Sofia Rasmussen

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

A REPORT ON MENTAL HEALTH AND SELF-LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE PERFORMING ARTS

Translated into English by Christina Cullhed

The Swedish Performing Arts Coalition, or SPAC (Scensverige), is a members organization whose purpose is to encourage development of the performing arts in Sweden, and widen that community's international relationships, by fostering cooperation and the sharing of ideas. It also aims to spread knowledge and information about the performing arts. SPAC's members are individuals and organizations who work professionally in the field of dramatic arts – (institutions), independent producers, national stages, unions, employers' organizations, various centre-formations, alliances, and (higher) art schools. SPAC belongs to the International Theatre Institute (ITI), a non-governmental organization founded) in 1949 by UNESCO, which organizes almost one hundred national centres throughout the world.

The project "Take Care of Yourself" (2022 and 2023) has been funded by The Swedish Arts Council (Kulturrådet) as a post-pandemic project to assist the performing arts.

In conjunction with this report, SPAC has arranged lectures in, for example, stress management, self-leadership, stress in relation to minority issues, conflict management, NPF diagnoses on stage, and grief management in the context of the pandemic. (Opportunities to do so) have been found in connection to our Council meetings in Gothenburg and our SPAC Biennials in Västerås and in Stockholm.

We want to thank The Swedish Arts Council for their confidence and for the opportunity they have provided.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

Over the course of my career, I have worked as a free-lance actor, a translator, and a project leader at forty different workplaces — both at institutions and free, private theatres, as well as in television and film. Only in these past few years has anyone ever mentioned work-related mental health issues or well-being, and I have never been asked how I am faring, or what I think of my work environment. I have hardly even asked myself. My focus has always been on finding new strategies to improve my next production. There are deeply rooted ideas about what an artist should endure. The vulnerability and the necessary adaptation within the branch are enormous, where performance anxiety, stress, and self-medication belong to the norm. Most of us have experienced productions in which a colleague's mental instability or capriciousness has influenced the whole period, or we have felt a collective concern for the well-being of a colleague — always a sensitive issue to raise.

In the wake of the forceful #MeToo movement it is time to take one further step towards a heightened awareness in our field. I want to initiate a mapping of how our co-workers currently experience their work life and the strategies for self-help and well-being that they use or need. SPAC has received funding from The Swedish Council of Arts to conduct such a project — although the topic, of course, is so much vaster than a time-limited project can cover.

We regard this as one step in a long-term commitment that everyone in the field needs to embrace. The first focus is on how we can work with reflection, self-leadership, and the importance of time spent on reflections about the good and the not-so-good. No matter what stage you are in your career, alone or together with others, you need to phrase your needs and create the basis of a sustainable work-life. This is also about maintaining your motivation and inspiration and about embracing your provisional 'family,' and the remarkable energies released when a work group becomes really close-knit.

We hope this report will help initiate an awareness of these issues within the field of the performing arts. At a later stage, when we want to work for change within the structures and norms that govern us, the report might come to function as a fundament. Mental health is healthy; we hope that your reading of this report will result in new angles of reflection and spark some new insights.

Ulricha Johnson
Operations Manager at SPAC, The Swedish Performing Arts Coalition

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report is based on nineteen in-depth interviews with people working in the performing arts. The interviewees, twelve women and seven men, were recruited via newsletters, networks, and social media. They represent people from all age groups, come from various parts of Sweden, and work in both theater institutions and free-lance groups. Some of them have personal experience with mental-health challenges, most do not. Some are leaders, others are not. Nine have regular positions and ten work free-lance. All are anonymous. Below is a list of the professions they represent.

The interviews focused on questions around self-care and self-leadership in their work lives. We asked about problems and challenges in their current work situation, and the ways in which they cope and manage their work. The aim of these in-depth interviews was to gain a deeper insight into the strategies that seem to function for various people, and to map the issues that are specific for the performing arts compared to other fields of work.

In addition to these in-depth interviews, we've had structured focus-group discussions with drama students at the Department of Drama and Music at Gothenburg University, with the aim of creating a deeper understanding of the students' expectations and perhaps their concerns for their coming work-life. What are their expectations on mental well-being in the field of work they have chosen? What strategies do they have to manage self-leadership and to remain healthy throughout their work-life? The focus-group consists of eight students in their third year of studies. The results of these discussions have been integrated into the report's analysis and the students remain anonymous. All the unspecified quotes in the report come either from the nineteen in-depth interviews or from the focus-group discussions.

The report also relies on previous research in the field of self-leadership, mental ill-health within cultural and creative fields of work, and research done on the labour market concerning development and leadership within the field. The in-depth interviews have been conducted by Sofia Rasmussen, the Executive Director of Rasmussen Analys, who is also the author of this report.

LIST OF THE VARIOUS PROFESSIONS REPRESENTED BY THE INTERVIEWEES

1. Dancer, choreographer, producer
2. Scenographer, costume designer
3. Dancer, choreographer
4. Actor
5. Producer
6. Producer, operations manager
7. Actor, director
8. Arts director, director, actor
9. Playwright, actor
10. Stage manager
11. Head of Department
12. Opera singer
13. Dramatist, playwright
14. Actor, musician, composer
15. Musical performer, actor
16. Technical producer, consultant
17. Adjunct, light technician
18. Playwright, producer
19. Head of Department

DEFINITIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

Mental ill-health, mental problems, and mental illness

In the introductory overview of research, we discuss various studies that help to define mental ill-health within cultural and creative professions, and it is of utmost importance to understand the distinction between mental ill-health, mental problems, and mental illness — as well as the concept of a sustainable work-life.

- Mental problems — these are mainly self-reported emotional and cognitive symptoms.

- Mental illness — this is a state of being where various symptoms combine to fulfil the criteria needed for a specific diagnosis.

- Neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD) is a generic term for biological variations connected to how the brain functions. The term NDD includes diagnoses such as ADHD, autism, obsessive compulsive disorders, tics, and Tourette Syndrome. People with neurodevelopmental diagnoses more often suffer from mental ill-health than neurotypical persons do.

- Mental ill-health — a generic term that includes different forms of mental issues as well as clinically defined diagnoses.

- Mental health — WHO describes mental health as "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in . . . Mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders."

- A sustainable work-life — the condition where the right circumstances exist for a person's chances of managing a full working life.

Self-care, self-compassion, and self-leadership

Self-care is the care one gives oneself to maintain and/or to better one's life situation and mental and physical health.

Self-compassion refers to the ability to meet oneself with a loving attitude instead of getting stuck in self-critical and negative thoughts about oneself. According to research theory, this ability can be learned. Sofia Viotti, who is a psychologist and the author of several books on self-compassion, writes:

"Self-compassion is sometimes wrongly thought of as being about warmth and love or of striving towards an ideal of perpetual harmony. This is not the case — that would be to avoid life. Self-compassion is to dare to face life just as it is. It means facing all that happens in life without avoiding the difficulties. Life is not easy, but we can find useful ways of taking care of ourselves."

Self-leadership is the skill of taking independent decisions about job-related issues and ways of performing one's work. The concept also includes a striving to deepen one's knowledge of oneself and an awareness of where one is heading and why. A more complete discussion about this concept and its components is included in this report.

Focus on the individual

The report discusses self-leadership and self-care. In other words, it focusses on the individual. It does not take a stand as to what could or should be done on a more structural level, which also, of course, is an important discussion.

It is important though to keep in mind that the one discussion does not exclude the other. The aim of the report is not to place the full responsibility for a person's mental health and a sustainable work-life wholly on the individual. But this report wants to inspire the use of, and to spread the awareness of, the tools that exist concerning self-leadership and self-care.

Self-care is about caring for oneself in relation to reality at each given point in time. It does not suggest that one necessarily approves of reality, for example, the insecure labour market, heavy competition, nonegalitarian power relationships, or hard-to-change structures that many mention. It is not about giving up or simply adjusting to problematic conditions; however, while practicing self-leadership these are the things that we need to relate to. Doing so will probably give rise to a complexity of feelings. Self-care is partly about taking care of all these feelings to which reality gives rise: listening in on them and taking them seriously, not looking to avoid unpleasantness, but rather trying to face reality head on as it presents itself.

While practicing self-leadership and self-care we can still take action to change the structural aspects of the circumstances hindering our mental health and wellbeing. Taking part in the social debate, attempting to change conditions at one's place of work, raising issues with a boss or with the human resource management (HRM), engaging in union work, creating opinion — there are many ways of engaging to bring about positive change. This report, however, does not focus specifically on these.

MENTAL ILL-HEALTH IN THE PERFORMING ARTS—SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS

Studies describe a dire situation within the creative professions

So, what is the situation concerning mental health within the performing arts? We will now look more closely at two international studies that have studied mental ill-health among persons working within theatre, the entertainment industry, and the film/streaming section. It is important to remember that these studies are geared to local conditions and the labour laws in place in particular countries, making the results different from what might be expected in Sweden.

An Australian study reveals major problems with mental ill-health

A major Australian study from Victoria University shows that persons working within the creative professions and in the entertainment sector suffer from mental issues to a much higher degree compared to the Australian population at large. Researchers base this claim on thirty-six in-depth interviews and survey responses from 2 400 people, of which fifty percent were active within the performing arts. The results reveal an extremely troublesome situation in these professions. For example, 44 % of the respondents profess mild to serious anxiety symptoms, which can be compared to only 3,7 % in the entire population. Also, depression, the use of alcohol, and the use of drugs for non-medicinal purposes show much higher percentages compared to the population in general.

Perhaps the most troubling result in this study concerns the suicide rate. Among the respondents in the study, and compared to the general population, it is six times more common to harbour suicide thoughts, four times more common to plan for a suicide, and attempted suicide is twice as high.

Moreover, results show that respondents greatly suffer from sleeping difficulties and find it hard to manage their social life – both in the private as well as the professional spheres — one of the main reasons being the irregular work hours. A majority reported a strong concern at not having enough time to tend to their social relationships, while they also often report having robust support from families and friends.

The factor keeping these professionals from seeking help for their mental issues is mainly their concern that their mental ill-health issues might become known, making it more difficult to find new work.

A British study on the film industry reveals unhealthy structures

Similar results can be found in the British report The Looking Glass from 2020, a study based on 9 399 respondents within the film and television industry. For example, results show that 87 % of the informants had experienced mental issues at some point compared to 65 % of the population at large. 24 % of the interviewees had inflicted self-injuries, whereas in general the number is 7 %. More than half of the respondents had harboured suicidal thoughts compared to 20 % in the population.

In sum, the study shows that working conditions direly impact the mental health of people in the performing arts. The work is described as intense, and the work-days as extremely long. One in eight respondents work more than 60 hours a week, which can be compared to the national average of only one in fifty working more than 60 hours per week.

The Connection between Creativity and Mental Ill-Health

"I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity."

This famous quote by the American poet Edgar Allen Poe from 1848 highlights a discussion that has been alive in our culture for a long time.

The reason why creativity has long been connected to mental ill-health can in part be explained by the fact that creativity presupposes a great deal of playfulness and an open cognitive mindset that can only come about when we are prepared to unlock our intuition. When we have the courage to cut loose from conventions, when we discard the pressure to deliver, and disregard peoples' expectations, then we can reach a state of freedom necessary for creativity. But to reach this point we need to be more open to our inner world beyond our sense of rationality.

A Swedish study about the connection between mental ill-health and the arts professions

Until recently, studies examining the connection between mental ill-health and creativity have been criticised for the small samples selected. But in 2016 researchers at Karolinska Institutet (KI) in Stockholm presented a unique study. They studied data from the national health registers for more than one million Swedes with mental diagnoses, including their relatives. The patients were then compared to persons registered in Sweden after 1961 who did not have a diagnosis. Via the national population register the researchers could access data about the patients' relatives who had a diagnosis, since data about a person's relatives, the relatives' professions, and contacts with the health system are accessible via this register.

The results show that people with creative professions are not more likely to suffer mental ill-health, barring writers, who are slightly over-represented in the diagnoses of schizophrenia and bi-polar disease. However, they found that persons with creative professions to a much higher degree have close family members with a mental diagnosis. Especially parents, siblings, and children of patients with schizophrenia and bi-polar disease are overrepresented within creative professions, since these, according to the study, have a pre-disposition but have not developed the condition. This means that they more often can tap into their creativity in a positive and more balanced way.

The researchers at KI describe it as an upside-down U-curve where creativity increases the closer you reach the top of the curve. The balance on the top they call an equilibrium, and when a person passes the uppermost point, their creative skills lessen since they are more ill than healthy and need to struggle to manage normal challenges in everyday life. Instead of seeing creativity increase, it is the suffering that increases and their ability to be productive and creative instead wanes.

The Labour Market for the Performing Arts and Its Characteristics

> "I know that people who have experienced a burn-out, or become ill in some other way, often find themselves excluded from work opportunities within their field of work. There is a fear of mental ill-health in our professions. My own crash has meant that I am not as sought after as an actor. There is a fear of engaging someone who has previously crashed in the middle of a project."

In this quote a free-lance actor relates the difficulty of being open about mental ill-health on a labour market where working free-lance is the norm. This is an issue mentioned also in the Australian study above. If you are open about your mental instability, you risk being less sought after for future engagements. Since time-frames and budgets are tight in the short period that leads to a premier, there is often no space in which to manage health issues or illness. This is only one of the effects of working in a job market that is insecure and assignment based. However, there are more characteristics that make the labour market for the performing arts stand out.

Creativity and the performing arts have complex demands

Creativity is a many-facetted concept that encompasses both a skill and a person's characteristics. A specific job can of course be regarded as more or less creative, but few would not describe the performing arts as a highly creative branch. Research distinguishes between different kinds of creativity, where the two main ones are first to create something good based on new solutions, and second to create something expressive. Creativity in the arts is more associated with the latter: an individual's subjective expression. Artistic figuration creates meaning and usefulness in a variety of ways and the creative process as such creates meaning.

Contrary to the situation in for example the sphere of industrial labour and production, there are seldom any ready-made templates for the creative professions, or any given scales for measuring and evaluating the quality of various productions and performances. Instead, it is part and parcel of the nature of creativity that something new is being shaped and explored. In the creative professions it is largely up to the individual to shape their own work.

Generally, it is more of a challenge for creative professions to determine boundaries for their work. Even during free periods, the job continues in internal processes, which lays a heavy burden on the individual to draw up their own borders to help create a balance in life.

Another aspect of the artistic creative profession is that it differs from other creative professions, for example, from the sciences or from business innovation. Research claims that the artist to a higher degree uses their emotional life and their imagination in the creative process. The creative element in an artistic work-life is therefore more emotionally taxing, inviting an increased vulnerability. This in turn warrants a deeper self-awareness in the artist and a capacity to harbour and to process feelings that surface.

Time-related and geographical limitlessness

The work hours characterizing the worklife of many within the performing arts contributes to a sense of time-related limitlessness. To work while others are free — for example in the evenings and on the weekends — helps to tear down the border between a private and a professional life. For the large group of professionals who do not have any regular position but instead work with time-limited projects, there is the added pressure of simultaneously being in search of new projects to secure a future income. This perpetual searching for new projects creates a boundless approach to work, where they can never really relax, or be fully attentive to the current project – or feel one hundred percent free when they are not working.

A geographical limitlessness is also a reality for many in this field of work. While working in the performing arts it is necessary to say 'yes' to projects wherever they turn up. To go on tour or have short engagements in another city, or longer time-limited engagements at institutions in another city, are common features in this field.

Passion, meaningfulness, and strong commitment

> *"The best thing about working in the performing arts is that it is enormously fun. Working in this field is a luxury. One develops as a person, and one develops together with others. It is wonderful. One is allowed to express oneself, which is something we all want to do. One learns a lot about the topic one works with. One is physically and emotionally active. Luxury."*

"As an artist you are close to your innermost being – that is part of your job. Everything revolves around you, and you make use of your inner self to create. When it works it is fantastic. Being hindered can be painful. It is such a wonder that within the performing arts there is a major human resource of people who are one hundred percent alive."

"The greatest advantage of being in the performing arts is that many people in the branch love their work. Many have chosen this branch and are happy to be in it. Many feel lucky and grateful for their choice of occupation."

Taking a more general view of the labour market, an employee's degree of engagement in their work may be a worry to the employer. A global report from Gallup, for example, shows that only 16 % of all Swedes feel engaged in their work. 73 % feel unengaged, and 11 % are actively unengaged. Based on the informants who are the basis of this report it is safe to say that this problem is not as common in the performing arts. The opportunity to work with their greatest passion in life is mentioned by almost all the interviewees as the biggest advantage of working in the performing arts. Many describe it as a privilege to have such playfulness, creativity, and an open and explorative discourse in their everyday life. The sense of community that builds up among participants in a drama project can be very strong and empowering, and several participants mention that they often find themselves in mutual flow that helps them forget both time and place.

REASONS BEHIND ILL-HEALTH IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

Before presenting concrete ways to lead oneself to well-being in the performing arts, a description of the current situation based on what people who are engaged in this field have to say is presented. We asked professionals within the performing arts: which, if any, are the greatest challenges for the performing arts concerning mental well-being and a sustainable work life? The answers raise several noteworthy themes.

An insecure job market and a culture of free-lancing

In answer to the question about reasons behind ill-health in this field the most common answer is the insecure job market. The performing arts are described as characterized by short-term contracts, temporary appointments, and unemployment schemes that do not benefit everyone. Many respondents feel that their everyday life is insecure since it is impossible for them to plan more than a few months ahead. This sense of insecurity often leads to feelings of stress and anxiety. Another reason behind their stress is the ever-changing work environments to which they must adjust. In each new production they are expected to quickly adjust to a new team; also, they have a new work leader and a new workplace culture to relate to.

In response to this insecure job market, a culture of free-lance is formed where power easily can be exercised in a negative way. Of course, no matter which branch of work, an employee always stands in a relation of dependency to their boss, but in the performing arts many say that the relationship of dependency and subordination is more noticeable. Since free-lancers want to make sure that they get future engagements, many can refrain from criticizing their management or their employers, thus forming a culture of silence.

> *"As an actor you are in a relationship of dependency that is stronger than what you usually have with your boss. Considering the insecure job market this relationship of dependency becomes more complex. I think this is what has led to the culture of silence that has dominated."*

> *"I work at a theatre institution where there is an infrastructure for issues surrounding mental ill-health. But all the free-lance workers function much as East-European construction workers: there are fewer rules, things happen quicker, and they are cheaper. The institutions feel safe because the free-lancers have voluntarily agreed to the conditions. But then they are often forced to do so to secure their incomes."*

"As a free-lancer you perform 210 percent each time because you want a chance to get a new appointment afterwards. It is hard to set up limits. There is a fear of being honest, or becoming difficult, which might mean a lesser chance of getting another job. If things go bad, one just perseveres, knowing that there is an end to it. A best scenario is when there is an evaluation at the end of the project."

"Those who are not on stage but still are part of the production: directors, scenographers, lighting technicians, and others, have no forum at the theatre where they can raise issues. If you are employed on a contract, or have a regular employment, you are offered work-place health services, which makes it easier to make yourself heard. This is a dilemma for all free-lancers who do not have any security nets and therefore are highly pressured."

Hierarchies and sluggish structures

Many professionals within the performing arts describe the projects and establishments they are part of as hierarchic with hard-to-navigate structures. Hierarchically organised workplaces have decision-making systems where instructions emanate from above and work their way down the chain. One advantage is that this enhances clarity surrounding who is in power and who has the most responsibility, and whom to turn to if one wants to be of assistance, to influence, or to share an opinion. In a flat structure the power is instead more evenly distributed, and the culture is often more democratic. However, a flat structure can result in less clarity about the distribution of power and responsibility.

Research shows that there are noticeable disadvantages with a strict hierarchical structure. The stress connected to belonging to a hierarchy, studies claim, results in a greater amount of employees with health issues. A study from Karolinska Institutet, based on more than 3000 employees, shows that the lower a position a person has in a hierarchy, the higher the risk for heart and vascular disorders and even heart attacks. In such a hierarchy there is a high demand for a perceptive and humble kind of leadership — people lower down in the hierarchy also need to feel implicated and well-treated. For such a leadership to materialize — one that helps the leader to focus on the human resources — there must be enough time allocated and favourable conditions need to be in place. Many say that in this respect there are shortcomings.

"In the world of theatre there is still an organizational model that is extremely hierarchic. Much depends on the leader. And each production is hierarchic with a director who has all the power to make decisions. It is easy to misuse this power. However, there is no other way of organizing productions. Directors must have power over their artwork. But they need to engage others in their vision and impart to others that they are free to contribute."

"Theatre is extremely hierarchic. It is part of the environment at some institutions, more than anywhere else. It is noticeable in who is allowed to speak in the room. Who talks? The atmosphere ought to be more permissive. Even if a hierarchy exists, people should be be more equal. It is usually obvious who is in charge. If the director says so, then that's it. Full stop. Once I belonged to a film-crew where it became terribly confusing when the photographer kept butting in and was allowed to decide certain things — we kept listening to the wrong person."

Leadership is not in focus

Within the performing arts there are a variety of different kinds of formal and informal leadership roles. A general opinion among many professionals in the field is that leadership is all too seldom focussed upon. It is problematic that leaders first and foremost do not identify themselves as leaders but rather see themselves as artists, making it more difficult for these leaders to realize their own power.

An organization that takes leadership seriously focusses on developing the actual leadership qualities as such: the leader gets the right conditions for the task, the task is clear, and the leader is given lucid information on the expectations implicated. The leader is keen on gathering and taking in evaluative feedback on their own leadership and there is an understanding concerning the kind of power position the leader has. According to professionals within the performing arts the above aspects are often overlooked.

"Some leaders do not regard themselves as leaders but see themselves foremost as artists. Directors have no official leadership title and are not employed as leaders but rather for their artistic ambitions. We need to make sure the director understands their responsibility for everyone in the room. No matter whether they choose a flat decision-making process or not, the employees are still aware that it is the director who makes the rules. It is in collaboration with the director that the day-to-day work happens. There is certainly a challenge in making directors aware of their responsibility. It is important that they are curious about the leadership as such, making it a better process overall."

Stress and tight deadlines

Opening nights cannot be postponed. Nor can applications for funds. Working with clear deadlines is part and parcel of working in the performing arts. A date for the premier is set and everything is expected to be ready by then — at times at any cost whatsoever. If any conflicts or other problems arise during the set time limit for rehearsals, it can be hard to deal with them in the short time at the groups' disposal.

Many employees feel that they are caught in a whirl wind, which is both good and bad. Everyone works collectively towards a common goal, creating a focus that can be exhilarating to be part of — a kind of productive community that lifts those

involved and creates a sense of 'flow'. At the same time, with only one week to opening night, many of life's other issues may need to be neglected, and there is a risk that conflict, for example, cannot be dealt with in any proper way. This means that there is no room for people to fall ill or go to pieces. Projects often involve people working on a free-lance basis, and being free-lance it may be hard to find the time to impact the long-term culture of the organization where one only works temporarily. As one person expresses it: "You need to find your place in the existing workplace culture."

> "Being free-lance you need to be super quick in reading the culture in place at a specific theatre. And you do anything to fit in, since there is no time to change things. You need to find your place in the existing workplace culture."

> "The difficulty is the deadline we need to relate to — often no more than eight weeks. If during these rehearsals something problematic occurs, it is hard to do anything about it."

Limitless behaviour

> "I have been part of a production where the choreographer consciously incited conflicts since conflict made the artistic process more interesting and seemed to benefit the production. This was a well-known choreographer whom everyone admired — a so-called male genius. Those in a leadership position would therefore not acknowledge the phenomenon and no one wanted to talk about it. Nobody wanted to be the one to be plucked out of the production, or the one who ruined things, or the one to be without a future job."

> "In our field of work, it is not unusual that a director who wants an actor to do something specific, manipulates them in their direction. It is so much better if the director clearly states their aim. Spell it out!"

Many interviewees point out that the performing arts has a long history of accepting limitless behaviour. This kind of tolerance has at times been motivated by the fact that art often seeks to be challenging, to ask questions, and even be provocative. Therefore, it has sometimes been regarded as inherent in the performing arts that directors and choreographers use techniques that would hardly be acceptable at other places of work; techniques that to some degree pressure the actors, dancers, and other stage workers into the type of expression that is called for. Against this knowledge background — in an insecure job market where relationships of dependency between professionals and their leaders are more complex — there is the risk that professionals fail to set necessary limits, or to say 'no'.

> "There seems to be an understanding at the theatre that you can act in ways that would never be accepted elsewhere. That people can come to

the theatre and in the name of art behave badly. That art somehow supersedes how people are treated. I hope this goes away. We are trying to weed out elements of that culture."

In October 2017 something exceptional occurred. The #MeToo revolt painfully laid bare the obvious shortcomings of working life, especially in the performing arts. In Sweden, actors were first on the stage with the hashtag #Tystnadtagning. The #MeToo movement highlighted assault and sexual harassment at workplaces. Between the lines though it was easy to read that other issues were at stake too, and that the assaults were made possible due to cultures of silence, poor working conditions, and poor leadership. #MeToo became a milestone and the movement functioned to create more transparency in the performing arts, especially in connection to a misuse of power and poor leadership. Many interviewees point out that limitless behaviour has decreased in the performing arts due to the #MeToo movement.

All are not equally involved in the creative process.

"A lot revolves around trust. Who is asked to take part and who is left out? The artistic team? The costume designer, the scenographer, the lighting technician, the sound designer, the technicians? It is up to the director to decide and therefore a lot depends on the director."

"Constantly these new teams to work with and these new leaders to deal with. Then it is important to be seen and heard. If this is not the case things soon become unpleasant and confusing, which may lead to mental ill-health."

One thing that may disrupt the creative process is when everyone on the team is expected to contribute to the common creative vision, while it is unclear who will be allowed to influence this vision. This may create an inner conflict in the individual that can affect group dynamics, which in turn demands a lot of the leadership. On the one hand the leader is challenged to communicate a clear vision to the production team, while on the other hand creating opportunities for all to be involved and an atmosphere where all may speak and be listened to. At times this is a tricky balancing act. The task is to assist the team to balance autonomy and goal orientation. If this balance is not achieved there is a basis for stress and illness among those who feel they have not been listened to.

"Quite often, when a new director has a new idea, everyone has perhaps not been part of the initial talks, or they don't understand the idea, but are still expected to be oriented towards that goal. In many productions one is not as convinced about the geniality of the idea as the director is, but one is still expected to take part."

Each production is unique and has its own unique processes. Participants' expectations often differ as to how involved they need to be in the creative discussions at the start of the production, which makes it more difficult to know what to

expect of the project. According to the interviewees, the key is to create an atmosphere of openness and responsiveness early on in the process. Also, everyone must have adequate and ready access to information, share the creative vision, and be familiar with the goals that the team is jointly working towards.

Inconvenient work hours and a split workday

One factor that may underlie mental ill-health in the performing arts is the inconvenient working hours. To work in the evenings on a regular basis can make it harder for people to find time for recuperation or for upholding social relationships with persons who have other kinds of work. It can be extra difficult for parents to manage their lives and feel confident they are coping. In our interviews many say that this is one of the non-negotiable aspects of the performing arts; if we want people to be able to experience the performing arts, it must be offered at hours when most people are free from work.

Split days, rehearsals during the day, having a few hours free and then back to work in the evening, are also common features. For many in the performing arts, a split workday is a prerequisite for managing to remain in the profession.

> *"I have at times worked with rehearsals both daytime and in the evenings. The setup then was that I was free a few hours in the afternoon, but this was usually pointless. There is no rest in that."*

Stage fright and nervousness

Stage fright and nervousness are two other aspects within the performing arts that can lead to mental ill-health. Working towards a clear and often rather tight deadline can lead to great nervousness, especially if one encounters problems during the process. Examples mentioned by those interviewed are actors who fear that they will not manage to learn their lines in time, who are upset about something in the production, or who find other issues problematic and realize that they will not be solved before opening night. These issues may result in a low-intensity stage fright and/or sleeping problems, which may be enhanced by the fact that stage fright/nervousness is often deemed shameful and something one does not talk openly about.

> *"Among actors one notices nervousness and stage fright. It is much more common than one thinks since no one talks about it. It happens to people on all levels, both those who have a lot of routine and those who have less. I would say that it more often happens to those who have worked in the game a long time. The expectations they have on their performances, the pressure to perform well, become higher and higher the longer they work at their profession."*

Minority stress and racism

"Being a racialized person within the performing arts I seldom experience that anyone utters racial slurs around the coffee table. However, I know that many with my kinds of experiences can feel a sense of loneliness and invisibility. Those of us who do not identify with the norm can find it hard to be heard when it comes to mental issues, mainly because we are seen to be talking on our own behalf and are often thought of as difficult people to work with. Issues of racial discrimination are still very sensitive for most people. If I were to say something along those lines, the responsible leader would believe that I was trying to get at them. No one wants to be seen to be a racist. If I were to claim that something has occurred along racial lines, then that would mean that the person in question would be a racist and then the whole world would topple. Or I would be seen as a spiteful person out to get them. For us to move ahead there is a need of a new generation of leaders — a change of perspective where the worst thing is not to be called a racist but to practice racism."

Research shows that people belonging to marginalized groups report more mental ill-health than the population at large. One reason behind this is that marginalized groups may suffer from minority stress, a stress triggered by the experience of being regularly regarded in a stereotypical way over a long period of time. It can be in the form anxiety caused by the negative attitudes that exist against one's group, of being subjected to all too private questions, or a fear of becoming a victim of violence or harassment. If this vulnerability is experienced continuously and over a long period of time, it leads to higher degrees of watchfulness and fear in those experiencing it. Many are in a state of constant alert and have developed a kind of hyperconsciousness, which in turn results in stress, or even in worse mental conditions.

Even though most people would describe the performing arts as a branch where discussion and openness are welcomed, many experience that discussions about racism or discrimination due to gender, functionality, or sexual orientation are still too sensitive to be talked about with one's leader. There is the risk that the leader will come across as ignorant about these issues or even be deemed discriminative. Moreover, there is the risk that the person who is the messenger be regarded as difficult and petulant, which can make it hard to find new projects.

Ageism, appearance fixation, and eating disorders

Ageism is a common topic on the labour market. It seems that we are not prone to fully appreciate people who are rich in years and experience, and who have thus acquired a lot of knowledge. This discussion is ongoing within the performing arts too. The theme was raised several times in our interviews and many interviewees pointed out that it is harder to get roles when one is between the age of forty and the age when one is suggested for granny roles. It seems that women are more often subjected to ageism than men. This is due to an appearance fixation in this

field of work. Many actors and dancers mention the pressure they feel to be attractive and to have a body weight that complies with the norm.

In the field of dance, some say, the opposite condition applies when it comes to ageism. Since professional dancers in average are very young, they are also vulnerable. The dancers' youth and lack of experience can be exploited by the more senior leaders.

> *"In dancing everyone is so young and there are elders who really know how to take advantage of this lack of experience. Since we make up the union, and dancers have such short careers, it is hard in this forum to establish a role and to get a real say. Perhaps one gets involved around the age of thirty-five, but normally dancers then only have a short while left in the profession compared to actors who continue until the age of sixty."*

> *"Resisting the kind of plastic surgery that some actors go through to get more roles, demands another kind of strength. The younger you look the more roles you get — it is a tough branch for actors. We don't talk about it; the subject is far too sensitive!"*

> *"Among dancers I have noticed there is another kind of stress that often results in eating disorders. On top of this there is also the fitness trend with some ensuing problems such as problems of over-exertion. And then people are often obsessed with health issues; everything they do or eat must promote their health."*

How best to care for ourselves considering the circumstances?

In view of the specific features of the performing arts, it is noticeable that high demands are placed on professionals in the field to shape and to hold on to a sustainable work life.

Certain consequences are brought on by the limitlessness concerning time, space, and emotional issues; also, by the insecure job market and the cognitively and physically demanding tasks in the field. One of these consequences is that it is largely up to the individual to set their own limits and to manage to communicate them — to understand the warning signals and to have the ability to communicate their needs and ask for help if needed. It is also up to the individual to find the type of recuperation that is best for them personally.

Another noteworthy factor mentioned by the interviewees, one that contributes to ill-health in the field, is that not much is being done to develop leadership skills. Instead, there is a history of unchecked behaviour, where art and genius have been prioritized at the expense of the employees' well-being. Also, some tricky, hard-to-navigate structures hinder people from maintaining their own boundaries and shaping a sustainable work life.

We have here listed some of the challenges in the performing arts connected to mental ill-health and a sustainable work life, and we have explored features of the labour market within this field. We have in other words tried to paint a realistic picture of the existing circumstances. Now the question remains: how can we take care of ourselves considering that the circumstances are such as we have described? We aim now to answer that question.

STRATEGIES TO REACH A BALANCED WORK LIFE AND TO MAINTAIN WELL-BEING WITHIN THE PERFORMING ARTS

"In our job in the theatre one is never done. There are always things left to do. You can continue for ever. That is why I have decided that if I want to avoid a burn-out, then I need to look after myself. I need to recognize my own warning signals and I must be able to ask for help. I must build my own boundaries. I must recognize the signals and talk to my boss. You need to tell them what kind of help you want. People love to help others if they just know what kind of assistance they need."

Even today many within the performing arts are experts at being self-leaders. This is partly due to the specific challenges and features that exist in this field and that have been discussed in the report so far: the features that force people to influence their own situation so as to maintain their mental health leading to a sustainable work life. So, what are these professionals in the performing arts doing to promote their well-being? What are their most common strategies and tools for keeping their life in balance and promoting their own health?

In the in-depth interviews we asked people in the field and the answers bear witness to an assortment of activities and priorities that are highly useful.

Build on and care for your social network

"It is crucial for me to have a network of producers with whom I can exchange ideas. Not only colleagues but also other friends in the branch. If you only talk to people in the same project — since you want to be loyal to the organization — there will be subjects you dare not discuss. But with a friend in the same field of work you are allowed more openness. Sharing with others is my strategy for finding solutions, a new focus, and more energy."

According to professionals in the performing arts, caring for one's social relationships, both professional and private, is one of the most important strategies for upholding a healthy work life. Several interviewees stress the importance of a professional network — one where it is possible to ventilate work-related issues with others who are familiar with the special circumstances in the field — but they also stress the importance of a private network of friends and family. During intense periods of rehearsal or when the opening night is nearing, friends from outside of the work sphere are easily neglected. Many say though that despite all the pressure it is the very act of meeting friends and doing other things outside of

work — especially during the most intense stages of work — that make it possible to remain healthy. But this kind of priority is not easy to manage. In an international study focussing on professional people in creative fields of work and the entertainment industry, a majority answer that they feel acute unease and worry about not being able to uphold and care for their social lives. One main reason for neglecting their social relationships is the late working hours.

The importance of maintaining professional networks and social relationships as a strategy of well-being in the performing arts is also backed up by research. The Public Health Agency of Sweden, for example, points out two factors that, when lacking, can add to the risk of mental ill-health: the quality of a person's social support network and a person's ability to sleep well. Moreover, stable relationships can prolong our lives. Research shows that it is not riches, education, genes, class, or intelligence that will make us live longer. Instead, the decisive factor for longevity is the quality of our relationships with other people. The ongoing health study called the Harvard Study of Adult Development, begun in 1938, which has monitored 700 men for eighty years, making it one of the world's longest studies of adult life, shows that, in addition to a long life, people with good and strong social relationships, while also being both richer and happier, are better protected to withstand mental and physical pressure. For people working in the performing arts it is, therefore, both vital and desirable to prioritize social relationships even under extremely hectic work periods.

Prioritize recuperation

Working in the performing arts entails long stretches of extreme tension, high pressure, a strict focus, and an orientation towards achievement. One can easily be both seduced and crushed by these demands when entering such a period of total focus and goal-orientation. The connections between stress in the workplace and ill-health in life at large are real and are supported by research. A Canadian study, in which data from national, representative groups in the population are studied, shows that visits to the doctor are 26 % more frequent among people who work under high stress and pressure, compared to those in the labour market who have less demanding jobs. Against this background it is easy to understand why recuperation is mentioned by so many of the respondents in this study. It is a question of both finding time for recuperation and realizing what type of recuperation fits one's own needs and goals.

Recuperation can come about in several ways: by finding the time to rest, to sleep well, to exercise; by making space for creative activities and social gatherings; by learning new things or consuming culture. Recuperation can be enhanced by your geographical location, or by the people you are surrounded by. Or, for a period, by making yourself hard to reach. Understanding the type of recuperation that fits you the best is a skill that you need to practice throughout your work life.

"Once you have decided to stay out of reach for a while, to make recuperation work you really need to dare make yourself hard to reach. It is vital to be able to say: 'We will have to do that tomorrow.'"

Good planning is essential

Good planning makes it possible to relax and to focus on the task at hand, even during intense work periods. Many interviewees mention good planning as one of the most important strategies used to uphold balance and good health in one's work life and they have made it a habit to plan so that life on the whole can function even during stressful periods.

> *"I spend a lot of time planning my life — not in detail — but I know that it often turns hectic during the last two weeks of a rehearsal period. At that time, I need support from home. So, I make sure to prepare for it."*

Some even mention that they set off time to make a more detailed plan in their calendar that also includes time for reflection and long-time planning. They make sure to reserve enough time for self-care, social relationships, and training. Our important relationships — among which the relationship to ourselves is the most important one — should not just be given the time 'left over'. In deciding to prioritize these relationships and your self-care, you need to deliberately plan for them just as you plan your projects and work tasks.

Value the benefits of freelancing

For the large group within the performing arts who work freelance, it is important not to dwell on its negative aspects, but instead to appreciate its positive ones. To not be bound to a specific workplace that expects you to be in place eight hours every day, can be seen as a privilege. In certain ways, as a freelancer you are perhaps less free, but in other ways you have greater freedom and more flexibility than others. Constantly learning new things by collaborating with new people, being able to say 'no' to certain tasks (if finances allow it), having new and varied workplaces. Putting these advantages into words, working out why you have chosen this way of life instead of some other, can be an effective method for not getting caught up in feelings of failure or bitterness.

> *"I feel a mixture of horror and delight when I consider the alternative to being freelance. I am used to being able to take my Mondays off; do my laundry during the day. I once tested working at a design bureau where we were expected to be in place nine to five every day — and still be creative. This did not suit me. This is not what I am looking for in life."*

Keep physically fit

There is hardly any doubt today that physical activity increases our well-being and makes us healthier. Research shows that physical activity allows us to tolerate stress better, dampens anxiety, enhances our capacity to focus, and more. In the performing arts, and especially in dancing, physical training is vital. Many interviewees point out physical training as the most important reason behind managing a

heavy workload during intense periods of work, and for managing physical and psychological strain at work.

Prioritize sleep

Most who work in the performing arts have periods of irregular and inconvenient working hours. Performing in a show in front of a real life audience can set the adrenalin pumping, and afterwards it might take some time to unwind and sort all the impressions — time that is often spent late evenings and at night, which therefore effects a person's sleep. Research shows that too few hours of sleep over time can result in mental ill-health such as anxiety and depression, a poorer performance overall, a poorer capacity for concentration, and a weakened short-time memory. Making sure to get enough sleep and taking active measures that enhance a good night's sleep, should be priorities for many within the performing arts.

Charge your inspiration and creativity batteries

> *"During my free time I take care of my health by charging my creativity and inspirational batteries. I watch films, read books and manuscripts. I make sure to take part in other activities that inspire me."*

Taking part in cultural events can of course give new oxygen to your own creativity and charge you with inspiration, but it also helps keep you healthier. The connection between physical training and health is well-established, and most people know that training enhances your health. But it may not be as well-known, albeit as well researched and scientifically proven, that there are enormous health benefits to be had from consuming culture and being creative yourself.

How culture effects the brain has been an area of research on the march during this past decade. In 2019, WHO mapped all available research on the connection between health and culture. The report contains more than 3000 studies, which makes it the most comprehensive meta-study in the field. The results confirmed that art and culture in all life periods play an enormously important role in the prevention of ill-health, in the promotion of health, and in the treatment of illness and rehabilitation. It is time that this message finally comes across: the consumption of cultural events is just as important for one's health as a card at the gym; intellectual muscles need as much training as physical muscles.

THE ELEMENTS OF SELF-LEADERSHIP

The fundaments of our well-being are as follows: understanding one's limits and thereby avoiding detrimental stress, knowing what to do to enhance recuperation and rest, and practicing a caring attitude to oneself instead of being overly critical. But for many it can be just as important for their well-being to put into words the things that really give them energy, to formulate their long-term goals, and what might help them to perform at the height of their ability. This is where self-leadership comes in. We will now regard self-leadership as a concept and study the tools that are at the disposal of someone working professionally in the performing arts.

There is no given definition of the concept of self-leadership, but here are a few aspects that are usually covered by it.

Make independent decisions about the nature of the work and how it should be executed

Instead of being given concrete and clear instructions, people with intellectual and creative jobs are expected to have the ability to structure their own work and to evaluate the quality of their own performance. For freelancers who are dependent on short-term commitments, the task of securing new commitments and a future income are part and parcel of these expectations. How should you structure your performance and creative work while juggling marketing and networking, searching for potential employers, and managing funding applications?

Pinpoint what you want and identify long-term goals or an ultimate aspiration

A crucial part of self-leadership is to formulate a long-term goal and/or aspiration, a goal based on what you wish to achieve for the future in both your personal life and your work life. It is easy to become a victim of circumstances, to feel that one is steered by forces beyond one's control. Up to a point it is true that we cannot always decide over our circumstances, but to have at least a chance to reach our goals in life we need to become aware of these goals. It is important to be able to admit that our goals and our expected path forward can change over time.

If you are familiar with your own long-term goals, it is easier to prioritize tasks and options. You can plan your time better and try to invest your time in things that do not merely give short-term gains but even long-term, less obvious, benefits.

It is, however, important to remember that goals are not everything. The famous researcher Peter Drucker, who once coined the concept 'knowledge worker,' writes: "Successful careers are not planned. They develop when people are prepared for opportunities because they know their strengths, their method of work, and their values." You can never one hundred percent plan your future success. But it is

when you know yourself that you will feel ripe and ready to see and savour the opportunities that pop up in your life. The following points are therefore extremely important aspects of your self-leadership.

Deepen your self-awareness

The famous saying 'know thyself' is supposed to have been coined by the Oracle at Delphi thousands of years ago. It is age-old wisdom that never goes out of fashion.

Self-awareness is defined as the most important ingredient in 'emotional intelligence,' a concept made popular by Daniel Goleman in 1995. Goleman's research showed that a leader's IQ or technical skills do not explain a leader's success, instead it is their level of emotional intelligence that does. Leaders who rank the highest on emotional intelligence have one specific characteristic that stands out: they have good self-awareness.

According to Goleman, a person with good self-awareness is a person who:

- Knows their own strengths, weaknesses, needs, and motivations.

- Is familiar with their own feelings and knows in what way various feelings affect their own performance and how they affect other people.

- Knows where they are heading and why. Is certain about their values and goals. Therefore, they can clearly say 'no' to tasks that do not connect with their long-term plan (even when the task is lucrative).

- Appreciates constructive criticism. People with a weak self-awareness interpret constructive criticism as a sign of failure.

- Is neither overly critical nor unrealistically optimistic; tries to relate to reality in a balanced way.

Self-awareness can often deepen as we grow older, as we become richer in experience, and learn from both setbacks and successes. According to recent research though, we should not just relax and think that we will mature with age. To promote your self-awareness and thereby become a better self-leader, you need an inner motivation, conscious and repeated practice in areas where you want to advance, as well as direction and feedback from others. This entails a form of learning that cannot be reached on any ordinary course or in any institute of learning. It is an individual form of learning, adjusted to your needs, and it includes feedback from others.

A better self-understanding will lead to a higher degree of professionalism in your work life. If you know your weaknesses, strengths, and values; if you know how your feelings affect your performance and how they affect others, then it will be easier for you to regulate your behaviour and reactions in professional situations.

Identify your values

One way of deepening your self-awareness is to identify your values. A value is something normative that comes across as important and right, and it is often related to one's needs. Values effect our decisions, our goals, and our actions. Values lead us towards our goals and make them easier to reach, which makes them important tools in our self-leadership toolbox.

From a sociological perspective we are socialised into our value systems. We do not actively choose our most fundamental values, instead they are inculcated during our childhood, brought across to us by persons whom we are close to in our early years. We are all geared to a system of values – either they be conscious or passive – values imprinted during our upbringing. To explore these values consciously, to prioritize among them, or perhaps to choose new values, is quite a different matter. Then values turn into ideals — ideals that we choose to strive for, that guide how we want to live our lives.

TOOLS OF SELF-LEADERSHIP IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

Until now we have discussed how people in the performing arts describe the kinds of strategies they use to maintain well-being in their work life and to uphold balance in their lives, thereby preventing ill-health. Let us now look closer at methods that enhance competent self-leadership.

Change your focus

When it comes to mental well-being, there is a tendency to focus more on identifying problems. We seek out and want to eliminate the factors in our work life that create ill-health and that may lead to a lack of motivation or a burn-out, which is of course important. But as much time as we spend identifying the destructive forces, we should also spend on identifying the things that spark energy. At times it is good to change your focus from trying to minimise the things that break you down, to things that really create such circumstances that will help you to realize your full potential.

To change focus you can ask yourself the following:

- What gives me energy?
- What circumstances do I need to be able to perform at my full potential?
- What helps me reach a state of 'flow?'
- What do I appreciate the most about my work, and how can I make it possible to do what I appreciate the most even more?

Learn to be afterwise

People say that it is easy to be afterwise, meaning that it is of course easy to judge one's deeds with hindsight when one knows how things have turned out. To learn from your mistakes is however a most important skill to develop if you want to be a good self-leader. It is, however, hard to be genuinely afterwise. It demands that you evaluate your decisions and actions afterwards; that you truly try to learn from your experiences. This is especially important for people in walks of life where the need of self-leadership is high, for example, within the performing arts. Imagine that you have managed to get through an extremely stressful period at work, where things have piled up and the pressure has almost been overwhelming – it is after such periods you of course first need to rest – but then you should evaluate the experience. What choices did I have, what were the decisive situations I encountered, and how did I act on these choices? With hindsight, it might be possib-

le to spot situations where you might have been able to choose or act differently. In the moment we often feel that we have no real choices. The situation is perhaps fraught, and everything seems to depend on us doing that little bit extra, working those extra late hours. In retrospect, viewing the situation calmly from a safe distance, you are more in contact with your full cognitive and creative capacities.

Questions to ask yourself in hindsight

- In that stressful situation, were there other possible solutions that I didn't notice? Could I have suggested a different solution that might have eased my burden somewhat?

- Could I have asked for help or delegated the task to someone?

- Might I have said 'no' to the prospect without it having catastrophic consequences?

- Looking back at the situation, did the task really need to be done immediately?

- In similar pressured situations in the future, how might I learn to recognize these choices? And what might I then do differently?

Write a list of your own tools and strategies — your own constructive suggestions — to be used in similar situations ahead.

Formulate long-term goals or a long-term pursuit

Five voices on career goals:

"I have never formulated any long-term goals for myself, partly because I have always worked freelance. Even when I have had a longer position, it has always been a question of contracts that need renegotiation every three years . . . This has made me less prone to planning. Also, I have always been lucky, so I have not needed to phrase any goals. I have had lots of work opportunities and just jumped from one job to the next."

"I have never made up any long-term goals, partly out of fear of them backfiring. What if I make goals and then fail to reach them? This is a psychological barrier; it is much better not to have a goal but to just take one step at a time."

"No, I have not set up any specific goals earlier. I have just moved from the one project to the next. The pandemic gave me a pause that got me thinking: where do I want to be when I turn fifty? What do I want my days to look like? For how long will I manage to work the way I do now? Seeking out projects and always being one step ahead?"

"No, because I wouldn't believe in those goals myself. If I were to decide that within a year I will be working as a director or an actor, I'd distrust even the possibility. I'm not prepared to do the work that is necessary to reach such goals. The demands that kind of pursuit calls for make me angry."

"In our branch, to be allowed to carry on doing what we love, we are highly dependent on others' good will . . . I need to rely on politicians making the right decisions, on a steady audience — but again, I have perhaps used these as excuses. They aren't real obstacles when it comes to setting goals for oneself."

Judging from the in-depth interviews in this study, the term 'goal' comes across as problematic. A major part of the interviewees has not clarified any specific goals, neither for themselves nor concerning their careers. Various reasons are mentioned: that one is dependent on factors over which one has no control; that projects are limited in time and demand less long-term planning; that one has mostly been successful anyway; or that goals are binding and create a fear of failure, thereby becoming a source of stress. Since the performing arts are characterised by short-term commitments and temporary constellations, it may follow that work is shaped by the present and the next engagement. Since one can never be sure to still have an engagement six months or a year later, it seems easier instead to plan for the present and the near future. However, you can always be aware of the long-term plan no matter what the job market looks like or how far ahead you can stretch your income. You do not necessarily need to know exactly how to reach this goal, the important thing is to create the circumstances that will lead you in the right direction.

Since the word 'goal' seems to give rise to conflicting emotions, it might be useful to rather use the term 'long-term striving.' A striving is not as binding. It does not imply a definite goal, but you still know what is important to you, in which direction your decisions and choices should be made, and as long as you are moving in the direction you have set up for yourself, then you have already reached your goal.

Ask yourself:

In the long term, what is the most important thing I wish to achieve?
In which direction do I want to strive?

There are of course examples of persons who have no difficulty describing their goals, especially among the students at the Academy of Music and Drama at Göteborg University. Below is a quote from a student who, to avoid becoming paralysed by all the different choices there are, has a definite need of setting clear goals.

"If I don't set myself goals, I get all stressed up. Faced with all these choices and the difficulty of having to rule things out, my brain just sees

too many alternatives. No, I need clear goals and plans. I have goals for my income, and ideas about things I want to achieve as an actor. I have lists for each year, and I sort things into categories. The strange thing is that I usually reach my goals — so far, I have never failed. I find that when I express them and write them down in words they usually materialize."

Try to constantly deepen your self-awareness

As mentioned above, self-awareness is about being conscious of one's strengths, weaknesses, needs, and motivations; and of being aware of how emotions impact one's performance, and how they affect others. Besides formulating values and goals, there are several other tools that can help to give us a deeper self-awareness. Below we present some of the most important ones.

Identify your strengths and weaknesses

A crucial aspect of self-awareness is to be familiar with one's strengths and weaknesses. To reach this familiarity you need to make time for introspection. Ask yourself if you are ready to scrutinize your shortcomings and learn from them. It can be painful to be aware of your failures, but to make it worthwhile, you need to know if you really want to go through with it. The most important thing though is to think about things you have always been good at and things you have an aptitude for. Several researchers say that it is more effective to build on one's strengths than to try to become better in areas where one is weak.

To find your strengths and weaknesses it might be useful to do some tests on the web. There are self-assessment tests based on Myers Brigg's personality tests, tests that build on research about the Big Five, and tests that are based on other research in psychology. The results can bring new insights and confirm things you already know.

Make sure to get continuous feedback from others

Research distinguishes between internal and external self-awareness. Internal awareness entails knowing one's values, passions, strivings, goals, and how clearly one sees one's own reactions (thoughts, emotions, behaviour). A high level of internal self-awareness is connected to a stronger sense of well-being in life and in one's work life; also, it means less stress and anxiety.

External self-awareness on the other hand is about how well you grasp other people's views of you — from the various aspects listed above. Research shows that people who understand how other people see them, are also more capable of showing empathy for and understanding of other peoples' perspectives. Self-awareness is a balance between two different perspectives: how you regard yourself and how well you understand the way you come across to other people.

To improve our external self-awareness, we need feedback from others. Here it is important to choose carefully who you want feedback from. Organizational psychologist Tasha Eurich advises us to ask for feedback from "loving critics," that is, from persons who have our best at heart and who are willing to tell us the truth.

Experience in itself does not automatically lead to a heightened self-awareness. Long experience can instead give us a false impression that this is the case. One study, for example, shows that more experienced leaders were not as good at judging the efficiency of their own leadership compared to less experienced leaders. Power and experience can stand in the way of self-awareness. For example, one study done on 3 600 leaders in various roles and fields of work shows that the more power a leader has the more prone they are to overestimate their own competences and skills. There are various explanations to this. One is that the more power a leader has, the fewer persons there are who are prepared to give them honest feedback on their performance — there is always the risk that constructive criticism of a superior can harm one's own career. This points to the importance of never giving up looking for honest feedback from carefully chosen persons.

Identify your own limits

"I've gone from not having a boss, to becoming a boss myself. I still have the feeling that I need to be around all the time to deliver and prove that I belong and that you can trust me to be close by when I'm needed. I want to be a leader who is always easy to reach — but I also suffer from my ambitions, at least during certain periods of the year. Then my sleep is impacted, and I can't stop thinking about work."

"Who are the ones to burn out here? Those who run like hell to satisfy others all the time. 'Oh dear, now I feel that things are going wrong so I must bake some cake or sit half the night and talk to a troubled actor colleague on the phone.' There are prompters who even go home to people after work hours. I never go that far. I am certainly not a personal assistant or a coffee girl."

A vital task concerning self-leadership is to identify one's limits and create a balance in one's life. This is especially important for those who work freelance and for all those who work on a gig market where all the responsibility to create a reasonable workload falls on the individual. The boundaries needed to create this balance vary from person to person. It may be a question of how many work hours one has, or the number of projects one can keep going at the same time. Some have a tendency to over-achieve and they might need to lower their ambitions, while others have the tendency to under-achieve and need to identify a lowest level that also works for others.

Identifying your own limits is a skill that you can and should develop your entire life, for example, by listening to signals from your body and taking them seriously. When you have recognized your limits, you also need to clearly, and respectfully,

communicate these to others, so that other people on their part can have a chance of respecting them.

Find a mentor or a coach

One question put to the interviewees concerned which advice regarding well-being they would be prepared to give those starting up a career within the performing arts. Many suggested: find a mentor! Having a mentor with more experience of the branch, you can access insights and tools that otherwise might take a long time to find. The interviewees underscore that for the talks to be open and for there not to be any fear of sabotaging one's career when talking freely about ill-health and anxiety, the mentor should be someone on whom one is not dependent.

A mentor is usually described as an expert who offers expert advice based on their own experiences. A good mentor, though, is more than one who gives good advice; a good mentor will help you to gain new insights by asking guiding questions. The talks should be based on the novice's goals and wishes as to how they want to shape their work life and their life.

Having a mentor is not only valuable for young people who are new to the field. It is also important for seniors throughout their careers to have vibrant social networks and to ask for honest feedback from a chosen few. This is important even when you are the most experienced person of all or have reached the highest position in your organisation. And it is especially important if you are a leader. Because, as mentioned earlier, the more power you have, the harder it is to get honest feedback, and you might easily be fooled into a false assumption that you are still developing and becoming a better leader.

Learn to say 'yes' to important things (and 'no' to the rest)

One way of understanding your limits without letting this understanding encroach on your potential, is to think in terms of essentialism. The writer Greg McKeown has written many books on this issue and defines the concept as follows: essentialism is your disciplined striving after less. If the goal is to strive to be one's best, then we must sort out what we are best at and take away the rest. The summons is to verbalize our most essential intention: if you are to excel at one thing, what would that thing be? By phrasing an answer to this question, we create conditions that help us to say 'no' to trivial pursuits and instead make it possible to focus on the essential ones. To be successful in an essentialist lifestyle we need to curb ourselves and ask: am I spending my time on the right things?

One can disagree with a lot in McKeown's reasoning — in practice it is not possible to formulate an essential intention and to stick strictly by it, especially not if you are trying to support yourself working freelance. However, his reasoning can be seen as a mindset that can open inner rooms. If you have tried to formulate your essential intention it is more likely that you can discriminate between things and

say 'no' to irrelevant suggestions and tasks — as opposed to not having tried to articulate your intentions at all. His reasoning can therefore allow us to be more selective.

Essentialism can be described as a conscious attempt to set limits. Limits might otherwise be set randomly, for example, when we suddenly feel that we have too much to do, or there are too many things on our plate. This kind of ad hoc limiting is not consciously fashioned, and we have no control over what we are saying 'yes' or 'no' to. An essential intention on the other hand makes it possible for us from the start to discriminate the tasks that are important to us from the great many trivial tasks that abound.

> *"When I was young, I said 'yes' to everything and at that point it would have been better if I had listened to my intuition. The quicker one realises one's own goals the better it is, because then it is easier to choose among jobs. Getting many requests to dance can be very flattering but it is important to learn what is good for you and what isn't."*

SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

"One of the leader's central tasks is to create an atmosphere of safety. When a person feels safe, if they want to they can override borders when necessary. This kind of atmosphere should be implemented. In the physical room it is important that the director creates such an atmosphere, which also includes the whole house. If that sense of safety is lacking in the rest of the house, it will spill over. It is necessary to work at all levels with an atmosphere of safety."

Research shows that one prerequisite for peoples' performance is that the workplace is permeated by an atmosphere of psychological safety. This is especially important when one is asked to contribute creatively and to have access to one's emotional resources. The responsibility of upholding this kind of psychological safety lies with the leadership.

Psychological safety means that co-workers should not feel inhibited by social fear, that is, that they should dare to share new ideas, fears, or failures, ask questions, ask for help, and show their lack of knowledge without being afraid of being belittled or punished. In a psychologically safe organization openness is rewarded and staff are willing to take the kinds of risks that openness and honesty imply. In such an atmosphere, even if they do not comply with the norm, people feel comfortable to show and to be their true selves.

Amy C. Edmondson, a researcher in the field of leadership and organizational learning, claims that there are three measures that leaders may implement to secure psychological safety:

1. Creating space — for example, by being transparent concerning the work task at hand, by setting up a clear framework for the task, and by stating the goal lucidly.

2. Inviting cooperation — for example, by asking the right kinds of questions and creating a structure that will make it easy for people to share ideas and misgivings.

3. Reacting in a constructive way — for example, by listening thoughtfully, by affirming the speaker, by erasing the stigma of failure, and by being clear about the limits and about the kind of behaviour that is deemed unacceptable.

Psychological safety does not indicate that leaders should pamper their co-workers or avoid setting high standards. On the contrary, psychological safety should be combined with high standards in performance to make it possible for co-workers to develop and mature. People working in a psychologically safe organization

should be held accountable if they do not perform in compliance with the standards or the set goals.

A leader's five measures

Based on the in-depth interviews conducted for this study, five measures are here presented for leaders in the performing arts who want a more sustainable and high-quality approach in their leadership. We are choosing to call these measures by the verbs' imperative forms: name, involve, defuse (tone down), challenge, and evaluate.

1. Name

> *"Eliminating as much silence as possible as soon as possible surrounding issues such as sustainability and mental well-being and making sure that everyone is open about these issues – these are the great challenges for me as a director."*

In a branch characterised by temporary constellations of colleagues and leaders, where projects mostly have both regular and temporary staff, the leader's approach, and the clarity of this leadership (especially at the beginning of the process), is crucial to eventually managing to reach the goals and making certain that people are coping. To be clear from the start about the expectations at the workplace and to distinctly communicate the vision, the framework, and the expectations, are all necessary tasks for the leaders. For various reasons, this initial communication can sometimes fail. Perhaps due to a lack of time, or that the leader does not have access to the relevant information, or that one thinks that everyone knows everything anyway.

> *"Time issues and having preliminary meetings are necessary at the start of a project. One needs to clarify the various ways of working. How do we go about things? What kind of support is necessary? How can I or we be of assistance? Time must be set aside to articulate how best to cooperate with the director and their team, with the lighting technicians, the actors, the costume designers — everybody!"*

How the team is treated from the start and the tone of the leadership at the first meeting are factors that will make an imprint on the kind of culture that will come to permeate the whole project. A leader needs to be aware of this and to carefully – beforehand – think through their style of leadership.

As a leader, in the initial phase of a project, it is also important to inform about aspects concerning a sustainable work environment and mental well-being. What measures should be taken if a conflict arises that cannot be handled directly by the director, the choreographer, or any of the others involved? To clearly name issues concerning mental health, and by informing about whom to turn to with questions, are ways of building confidence in the leadership, which in extension will promote the whole creative process.

Several interviewees describe failed leadership within the performing arts, so there clearly is a need of more professional leadership. Leaders who lack respect for their co-workers' integrity, or who treat their regular employees differently from the freelance workers, are of course not acceptable at any workplace. An important first step in this professionalization is for the leaders to take their responsibilities seriously and to ensure that all the co-workers have all the relevant information already at an early stage in the project.

> "It's one thing to be the chief executive or the artistic director, but then even the director is a leader. There's a need of more clarity when it comes to who is responsible for what. The director is responsible for the work environment during the production; for example, the director has to report when a person is unwell or is the target of harassment. Today, many directors don't see this as self-evident, often because it has never been clearly communicated. If the leadership does not agree on where the responsibility lies, then how can it be clear to the rest?"

Questions a leader should ask themselves:

- Have I clearly communicated the vision for this project? Has everyone understood what is expected of them and what they can expect from me?

- Can I be certain that everyone feels welcome?

- Have I made clear how I prefer to work? What methods and procedures I may use to realize my ideas?

- Have I communicated the difficulties we might encounter?

- Have I made clear to my co-workers to whom they can turn in health-related issues or if they encounter any problems or conflicts?

- Have I clearly communicated where the limits are and what may be deemed a breach of these limits?

2. Involve

> "A good work environment in the performing arts is an open environment where you feel listened to and implicated in the discussion, whether you are an actor, a costume designer, a scenographer, or a stage technician. If the atmosphere is open enough for a stage technician to contribute to the artistic process, then I can rely on everyone's well-being and I know that the leaders have done a good job."

Creative processes and situations put high demands on the leadership. It is difficult, if not impossible, to cooperate with others and to actively contribute to a creative vision if one does not feel involved in the process, or if nobody listens to

one's thoughts or ideas. For everyone to feel involved, the leaders need to set the right tone from the very first meeting. The leader needs to signal perceptiveness and a genuine interest in everyone who is part of the project. One needs to be humble and to point out that one does not have all the answers, and that the process will be a collective learning process. It is also important to set up a structure for continuous monitoring of the co-workers' ideas and possible concerns. This structure can vary depending on the group or the project, but the point is for the leader to have a plan beforehand.

The challenge for the leadership while creating this open and engaging work climate, is to avoid becoming vague or unclear in the leadership role. The key to success for the leader is to balance goal-orientation with perceptiveness and flexibility. On the road to the clearly communicated goal, the leader should navigate by means of listening in and adjusting to new circumstances.

> *"Perhaps one reaches the goal in a different way from what the leader first envisioned. Firstly, open communication is important — the leader needs to listen to and really hear people's ideas. What the leader wants cannot be fuzzy. It must be lucid – not hidden or secretive. Everyone must know what the director wants. However, it should still be possible to say: 'Yes, that was true yesterday, but now I have listened in and have changed my mind.'"*

To actively involve and engage people of course raises demands on the co-workers' self-leadership skills and professionalism. One needs to be able to express one's ideas or any criticism one has in a professional way. We have also learnt from #MeToo how important it is that people feel safe to express their limits and to say 'no' when necessary. This should be welcomed by the leaders. But it also entails that co-workers are competent and professional in their communication.

> *"A lot became better after #MeToo and it was certainly not good before then. Now it is possible to say 'no'. Meanwhile, the demands are higher on the actor to communicate in a professional way. Instead of for example remaining silent or just leaving the room, it is important to stay calm and in a friendly manner point out your boundaries vis-à-vis a director or other colleague. Free-lancers sometimes fear that if they draw a line they won't get another appointment, but it is also about how you say 'no' and how you mark your limits. If you act in a way that makes the other party angry — if you shout or lose control — then things will go wrong. On the other hand, if you act professionally and wisely then there is seldom a problem. We need to help each other."*

Questions to ask yourself as a leader:

- Have I clearly encouraged people to ask and speak up if there is anything unclear or anything they wonder about?

- Have I clarified that this is a collective learning process?

- Have I listened perceptively and affirmed that I have heard my co-worker's ideas?

- Have I secured a structure that makes it easy to continuously gather my co-workers' ideas, suggestions, and trepidations?

- Have I pointed out that no matter what part one has in the production, everyone's contributions and ideas are welcome and equally important?

- Have I communicated that I am open to feedback, and have I mentioned where and how I am prepared to receive this feedback?

3. Defuse (tone down)

"In the world of theatre, people perform best in unpretentious and non-judgemental groups. In groups where one is generous towards and curious about one another. It all begins with the leadership. The leader must admit: 'I can be wrong.' The leader must ensure that there is room for new ideas; that there is opportunity for testing and trying out new notions! As a leader, each time I succeed in creating this kind of atmosphere it makes me happy — for example, when actors test new methods; when they dare to cross borders that they have been wary of before; when it is not just a question of talk, but that we have managed to create something truly permissive."

An important aspect of safety in an organization is that the leadership in a constructive way reacts to problems encountered, to criticisms and shortcomings. It is partly a question of upholding a solution-oriented approach in complicated situations, and partly about defusing failure. Performing arts projects are often beset with new challenges and complications that pop up during the short period of time when a project must be drawn up and rehearsed. As a leader one needs to be prepared to face bad news from co-workers and to ensure that these problems do not have negative consequences for all involved. It is of course much worse if people do not dare to pass on the bad news. In the face of failures and problems silence can be far more devastating to a project than openness. Failure can also be a necessary part of the creative process and of innovation.

"As a director it is stimulating when one has managed to create an environment that helps people to take initiative and to contribute to the creative process."

Within the performing arts, since many work on a freelance basis, it is especially important to actively encourage co-workers to test new things and to take risks. The continuous search for new appointments can curb the will to be experimental, because many who work freelance feel that there is no room to fail.

"Everything is connected to whether one has an engagement or not. We must work with the job we have, and better ourselves, but meanwhile we need to look for our next job. This can curb one's personal development.

Since one is afraid of failing, there is no space for bad scenography; it is bound to have repercussions, consequences. Experiment is constrained.”

Questions to ask yourself as a leader:

- When my co-workers have brought me bad news, have I reacted constructively?

- How can I make sure to keep a solution-oriented approach in the face of drawbacks?

- Has my own behaviour demonstrated that experiment and failure are permitted and may make good learning opportunities?

- Have I clearly communicated the limits and what is and is not permissible? Also, have I communicated how breaches of these limits will be handled?

4. Challenge

“To create art, people need to be challenged; we need to be dared to do something hard. This is a balancing act: if the task is too difficult one loses one's self-assurance, but if it is too easy then there won't be any great art. The actor in me likes a director who doesn't give up easily. Someone who says: 'We're getting there, but we need to take one step further.' Someone who can challenge my usual way of doing things.”

As mentioned above, to challenge co-workers and allow them to develop in their professional roles they need to feel safe. Research shows, however, that if this safety is not combined with high standards, then the co-workers may easily fall into a comfort zone that in the long run fails to be demanding enough. If the team is to maintain their strong engagement, they need to be challenged.

Many agree that good art is created when actors and other professionals in the performing arts dare to step outside of their comfort zones, a state that is reached by demanding high standards from everybody. For this to happen, there must be a general trust in the leadership — trust that the leaders have earned.

One challenge for a director, for example, is to have the actors feel uninhibited enough to take new steps in their artistic lives. To reach this goal the leader needs to think through how they should relate pedagogically to the actors. Leaders must be honest, but they also need a thorough knowledge of how to communicate honest feedback constructively. This becomes even more important when people are expected to work with their inner, emotional, and creative resources, which tends to leave them feeling exposed. The director must balance between allowing their team to stretch their professional limits, while still managing to maintain their own sustainable limits. This demands a lot of the leader's perceptiveness, their sure instinct, and their concern for both the work at hand and for their co-workers.

"For me to perform at my very best, I need some artistic resistance and I need to be artistically inspired. I need to be put into question; I need someone to say: 'What are your thoughts on this?' I need to be challenged."

Questions to ask yourself as a leader:

- Have I clarified the demands that I as a leader have on my co-workers, and have I clearly communicated what they are expected to deliver?
- Do I have a strategy for how to communicate honest, constructive feedback to my co-workers?
- Have I done everything in my power to help my team feel challenged so that they can perform to their full potential?

5. Evaluate

"Following up and evaluating is of utmost importance. Even when a project has failed, there is often no follow-up evaluation. It seems that when a freelancer is done with their job at the theatre, their experiences suddenly become uninteresting. I think that, if a person has had a tough time before leaving, one should still show some empathy and approach them afterwards even though it is no longer one's responsibility. Many leave due to stress and this is seldom followed up on."

One of the most important measures taken by a leader to promote a sustainable work life is the evaluation of a project. Since evaluations contribute to future learning, they mark both a finish to a project and a new beginning. Within the performing arts there is a great deal of variation as to whether projects and performances are formally evaluated afterwards or not. At some institutions it is a routine procedure, while at others it becomes a question of finding time for it. Evaluations offer a great opportunity for the leadership to develop, and each leader ought to be allowed to see the evaluation and to learn from it so that they have a chance to develop their leadership.

Within the performing arts, often due to a lack of time and tight deadlines, it is hard immediately after a performance to share thoughts, evaluations, and criticisms. Many say that discussions are often pushed to the future. Since a great number work freelance and perhaps feel that there is no forum to raise issues of criticism, it is ever more important to conduct evaluations afterwards, thereby giving the organization and leadership an opportunity to develop.

"Even if we don't have contracts, there must be ways to implicate free-lance workers in the ongoings at the institutions. We freelancers want to but can't always manage to contribute to activities. We certainly want to feel that we belong — even when we aren't working in a specific project. Everyone wants to feel included and to be able to influence things."

Questions to ask yourself as a leader (issues to raise in an evaluation):

- Have we made sure that all those who have taken part in the project will be given a chance to do the evaluation?

- Is it possible to find out why some participants have chosen not to take part in the evaluation of the project?

- Does the evaluation include questions on how psychologically safe the participants have felt during the project? For example, whether it has been safe to take risks; whether there is an openness in the discussions; whether they have felt encouraged to ask questions, and to share ideas?

- Have we clearly communicated the vision, the limits, the general framework, and the expectations?

THE AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

To have had the opportunity to research the subject of mental health and self-leadership for the performing arts has been an exciting experience. This report seeks to create a balanced picture that reflects the seriousness of the situation within the performing arts, while pointing out how health and a sustainable work-life might be maintained. There is a high level of awareness about the need of change, and a noteworthy striving to address these issues. The interviewees in the study give me reason to believe that things are getting better and that a brighter future is possible.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to all those who anonymously have shared their experiences, their ideas, and their concrete strategies. Your stories have added to the weight and the credibility of this report. By sharing your thoughts, you have contributed to a greater understanding of the situation in the performing arts and have encouraged change.

Finally, I would like to add that it is not an easy journey we have ahead of us. The journey demands endurance and collective action from all parties. I hope that this report can function as one step forward on that journey and that it will stimulate many important discussions.

I am proud to have been part of this vital dialogue.

Thank you.

Sofia Rasmussen,
CEO Rasmussen Analys