

Fuelling Change, S2 | E1

How to Begin?

[music in the background]

Kate: Hello and welcome to Fuelling Change. This special three episode series of podcasts was recorded live as a series of conversations on the theme of values and ethics in cultural production. Whilst I was on a visiting fellowship with the Cultural Programme at Oxford University and Hertford College, the podcasts are produced by the Cultural Programme and Fuel Episode one.

How to Begin? With Farooq Chaudhry OBE, Deborah Frances-White and Professor Eero Vaara live from the Story Museum.

[music fades]

Thank you to everyone joining us live at The Story Museum in Oxford. I am your host for today. Uh, my name is Kate McGrath. My pronouns are she her, and I'm a white woman in my forties [00:01:00] with long brown hair wearing a white top and grey trousers.

To introduce myself a little: I am Artistic Director and Chief Executive of Fuel, a producing company, which I co-founded in 2004. Uh, we produced new live performance, um, exploring the big questions of our times for audiences across the UK and beyond. I'm also a trustee of several arts organisations, um, including Clore Leadership,

What Next, and ARTCRY.

We live in a world full of evolving ethical questions and dilemmas. Our cultural life reflects the world we live in, and arts and culture can create spaces to debate ethics and explore values systems through history. It's always been this way, but in the fraught and divided world we live in today, how do cultural leaders approach ethical dilemmas?

What place do values have in navigating decision making? How do cultural leaders manage conflicts or [00:02:00] tensions when they arise? How can vision and values align. In this session I'm particularly interested in talking about the role values might play in setting the course towards a new vision.

There may be many routes to the same destination, but for me, the journey or process or the way that we do things is as important as what we do.

And more than that, it affects what we do. I am intrigued as to how leaders might start conversations about values set up organisations with ethical processes, and, um, if we have time, how those foundations might contribute to creating more enduring organisations, breaking new ground and delivering against purpose while staying true to core values.

I'm absolutely thrilled to have three brilliant and really very different speakers here today to talk about these questions, each of whom is overqualified, uh, for the task at hand and brings their own experience [00:03:00] and expertise. So here's how it's gonna work, I'm going to introduce each of the speakers and then ask them some questions about their specific experience and ideas around these themes, and we'll then move to a discussion,

so off we go. Um, Farooq Chaudhry, in 1999, Farooq met a young gifted dancer and choreographer, Akram Khan, and together, a year later, they formed Akram Khan Dance Company, 25 years on it is now undisputably one of the foremost innovative dance companies in the world. They say, through the meeting of worlds, we invite people to see, dream and reflect on the beauty and complexity of being human.

Farooq is also Artistic Director of Fengling Productions whose vision is a world where East Asian stories enrich British and global artistic narratives, deepening connections through the art of dance. Farooq says what he's learned over the years is that values and ethics are so shaped by context, culture, and life experiences.

He's well known for his integrity and commitment to [00:04:00] his work, and it's a real pleasure to have you here with us today. Can I ask you to introduce yourself? Yeah. Hi, I'm, I'm Farooq Chaudhry. He, him, um, I'm a 65-year-old. Uh, male with no hair of Pakistani heritage. I'm wearing glasses, I have a white shirt and blue trousers.

I've been told I look a lot younger than I am, but you know, I've got friends who want opportunities from me. So, uh, thank you Farooq, um, I'm gonna hop, uh, along to the end and I'll introduce our next. Guest, Deborah Frances-White, best known as the host of the Guilty Feminist Podcast, and also a playwright, screenwriter, comedian, and Sunday Times bestselling author.

Her brand new book, *Six Conversations We're Scared to Have*, is about the fragmentation of the left in a polarised world and what we can do about it. In addition, I've known her for over two decades as we went to university here together in Oxford last century she tells me, uh, please welcome Deborah Frances-White.[00:05:00]

Yes, late 20th century Oxford scholars, we aren't now. Um, but it feels like no time has passed at all, and Kate hasn't aged a day, annoyingly. Um, I am she, her and I, well, I'm not, she her, my pronouns are she, her, and I'm five foot nine. I'm in a rather fetching navy blue velvet jumpsuit. I have brown hair and it's not for me to compare

myself to Catherine Zeta-Jones that's for others. Um, I, that, that's if you are, if you are listening at home, that's a joke. Thank you very much. And finally, Eero Vaara is Professor in Organisations and Impact and Academic Director of Management on the DPhil programme at the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, Eero is one of the world's leading experts in discursive and narrative perspectives on strategic and institutional change, and has published in all the leading journals in management and organisation studies and held leadership positions in journals and academic associations.[00:06:00]

Here Eero's work on participation in strategic decision making. For example, open strategy or purpose work and legitimacy struggles in strategic change is especially relevant in this context. Eero says that critical perspectives have been important for him throughout his career. Um, and in recent work on the stigmatisation of the tobacco industry, the First Nations fights for their rights or the Sicilian Mafia, he's also been interested in how to involve others and make better decisions together as in open strategy, which we will come on to.

Can I, can I ask you to introduce yourself?

Eero: So I'm Eero Vaara and it's he and him and, um, I'm in a pink shirt and blue trousers and I was just told that I have a Finnish face, and I know that I have a Finnish accent. And did you know that Finland is the happiest country in the world? So thanks for having me.

Kate: Thank, thank you so much for the, for the great introduction. Great. Can I ask you all to get your own voices and noise in the room and just give a warm welcome to all our guests please.[00:07:00]

Thank you very much. Farooq: thank you for being here. Um, I should share that we have a special connection around the beginnings of new adventures. In

2003, when I was thinking about setting up a production company with my colleague and friend Louise Blackwell, the company which would become Fuel, we came to see you to ask your advice.

you were, and I realised three years into Akram Khan Company, but it felt like you were millennia ahead of us, your advice was inspiring in its clarity. I remember being somewhat daunted by the anecdote that you'd mortgaged your house to set up the company as I didn't have a house to mortgage at the time, but I decided to take it metaphorically and, uh, commit everything we had and we did.

Values are clearly really important to Akram Khan and to Fengling Productions. Um, Akram Khan Company lists their values as courage, curiosity, caring, collaboration and connection, [00:08:00] and Fengling as curiosity, creativity, connection, compassion, and collaboration. You can see the connections and it's not just an alliteration.

So to kick us off, I would love to ask you about how to begin. If you cast your mind back to starting those companies one in 2000, one in 2021, I believe, how did you approach thinking about values in your early planning?

Farooq: Thank you, Kate. The good thing is 22 years later, I know a lot less, so there's a good thing you didn't come for advice today.

You know, that's something I'm learning as I get older, if I'm gonna be, to really honest, I don't think I was thinking of values at the time when we started things. I think there was, there was an obsessive ruthless sense of focus about fascination to create something and to do it collaboratively.

And in, in both situations. I started with Akram. Back in, back in 2000, it was this incredible, fun, uh, conversation in the Royal Albert Hall [00:09:00] where we, there was this just a chemistry created and that kind of ignited something between us. And there was this sort of relentless pursuit to bring that conversation, that spark of that conversation into something.

And that was to work to make dance works, which were like, um, inspired by his upbringing, um, as a kathak dancer, but also as, as a person who learned contemporary dance. So really because we were people of different worlds, we were seeking to build a connection between those, so connection is, is one of our values, is really important.

And equally so with Fengling - but I don't, I don't think, I was seeking values, I was seeking purpose. I was seeking to create something and, and now it feels to me that. I think values are unbuilt in us. You know, they, there's something we don't have to talk about. There's something we embody and something people feel, and I think that's when they're the strongest.

I'm always very aware that when we are creating artworks and recently there's been a little bit of a habit of trying to sell the message in the work on, on [00:10:00] your forehead rather than let it sit in the DNA of the work itself. And then it can be felt. So there's a danger that the value drives the work rather than the work drives the, the value.

Um, but honestly, I didn't have a clue. I mean, I was young, fearless, I was determined we wanted to create something magnificent together, you know, at that time, and I don't want to get into the politics of it, but, you know, I, I had to, you know, ignite the industry doorways to get into that space.

Both of us did. It was a time when, um, as people of colour, it was difficult to find those opportunities. But also the world was becoming really highly globalised. So there was an acceptance of new ideas and perspectives in a way that hadn't existed prior to that time. So we came on a wave, we came on a wave of transformation, global transformation, and that suited our needs.

So, um, I've avoided that thing. I just, I think we create values now and it's that funny thing about strategy. You know, I think someone at Clore [00:11:00] once said, strategy is that thing where you look back to all the bits that made sense, join them up, and you look like you were really clever and you knew what you were doing.

But the truth is, we were just naive and fearless, and we just followed our guts. And, and I think in the end of the day, I think you, you become what you believe, not what you want. And I think it's the belief that shaped us over the years. And, and therefore you begin to understand your values by being as true to yourself as possible.

Kate: Brilliant. Brilliant. Thank you. And, and what a, what an achievement, uh, you, you've touched on this, so I want to dig in a little bit more, but you talked about how important context and culture is as well. Um, can you talk a little bit more about how you see that shaping your values? You talked, for example, about the time that you started at Akram Khan Company and how some things about the context felt differently then.

I'm interested in how that manifests in your practice as a producer particularly, and maybe in a more tangible way, how do your values now that you recognise them, show up in a, in an average [00:12:00] working day?

Farooq: Yeah. Oh my gosh, you know, you are a producer, you know, it's, it is the thing where one eye's on the art, one eye's on the money, and you have this third eye, which is the context in which everything takes shape.

And, you know, that context is a fluid thing, you know? And one thing I've learned is that, there is the pursuit of a truth where there is no such thing as a single truth. We live in a very pluralistic world, and so understanding, you know, the differences and that's why, in our, uh, vision statement, at Akram Khan can we talk about embracing complexity 'cause we're so obsessed with making things understandable. And I think that also then diminishes values because they vibrate within you rather than they need to be expressed. I, again, I, all I can say is that in my day-to-day work, you know, I, stay true to how I feel and I'm driven by those, those, those emotions.

But, you know, it's very easy that, you know - I work in China, I work in South Asia, I worked recently in Saudi Arabia. [00:13:00] I've worked in Britain. I worked with Americans, I worked with French, and you work with so many different, and there are such different, um, pathways to finding particular truths in projects and the way people see the world.

And so I, and I think it's really what I've learned over that is not to end game, not to think there is a, there's a pursuit of something, but it's, it's being interconnected with things that allow those values to again, thrive and be genuine and, and to be felt. Um, what was the other part of the question again?

Well, sort of day to day really, how does it show up when you are, do you find yourself thinking, hmm, I really need to have a, have a think about that decision or that choice. What do you have? I think it's really hard living a life where you're faking it. Right. It's exhausting when you're not being yourself and you're not saying things that may be uncomfortable.

And too often we're trying to get out of uncomfortable spaces, right? Because it's difficult to be in conflict or in tension [00:14:00] with others. But I feel like when I'm being true to myself, I'm prepared to stay in that uncomfortable space for longer to find a resolution or solution. And I know just by behaviour alone when I'm being, my values are being.

You know, are kind of driving me rather than trying to please someone or trying to, trying to just avoid an uncomfortable truth or an inconvenient situation. So it's just something, you know, something that I really feel rather than something I know. I'm, I, I'm very intuitive and instinctive about things and I know, and I get really annoyed with myself when I've done something and I come out and say you are not being yourself.

And I felt I either was a coward, or I wanted to please someone, or I wanted to avoid an uncomfortable truth, and that I don't like. So in a way, sorry. Long, long answer. Um, it's not that I know when it's there. I know when it's not there.

Kate: Yeah, it's a, it's a, it is a good answer. And there's [00:15:00] lots more I wanna ask you. So we'll come back to some of those things. I'm gonna just bring in some of, of the other guests. So, Deborah, the theme today is how to begin. Uh, so I wondered if you could share how you, if at all, you think about values or ethics when you're starting out, whether that's launching the Guilty Feminist podcast, writing a nonfiction book, like Six Conversations, or writing a novel or a play.

Deborah: So, when I started the Guilty Feminist, I remember saying to Bridget Christie, she said to me - do you know, do you guys all know Bridget Christie? She's a comedian, she's a feminist comedian. And she said, she also wrote a brilliant, brilliant, brilliant TV show, um, comedy drama, uh, , called it's about the menopause, um, the name will come to me in a second, but she, she's very brilliant, and she said to me, you'll never really truly find your audience until you say the thing.

You are too scared to say. And I said, well that's right for you Bridget. 'cause what you really wanna say is strident feminism. And you, [00:16:00] you are so sure of everything. And what I felt was, I dunno if I'm doing it right, I knew I wanted to be involved. It was 2015 and, all the conversations I was having when I'd meet a girlfriend for lunch, instead of it being our love lives, our careers, our disappointments, suddenly we're about the injustice of the system and it just like a gear shift inside of us.

And I really noticed it and I, I said, but I don't know if I'm doing it right. I haven't learned yet. I just don't really know, like. She said, well say that. And I thought, well, yeah, I'll get kicked outta the club. The first thing that we said was we called the show. I had a co-host at the time and the first thing that we said was we did a kind of confessional, so I'm a feminist, but one of the thing, first things I confessed 'cause we're comedians, we were doing one-liners, we,

I'm a feminist, but one time I went on a women's rights march, popped into a department store to use the loo.

While I was in there, I got distracted trying out face creams and when I came out the march was gone and I thought, oh, there everyone's gonna go you're not a real feminist. But they didn't like [00:17:00] thousands and thousands of women especially. Uh, and other people were like, oh, thank god you've said that

'cause I've also gone to the pub during a march and thought I'd go back and never did. And so, uh, really. I started the podcast to look at what I wasn't getting right and said to the audience, I think it was one of, I think the reason it took off, it was one of the first podcasts where instead of me being the expert, I was saying, I'd like to learn about this with you.

And my audience pretty quickly taught me stuff that I didn't know about, I didn't really understand about intersectionality. i.e the intersections of privilege and oppression. You know, I didn't know, you know, that I wasn't being necessarily representative with my guests in the right way or, um, and again, right way.

What does that mean? Uh, discuss. But , I, I learned so much from my listeners. And I evolved as a human being, as a feminist throughout through it. But I got to a point in the last few years where I started to feel I'm not being true [00:18:00] to myself anymore. So exactly what Farooq was talking about, I'm going through the motions and I am not saying that, but when I was young, when I was 14, my family joined a religious cult, and I got out of that in my mid twenties on my own, and it was really, really difficult to do.

And I felt I was in a cult again. I felt like the world had become a series of intersecting cults where there were certain things feminists could say and couldn't say, and it depended what kind of feminist you were, that you could say these things and you had to kind of, um, be you. You got to be endorsed by your community by agreeing with everything, and if you had any questions, you are immediately in that camp.

And I just thought, I am not enjoying this anymore because I have some thoughts outside this orthodoxy. And I know that friends who are in that camp who I've now don't speak to as much because they see me as in this camp, also have questions and doubts. And so I thought, I went to my editor who'd published, uh, the Guilty Feminist book and [00:19:00] said.

I want to do a book saying, I think we're all in a series of cults and we need to start thinking differently and saying what we're doubting and, and having better conversations. And bless her. She said, yeah, let, okay, let's do it. So that's what the book *Six Conversations We're Scared to Have* is about. And in doing that, I did a lot of research because in a nonfiction book, if you get something wrong.

Like the stats around prisons or you quote someone in a way that's not what was their intention. You are publishing misinformation, you are contributing to the problem that we have. The fear I had about that book, that book took four years to write. Partly 'cause I kept paying academics to look at it and trawl through it.

And did I get this right? What do you think? It was almost like I couldn't release it. 'cause of the fear was so huge. Now I'm writing a novel. Can I tell you the relief? Because a novel is fake [00:20:00] news. That's what it is. It's called a novel 'cause it's new. It's a fake news. It's, it's, and uh, it's a historically, um, it's a historical novel and it's about real people and it's set in the Twenties and.

Anything that is in there that is of substance, that's real. I do a lot of research. I love doing research, but I go, when people read this, I'll be able to tell them that's real, you know, and anything else that I dunno about, can't find in the research or. I don't even have to research I don't make it up. And nobody is gonna go "But that's not true!"

Because it's a novel!

So the joy and the relief, and I, I wrote a play that actually I'm going out to, I should be in Perth now, but I've stayed for you. Don't feel guilty. Um, uh, to go out to do a play that I was on at Chichester, hopefully will be on the West End, it's called. *Never Have I Ever*.

And um, that play. Do other people know about writing plays? It's absolutely amazing because any of the thoughts that you've got that you think, I'm not sure about that, but I do think it in some ways, or I have, [00:21:00] this has occurred to me. Just put it in the mouth of a character then it's not your fault. It's, it's like, no, but he said that definitely wasn't me.

Um, I don't think that at all. Uh, so you can just pop out views, thoughts. The worst thing you think, put it in his mouth, don't like him anyway. I mean there's, it's an unbelievable relief to write drama or to write fiction on the page because you don't have the same responsibility. However, there are other ethics, which maybe we'll go into later.

Kate: Yeah. Great. I mean, look, there's, again, there's, there's a lot in all of that and, and loads to, to unpick and ask you more about, I just wanna pick up on, on something which, uh, relates to this idea of kind of, uh, fiction and nonfiction, which is, uh, back when I knew you, improv comedy was a big part of your process.

Deborah: Yeah. And in Six Conversations you talk about I guess tools to have difficult conversations. In particular, I'm just interested if you could talk a little bit more about [00:22:00] how you kind of draw on creative processes to think about digging into ethical questions. This is the interesting thing: progressive people tend to have -the progressive side of the argument, opposed to, you know, the right side of the argument-

The, the more left wing side of the argument, we have... Left wing people, left wing communities tend to have the artists, the writers, uh, often the, often the academics tends to be very progressive. We can see right now Donald Trump really coming down hard on Harvard and other academic places and um, Kennedy Center, that kind of thing, right?

But when it comes to political messaging, all we do is tell people off. I think the right, the right wing have become really strategic in storytelling, especially in the last ten, twenty years. If you think about Make America Great again, that is a four word story. [00:23:00] America was great. America is not now great.

America can be great again. That's a three act story in four words. Um. What's the, what was the Brexit one? It was um...

[Someone shouts from the audience: Take Back Control].

Deborah: Take Back Control. Take Back Control. I knew it was three words. Something to do with control. Take Back Control. does that imply? Three words. We had control. We do not have control, but we can have it again, we can take it back.

We can be the hero of that story. In Make America Great Again, that's really, tick this box and then Donald Trump will make it great again, Take Back Control - I think even gives us more agency. The right are incredible at telling stories where it comes to politics and we are great at something like Adolescence, which tells the story of a young man getting sucked into the manosphere and feeling empathy for him, but also looking at the, the, the terrible fallout on the violence against a young girl and a violence and the violence, the structural violence against the community, and then his family.

And we're really good at [00:24:00] that. But if you look at the rhetoric on social media, if that was a real young man, would he have that same sympathy? Would we tell that story sympathetically on the left? I don't think we would. So I think we have to start analysing how we are using storytelling in our political messaging if we do not want

frankly Reform to take over this country. If we do not want the far right to sweep across the world, we have to get more strategic and we have to embody our ethics in our debates, our ethics of kindness. We have to model compassion. We have to model the world that we say we want. I do not think you can create a compassionate world using uncompassionate means.

I think cancel culture...

There has been, it is a very complicated conversation,

There is some value, of course there's been value in the Me Too movement

but when it's the only tool in our box. [00:25:00] I question it, I really question it because what society are we building and how are we building it?

And what tools are we using? Are we modeling the, the society that we say we want to live in? So I think all of that is, very juicy to unpack.

Kate: Amazing. Thank you. There is a lot there. Um, uh, and I hope all of you who are, who are thinking of questions out there, remembering them as we go, um. Eero, thank you for joining us.

Um, I wondered if we could start, um, with your work on open strategy. So we've had some conversations about leadership and processes. Um, so for those who aren't familiar, could you tell us what you mean by open strategy and if you can, what the connection might be to values and ethics in open strategy approaches?

Eero: First of all, thanks again for having me and, and listening to the, uh, great conversation that we are [00:26:00] having, what came to mind that I've been only writing, uh, nonfiction, but my mom who turned 80 years old, she wrote a novel. So that's, that's a great accomplishment. Yeah. Um, much, much more than I have done on that front.

Um, but I'm glad that you asked about open strategy because I'm really excited about this. And then the background goes more or less as follows. Uh, that I

think, our models of decision making and leadership are lagging behind the world has been changing. And, and I guess we'll always be saying that the world has changed.

But, but the truth is that the, very traditional conventional models that are based on this idea of top down control are not simply adequate in dealing with the, with the challenges that are having today. Not, not speak of, speak about those of, of tomorrow and, and we know that to, to, you know, lead organisations or to be able to, you know, make change [00:27:00] happen that requires that people are engaged and on board.

And so, so that's one of the first reasons for, for thinking about open strategy. So open strategy is like a 180 degree departure from the conventional models of top-down processes or us us thinking that it's the, um, you know, top managers or the boards that, that make the decisions. And then it's up for others to implement those, those decisions or, or changes and , and that, that might.

In principles sound good, but it's not in terms of, uh, helping people, uh, become on board and, and engaged and have this buy-in and I guess we've all seen this in so many ways that we might have the best ideas and plans and initiatives in the world, but they are just not getting any traction.

And that's why open strategy is, is very useful. So open strategy is a little bit like. All these other [00:28:00] movements that we have, open data, open access, um, open science, open marriage, well, probably, I shouldn't have mentioned that, but, but anyway, the ideal, is almost like, a utopia that we will never, never reach in terms of thinking that a decision making or a leadership, everyone, all stakeholders within an organisation and around an organisation could, could take part or, or have, have a say, but I think it's a utopia that is worth pursuing and how that, you know, would play out in practice. Can be mean, very different kinds of things. It can be just a, just a little bit of more inclusion and participation, a little bit more transparency in a strategy process or, or in the decision making practices that we have in our organisations.

Or, or a little bit more listening when we, when we are, you know, working as, as leaders and moving, [00:29:00] moving things forward.

Kate: Um, great. I can see Deborah nodding and I think this conversation's coming, I just wanna connect actually with the idea of narrative that, that Deborah was talking about, um, for those not familiar.

Um, and I really recommend reading, Eero's work on this. Um Eero's has done some fascinating research into polyphony and, uh, so multiple voices and orchestration, organising in narrative strategy, strategy making. So the idea of how to, create structures that enable that kind of open strategy, I suppose, processes and structures.

Um, and when I read it, apart from being reminded that is, quite some time like Deborah, since I've, uh, used my brain in that kind of way, and I found myself recognising, um, descriptions of some of the processes that that form part of my sort of everyday work as a cultural leader. Um, so I'd be interested if you could talk a little bit [00:30:00] more about your work in that area and how you think the orchestration of narrative making might connect with some of these thoughts about values and instincts...

Eero: I'm glad that you asked this question, there's so, so much to be said about narratives and stories, and I think we are in the right place for that as well, but, but one point of, uh, departure on my perspective, uh, for starters has been the idea, a simple idea that strategies...uh, whatever we think about strategies, they are like narratives. So strategies are about the future. So, so we want to go somewhere and that's awfully close to a narrative in my view. So, so for people like me, then the narrative perspective comes kind of naturally then we're, when we're thinking about. Uh, leaders and organisations and when people are making sense of what's happening, uh, you know, in these organisation and around them and, and what they're strategising, uh, in terms of, you know, developing something, something new.

So I think [00:31:00] that's, that's my point of departure, and it would be kind of easy to think that, you know, no, here's our organisation and here's the, here's the strategy narrative or, or here's the purpose narrative that we have. But, but there's a problem because often times people don't think exactly alike or they don't share exactly the same values.

And I think we're sometimes, sometimes misled by this assumption that people would like always think about the organisation that we are involved in a similar way. Um, but, but with these narrative approaches, which I would connect with open strategy and trying to have people on board and included and, and try to, uh, in trying to, uh, embrace, uh, promote dialogue, I think those would be ways in which we would then, um, make sense of this.

Polyphony or turn this polyphony that is like multiplicity of narratives into, into something, something positive. Um, of course, uh, it can also be the [00:32:00] opposite, which I guess would be cacophony in, in the sense that, you know,

there, there would be dissonance and, and, and, you know, how far can we go in terms of allowing people to have different kinds of narratives and, and sharing those.

I think this is one of the most fascinating, questions. But going back to orchestration, I would also tie this to open strategy with this basic idea that, that, at least when I'm thinking about open strategy or, or let's say strategic storytelling, um, I, I think it's also important to, realise that things don't happen by themselves.

So, so we need some people who would be leading these processes, whether they would be like more formal strategy processes in organisations or, or whether it would be a question of decision making in, in teams. So someone has to orchestrate these processes, and I'm a big believer in this, that we would take the time to pause, to reflect as to what we are doing and try to, [00:33:00] uh, promote dialogue and embrace the diversity the you know, differences in values and starting points , but on that basis then try to develop common ground and, and shared understanding.

Kate: Great. Uh, again, there's so much in this, it makes me think about, uh, creative processes as well in terms of, you know, what, what's happening in a rehearsal room, for example, and, and whether a, whether a director is telling everyone what to do or inviting everyone to improvise.

I'm sure you've been in, in versions of those situations. Um, so look, I'm hogging the questions so far. Um. What I'd like to do now is just ask if any of you are itching either to come back to connect, to ask a, a question of each other, or to to add and build on, on what's being discussed. And I can see Farooq's ready?

Farooq: Yeah. I'm dying to ask the question. No, I was just in response to what you just said. Um, one of the things I remember very clearly as, as, as a professional dancer, the moment I felt I arrived at being a dancer, when I did a whole rehearsal [00:34:00] without thinking. And um, and I thought, oh my God, I didn't think once because the, the whole interconnected system that I have of intelligence within me was cooperating and transferring energy within it, without me trying to guide it too much.

And there's something about leadership, there's something about this open system where the, the body does it said biologically, cells are transferring energy into other cells and they know exactly what to do, because it's innate. There's a kind of inanimate intelligence within us, and perhaps, you know,

there's, there's a joke going around the arts world about the the old AI, Ancestral Intelligence, you know, and, and there's things happening with within us that we don't trust.

There's an interconnectedness, that we need to allow to happen. And I think someone said to me, you know, when you are really passionate, you don't make sense. I mean, artists generally, live in perverse fantasy worlds with unrealistic expectations and that needs to exist and it doesn't need to make sense because otherwise once yo [do] there's a danger of when things make too much sense and we're trying to analyse it too much, you [00:35:00] kind of almost kill it dead and suffocate it.

And I know that's how I feel, so often, when you ask me my day to day, I'm trying to just transfer energy between me and other people and feel whether that energy transference has created expansion or contraction.

Eero: Mm. That, that's just, just great. Uh, and I, I really appreciate your comments on, on openness, and that's almost like the ideal state.

Let me also come back to you what you said in the beginning, which was like, like something that, that then retrospectively feels like strategy. And I think that's, that's one of the challenges we have, when we're talking about things like, organisational strategies and, and values or purpose, that it looks different retrospectively.

Deborah: And we're kind of easily forgetting what it is when it's happening and that's what your, your great description comes to mind, brings to mind. Um, something I'm interested in as we are seeing this rise of anti DEI, coming from America, which I feel is [00:36:00] going to, impact on the United Kingdom and other places, this idea that, um, DEI is somehow a destructive force. It's hard to see how all it is, is saying, can we have some different sorts of people? Included in our creative processes or any processes that we have, and can things be more equitable? So it's hard to know how they're demonising it really, but they are, how do we hold our ethical line?

As, hopefully the UK won't go this way, but assuming it will, it's got to a bit: how do we hold, how do we hold this off? , I heard today that in American theatre, even if you just get a little bit of money from the government, like the, the, the equivalent of the Arts Council's been cancelled in DOGE there, but they have got, um, it, you can still get some money from, you know, people can still get funding and even if you get a little bit.

And then they find out you are doing [00:37:00] anything that they think could be DEI you'll, it'll get taken away and bad things will happen, but if you tell on another theatre company, you get a third of their budget, if you grass them up for doing DEI. So it feels like we're gonna be set against each other.

And my question is, I am not in the dance world Farooq, it's not my world, I love it, but you know, I'm not in that world.

How do we cross discipline? If Kate's got a theatre company, I'm a playwright, you know, write TV scripts and things like that, how do I, hold hands across the Isle and protect, dance.

How do I, how do we come together as a community in order that we do not lose our ethics or compromise our ethics in an every company for themselves or every artist for themselves style way.

Farooq: It's a super [00:38:00] excellent question, you know, there is a danger, I, have to say, this may be a little bit provocative or controversial.

I remember when they were trying to, you know, some of these politically correct policies, and I'm not, saying it's what's happening in America is right, but I know as a person of colour, there were times it was quite reductive.

Now the categorisation of people, the reductiveness of categorisation is a terrible thing.

Right. I remember feeling some people would just get, you know...

Opportunity is important for everyone, and everyone deserves the right to that, and deserves the right to express their ideas with intelligence and imagination and sensitivity and stuff.

But, there was a time when it was really reductive and it was doing a disservice to artists from South Asian communities, Black communities, because it didn't fully understand the complexity of that situation.

And I think, and sometimes the people making those decisions. I remember I led the Race Equality task force at Sadler's Wells, and one of the first things that Alistair Spalding, who, who's the Artistic Director, said [00:39:00] to the Black and um, South Asian artists, I apologise because I impose my ideas on you, assuming they would work and we said this, imposition of values, you assume that that would be understood. And there's a, there's a danger in that and

sometimes you've gotta step back and be in the listening mode. And allow someone who's in the room to guide that, who truly understands how that could, how that could be leveraged in the best possible way.

Look, I think the arts, particularly in Britain, are pretty good on that front. And dance is, you know, I'm so proud of dance because, 'cause if it's a non-language and it's borderless, you know, there are so many dance companies. If you even go back to the Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn in the Seventies, as a Russian working with a British ballerina, and that transformed how we saw ballet. And it's been happening for, many, many years now, and it continues to be a strength of, of the art form. Music is another one that does it really well, but I, but I think we are protecting it really well, but it's a danger. But I also wonder what happened.

'cause 25 years ago when we were so [00:40:00] globalised, there was such an enjoyment about exchanging ideas. Like, you know, I think since the beginning of humankind, whenever someone's walked past you that you don't know go, what have you got there that's fascinating, I've got this. Shall we exchange it and see what we can do with it?

And that's been, that kind of sense of cooperation exchange has been the basis of everything magnificent about humankind, and this is the danger that we run now. We'll all end up being homogenised and the same each other, as each other. And that globalised energy 25 years ago was fantastic. But I think what happens, everyone panicked and goes, I dunno what I, who I am anymore because I'm washed into this big global narrative.

So there was a need to, to claim back that national identity, that kind of, and this was the beginning of that very parochial, very kind of small minded thinking that began to retract and diminish, have diminishing returns. But I think we tend to do that. It's like, we human beings, like, we want to believe we're put on the earth for some unique, individual reason, but you also can't bear to be alone.

We've got to [00:41:00] be with others. So this is kind of strange push and pull of our human behaviour that we're always struggling with. But I have no answer to that.

I think it would sway it, it would keep like a pendulum, it would go this way and that way. I hope it comes this way.

Deborah: Me too. I'm worried and I think we do need to have some safeguards in place for how, how we proceed now.

I think what, when we're seeing far right parties clean up or get close to cleaning up closer and closer and closer to cleaning up, we cannot take for granted, you know, as you said at the beginning of your career, it was very difficult for somebody who wasn't White to kind of break through.

And then you go through the theory, whereas you say it might sometimes be reductive and box ticking and you are getting money. You think, am I getting money 'cause I'm Brown 'cause I wanna get money 'cause I'm a good dancer. But those things have to happen until it becomes normalised and it's just, you know, everyone's a bit clunky, especially white people.

We are very, very clunky about these things. And we go, are we [00:42:00] doing it right? Are we doing it right? But it, that's the really only way through, you know, the only way out is through.

And I feel like we are seeing some incredible work, funded and coming forth and coming up and I don't want that to go anywhere.

Um, and already we're seeing it, going somewhere in America and it's a scary time. So, you know? Yeah, just go on, go, go.

Well, I just wanted to come back from this, uh, this idea because it, uh, I'm interested, intrigued by Eero, talking about, setting out with purpose and, and creating a narrative of where you're trying to go. I'm intrigued by Farooq talking about nothing really making sense until it's, in hindsight, it's all instinct and passion, and then you look back and, and then you go, yeah, there was definitely a strategy there, and we knew exactly what we were doing. And, I suppose I'm,

Kate: I'm interested -not in a Blair third way - whether there's a sort of third thing, so I sometimes think of producers as a bit like midwives who are my heroes.

Midwives and palliative nurses and doctors are sort of my heroes [00:43:00] 'cause they see us through these transition moments of, of birth and death with, with this extraordinary skill of, um of, of dealing with living with uncertainty and, and adapting to what's happening in the moment. I suppose I'm thinking about producing particularly and also possibly dramaturgy. I was finding myself thinking when you were talking about this process of improvisation or of developing a, a piece of work or an organisation without really knowing what you're doing, just following your instincts.

I was thinking of our mutual friend Ruth Little, who worked a lot as a dramaturge with, with Akram and who I've had lots of conversations with about how her role sitting alongside the work is to make sense of the instincts and to kind of almost like a coach to kind of reflect that back to the artist and say, you've, you've done this.

And they go, oh, oh, yeah, 'cause I have, I, it, it came from instinct, but actually what you're saying makes sense or, no, it's not quite that. It's something else. And through that [00:44:00] dialogue you arrive at, uh, some kind of sense of meaning or, uh, evolving in time. And I wonder whether in response to your sort of questions around how do we move forwards together, whether there's, there's, there's something in that space, which is about how we keep moving forward iteratively recognising our mistakes and clumsiness, uh, trying to spot our narratives and our, uh, uh, kind of hindsight strategy, um, as we go so that we are not end gaming or, or failing to have any strategy at all, but somehow kind of stepping forwards. Each with each other in, in, and seeing what we're doing in, in what's happening in dance, what's happening in tv, uh, and, and what's happening in, in academic work, looking at these questions.

Eero: I think these are, these are really important questions and, and, and two things come to [00:45:00] mind. I, I think first this, you know, I think the incredible examples we've heard, uh, uh, telling us about this need for, for psychological safety or ontological security that we would be able to protect these spaces.

And, and that would be important not only for the culture of productions themselves, but also for, for this kind of dialogue and, you know, together trying to make the world a better place and create purpose for our organisations. But I get that many of these spaces are, are now, uh, under attack or that's, that's basically your, your argument.

And I think this is a problem. Um, also from a, you know, maybe, maybe it's, maybe it's too, too much of a academic jargon type of type of view, but it's also a question of boundaries. Like where we have the boundaries and where we want to remove the boundaries.

And I think that's really important, and in some ways boundaries are helpful, but, but, but in other ways, the kinds [00:46:00] of boundaries that this discussion has brought to the fore.

Farooq: I think those are, those, those are really not helpful. I, I mean, also talking about the dramaturge, that's a fascinating, you know, um, thing you've

raised. 'cause the dramaturges role is to ask questions. And usually what happens in the asking of questions is that things are getting killed off, not added to the idea and, and often creativity is an act of destruction rather than an act of creation.

I mean, I remind you, I think Michelangelo, when he was making the statue of David was asked, how did you do that? It's extraordinary. He said, well, I just took away the bits of stone that weren't David. And I think when you're creating, that's what you're doing. You're trying to find the truth of the thing within it by removing the untruth.

And it's the process of diminishing something. And, and sometimes it's, maybe it's not strategy. I, I often joke as dance companies we're more tactical, which is a much more in the moment where you're having to moment by moment think left, right, backwards forwards. And, and there's a strange notion that we're always moving forwards to [00:47:00] go somewhere.

I don't think that's how it really works. I, I, I think we, we moved in all different directions and, and sometimes the best ways to move is not to move. To be still and to be listening because dance begins with a single body listening. That's how it's born. And so I think there's something about just being in a state of listening and not having to have movement to, to suggest that we are going somewhere and growing.

Kate: Beautiful. I, I wanna, uh, we, we've started to move towards the work. I just wanna ask one question about the art. Um, there's lots of questions I could ask, but, um, I'm, I sense from a couple of different things that, that have been said. Uh, some questions around, uh, I suppose the high presence, ethics or values are.

So I'm intrigued by, by Deborah talking about, um, being able to put, um, views into the, the, into the mouths of characters in order to, [00:48:00] to play out some potentially interior internal monologue or debate that's, that's happening, um, to find the drama in that, to, to allow not just yourself, but also audiences to wrestle with those views and those voices.

And also you've talked about, um, about the, the beauty of dance, um, creating a lot of space for interpretation and meaning. I think you talked, uh, you alluded to some things maybe being too... you said something about forehead, putting things on your forehead or something. Um, so I just wanted, I just wanna ask a bit, what do you think, um, do you think we're in a good place with the art in this sense?

Do you think that we're making good, interesting art about, in this context, in the, of these questions around values and ethics? What, what gives you hope and excites you? Is there anything you've seen that's made you go, yes, okay, or, you know, do you see any trends from your, your time working, [00:49:00] in the work itself, less the strategy in the organisation, but the work that you were seeing.

Deborah: Good question. I think the best things, the best pieces of art are often seem to be about something else. Um, so like a prestige television show, which I think, 'cause I think TV has been at the forefront of storytelling, for a, for a long time, really expert storytellers.

And so *Mad Men* seems to be on the face of it. About men, literally in the title, um, chain smoking, being sexist, a kind of love letter to the Sixties in some ways. But really I think it's about feminism. It's about, it's about the struggle for like Peggy and Joan that they started in 1960, and what's great about it is they themselves do not realise that they are marginalised.

Um, the first time we see Joan and Peggy if you don't know what this is, just to shorthand, it's about an advertising agency on Madison Avenue in the 1960s, and it takes place from 1960 to [00:50:00] 1970 over I think six seasons. Joan is this a voluptuous secretary who, uh, rules the secretaries with a rod of iron.

And Peggy on day one is a secretary, and she says to her, there's a lot of technology, but don't worry, they've made it so easy, even a woman can use it. And Peggy says, I hope so. And then it's like a typewriter and one of those, um, intercom machines where she says her, Mr. Draper, there's a message for you and a few things like that.

And it, it's over that decade, it is about Peggy waking up that she's actually a very good copywriter, which she discovers by accident and the fight that she has to make in order to get into the right rooms, be paid anywhere near what the men are paid to get any responsibility and to be taken seriously.

And Joan has a similar arc in a slightly different direction, but in 1970, they're basically being treated appallingly and misogynistically in a much nicer room. [00:51:00] Um, with, with much better pay. And that's what I loved about it, it's not like, oh, and now things are easy, it's now you've got more responsibility

But life will be hard in a different way. And now you are kind of being mocked for being women in the workplace and, and, uh, you are being pressured out and, and that kind of thing. So it seems to be about men, but really it's about

misogyny, sexism, but also the great fight which has, you know, that show finished just before I started the Guilty Feminist.

I do not think I would've started the Guilty Feminist without it, because I kind of grew up with those characters in a way over six, seven years, and went, oh, and it was all seeping in and I, it, it formed my feminism in many ways. Now, I don't know that Matthew Weiner, who created that agrees with me, but he is wrong.

Um, many of you will know about "Authorial intent", the idea that you know, that what the, "author intends", but the is not necessarily what the piece of art is because the, the, the [00:52:00] reader or the, the viewer, whoever has to bring part of the experience and part of the story too. You may watch it and see something totally different.

Um, but it in so many ways I feel like when I've heard Matthew Weiner talk about that show, I'm like, Matthew, that is not what you made. Um, and I'm sure, I know that he had a lot of brilliant women in the room who maybe were getting ideas in past him. Uh, what what I think is great about it is, it's a piece of television, which shaped my ethics what if it's too on the nose or if the thing is about, the thing is about the thing is about the thing, you are just being told something. You're just, you might as well send me an email. You know, here are the some points, there was more sexism in the Sixties, but by 1970 women had broken through.

I don't need to watch all those episodes of beautifully crafted television. I can go and see a night of modern dance. Somehow something inside of me can be released. Could I even put a finger on what was released? [00:53:00] No, not necessarily. But somehow it pushed me further into my humanity, or it made me cry, it put me in touch with something. It made me understand something. So I feel like there's incredible work going on in theatre. There's incredible work going on everywhere. But some of the things that have really changed me, and you wouldn't have said this in, you know, a few decades ago, have been television.

Kate: Any other examples?

Farooq: I've seen some amazing plays by, you know, small plays at the Royal Court uh, two weekends ago, there was a, by an East Asian theatre company called Scenes from a Repatriation.

Kate: Yeah, I saw it as well.

Farooq: Did you see it? I loved, it was absolutely brilliant and, but what I love most about it, it didn't really, there was this thing about the, you know, colonial Britain stealing this artwork from China and having it returned.

But I love the fact that they took a colonial British soldier, and he also was a victim of this as well. And, and I think great art doesn't preach like, you know, it, recognises that everyone is flawed in the narrative and somehow this [00:54:00] mistake has been made by an ecosystem of mistakes.

And, and it doesn't put people on the wrong side and the right side. And I think we are too obsessed with that right now. The good and the, you know, you are right, you are wrong, you are good, you are bad. And, and I, I love what's happening in, in, in small scale art. I think there's some of the most bravest and riskiest work is happening there.

I, I fear for dance in some ways because over the last twenty years it's become hugely successful and it's no longer about the voice of the artist, it's about the quality of the show. And the production, and that's kind of, you know, slowly dominated the power of an artistic expression. So yeah, I'm seeing lots of brilliant small stuff. I, love the work that I'm seeing in these little theatres around London. Yeah.

[music]

Kate: Thank you for joining us for Fuelling Change. This podcast series and live event series was co-produced by the Cultural Programme at Oxford University and Fuel with support from the Story Museum, the Old Fire Station and Oxford Playhouse.

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