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Howard Gwynne

Creativity and innovation tangled up in blue

By Annie Talvé

“I don’t remember what I did before and whether I can do it again,” Cate Blanchett confesses to her husband Andrew Upton in the behind-the-scenes documentary, *In the Company of Actors*, which tracks the Sydney Theatre Company’s tour of Hedda Gabler in New York during 2006. Andrew reassures her that she’ll know exactly what to do when the time comes.

When Andrew Denton interviewed Helen Mirren on his show *Enough Rope* in 2007, he seemed as surprised as I was to hear her say: “When I am not acting, I always forget how to do it.”

Stephen Spielberg gets the *spielkus*, a Yiddish word meaning nervous stomach, at the prospect of making a new movie. In conversation with Andrew Denton in 2005, he describes the ‘humbling experience’ of stage fright before every new undertaking: “I don’t have all the answers and thank goodness I don’t, because the process of making a movie is a process of discovery.”

Every situation is different; it’s never a perfect replica of the past, as Cate Blanchett knew only too well. And, because every moment is new, it calls for a creative response. That can unsettle us though; there are unknowns and unknowables over which we have no immediate

control. At times it’s enough to give us all a dose of *speilkus*.

By its very nature, creativity is tangled up in the subjective. It is out of our subjectivity that the creative impulse emerges. All the tricks, tools, techniques, structures, policies and plans at our disposal provide a necessary medium but originality of thought is fuelled by our subjective experience.

When the affective mind is stirred by an idea, an unexpected connection or strong expressive urge, there is a corresponding visceral response – a sense of movement, a sense of hope, a spark.

Creativity and innovation.... subjective/objective

continued....

This interplay of subjective/objective, poses a dilemma for the actor or architect or film director or innovator. The language and schematics of business are generally instrumental and shrouded in a veneer of objectivity and rationality, with a long lineage of triumphant hegemony over the 'inferior' subjective states of feeling, tactility and visual perception. Important as they are in their own domain, the frameworks and assumptions of the analytical world are left wanting when it comes to understanding and describing the unique non-linear logic of the subjective creative process. Yet some kind of language is needed to negotiate the terrain between the inner and outer worlds.

The greenhouse

British creativity consultants, What*ff*, use the analogy of a greenhouse to describe the kind of behaviour and environment organisations need to nurture if they want to turn creativity into innovation. They differentiate the 'greenhouse', a place where young ideas can be temporarily protected and developed, from the frenetic emergency room (ER) culture that permeates organisational life today.

In striking a bargain between creative design and business outcomes, it is often the greenhouse that suffers. Anxiety can permeate the process of translating creative ideas into tangible innovative

solutions. The client or project leader is often anxious about how they will be seen by their team and their peers, especially if the project strays 'off target' and fails to 'deliver' concrete outcomes. The creative consultant is often anxious about meeting the expressed needs of the client, even when they are unrealistic, not well thought through, and sometimes proscriptive. Team members are often anxious about what will be subjected to – will the innovation process put them on the spot, be embarrassing, or be deadily boring?

Anxiety, as we all know from experience, is a big barrier to being fully present. Our minds do somersaults, rehearsing the endless possibilities of what could go right or wrong. Anxiety can often trigger anti-group behaviours – unconscious and anarchic, the anxious feelings need to be displaced onto something or someone else.

It's tempting to avoid taking risks, to play it safe, give what is expected, and conform to type. Pushing uncomfortable feelings aside and taking refuge in the familiar transactional world of everyday business life, usually produces the opposite of innovation - more of the same.

“Anxiety, as we all know, is a big barrier to being fully present”

Annie Talvé

Sculptures by the
Sea, Sydney
photos by Howard
Gwynne



The shock of the new

“We need to nurture revolutionary thinking to create evolutionary futures,” writes Juliana Engberg, Artistic Director for the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne.

Elastic minds and incongruous collaborations, entered into with curiosity and trust, are just what we need to tackle problems that have no obvious solution, not to mention the complex challenges humanity now faces. Engberg continues:

“We need to become more haptic: to feel our bodies and test our perceptions. If we are to keep our minds and bodies agile, we must give ourselves the chance to deal with the incongruent and encounter the cognitive conflict that gives rise to thinking. It’s what I call positive apprehension: that moment of radical misunderstanding that leads us to use our brains again. Art is great at creating these moments of arresting, conflicted thoughts.”

Don’t know, do you?

Perhaps Engberg’s ‘positive apprehension’ is similar to what Zen Master, Suzuki Roshi, called the ‘don’t know’ mind. Some call it the ‘beginner’s mind’. It’s that scary but electrifying place from which you see, hear and feel the moment unfolding just as it is. The



“We need to nurture revolutionary thinking to create evolutionary futures”

Juliana Engberg

bare present, without the conventions of knowing and describing and categorising that will soon step in to mark out the illusory line between self and other, subjective and objective. It’s a place of discovery, if you can hold your nerve, if you can trust, like Helen Mirren, Stephen Spielberg and Cate Blanchett seem to do, that somehow you’ll be able to do it all again.

This space from which spontaneity and magic emerge, this creative impulse, is available to us all if we slow down enough to let the greenhouse do its job.

In the scheme of things, with deadlines to be met and money to be made, does this attention to the present really matter? Yes, absolutely, if we want to be truly creative. Our hyper-doing,

outcomes-driven corporate cultures have tended to relegate Being to the fringes of what is allowable. Space to think, feel, invent and play, or admit that you ‘don’t know’, is often cast as the antithesis of ‘performance’, a waste of precious time.

Life is full of constraints and possibilities. Constraints are often great, they energise and galvanise us into action. What is needed in many business environments is not another constraint, it’s a more sophisticated understanding of and sensitivity to the creative process, which really means a more sophisticated understanding of the human mind and heart.☪



Tangled up in blue

Every situation is different; it’s never a perfect replica of the past....

What is sisu?

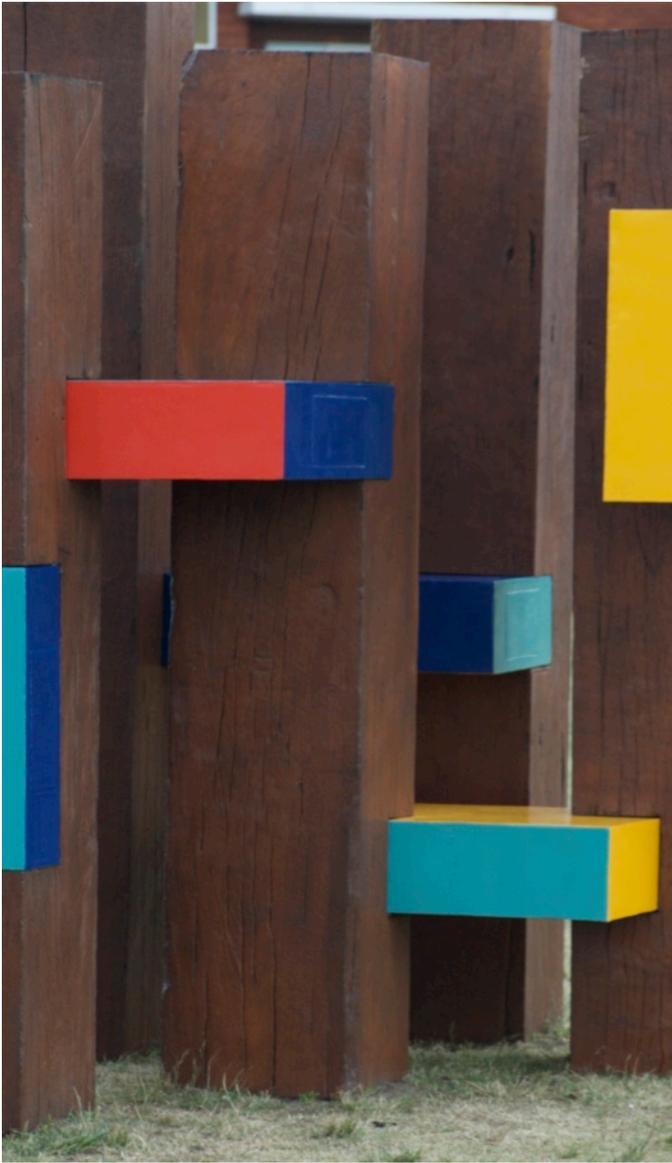
“Yes, *sisu*, that untranslatable, indispensable Finnish concept, a combination of physical, mental and spiritual stamina, a going inwards to a core of strength in the face of solitary adversity.”

‘The Arctic Oz’ by Guy Rundle, *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 23, 2008

Project Sisu explores how the quality of quiet determination, a solitary commitment to keep on going, can be a foundational platform for a creative, self crafted life. After all, if we

take away the cultural conditioning, the specificity of place and time, important as they are, there is still the human dilemma of meeting the innumerable challenges every life presents. And a self crafted life presents more than the average, because those of us who pursue it, stubbornly refuse to conform to the normative models of how one should be and what one should aspire to in order to be acceptably human.

Carving out space to live a creative life in the manifold ways in which creativity can be expressed and lived, requires a lot of *sisu*.☪



“When I am not acting, I always forget how to do it...”

Helen Mirren



Let yourself go Blurring boundaries between work & play

One day, out of the blue, I got a call from a business looking for something new to do on their annual ‘away days’.

Like an architect pining for a client adventurous enough to fuse the aesthetic with the functional, I hoped that this might be a client I could go on a creative journey with.

I was hesitant at first, expecting the dead hand of ER business culture to reassert itself. Then, after a couple of meetings, I got curious. Once I got curious my mind started to come up with possibilities and then a design started to take shape and then I was eager to test it out. But then I wondered whether my design was too far-out, too playful, too weird.

After untying some of these mental knots, I thought, okay, I’m going to do this as authentically as I possibly can; I’m going to start from the subjective experience of everyone in the room, including me, and work outwards. It turned out to be a good fit, we clicked, and the anxiety visibly

diminished on both sides. There was room to move and space to dance.

And, to my surprise, it was dance that opened up a transcendent moment. After an intense session, just before we broke for lunch, I spontaneously reached for a CD, put it on and turned up the volume. I started to dance and everyone joined me. There we all were, for three minutes or so, in our own joyful way, sharing an unforced, unplanned, unrepeatable, evanescent moment dancing to the strains of Stacey Kent singing the Fred Astaire hit, *Let Yourself Go*. And then we all laughed.

*Let yourself go, relax
Got yourself tied up in a knot
The night is cold but the music’s hot.....*

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Sydney Scene
Photo: Howard Gwynne

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