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Vulnerable Selection: Reshaping Selection Practices In the Performing Arts

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For the last ten years, I have been working internationally across theatre, dance and contemporary performance and in that time, I have sought to make the process of how work gets programmed, curated, commissioned, or booked a more transparent and rigorous practice. As an audience member, I have often found myself wondering at a choice of programming and the perceived lack of transparency in the communication of programming choices from artistic institutions. When speaking to other artists or critics about this frustration, I observed flippant dismissals of programming choices and lamented the limited awareness and representations of the intersections of class, race, gender, and ability. Many concluded that these 'lazy' or 'safe' choices were made on grounds outside of the organisation's announced values or mission. This might just be insider gossip, but it points to a bigger issue: If there's such a fundamental lack of understanding of how programmes are made within the industry, how are audiences meant to comprehend the largely opaque selection processes of cultural programming?

In recent years, this miscommunication has repeatedly put arts leaders across disciplines on the back foot. Chris Dercon and Marietta Piekenbrock's failure to communicate with their audience, for example, showcases this issue. While they publicly declared a desire to return to the fundamentals of 'theatre' for their first season at the Volksbühne Berlin in 2016, they were unable to adequately justify this choice to their audience and failed to engage with their theatre's local importance as a cornerstone of socialist Berlin. Audience numbers dropped rapidly, and one might say that their inability to mitigate notions of neoliberal programming was among the factors that lead to their early dismissal after a mere 255 days as directors (Syme 2016). In the same year, Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, the head curators of the Whitney Biennial in New York City, were blindsided by accusations of racist profiteering

for their selection of Dana Schultz's *Open Casket* (Greenberger 2017). The painting exhibited the body of Emmett Till, a black child who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955, which drew criticism that Dana Schultz, a white American, was gaining cultural and economic capital at the expense of his death. Again, Locks and Lew were not able to effectively connect with their audience over their curatorial decision. In 2014 the Barbican's lack of ability to defend its programming of *Exhibit B* after protesters and petitioners decried it as a racist 'black and white minstrel show', meant that they saw no other option but to cancel the show (Andrews and Odunlami 2014). These are just a few examples of the increasingly visible challenges to the seemingly under-interrogated decisions in programme selection. Moments like these often result in public outcry because art institutions are perceived to lack empathy, interest, or effort to understand the context in which their work is seen. My question, thus, became: How could a selector work to avoid such blind spots in selection? How can a selector avoid the missteps of Dercon and Co?

This question led me to have conversations with 30 arts leaders in the UK, where I asked them how they select works for the cultural venues they were responsible for. What I found was that the collaborative methods and feedback structures utilised in selection practices often reflected the implicit values or biases of an individual or organisation much more than any mission statement ever could. But unlike activities like strategic marketing or artist development, the way individuals or teams selected work usually went unevaluated. My practice as a selection consultant seeks to challenge this status quo.

Cultural gatekeeping in the UK is going through a transformation, so now is an exciting moment to have this conversation. The appointment of leaders like Kwame Kwei-Armah at The Young Vic, Lynette Linton at The Bush, Madani Younis at the Southbank Centre, Suba Das at HighTide, and Tarek Iskander at Battersea Arts Center stand in contrast to what Lynn Gardner called the 'dinosaurs' of performing arts institutions who need to be 'dragged into the 21st century over diversity' (2018). At this moment of transition, I want to encourage those in the

cultural sector to not only rethink *who* is doing the selection, but *how* it is being done. While a wider breadth of non-white representation and gender diversity is no doubt a much-overdue shift in the cultural landscape, how work is selected will continue to be a barrier to risky and innovative works if there is no rigorous development of value-informed methods of selection.

The Practice of Vulnerable Selection

Simply put, selection is a process of observation, reflection, and reaction. My method, Vulnerable Selection, proposes tools to evaluate how we observe, and what structures might support a reflective evaluation before making a decision. I've developed this method over the course of three years while working with artists and organisations in the UK and USA, including Cambridge Junction, Circumference, Diverse City, the Total Theatre Awards, and Parallel 45 Theatre. While I will outline this method as a tool to interrogate working practices and generate a season of programming for a venue or festival, it has also been useful in providing feedback for artists, building a plan for project development, or even as a solo practice of reflection after seeing a performance.

How we observe something is informed by our subjective impressions and biases, but these biases don't need to be a selector's enemy. Rather, an awareness of how one's experience factors into one's taste makes a selector unique and informs their aesthetical preferences. What follows is a description of the six stages of evaluation I propose, which encourage selectors to vulnerably explore their values and tastes. The aim is to support the growth of both the selector and the programme for which they are selecting. Drawing on sociological and artistic research and contemporary leadership techniques, Vulnerable Selection considers the practice of leadership and aims to shape these practices with realistic and efficient expectations.

Ground Rules

Before beginning a reflection process, it is important to put together a selection committee and be clear on who is responsible for the selecting

at the end of the process. Constructing a team with diverse knowledges, backgrounds, and experience will serve to enhance the work and give new perspectives to the selector/s. Some of the more successful selection practices I have observed incorporate not only staff and board members from their organisation, but also some of the audiences and artists which the organisation serves.

For a selection practice to succeed, it is essential to foster a culture which feels psychologically safe. Talking about taste, values, and opinions can often become very personal and emotional, and it's important that the framing of care is set up before the discussion can begin. Psychological safety can be defined as 'being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career' (Kahn 708) and invites vulnerability into a selection practice. Psychological safety is not about censoring, rather, it encourages a space for people to take risks in front of each other. *Vulnerable Selection* asks the selection committee to articulate personal values and dig deeper into questions of positionality without fear of unspoken judgement. Before beginning any selection it is important to have the conversation about creating psychologically safe spaces by asking the participants to imagine a space where they feel safe taking risks. We then talk in a group about what those spaces look and feel like, and how we might create them together. Common barriers to psychological safety include arguing as a decision-making strategy (i.e. bullying), interrupting, unacknowledged hierarchies, and a culture of gossip. Tools that support psychological safety include access to agendas before a meeting and structured break time. Once these barriers are discussed and agreed upon, I put them into a contract to establish an official agreement. The group is then aware that these are the parameters we need in order to have conversations that lead to us presenting dynamic, courageous, and risky work on stage.

Once these ground rules have been set up, we embark on a set of questions, which become a method of reflection. Without an intentional process, reflecting on work comes down to questions like 'what did you think?' which not only provides very little data, but can

also be difficult to answer. Taking time to understand the function of each stage of evaluation allows for an efficient but thorough review of potential work. Each method of evaluation should be designed to the needs of an organisation, curator or community, but what I suggest here is an example I've utilised with Parallel 45 Theatre in the USA. However, the individual stages might differ from organization to organization. Introduced by Michael Quinn Patton, the line of questioning I use supports evaluative anthropological inquiries to collect qualitative data (7). I have used these questions to interview a scout, discuss a show, design a season, or even build a mission statement. As the stages progress, we as a selection committee deepen our awareness of ourselves as selectors and other voices in the room. We gain more clarity in why we select the work we do. And hopefully, we develop a clear and comprehensive season of work that informs the values of the organisation we're supporting.

I run these sessions as it best fits each organization but often I function as a facilitator who is outside of the evaluation and is committed to maintaining the integrity of the process by following the agreed-upon steps. Previous to the meeting, the person or people who are tasked with making the final selection assign various performances or scripts to different members of the committee. It is not necessary for every person to have seen or read each work discussed: illuminating why one found that aspects of a performance did or didn't work to someone unfamiliar with it requires an even clearer and more precise description and evaluation. Each work goes through the stages of evaluation before the selector will decide if the work needs further review. As facilitator, I ask questions, encourage the selection committee to make sure they have all the information they need, and enforce the agreement of psychological safety if it is at risk of being compromised.

The Six Stages of Vulnerable Selection

Stage One: 'What are We Looking at?'

These prompts address concrete human action, conduct or our ways of doing.

The aim of this stage is to get everyone focused on what they are evaluating. Is it dance? How many people are on stage? What language do they speak? What does the stage look like? These details are important ground work for the questions that will follow, so it is important to make sure everyone on the committee can imagine the work before moving forward. Production images can be helpful at this stage.

As much as possible, taste is left out of this first stage of evaluation, so that even if not everyone in the selection process has seen the work they get a sense of its the form and content. This stage sets the framework for what will be evaluated through more positional discourse later on. As a facilitator, I push people to avoid the instinct to give a moment by moment account, but rather focus on the big picture of the work. I finish each stage by checking in with everyone on the committee to make sure they all feel they have a clear image of what the work being discussed is, and encourage questions if there are gaps in understanding.

Stage Two: 'Letting it All Out'

These prompts address a conviction, judgment or belief.

This stage allows for the clearing of taste and most directly mirrors the selection practices I observed in my interviews. I call it a 'clearing' because this stage often feels like a blurting-out of value proclamations, such as 'I loved it!' or 'I want my two hours back'. It's important to remember that this is only one of many factors when considering a work, and this is all data for the selector/s to consider when making their decision in the final stage and is not a definitive judgement. This stage consists of a committee member letting us know what their opinion of the work is. As these conversations happen in a committee setting, it is here that someone can feel fragile, because unlike in a conventional selection practice, it is important to understand why someone loved, loathed, or dismissed a performance. Here is where we start to reveal the value

systems of a committee, and those values are important to be noted as the selection continues. If for example, the performance 'just didn't work,' it's good to know *why it didn't work for you*. Sweeping statements like this can not only dismiss valuable work but also have the potential to diminish courage in other assessors.

When evaluators are struggling with this transition, where taste is no longer expressed as an objective truth but rather as a subjective value, I draw from the feedback process developed by DAS Theatre – Academy of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam. They focus on each feedbacker's perspectives so that the feedbacker must declare positionality before providing feedback. It fits into the format of 'as a _____, I needed _____.' For example, one might say 'as a queer person, I needed a more non-binary discourse on stage.' I use this assertion of perspective as it allows selectors to see their own subjective position in their criticism. This encourages a separation of feeling (this is true!) and perspective (my lived experience tells me this is true!). A selector can then ask: Do I want more non-binary discourse? Yes! Is that what our programme needs? Not necessarily.

Stage Three: 'Heart Check'

These prompts address emotions, sentiments and passions.

This is a moment to transfer the selector back into the show. Though at first this might appear similar to the second stage, the aim is to reflect on your emotional and sentimental experience *during the performance,* not your critical reflection after the work. A prompt suggesting that the committee should begin not with 'the show was' but rather 'I felt' creates space for a personal reflection, not an assessment of the success or failure of the work. There is a big difference between 'I was bored' and 'the show was boring.' There is a gentleness in this stage as people acknowledge experiencing sadness, fear, exhilaration, joy, longing, or frustration. By separating this out, the selector/s can consider the emotional experience of an audience and thus begin to consider what the *emotional dramaturgy* of a venue might be.

Stage Four: 'Bringing Out the Expert'

These prompts address the range of information that you hold about the production and its context.

This is the moment to evaluate the materials, aesthetic forms, themes, language and dramaturgy of the production. This stage draws on what the work explicitly addresses literally and conceptually. The aim of this round is to understand the maker's intention behind the work: what creative tools were used to produce that intention on stage? Following this, we evaluate those principles in relation to the selection committee's explicit values. For example, if we were evaluating the film *Billy Elliot*, it would be important for us to discuss the contexts of class and art which the film touches on, the choreographic score as it informs the dramaturgy of the film, or what the creative team say about the work. The discussion then focuses on how these assumptions and contexts do or do not line up with the values of the organisation.

Stage Five: 'Looking Outwards'

These prompts address concrete and practical information concerning distribution, location and population.

Whereas stage four is evaluating what the intention of the work is, this final stage places it against the backdrop of a wider cultural context. The conversation at this stage addresses the question of 'why now?' Is there an urgency to the work? As a selection committee looks at their position in a wider field of cultural production, we consider how a specific performance is informed by or engaged with broader cultural, scientific, or political conversations. What is the experience the organisation wants to create? Does this work support that?

Also beyond the urgency of the work, practical concerns can be addressed at this stage that look at the wider scope of the artist's work. Is the venue interested in supporting this artist beyond this project? What do audiences for this kind of work traditionally look like? What barriers might the venue or organisation present to that artist or production?

We also reflect on the representation of age, gender, ethnicity, background, ability and experience of the artists. It is important to note if a production being considered speaks primarily to a middle class experience, and reflect on how that might speak to the values of an organisation. Does who is on the selection panel speak to the identities represented in the work? What audiences and artists are and are not being represented by the organisation? Does that fit in line with the values of the organisation? As the exclusive practices of the arts come under more scrutiny, these uneasy, revealing conversations are reinforced by the psychologically safe structures of this practice.

Stage Six: 'Reaction'

Choosing the next steps of action and decisions

This mutli-facetted feedback results in diverse data, rich with potential. At this point the evaluation process is complete, and the selector/s choose work outside of the committee structure. It is up to the selector/s how this process takes place: some prefer to propose seasons to the committee and carry out another round of evaluation, some prefer to move forward with a decision without further discussion. With this data a selector can feel confident that whatever they select, their decision rests upon a rigorous and comprehensive process of evaluation. What they chose is up to each selector's positional knowledge and experience, but now these have explicitly been acknowledged in the process rather than remaining in the unengaged unconscious which many selection processes usually build on.

Conclusion

Vulnerable Selection is the result of my values of empathy and courage shaping a process that asks leaders to practice vulnerability in a committee of peers. But as Brené Brown points out, courage is embracing the inevitability of failure (2016, 19), and sometimes this process has failed. But embracing that failure has led to important considerations for future evaluations. Often after using *Vulnerable Selection*, we find a conflict between an organisation's announced values and those enacted by the

selection, because the enacted values unveil biases towards a particular artistic form, aesthetic genre, or background, age, race, ethnicity, ability or gender of the artists involved. This can be a productive moment in confronting organisational decision-making processes. If we want greater risk taking in selection processes, we need to acknowledge when an organisation fails to produce the culture it claims to support and allow them to try again after a deeper interrogation of how they act upon their values. The way forward for arts leadership in the 21st century is to embrace the vulnerability of selecting, acknowledge that awareness of positionality is an asset, and build an intentional, transparent process to evaluate the work artists create.

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