

## An identity in lockdown

Who is the performer when she's not performing? Who is the singer when she's barely singing? Where do I find community now, what is its role and what does it need me to be? How to disentangle oneself from the many years of pressurised productivity, and embrace the opportunity for a slower, more reflective pace? What does my womanhood mean when separated, essentially, from all gazes but my own?

Today is my thirty-ninth day of lockdown. These are some of the questions that have come up for me during those 39 days. Some emerged surprisingly fast: unwanted issues around body image and singing were, perhaps predictably enough, the first, alongside a more intentional questioning of the opportunities that could be grasped, particularly concerning productivity. New riffs on old themes circle, but what's unique is that I now allow myself the time to examine them, and this is because, for once, with 'business as usual' currently on hold, our global society seems to allow *for* this sort of examination.

I should establish some context and get some admissions out of the way before I go any further. My lockdown experience is, undoubtedly, very privileged. Whilst I have lost all my work through until mid-August (so far), and therefore all my income (except where promoters find they're able to pay me something), I own my home and have some savings and no dependents, so I'm not struggling financially. Financial security, I imagine, is probably the biggest shaper of this experience for people. The second might be the emotional landscape of one's domestic situation. Well, I live alone and, for the most part, am very happy in my own company, so I'm fortunate there too. I'm also of sound body and mind: though I've had battles with depression in the past, I'm now quite adept at recognising the warning signs and weathering the 'mean reds' if they do descend — I was braced for difficulty on that front but, so far, I seem to be doing OK. All of these personal circumstances mean that my lockdown experience is certainly more comfortable than most. I do count my blessings. And I am trying to seize the opportunity to rest, reflect, get my house in order, experiment with all sorts of things and nurture my relationships.

So, without any performances, what sort of performer am I? Firstly, it's worth pointing out that there is a lot of time spent alone, preparing in various ways, before one gets up on stage to perform, therefore, to a degree, not all of my performer 'rites' have stopped. Second, I am assuming that this state of not-performing is temporary — there is no need to dismantle that part of my identity completely. It's unequivocally the case, though, that the main part of what I 'do', and therefore a significant part of who I 'am', currently has no outlet.

I knew something was up when I observed myself reacting (internally) very defensively to two completely unimportant instances of very mild criticism. This 'touchiness', I realised, was because I was feeling vulnerable, and this vulnerability surfaced because I was without the usual 'bolsters' that performing gives my sense of self: not in demand, not achieving, no purpose, no affirmation — without the rituals and costume of performing, I felt uncertain and exposed. I sense I'm not alone in experiencing this vulnerability, and I suspect that the always-delicate private negotiation of one's perceived place in the scene and the precarity of that is not far from the surface in conversations between artists about how much work has been cancelled, until when, and

in the violent split between artists who are frantically making and those who feel quite unable to.

Of course, there is some liberation that comes from being able to put part of one's public identity aside — I'm less stressed, less terrified, less constricted and this, perhaps, leaves space for other aspects of my identity to flourish. It's a relief, in some ways, just to STOP, to stop performing (in all senses), to stop preparing, to get off the hamster wheel and look around. It turns out that the hamster wheel doesn't really take us anywhere, though I do like the exercise. It turns out that the decision to keep running on it, and how fast, is mine, and mine alone. These are useful realisations, I think.

I am barely a singer at the moment — in fact, if this part of my identity is constructed through embodied practice, or, simply put, time spent doing something, I am currently more a yogi, chef or writer than I am a singer. And that's quite pleasant for the moment, but what are the longer-term implications of that, physically and psychologically, if, for example, lockdown continues for several months? I feel like a singer when I am regularly singing. The context in which I am singing might vary hugely from week to week, sometimes with a lot of performances, sometimes recording, sometimes rehearsing or in workshops, sometimes just alone in the studio, practising. When I feel 'well' as a singer, it's because I'm vocally (physically) fit, intellectually stimulated and emotionally confident. The main challenge for me, in the current conditions, is that I find it extremely difficult to sing at home — the rooms are all rather small which means I'm singing straight into a brick wall no matter where I stand which is, essentially, deafening. It's not really possible to do much effective practice with the brakes on all the time and your inner critic screaming "that sounds AWFUL! The poor neighbours!" I am forcing myself to do the bare minimum, and I know that is the right thing to do, but it's a daily battle and the temptation to give up is huge. It's pretty obvious, then, that I don't feel 'well' as a singer right now: I am vocally unfit and rapidly losing confidence; if I'm intellectually stimulated, it's through other activities.

These challenges have, at moments, led to quite profound anxiety concerning the process of returning to work if/when our industry starts up again. If promoters are (sometimes) making the right noises about protecting their artists by rescheduling postponed engagements (which is, by the way, not necessarily what we want, for various reasons) and paying at least part of the fee for cancelled performances, I don't think they are giving any consideration to some of the physical, psychological and practical obstacles we may face when preparing to return to work. I don't blame them, necessarily, after all, many of them are still stuck in the horrific daily weighing-up of whether their events can go ahead and what the heck to do if they can't, but the following pointers — messages, if you like, to promoters — may help them when planning their next moves.

1. It will take time to get vocally fit again.

On the basis that it takes me about a fortnight to get back to form after a holiday, I'm hoping one month will be enough, but we don't know yet how long lockdown will last and I've never been in this situation before. You wouldn't expect an athlete to come out of lockdown and compete without a carefully paced training regime; I reckon some of the material that I have to wrap my vocal cords around is pretty athletic... So, please trust me if I voice reservations and support me if I request some flexibility.

2. It may take time to get psychologically fit again.

I have never taken this much time off work before. I have never gone this long without being on stage. I have always suspected that something about the fear and exhilaration of performing (for me, at least) was rather like avoiding vertigo and total panic when taking a rickety little rope bridge to cross a ravine: don't look down! I worry that, having got off the carousel of high-pressure performances, I may find it very difficult to summon the courage and the confidence to get back on. Certainly, I am going to be dealing with some frightening unknowns. So, please trust me if I voice reservations and support me if I request some flexibility.

3. There may be some practical issues to solve.

It's not just promoters' programmes that are being affected by this: my carefully laid plans for spreading the learning and premiering of new works through the year have gone out the window. My finely balanced (and already at-capacity) workload is now expected to jolt from empty to full-tilt, whenever activity restarts. I have had seven premieres cancelled between April and August, and have lost performances of three major works I would have been singing for the first time. All of that repertoire repeats throughout the 2020/21 season — ostensibly where we hope we might be picking up — but I can't possibly learn all that music, not to mention all the other music programmed alongside or around it, in my one month of getting back in shape. My programmes, therefore, may well need to be revised. Please trust me if I voice reservations and support me if I request some flexibility.

There is also an issue with promoters assuming that postponed events can be rescheduled for the immediate future. In fact, there are two issues.

- My diary for the Autumn was already full, and given my concerns about returning to form, it strikes me as foolhardy to be *adding* work to that period.
- Many performers I know are finding it quite stressful dealing with these conversations about rescheduling because of the anxieties listed above and because, possibly, we have put ourselves in a state of psychological paralysis in order to cope with the cancellation of all our work and the ongoing uncertainty concerning what we'll have to deal with when work begins again. Having conversations about *entirely hypothetical* reschedulings forces us to confront these anxieties, but pointlessly, because nobody knows what timeframe we are dealing with here. I have lost count of the number of times I have been asked "Do you think you'll be able to travel..." or "Can you confirm the programme..." or "Might you just be able to squeeze in a ...". You may as well just ask me "When is this all going to over?", to which my answer would be "NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING so please stop asking me questions I can't possibly answer".

I know promoters have their own anxieties and are under their own particular pressures, but attempting 'business as usual' through this period of hiatus, and particularly when we begin the return to normal activity, will not protect the arts because it may destroy the artists. The bottom line is that all of us, whether performers, composers, managers, promoters, programmers or funders, need to be gentle and flexible going forwards.

Isolation is often cast as the opposite of community but now we are having to find ways to keep tethered to our communities whilst living in isolation. What we embrace or reject as our communities are also indicators of who we embrace or reject *ourselves* as being. A community can anchor us. A community can legitimise us. A community can nurture or wound us... The relationship is risky, therefore. Here in the UK I think there are conflicting messages coming at us: on the one hand there is the government's motto, 'Stay at Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives.'; on the other hand, we're desperate to see the phoenix of 'good old-fashioned community spirit' rising from the ashes of our insular, selfish society. I'm not sure that I have really felt part of any formal community, either in the recent 'before times' or in lockdown. I prefer to float a bit between different groups and I savour one-to-one relationships, and both these modes translate reasonably well, if they have to, into a digital context. I feel very well supported by friends and family, and have been enjoying writing postcards and letters to people who might not be expecting them. I'm also drinking quite a few cocktails whilst on Zoom. Facebook, the Janus-faced Facebook, is a community of sorts for me, hideous though it is to admit it, and it strikes me now that it is functioning partly as a replacement for the sort of random, fleeting, international encounters my work normally provides. The community most close to my heart at the moment, though, is this one, the eavesdropping one, which is still so new and small, and will never be one thing or one shape, but being in touch with you all and hearing your thoughts and sharing ideas and just coming together for a moment in time was always the *whole point* of eavesdropping, and now we find it's more important than ever. I have felt anchored by the process of preparing for this symposium, and the role I have accidentally made for myself and the relationships I have accidentally wandered into are, right now, a huge part of my identity.

I was struck, on that first day, by how engrained the pressure to be 'productive' is. I realised that it's probably not since I was about 13 years old that I have lived without a cascade of time-sensitive targets hanging over my head, and this opportunity, in which *the whole world stops*, will probably never happen again in our lifetime. For the past twenty years a proper day off for me has either been a luxury or a guilty pleasure — there is always admin clamouring for attention. I'm not sure I know anyone who has the practice or discipline of taking a full day of rest (whatever that might mean) each week... Time and time again, in the first 10 days of lockdown, I was having to remind myself that "it *isn't* urgent", "no, it *doesn't* matter", "no, you really *don't* have to" as I attempted to rewire my thinking. Productivity, I concluded, was probably too habitual to be done away with all together, but by changing the definition of what that was, broadening it to embrace so much more than just 'work', I found a way to neutralise its heaviness, and so it kind of slunk off into a corner...

(All of that went out the window, of course, as the symposium approached, but this has been a reassuring reminder to me that my old modes can kick back into action (mostly) when required and when desired. There's no doubt that my concentration is more patchy, my thinking more slippery, and because of that I don't completely trust myself in an organisational capacity which is a new and unpleasant anxiety, but from what I hear, we're all feeling that way and so I'm imagining that our expectations have lowered, collectively.)

One positive outcome of this unexpected *space* that I've encountered within myself has been the permission to deviate. I have found myself exploring creative avenues I'd never even imagined, let alone just not got around to. I have been having a lot of fun playing with a new bit of kit that does fantastically clichéd rock and pop vocal effects and looping, and last weekend I wrote a song — I don't think I've done that since I wrote 'The Purple Panther' when I was about 14! I'm sure that it's only because these things have happened 'accidentally' and have been pursued entirely for my own pleasure that I have given myself permission to deviate from my usual ideas about what I do and therefore who I am. And again, this space only opened up when I removed something, and ironically the 'something' has been 'new music'. Since Day 1 of lockdown I have felt almost a visceral horror, or terror perhaps, of engaging with the sort of new music I normally champion. I can't look it in the face; I definitely can't sing it. My whole body just says "no", and turns away. I think I understand this reaction, and so it doesn't trouble me (though I am depending upon it to go away when the time comes); rather, I welcome the surprises that greet me as I turn away and see a new perspective, a new side of myself.

And my womanhood? Well, how likely is it that issues around gender *wouldn't* arise during such a time?! If the last 39 days have been unusual in two particular ways, it's 1) that this is by far the greatest number of days that I have been at home and nights that I have slept in my own bed, and 2) that, at 36 days and counting, this is the longest period that I have been on my own — I haven't sat in a room with, shared a meal with, hugged or touched another person for over 5 weeks. If gender is performative, who am I performing for right now? Well, of course, I discover that I am performing for myself, I am performing habitual, embedded roles as I deliberate, yet again, over whether to epilate my legs or wash my hair, as I view with pleasure the subtle changes that all this yoga is effecting upon my body, and I am confronted by the gendered if well-meaning vision of others as they reveal their assumption that the lockdown experience of a single, childless woman must be notably 'hard', 'lonely' or 'awful'.

No, no, those are not the words I would use, and I shrug off those comments because I know they're intended to be compassionate, but they remind me that we will emerge from this time with as many stories of 'the lockdown' as we are humans, and that there are structural inequalities and biases at play throughout this period, just as there were before it began. If we are to stand a chance of imagining and then designing and then constructing a brave new world into which we can emerge when this is all over, we should challenge the assumption that 'we are all in this together'. We may do well to turn to intersectionality for help here: if I can make habitual some of the discomfort of this experience, I may be better equipped to leave space for others.

And finally, if I were to set one ground rule it would be this: do NOT at ANY point say to ANYBODY "but what on earth were you *doing* during lockdown"? To circle back to the issue of productivity, I think we would do well to abandon all expectations and judgement of ourselves and others as to how they spend this time. What we are living through is not a universal experience, it is a highly subjective learning process, as we learn to be who we are.

Juliet Fraser, 23 April 2020  
for the eavesdropping symposium, 25 April 2020