

Delicate weave.

Didem Caia



Art is a human activity consisting in this: that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.

–Leo Tolstoy.

There is universality in experiencing theatre. Bodies, images, movements, sounds, words and the delicate weave of these elements into a live and present moment, have a way of transcending the barriers between humans that can become washed by the tides of everyday reality. The muses of theatre guide us to evolve. Sometimes with gentle nudges, sometimes with startling bolts of creative lightening. The accessibility of arts and culture is a gauge of freedom in a society and the appreciation of it, exalts us. As French philosopher Albert Camus said,

There is not a single true work of art that has not in the end added to the inner freedom of each person who has known and loved it.¹

From this I take the point that the arts are necessary. I believe that the apathy present in our current cultural climate, and the declining economic investment in creative development, artistic pathways and execution of theatre, mean that we are moving further and further away from the necessity of creative expression. The arts embrace, express and define the soul of a civilization. A nation without its arts would mean a nation that has stopped talking to itself, stopped dreaming, had lost interest in the past and lacked curiosity about the future.

The world of the theatre is experiential. It is not purely logical, nor is it purely emotional, it reflects a picture of the times through the totality of a spectator's senses and capabilities. The theatre, as Peter Brook observes, '*is the last forum where idealism is still an open question*'.² In theatre, magic can exist, disbelief is suspended and humans are reminded that they have bodies, which react to emotional and intellectual stimuli in a physical way. We sit, waiting, fidgeting, talking, trying to abandon thoughts of our hard day at work, our difficult relationships, our money woes; and we put our faith in the journey that awaits us. As I write this I'm reminded of my own

inclinations towards this art form.

I am drawn to the absolute awareness I have of myself and of others when I'm in the theatre. There is a heightened sensitivity and concentrated attention that sets in when we are positioned to hear, see, think, feel and anticipate the succession of stage moments. The times when I have been most affected, are when I have seen the invisible be made visible. By this I mean, circumstances which had previously not been part of my own personal reflections suddenly became part of me. When this happens, I have an experience that transcends my everyday reality and I am moved. Plays performed with love, rigour and vitality ignite my senses and offer a message that there is a world outside of my own and that people contain multitudes. The theatre is a forum where we can come into direct contact with the other, and strengthen the collective understanding of stories which define the entirety of our nation, our voices, and our people. Theatre ushers us forth, bringing us into contact with the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Historically, during times of death, famine, war and revolution, theatre was thought of as an escape, and indeed acted as an oasis in the thirst of dry lives. Though the idea of escape is still appealing for many audience members, theatre is also a reminder of the necessities of communication and connection, and in a generation where individuals are apparently more connected but significantly more disconnected, theatre might be more important than ever.

The twenty-first century has charioted with it many forms of entertainment, escapism and miraculous technological advancements. The lighting speed of this advancement has vastly altered the human organism (mind, body, spirit) in a very short space of time. Of course, there are countless benefits from technical progress—but there are great dangers as well, and I believe that we are seeing some of these today. The brain is literally shaped by our experiences in everyday life. At a microcellular level, the infinitely complex network of nerve cells that make up the constituent parts of the brain actually change in response to certain experiences and stimuli. Of course, there's nothing new about that: human brains have been changing, adapting and developing in response to outside stimuli for centuries. However, more recently our brains have come under the influence of the ever-expanding world of new technology, multichannel television, video games, MP3 players, the internet, wireless networks, Bluetooth links. These devices mean human beings can actually hold a connection to many corners of the world in the palm of their hand. With this come many other intrusions on the psycho-physical system such as anxiety, increased

adrenaline, depression and insomnia. For some of these, pharmaceuticals can be prescribed, but it is no secret that electronic devices and pharmaceutical drugs all have an impact on the micro-cellular structure and complex biochemistry of our brains. And that, in turn, affects our personality, our behaviour and our characteristics. In short, the modern world could well be altering our human identity altogether. As a result, concentrated attention, deep thinking and the ability to focus without being swept away by distractions, are skills with which we might be losing touch.

Today's technology and lifestyle habits are already producing a marked shift in the way we think and behave, particularly among the young. What I am talking about here, is pleasure. For some people, the attainment of pleasure may come in the form of wine, rich food, sex, music, live performance etc. But for millions today, pleasure is represented by endless hours in front of a computer console or a phone screen. Whatever one's variety of pleasure involves, it has now been accepted that 'pure' pleasure—as derived from what Greek Neo-Platonist philosopher, Proclus called *'existing in the natural condition itself [...] fully devoid of the contrary, distress'*,³ is becoming less and less attainable.

States of pure pleasure, in which a person experiences a release through the body, or a feeling of 'letting go', was once part of the mythology of normal human life. This was executed through forms of dance, singing, storytelling and performance. Participating in collective creative expression, not necessarily as a performer, but as a spectator, still has the ability to arouse the body and trigger these pure pleasure states. This is the power of the aesthetic experience of music, theatre and dance. As these human capabilities have evolved over time, they have further allowed adaptive advantages, such as enhanced community integration, information acquisition and ultimately, cognitive evolution. Theatre, which proposes a communication between audience members and stage action, is one platform from which these capacities can still be exercised. This creative form still aims to connect to the core of the original human capacity to achieve both increased awareness of the self and un-selfconsciousness, its processes for community integration and tools for psychological development and healing.

Now, coinciding with the moment when technology and pharmaceutical companies are finding even more ways to influence the human brain, instant pleasure is becoming the sole be-all and end-all of many lives, especially among the young. A generation is emerging that will live only in the thrill of the computer-generated moment, and is in distinct

danger of detaching itself from what the rest of us would consider the 'real world'.

For the purpose of this argument, I will define the real world as the total human experience of living in society: thinking, feeling, sensing and intuiting, interacting and participating with others. What has struck me is that, within modern times, this is becoming more and more alien. A genuine self can't be in two places, much less five or six, at one time—at least not in any meaningful way. One indication that we're becoming aware of this limitation is suggested in the collective emotional lives, fragile attention spans and restlessness of many individuals today. A recent study by Microsoft Corporation has found that the digital lifestyle has made it difficult for us to stay focused with a human attention span that has shortened from twelve to eight seconds in a little more than a decade.⁴

The decline in reading, creativity and communication, especially among children, is to the detriment of learning how to engage in periods of thoughtfulness, sensitive observation of people, the ability to pick up on tone, metaphor, symbol and abstract human thoughts and behaviour. There has been a marked shift in the lives of children, because of technology and cyber play and this has been well documented in many English and American studies.⁵ 'To play' is a creative process that fosters emotional health, imagination, original and critical thinking and problem solving. As children actively invent their own scenarios in play, they work their way through the challenges and gain confidence and a sense of mastery. Children are learning how to take initiative, to ask questions, to create and solve their own problems. Open-ended materials such as blocks, play dough, sand and water encourage children to play creatively and in depth.

What I am referring to here is the importance of active communication, the necessity of arts, culture and imagination in each other's lives and the prime importance of this kind of communication and creative expression. It is evident that community ritual, music and even the simple act of face-to-face communication, not barricaded by a screen, has the profound ability to bring us into contact with our senses and emotions, building connection, understanding and empathy. This learned behaviour can become diluted amongst the saturation of constant exposure to technology and declining levels of connection between individuals. But can the theatre become a crucial tool of connectivity amongst this influx?

What occurs to me most in all this, is that much of the toxicity in this world comes from a collective draining of empathy. We don't understand

each other, and we don't want to.

But Theatre invites us—no, forces us—to empathise. It's where we can go to build up the muscles of compassion, to practise listening and understanding and engaging with people not just like ourselves. As audience we practise sitting down, paying attention and learning from other people's actions. We practise caring. In the current cultural climate there is a rising concept that futurist Paul Saffo describes as 'personal media'.⁶ Saffo stipulates that the growth of personal media has the ability to destroy empathy. Individuals can select from a vast cyber-sea of media and utterly saturate their information space exclusively with information sources that reinforce existing world views. Each of us can create our own walled garden of personal media that surrounds us with comforting, confirming information, and excludes anything that conflicts with our convictions. This, Saffo asserts, is 'social dynamite'. Shared knowledge and information is the glue that holds civil society together, he says, and if we are increasingly building realities pillowed with personal interests, how can we engage in understanding the plights and values of the other?

To an extent, every individual lives within their own consciousness, their own wounds and perceptions. In a perfect world, there would be no art. Art is born out of necessity to a world of imperfection. Through art, we have the ability to consciously shape their perceptions and the perceptions of the other.

There is considerable evidence, which has been further expanded in England's 2016 'Culture white papers' which shows that cultural participation amongst individuals, can contribute to social relationships, community cohesion and make communities feel safer and stronger⁷. Research has found positive links between cultural participation and improved social skills and engagement with wider communities. I also believe we are now beginning to understand better, the profound relationship between culture, health and wellbeing. Everyone should have the chance to experience arts and culture, participate in it, create it, and see their lives transformed by it. We need to dedicate ourselves, as artists and advocates, to structure and maintain much more inclusivity, diversity, and dedicated platforms and workshops, which build and nurture artistic and cultural expression amongst our society. This is not about ticking boxes, it is about rebuilding the social ecology and transforming the exhausted paradigms of arts and culture which still dictate our national expression.

I want every single person in this country to have the opportunity to discover how the arts can enrich their lives. For me, this is a matter of social justice. Regardless of background, education, heritage or class, an individual needs to feel as though they have the right to engage in artistic expression, that it isn't a closed door or an unwelcome mat. Through my engagement with cultural and community development, what I have come to understand is that even though exposure to culture opens doors, improves social mobility and has a huge impact on life chances; many individuals who lack this knowledge, or have never been introduced, are excluded from our platforms. Our national and local cultural institutions need to work together to grow and support spaces and initiatives that will harness the power of culture and cultural diversity, because along with leadership, we need partnership. In turn what I hope is that this will drive education, wellbeing, and economic growth.

In the wake of the tragic arts defunding by our federal government in 2015, it becomes clear that if any justification for the arts is to have resonance, it needs to do so in the real world of politics, votes and funding. John Tusa, an English arts advocate and journalist, put forth the idea that

*the arts have a way of expressing the ideas and wishes that ordinary politics do not allow. The arts are immediate, intense and owned by the people who create them. The arts regenerate the rundown and rehabilitate the neglected. The arts teach the young how to create. Anywhere that neglects arts, shortchanges its people.*⁷

Today, because of the economic turmoil created by the aftermath, an even bigger obstacle faces us in relation to why it matters. The value of arts cannot be defined as if they were just another economic lever to be pulled, or a particular investment vehicle of choice. To behave as if they were places them on the level of activity where measurement of results, predictability of outcome and direction of activity are rated as the only conditions of success and therefore as grounds for investment in the first place.

The damaging result of this is that if our arts are not, in the public perception, delivering immediately measurable outcomes, then any case for public funding fails. Which is what we are currently facing. But the real question still remains: why does art still matter, if it cannot repay its public subsidy? This is the tragedy facing many artists today, and is as much a matter for us as it is for politicians who need to find their own language for supporting the arts that goes beyond the instrumental.

As arts and culture head into a new era of austerity, the intrinsic cannot be denied. But though much research and outcome has been collected in Australia on the instrumental value, the intrinsic value cannot be as easily measured. How can we measure intellectual stimulation? Emotional engagement? Joy? Of course there is research conducted in these areas, but it is not finding its way into the larger debates as much as are the economic, social and policy outcomes. What we can offer, as artists, is the continued conversation within our social and professional circles, to build vocabulary and ease when talking about these values in order to advocate for the importance of art within our nation.

For myself, the intrinsic value of art was demonstrated incrementally by how I came to be on this career path as a playwright and theatre maker. As a teenage bibliophile turned classical-literature major, turned playwriting-post-graduate, turned Master of Dramaturgy. An investment in the expression that arts offered me was what led me to the further interrogation of forms, structures, history and evolution of theatre and theatre writing. But first, it became a way in which the arts allowed me to find expression and identify myself within stories: identify my family and our experiences. I was so moved by the way that poets, playwrights and novelists could put words to pain and bliss; create worlds populated by characters that are flawed, multi-dimensional, far reaching, heroic; who make mistakes, don't always fit in, and don't always know what to say. For me, coming into contact with art, specifically theatre, was a way of coming into contact with myself. This kind of value is as important to our cultural context as any.

In 2014, with grants from the Australia Council and the Ian Potter Cultural Trust, I undertook a five-month study of new-writing theatre companies such as the Traverse, Paines Plough, the Royal Court, Steppenwolf, Chicago Dramatists, the Lark play development centre and the New York theatre workshop.⁸

One milestone experience was a week spent in a development room in Chicago with a new playwright, two dramaturgs and an artistic director. There was something of the old world about this playwright. Though only in his 'twenties, he was tipped to be the next best thing in American playwrighting. He had the unspoken desire for old letter-writing days, romantic cups of morning balcony coffee after warm nights and wet kisses. He carried a briefcase and had heavy bags under his eyes like Bukowski. He didn't speak much, but he had a strong confidence in the way he held eye contact when provoked by the dramaturgical commonalities of *'what is this*

play trying to say? This meeting was an important moment in my creative expedition. I observed the ways in which these dramaturgs involved themselves with the script, the ways in which they *'leant into the playwright'*, as English dramatist, Simon Stephens said to us in his 2015 Melbourne Theatre Company Masterclass. I listened to the ways in which the playwright was offered feedback, questions and provocations—sometimes abruptly, sometimes in an attempt to challenge the writing and the form. But what was important, was the engagement.

Playwrights long for this. We long for the deep, microscopic interrogation of our work, and a team of supportive people who are dedicated to strengthening the collective voices of this country. Writers are vital to a thriving cultural capital. Writers give voice to the voiceless, words to the unspeakable and expression to the mysterious.

This young man's play was going to have a reading after a week's worth of development. He wasn't the slightest bit on edge and I convinced myself he didn't care and wasn't worthy of his talent. But boy, did he have talent. On the eve of the reading I was backstage with him and he spoke to me for the first time.

He asked me

*Are you a writer?
Only when I'm writing
Aren't we so lucky?*

I paused. He continued.

Do you know how hard it is for some people to even get a glimpse of their own truth? To find the words and the images and the revelations to expose all of that stuff that's going on inside. We do that, you know. We get to give them that. That's all I care about. All that conversation throughout the week, trying to intellectualize the experiential. I hate it. I never know what to say. I'm a wreck when it comes to the questions and they're so patient with me. You need to work with people who get that it's not easy to express why you've written what you've written and what it means. You just hope that when it lands in their hands, it means something. I just try and write and shape something. It's not perfect. It's theatre.

'It's not perfect, it's theatre.' Some of the most important words of my

embryonic career. 'Why theatre?' has never been a question for me. It was only two years ago, while attending a panel discussion about the relevance of theatre, that I started to ponder it. But it didn't mean anything to me. All I know is that something happened to me when I saw Essie Davis in the 2008 production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*;⁹ something happened to me when I saw Barrie Kosky's *Women of Troy*;¹⁰ something happened to me when I saw Enda Walsh's *New Electric Ballroom*¹¹ and *Ballyturk*,¹² Patrick White's *Season at Sarsparilla*,¹³ Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*,¹⁴ Edward Albee's *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf*.¹⁵ Even new experimental and immersive theatre experiences such as the Wooster groups *CRY TROJANS!*¹⁶ Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*¹⁷ have left with me forever traces of sense memory and renewed understanding of humanity.

What happened to me in those moments was that I was rendered by something through my body. My feelings and thoughts were either affirmed or challenged and *in the moment*, I had to reconcile and negotiate how I felt about the world, myself and others. *Ballyturk*, by one of my favourite playwrights, struck me as one of the most delicate, yet strong, theatre experiences I've had. I watched this modern day *Waiting for Godot*, listening to a script that Walsh was still writing up until opening night, discovering the secrets of the set design and almost smelling the decay of these two men, trapped in a small Irish town, reiterating the same stories about the townfolk.

Walsh is a playwright. This work couldn't be anything but a play, and herein lies his craft: in turn I am offered a brief glimpse into the horror which surrounds death, mortality, and the devastating effects of time. This performance made me understand the finite nature of our existence in a way I hadn't ever imagined before. As I watched these men hold on for dear life, sweating and panting as they told the same stories over and over in an attempt to affirm their existence. As the theatre backdrop slowly ascended at the end of the performance to reveal emerald green grass, scattered roses and an undertaker, its delicate balance of earth and the afterlife gifted me the most memorable stage images. The form played with the notions of what playwrighting is, what set design can achieve, and how an artist can bring the most obscure and hidden voices out of the depths of society, to speak, and play and be heard. Theatre encompasses language, image, sound and movement in ways that can redefine the meaning of existence and explore the depths of the human being. It is very hard work. But we who involve ourselves with it, work tirelessly to create new ways of delivering live performance, because we know that it has the ability to enact change within a culture.

I've travelled to cities specifically for plays, for performances, for experiences in order to learn, understand and contextualise my own voice as a writer of the times. The list of my experiences is immense, and it will evolve as I evolve. Because within those plays and performances that have moved me, there is a transcendence of time and space. Time becomes irrelevant, because at the core of our existence, once all the tassels and labels are abandoned, humanity remains. And when done successfully, theatre has the power to strike the centre of that place and release those unifying elements of our collective consciousness. Theatre responds to the undercurrents, the swelling tornados of the subconscious. Theatre stands for physics and metaphysics, for the principle that communication and energy exists between anything and everything. Theatre can teach us about differences and similarities, about the rhythms of the universe through dialogue, song, images and human breath. Theatre is constructed in order to teach and shift and challenge and move us. Though the form may change and evolve, it will always remain a unique experience acting as an important vessel for the communication of the times.

For me it isn't a question of *does* theatre still matter. It's a question of *how* can we continue to allow people to see, feel and hear why it matters, so that the question itself dissolves into redundancy.

There is no conclusive argument for justifying the arts as an activity that society needs to support. People who choose not to be persuaded will remain so. Ultimately, the arts must continue to do what they alone can do, and that is: reveal, heal, excite, frighten, shock, anger, confront, delight and re-affirm. I am not a religious person, but for me, theatre is about as sacred an experience as I can comprehend. Audiences, mainly all strangers, come together in a given space, and sit with the desire to be taken into a realm that renews their faith in, and understanding of, the human condition. These audiences, whether they are aware of it or not, are looking to commune and feel. Regardless of all the differences the audience members may have, the liminal space between when a show begins and when it ends is where a performance aims to unite them.

¹ Camus, A., & Bloom, R. (2008). *Notebooks, 1951-1959*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.

² Brook, P. (1968). *The empty space*. New York: Atheneum.

³ Riel, & G. (2000). *Pleasure and the good life: Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists*.

Leiden: Brill.

⁴ Microsoft study shows that tech is shortening your attention span. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.engadget.com/2015/05/17/microsoft-attention-span-study/>

⁵ Fumoto, Hiroko, et al. *Young children's creative thinking*. Sage, 2012. Floyd, Ronald T. 'Are We Losing the Ability to Think Abstractly?' *The Canonization of Philip K. Dick* (2008).

⁶ Saffo, P. (1997). 'Sensors: the next wave of innovation'. *Communications of the ACM*, 40(2), 92-97. doi:10.1145/253671.253734.

⁷ Culture White Paper - Publications - GOV.UK". Gov.uk. N.p., 2016. Web. 29 July 2016.

⁸Tusa, J. (2007). *Engaged with the arts: Writings from the frontline*. London: I.B. Tauris.

⁹ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Tennessee Williams, directed by Gale Edwards, Melbourne theatre Company 2008.

¹⁰ *The Women of Troy*, Euripides, adapted by Tom Wright and Barrie Kosky, directed by Barrie Kosky. Malthouse Theatre 2008.

¹¹ *New Electric Ballroom*, Enda Walsh, Siren Theatre Co and Griffin Independent 2012.

¹² *Ballyturk*, Enda Walsh, directed by Enda Walsh, presented by the National Theatre London, 2014.

¹³ *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, Patrick White, directed by Benedict Andrews, Sydney Theatre Company 2007.

¹⁴ *Top Girls*, Caryl Churchill, directed by Jenny Kemp, Melbourne Theatre Company 2012.

¹⁵ *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Edward Albee, directed by Benedict Andrews, Belvoir Theatre 2007.

¹⁶ The Wooster Group is a New York City-based experimental theater company known for creating numerous original dramatic works. *Cry Trojans!* was based on the tale of Troilus and Cressida, directed by Elizabeth Lecompte 2014, REDCAT Los Angeles California.

¹⁷ Immersive, *Macbeth*-inspired performance in which audience roams in an eerie, 5-storey set with a bar, created by British theatre company Punchdrunk. 2014.