

REFINING THE MEANING OF CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

BY PIERS IBBOTSON

Within the theatre arts there are many useful sets of skills and processes that we can transfer to other contexts. The theatre is a collaborative art; its raw material is human beings. It does not deal with abstractions from our lives, it mirrors life, reflects “the very age and body of the time.” One of the core processes of the theatre arts is that of rehearsal - the joint creation of a piece of work by many artists working all together under a director. Rehearsal is not practising, it proceeds by iterative failure. The group attempts and tries, and fails, and fails again to make meaning for a scene and the director edits, guides, and stimulates the process until a final vision is achieved. It is a useful metaphor for the creative process in a group.

For this process to have an innovative result, some skills and attitudes must be in place. There must be a safe and private space where failure is encouraged and accepted. There must be a universal attitude of support and acceptance of one's own first thought and others'. There must be fearless commitment to the maddest proposition and everything that bubbles up must be tried out, explored and its useful parts named and absorbed, before it is forgotten.



For this to happen, all hierarchies that are necessary for the execution of the piece, must be suspended. The leading players and the humblest walk-on part must have an equal status before the task and have the freedom and the confidence to speak out, dare something and be accepted when it fails.

The director's role is to establish this "equality-before-the-task" and to observe minutely, all the work the ensemble is creating. The greatest directors act as the perfect audience of one. They notice and reflect back all that the actors try to do. They pick up all the fragments of that infinitely complex, inarticulate thing that is the new emerging concept. They must notice everything and cling to nothing. They are there to act as midwives to the creativity of others and to frame their observations as constraints to guide the ensemble's next attempt.

Of course the director has a vision of the piece, but for an innovation to occur, and be enacted with commitment by the group, the process has to be emergent. The actual form the idea takes at last, must be allowed to come from the rehearsal process and not be dictated from above. Only then will it be acted out before an audience with consistency and energy and only then will it remain alive after the director's work is done. The director therefore has to be uncertain of the way, guiding, shaping, stimulating further flights and always vigilant for the happy accident that opens up a door to something genuinely new. Then they must be certain, and have the authority to select and fix that moment in the piece.

But do we want to innovate? Do we want to make things challenging and new? Or do we want to make them familiar and well? In organizations outside the arts there is a lack of clarity about the usefulness of innovation and the conditions necessary for creativity in groups.

Creativity flourishes under accurate constraints. One of the director's skills is to frame constraints that will stimulate creativity in the company. In other places constraints are of the form of disciplines: strict rules, ruthless hierarchies, that must not admit of creativity or innovation or the whole enterprise of putting on a play cannot move on. Once the set design, for instance, is agreed upon, it cannot be altered by the actors. Once the final script has been agreed upon, it cannot be re-written in performance. The theatre arts are just like any other business in this sense. Without these disciplines the piece of work cannot be delivered on time, on budget.

Creativity in art is action. It is a by-product of people exercising their skills, it can be provoked and encouraged in various ways, but careful thought needs to be given to where exactly it is to be unleashed and where it must be contained. To talk in general terms of "making people more creative" and "encouraging innovation at all levels" is nonsense. Who are the relevant players and what are they going to do? What are they being required to perform, and where and when are they going to rehearse it?

Innovation may occur where people are creatively engaged, but it cannot be dictated and it cannot be planned, it must be found from the emergent actions of people who are struggling with a task.

There are some things that will prevent it:

- Competitive individualism is antithetical to creativity in groups.
- "Freedom from all constraints" is not a help.
- "Getting it right first time" is antithetical to creativity – as are the three fears: fear of being mad, fear of being wrong, fear of being rude.
- Feedback and assessment are antithetical to creativity.
- Speed and efficiency are antithetical to creativity.

Much of present business culture, in fact, mitigates against conditions that will allow creativity to flourish and innovation to occur. It needs to change.

There is a popular misconception that artists are chaotic and eccentric people. They are not. They merely operate in a different, but equally rigorous and systematic conceptual framework than those who are not artists. Many business people, for instance, actually borrow their conceptual framework from science, without really being conscious of the fact. There is also a very dangerous and widespread fallacy that these differing conceptual frameworks are in some way competing; that the truths of art are in some way inferior to the truths of science. This is dangerous nonsense. We need, and daily use, a multitude of frames to make sense of the world and navigate through it successfully. Familiarity with many different ones only serves to make us wise. ■

Piers Ibbotson runs The Directing Creativity Programme, which was developed for The Royal Shakespeare Company. The program provides management development and consultancy for business using techniques and approaches from the world of theatre; with the dual objectives of enhancing business performance and developing closer links between industry and the arts.

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