, made an observation about vulnerability that has stayed with me; *when I come across so strong and like I can take anything, of course the group will load everything onto me.*

The thing is, clear boundaries aside, I feel I should be able to take the load.
Maybe I am wrong to think so. Maybe that is where I flunk at vulnerability.

My key learnings from this process for me are not elixirs but inquires I take with me going forward: How do I as I leader in intentionally build trust and create safety? How can I be more courageous with vulnerability and yet maintain vigilant boundaries? How can I further develop the emotional intelligence and intuition to evaluate, on a case by case basis, what level of vulnerability is relevant, productive, and safe?

Riding the wave of *Neptune*, I did my very best. But leadership is a learning process, and I am called to acknowledge that I can do better. Otherwise, I would not be aligned with my values, who make up the most important standard to which I measure my own success.

5. ALIGNMENT WITHIN THE INSTITUTION

In this chapter, I will shed light on my artistic leadership in an institutional setting.

In early 2020 I was handed the mandate to lead and curate two spaces within The National Theatre of Iceland (NTI); Kjallarinn (The Cellar) and Loftið (The Attic). Both spaces were reserved - by a then new administration - for alternative programming and reaching new audiences. I took this mandate and ran with it, humbled by the opportunity, yet trying to ossify it so within me that my calling to this project was not to serve the institution, but to the best of my ability, serve the people who by law own the institution but have not had its fair share of it.

I ran into a lot of walls and obstacles on this project. Strangely enough, the Covid-19 pandemic with all its restrictions and crises was not the biggest challenge, although it did greatly affect the whole process. Staying aligned with my own values was often times my biggest challenge, within an institutional paradigm operating on different and sometimes seemingly opposite terms – although most of them were entirely unarticulated. To the best of my ability, while still abiding to confidentiality clauses of legal contracts, I will make transparent my process of defining, establishing and leading these spaces and their operations. To do this, I will seek context and inspiration from Kenneth Foster and the 2nd edition of his book *Arts and Cultural Leadership* (2023).

Then I will break form again and attempt to shed a light on my experience of being positioned in the cracks. I will archive my thoughts, feelings, questions and struggles, as well as insight, context and teachings from others that I find useful, inspiring and urgent in navigating artistic leadership in a public-institutional paradigm. I will approach this inspired by the Nonviolent communication guidelines, where I imagine myself, in my own subjectivity and alignment to my values, having a conversation with The National Theatre of Iceland: a public, state funded and historical institution, which is essentially made up of a long series of choices.

5.1. Kjallarinn & Loftið (The Cellar & The Attic)

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, I was employed by a state funded institution. Unlike so many in the field of performing arts, my income and position were therefore secure during this period. I felt and still feel a profound sense of gratitude for this course of events, which might have gone whichever way.

During Covid-19, I had the privilege of time and resources to get busy creating frameworks, visions and definitions of processes for Kjallarinn and Loftið. Instead of being driven to “return to normal,” as so many cultural organizations and leaders preoccupied themselves with, I was creating something entirely new and different. Kenneth Foster’s observations frames my approach quite well: “The post-pandemic environment has provided

us an opportunity - a portal, [...] - to step into a new world in which the arts really are transformative, in which arts experiences really are meaningful and impactful and in which art, artists, and arts leaders accept responsibility for inspiring the cultural transformation that we so desperately need.” (Foster 2023, 62)

5.1.1. Loftið: a fluid stepping stone

Loftið was a puppet theatre space and workshop overseen for years by the German puppeteer Bernd Ogródnik. Mostly creating performances for children. During Covid-19, Ogródnik’s operations were relocated and Loftið stripped to its black box essentials.

The space is high up in the attics of NTI, above the main stage. It is very inaccessible to people in wheelchairs or with limited mobility. Due to that given, I resisted programming performance events there, but instead focused on finding grounds for collaborations with NTI-external artists on process based projects, workshops, residencies, labs and developmental research. Ironically, most of the projects I curated there ended up producing a performance event at the end of their process.

On behalf of NTI, the objective for Loftið was very open, mostly that it should focus on new and developmental work, experiments and a young demographic. And there were no prerequisites on money making or profitable returns. I had therefore a lot of freedom and autonomy in shaping Loftið myself. I wanted to avoid what Kenneth Foster warns arts leaders about:

“Looking out at the sea of white hair in our audiences [...] We want new, younger, more diverse audiences at our performances, but we want them on our terms. [...] by refusing to change the content and contexts for the programs we create in ways that acknowledge new community realities, we are losing, not preserving our future” (2023, 105)

I committed to thinking outside of the normal institutional terms and be adaptable to new content and contexts. Not focusing on events – but developing something new in direct contact with artists, formats and ideas that had not been very present at NTI before. It was not about products to sell or image to strengthen externally. Rather about seeing what was out there and learning something new, inventing new formats, structures and processes.

This is the definition I created for Loftið in 2020:

Loftið is a new space in NTI for resident artists. It is a space for artistic research and development of new content and forms on the terms of artists and audiences NTI has not addressed before. Loftið is a space to listen to unheard voices, tell untold stories and share hidden knowledge. It is a place and a platform for diverse performing artists from outside NTI to experiment without the necessary demand of premiering a result in a traditional show. Collaborators and their works programmed for Loftið are supported by New Writing

resources of NTI, and that of NTI's Educational department. These projects are presented to the public as part of the NTI season and the collaborators gain access to NTI staff, spaces and equipment available.

New Writing resources here refer to yearly funds allocated for developmental contracts, and the Educational department was a one-man department but with a vast network to resources inside and outside of NTI, most notably to the then Ministry of Culture and Education in Iceland. That network was crucial in meeting the needs of the different groups and projects in Loftið, and inventing ways to support them. I worked closely with the one-man Educational department in shaping the diverse frameworks for projects in Loftið, Björn Ingi Hilmarsson. The main resource for Loftið was however the space itself, which could be opened to artists in need of a place to develop their ideas.

Loftið was in many ways a responsive shape, constantly shifting and adapting to what was there. There had been a lot of applications for collaborations with NTI, too many “good ones” to fit in the NTI regular program. Loftið in many ways provided means to respond to the flow of creativity happening in the field outside NTI and provide vessels for early ideas, seeds and sprouts to grow into whatever they wanted to become – without the demanding framework of a production and a premiere. I can further contextualize my framing of Loftið with Kenneth Foster when he says: “When we let go of the idea of “art as a product” and embrace the concept of the arts “experience,” we can correspondingly understand the arts organization itself as a creative process: constantly in motion, growing, evolving, and changing. These are the qualities of resilience. To make our organizations as resilient as the art they seek to support, we must move away from the old paradigms of creating stable, immovable structures and methodologies and toward flexibility, malleability, and ultimately, the sustainability that we seek” (Foster 2023, 50-1)

The projects I programmed were:

Trúnó, a workshop led by a theatre pedagogue/director and a sexologist duo in collaboration with a group of 15-17-year old's, who applied to participate through a government funded initiative, so they could actually get paid. The content of the workshop was on the young participants' terms. The only defined research question being “If you had the big stage of NTI, what would you talk about?” Trúnó was about what the young participants wanted to research and address given access to their theatre, which turned out to be: apocalypse due to climate change, fear and friendship. This project did result in a performance, but the major learnings were the horizontal formats of emancipating theatre pedagogy created and applied in Trúnó, which we were passionate about integrating into the processes of NTI's Educational department. Serving community on the community's terms.

Sýningin okkar by the group Konserta, consisting of six young theatre and performance makers, researching the narrative forms of social media and influencers and horizontal, non-hierarchical working methods. They for example commissioned four different, highly acclaimed Icelandic artists to create parts of their performance. There was e.g. one scene from Ragnar Kjartansson, a movement bit choreographed by Katrín Gunnarsdóttir and a performance concept by Margrét Bjarnadóttir. Not only did this destabilize authorship similar to social media narratives, but it also made for a perplexing mixture of enmeshment and criticism on the economy of influencers and stultifying algorithms.

Lukka, a developmental, creative research process stretched over two seasons, with approximately one workday a month. I facilitated the work myself, with three black and brown performing artists Jónmundur Grétarsson, Davíð Þór Katrínarson And Unnsteinn Manuel Stefánsson. Our research was on privilege and racism through the perspective of Luck; the intersectional arbitrariness of whether one has a good life in our society.

A residency workshop of O.N Sviðlistahópur, as part of their process in creating a bilingual performance in Icelandic and Icelandic Sign Language. The group consist of an equal mix of hearing and deaf performance artists. When it came to their workshop, access to the space was an obstacle so their workshop was relocated to another, more accessible space within NTI.

A two-part residency of the collective Elefant, consisting of professional, non-white actors where they devised and researched Halldór Laxness's *Íslandsklukkan* through their own lived experiences as Icelanders of mixed origin. It is a canonical novel about the independence of Iceland and our cultural heritage as a former colony of Denmark and it has been adapted for stage multiple times. In their reworking it became a stark criticism of historically latent racism in our country.

Hliðstætt fólk, A VR experimental performance of the multi-national collective Hulduflugl. The first of its kind at NTI, by a leading collective in VR and new theatre technologies in Iceland. As part of the collaboration, they provided a VR workshop for NTI staff and a lot of knowledge was passed on.

These projects had varying premises of funding, own resources and artistic or political objectives that I took into account when transparently creating frameworks of contracts, collaboration, and NTI investment in hours, equipment resources or direct funding via partial royalties (developmental contracts). But all projects had in common that never before had their stories, forms or bodies been present at the NTI.

After one and a half season of my programming, and incessant ruptures due to Covid-19, the operations in Loftið could not be streamlined to the extent that they could fit into an already packed program of the NTI. The knowledge accumulated there did not find pathways to be integrated into NTI operations. The Educational department was later dismantled and

redistributed, and the networked connections to crucial external resources trickled away somewhat. So did the vast learnings of emancipating theatre pedagogy formats developed in the Trúnó project. Making the space accessible to all audiences could unfortunately not be funded and that became the greatest obstacle. I, and the NTI administration, could not justify maintaining a performance space that was not accessible to all people. Loftið was therefore disqualified as a venue for public performances, and slowly but surely, I myself lost the grip and the gusto to fight for its manifestation and resilience as a space for experimental and developmental programming.

As much as I regret Loftið's demise as what I set it out to be, I am very proud of the projects that stopped by there, some of which started and ended within their stay, others metastasized into something larger. Most notably O.N Sviðslistahópur's work which resulted in the premiere of *Eyja*, a bilingual performance in Icelandic and Icelandic Sign Language in November 2022, the first of its kind on NTI stages; and Elefant's *Íslandsklukkan* grew into a radical performance premiered in March 2023 at NTI. Neither of these were produced by NTI, but in collaboration with these independent collectives. Lukka is still lying dormant and waiting to be taken onward.

5.1.2. Kjallarinn: a bastard community

Kjallarinn is a performance space located in the cellar of NTI right beneath the main stage. It had not been run with any intentional vision or clear objectives for a while when I was assigned to lead it. It was at that point a home base of sorts for two separate collectives of independent artists: Improv Ísland and, although more sporadically, the burlesque collective Reykjavík Kabarett. Both had in their respective ways, mostly by sheer willpower and passion - and by almost entirely volunteering their work - enabled a self-organizing culture in Kjallarinn: Improv shows had become a steady presence, happening every Wednesday night, and there were occasional burlesque and cabaret shows organized by the burlesque collective.

It was clear to me that my task was to build upon what was already blossoming, creating frameworks of collaboration that could elevate and nurture what was thriving. I wanted to invite others to join in for what I set out to be a service to marginalized communities of artists and audiences, where DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) would be implemented intentionally, in action.¹⁶

¹⁶ See e.g. Foster 2023, 204-206, particularly „If real change is to occur, every arts organization must welcome and embrace our obligation to correct historic inequities and imbalances, especially around race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. This is true for any organization that seeks to connect with the contemporary world and remain (or become) relevant to changing communities. Entrenched structural inequities must be acknowledged, deconstructed, and rebuilt in equitable ways. It will require purposeful hiring decisions that address historic inequities, foster diversity at every level, and systematically advance marginalized people into positions of power within the organization.“ (p. 206)

I struggle with the “Inclusion” part of DEI, for me it suggests a hierarchy where X is admitted on the terms of Y that decides to include them. It is sometimes more fruitful for me to name ‘Access’ as an alternative objective, or as an important

“Diversity only happens with intentionality.”

(Foster 2023, 205)

In this task, I was driven by my faith in theatre’s power and potential to come to our senses together, to enforce equality by communicating across difficult differences, to liberate and to heal our pain.

My most fundamental starting point in this work of leading Kjallarinn comes from my lived experience and knowledge. I believe that the National Theatre of Iceland is the property of the Icelandic public and the public should thus have access to it. It is funded by public money and its fundamental societal, democratic purpose is to serve its community and actively contribute to its spiritual growth. To me its purpose is to actively Love: both theatre as art and the public as people. By a long, historical series of choices, The National Theatre has not fully lived up to this purpose. Some members of its community are absent from representation, involvement and true ownership of their theatre. And some have been latently and systematically excluded, ignored, dehumanized, and harmed. That is unjust and wrong. I wanted to go as far as I could with Kjallarinn to right that wrong.

“[...] any presumption to Arts Leadership must be grounded in a conceptual understanding of purpose, meaning and vision. [...] unless we know, and can clearly articulate for ourselves, our organizations, and our communities, *why* we are doing this work, *what vision we have for the future* of the communities we serve, and *why that matters*, we cannot claim to be leaders.” (Foster 2023, 7. original emphasis)

With Kjallarinn, I was driven to serve and nurture community and create conditions for communication and knowledge exchanges between different communities, through art experiences. In my pre-planning I identified community as:

- 1) the communities of marginalized artists (of which there were myriads of sub-categories)
- 2) The public (frequenting NTI audiences, and the neglected, marginalized, “invisible” public; all with different sub-categories)
- 3) The enclosed community of NTI
- 4) A new community of Kjallarinn. . . Question mark.

additive footnote to Inclusion, where the excluded are granted intentional Access to what they have been closed off from and can then, on their own terms, criticize, influence and negotiate the processes and values without having to necessarily accept them as a given or adapt to be ‘included in them.’ My mentor Rodolfo has influenced me in this thinking, whereas, from a decolonial perspective, ‘Inclusion’ to a Euro-centric theatre institution implies “that everyone should be middle-class, and that there is no other valid reality than the one doing the including. Access to another reality might be more equitable. Don’t assume the excluded wants to be included, they have their own belonging and community” (Rodolfo García Vázquez, Lecture, in Decolonial Directing, Teak, 26.10.22)

As my first task in trying to define the community purpose of Kjallarinn, I met with the founding members and active participants of all the diverse grassroots collectives I could locate and recognize as practicing in Reykjavík. All of whom had grown their community and operations from scratch over the previous years. The drag, improv, comedy and burlesque scenes had particularly exploded in the five years before Covid-19. I also asked various sources to point me in directions of people and parties I might not know about myself.

In the name of DEI, I wanted the diverse artists and communities themselves to have direct access and influence over the establishment of Kjallarinn. Some of the artists I met were established in their form and field, others still forming their operations and practices. All of them were passionate about their artform and their communities. I spoke to the leaders of the Improv Ísland collective who had built operations that I could learn a lot from, they had weekly rehearsals and weekly performances in Kjallarinn over the season. I identified with them a model of rotation, distribution and sustainable accumulation of community over time, and that became my greatest inspiration in envisioning Kjallarinn.

I met with drag artists that had founded collectives and built the drag scene in the queer bars. I met burlesque teachers and “mothers” who had progressed the form and grown their operations passionately. I was approached by Óður - a young opera collective committed to challenge their stagnated form via accessible, yet critical bar operas. Then there was R.E.C Arts; a then newly formed collective of artists of diverse backgrounds and identities striving for visibility and representation of marginalized people through dance and theatre. I saw Viðlag, a newly formed musical choir of singers with diverse backgrounds. I met with circus artists with expertise and experience in their growing field. And I sought out young women in comedy: I intentionally focused on women, since their male counterparts had near monopoly of the mainstream comedy scene at the time. What I asked to learn about and identify together with these people was how Kjallarinn could serve them. What could Kjallarinn as a venue and a resource add to their growing communities and their art? What would amplification and beneficial collaboration look like to them?

Especially in the cases of grassroots entities like burlesque, drag and circus arts – we agreed that Kjallarinn was not to take over as a home base. These collectives, although variously organized, have their home bases in queer clubs, bars and in shifting locations where they have their workshops and community gatherings internally. That’s where they recruit, experiment, train, teach and learn. But then there was the choir Viðlag and the R.E.C Arts collective, who were both in need for a home base. R.E.C Arts did not need a space for events, seeing that they were just starting to create their community, but we agreed on steady slots of 4-hour gatherings every single Saturday midday for two seasons, free of charge. The musical choir Viðlag also booked steady rehearsals every Tuesday afternoon and a flexible contract of at least two concerts a season. Kjallarinn became the home base for these new

collectives to grow, train, recruit and experiment, much like the Improv collective had done on their own before. And when they would be ready for meeting an audience, we would arrange that together.

What sprung out as a need for all the others – and a gap to fill - was a venue for the advanced artists within the forms. For the drag artists, comedians and performers that had grown out of entertaining at open-mic nights and in bars for coins, where the “happy hour” might be a bigger attraction than their art. They had no wishes of leaving their communities, but they had bigger ideas for their art. They had accumulated a lot of knowledge, skills and training, and wanted to expand with access to resources and support.

All of the artists I spoke to declared wholehearted interest to join me and build Kjallarinn as a space where this could be realized. From what I gathered in conversation with the experts of these marginalized, self-proclaimed “bastard” forms of performing arts, we were together in this project and equally inspired to collaborate in materializing it, as a fragmented, chosen family of bastards: a community.

I was clear that I did not want to disrupt the biodiversity of the marginalized art collectives and their communities. I was conscious that the art forms I had my eyes set on programming in Kjallarinn: drag, burlesque, comedy and the likes, have their own natural flow and symbiotic, overlapping, self-organizing operations that cannot be thrust into a rigid framework without losing their essence as artistic, social and political forces. It did not want to simply pluck “the best” from the independent scene, extract and exploit their riches and disrupt the ecosystems that were in place and thriving already. I did not want Kjallarinn to be a parasite – but a site that could enter the flow naturally and provide beneficial energy and resources in a flexible way. I was envisioning sustainability and resilience for Kjallarinn and the intersectional, marginalized community I felt called to serve.

I struggled to define how this could look like within an institutional framework that in some ways demanded quite the opposite. The complex machinery of the institution called for stable infrastructure and reasonable predictability, sound definitions of scopes and evaluations of investment and risks, clear borders in concrete contracts, pre-planning of all processes and allocated resource contributions, measurable “success” in revenue and a “balanced” assembly of “high quality” products that could easily be marketed to a young target audience.

It’s important to state that I had no specific liquid funds for Kjallarinn. There was no reserved budget for operations or initiatives from administration, no direct financial resources for artistic projects and I did not have authority for hiring of any kind. What I did have was still plenty. During Covid-19, Kjallarinn was renovated and equipped with new, basic tech-systems and gear. There was seating for around 120 people. I had my own man-power and my working hours, one half-time technical director, a bar to conceptualize and staff of the

front house to be assigned to shifts, and hours from within the frameworks of the box office and marketing department. Towards the institution, Kjallarinn should fulfill the dream of attracting the un-attracted, particularly young audiences, while being almost entirely self-sufficient and financially sustainable. Not necessarily returning a profit to begin with, but surely not run at a loss.

As stated before, I am a sucker for impossible tasks. Coordinating my vision and values to the expectations and conditions of NTI was both frustrating and invigorating. Everyone at NTI wanted Kjallarinn to flourish and succeed, we just often had very different ideas of what that meant exactly. The metric I had for Kjallarinn's "success" is mirrored well in Foster's saying that "[the] interaction between an arts organization and its community can and should be the metric by which the life and vitality of the organization is appraised." (Foster 2023, 104)

The objectives I defined for Kjallarinn were:

1. Resources to the marginalized: Give space, time, respect and attention to the thriving art-forms, artists and communities historically underrepresented, neglected or ignored by the main program of NTI.
2. Nurturing: Contribute to the growth of these art-forms, artists and communities how they themselves see is nurturing. Find ways to collaborate and integrate knowledge into NTI operations in a symbiotic, mutually beneficial way.
3. Access for new audiences: Prioritize access and a sense of belonging for audiences not represented or included before at NTI, whilst exposing frequenting audiences of NTI to new experiences on different terms.

In these objectives I can definitely identify my core values of Love and Integrity. Love is the active choice to nurture growth. Not just of the marginalized arts and communities, but also of the institution. Integrity lies in honestly acknowledging the past and defining a future together, me taking accountability to ensure that is done fairly, transparently and in a way that serves and nurtures all parties.

Thinking of my role in the terms of a curator makes a lot of sense to me. The root of the word curate is Care. In its Medieval Latin roots, it signifies "to have spiritual charge of." [...] More than simply putting a program together, it's having spiritual care of the art, the artists, and the community which you choose to serve. (Foster: 212) That encapsulates quite well what I wanted to do.

My task was then to create flexible organizational frameworks that could fit and serve these very different artists and their projects, in a way that would also fit and serve NTI - all the

while pushing the boundaries. What became apparent to me is that comedians had very different needs than the Improv collective, drag troupes of highly experienced performers require different things than the REC-Arts collective as previously outlined. The opera group had public funding. Burlesque artists have yet to ever receive public funding for their projects.

In line with my values and to honor the Equity of DEI in action, I committed to transparently create organizational frameworks of collaborations that could serve the very different needs of these groups in the fairest way possible. There was no ‘one size fits all’ solution. In striving to be transparent and working towards equity, I defined a ‘minimum effort’ non-negotiable standard of contribution on behalf of NTI, including minimum hours of technical support in ‘get-in’ of performances, allocated working hours of bartenders and ushers surrounding a performance, and a minimum contribution of the NTI marketing department, assisting with marketing and marketing material by NTI standards. From putting a price tag on these minimal contributions of NTI, I could then negotiate each individual contract in accordance to individual needs of each project I was in the process of defining with the artists themselves. Everything was as transparent as could be, all basic parameters were clear, all available resources were defined, standard needs and requirements of NTI were clear and I had a “language” to speak that was both understandable to the institution and the artists I was communicating with.

Depending on size, shape and needs of each project, and most importantly: whether they had any prior funding or not, I negotiated ticket pricing openly with each collaborator and how we would split ticket sale income. The more service the project needed from NTI, the higher share NTI required for their contribution. But I was adamant and insistent on Equity: that in the case of systematically underfunded artists like drag-performers, burlesque artists, comedians and the Improv Ísland collective – they take a higher share of the income by default and NTI take a bigger portion of the financial risk. This model of collaboration of course limited the scope of projects possible and sustainable in Kjallarinn. It was not an option for me that artists donate their work when the institution made a profit, however small.

NTI administration and I were committed to accessibility in pricing of Kjallarinn events overall, that performances and events be accessible in particular to younger audiences. All the while the frameworks of collaboration could not be too financially risky for NTI and contributions of NTI had to be clearly defined and measurable. There were a lot of things to consider. Some projects I could anticipate having a balanced return and even be profitable, e.g. a happy hour drag cabaret one Friday a month and the stand-up shows. Others would probably not turn any financial profit, but I saw them as crucial beginnings that could grow into being more sustainable if only granted the opportunity to come alive. *Ástardrykkurinn*, the first bar by the young ensemble I mentioned before, came in fully funded for the season 2021-22 but did not do so well by box office standards. I at least deemed their work highly

artistically successful and in accordance with its own goals, so we renewed the contract for the next season. Their good word had spread slowly but surely and their second bar opera, a rendition of *Don Pasquale*, is still running in Kjallarinn when this is written.

I do not have a business degree and I was anything but fluent in economic terms while navigating the establishment of Kjallarinn. I can barely make a formula work in Excel. The learning curve for me in this process was therefore steep and straining. I can only explain these processes from my own perspective, and I might be humiliating myself on the way, in the eyes of someone fluent in the language of business. My approach and framework of thought was not that of a business or creating money revenue for NTI. All I cared about in regard to money was that the artists get their fair share for their work from the income their projects acquired. I was set on advocating for these artists and their projects, extending to them the respect and acknowledgement they inherently deserve for their own merit, through all of the resources and nurturing I had the authority to supply. To me, Kjallarinn was not at all about profit, but about establishing a resource of the NTI to serve underserved communities and nurture them. Kjallarinn was not a business to me.

Navigating that, I sometimes needed to prove merit and translate things to market-value terms. Explaining that e.g. drag and burlesque are not only wildly popular artforms of a vibrant queer culture; they have always existed. They are rich artistic forms that have influenced, affected and inspired traditional theatre since the dawn of time. These artforms also carry their own innate worth and value. Not just in their relation to the traditional forms of theatre – but in and of themselves. As vast, overlapping, complex cultures, as communities of knowledge and forms of expressions of often marginalized people that are valuable in their humanity and inherent difference from what the institution might be accustomed to.

Kenneth Foster articulates some of my biggest, latent and systemic obstacles in realizing my vision for Kjallarinn:

“Arts organizations have developed and evolved in such a way as to "tame" the wildness of the art and the artist. Our purpose as organizations and arts administrators in particular has been to find ways to integrate art's wildness more smoothly into prevailing and predominant systems. [...] The systems of business management, marketing, and development all demand that the content and communication about the artwork itself be subjected to the strictures of the marketplace. The language we use to talk about the work, [...] the programmatic choices we make ensuring that we have a “balanced season”; [...] the obsession with “fiscally responsible” organizations that not only mitigate risk but nearly obliterate it - these practices are said to exist “in service to” and “in support of” the art. But they are not. They are in service to the market and our over processed culture - which demands that the art be domesticated palatable to as broad an audience as possible.

In order that it “succeed” at least on the terms of the prevailing system which understands art as a commodified, disposable product.” (Foster 2023, 57)

After the first season I programmed, 2021-2022, it was concluded to cut down Kjallarinn’s operations by a few notches. The season had proved, over-all, financially balanced for NTI, audience numbers were positive, artistic quality deemed high and PR-wise, Kjallarinn was “buzzing.” It had however proved more and more challenging for departments to meet commitments of service and contribution agreed upon to each project, on top of all the other standard operations of NTI. I might have oversaturated the program and overwhelmed the machinery with all these new projects of sometimes unfamiliar shapes to in-house processes. I did not reach my goal of integrating the program entirely to the production machinery and processes of NTI. I am not sure whether that is good or bad.

I had learned a lot from the initial season and could bring that knowledge forward to shape it further and adapt. A new, common goal was to make operations in Kjallarinn more self-sufficient and sustainable for NTI – while I was still striving for nurturing the communities. The scope of the bar was stripped to a bare minimum, involvement of marketing department as well. I asked that the technical departments take the time to pre-program and create clearly defined tech packages based on what we had learned were the most common tech needs for Kjallarinn, so that it could operate on a “plug-and-play” basis. The artists and collectives would then be more self-sufficient and service themselves with easily manageable technical resources. This “downsizing” was not necessarily a bad thing in my eyes. Although “streamlining” was not a word I wanted to apply to Kjallarinn and its rampant flow of energy, I had to figure out ways to adapt and keep it alive and thriving within the institutional framework.

For the next season, 2022-23. I programmed fewer projects and defined each one more thoroughly – with less contributions and commitments from NTI. I also aimed for a slower rhythm of events. I adamantly fought for the artists programmed getting by default a higher share of ticket sale income. Since the NTI was contributing less than before, nothing else made sense. While still resisting a rigid form, I met and brainstormed with the artists and collectives what could work. After careful deliberation, each project would ideally stretch over a longer time period than the season before, and all projects would adapt to more similar frameworks allocated and defined across the board. For example, as we maintained Improv every Wednesday night, we planned late night variety shows every Friday night from October to April, where all the different collectives of burlesque, drag and circus could take turns performing how they themselves self-organized with the steady overseeing of Margrét Erla Maack, who is rightfully called the burlesque mother of Iceland. She is an experienced,

respected and integral member of all these intersecting communities with vast and valuable knowledge. I would not have been able to shape Kjallarinn without her generous guidance and involvement from the very beginning.

In the summer of 2022, my contract with NTI expired, and I moved to Helsinki to complete my studies. My position was not filled but redistributed among inhouse staff. I do not know if the position of Artistic director of Kjallarinn is defined as existing within NTI today. I do hope so, or I hope it will be again. Whether I am to return or someone else takes over who is passionate about nurturing the underground, alternative, marginalized “bastard” forms and collectives in the performing arts field, who carry their own innate value as communities of knowledge worth paying attention to.

The existence and prosperity of these marginalized artforms and communities is not dependent on the institution. They have always been there, and they will continue to shift, contract and expand in their own symbiotic resilience. Whether the institution commits to nurturing a mutually beneficial, sustainable relationship to these magnificent artforms and communities, only comes down to a choice.

When I think back on some of my favorite moments in Kjallarinn, they are:

A Friday afternoon. A diverse group of burlesque and drag artist have put together a marvelous matinée show. I have never seen so many non-white people gathered in the building before, in the all engulfing auditorium and on the central stage. I’m not sure if these are tears of joy or tears of sadness that this has not happened before. Cocktails are floating, music is roaring. The National Theatre of Iceland is theirs.

Reykjavík Culture night. Improv Ísland performs a marathon show for 7 hours, audiences changing every thirty minutes, and a large collective of performers take turns creating uproarious scenes on the spot. Free admission. Young people from all walks of life stand in a line that stretches 100 meters down the street. The National Theatre of Iceland is theirs.

Saturday afternoon. A completely packed house of diverse people (mostly queer) for a concert by Ukulellur: a ukulele orchestra consisting of thirteen queer women. All of their songs are about queer and lesbian experiences, of love, sex, stereotypes and solidarity. The National Theatre of Iceland is theirs.

Thursday night. The premiere of the first bar opera by Óður. I’ve never heard people laugh belly-laugh at an opera performance before. And not because it is full-circle awful, but because it is actually accessible and hilarious. Their sharp comedy sheds a fresh, revitalizing light on the form. And f*** they sing good! The National Theatre of Iceland is theirs.

Saturday night just before Christmas. A gloriously queer Cabaret dinner and show with diverse Icelandic, US and UK performers flying all around the space moving in ways none in the audience thought possible. The National Theatre of Iceland is theirs.

A Tuesday night. A charity variety show organized by burlesque and drag artists to collect money for a trans woman's legal expenses in vigilantly prosecuting for a blatant and aggressive trans-hate crime committed against her. Every seat is sat in. Overwhelming majority of guests are queer people. The love and joy in that space is all-encompassing. The National Theatre of Iceland is theirs.

Saturday Mid-day. I stop by to assist the R.E.C Arts collective turn on the light desk in Kjallarinn. They are about to dive into a vogue-ing session. The group consists of more diverse people that have ever seen assembled in this building before; disabled artist, artists with immigrant backgrounds and queer artists. As I say goodbye and get out of their hair, music comes on and they start cheering and clapping. The National Theatre of Iceland is theirs.

6. A CONVERSATION IN THE CRACKS

By the standards of the Nonviolent communication method, I will now address the institution, The National Theatre of Iceland. I will make observations, share feelings, express needs and make requests. This is a slippery slope for me for many reasons. I am positioned in the liminality of being both driven to challenge and change the hegemonic systems that largely dominate the institutions operations, while also intricately entangled in them. As a former member of artistic leadership at NTI, I am inevitably accountable for its operations even as I have committed myself to direct and indirect opposition and alternative thinking to many paradigms and processes. I have duly signed legal contracts with non-disclosure clauses and there is no personal gain for me either to breach confidentiality, that is not my intention and that does not align with core values.

I am also a freelancing theatre director whose livelihood in my field is largely dependent on whether I am appreciated as an artist and a person or not – so I am scared and vulnerable as a human being. But I want to be courageous, step into my values and lean into my vulnerability. To say what I need to say and belong to myself first. The National Theatre of Iceland is a public, state funded and historical institution, made up, over time and ever again, by a series of choices. I am inclined to enter this conversation from there.

Observation:

I hear you asking for the business case for DEI.

I see you asking for the gross margin excel sheet of community service.

Feeling:

I feel demoralized.

I feel stupid.

I know I'm not stupid.

Need:

Let it sink in to your breathing, real and very much alive body
that some real, breathing and very much alive people
feel repeatedly dehumanized, subjugated
and oppressed by the institutions' previous choices.

Request:

Make better choices.

Observation:

Curate, from Latin 'Care'

A guardian at best, gatekeeper at worst

responsible for creating and assembling conditions for art to happen.

Feeling:

No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care

Need:

Curate = Cure

Request:

Cure-ate public spaces and public time.

Cure-ate hundreds of years of absence with presence

Cure-ate hundreds of years of neglect with nurturing

Cure-ate hundreds of years of apathy with empathy

Cure-ate justice.

Observation:

"Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people." - Audre Lorde

Feeling:

Denying my difference by saying "*it makes no difference*"
nulls out the fullness of my humanity, that I have spent my entire life claiming.

It hurts.

Need:

The only thing I need us to agree on, is that we should not agree on everything.

Instead of sameness and 'same pages' being the desired destination

I need difference to be the objective, not an obstacle to overcome.

Difference makes for a real conversation.

Difference makes for real equality.

Request:

Institutionalize difference.

Observation:

I see my work fully integrated into an image externally while it is not very well integrated into internal operations

Feeling:

In October of 2022 I attended a course led by my before mentioned mentor, Brazilian director Rodolfo García Vázquez, titled Decolonial Directing. The starting point was a circle in which we sat; students and teacher, horizontally together. We were introduced to the concept of The Colonial Matrix of Power, by Aníbal Quijano.¹⁷ Mixing theory, discussions and physical exercises, the objective of the course was to detach from oppressive and hierarchical binaries of e.g. gender, race and culture and empower a mostly white, European body of students to think outside of our own confined bubble, acknowledge the hidden colonial histories of our field, and consider burning political questions through decoloniality.

There are a lot of intersections between feminist criticism, queer criticism of which I am familiar, and decolonial criticism. At the end of this eye-opening course I attempted to think through my own personal entanglements and contact points with decoloniality, in an act that might be fitting for a political cabaret show.

These words were written on a whiteboard in the studio:

TO DO:

Break the cis-heteronormative, white, colonial, ableist, capitalist fucking patriarchy.

Laura Branigan's 'Gloria' started playing.

Dressed as my most androgynous self, in a white long-sleeve shirt, black overalls and rainbow socks, I entered the space smiling, acknowledging the audience, looking them in the eyes. On my body, I had a large badge on which I had written:

CECI N'EST PAS UNE TOKEN

I looked at the white board for some moments and then I looked around the space, searching for tools, ways, means to complete the task on the board.

¹⁷ Rodolfo García Vázquez 2022 "Decolonial Directing Approach" *Looking for direction: Rethinking theatre practices and Pedagogies in the 21st century*. Uniarts Helsinki Theatre Academy 266-305

Then I moved to the back wall and started pushing it. Jokingly at first, but with ever growing urgency. Eventually, I was crashing my body into the cement walls full force until it started to really hurt. Then I turned to face the small audience again and asked them to help me. Some of them got up and joined me in the task of pushing the walls.

All the while, 'Gloria' played:

*Gloria, you're always on the run now
Running after somebody
You gotta get him somehow
I think you gotta slow down
Before you start to blow it
I think you're headed for a breakdown
So be careful not to show it
You really don't remember
Was it something that he said?*

*Are the voices in your head calling,
Gloria?
Gloria, don't you think you're falling
If everybody wants you
Why isn't anybody calling?
You don't have to answer
Leave'em hangin' on the line
Oh-oh,
calling Gloria*

When the song ended. I thanked everyone for their presence, and I especially thanked the people who joined me in completing the seemingly impossible task.

Need:

Help me.

Request:

Help me.

Observation:

Being publicly called out on racism is not a PR crisis,
it's a crisis in the relationship to the public.
Being publicly called out on ableism is not a PR crisis,
it's a crisis in the relationship to the public.

Feeling

I feel like you don't care about this relationship.

Need:

Rethink what Public Relations means
I need to know that you care.

Request:

Show me that you care.

Observation:

“Core Values are the guiding moral, ethical, and definitive principles for all the actions that an organization takes. They exert an active influence on organizational behavior, providing direction on how we create the work and make decisions for the organization.”

(Foster 2023, 127)

Feeling

I have no idea what you really stand for

Need

“Arts leaders must be visionaries [...] Moral and ethical behavior is intrinsic to arts leadership. [...] To be a cultural leader is to be an exemplar of ethical behavior and to lead organizations that hold themselves to similarly high standards” (ibid. 10).

Request:

Tell the public who you are.

Observation:

“As arts organizations, our core reason to exist is to provide meaning for ourselves and the world in which we operate.

It is not to create jobs.

It is not to build beautiful buildings that revitalize downtowns.

It is not to provide social status, generate profits, build endowments or have a string of deficit free fiscal years.

It is not to organize or proselytize for a political agenda.

And it is surely not to create art for art’s sake, however one interprets that phrase.

These might be laudable byproducts of the work we do.

But it is not why the arts exist.

Art exists to create meaning for individuals, communities and societies.

Arts organizations exist to make sure that this happens.”

(Foster 2018, introduction xiv-xv)

Feeling:

Absolutely terrified. But also ‘Yes I’m Changing” by Tame Impala

Need:

[...] when we own our hard stories and rumble with them, we can write a new ending – an ending that includes

how we’re going to use what we’ve survived to be more compassionate and empathic.

When we deny our stories of struggle, they own us.

They own us, and they drive our behavior, emotions, thinking, and leading.

Daring leadership is leading from heart, not hurt.

(Brené 2018, 114)

Request:

Place your heart above your head when you bow.

7. CONCLUSION

In the end, when the lights come on and we bow in that ancient gesture of humble gratitude –
what do we bow to?

The purpose of this autothesis is the very personal mission of self-actualization and healing, in theory and practice, conjoined. Articulating my elusive self and exposing my core values - the beacons shining through the cracks – has been rewarding, scary and vulnerable.

I have found great self-actualization in my struggles for belonging. That is where my lived experience *is* my knowledge. It is precisely because my belonging was not self-evident to me, that I was propelled to examine and justify it rigorously, internally and externally. That constant self-interrogation has provided me with an irrevocable sense of who I am – and who I want to be as a theatre director and a leader.

None of us are supposed to be here. None of us hold exclusive copyright to the meaning and makings of our reality. None of us are inherently entitled to curate public spaces and time. The integrity of stand-point theory and the critical perspective of autotheory demand that we assert and situate ourselves subjectively in relation to our work, instead of hiding behind false universals, anonymity and alleged objectivity. Those alibis are historically only in place to exclude and discriminate against difference. And we desperately need difference. Difference is the key to true equality and thriving community. It is crucial for true belonging. True belonging does not ask us to abandon who we are. Instead it requires us to be who we are.

The original intention of this thesis was to talk about “value-aligned leadership in artistic practice and on an institutional level.” Without understanding exactly where it would take me. The impulse sprung from my feelings of aggravation and disarray over repeated, incessant incidents where the work of cultural institutions in my country and the neighboring countries betrayed their promises to the public: with harmful racial stereotypes, trans-hating “jokes,” under-representation of factual diversity in their communities, blatant ableism, rampant misogyny, straight people cast as trans people, white-washed and hegemonic bulldozing of all difference, etc. etc. etc.

People of the public, the rightful owners of most of these institutions, again and again demanded change, accountability, that wrongs be made right. In the local and international panels, on the radio shows, in news media and on social media where these matters were discussed exhaustively, I noticed a huge crack: Nowhere among the floods of statements on

artistic excellence and the institutions devotion to art, were there any clear vows on ethical responsibility, true representation of community diversity or commitment to social justice. In most examples, all across my small bubble of the Nordic countries, the same thing repeated itself over and over again.¹⁸ I noticed also that most institutions being called out, in their responses to the public, could not clearly articulate what they believe theatre - and representation in particular - actually *does* on a societal level of community and the political level of democracy. How the artistic productions and projects of these public institutions contribute to reinforcing or reframing our reality, how they can in fact dehumanize, subjugate and contribute to a culture of domination that hurts people and harms the health of communities. The communities they should be serving.

The crack I noticed was that the promises betrayed were not stated anywhere. The demanding, hurt members of the public largely seemed to know in their hearts what the role, purpose and values of their institutions were supposed to be – but there was nothing for the public to grasp in holding the institutions accountable for their actions and their choices. They never told us who they are.

It's hard to reckon with yourself, and it stirs up a lot of shit. But I would personally rather face it than deny it. I'd rather sit in discomfort with a hard truth for a while than unconsciously work my shit out on other people, hide behind my work and shrink my sense of self out of fear.

Who we are is how we lead – and I believe our full potential as leaders only reaches as far as our willingness to reckon with ourselves and everything that makes up who we are: our story, our village and our worldview, our pain, our privilege and difficult differences. Our interconnectedness to other people, to our community, nature and our planet. Our hopes and dreams for the future and the visions and values we carry in our hearts and carry out in our choices.

¹⁸ Just to name a few, e.g a panel I attended at the New Theatre Helsinki festival in March 2023:

<https://www.newtheatrehelsinki.com/festival-event-paneldiscussion> ; multiple panels on representation and diversity of disabled people in Icelandic theatre, e.g. at NTI 11.10.22 <https://vimeo.com/event/2501798> ; The conference 'Her Voice' on women of foreign origin in Icelandic arts, 01.04.23 at the City theatre of Reykjavík: <http://hennarrodd.is/> ; A series of panels on DEI and representation organized by R.E.C Arts collective during Reykjavík Arts Festival 2022 <https://fb.me/e/1N3HY2FL2> ; See also Tiina Rosenberg's 2021 article "We are still not being heard" in *Rethinking Nordic* vol 33 no. 2 discussing the situation in Sweden regarding race: <https://doi.org/10.7146/nts.v33i2.132869> ; and Mike Gamble's open letter to Det Nye Teater in Copenhagen: <https://www.copenhagenpride.dk/en/inclusivity-in-theatre-an-open-letter-by-mike-gamble/>

I want to propose, with my very subjective, vulnerable and personal autothesis, that we should all interrogate ourselves to self-actualization and accountability as curators of public time and spaces, as makers of meaning, as leaders and visionaries of the future of our communities.

I've done my part, for now, in asserting who I am and what I stand for. I've tried my best to articulate what I believe theatre does, what it has done for me and what I want to do with it. Where my blind-spots, biases and compliances might be dwelling, my privileges, my challenges. It's not exhaustive, and I've definitely missed parts and made mistakes. I'm not trying for mastery or perfection.

I'm trying to belong to myself, aligned with Love and Integrity.

I've told you who I am.

Who are you?

... In the end, when the lights come on.
As our hearts ascend our thinking heads –

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