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### **'Dark Night Ends': The Ethics of Vulnerability in Applied Theatre**

Question: Have you ever experienced the dark night of the soul? Your teachings have been so helpful through this difficult period. Can you address this subject?

Eckhart: The "dark night of the soul" is a term that goes back a long time. Yes, I have also experienced it. It is a term used to describe what one could call a collapse of a perceived meaning in life...an eruption into your life of a deep sense of meaninglessness. The inner state in some cases is very close to what is conventionally called depression. Nothing makes sense anymore, there's no purpose to anything. (Tolle, 2020, n.p.)

Eckhart Tolle, a spiritual teacher and author renowned for his work on depression and spiritual awakening, exemplifies the experiences of depression and deep meaninglessness experienced by many people. He is using the metaphor of 'dark night of the soul' as a medium to address and give meaning to emotions and inner states that at times are difficult to articulate in words. Tolle's quote was the entering point of the performance project *Creative conversations*, a verbatim dance theatre project with people in recovery from addiction to alcohol and other drugs that took place in Liverpool, UK in 2017 and 2018. My involvement in the project was as a member of the creative team and project evaluator. For the first session, participants were asked to bring readings or texts that had inspired or helped their recovery process. 'Dan'<sup>1</sup>, one of the participants, brought the above extract from Tolle's interview that stimulated really interesting conversations amongst the participants and the creative team. He explained that Tolle's quote resonates with his experiences of becoming recovered from addiction to substances, and that the symbolism of dark night is a useful allegory to depict his experiences. Other members shared similar experiences of trauma, pain, chaos, a sense of loss of control accompanied by messages of hope for a positive future. Each story revealed the complexity, diversity and ambiguity of what it means to be in recovery from addiction. A common ground amongst participants was established very quickly, emphasizing that

<sup>1</sup> The participants' names have been changed to protect their identities. personal accounts of addiction recovery are varied and too complex to fully articulate into words. Hence, borrowing from Tolle, *Dark Night Ends* was chosen as the theme to explore

throughout the project and subsequently became the title of the final performance.

These initial sharing of ideas and personal experiences created a framework for the initiation of the creative process, but also brought some immediate ethical tensions and artistic dilemmas in terms of how to represent personal experiences of 'dark night of the soul' on stage in ways that avoid the risk of re-traumatization or victimization. It raised the following questions: What ethical guidelines and modes of ethical practice are appropriate in working artistically with lived experiences, particularly when the project is focusing on difficult and painful experiences? What are effective ways to handle the risks of reinforcing re stigmatization and unequal power relations in the context of applied theatre that draws on the personal and collective experiences of participants? How does one deal with the complexities of vulnerability in co-creating artistic practice for the development of a performance?

The project has enabled a rethinking of the ethics in making performance based on personal experiences of addiction recovery. Extending from Braidotti's suggestion that we need to 'invent a form of ethical relations, norms and values worthy of the complexity of our times' (Braidotti 2013: 86), this chapter traces how my thinking about ethics in applied theatre practice has shifted, particularly in terms of how we respond to the concept of vulnerability. This has been influenced by Fiona Bannon (2019) who in her book *Considering Ethics in Dance, Theatre and Performance* explores the concept of relational ethics in conjunction with Erinn Gilson's (2014) *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*, that questions current discourses on vulnerability and otherness. In doing so, I suggest that applied theatre needs to attend to the important ethical issues of power dynamics, duty of care, and relational practice when lived experiences are employed in performance creation.

### **Creative Conversations: Background to Project**

The project 'Creative Conversations' was led by Fallen Angels Dance Theatre (henceforth Fallen Angels), a charity working with people in recovery from addiction, and in collaboration the multi-instrument composer Lee Affen and myself as an applied theatre practitioner-researcher and project evaluator. Funded by the *Paul Hamlyn Foundation: Test and Explore* fund, the project aimed to develop an innovative approach to creating fully inclusive performances with people in recovery from addiction that initiate 'Creative conversations' with the wider public about addiction stigma and recovery. In particular, it aimed to address

the possibilities and challenges in using spoken word, music and dance to create a methodology of dramatizing and choreographing personal experiences of addiction and recovery. The project took place in Merseyside, UK and engaged with three local addiction recovery groups. These comprised members of the Spider Project, a creative arts and well being recovery community project based on the Wirral, Merseyside, members of Tom Harrison House: Military Veteran Addiction Recovery Center which is a specialist facility providing an addiction recovery program exclusively for military veterans, and members of Fallen Angels Liverpool recovery dance group with a previous experience of working with dance and theatre.

The participants were in different stages of their recovery process, varying from one month to two years, and had a wide range of cultural and personal backgrounds in addiction and recovery. Moreover, a number of members were participating for the first time in a creative project of this scale. Fallen Angels' previous projects evidenced an increased participation of people with complex well-being and social needs. The artistic methodology deployed in this project explored alternative ways of gathering and telling stories of addiction recovery through movement. It emphasized the lived experiences of the participants' personal experiences of addiction recovery, which often offers poignant insight into the often unspoken stories and experiences of overcoming addiction.<sup>2</sup>

My role as a member of the creative team allowed an insider/outsider status to the process of choreographing the piece, and directing the final performance, whilst providing a framework for a contextual analysis of Fallen Angels' artistic approach. As a member of the creative team, I was responsible for the delivery of the project and worked in liaison with Fallen Angels' artistic director Paul Bayes Kitcher Bayes to create the final performance. As part of this, I acquired an insider's access to the artistic rationale behind the project, and

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed analysis of Fallen Angels' creative practice see Zontou (2017, 2019). intimate knowledge of the group's dynamics. In my secondary role as a project evaluator, I had to distance myself from the creative process in order to effectively monitor and gather evidence about the participants' experiences. Hence, in addition to documenting how the participants engaged with the project I aimed to closely observe the creative methodologies deployed by Fallen Angels in translating personal stories into performance work. My analysis focuses on the conversations between the creative team and participants' responses.

## **Towards an Ethics of Vulnerability in Applied Theatre Practice**

Applied theatre considers vulnerability in multiple ways. Thus, vulnerability plays a crucial part in the process of making performance in different contexts, and with different social groups. It is often targeted at participants who might already be classified as 'vulnerable' or 'at risk of being vulnerable' in social, political and economic terms. Indeed, participation in the process of making performance invariably requires a personal 'disposition' drawn from the individual's personal experiences. To this end, the process of making performances requires a degree of openness to *become* vulnerable and being exposed to and with others. Our subjective vulnerabilities are constantly shifting and changing as we learn to share our personal experiences, co-create with others and shape the creative process. Vulnerability is relational in that sense, but also due to the fact that our connectivity and collective moments of creativity with others are in themselves potentially both vulnerable and precarious.

In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown discusses the concept of vulnerability, which she connects with feelings of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. She argues that vulnerability is "the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity" (Brown, 2012: 33). According to Brown (2012) the tendency to associate vulnerability only as weakness or with dark emotions that we do not want to discuss is a dangerous misconception. Her definition has been key in shifting my understanding of the role of vulnerability in applied theatre ethics, particularly when we consider how prevalent the concept of vulnerability as weakness is within the bounds of this field. Within applied theatre the term has been used to describe groups as for example offenders, children, disadvantaged youth, or victims of domestic abuse as vulnerable populations, or as those at 'vulnerable points in their lives' (Nicholson, 2005: 119). Brown's position of vulnerability urges us to make a clearer distinction between vulnerability as a condition imposed upon the vulnerable others or as a necessary act of growing, maturing, and finding the courage to express ourselves.

In the context of applied theatre, being vulnerable means being exposed together both as artist/facilitators and participants and learning to *create together* without entering into paradigms of exploitation and re-traumatization, and in ways that value personal experience. As Helen Nicholson maintains, it helps develop creative spaces "in which people feel safe enough to take risks and to allow themselves and others to experience vulnerability" (Nicholson, 2005: 129). Hence, the moments of creating applied theatre are as vulnerable as

the people who engaged in it. Applied theatre requires a certain degree of exposure and risk alongside a radical openness to other people's differences and creative imperatives. From an ethical perspective this would mean that the issues of power dynamics, agency and duty of care heavily rely on the interpersonal understandings and multilayered levels of vulnerability that co-exist in the workshop/rehearsal space. However, extending the definition of vulnerability becomes complicated when working with participants who are considered as vulnerable or at risk of being vulnerable in social, political, or economic terms. These issues can be amplified by the fact that in many cases participants in applied theatre projects might not have previous experience of participating in a creative project, let alone have used their personal lived experiences to create a performance. Hence, it might be difficult for participants to anticipate what comes next, what the outcomes may be and what the ramifications of the process might be for them. This raises fundamental concerns on how to work with lived experiences and vulnerabilities in an ethically sustainable manner.

Other scholars in the field share similar concerns. For instance, Salverson (1996) argues that a potential weakness of theatre that draws on the lived experiences of participants is the idealization of staging vulnerability as worthwhile or a notable achievement in itself. Baim makes this point more explicit by stating that "by merely staging pain and suffering is not an answer in itself and runs the serious risk of voyeurism, collusion with oppression, and even re-abuse and re-traumatization of victims" (2017: 87). He moves on to assert that if we are to remain ethical, personal stories of vulnerability "should never be presented as an unexamined spectacle and never with the assumption that the theatre artist is rebalancing the scale of justice" (Ibid. 88). These scholars both recognize the complexity of working with vulnerabilities and highlight the significant need to constantly reflect upon and renegotiate our ethical models of practice. They call for caution in the use of lived experiences, which, although they have become a consolidated feature of applied theatre, may not be unproblematic. This is particularly the case in reference to issues related to exposing participants' vulnerabilities as personal failures, and in perpetuating existing misconceptions as for example about recovery and addiction.

Practitioners and performers in the field should be aware of such complexities and give priority to considering the ethics that underpin such acts. Hence, both Salverson and Baim propose that attention needs to be placed upon the development of an ethics of practice that avoids either trivialization or sensationalization of personal experiences. This, in turn, echoes the suggestion by Braidotti that ethics need to be concerned with a different level of

accountability that allows us to find new ways to combine ‘...self-interests with the well-being of an enlarged sense of community’ (2006: 35). I am therefore advocating for a re-theorization of vulnerability in relation to ethics in applied theatre. We must consider in more depth what we mean by vulnerability in the context of applied theatre practice, and at the same token, what it means to experience vulnerability in order to better explore ethical responses.

Gilson’s theorization of *The Ethics of Vulnerability* (2013), moves this argument further when exploring the implications of how different assertions on vulnerability led to its association with weakness, liabilities, incapability and notions of powerlessness. Similarly, to Brown (2012), Gilson argues that these negative connotations are reductive for two main reasons: firstly, they imply an implicit understanding of vulnerability as a sign of weakness; and secondly, they devalue vulnerability as something socially ‘bad’, a sign of personal failure (2013). She refuses to accept the normative frame of vulnerability as given but rather examines it as a possibility. For Gilson, vulnerability describes the very structure of subjectivity, and its “transcendental condition, pointing to an openness and plasticity that makes possible transformation.” (ibid.:10). She maintains that vulnerability can be viewed as an ethical resource that helps manifest virtues of empathy, compassion, and community. Hence, by treating vulnerability as politically productive, as a contingent performative process rather than as a stable categorical marker, we can better understand what it achieves.

In extending this argument, I examine Alice O’Grady’s concept of ‘critical vulnerability’ which she is using to examine “how the core characteristics of openness, uncertainty, and varying degrees of exposure contribute to an aesthetic paradigm where risk is deployed as an intentional tactic, a strategy of engagement’ (2017: xi). In a similar vein to Brown (2012) and Gilson (2013), vulnerability for O’Grady offers itself as a possibility, in which openness, uncertainty and exposure become a deliberate aesthetic choice and a critical tool for engagement. Applied theatre develops creative spaces in which participants and facilitators might experience moments of *critical* vulnerabilities together, and in so doing, ethical relations are informed by an ethos that embraces *being-with-others*. An ethics of vulnerability is framed as an adaptive practice of being and doing beyond any prefixed moral codes.

For instance, in the *Creative Conversations project*, every workshop began with open discussion (check-in) in which everyone had the opportunity to talk about their feelings in the present moment. This was an opportunity to talk to each other, share stories, news or

even just express feelings in the moment. These introductory discussions aimed to assist the participants to express themselves in an open environment, connect with each other and focus on the here and now of the workshop. It set up the foundations for the workshop, as often the participants were asked to reflect through movement on a specific area of their life story, or events and feelings that were shared at the start of the workshop. The same approach was utilized at the end of each workshop (check-out) in which the participants had an opportunity to reflect and share with each other their responses to the workshop. This ceremonial space allowed the participants to open and relate to each other. It gave them the opportunity to discuss issues that mattered to them in the current moment and an agency to shape the creative process based on these sharing experiences. This mode of practice offers an appreciation of ethical work as relational which is shaped in association with the others with whom we co-create and correspond.

Fundamentally, an ethics of vulnerability gives important agency to the participants to make their own choices and offers a paradigm within which to understand the complexities of working with embodied, difficult past and present experiences. The role of the artist/facilitator in the instance is to provide spaces for the participants' shared vulnerabilities to constitute the basis of ethical responsiveness. For example, in the second workshop one participant discussed how they often experience intense moments of racing thoughts which can be confusing and conflicting and that is causing them anxiety and distress. That week they started going for long walks on the beach which seemed to help them to calm down. Other participants discussed similar experiences and shared ideas on how breathing, meditation and connecting with nature can be useful self-care practices for people in recovery. Following this disclosure, Bayes Kitcher invited the participants to create a sequence of movements that reflect the contrasting images of racing, confused thoughts as opposed to calmness, tranquility and serenity. He urged participants to use the beach as the starting point of their movement improvisation, recalling its smells, sounds and colors. The participants created movements that reflected the transitions from distress to calmness. Rustic, spinning around and erratic movements, were followed by stillness, breathing and slow movements. This moment of shared vulnerability in participants' lives became the starting point of a new aesthetic paradigm, where a traumatic experience is collectively explored as a strategy of engagement, creativity and empathetic connection. Hence, working with juxtaposed movements in solo or pairs, and exploring contrasting feelings and experiences, helped to generate the creative material, and placed relationality and critical vulnerability at the core of the creative process.

Over the years of working with people in recovery from addiction to stage their lived experiences, I have become anxious as to how personal stories, as the moment discussed above, can be translated in ways that do not victimize or produce the stereotypes and stigma attached to addiction. In my role in the artistic team as an applied theatre facilitator and in order to fully comprehend Bayes Kitcher's methods of working, I have sought to explore creative methods that put value on the embodied experience and participants' artistry and at the same time demonstrate duty of care. One of the fundamental insights of my ongoing inquiry in this field is that, when people in recovery from addiction are presented with opportunities to work creatively with their lived experiences, it is often accompanied by a notion of 'redemption', an openness and strong imperative to tell and share their experience (Zontou 2017, 2019).

This imperative to share, however, presents an ethical problem for two main reasons: Firstly, the public attitudes towards people with a history of drug dependency remain rather negative. Reports on the public attitude towards people with drug dependency problems or people in recovery indicate that a significant proportion of the population believes that people with drug addiction have responsibility for their own situation, and that recovery from addiction is a matter of personal agency (Lloyd 2010, Scottish Government 2016). These categorical ideas of responsibility and agency undermine the complexity involved in the process of recovering from addiction. They also suggest that shifting the public attitude on addiction recovery through performance is a rather complex process. Secondly, even when individuals are not identified as vulnerable or at risk, the nature of the lived experience shared, the context in which one is working, the processes used or the mode in which the lived experience is presented in the workshop or to an audience may in fact make participants vulnerable. This raises a crucial question: how we can remain faithful to the participants' imperative to tell but at the same time avoid stigmatization or reproduction of stereotypes?

Cathy Sloan (2017) in her account of directing Simon Mason's biographical solo performance *Too High Too Far Too Soon* describes the challenge of avoiding "aesthetizing" the experiences of addiction. She draws attention to the fact that if we are to remain faithful to the lived experiences of people in recovery from addiction it is inevitable to consider including scenes that represent rituals and behavior patterns related to the past of drug taking. She highlights that one of the most important aspects of staging real narratives of addiction recovery is the intention of passing on the hope of recovery to those who might have been affected by it,

while also challenging the social attitudes of addicts in the wider public. Similarly, to Sloan, I regard my responsibility as an artist-outsider who enters the group setting is to transform participants' lived experiences into a performance that is meaningful and owned by them. This echoes Barrow who maintains: "What remains important (...) is a developing association with ethics as a rational and social *process*. In this way, the journey is, in effect, an exploration of social and creative encounters that occur between individuals when they operate as beings-in-common" (2019:7). Throughout the *Creative conversations* project, we were offering the workshops as an open space in which stories of addiction and recovery could be expressed and realized as artistic material, as well as a space to openly discuss the ethical concerns that arose in the process and finding ways to overcome them can you give an example here?. Understanding together the challenges presented in working towards a performance based on their experiences was highly important. In this way ethics became the participants and facilitators' shared responsibility. Bayes Kitcher's personal experience of being in recovery from addiction operated as a crucial starting point in opening up a dialogue with the participants about addiction and recovery and introduced them to ways to work creatively with these experiences. This created a sense of emotional attunement between Bayes Kitcher as the leading facilitator and the participants that was informed by a relational interpersonal connection with their stories. His ability to connect with the participants at a personal level had a strong impact on the way that they engaged and responded to the creative process.

Critical vulnerability was mobilized as a useful tool throughout the creative process and created spaces in which participants felt open to express themselves and relate to others. As I discussed in the earlier examples and in the next section, each session opened with personal sharing, which was then translated into movement. Hence, the lived experiences that participants chose to discuss or bring into the workshop space were at the core of the process. In this way, the participants were co-creators and collaborators as they were responding and reflecting on the material produced at the moment, aiding them in being attuned with each other. Hence, relationality became an important component of our artistic practice. It enabled us to build a deeper connection with the group's creative imperative and challenged us to reconsider how we work together and what we thought might be possible within this particular process.

**'Life on highs to high on life'**

A moment of critical vulnerability occurred in the fourth workshop. 'Jenny' had written a poem in which she described her journey from initial drug consumption and getting 'high' to finding recovery. The poem was entitled *Life on highs to high on life* and traced her journey from the highs and lows of addiction to the lows and highs of being in recovery. She recalled writing the poem when she was not in a good place, feeling isolating alone and suicidal, then returning to it later to add another section on the merits of recovery ('Jenny', 2017). The creative team's initial response was that from an ethical perspective it was perhaps too 'risky' to work creatively with the past traumatic experience cited in the poem. We had to be cautious of the participant's recovery stages and avoid specific triggers that might cause relapse or reinforce revisiting traumatic experiences both for Jenny and the other members. For example, the poem's opening line: 'Flying so high up in the sky, fooled by the way drugs lie, losing touch with what was real, I loved the way drugs made me feel,' could have been a trigger for relapse. Triggers are social, environmental or emotional situations that remind people in recovery of their past drug or alcohol use. These cues bring about urges that may lead to a relapse. While triggers do not force a person to use drugs, they increase the likelihood of drug use (Drugrehab, Relapse Triggers 2012). However, it also felt unethical to shut down Jenny's imperative to share her experiences. We, therefore, decided to find a symbolic and abstract way of 'telling' the poem using fragmented text, sounds and movement. We did a group reading of the poem and participants were asked to pick words or phrases that resonated with them, which we then used as a stimulus to create a sequence of movements and a soundscape. There were two parts in Jenny's poem. The first part which was quite harsh, describing her attachment to drugs, loss of self and control and so on, while in the second part when she talked about her recovery was more positive. When we asked participants to choose a phrase that resonated with them, they all chose words from the first part such as: "Death is ringing its alarm bell, as I went round on a drunk carousel, but soon obsession began to linger, time after time I kept on falling'. This was astounding, and I was unsure why it happened. Was it the poetic language that draws them into this? Or does this show that this is the part of the story that they want to tell? How can we move the creative process from here?" (Research diary 2017).

The initial discomfort that I experienced when the participants chose phrases that alluded to their past in active drug consumption, accompanied by not knowing how to steer the process away from these, made me realize how in fact it was my own vulnerability that was blocking the process. I was perhaps too preoccupied in thinking of my obligation to cause no harm and

was stuck in a prefixed definition of vulnerability. I had taken for granted that the meaning of vulnerability is to be susceptible to harm. In reflection, I recognize that this reaction was inherent from the institutional prescriptive and protective ethical protocols that I am used to following, in which a set of guidelines are offered as a mechanism to ensure duty of care. My vulnerability here emerged out of fear of not knowing how to both embrace the participants' creative impulse and remain ethical in terms of causing no harm (possible relapse or distress).

Aside from this, my vulnerability was amplified as I recognized my status as an outsider practitioner-academic, and as the only person in the room without a direct experience of recovering from addiction. This has created a dilemma between openly expressing my vulnerability, by admitting that I was unsure on how to navigate this challenging situation, and at the same time maintaining my credibility. The tension between remaining ethical, experiencing vulnerability and seeking credibility created a significant challenge which added a tension between ethical dilemmas, artistic excellence and accountability. I was responsible to demonstrate duty of care and professionalism in handling challenging situations, in addition to successfully delivering the project. This moment of practice revealed the complexity, diversity and ambiguity of who should be vulnerable in the context of the creative process, and how these dynamics are constantly shifting.

Gilson asserts that one of the central challenges of vulnerability is the fact that it derives from a deep sense of discomfort with the unfamiliar, the unpredictable and uncontrollable. Yet it is through engagements with these experiences that we learn how to change and “extend ourselves beyond our current limits” (2013:127). Learning how to balance the tension between vulnerability and credibility was an important learning curve in this process. Reflecting back on this moment of practice reveals that it was of paramount importance to *distance* myself from the preselected set of conceptions on what constitutes an ethical way and, rather, to allow the participants to reflect upon their own ‘repertoire’ of stories and lived experiences. This moment of critical vulnerability assisted me to recognize that the stories that participants choose to tell are “something that they care about, something important for them” (Mankowski and Rappaport 2000: 481), and for this reason, I sought to trust the participants’ imperative to share their experiences. The way to deal with ethics is to approach the creative process with the necessary sensitivity and duty of care but in a way that allows participants and facilitators alike to experience vulnerability

In the case of the Creative Conversations project, the participants wanted to put emphasis on the highs and lows of addiction, patterns of behavior and moments of ‘dark night ends.’

Our responsibility as facilitators was to find ways of accommodating their imperative to tell this specific lived experience, and to openly acknowledge that as part of relational ethics of vulnerability, “we seek to deal with the reality and practice of changing relationships with our (...) participants over time” (Ellis 2007: 4). For this it was necessary for us as facilitators to be open and honest in expressing our worries and anxieties. As I mentioned earlier, the participants had already established an emotional attunement and strong relationship with Bayes Kitcher who has made it part of his practice to openly discuss his thoughts and worries with the groups on a regular basis during the check-in and check-out. Hence, it was me that needed to deal with my vulnerability and let go of my fears of failing and losing credibility. During the check-out at the end of the session, I openly expressed my concerns about the ethical issues that might arise, highlighting that aside from participants, the experiences and behaviors cited in the poem might be triggering for possible audience members in recovery. I acknowledged that I was unsure on what was the best way forward and invited the participants to share their thoughts. Following this, we reflected together as a group on how to creatively depict the experiences mentioned in the poem without ‘aestheticizing experiences’ (Sloan 2019) or triggering cues of past behaviors. We collectively therefore, agreed that symbolism and an abstract way for navigating this process was the best way forward. Following from this moment of practice, rehearsals, decisions and discussions of the creative challenges of choreographing extracts of the poem was navigated through a mutually reflexive process, a continual negotiation of what we all felt to be acceptable to be performed and how it would be performed, including how the performance should safeguard audiences that had similar experiences. From this position, we acknowledged that it is our varied abilities to reflect upon experiences and contexts that will help us to recognize which is the best way of dealing with the ethical apparatuses of our practice. In this particular example of practice, the unpredictable response of the participants became the genesis of a moment of relational vulnerability and forced me in particular as an outsider to the group to reconsider my own subjectivity:

When we moved into movement improvisation it was really fascinating to watch how they completely shifted the literal meaning of these phrases from their negative associations into something so beautiful and hopeful. Sharp movements of connecting and disconnecting their bodies, giving us glimpses of their shared histories and collective vulnerabilities. The emotions and behaviors described in the poem, was once their own reality too and is perhaps our duty not to shy away from them. (Research diary 2017)

The experiences of addiction and recovery made the participants who they are and without them it would have been impossible to create such work. Therefore, it became important to

approach ethics as resource and possibility. For the final choreographed material, we used a red rope in which the dancers were trying to untangle themselves to represent the fragility and uncontrollable sense of loss of control experienced in active addiction. The pre-selected phrases from the poem were recorded and presented as fragments in looping through the soundscape that composer Lee Affen created. By incorporating visuals, kinesthetic, and voice overs we were able to symbolically depict the lived experiences depicted in the poem and represented them through performance. The participants' experiences of the harsh reality of addiction found a way to be articulated and revisited through the co-creation of a sequence of movements and images.

Developing a nonlinear, highly symbolic way of exploring life experiences became fundamental to dealing with the ethical dilemmas presented in this project. The creative process was shaped around the understanding that recovery journeys are nonlinear and complex. Participants were encouraged to explore through movement and sound, their transitions from the betwixt and between gray areas of addiction and recovery and share moments of when the 'Dark Night Ended'.

There is something quite intriguing about observing the particular movements that the participants created as a response to Jenny's poem. Frantic, fragile, reaching out and resisting, pushing and pulling. Simultaneous moments of connecting and disconnecting, togetherness and separation, hope and hopelessness. The poetics of fragility. (Research diary, 2018)

Nussbaum (2016) writes of the need for openness to life in coming to terms with vulnerability, fragility, anger and social justice. She highlights the balance between the capacity for vulnerability and ability to trust others in exploring the ethical dimensions of resentment, generosity, anger and forgiveness. This has many resonances with the *Creative conversations* project as throughout it, the relations and bonds that we formed with the participants required us to reconsider what an ethics of care might look like. Jenny's poem 'Life on highs to high on life' expresses the poetics of fragility and urges us to consider how moments of vulnerability in our lives can be the birthplace of belonging, creativity and empathy (Brown 2012). The poetics of fragility is a useful metaphor to further articulate the role that relational

ethics should play in applied theatre. Any consideration of ethics should encompass the idea that we must explore and share the things that make us uncomfortable, our vulnerabilities.

As facilitators, we must lean into the discomfort to make sense of the messy emotions that surround the process of making applied theatre with different groups. In order to build stronger relationships and deliver better applied theatre practice we must embrace and be seen to be vulnerable.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I have worked closely to examine the ethical, methodological and practical implications of the ethics of vulnerability in my work with people in recovery from addiction. Although much of the discussion documented here takes an anecdotal form, it is my hope that some insights offered might propose some useful strategies and analysis of working towards an ethics of vulnerability in applied theatre. Throughout my analysis I argued that a political approach to vulnerability in applied theatre sheds new light on the power dynamics at stake in the process of co-creating performance with marginalized groups. The project *Creative Conversations* demonstrated a mode of ethics that both challenges and extends our understanding of ethical practice in applied theatre, and how we think about vulnerability, lived experiences, and the power of relationality in performance.

Through its improvisational structure and choreography, the project disrupted the normative way of 'telling' a story on stage on how personal accounts can be interrogated in the performance. Both of the aforementioned concepts bring attention to the issues of co-creating work about lived experiences and negotiating the ethical dilemmas that arose in the process with sensitivity and with an acknowledgment of the role of vulnerability.

Throughout this chapter I argued that repositioning vulnerability at the center of applied theatre research and practice, offers a new way of understanding the politics and ethics of representation. In aligning with the ethics and collaborative processes in applied theatre, I therefore assert that what is needed is an adaptive framework of ethics, as a practice that emerges through those interpersonal bonds and are the outcome of our responsible, responsive, and affective engagement with participants and facilitators. In the context of the *Creative Conversations* project, the ethical tensions that arose in the creative process made me reconsider how relational practices of vulnerability connect with power dynamics. The project contributed to a reconsideration of our capacity to engage with variation, in terms of the circumstances in which we each find ways to facilitate a retelling of 'The dark night ends'.

To conclude, my ethical principle is that we need to dismantle and reject negative assertions on vulnerability, particularly those that dictate the power dynamics of the creative process. We need to learn to provide spaces for our shared vulnerabilities to constitute the basis of ethical responsiveness. A reconsideration of the type of exposure associated with the notion of vulnerability in applied theatre, might mean to conceive it positively, namely as a way of being open to the world and to others.

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