

## **SYMPOSIUM – THE ARTIST’S BODY**

**University for Music & Performing Arts  
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### **THE METAPHOR OF ‘CONVERSATION’: IMPROVISATION, ENSEMBLE AND VALUES**

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#### **‘Conversation’, creativity and collaborative learning**

- Key elements in a collaborative ‘conversation’ (e.g., in any musical, movement, drama or verbal improvisation):
  - shared trust within the group:
  - the dynamics of the group
  - the interaction between members of the group
  - the flow of energy within the group
  - active listening within the group.
- The interconnectedness that lies at the heart of a collaborative ‘conversation’ generates:
  - unpredictable outcomes that stimulate participants to see themselves, their colleagues and the world differently
  - complementary actions that serve as a driver for creativity and innovation
- Group flow works best when an ensemble or partnership is bound together through shared language and shared understandings arising from ‘tacit’ knowledge. Creative energy is embedded in tacit knowledge that is caught through the act of doing and remains unspoken. The enriched feeling of tacit knowledge can strengthen a person’s sense of connection to their creative source and to the creative flow of the group.
- The communication central to collaborative ‘conversation’ is transformative in generating shared meanings and understanding because if it is to work, it has to respect differences, see commonalities and cross boundaries.
- It is through interaction, with its unique chemistry, that creative ideas and leaps of imagination begin to fly. Creative challenges emerge from the group responding to the unexpected. Nothing will ever seem quite the same again, as participants extend their ways of seeing and understanding.

- New knowledge is ‘co-constructed’ through dialogue, risk-taking and the shared exploration of ideas and meaning within the group. This is the nub of creative collaborative learning, with ‘conversation’ being the engine driving the creative collaborative process.

### **A supportive climate for ‘conversation’ to flow**

- The personal and group challenges arising from the flow of creative collaborative learning can be energising and inspiring, but often they are also quite daunting. Living ‘on the edge’, constantly taking risks, responding to the unpredictable, drawing on ones creative resources yet always listening to the voice of others – these finely tuned skills and states of being lie at the heart of any creative conversational process.
- Certain conditions are necessary for nurturing and supporting the emotional connection at the core of a collaborative process:
  - Creating and sustaining a safe, receptive conversational space that is non-judgemental, trusting, empathetic and accepting
  - Listening reflectively to the voice of others
  - Remaining engaged with and learning from different perspectives
  - Seeing differences and conflict as opportunities for learning
- The emotional connectedness that helps to bind a group together involves:
  - a shared sense of motivation
  - a shared purpose
  - solidarity based on shared values
  - a reassurance knowing that feelings of fear, vulnerability, self-doubt and marginality can also be shared
- Creative collaborative learning best flows and thrives in an environment that is emotionally supportive and understands what makes collaborative processes work. The synergy and connectedness arising from a supportive context, one which is sensitive to the place of physical and psychological space, can help to unlock the creative capacity of a group.
- Ideally, the philosophy and spirit of the whole organisation needs to be responsive to fostering a culture of creativity and collaboration. This is achieved partly through choreographing and sustaining a collective ‘conversation’ or reflective dialogue aimed at facilitating cultural change throughout an organisation.

### **The principles of ‘ensemble’**

#### ***Example of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC)***

- In 2007 the RSC embarked on a collaborative journey of change and renewal, applying an artistic process – the principles of ‘ensemble’ – to the leadership and management of the whole organisation. Its intentions are spelt out in its statement of ‘Purpose and Values’:

'To create our work through the ensemble principles of collaboration, trust, mutual respect, and a belief that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. This purpose should not only govern work on the stage and in the rehearsal room, but extend throughout the operations of the RSC, so as: 'to inspire artists and staff to learn and make theatre at the same time'.

- In the broader context of organisational development, 'ensemble' was viewed not only as a way of 'doing' but also as a way of 'being', based on a set of moral principles that guide leadership decisions and administrative actions.
- The RSC considers that collaboration, interconnectedness, lies at the core of creative theatre making and that the values implicit in 'ensemble' should underpin the life of the whole organisation. For example:

Mutual respect; trust; tolerance; honesty; compassion; empathy  
integrity; sincerity; cooperation; altruism; forgiveness; humility;  
magnanimity; rapport; patience; diversity; imagination

- The RSC recognises that a delicate balance has to be maintained between valuing the shared responsibility of working together as an ensemble with equal respect for listening to the individual voice of members of the company and of the organisation.
- It could be observed that this ecological model, premised on the principles of 'ensemble', is very idealistic and inevitably confronts individual staff, directors and actors across the organisation with major challenges. Attempting to choreograph such a fundamental cultural shift in any organisation necessitates a continual dialogue if shared responsibility and collaboration is to work in practice.

### **Key questions**

- In what ways might artists discover a shared 'language' that is clear, meaningful and coherent when working together in a group?
- How far might a more reflective type of language be seen as a threat to some artists working collaboratively?
- How do you see the place of individual artistic identity within a collaborative arts context?
- In what ways can artists deepen their sense of engagement, ownership and authenticity in collaborative work?
- What are the most effective ways of 'choreographing' an institutional conversation aimed at creating an environment that is emotionally supportive and understands what makes collaborative processes work?

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