Safety and Justice in Our Artistic Spaces

by Nikki Shaffeeullah

What do we do when harm is done? Who is responsible for holding accountable those who do harm, and who is responsible for helping survivors heal? Does healing look like those who are harmed returning to a pre-harm state—and if not, what else can healing look like? Is it possible for those who offend to reintegrate into spaces? Does punishment deter harmful behaviour? Is rehabilitation possible? What does it mean for communities to hold offenders accountable? Can the state be a reasonable proxy for a community?

In the ongoing project to make our artistic spaces safer, more accessible, and more equitable, I am interested in questions that invite us to interrogate the wider systems that enable harm, that protect offenders, and that shame and isolate victims/survivors. This is transformative justice. Unlike other frameworks of justice, transformative justice moves us toward collective liberation. Retributive justice believes that criminality comes down to individual, morally deficient acts, which should be punished, as if punishment deters criminal behaviour. Restorative justice methods encourage victims and perpetrators to collaborate post-harm, to find ways for the victim to heal, to achieve a reconciliation. Transformative justice, however, is not just reactive but preventative. It considers the systemic conditions that enable harm to happen, and works to shift those systems.

Nikki Shaffeeullah, Canadian Stage Director Development Residency, 2018.
Photo by Nathan Kelly

Transformative justice can be an intimidating idea—it carries with it big activist goals, like the abolition of the prison-industrial complex. Big ideas can be scary, and that makes them easy to reject. It's difficult to imagine a world without prisons, especially if we haven't been given the space to imagine what the alternatives could be. We worry that a world without prisons might mean chaos, a world without safety, when in fact transformative justice is deeply invested in safety, in holding offenders accountable, in healing survivors, in minimizing the conditions that enable harm to happen in the first place.

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I believe in transformative justice, and I do want a world without prisons, but I don't see transformative justice and prison abolition only as big social movement projects—they are also a way of being in the world. How can I practise this politic in my relationships, in my day-to-day-life, in my work?

One framework that helps me think about transformative justice in my work leading rooms and spaces—as a facilitator, a theatre director, and an artistic organizational leader—is container-building. This is a concept I learned through Training for Change, a Philadelphia-based capacity-building organization for activists and organizers that believes strong training in group facilitation is vital to building movements for social justice and radical change. In order to foster safety, and thus the conditions for bold, truthful risk-taking, container-building challenges the ways in which the outside status quo might be brought into a room. I've found it useful to adapt this value and practice from direct-education work and apply it to artistic spaces and organizations. In any creative setting, there will be a group dynamic and working culture, which will be created either by the omission or by the intention of its facilitators. "Building a container" is intentionally constructing an environment that holds the group and its work, making space for conflict (which is inevitable), facilitating safety, and encouraging risk-taking.

This article invites a very broad spectrum of questions, asking how people and organizations can position themselves to minimize harm, hold themselves and each other accountable when harm is done, and be open to shifts in processes and culture that create new frameworks for safe, generative, and innovative creativity. While what follows is presented as a list, it is far from a set of tasks to check off, but rather a non-linear set of starting points that I hope might serve to support you and your collaborators in our collective journey to ground artistic work in community, mutual respect, and justice.

This article is for the older white leader who has long been challenged by the younger employees at the arts organization she helms to understand the ways in which their work is not in fact radical but rather serves to maintain the status quo through cycles of tokenizing and minimizing racialized and Indigenous staff, and who is one push away from understanding what they are saying—like really understanding it, in her gut and bones; I hope this helps you take brave next steps. This article is for the cisgender male director quietly reflecting on whether he too might in fact be implicated in the demands of the #MeToo movement; I hope this helps you to better audit your own behaviour. This article is for the BIPOC arts worker who avoids building friendships with non-white coworkers and tries to stay out of equity conversations at their organization, for fear of reprisal from leadership; your need for survival makes sense, but I hope this helps you pave a path toward your peers, for that too is in fact a path to survival. This is for the men of colour and the white women and the cisgender queers whose arts equity activism is driven by a desire to have their own work better seen and understood; I hope this helps you to see that when we centre in our activism those who experience the most social marginalizations, everybody wins. This is for everyone who believes in these progressive ideas on the one hand but on the other feels too disempowered to do anything in your immediate context; I hope this helps you to consider that your choice to indulge your feelings of disempowerment might actually be apathy in disguise, and there is in fact a huge spectrum of ways you can begin to stop being complicit in other people's oppression. This is also for you who have been made to work in a silo—the only one like you in many of the spaces you move through, the one fighting for dignity for yourself and others like you; I hope this helps remind you that you are not alone, that it is not all hopeless.

For everyone: here is a non-exhaustive list of things you can consider in building containers for creative work, from your organizational offices to your rehearsal rooms.

1. Understand your (potential) team

Do an audit of who is and who is not at the table. Are the directors, producers, decision-makers, and those who are doing the hiring representative of the artists and others who are being hired?

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> *Do an audit of who is and who is not at the table. Are the directors, producers, decision-makers, and those who are doing the hiring representative of the artists and others who are being hired? Are you seeking to engage artists and/or produce artistic work coming from different cultural experiences than those who are helming the organization/project?*

Are you seeking to engage artists and/or produce artistic work coming from different cultural experiences than those who are helming the organization/project? And if so, are those in leadership positions culturally knowledgeable about the work you want to produce? What barriers exist that might be keeping out potential players? What have been your outreach strategies and priorities in past hiring and network-building processes, and to whom might those have been inaccessible?

2. Be transparent

In order to invite your collaborators into a process that is clear and honest, take some time to consider what you might not even realize you are being opaque about. Can you reasonably anticipate some concerns people might have—and, in particular, concerns they might not feel empowered to verbalize?

For example: do you or does your group have a history of (and thus a reputation for) primarily working with white artists, and now you are seeking to cast a show with all racialized actors? Are you encouraging Indigenous folks to apply for a mid-level artistic leadership position in your organization when every other staff member is a settler? Have you initiated a conversation about hiring someone and not yet brought up the topic of fees? Are there people in leadership roles who have a real and/or perceived history of sexual misconduct? Has your organization had public-facing past wrongs that you have not publicly accounted for?

An artist may, of course, express interest in working with an organization while still also harbouring concerns about what the experience or their safety therein will be, whether they are being tokenized, or how their participation might be serving to optically legitimize a project that is otherwise ethically murky. How can you set good conditions for building trust and for creating a healthy process?

3. Consider your channels

What are the pathways to power in your project, group, or organization? When collaborators have challenges, concerns, or questions, they need to have multiple places to turn, in case the most obvious channel proves inaccessible. If an actor has an issue with the director but the director is good friends with the stage manager, then the actor might not be empowered to talk to the stage manager. How are channels made known? Are contract artists and workers given information that enables them to talk to a human resources entity or the board of directors?

Does your organization have policies on harassment, anti-oppression, and conflict resolution? Many policies have implications for those who interact with an organization, from senior staff to interns, contract workers to audience members. How are these policies made known and accessible to those who are implicated in them?

One of the many conversations that opened up in the Toronto theatre community after the "Soulpepper four" went public in January 2018 with their testimonials about sexual harassment by Albert Schultz was about the relationship between arts organizations' policies and practices. At the Artists Mentoring Youth (AMY) Project, we took the opportunity to review and revise our policies and reflect on how we put them into practice. For example, our confidentiality and child abuse prevention policies in

(Front to back): Nikki Shaffeeullah, Saba Akthar, Julia Hune-Brown, Jules Vodarek Hunter, and Rachel Penny of The AMY Project.
Photo by Sean Howard

large part pertain to our specific context of youth work—the situations in which mentors must respect the confidentiality of information shared with them by youth and, conversely, the situations in which adult mentors have a legal responsibility to report certain kinds of disclosure to authorities. We struggle with this. We take the safety and well-being of the youth in our community very seriously. We also know that the state agencies with whom youth workers are meant to file reports are colonial bodies that have been active participants in the marginalization of many communities, including Indigenous, Black, newcomer, and LGBTQ2 people.

Taking care to ensure that our policies are known and accessible to all involved is one way we work to manage these competing priorities, our fiduciary responsibilities as a non-profit and registered charity, and our own critical knowledge of how state systems can perpetuate inequity and enact harm. And so, in 2018, we began a practice of leading in-person policy orientation sessions not only with the program leaders and artist mentors we hire but also with the youth participants of our programs. Across all of our programs, AMY Project participants create performances that draw from lived experiences, and by equipping participants with the knowledge of how our policies work, they can have informed consent about what they share and how they share it. We are still in our learning about how to do radical political community-engaged artistic work that can engage models of transformative justice and harm reduction, where our policies are transparent and match our practices, in ways that are compliant with our fiduciary responsibilities to the structures that enable our funding and operations. It's a journey.

4. Provide space to name needs

What mechanisms have you created within your project or organization for people to identify and name what they need to be safe, and to be their best, most effective, most creative selves? Are there practices that are embedded into organizational practices and not just dependent on who the given leaders are on the project and whether they happen to be good listeners and nice people?

Group containers are also always shifting. How can you make space for these conversations and new "beginnings" in processes? How can you make space for these conversations consciously and on an ongoing basis?

It's an excellent investment in any creative process to build time at the beginning and throughout for people to reflect on how they want to show up in the process and be treated in the process. This is useful not just for facilitators/leaders to gather information, but also for all involved to have the opportunity to reflect on their own work and on the ways in which they can be accountable to themselves, to the work, and to each other.

5. Have the will to honour those needs

How do you follow through when people in your project articulate accessibility needs that are not organically being met in the given structure?

Sometimes, leaders fail to prioritize accessibility as projects unfold. Once I worked in connection with a large community arts project where the producers conducted a widespread outreach process and circulated a survey that asked potential participants about creative interests and schedule availability, and also included

Parallel Tracks, a community arts training program for BIPOC artists, directed by Nikki Shaffeeullah, 2017.
Photo by Jamie Milay

a checklist of accessibility needs, such as "child care," "wheelchair-accessible spaces," and "non-gendered bathrooms." They were sincerely interested in being good allies and thus knew to pose these questions, but when participants checked these boxes, they never followed up. The project's activities took place in spaces that had binarized men/women bathrooms, and people had to repeatedly follow up before the producers arranged child care for them (and those who couldn't or didn't follow up repeatedly trickled out of the project).

Another arts organization I worked with had a reckoning around issues of racism in the organization after an external facilitator came in and led an anti-oppression workshop. The white leadership was surprised to hear that many racialized workers and artists felt marginalized, and expressed their desire to listen and do better. In the immediate few days following the workshop, they held a few one-on-one and group conversations with staff and artists in a stated effort to better understand how racism was operating in the organization and its work. However, within a couple of weeks, the next big organizational project picked up momentum, and the organizational leadership ceased this anti-racist reflection. After a few more weeks, it felt as if that workshop and the immediate conversations that followed had never happened.

In order to honour what people have said they need, I invite you to consider three actions:

a. Be willing to think imaginatively and to step outside your comfort zone when considering how to meet needs.
b. Follow up clearly, thoroughly, and sensitively when you cannot offer what people need.
c. Now that these needs are known to you, make a plan for how to consistently consider them in your work. (For example,

I understand the desire to think of an organization or a particular artistic community as a family. But I cannot do that when I am in a leadership role. Saying "we're all family" when in fact I am hiring/contracting people minimizes the power I have to help and hurt careers. We may be collaborators, creators, friends, a community, but ultimately we have professional commitments to each other, and we cannot let the sometimes-familial work culture mask that reality.

now that you know there are audience members in your network who require American Sign Language interpretation, how will you structure future production budgets to make room for this expense? Now that you know that transgender arts workers are experiencing transphobia in their workplace, how can you start shifting the culture to be a more resolutely trans-positive space?)

6. Dispel the myth of family

This is one of my favourite points, because it is at once so obvious and so challenging. One of the reasons I love working in the arts the way that I do is that I get to work with people I care about and respect, working to make the world a better, more just, more beautiful place. Many of the people I work with truly feel like chosen family, and are people I have had and want to have lifelong collaborative relationships with. I understand the desire to think of an organization or a particular artistic community as a family. But I cannot do that when I am in a leadership role. Saying "we're all family" when in fact I am hiring/contracting people minimizes the power I have to help and hurt careers. We may be collaborators, creators, friends, a community, but ultimately we have professional commitments to each other, and we cannot let the sometimes-familial work culture mask that reality. When you call yourself a family, you invoke familial tropes like unconditional love and trust. If you take for granted that trust exists on your team, then you won't work to earn it. People who hold power need to be intentional and ongoing about building and maintaining the trust of their creative communities.

7. Dispel the myth of gossip

Toronto-based essayist and poet Emma Healey writes, "A story like this is a password. Once you say it out loud, doors start to open." In her 2014 viral article, "Stories like Passwords," Healey describes an experience of being at a Banff Centre residency and having a revelatory experience of connecting to other women through each of their stories about sexual assault—previously silenced and driven underground, but now spoken, forging paths, to each other.

Conversations happening in hushed whispers should not be universally dismissed—or condemned as gossip. Many of these conversations are *driven* underground: when the mainstream of a work culture fails to provide adequate and accessible channels for communicating problems, people are forced to process their experiences of harm (racism, sexual assault) elsewhere. If this happens in your organization or in your project, resist the urge to feel attacked or marginalized by the fact they have been speaking in hushed tones and have not spoken to you directly, and instead ask not "Why are they talking?", but why you haven't made it possible for them to talk to you directly.

8. Don't cling to your own marginalization

Don't cling to your own marginalized identities to sidestep the ways you might be upholding and reproducing systemic oppression. A gay white person can still be racist. In fact, a racialized person with their own lived experience of racism can still enact the harm of institutional white supremacy. A woman working in human resources might fall back on an organization's convoluted policies to avoid meaningfully supporting a fellow woman who has survived a harmful experience of sexual misconduct at the organization—in that instance, the fact that the human resource worker is a woman does not erase her complicity in a misogynistic system.

Acknowledge the power you have to hire, fire, renew, engage, criticize, challenge, make space, and take away space. Minimizing the agency you do in fact have only serves to perpetuate the status quo.

On a wider level, I desperately want all of us in the arts industry to stop citing the fact of working in our resource-scarce field as a site of marginalization. Sure, you can speak to that when you are lobbying government and funders for more financial support, but, no, please do not cite your own lack of funds when we are speaking to each other or thinking of how our work intersects with wider communities. Making art in our neoliberal economy is hard—that is a fact. We are overworked and underpaid and do so much for so little. Do not use this as an excuse for not investing the time to make our spaces safe and more inclusive. Remember that scarcity hurts us all, and in fact especially hurts those of us who are made most vulnerable by the intersecting systemic oppressions that coexist with capitalism.

9. Allow time

Western middle-class culture has such a fidelity to tightly packed schedules and often forgets that this is indeed a social construct and not natural law. This relationship to time has its advantages—an obvious one is how it can enable capitalistic productivity. It is a manifestation of many polite Canadian norms, including deference to authority and conflict avoidance: we create work plans that favour the creation of a product that will, above all, fulfill the desires of those who have high status (funders, boards of directors, senior artistic staff); in the process, we may agree to ideas or activities that we may not truly understand or agree with, for fear of creating uncomfortable, time-wasting conflict. As a consequence, we create processes that make use of hierarchical decision-making

(l–r): Morgan Davis, Nikki Shaffeeullah, Destiny Laldeo, and Kama La Mackerel. The AMY Project in rehearsal, 2017.
Photo by Bessie Cheng

(as opposed to, say, consensus-based or democratic decision-making) and are inattentive to the needs of those in low-ranking positions. Boundaries are crossed, consent is not freely given, and strong ideas that are born through the navigation of conflict and meeting of diverse viewpoints are never incubated.

Importantly, time gives space for things to emerge. With a no-room-for-error, tightly packed schedule, we end up having to choose between the quality of the process (let's shift gears for thirty minutes and address this conflict, to see how this actor can feel safer in this scene, etc.) and the quality of the product (we must finish table work by the end of today, or we'll be behind schedule). In those cases, product nearly always wins. Allowing time for emergent conversations and processes is a harm-reduction measure.

10. Budget for safety

Yes. There are costs associated with building space for safety, harm reduction, equity, diversity, inclusion. If you consider these values as part of the core of your work, then they deserve being budgeted for. Theatre producers believe having a lighting design is a core part of putting on a production, and therefore they budget for a lighting designer. We budget for what we consider a priority.

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Safe working cultures are creative and generative working cultures. Doing things in a safer way does not mean doing them without discomfort or without risk. On the contrary, it is when we know we are fundamentally safe that we can step into discomfort and take our best creative risks. Let's continue to find ways to enable justice by transforming the systems and cultural norms that dictate what justice looks like. Let's invite honesty, minimize shame, encourage risk-taking, acknowledge conflict, and hold each other, and ourselves, accountable for our actions.[1]

Note

1 I presented an earlier version of the ideas in this article as a talk at Generator's January 2018 #UrgentExchange event, "Who Is a Monster? What Makes a Monster? Am I a Monster? #MeToo What Next?," produced in partnership with the Toronto Fringe Festival.

Work Cited

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About the Author

Nikki Shaffeeullah is a theatremaker, facilitator, equity worker, and community-engaged artist. She has been Artistic Director of the Artists Mentoring Youth (AMY) Project since 2015. Past work includes serving as Editor-in-Chief of *alt.theatre* magazine from 2012 to 2016. Nikki believes art should disrupt the status quo, centre the margins, engage with the ancient, dream of the future, and be for everyone.