28 Being imperfect

Breakin' away from relating competitively in Singapore

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HE WAS HIDING behind the pillar, trying to make himself disappear.

In July 2015, I organised a workshop for five young people at Lakeside Family Service Centre (FSC) in Singapore.[1] The free workshop was positioned as part of the FSC's outreach activities, engaging youths from low-income families in the neighbourhood. Although this was advertised as a 'breakin' x applied theatre' workshop, most participants came because they wanted to learn how to dance.[2] My co-facilitator, Felix Huang, began by teaching us some basic 'toprock' steps.[3] Z stood behind a pillar, hidden from Huang's line of sight. He was struggling with turning while dancing in rhythm. I moved to the back of the room. Z saw me approaching and hugged the pillar, petrified. I danced next to him at a slower pace so he could follow along. Z slowly let go of the pillar and started to try the moves. But every time a new move was taught, Z would vanish behind the pillar again. Extending Majid Rahnema's reflections on participation with the Japanese affect of *wabi sabi*, this case study will suggest that being imperfect with others can facilitate more compassionate ways of relating in a hypercompetitive place.

Dancing like a chicken

For development theorist Majid Rahnema, recognising that our ability to relate to other human beings who cohabit this earth is limited by our own biases and inculcated values is a first step towards being able to participate fully in the wider living world (Rahnema, 2010, p.139). This has resonance with the idea of *wabi*. In *wabi sabi*, *wabi* is an acknowledgement of imperfection despite doing all you can do to treat your guests well. In the context of a tea gathering (*chanoyu*), *wabi* is related to '*owabi*' (おわび) which translates as 'I am sorry for the imperfections of my service' (Sen, 2010, p.59). *Sabi* is related to the idea of quiet 'enjoyment and appreciation of the lingering memory after some beautiful moment had vanished' (p.63). This idea of *sabi* evokes a contemplation of impermanence in quiet stillness. *Wabi sabi* is not an adjective, but an affect evoked in response to the beauty of imperfection that reminds one of the impermanence of life (Kempton, 2018, p.29). This appreciation of the imperfect and impermanent in *wabi sabi* is, I suggest, significant for applied theatre facilitators as we invite participation and listen to our participants.

In critiquing the manipulative way in which participation is used to legitimate foreign control over populations in developing societies, Rahnema suggests that instead of 'empowerment', this encounter between activists and participants of development programmes might be approached as an opportunity 'to live and to relate differently' (Rahnema, 2009, p.143, 145). Rahnema persuasively argues that participatory

relationships, motivated by the activist's desire to empower the participant, often displace existing power relationships by conditioning participants to embrace Eurocentric notions of power as liberatory (Rahnema, 2010, p.135). This is manipulative and nurtures a dependency on knowledge and services provided by the foreign activist instead of enabling the co-creation of new knowledge through the participatory process (p.129, 134). In extending Rahnema's reflections on participation to the facilitator–participant relationship in applied theatre interventions, this case study will explore the possibilities of relating and living differently that emerge from adopting *wabi sabi* as a way of being *with* participants. This appreciation of the imperfect and impermanent might, I suggest, be sustained by a way of living that constantly works towards recognising, and revealing, a new appreciation of our transient lives in the world and new understandings of our relationship to other living and nonliving beings.

After Huang had taught us a couple of freezes, he gathered us to form a cypher.[4] To create a cypher, participants form a tight circle in the centre of the room, and move together, stepping from side to side. As dancers enter the cypher, one by one, the participants continue dancing in sync to maintain the circular formation. The cypher is a place of improvisation where dancers 'instantly incorporate mistakes into a larger framework that re-characterises them as being correct' (Schloss, 2009, p.101). Huang demonstrated how one might take on a character and adapt the dance steps we had learned to fit this character. Although this may appear to distort the moves that one is meant to perform, Huang emphasised that portraying a character consistently through these basic steps is held in high regard, as a creative interpretation that gives each dancer their 'style'. He called his first character Angry Man, and stepped into the cypher with fists clenched and arms tensed, performing the dance moves as if he was fighting for justice. Then Huang performed The Thinker, arms swinging fluidly into various freezes that conveyed being deep in thought. Huang then invited the participants to enter the cypher with their own characters. I looked at Z and he had his arms crossed in front of him. He was not dancing. In fact, he was slowly retreating from the circle. Z kept retreating until his heel hit a stack of plastic storage boxes and he realised he could not step back anymore. I decided to enter the cypher with a character that would reveal how physically awkward and uncoordinated I really was. Entering the cypher with arms flapping like a chicken, I proceeded to do the 'running man'.[5] Z caught my eye and his eyes widened as he tried not to laugh. He chose not to enter the cypher, but Z started to step closer towards the circle and dance in sync with the rest.

The aesthetic of *wabi* has been described by tea master Sen So-oku as a 'minimal, egalitarian beauty … seek[ing] harmony by creating equality … a simple unpretentious beauty with which all participants identify' (Sen, 2010, p.33–34). For Sen, *wabi* represents a world of simple beauty that can be realised by and shared with anyone (p.35). A teacup that is worn with age is more beautiful than an ornate, perfectly painted teacup (p.34). Although I would not describe my running chicken dance as beautiful, there was a sense of *wabi* where my (imperfect) dancing had started to bring us just a little closer, as we experimented with silly and mischievous characters together. The other participants seemed to relax and enter the cypher, one by one.

Next, I invited the participants to create an abstract shape that represents their fears. I asked for a participant to help me demonstrate this. I gently guided the participant into a kneeling position, placing one hand in front of my eyes as the other hand stretched forward, groping while not being able to see. I decided to explain my fears to the participants, to challenge their perception of PhD candidates as people who do not struggle at all with

their studies. For Sen, '*wabi* invites humility. The self is negated by being absorbed in something else' (p.34). The contemplation of a broken (imperfect) vase holding a single bloom that has just begun to wither (impermanence) evokes 'compassion and aesthetic sensibility' that 'could open, for the first time, a new world of possibilities', encouraging 'quiet detachment' from the material desires of this world (p.156). In making my fears (imperfections) apparent to my participants, I problematise the competitive, academically successful self that I am conditioned to present in Singapore.

In Singapore, young people in formal education are presently assessed relative to one another. The Ministry of Education announced in 2018 that it will cease the practice of grading national examinations on a bell curve by 2021, but some parents have argued that 'such a system which measures children's abilities relative to their peers is vital training for the real world' (Jagdish, 2018). This belief in competition has created a hypercompetitive education environment where students learn to relate to their peers as competitors. Students have sabotaged their peers' work and high-scoring students who struggle to cope with the academic stress of maintaining straight As are told, 'if you keep up this way you are going to fail' (Chaw in Davie, 2018). Performing academic excellence becomes a form of competitive bluffing that is used to intimidate the competition. I told the participants that I am a slow writer, a mature student and, often, I feel like I am not smart enough to do a PhD. In making my struggles with academic expectations (imperfections) apparent, I sought to negate the expectation to perform perfection and assert intellectual superiority. I told the participants not to speak their fears out loud. That demonstration of my internal monologue was just to give them an idea of how they might acknowledge their own fears after they've created their shapes. Everyone was paired up, including myself and Huang. We then took turns to create our shapes and share them with the group. Huang was paired with Z.

Huang put both of Z's hands on the back of his head, and guided Z into a position where he appeared to be hunched over with worry. When it was time for Z to create a shape of his fear, Z put one of Huang's hands on his head, and the other hand over his eyes, and said, 'Shy. Got homework, don't want to do. Don't want to study'. One could choose to take Z's words literally, concluding that he is lazy or irresponsible, but I want to suggest that Z's shape of fear reveals a struggle to gain knowledge that remains incomprehensible and elusive, even though he tries. In her research on inequality in Singapore, sociologist Teo Yeo Yenn has noted that low-income families who cannot afford to send their children to preschool have found that not being able to read and write in English by the start of compulsory education at six years of age (Primary One) significantly disadvantages their child's ability to cope with English and Mathematics (Teo, 2017, p.4). This initial disadvantage can negatively impact the child's long-term experience of formal education. Parents who can afford to do so pay for private tuition and accelerated learning enrichment classes.[6] Teachers in formal education feel compelled to teach at a faster pace to engage these students, but this exacerbates the struggle to learn for children from low-income families. This accelerated pace in formal education normalises academic precociousness and validates the purchase of private tuition and enrichment classes in ways that reinforce inequality. Young people from low-income families may mistakenly form an understanding of themselves as not academically inclined. Z has identified studying as his fear. In distancing himself from his fear (by not studying), Z inevitably confirms the negative (undeserved) narratives that are imposed upon young people like him who are unsympathetically dismissed as lazy. They are not lazy, but their fear of studying leads to similar academic outcomes.

'Battling' inequality

Then I invited the participants to 'battle' their fears using the dance moves they had learned. In an interview with Schloss, Brooklyn b-boy Tiny Love asserts that 'battling' is 'not like trying to kill each other. It's more like topping the next one and going to the next level' (Tiny Love in Schloss, 2009, p.108). The *dance battle* can be intensely competitive where dancers learn from each other by mimicking their opponent's moves and trying to perform it even better than their opponent. For his *dance battle* with fear, Z chose a combination of martial arts moves, shadow boxing and then jumping in the air before forcefully landing an elbow inches away from Huang's back. When it came to Huang's turn, Huang chose not to perform any dance moves. Instead, he put one arm around Z's shoulder, as if comforting a friend in need of some encouragement. Huang appeared to have interpreted Z's 'shy' as 'scared' and was moved to allay Z's fears, encouraging Z to persevere in his studies. Z's admission of struggles appeared to somewhat diminish Huang's impetus to compete, evoking a place of openness.

I suggest that it is in being imperfect *with* each other that we might begin to form new understandings of *us* in the world. In this hypercompetitive education landscape of Singapore, I suggest that admitting imperfection might open up non-competitive ways of being *with* each other that might lead towards a new understanding of *us* – one that offers more compassionate ways of living together in this place. For Judith Butler, being vulnerable encourages receptiveness to the experience of another body (Butler, 2015, p.211). In taking the shape of Huang's fears, Z appeared to open himself up to understanding Huang's worries. In doing so, Z may have recognised struggles that he could identify with and responded to Huang's present vulnerability with a shape that revealed his struggle with academic expectations. Being vulnerable, in this exchange between Huang and Z, was expressed as an openness to experience each other's fears. This openness can create moments of possibility where new connections might be formed. This openness is what prompts us to relate differently to each other. It creates new possibilities for being *with* our participants. Z may have perceived Huang as an outstanding, intimidatingly flawless, b-boy and facilitator. Being open to experiencing Huang's fear may have shifted Z's image of Huang, making Huang more relatable, and less intimidating, to Z. This relatability can, I suggest, begin to shift the power dynamics between facilitator and participant beyond the workshop. Z begins to understand that we, as facilitators, are not perfect.

The shape of fear created by Z conveyed a sense of loneliness, of being misunderstood as lazy and alienated for not studying diligently. This image of despair may have reminded Huang of his own struggles with his studies. After the workshop, I asked Huang why he chose to put his arm around Z instead of responding with dance moves. Huang said, 'that move with Z was intended for both him and myself'. I suggest that the loneliness evoked by Z's struggle with his studies prompted Huang to support Z. Instead of the usual admonishment received for not studying, Z found in Huang someone who listened with compassion and understood what it was like to struggle with academic expectations. In being *with* each other differently, we can open up possibilities for living together more compassionately.

Ichi-go ichi-e (–期–会)

Ichi-go ichi-e literally translates as 'one time, one meeting' (Yasuhiko, 1989, p.27), capturing the essence of impermanence in *sabi*. Tea historian Murai Yasuhiko argues that 'if

the aesthetic of *chanoyu* is to be sought in the relationship of people to things; its ethic is to be found in the relationship between people and people' (p.29).[7] The idea of *ichi-go ichi-e* encourages each participant in a tea gathering to cherish each meeting as transient, filled with unique conversations that will never be repeated again. This reminds both host and guest to set aside the preoccupations of the world to be in the moment, with each other. The tea gathering becomes an opportunity to care for each other. As host and guest immerse themselves in mutually attentive conversation, the ephemerality of vainglorious pursuits becomes apparent. Through these interactions, people form new understandings of themselves in the world.

In Ii Naosuke's *Chanoyu Ichi-e Shu* (Collection of Writings for the One-Time Tea Gathering) (1857), the passage 'Seated Alone in Meditation' describes how the host should enjoy a final cup of tea alone, 'reflect[ing] upon the fact that [this *chanoyu*] can never be repeated', after the guests have departed (cited in Varley, 1994, p.188). In similar ways, applied theatre practitioners might reflect on moments where our participants have opened up new understandings of the world, long after the workshop has concluded. Following Rahnema, these interactions can open up new ways of relating that trouble the way we think about participation. On this occasion, Huang and Z found ways of relating non-competitively in that moment where they chose to open themselves to experience each other's struggles. At the end of the workshop, we gathered once again to dance in a cypher. Z did not retreat this time. Instead, he surprised us by somersaulting into the cypher, executing a few kicks and ending with a back flip. Z appeared to have formed a different understanding of himself through his interactions with Huang during the workshop. In this moment that will never be repeated, Z's dance compelled me to live differently, in place. Being imperfect *with* Z has challenged me to relate differently, to participate more compassionately, in this hypercompetitive place called Singapore.

Notes

1 Family service centres are welfare organisations set up to provide a variety of financial assistance, family counselling services and after-school programmes for youths from low-income families.
2 I have chosen the term 'breakin'' instead of 'breakdancing' as the latter term is perceived as a name imposed on the dance by the media (Huntington, 2007, p.54).
3 Felix Huang is a second-generation b-boy, leader of Radikal Forze and founder of Recognize Studios in Singapore. 'Toprock' refers to dance moves executed while in a standing position.
4 A 'freeze' is a pose that marks the end of a dance set (Schloss, 2009, p.86).
5 The 'running man' is a disco move where dancers stretch the hands forward and pull backwards as the knees come up.
6 A 2015 poll of 500 parents found that eight in ten parents send their primary school children to private tuition with 52% saying 'it was to help their children keep up with others' (Davie, 2015). One in two parents with children already enrolled in tuition spend more than SGD$500 (£279) a month, per child, on tuition (Blackbox Research, 2012, p.4). Accelerated learning enrichment classes typically offer more experiential learning and teach one to two terms ahead of that which is assessed in the national curriculum. These classes are typically more expensive than tuition classes.
7 '*Chanoyu*' literally translates as 'hot water for tea' in Japanese. It is understood as 'the Japanese tea ceremony'.

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