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Troubling aesthetics: mapping vulnerability as a generative force in community theatre

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the risks and potentials of staging vulnerability in community theatre with teenage girls. By drawing on postconstructionist and spatial theories, the article elaborates on how aesthetic spaces emerge when interwoven with spaces of vulnerability. Exploring how vulnerability becomes a generative, or restrictive force, the article debates tensions produced in the process in terms of *potentia* and *potestas*. It examines the embeddedness of the drama practice as it both challenges and merges with the local context and the participants' everyday. The article argues that this embeddedness is a prerequisite to turn vulnerability into potentia.

KEYWORDS

Vulnerability; heterotopia; community theatre; girls' drama; applied drama

Prelude

Sweden, November 2019: Friday night at the local theatre

Act 1, Scene iii: The break-up

Characters: Lova and Michelle, both aged 15

Place: A viewpoint in the Central park from where most of the town is visible

'I have got a surprise for you!' Lova says with a voice filled with anticipation as she shows the recently purchased train tickets to her girlfriend Michelle.

'What?' exclaims Michelle and laughs. Lova holds up the tickets and explains that these are the tickets that will take them to their planned vacation up in the mountains during the summer break away from watching eyes and the gossiping behind their backs. She exclaims they do not need much, as everything is supplied in the cabin. Michelle replies in a hesitant voice that because of her parents, she might not be allowed to go. That was not the response Lova had hoped for: 'You still haven't asked them?' Lova takes a step back, looking at Michelle in disbelief: 'We are leaving on Friday!' Michelle tries to explain that her parents are not like Lova's and she is not sure they will accept her being gay: 'You know it does not work like that in my culture', she says in a sad voice. Lova becomes upset and disappointed that the trip might not happen after all

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and while turning her back to Michelle, she mutters: 'Damn shitty culture destroying this town'. At first, Michelle cannot believe what she is hearing and approaches Lova, asking in a distressed voice: 'What are you saying?'. Lova screams in reply: 'I am saying that your culture fucks up this town'. Lova makes a gesture towards the town below them and looks straight at Michelle who then backs away and answers in the same affective way: 'I never thought I'd have to defend myself in front of you!'

The audience sits absolutely still as the scene evolves in front of them. After this argument, the two teenage girls go their separate ways only to meet some years later at Michelle's hen night which is the central plot. The play is based on the performers' own stories and experiences, which brings an extra resonance to the event. The scene is a flashback, revealing a hidden love story, surfacing just as Michelle is about to enter into an arranged marriage with a man she hopes she will learn to love. Many of the 250 audience members seem to be torn between laughter and crying as humour blends with tragedy in a story that also deal with teenage pregnancy, dick-pics, creative ways of hair-removal and how to trick your husband into believing you are a virgin on the wedding night. More than anything, it is a story of becoming woman in this particular Swedish town. No matter how easy it is to focus on the success of the play, this article will focus on the rocky road leading up to this night of the performance, the decision-making and tensions involved when working with community theatre in which the participants' vulnerability is also the theme of the performance.

Points of departures

This article stems from a 15-month long ethnographic study exploring space, place and the staging of young females' everyday lives. As a researcher, I have been following an all-girl community theatre-group in their process of creating a performance. The group's performances are based on the girls' experiences of becoming young women in a particular industrial town in Sweden. The girls create the content of the play and the workshop leaders / artistic team are responsible for the aesthetic shape. This is, however, a collaborative process with no clear divisions between the two. The group's artistic work strives to put girls' experiences at the forefront of what it is like growing up in a town which is perceived by the girls, aged 13–17, as permeated by rumours and gossip and a feeling of being controlled. One of the participating girls, Nora, says: 'You can't really say anything to anybody ... people will find out. It's a gossipy town'. Another girl, Sarah, recognises she is always being watched and feels that she 'can never hide' from those controlling her. Many of the girls speak of the town as 'all homophobic and sexist', to use Malva's words, why girls such as Linn avoid holding hands with her girlfriend when walking in the central parts of the town: 'I am aware people will dislike it' she comments. She and many other gay men and lesbians travel to a nearby city where they feel more comfortable being publicly open with their sexuality. Through these disclosures, the girls come across as vulnerable, in the sense that they are interdependent on place and social context as well as on discourses. However, rather than 'viewing girls as needing to be empowered, transformed or rerouted' (Renold and Ivinson 2014, 374), my ontological assumptions are in line with Renold and Ivinson that the girls are agents in their own right, despite being simultaneously vulnerable.

In this article, vulnerability is encountered as a structural and situational matter, related to class, ethnicity, place and gender. All beings are vulnerable, but, as Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti make clear, different subjects and groups will be affected differently due to the norms and power structures they encounter (Braidotti 2019; Butler 2016; 2020; Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). Vulnerability is often connected to passivity and lack of agency, however, Butler argues vulnerability is also a condition informing resistance (Butler 2016). Through this argument, she strives to move beyond old binaries where vulnerability is the opposite of power and agency. Butler suggests that vulnerability can potentially inform actions resisting limiting power structures. Vulnerability can thus be a resource for collective action that strives for social change. Articulating vulnerability in this manner is thought-provoking when exploring how an applied theatre practice enables vulnerability to become both an artistic expression and a mark of resistance.

When working with groups such as the girls in this theatre group, who are vulnerable in the sense that they are interdependent on social context, there will always be a certain amount of fragility involved. The participants might be marked by violence, discrimination and/or injustice. Thus, when creating a performance based on their experiences, the aesthetics will partly arise from experiences of vulnerability. As drama practitioner and founder of Geese Theatre Company Clark Baim has expressed, this can make the performance vibrant and relevant at best, or voyeuristic and abusive at worst (Baim 2017). The participants are co-creators of a performance in which their lives, dreams, experiences and vulnerabilities are the stuff of which the performance is made. This, together with the personal and collective investment in this practice call to explore the risks involved creating meaning and engagement and where experiences of vulnerability are used 'within the frame of the imagination' (O'Grady 2017, xi). One response to these concerns in applied drama and theatre is how to create safe spaces where the participants, more or less at risk, collectively share and explore difficult themes from their everyday by embodying fictional roles and situations. However, as Paul Dwyer points out, notions of safe space are rarely contextualised with the location in which the drama work takes place (Dwyer 2016). Considering the range of research that problematises the concept of safe space (e.g. Norris and Salverson 2021; White 2021; Hunter 2008; Busby 2021; Sloan 2018), I recognise that practitioners and researchers are well aware of the complexity of spaces produced in applied theatre practice. There is now a move away from the notion of safe space and instead explore spatial concepts such as 'third space' (Soja 1996) or 'heterotopia' (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986) when trying to capture the multitude of spaces created in the drama room (e.g. Szatek 2020; Rodricks 2015; Greenwood 2010; Woodson 2015; Busby 2021; Kitchen 2018). The idea of heterotopia allows for an exploration of how the drama room is a complex space as it is both secluded from and firmly inter-connected with local context. The spaces produced in such a space are bound to be multiple, some of which could be described as safe, others will not why I will return to the idea of heterotopia later in this article.

In light of this, I will engage in mapping the theatre practice as an embedded practice, dealing with issues entangled in local culture that produce vulnerabilities. Of interest is also the multitude of spaces produced and encountered in the process. Part of this mapping will inevitably have to explore the tensions framing the relations of place, vulnerability and aesthetics. That is, how to handle the fact that the participants' vulnerability

becomes an aesthetic expression as well as the theme of a public performance. I believe this discussion will be of benefit to practitioners and academics who, through their theatre-practice, strive to make their local context a better place.

Within this framework, this paper discusses how the vulnerability of the participants becomes integral to a performance based on their own lives. This approach is often put to work in community theatre and other applied theatre genres with political, social and artistic ambitions. It also maps how various spaces evolves and changes as the performance takes shape and the relation between the drama room and the local context becomes increasingly complicated. With the attempt to map how vulnerability can become a generative force (Butler 2020) in these kinds of complex and entangled drama/performance spaces, I will frame the discussion by putting Braidotti's and Butler's ideas on vulnerability in motion together with spatial theories. This article is guided by two questions: How are resistance and restraints generated from vulnerability in the performance process? What tensions and spaces emerge in the process of working with vulnerability?

This article starts with theoretical departure points followed by a description of the drama practice and methodological considerations encountered during the research. The theories are put to work when analysing events from the performance process. I will conclude by discussing my findings in relation with the field of applied theatre.

Vulnerability as a generative force

By putting spatial and postconstructionist theories to work I will explore how resistance is generated from vulnerability and what spaces emerge in the process leading up to the performance. How and why is explored in the following section. Postconstructionist philosophy embraces social-constructivism at the same time as it challenges some of its anthropocentric departure points by taking inspiration from posthumanist thinking (Lykke 2010). In this article this is further explored through feminist scholars Rosie Braidotti and Judith Butler. Despite their somewhat diverse theoretical framing, I found it productive to work with both of them as they help me explore vulnerability as a situational and relational matter that can inform resistance.

A postconstructionist approach means considering place and space as more than a mere backdrop against which vulnerabilities unfold. The subject is always, according to Braidotti, considered to be embedded or, located somewhere (Braidotti 2013). This means that the subject cannot be separated from the context and is always in the process of becoming while relating with place, things, and other living creatures. Braidotti calls for an 'enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human' (2013, 49). As such, becoming is not an individual matter, rather it is a relational, situated and open-ended process which by no means is linear. In the light of this, vulnerability is both embedded and relational. This makes issues such as class, location and gender matter why vulnerability is politically and socially produced (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016).

Although all living things are considered to be vulnerable in the sense that we could die or be exposed to harm, some will be more exposed than others and therefore be more vulnerable. That is, using Braidotti's words: 'We-are-in-*this*-together-but-we-are-*not*-one-and-the-same' (Braidotti 2019, 157). Vulnerability is always embedded and embodied in

a historical context in which politics and social relations matter and can only 'make sense in light of an embodied set of relations, including practices of resistance' (Butler 2020, 192). By thinking vulnerability together with resistance, Butler claims that 'vulnerability is not exactly overcome by resistance, but becomes a potentially effective mobilizing force in political mobilizations' (Butler 2016, 14). Vulnerability can thus, be a resource that strives towards political equality and justice. As such, it could be a transformative force enabling, what Braidotti (2013, 2019) refers to as 'potentia', a positive way of becoming linked to knowledge production enhancing the ability to take on the world. Potentia is linked to enabling power as opposed to power systems working in a more restrictive way, that is 'potestas'. As Braidotti notes, however, these two power systems, potentia and potestas co-exist 'as multiple facets of the same process, namely the process of subject formation' (Braidotti 2019, 92). A key focus of this article is to examine how community theatre creates spaces that enable potentia by working with and through vulnerability.

In line with Doreen Massey, I consider space and place as socially constructed, constantly in the making, containing multiple trajectories (Massey 2005) and ways of being. Space is in constant flux, shaped and reshaped by those inhabiting it. The formation of space is a collective achievement 'formed by a myriad of practices of quotidian negotiations and contestations' (Massey 2005, 154). At stake is an openness allowing for multiple possibilities of becoming, producing knowledges. This article will, in light of this, engage with the spaces and tensions involved when through community theatre attempting to both re-work negative experiences and break with norms.

Researching vulnerability in a heterotopic drama room

In my research, I found that the theatre practice is embedded and entangled with local structures while at the same time being an isolated safe space exclusively for the girls involved, aged 13–17. To highlight this particular function of the drama room I have chosen to conceptualise it as a heterotopia as explored in Szatek (2020). By mapping the drama room as heterotopia its political aspects were accentuated while also exploring how the drama room is simultaneously produced by and producing a multitude of spaces. The Foucauldian term heterotopia can be interpreted in multiple ways but I focus on its capacity of being 'in relation with all other sites' while also being 'outside of all places' (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 24). This paradoxical nature allows for the drama room to be embedded as well as isolated from local context, making it 'absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about' (ibid). The drama room is thus encountered as a political space, reflecting, juxtaposing and opposing particular sites in the participants' everyday (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986; Hetherington 1997; Soja 1996). In this space the girls are enabled to embody emotions and experiences from their everyday places, such as the school and town, while also creating expressions of resistance to limiting norms producing vulnerabilities.

Participating in the theatre group is free of charge, with the aim of positioning the artistic expression of the girls at the forefront, especially those whose access to art is limited. Once a week the girls meet to rehearse and explore themes related to becoming woman in their town. The performance process runs just over 18 months and is based on the girls' everyday experiences, visions and dreams. The aesthetics emerging from the girls and their everyday in this particular town are marked by a specific rhythm, pulse and

poetry and I perceive their expression as a response to a pressing issue or concern in line with Van Erven (2001). The plot of the performance is a forbidden love story between two teenage girls from different cultures. The girls have made up the central parts of it and populated the plot with characters. The participants' ideas and experiences, embodied in workshops and improvisations continually feed into the script, which is re-worked and edited by the workshop leaders /artistic team who have the function of authoring the play and steer the creative process towards a performance. Added to the material are layers of fiction and roles to protect the participants. This rewriting aims to produce a piece of theatre to which an audience can both relate and react by moving beyond the personal and private or, delivering mere messages, when challenging hegemonic norms in a town marked by homophobia and honour-violence. This participatory way of working also intends to create a sense of shared ownership of the performance produced. The girls are thus regarded as the experts on the content, whereas the artistic team has the final say when giving the content its artistic shape.

I have been following the process of creating the performance on a weekly basis from February 2019, when the group was exploring issues, themes and plot through to November 2019 when the performance premiered at the local theatre.¹ Three to four months after the premiere I also conducted individual interviews with the participants to create spaces for further reflections. Rather than focus on the subject, this article is, in line with post constructionist thinking, concerned with the multiple spaces and tensions in becoming and what they co-produce in the drama room. Attempting to research a heterotopic drama room that is ever changing as spaces evolve and emerge – not only in relation with the events in the drama room but also in relation with local context – is challenging. Multiple trajectories, spaces and tensions as well as subjects are at play in the process of creating a performance, thereby making research a multilayered and complex task. Tensions here are recognised as emerging when multiple trajectories clash rather than smoothly co-existing (Mol 2002). These collisions are not necessarily negative, rather: 'frictions are vital elements of wholes' (Mol 2002, 115). Questions to ask as a researcher are how do these trajectories of difference clash, how are they co-dependent and how do they resonate? As tensions and spaces are ephemeral, it has been a rather intuitive and sensuous process requiring me as a researcher to tune into the drama room as well as to the town. As such, it has been a process of moving between multiple spaces, mapping the drama spaces as both embedded and isolated from the town.

Mapping vulnerability as an ephemeral, embodied and embedded matter

Encountering a rather unpredictable process that is both ephemeral and material at the same time (Kershaw and Nicholson 2011) inspired me to put ethnographic methods to work by combining filming with formal and informal interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014), as well as involving arts-based methods (Barone and Eisner 2011). The study has in many parts been a mutual exploration where the girls, the leaders and myself tried to both put practice into words and words into practice. It should be made clear however, that I as researcher was not involved in the overall planning of the workshops leading up to the performance. Inspired by St. Pierre (2019), the empirical material for this article has also been co-constructed by theory, space, the participants, the researcher and

the theatre practice. With an extensive background as an applied theatre practitioner, I recognise the many tensions produced in the theatre process and I am aware of some of the challenges involved as a leader when trying to navigate them. Even though my apprehension of the events builds on an embodied experience, not always verbalised, it is of assistance as Pitches et al. notices (2011), when embracing the complexity of the situations explored as well as choosing which material to analyse further. The role as a researcher is from this point of view, not objective nor innocent (Braidotti 2019; Lykke 2009).

Articulating some of the spaces and tensions in the making, while also relating them to *potentia* and *potestas*, is a way of mapping how vulnerability becomes a force in the theatre process. In this process, I have been inspired by Braidotti (2018, 2019) whose cartographies account for subjects in becoming, and the non-human actors underscoring this process. The subject is in line with Braidotti, encountered as embedded and located somewhere which is why this mapping will focus on the spatial aspects of vulnerability in the performance process. When staging vulnerability, mapping emerging tensions and spaces is a matter of pulling apart the empirical material, momentarily separating bits and scenes from the bigger picture and, scrutinising them while asking 'how is vulnerability embodied here?', 'how are tensions and spaces produced in the event and what agents are involved?', 'how are spaces and tensions co-produced and co-dependent?' 'how are *potentia* and *potestas* produced?'

While engaging with the extensive material, a multitude of issues occurred. A cartography can never be fully complete; it is 'necessarily selective, partial and never exhaustive' (Braidotti 2018, 3). The analysis, therefore, does not capture the whole complexity of producing a community performance. Rather it concentrates on vulnerability in relation with artistic expression and space as well as with why and how the heterotopic character of the drama room comes to matter. I have chosen to stay with three events from my extensive material, which serve as a foundation for the analysis. The three events spoke to me because of their ability to intensively address two reoccurring tensions when working with vulnerability in an intersection of social, political and artistic ambitions:

- The tension of ownership and authorship of the performance
- The tension of protection and exposure when working towards the performance

The three events also acknowledge the heterotopic character of the drama room as well as put focus on the leaders' input when co-producing *potentia* as well as *potestas* with the girls.

Troubling encounters with vulnerability and aesthetics

In this section, three events from the performance process are explored through postconstructionist and spatial theories. The first event explores the importance of safe space when working with vulnerability, while the second example considers how the protection of participants and the idea of shared ownership of the performance create tensions. Thirdly, I consider the tensions involved when staging vulnerability when participant risk exposure in relation with local power structures. Altogether, I address the spaces and tensions in the making as an embedded and collective matter, generating *potentia*

as well as potestas when working with and through vulnerability. The events encountered in this article are part of the pre-performance workshops from 2019. In line with the general data protection regulation (GDPR), fictive names have been used throughout, including the leaders (Tove and Sofia) and the participants (Lina, Lea, Stella, Malva, Linn and Alya).

Analysing spaces for exploring and embodying vulnerabilities

Spring 2019: One mission for the day's workshop is to create a new scene that will show why the lesbian love story, the play's main focus, came to an end. Tove readies Lea, Stella and Lina, for an improvisation that shall embody the break-up between the story's main characters: Lova and Michelle. Tove asks the girls: 'Why do they go separate ways despite the fact they are in love?' Lea suggests as homosexuality is surrounded by shame among Syrians, Michelle is 'just ashamed about being with Lova. And that creates problems'. Tove asks what would happen if it came out that Michelle is in a same sex relationship. Lea responds: '*If her parents find out/ ...*', Lina interrupts: 'I don't think it is just the parents that is the biggest problem, I think society!' Lea replies quickly, suggesting it is a combination of both, adding: 'As Michelle is Syrian, the rumor will spread amongst all of her relatives, their friends and then the whole town will know'. Tove wants to know what could happen then: 'Would anyone do anything physical to her?' Lea shrugs and answers it is all about shame and the spreading of rumours. Stella explains further:

If you live in this town all of your life and have a big family, this town is your life. You know, my mum told me about her friend who can't get a divorce from her husband because people will start talking like: "Why does she do it? Does she want money? Her husband is tall and handsome". (Lea nods) So it will be like your whole world is against you, your whole world dissolves.

After this discussion, Lina and Stella improvise a scene that becomes central in the performance: the break up between the two main characters in the play, described initially in this article.

The discussion described between the leaders and the girls discloses an open and safe space in which the girls are quick both to respond to questions posed by the leader and to illustrate their answers with examples from their own everyday. The events discussed are connected to the characters in the play and the girls' families in which the girls relate with the underlying theme of gossip and shame, which resonates with them. In their day-to-day lives, many of the girls have to relate to rumours and are vulnerable in the sense that showing a bra-strap may expose them to comments and slut-shaming. Through the sharing of experience, there is a mapping of the girls' everyday and possible exposure of the structures producing vulnerability taking place. Paradoxically, as Butler (2020) points out, the structures that produce vulnerability are also structures on which the girls are interdependent, including family and local context. The girls, being teenagers, rely on their families as well as on the town they live in for their everyday and should this falter the girls would be left exposed to precarious conditions. The girls depend on the structures that produce vulnerability which indicates that reworking vulnerability towards *potentia* is not easily done.

As encountered in this event, the experiences of being vulnerable in relation with shame are spread equally throughout the group, regardless of family background.

Allowing the risk of shame to be a reason to break up a relation is thus not far-fetched, as illustrated above. The theme of the scene Lina and Stella makes later in the workshop is crystalised in the discussion, enabling the girls to embody the scene with confidence and care. There is a practicing of place happening here (Massey 2005), that is, an individual and collective investment, in which the girls become entangled with the drama and theatre practice by producing stories together with the drama practice. For Braidotti (2019) the creation of spaces where issues of negativity can be reworked into potentia are important. The drama room becomes a space where limiting structures in the everyday of the girls can be explored, thus collectively shaping a generative space enabling new ways of becoming. However, important aspects of this space include its creative and artistic qualities, brought forward by working through role and fiction as well as discussion. Embodying vulnerabilities creates engagement but is also a way to mobilise vulnerability stemming from shame and gossip towards potentia. Working through a fictional story could be a way of reworking negative experiences and aspects of vulnerability while also enabling vulnerability to become part of the performance.

Whose story is it anyway? Negotiating ownership and authorship of story

In the above-described scene, the experience of vulnerability in relation with public shaming is put in resonance with a fictional story: the forbidden love story between two teenage girls. The fictional story is a way of displaying limiting structures at work in their everyday. By working through fiction there is a safe distance between the girls' experiences and the story told on stage. The idea of how fictional contexts and roles help protect those owning the story is put to work here.

As the process continues the leaders take a more active role as authors striving to create art out of the girls' stories and the fiction is thus given an artistic shape. The protection of the girls is a major concern as some of the participants are exposed to honour violence in their everyday. The leaders argue that allowing the girls to shine and be their very best on stage is a way to protect them when publicly performing versions of their everyday why the rewriting act as a protection. Another measurement of protection taken by the leaders is to cast older actors in some of the most daring roles. The decisions are based on the leaders' long experience of living and working in the town from which they have developed a strong sense of awareness of the dangers of challenging local power structures. Their judgement is also validated by local town organisations working with women exposed to control and honour-violence. As Tove puts it: 'The whole play is based on a lesbian kiss. We didn't know at the start it would be so dangerous in this town. There is an absolute need for a safe and well-functioning cast'. Neither Tove, nor Sofia, wants to expose the girls to the most prominent roles, as the girls are too young to carry the theme of the play on their own. In the casting process, a handful of disappointments and questions arises concerning who is of an appropriate age and who has enough experience to take on a large role. As Linn puts it: 'I am showing a stereotype ... my character have no personality and there is no life history being shown.'

As the leaders step in as authors, rewriting many of the stories, some of the girls have difficulties with following the plot that is in the making; those girls are left hanging, so to speak, for some time. Perhaps this has to do with the paradoxical fact that the girls have created and, to some extent, also lived the story; they are the experts on the content and

as such they know all the small and subtle stories interwoven within the emerging script. As the leaders remove and add details to create a script that can communicate with an audience, the girls initially have difficulty following what the main story is. Alya explains they know all the intricate stories involved: 'It is difficult to point at what the play is about, we know more because we have been part of creating it'. The leaders have to spend time explaining how it all fits together, why some characters and scenes have been removed and why other scenes and characters remain. One month before the premiere this issue resolves at the first rehearsal of the play when all the scenes come together. This rehearsal enables the girls to grasp the entire play and regain a sense of ownership of the performance in the making. Then, on the other hand, the girls are affectionately moved as well as proud, as Lina, three months after the premiere, reflects:

At the first rehearsal we had, it was then I saw all the scenes in the correct order, how it all came together, how everyone had their own role and took responsibility, that's when I felt wow, this is a strong story. ... It was the exact same story I had imagined.

When looking back, Linn, who first was disappointed with her small role concludes that she feels as she is one of the creators of the performance although not showing it on stage: 'This performance has a story that needs telling ... I am really proud of that we created it and that is awesome!'

This example, I argue, problematise the idea of shared ownership as something automatically arising when merging artistic intentions with stories and experiences of vulnerability. Displayed is the emergence of different trajectories creating tensions (Mol 2002). The tensions are produced as the leaders try to ensure a safe connection between the drama room and the public performance space. Their striving towards a long-term responsibility is dependent on a careful contextualising of how and why the girls are vulnerable in their interconnectedness with this particular town. This is in line with Butler (2020), who argues that vulnerability cannot be reworked unless it is contextualised. When contextualising vulnerability, recognising limiting structures in the girls' everyday is important not only for the girls but also for the leaders. However, in the desire of the leader's to protect the girls, tensions and potestas surface as some girls feel left out, robbed on their own story and disappointed with their smaller roles. Linn's statement is marked by a loss of ownership of the story, a story she has been invested in and part of producing. The drama room, being a participatory and open sphere that embrace the sharing and embodying of experiences, as described initially, is now also marked by restrictions. This space materialises as the leaders try to take long-term responsibility, protecting the girls from the structures permeating the town and in doing so, rewrite and edit the girls' performance while also giving the play an artistic shape. The artistic and restrictive space in the making does not initially play well with all the girls and the open space that has been established in the drama room.

Tensions also emerge from the girls who are intimately familiar with the story and seem to struggle with identifying the exact plot of the performance and their role in it, thereby generating several trajectories in the drama space, each with its own direction. The restrictive rehearsal space does not have room for the amount of explaining that seems necessary to assemble the trajectories and create shared ownership, which is problematic in these kinds of community theatre processes. This tension does seem to ease, however, as the performance settles, indicated by Lina's statement. An important part of

this is related with grasping how one's character fits in with the bigger story. Lina and Linn display a sense of pride as well as ownership of the performance all of the girls expressed looking back at the process of the performance-making. The open and safe space can be seen as a process, eventually merging with the artistic space and when doing so create potentia. What more, these spaces become co-dependent, unable to exist without the other, making me think that the friction between them become 'vital elements of wholes' (Mol 2002) in the creation of community theatre signified by artistic, political and participatory ambitions. That is, the safe and open space established in the beginning of the process need nurturing as the drama space becomes more disciplined and artistically focused. Otherwise, there is a risk of loss of ownership of the performance in the making. The lack of spaces for discipline and artistic focus may, on the other hand, result in a performance without political and aesthetic relevance.

Exposure and protection

June 2019: It is close to summer break and Tove sits cross-legged on the floor together with two of the girls, Alya and Malva. Today's workshop will start in a few minutes and they are waiting for the rest of the girls to arrive. Tove asks Alya:

Can you be part of the performance and still be protected? That is what I am interested in. It is too late to change the script now. Sure, we can remove the odd bad word and so on but we can't change the plot. What we could do is to talk to parents before the performance starts and we can use speakers' (pretends to hold a microphone in front of her, and speaks in a metallic voice) "Everyone is playing roles, nobody is on stage as herself" (Tove puts her hands down on her thighs). – 'You know, make clear that you are actors. So people will not match you with a certain sexuality or situation. We can make it clear for those watching that this is theatre, do you understand? But perhaps that is not enough?

She looks towards Alya who answers it is the very religious people from her church she worries that will not accept the play:

I need to make sure none of these [people] will come (makes a gesture with both hands to the right) and not these people either (makes a gesture to the left). I don't want us to change a lot of stuff because it is too late, as you said. I don't want to change a lot just for me because [these things] are ok for the others. I guess I think it is better I am not in [the play] at all.

Tove clasps her hands in front of her face while making a loud sigh. She suggests they consult a woman called Jasmina who is an expert on honour violence and while she speaks Lina and Stella enter the room and sit down in the circle. Alya says that it is not so much the bishops and priests concerning her but: 'the people around. These are people whom I have grown up with ... and I have never shown this side'. Stella comments she understands Alya feels uncomfortable 'but it really does not say anywhere in the bible that homosexuality is a sin. You must just stand up for it'. Alya looks down at the floor and answers that she thinks it is

very hard to understand if one has not been in this situation. It does not have to be religion, it could be about anything else ... like.. we are talking about porn ... we are talking about things that are not talked about so much.

Tove exclaims: 'Yes, we are saying that girls have a sexuality and that is just so intimidating for people in this town.' Alya answers it is exactly the problem: 'But I can't do anything

about it. I can't just change them. I can't change my dad's 40-year-old mate who has been thinking this way for 40 years'. 'No, perhaps we should not change anybody at all', says Tove and continues: 'it is more about you not being exposed. That is what matters'.

The script is now nearly finished as the artistic team finesses a few details. During the process, Alya has been a strong force in sharing experiences and stories but as the premiere draws closer, she becomes afraid of being too exposed on stage in relation to some members of her church. The fictional layers and the rewriting of some of the stories that created a loss of ownership for some of the girls, have for Alya, not been enough to create protection for her. It is clear that the girls, despite being defined as a community through their participation in the theatre group, are not one-and-the-same (Braidotti 2019), as they are vulnerable in different ways, which becomes clear by Stella's remark. To participate becomes too risky for Alya who is already in a vulnerable position. Alya fears she will become too exposed in the performance, even though the story has several fictional layers and the protection of role. The heterotopic character of the drama space with its interconnectedness with the everyday that, up to now, has been a connection producing knowledges and agency (Szatek 2020) is now a risky connection producing potestas.

The event can also be mapped as if the drama space enables Alya to resist the wishes of both the leader and her peers. The drama space that is in the making is open for multiple trajectories, this being one of them. Having been part in producing and embodying the performance, Alya is now expected to perform it in front of an audience. The expression of resistance is a way for Alya to protect herself from a potentially harmful situation that could create potestas. The event could, from this point of view, be filled with potentia despite the distress displayed.

The event does, however, also contain potestas, as Tove tries to navigate between the intention to include Alya and at the same time not risking to expose her to harm. The tension is created when striving to combine social aspirations of inclusion with artistic and political ambitions aimed at putting the girls' experiences on the agenda. This situation highlights a dilemma many practitioners working with theatre, containing democratic as well as artistic ambitions, will encounter; how to deal with the fact that those who share their stories cannot be on stage? The case of Alya exemplifies some of the tensions involved within the field of applied theatre where the ambition is to be inclusive while at the same time politically and aesthetically relevant. It draws attention to the question of which stories can be told within this kind of theatre context and by whom. I also argue that it draws our attention to some of the tensions facing participants and leaders when working in a heterotopic drama space. The negotiations between the town and its limiting structures and the girls' desire to become something different are inevitable as to why the interconnectedness of the drama room, the town and everyday produce potentia as well as potestas.

The heterotopic drama room holds a multitude of spaces, some of which include Alya and, others that do not. Throughout the process, there are spaces for Alya to share her thoughts and experiences but in the end, the performance space becomes too filled with potestas for her to be part of it. One option would be to adjust the performance so Alya can be on stage, but it is likely then that the performance would lose many of its political aspects, thus not being the response to limiting structures it intends. Alya has been part of generating potentia out of vulnerability in the process of creating the

performance, but she will not be on stage, manifesting her resistance in front of an audience at least, not at this point. As it turns out, a few months later, Alya changes her mind and decides to be part of the cast. After thinking about participating, she decides to take the consequences of people talking behind her back as she is not alone on stage standing up for the message of performance. She explains: 'I ought not to care about what other people say and think about matters that I am sure about, because I know that this [homosexuality] is not wrong'. The collective drama space thus allows for her to become in many different ways over time enabling a change of relation between the town and Alya. This indicates that creating potentia out of vulnerability can be a slow process, demanding spaces for reflection, endurance and exploration.

Mapping together the events

The first scene explored in this analysis comes across as rather unproblematic as the girls share experiences related to public shaming and then rework those experiences to create an embodied fiction in a safe and open space. It is a safe and secluded space in which vulnerabilities can be mapped and transformed, although not always overcome, and where new ideas, identities, stories and practices emerge making vulnerability a generative force (Butler 2020; Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). The seclusion of the drama room allows for a safe distance from the structures the girls are depending on in their everyday that is also producing vulnerabilities. As such, the drama room is a space for a new ordering of things and social relations, turning around old hierarchies which also mark a heterotopic space (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986; Hetherington 1997). Part of this new ordering also feeds into the play and becomes part of a narrative where girls dare to question norms and ways of becoming, for example, a woman. By creating these kinds of spaces where the participants in a creative way can deconstruct the everyday, I argue that the drama room can be a powerful platform when generating resistance out of vulnerability. The interconnectedness with the town supports the process as the heterotopic drama room paradoxically also is a secluded and safe space (Szatek 2020).

As the process moves forward towards a public performance, it becomes clear that the town becomes a force also creating potestas. When the leaders step in as authors, the context causes them to impose restrictions on the drama space so as not to expose the girls in the performance. This discloses how the heterotopic drama room is not only secluded but also embedded, firmly located somewhere. My claim is that without this embeddedness it is not possible to turn vulnerability into a public act of resistance. If we are to follow Butler and Braidotti when mapping vulnerability as an embedded matter, then the practice that turn vulnerability into a generative force needs to be firmly embedded as well.

However, for some of the participants, the restrictions create a loss of ownership as well as disappointment and the drama space is challenged as trajectories clash and disperse in various directions. In the examples of Alya and Linn, this manifests by the girls speaking up for themselves, allowing tensions to be acknowledged. Had the drama room not been a safe and open space many of these tensions would probably not have surfaced, but what materialise through these clashing trajectories is also a brave space (Arao and Clemens 2013) allowing for critical discussions and decisions to be acknowledged, although uncomfortable. As such, the brave space engages with authentic and difficult

tensions, requiring critical reflection that I argue is necessary when working with and through vulnerability. For this process to develop and settle time is needed. There also has to be enough time for the participants to explore how their stories evolve, momentarily losing control as well as regaining ownership. Time is needed to both make decisions and undo them, allowing for other decisions to emerge. The matter of time also points to the importance of endurance and trust needed when momentarily losing control and being in the not knowing. The making of community theatre requires leaders as well as participants to endure, and while doing so dare to trust one other.

Although the process leading up to the performance has been the focus of the article, it is important to comment on the performance and the sense of pride it generated among the girls. Through the artistic reworking that created tensions, vulnerability was mobilised from which a performance also materialised. The performance enabled vulnerability and everyday life to become a public act of resistance that the girls could take genuine ownership and pride in. As such, the artistic expression forms a collective resistance that is partly exposing but also agentic, which is in line with how Butler thinks of vulnerability in resistance (Butler 2016). However, as has become clear through this article, when working with young people it is important not to make them too exposed why the artistic reworking remains important. For Butler, public acts of resistance require infrastructures, streets and squares for people to meet and protest. My argument is that theatre can also be both part of, and a support for that infrastructure thereby, enabling public acts of resistance on a local level delivering a feminist critique towards structures that does not work in their favour. But as shown, it requires a great deal from the leaders whose embeddedness and skills to navigate through multiple spaces are a prerequisite. If this is lacking, I believe there is a real risk of fixating the participants as powerless victims or traumatising them as well as the audience.

Conclusion: becoming space weavers

Through spatial and postconstructionist theories, this article has explored the challenges when reworking vulnerability towards potentia in a community theatre practice. By mapping which different spaces come into being and how they co-exist and sometimes clash the challenges in the process have been highlighted. I have tried to map some of the many trajectories shooting through these spaces and to capture a complex drama room where leaders, participants and place are in constant negotiations producing both potentia and potestas as well as a dazzling piece of art when mobilising and dealing with vulnerability. The challenges are many in the process and as shown, I claim that the heterotopic character of the drama room plays a big part. To embody and explore vulnerability in a secluded drama space is one way of making vulnerability a generative force. However, turning these explorations into a public act of resistance requires both a drama room where multiple spaces can co-exist and a firm inter-connectedness with local context.

Overall, when thinking with spatial and postconstructionist theories it becomes clear how the everyday of the participants and the town interplay with theatre practice when creating a performance. Through these theories, the town in which this practice takes place comes across as a generative force, rather than a backdrop. The heterotopic

character of the drama room firmly connects the drama space with the town at the same time as it is an isolated space. I would like to refer to this inter-connection as heterotopic embeddedness, which comes across as crucial when processing and staging vulnerability. As the processed and reworked vulnerability is a firmly embedded matter in line with Butler's thinking, a space offering another social ordering is an important factor as displayed in the example in which the girls discuss shame.

The heterotopic embeddedness of the drama room does, however, challenge the leaders who must navigate through multiple spaces that are isolated as well as entangled with location and the everyday, which is a complex task requiring endurance. Without the process of navigating through and tuning into the multitude of spaces encountered and created, the leaders are not able to give vulnerability an artistic shape, tone and vibration stemming from the participants' expressions and everyday while also challenging local structures. This tuning-in process also includes weaving together different spaces such as the open, creative and safe space with spaces marked by artistic ambitions, restrictions and protection. In this process, in which the leaders become a kind of 'space weavers', a productive tension emerges, enabling vulnerability to be part of the performance, making it provocative without exposing the girls on stage to danger. My conclusion is that if the intention is to produce a dazzling piece of theatre that can be a public act of resistance in which the participants can take pride, both navigating through multiple spaces and exploring these tensions are absolutely necessary.

The performance may not have changed the structures producing vulnerability, but they have been reworked and critiqued by the girls who put them on the agenda thus pushing the boundaries for how to become woman in this particular setting. The pride and ownership of the performance displayed by all the girls interviewed after the premiere indicating they can be proud of what and who they are in relation with the town. And that is an important mark that vulnerability has, to some extent, been mobilised when generating resistance through the performance.

Note

1. Prior to undertaking the research, the study was vetted by the Swedish ethical committee.

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Elsa Szatek is a PhD student in Teaching and Learning with Specialisation in Applied Theatre at Stockholm University. She is interested in socially and politically engaged theatre and the challenges involved when working with artistic and educational ambitions. Szatek focuses on teenage girls and their process of staging their everyday.

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