



Christina Barandun

FIRST AID FOR THE ARTIST'S SOUL

Stress management, communication and
conflict resolution in the cultural sector

A Guide



Photo: © Bettina Fürst-Fastré

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For Yoshi and Daniela - thank you for your >yes<.

C. B.

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Foreword

“I no longer feel so helpless and at the mercy of life’s adversities! It feels good to have ‘tools’ and thus the opportunity to improve something, make life a little easier, a little more joyful!”, a chorister wrote to me after a workshop I had given at a theatre on the subject of “stress management”.

This feedback made me very happy. In my life and in my work as a trainer and coach, I deal with a wide range of people, and experience daily how merely by redirecting our way of thinking and our inner perceptions we can change many things, even though conditions be ever so rigid and adverse. The fact that artists were able to apply this learning successfully within the hierarchical and rigid structures of the theatre reassured and inspired me to focus even more on collaboration with cultural institutions.

If we want to preserve our “German theatre and orchestra landscape”, we must transfer the theatrical structures into the twenty-first century. Although envied and admired by many and nominated by Germany for the international UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage,¹ our German theatre system has in actual fact been in a crisis for quite some time now: underfunding,

high illness rates and crushing overwork have created the feeling that it may collapse at any moment.

The social change currently taking place is radical and sometimes frightening, but these new perspectives are opening up exciting possibilities for redesigning creative workplaces, for example as self-organising companies. Theatre could even be a pioneer in the cultural sector in this respect.

In the large theatre-related institutions, potential methods of change are being discussed extensively. At individual theatres, initial structural changes are being implemented, but until they actually take effect, co-workers and artists in the theatres continue to suffer.

With this book, I want to offer artists pragmatic help to find greater self-efficacy² and satisfaction in the here and now, and within the currently difficult structures. At the same time, I hope that this growing self-efficacy of everyone involved in the artistic operations at the theatre will drive the transformation from the inside, preparing a fertile ground for future necessary changes.

¹ The application for the nomination of the “German theatre and orchestra landscape” as an immaterial cultural heritage was submitted to UNESCO. The decision will be made in 2021. So far, Germany’s theatre and music landscape has only one entry on the German List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. (See <https://www.unesco.de/>)

² The concept of self-efficacy expectations was developed by the Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura in the 1970s.

Introduction: **Why endure when you can create?**

Talented young artists,¹ fresh from university, usually get a loud wake-up call when they start their first job in theatre. Once confronted with the day-to-day operation of a theatre, the holy aura and utopian visions of collaborative artistic creation fade rapidly: when scenes are reordered just before opening night, when senior members of the ensemble 'assert their authority' in subtle and not so subtle ways, when they find their strong, new ideas are ignored or nipped in the bud and first signs of fatigue crop up after months of tightly packed rehearsals and performance dates, having eaten nothing but fast food; when the fear of failure rears its ugly head, blackouts occur and they can't remember the last time they spoke to their best friend...

The theatre "slowly eats you up", and you don't live in a cloud of creative bliss, as you had imagined; instead you "survive" somehow in a permanent state of mental and physical overload. The difficulties of the current situation for artists engaged at theatres cannot be overstated. When choosing our profession and considering its negatives, we might think about the issues that specifically affect theatre artists, e.g. how to deal with stage fright or accepting that

you work evenings and nights, something not conducive to a regular family life. What we might not have anticipated are the myriad other, more general grievances, e.g. poorly ventilated, narrow rehearsal spaces, poor leadership behaviour, or unnecessary extra work because internal communication is not working.

Fleeing into self-employment is not a solution either because, firstly, it doesn't change anything in the theatre system, whose transformation must come from within; and secondly, we are just as likely - if not more so - to push ourselves beyond our limits when working independently.

A society that wants to experience art should not allow artists to exploit themselves for our sake and the sake of art, risking their health. The economic damage would be enormous. Both the theatres as employers and the artists themselves should therefore reach an understanding that they too need working conditions and structures in which they can unfold and sustainably develop their full artistic power.

Fortunately, the people responsible at the theatres are gradually trying to do something about these conditions. Slowly and cautiously, issues are rethought and action is initiated, not least because by now the legal provisions, e.g. in occupational health and safety law, have been tightened. This is quite a challenge for theatres because in many ways a career in the theatre does not lend itself to having a healthy "work-life balance", as defined in health protection laws. Up to now, this fact was also the reason often proffered for not being able to change anything: "That doesn't work in the theatre. Everything's different there." - Well. Sure.

It *is* different, but that fact does not have to stand in the way of new developments and positive changes. Where is creative change possible if not at the place where each

season numerous new productions are created? In the opera, up to two hundred people work on and behind the stage to achieve a coordinated, accomplished performance in no more than eight weeks. In an environment that is used to creating something as structurally complex as an opera, it should be feasible to optimise the overall structure of operations creatively.

If you look at the current development of work and organisation in the economy, you can easily identify healthy, motivating working practices that could certainly be transferred to the theatre. However, due to the necessary, constant fluctuation of its workforce, it is important that specific solutions are developed for the cultural sector.

First Steps Towards a Theatre of the Future

Theatre draws attention to the increasing dehumanising disconnect in society, but if it wants to remain vital and relevant, it has to be a living vision of a better society. The fixed, hierarchical structures within the theatre industry are insufficient to achieve this, as the process of change demands openness and creativity – qualities that (should) define theatre at its core – on all sides and at all levels. Throughout the world, experiments with progressive organisational structures are being made, with their key facets being *self-organising companies* and *agility*.²

Our common long-term goals in theatre should be to improve the institutional conditions, to boost the self-efficacy of individuals, and strengthen communication and conflict-resolution skills in order to create a step-by-step framework in which creativity can unfold to its full potential. We should develop a working structure that actually *serves* art – theatre as an art forge, in which the

“what” is mirrored in the “how” – theatre as a creatively operational work of art in itself.

What I’m aiming for with this book

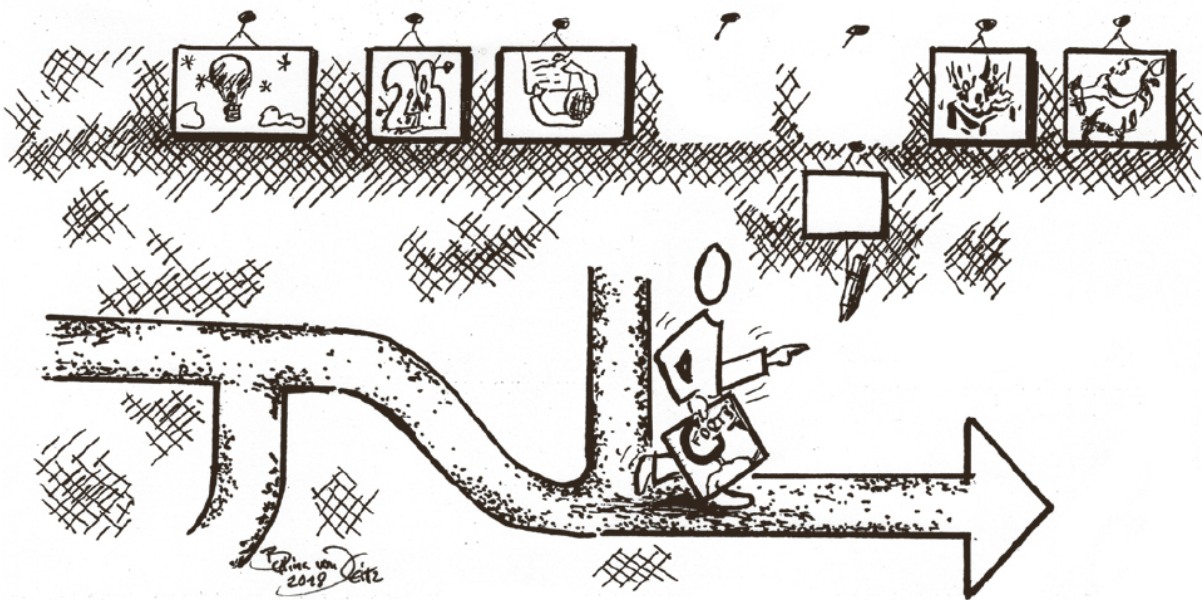
This book offers ideas about what we, as individuals working in theatre, can contribute to digging out entrenched structures and transforming them into creativity-fostering working conditions. A system as complex as the theatre industry can only be changed with small, active steps, so our individual contributions are incredibly valuable – the more among us who opt to embark on this journey, the greater our power will be. And as an eternal truth puts it so well: Every journey begins with a first step.

In this book, I will give you background information, suggestions and pragmatic tips for how you can take care of yourself in your everyday artistic life, how you can optimise your workplace with your own efforts, and how you might find a new attitude towards your work. The aim is to give the artistic creativity within us a protected space; a space in which we can abandon our fears, vanities, uncertainties, our shying away from conflicts or our combativeness (and other problems when dealing with others), and give free rein again to our inner creative capacity.

In the first chapter, I address the issue of “theatre as a workplace”, and describe where there is valuable potential to make it creative and nourishing for the artist. In order to develop this potential, there is a need for self-efficacy, which is described in the second chapter; the knowledge that often far more depends on us than we think. And in order to support self-efficacy, the next four chapters

contain further information, pragmatic tips, advice and exercises about how to make a demanding, communication-packed everyday life more relaxed, healthier and ultimately more effective. I'm going to show what creative (brain) potential is still waiting to be exploited by us in order to deal with stress skillfully, along with techniques for stress and conflict management.

In the final chapter, I want to re-examine the idea of genius, and motivate readers to explore the mindset of an artistic craftwork. A holistic mindset that allows the artist to be as creative, comprehensive, moving, touching and spiritual, but does not demand that 'the fire of the artist quickly consumes itself' and instead is characterised by the artist continuously working on himself in a healthy way, appreciating the gift of artistic creativity.



Paths to satisfaction

In addition to specific and practical exercises in [Chapters 4, 5 and 6](#), a summary of tips and advice is included at the end of each chapter. At this point, I'd like to point out that

you do not need to try and implement all the exercises and suggestions at once – it won't work and might only demotivate you!

This leads us on to my first tip: Let your interests guide you. Start with just one exercise from the book and see what changes. Experience teaches us that from the first step there will come a logical second step. Since all things are connected, a positive change in one area will automatically impact all others.

A final note: Ostensibly I'm dealing with "performing artists" and their "art", so the specific examples I use may not be directly applicable to the equally important technical and administrative fields. But of one thing I'm certain: All employees of an enterprise in the cultural sector are artists. All belong to a large, special community that creates art and makes art happen; all deserve appreciation and recognition in equal measure. As such, these areas not explicitly mentioned will still benefit from the tips and exercises in this book

I wish you much joy on your personal journey of discovery!

¹ For reasons of readability, the male form is mainly used in the book; the female form is always also addressed (note of the editor).

² "Agility is the ability of teams and organisations to act in an uncertain, changing and dynamic environment with resilience and flexibility and speed. To this end, agility uses various methods that make it easier for people to behave in such a way." Svenja Hofert: *Agiler führen: Einfache Maßnahmen für bessere Teamarbeit, mehr Leistung und höhere Kreativität*, Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler, 2016; Kindle version, Kindle positions 687–689. In addition, I would like to point to the exciting book by Frederic Laloux: *Reinventing organisations* (Munich: Franz Vahlen Verlag, 2015), which is about new forms of organisation.

Chapter 1:

The Theatre - Lots of Potential for Your Health

Let's first take a look at the full extent of artistic work behind the scenes, and the challenges we're confronted with on 'the other side of the portal' day after day. Looking at the theatre as a working environment can help us determine with greater accuracy where there is potential for change, and for the design of a healthy and creative workplace.

The Dilemma of the Artist

In the theatre, artists are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. They're sandwiched between a creative, sensitive work task and the often gruelling working conditions. As the image below shows, an artist must be sensitive and, at the same time, have a "thick skin"; in other words, he must be both sensitive as an artist and strong as a person. It works, no doubt of it. However, a "thick skin" - which in its positive version I interpret as grounded in self-confidence, easygoing poise, a high level

of empathy, appreciative, polite conduct with others and sound capacity to deal with conflict - is often less strongly developed than excessive sensitivity.

As the communication expert Friedemann Schulz von Thun describes¹ any virtue or quality that is fostered in a one-sided way will turn into a devalued exaggeration if the twin virtue balancing it is not correspondingly fostered.

For artists, this means: If only sensitivity and self-centred delicateness is fostered, a volatile, egocentric lump of emotions will emerge. Conversely, an artist whose skin is too thick will make a rigid, inflexible, uniform and colourless impression, and move the audience little on an emotional level, like an artistic steam roller.

These two twin virtues of the artist - "sensitivity" and "strength as a person" - must be developed in tandem. Since the former is the main focus of the artist's training, the other side, the "strength as a person", is our subject.

