

It is always a dangerous position to be standing between arts leaders and alcohol, so I will get the point so that you can get to the alcohol!

The point is this: We are here to save the world.

It's true! We do our jobs because we want to save the world.

These last two and a half days we've shared that our government or founding-charter remits are to improve the quality of life for our communities; to create more jobs, improve local economies, build capacity to help artists make better art, ensure our hiring practices are fair and equitable, ensure our buildings and programmes are accessible to all, build more bathrooms, partner with the private sector, partner with the public sector, partner with schools, partner with everybody, future proof our buildings and future proof our parking lots, engage digitally, and ensure our company cultures promote positive health and mental well-being.

This is a LOT. But it all boils down to something very simple: Make this world a better place to live. For ourselves, for our communities, for our children.

In other words, save the world.

For those of you who've seen the musical RENT by Jonathan Larson, you may remember that iconic lyric: "The opposite of war isn't peace, it's creation."

If war is destruction, then the opposite is surely creation. We are in the business of creation. The creative industries! This means we are in the business of world peace.

A friend of mine is a Hollywood TV writer and also a political activist. In a recent speech, she wrote: "There are SO many ways our real world can be, but ALL of those begin with imagining it."

I sometimes think one of the reasons there's so much war and destruction in our world isn't because people are inherently evil, it's because we're inherently unimaginative. We just can't think of a better way to do things and to solve problems. The enemy is inertia and lack of imagination.

This is why our work is so important for our world. We are in the business of developing creativity and imagination, of fostering communities where we can have big ideas and the guts to follow them through to reality.

This is what we are here for: We are here to make this world a better place.

That's the "WHAT". The hard part is the "HOW". I keep coming to conferences like these so that I can learn from colleagues about the "HOW" → How do we manage grumpy aging stakeholders? How do we set up labs to foster better, more imaginative artists? How do we tour works within our region, or outside our region? How do we engage and inspire new audiences, encourage shared experiences and collective dialogue in our venues and festivals? How?? HOW??? HOW????!!

This leads me on a slight tangent to share a guilty secret with you:

I LOVE superhero action movies.

The Avengers, Wonder Woman, Super Man Vs. Batman, Black Panther (which I actually watched twice in a row on a recent flight), all those *Fast and Furious* franchise movies (maybe not superheroes, but still heroes) with Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson whose mother is not Maori but is Pacific Islander

I love these movies because they are always about a group of people who frequently argue (in horribly written dialogue and bad puns) but ultimately overcome their differences for the greater good of saving the world.

I only ever have time to watch movies when I'm on a plane. I love watching these movies on planes, because nine times out of ten, I'm on that plane coming to a conference like this, to meet people like you, from around the world, to talk about what we are doing to make this world a better place.

One of the compelling aspects of superhero movies is that the heroes almost always have some inner dark secret of a past tragedy or other personal issue or inner turmoil that they are grappling with. So the movies are almost always as much about the inner conflict of the hero as they are about the external good vs. evil bit.

Now this is important for us to remember, because, I think it was Liz on the first panel who made the point that we all come to these positions in our institutions with our own existing prejudices, stereotypes, and personal backgrounds that influence and affect us. These are our superhero imperfections, our inner flaws and inner conflicts, inner stereotypes, that we must constantly face, and make constant efforts to practice self-awareness to ensure we make decisions as consciously as possible, and not allow our internal prejudices and baggage – that evil inertia – to unconsciously drive our decisions, whether those are hiring and staffing decisions or programming and curatorial decisions.

So now that we've established that all of us in this room and all of our colleagues back home are all flawed superheroes on a mission to save the world, I'm back to the original question: the perennial HOW. HOW do we do it?

One key difference between our work and the superhero movies is that we are not battling some external bad guy. (Though I'm sure at times some of us feel like we are!)

We are battling the **inertia** and the **lack of imagination** that exists within us all. And I believe the only way to push back against inertia and lack of imagination is to create programming and operational frames that allow our communities and our stakeholders to come together and have HARD conversations.

What are these hard conversations? I want to share an example that illustrates this.

In my last organization, we toured a production of the Pulitzer-prize winning Broadway play *Disgraced* by Ayad Akhtar to eight cities throughout China, to around 15 theaters, universities, high schools, and culture centers.

The play *Disgraced* centers around a dinner party that takes place in a ritzy upper-east-side Manhattan apartment. A Pakistani-American lawyer and his white wife invite his African-American colleague from the law firm and her Jewish husband over for a dinner party. And the dinner gets ugly. And the dinner gets violent. And the play is rough, and raw, and all about post-9/11 America and the hard issues of race, religion, Islamaphobia and more.

We did post-performance discussions after every show because it's a very provocative play and we didn't want to just throw it out there and leave. Often the post-show talks lasted almost as long as the play.

At Nanjing University after the post-show talk, two students came back in who I'd seen leave during the talk. They were carrying a fistful of flowers that clearly had been ripped up from the front lawn of the theater, roots still hanging. The boy introduced himself and his girlfriend. They were from Xinjiang, China's most northwestern province, north of Tibet. The population is primarily Uighur and other Muslim minorities. These students were not, they were from the Han Chinese majority.

The young man said, "Growing up, I had classmates who were Uighur, and we would occasionally hang out, maybe play basketball, but we never talked about anything going on in our community. I thought it would be too hard. I thought it would be embarrassing or awkward and just too hard, so we never talked about it.

But seeing the performance tonight, I realize, we *have* to have these Hard Conversations.”

So if, as my TV-writer friend said, there are so many ways our real world can be, and all of them begin with first imaging it, then the next step is to start talking about it.

So HOW are we creating programming frameworks and operational structures that allow us to have the hard conversations about our world, and all the things going on in it?

The performing arts are uniquely suited to help us have the hard conversations. It's like that adage my 6th grade writing teacher used to scream at us every day: “SHOW! DON'T TELL!” The performing arts show us, they don't tell. They show nuance, they show complexity, they show contradiction, they show humanity.

This is the difference between the arts and propaganda. Propaganda tells, it doesn't show. Its purpose is to tell you what you should think. The arts have the power to affect how you feel, regardless of what you think about the work. And it is at the emotional level that we really start to shift hearts and minds.

The performing arts also allow diverse groups to have collective, shared experiences, and address these contentious issues NOT in a way that tears groups apart but in ways that bring us together, and show us our shared humanity.

David's question yesterday about the increasing homogeneity across international festival programming reminded me how we must keep asking ourselves, what stories aren't being heard, or aren't being heard frequently enough, or aren't being heard in the right way in the right contexts?

What stories need to be told NOW? There MUST be an urgent relevance to our programming choices. How are we engaging in the most relevant issues of our time? How are we sharing the most relevant voices, who have something immediate and urgent to say, to communicate through their art? And how do we find those voices – maybe they aren't even in our own communities – and give them a platform to share those stories, and work together to share them across multiple platforms, countries and contexts?

And, to be fair, relevant programming doesn't always mean programming that helps us have hard heavy conversations about the most urgent relevant issues of our time. Sometimes the most urgent thing that needs to happen is to relax and

have fun. Sometimes the most urgently relevant thing is for a community to come together and experience shared joy.

This was certainly true right after the earth quake in Christchurch that we discussed yesterday. I was talking to a programmer there a number of years ago and he said for a while he only wanted to programme things that helped his audience relax and reconnect to a sense of lightness and joy because that's what he felt people needed. And it doesn't have to just be after massive catastrophes. A city like Hong Kong is doing pretty well these days (the recent typhoon notwithstanding.) But in fact Hong Kong has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, and when I moved there last year I was struck with the palpable weight of anxiety and existential identity crisis that has mounted over the two decades since The Handover.

So yes, our programming at West Kowloon MUST allow us to come together as a community and have the hard conversations about the causes of this anxiety, to explore identity and race and religion and post-colonialism and Hong Kong's changing place in the world – AND, for the love of god, the people of Hong Kong need to chill out! And need to have a place to come to just relax, and the programming at West Kowloon must create this place and these opportunities.

And I'm sure in many of your own communities, you also need to help people just find that lightness and sense of shared joy again. We come together as a community by civil discourse yes, but we also come together as a community just by having fun.

And the importance of that aspect of our jobs shouldn't be underestimated.

Another word on our roles as storytellers. We in this room are programmers and CEOs and directors and managers, not necessarily the performing artists who are usually thought to be the storytellers. But we have a very direct storytelling role.

How we contextualize things changes the story. How you frame the performance is how you frame the experience an audience has. Yesterday offered a great example, with the Esplanade talking about presenting Raika Maitra's choreography both in the Indian Culture Festival and in the contemporary dance festival. Two totally different contexts, two totally different frames, and two totally different set ups for the audience to read and engage with her work. Not one good or bad, just different, depending on where you frame it.

This is where our story-telling responsibility lies. As the gate keepers of whose stories get told, to whom, and in what frames, we control the goggles through

which our audiences watch and experience the performances and programming we bring.

Right now, my team and I are in conversations with Berlin-based Singapore performer Ming Wong about co-commissioning a crazy science-fiction multi-media futuristic Chinese opera.

We have some fun creative options for how we choose to frame this production, depending on where we present it. If I choose to present this sci fi Chinese opera in our new Chinese opera house the Xiqu Centre which opens later this year, I'm telling one story, perhaps about how an ancient art form is evolving in new contemporary ways. This context emphasizes the production's Chinese opera-ness. If I choose to present it in our new centre for contemporary performance called Freespace which opens in April next year, I'm telling a different story, perhaps about how contemporary performing artists draw on traditional idioms to tell avant garde stories; I'd imagine this would tell our audience we are categorizing it as a contemporary work, not a Chinese opera. Same work, but defined by the building we put it in. We will most likely co-commission this work with West Kowloon's museum of contemporary visual culture, M+. If we present this performance in a museum gallery setting, we're telling yet another story, say about how performing artists are working outside of traditional theatre settings. Same performance, three buildings, three very different stories told through context.

This context-as-storyteller and our roles in setting the context is important to remember as we engage in our many cross-cultural collaborations that we've been discussing these two and a half days, and as we present works across vastly different cultural contexts. How we frame the stories tells a story.

In reflecting on the conversation yesterday about our roles in developing skills for the future workforce when we all ride in those driverless cars Claire was worried about parking, in addition to creative problem solving and innovative thinking, another vital skill for the future, that we must teach our children and future generations of leaders, is EMPATHY.

The performing arts is one of the most effective ways to help people experience empathy. Empathy does *not* mean agreement.

I am reminded of the young man from Xinjiang who was so moved by the play *Disgraced*. No one in that play is a hero, every character has one or many tragic

flaws, and behaves pretty badly. But the play *does* allow you to empathize with the characters, to feel for the complex, human frailty and motivations behind their often ugly and destructive actions.

It's not always comfortable, it's often hard, but it is a life skill we must instill in our increasingly diverse communities: How to have empathy for "the other", for people we disagree with, for people with whom we do not share the same values or priorities, and thereby continue to seek our underlying shared humanity.

We know the performing arts can do that. We know because we've experienced it. Science has even attempted to study it, though imperfectly and not thoroughly. The New School in 2013 published a study that reading fiction – not performance but at least it's storytelling – has the capacity to improve skills of empathy. The study claimed that "reading certain kinds of fiction improves the capacity to identify and understand others' subjective states. Because it requires more mental processing, it tasks readers with interpretation or critical thinking. Literary fiction therefore has the power to 'disrupt our stereotypes'; what's more, it is full of 'complicated individuals whose inner lives are rarely easily discerned but warrant exploration.' Literary fiction, that is, requires of us the same kinds of interpretive tasks that we undertake when engaging with other people. At the same time, it reminds us to look beyond the stereotypes we are all guilty of relying upon in daily life."

We can extrapolate that "literary fiction" means "storytelling" and storytelling in our world means both narrative and abstract performances, really any performance that takes us on some kind of emotional journey.

Perhaps a quote from a work of literary fiction might illustrate this science a little better, this is from Ray Bradbury's "Dandelion Wine":

"The people there were gods and midgets and knew themselves mortal and so the midgets walked tall so as not to embarrass the gods and the gods crouched so as to make the small ones feel at home. And, after all, isn't that what life is all about, the ability to go around back and come up inside other people's heads to look out at the damned fool miracle and say: oh, so that's how you see it!? Well, now, I must remember that."

So this, at last, my fellow perfectly flawed superheroes, this is how we save the world: we create again and again the opportunities for our communities, our stakeholders, our colleagues and ourselves to go around back and come up inside other people's and other cultures' heads and look out at this damned fool miracle of a world and say:

“Oh, so that's how you see it? Well now I must remember that.”

Thank you.