

## Experiments in failure

I don't know if it's because failure is on my mind, but suddenly I see it everywhere: another festival has failure for its theme, a journalist interviews a band about 'the role of failure in their music', there is a rash of podcasts telling us how to fail, and by the till in the gift shop of the Saatchi gallery, I spy two terrible-looking books<sup>1</sup> on... failure. I always try to choose a topic for the eavesdropping forum that feels *zeitgeisty* but where does 'topical' tip over into 'tired'? Have I failed in choosing something so ubiquitous?!

Well, perhaps it depends on you! This forum is not so much about the topic itself but about what we, collectively, make of it. Through the provocations, the discussions, the Q&As and the informal breaktime chats, I hope we will succeed in rescuing the topic from the tedium of self-help memes and, together, undertake some experiments in failure.

How do we fail? Failure emerges in the gap between an intention and an outcome: there has to be a goal in order to miss it. Failure is a particular threat in scenarios weighted with status or duty. In a professional context, a marginal gap between intention and outcome is enough to label the process (or the person) a failure; in a societal context, the perceived dereliction of a kinship duty, that is to say the gap between one person's expectation and another's capacity to deliver, is judged a moral failing. By contrast, in more relaxed contexts in which we are not striving to better ourselves or prove ourselves — for example, a birthday party — the gap probably needs to be more catastrophic for the outcome to be labelled a failure ("no-one showed up" or "the cake exploded").

We cannot fail without first having an intention. This sets up the hurdle — the gap, if you like — over which we hope to leap. The bigger the gap, the greater the risk of failure. Many of us are drawn to risk, perhaps not for the adrenaline but for the creative potential to discover something new about ourselves or about the world. All the self-help fluff around failure celebrates 'teachable moments' as a way of neutralising the sense of failure, acknowledging that failure hurts, but that it can clarify things. The danger is that the scars of failure inhibit discovery.

We cannot label something a failure without passing judgement, and though we like to believe that the experience of engaging with art is subjective, we constantly fall back on problematic pseudo-objective terms such as 'good' and 'bad'. I might say "I went to a really good concert", or that "I sang really badly", but these are lazy terms which convey nothing about my assessment criteria and conjure up nothing imaginative about the experience. This is not to say that value judgements and criticism have no place — Arthur C. Danto<sup>2</sup> was awesome and I love me some good critical theory — but to contribute constructively the language needs to be rigorous.

Sisyphus fails repeatedly. If the goal is to roll that stone to the top of the mountain, Sisyphus fails, again and again. But what if we were to introduce him to mindfulness?! What if an embodied, sensory experience of each journey towards the top became his intention, to observe the stretch of each muscle, the glance of the rain or sun upon the

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<sup>1</sup> The two books in question were Paul Arden, *It's not how good you are, it's how good you want to be* (allegedly 'the world's best-selling book') and Erik Kessels, *Failed it! How to turn mistakes into ideas and other advice for successfully screwing up*.

<sup>2</sup> I loved, for example, *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap between Art and Life*.

well-known rocky surface, the changing smell of the crushed soil, the taste of each bead of sweat that reaches his upper lip, the sound of his own soft grunts merging with the mewling of the buzzards overhead? My point is that it makes no sense to say that Sisyphus fails when the stone falls back down the mountain if his intention was to have a rich sensory experience rolling the stone — if he's having a good time, he might relish the chance to do it all over again!

The intention behind the effort is crucial. Sometimes we rush through that part of the creative process, though, which leaves us vulnerable to criticism that may sound valid but actually fundamentally misunderstands our aims. This criticism may be external (a review, a verdict on an application or interview or audition, critical feedback etc.) or internal: the trick is to be disciplined in the way we receive it, no matter where it comes from. I fail myself all the time: I set a sensible aim before going on stage to sing (generally something along the lines of "get out of your head and just communicate something that you feel"), and then, after the event, I judge my whole effort a failure because I was flat on that F#. My inner critic always has something to criticise but how useful is that criticism if the assessment criteria is entirely irrelevant to my carefully set intentions?

Which leads us to perfectionism. Perfectionism is cultivated as part of the classical-music training. "That note was wrong." "That rhythm was sloppy." "You're flat; you're sharp." We need to develop critical faculties, of course, but I don't think we're taught well the importance of knowing when to turn them off. In my training, stumbles were rarely embraced as a corollary to creative risk-taking and it certainly wasn't made clear that what serves us well in the practice room can cripple us up on stage. We need to learn to distinguish between the two modes: the critical mode when practising and the 'flow' mode when performing.

To which end, I have been experimenting with the pursuit of imperfection. As a perfectionist, naturally I have had to build precise and achievable strategies in this pursuit. Firstly, I introduced The Rule of 70% which states that I cannot aim for more than 70% brilliance (when singing — the rule doesn't apply to friendship, cooking or poker). I realised that, historically, I had been aiming for 80% or above which was causing me to tighten up and overreach, sending my inner critic into overdrive. 80% sets the hurdle too high and actually makes failure more likely; 70% encourages my flow mode. Second, I am actively pursuing imperfection. In my practice I am trying to pay attention to 'the grain of the voice'<sup>3</sup>, as Barthes puts it, which I understand as the sounds that are particularly idiosyncratic, unstable or unexpected. It's a Sisyphean task, but a shift in mindset is slowly taking place.

One can fail at a task without that task becoming a failure. One can fail at a task without oneself becoming a failure. It's obvious to observe that there is often an element of struggle within creativity and of failure within experimentation, but what habits in our way of thinking about failure are holding us back, creatively? How do we speak this word over ourselves and others? How disciplined are we in the way we receive external criticism? How constructive are we in the way we evaluate our own efforts? In what ways might we be avoiding failure to our own detriment? In short, are we thinking critically about failure?

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice' in *Image, music, text* (Hill and Wang, 1977).

And are we thinking critically about success? Penelope can teach us a thing or two. By day she weaves a shroud; by night she unravels it, thus winding ‘a skein of wiles’<sup>4</sup> that buys her time and reframes the story. This myth celebrates the unsexy aspects of creativity: the undoing, redoing, revising, reworking, persisting... It also proposes a long-term perspective that I find refreshing, for a creative practice takes years to build and to unfurl.

How do we view isolated failures if our ‘success’ is measured on the basis of many years’ work, rather than one project? And who is defining and measuring our success? Penelope, as she weaves and unweaves, is undoing the ‘violent ontology’<sup>5</sup> of success. The slow, repetitive weaving of her victory offers a metaphor for a life’s work. In today’s terms, she is prioritising process over outcome, to such an extent that she is liberated from the burdensome considerations of a ‘creative output’ or, even worse, a ‘legacy’.

It's no accident that everyone is talking about ‘failure’: it is a word fit for our times. Failure is binary — there is no nuance, no wiggle room. Failure is polarising — it’s brutal and exclusionary. Failure is bound up with the desperate pursuit of success and status. As such, we should perhaps be wary of failure as a tool of the capitalist merry-go-round. Failure can be funny — it can keep us grounded, humble and open to new perspectives, if we can laugh when we fall.

Systemic failure, however, is serious. At times it feels as if we are witnessing the death throes of so many systems and structures; from capitalism to democracy to the environment, it’s unclear whether holding our breath will prevent rupture. The arts are unavoidably implicated and also have their own internal systemic struggles: the debates raging around music education, funding priorities, the rights of freelancers or artist censorship directly affect us and our communities and yet, in the face of a governing lack of imagination and an overabundance of bureaucratic red herrings, we often feel powerless and paralysed. We will have a go this weekend at confronting some of these systemic failures and will perhaps rekindle the courage and creativity required to contribute to a collective success story that is yet to be written.

To make music is to take a leap towards an often-unknown auditor. It is the effort to bridge a gap that is ‘bristling with infinite possibilities’<sup>6</sup>, in the name of communication. As Daniel K.L. Chua and Alexander Rehding write so beautifully in their book *Alien Listening*, ‘We give music as an act of hospitality, as a fabric of time to clothe the stranger.’<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the only failure that should concern us, then, is the failure to listen. Whether to our true intentions, our deeper instincts or to the humble efforts of another to leap towards us, we triumph when we don’t just hear, we listen.

Juliet Fraser, 23 March 2024

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<sup>4</sup> Ioanna Papadopoulou, ‘Penelope’s great web: the violent interruption.’ *Classical Inquiries*. <https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/penelopes-great-web-the-violent-interruption/>. Accessed 20 March 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel K.L. Chua & Alexander Rehding, *Alien Listening: Voyager’s Golden Record and Music from Earth* (New York: Zone Books, 2021), p. 218.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. but I cannot for the life of me find the page number.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 203.