

SLOW THINKING

SESSION #7: Tools and strategies to look after performers' and creatives' mental health in the rehearsal process

Co-organised by Upswing and Mimbire

Tuesday 1 March 2022

Upswing's *Slow Thinking* is a series of collective, online and free-to-attend conversations that respond to the needs of the circus sector. We are inviting circus artists, practitioners and programmers to join and discuss topics that we, as a sector, feel preoccupied with at this time.

SESSION 7: Tools and strategies to look after performers' and creatives' mental health in the rehearsal process

Looking after performers' and creatives' mental health feels more important now than ever. Mimbire and Upswing have come together to organise a Slow Thinking session specifically aimed at circus artists, creatives, directors and producers, in order to share concrete tools and strategies to build a supportive and caring rehearsal and creation process.

Three speakers – Farrell Cox, Molly Nicholson and Søren Nielsen and Daniela Essart – will each do a short presentation sharing their practices and tools from specific projects. They will cover different points of views as artists and producers, as well as in some cases drawing from their experiences working with young people. This will be followed by space for a Q&A and an open discussion for others to share their approaches and reflections.

Upswing's Slow Thinking is a series of collective, online conversations that respond to, and are driven by, the needs of the circus sector. These conversations are free to attend and serve as an open space for individuals working in the circus sector – freelance artists, educators, producers, directors and technicians – as well as circus organisations.

Who's it for?

- Individuals working in the circus sector – freelance artists, educators, producers, directors and technicians, and those who work within circus organisations;
- Those who programme circus as part of wider public performance programmes – either online or live

1. KEY SUMMARY POINTS – CONTRIBUTOR SHARING SECTION:

Farrell Cox

Key summary points:

- Performers - ask companies to highlight the key points in a long contract, so you can focus on the important information
- Consider including provision for counselling in your access budget
- At the beginning of a project take some time to work out what your goals are
- Structure of typical rehearsal day – Start by discussing the previous day of rehearsals, then outline what is going to happen today. Each time we do a new scene/piece of work we talk about what our aims are in this scene/work, this is what we want to accomplish, this is what we want to do
- Check-ins: Head, Heart, Body – on a scale of 1-10 how are you feeling?
- Consider tag-teaming with your creative team – if you're struggling during rehearsals someone else can step in and lead the rehearsal whilst you step out the room
- De-roling at the end of the rehearsal – this is for everyone, not just performers
- Have a rehearsal buddy you can debrief to /vent
- Do stuff outside of rehearsals with your cast and crew – pub trips, meal out

Søren Nielsen and Daniela Essart, Scarabeus Aerial Theatre

Key summary points:

- Be discerning about the creative team you have in the room – make sure they can work together
- Set clear boundaries before you start rehearsing. Write a list of rules. Display this in the rehearsal room
- Talk about consent - what people are prepared to talk about and work on
- Do as much preparation as possible with the writer *before* you go into the rehearsal room
- Share material about the themes you are going to be working on with the whole company – images, books, films

- If performers are sharing their stories as part of rehearsal process, make sure you have their consent about how it will be used in rehearsal process and also in the final product if appropriate – how it will be presented in the end. If there are themes that performers are not comfortable with, either don't do it, or wait until a later stage in the rehearsal process before you tackle it
- If you have to share difficult stories, consider using a breakout room with just one performer so that you can work on this separately with them and see if it's appropriate to bring it back into the rehearsal room and use in the process
- If you are working on a project with sensitive themes/material consider working with similar minded creatives who have shared lived experience of what you are working on
- Ask performers and creatives to complete a questionnaire before the rehearsal process – What does my ideal rehearsal space look like?
- Scarabeus typical rehearsal day - Start with a check-in: how is everyone? Anything that came up from the previous day of rehearsals? Sometimes we do a bit of writing, usually a yoga warm-up. We start rehearsal day with the most demanding physical work in terms of skills and physicality. Take an hour lunch break. After lunch we focus on less physically demanding work or the work that needs more time. End the day with an hour long cool down and a check-out: What has happened during the day? What have we learned?

Molly Nicholson

Key summary points:

- Check-ins: start with a light question like 'what's your favourite biscuit?' moving onto How is your head feeling, how is your body feeling?
End of the day – check-outs: How are you feeling? How did you feel today went? Tell us about your act of care for that night – this might be talking to a loved one, having something nice to eat, watching some rubbish TV.
- End the rehearsal day with 'The End', which is our version of de-roling. Then we leave the rehearsal room. All cast and creatives take part in these rituals of care, check-ins and check-outs
- Show Parent – in creation and on tour. Scottee and Friends have been working with the Show Parent role for around 5 years. Responsibilities: Run check-ins and check-outs, observe the rehearsals, especially when there is triggering material, take an hour with each performer or participant to talk through any issues – Is there anything you want to talk about? How is the work making you feel? What are you doing to reward yourself tonight? These hour-long sessions always feature something nice like a coffee provided by the company. This is an hour to reflect on how things are working for each individual, where as check-ins/outs are a collective sharing
- The Show parent is an external role to the Scottee and Friends team, so the creative team can be confidentially criticised within these meetings. The performer/participant can agree with

the Show Parent how /whether this feedback will be shared with the creative team so that changes can be made

- Check-ins and check-outs and the Show Parent role are easier to introduce with participant focused work. It's more difficult to include care practices with professional performers, but is incredibly beneficial. It's about having to decode the usual way of working, giving performers the permission to be vulnerable
- The Show Parent role is a very human role. Asking performers and creatives how they are – the important thing is how the company put in those structures so that performers and creatives feel safe answering these questions

2. OPEN DISCUSSION SECTION:

Click on the below links for video, audio and transcript formats:

- [VIDEO RECORDING \(YouTube\)](#)
- [AUDIO ONLY \(.MP3\)](#)
- [TRANSCRIPT \(.DOCX\)](#)

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Farrell Cox

Farrell Cox, a black British physical actor, aerialist and theatre maker. Performing nationally and internationally Farrell has worked as a performer and deviser. with lived experience of mental health. I'm passionate about using physical theatre and circus to tell important & untold stories breaking down taboos around difficult subjects.

As a performer Farrell uses versatility as a dancer, clown and aerialist to captivate the audience. Bringing lightness and humour into her work and enthusiasm to explore a variety of narratives using physical theatre. Farrell's aim is always to tell the truth within a narrative, not shy away from the harrowing parts but allow the lightness and humour to be brought forward. Creating performance excites her as a form of representation to encourage others and is very passionate about access and wellbeing for audiences and creative teams.

“Farrell Cox dives, jives and flies precariously through an emotional landscape of mental health issues...Her versatility as a dancer, acrobat and aerialist transports her to many different physical planes: submerged in a bath, cavorting around its edges or propelled skywards on her trapeze. A thrillingly expressive performer, Cox captivates us in her action and word”

Website: <https://www.farrellcox.com>

Instagram: @farrell.c

Molly Nicholson

Molly Nicholson is the co-founder of Scottee & Friends LTD.

Scottee & Friends work is political, provocative and participant led - we create cabaret, circus, drag, live art, dance and theatre shows, national tours and international projects all which empowers, advocates and supports marginalised communities, specifically those who experience ostracisation because of their class, gender, sexuality, bmi or mental health.

As a producer Molly has worked, in the majority across, the theatre, queer, socially activist & circus arts sectors since 2010.

She has worked as producer and programmer with organisations such as Crying Out Loud, Museum of London and Roundhouse. Between 2017-2018 Molly was the circus producer at the Roundhouse leading on programming and delivery for their large scale multi-venue festival CircusFest

Website: www.scottee.co.uk

Søren Nielsen and Daniela Essart of Scarabeus Aerial Theatre

Scarabeus Aerial Theatre has created for over 30 years visually arresting and transformative performances. Our work merges aerial skills with visual theatre and choreographed movement in site-specific, immersive and touring performances.

We conjure into existence thought provoking, unforgettable productions and participation projects dealing with contemporary narratives, aimed at awakening empathy and ethical consciousness in our wide range of audiences.

Daniela Essart I am the co-founder and artistic director of Scarabeus Aerial Theatre. I'm responsible for the company's overall strategic vision and the creation of all our projects from hatching ideas, through fearless research and collaboration, to making and presenting the work. I believe in the transformative power of the arts, in creating experiences that endure in the collective imagination and promote a sense of belonging.

Søren Nielsen I am the co-founder and executive director of Scarabeus Aerial Theatre. I deal with the production side of our aerial performances, designing and supervising all the rigging aspects. This has involved site specific shows in locations such as modern and historical buildings, trees, tall ships and even a disused satellite dish. This has called upon creativity and inventiveness. I am passionate about circus and flight and believe that art should be available to everybody.

Website: www.scarabeus.co.uk

Instagram: [@scarabeusaerial](https://www.instagram.com/scarabeusaerial)