Leaning into discomfort

Of intercultural vulnerability in an Indo-German youth theatre project. An attempted analysis from two perspectives

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Abstract *Vulnerability, as a political and philosophical idea, is having a moment. Thinkers and feminists have re-framed its epistemological foundations and attempted to differentiate »precarity (as a political/ social/ spatial predicament) and precariousness/ vulnerability (as an existential condition)« as Mikko Joronen and Mitch Rose (2021, p. 403) summarize referring to Judith Bulter (2009). Significant in these ›woke‹ times where educators and facilitators walk the tightrope of being sensitive to historical oppressions while not de-emphasising intellectual provocations. Rather than undermine ›woke‹, we advocate for the often painful work of delving into historical contexts and the dehumanizing matrix of colonialism. In From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces (2013), Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens unwrap the impossibility of protecting students from knowledge that causes discomfort (vulnerability) and simultaneously tackling subjects of social justice. In this paper we look at the role of vulnerability in the rehearsal process as an issue of modernity. Resistance to accepting vulnerability as a human condition, complicates a participant's experience of inequalities and perpetuates pre-modern ideas of power and economic invulnerability. We, hence, ask if a resistance to emotional vulnerability, may emerge from a tacit acceptance of the primacy of a Eurocentric worldview. Through introspections on this intercultural encounter, our aim is to underscore the humanity, openness and strength inherently contained in the word vulnerability. We imagine that two cultures could indeed meet and find a common creative ground, if the pedagogical process invites participants to shed artificially erected defenses through*

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games, exercises, and research approaches. It may involve discomfort, but we suggest that the intimacy forged is worth the journey.

Zusammenfassung *Vulnerabilität als Begriff und Konzept hat Konjunktur. Angesichts von Drohszenarien wie u. a. die COVID-19-Pandemie, andauernde und neu aufbrechende kriegerische Konflikte, die global rasante Zunahme sozialer Ungleichheit(en) hat der vormalige Fachbegriff Vulnerabilität – zu Deutsch Verletzbar- oder Verwundbarkeit – zusehends Eingang in den öffentlichen Diskurs sowie in die Alltagssprache gefunden. Dabei haften dem Begriff häufig normative Konnotationen an: So wird einerseits ein Minimieren, gar Aufheben der (überproportionalen) Vulnerabilität bestimmter Personen(gruppen) gefordert. Andererseits wird auch die produktive und verbindende Kraft[3] von Vulnerabilität unterstrichen. In dieses Spannungsverhältnis schreibt sich auch das im Zentrum dieses Beitrags stehende interkulturelle theaterpädagogische Projekt ein. Aus einer indischen sowie einer deutschen Perspektive untersuchen wir die gemeinsamen Proben auf Aushandlungsmomente interkultureller Vulnerabilität hin. Um auch die politische Dimension des geteilten wie unterschiedlichen Verständnisses von Vulnerabilität der Beteiligten zu konturieren, stützen wir uns auf Judith Butlers Konzepte von ›precariousness‹ und ›precarity‹, mit denen sie eine allgemeine, geteilte menschlichen Vulnerabilität von ihrer politisch bedingten Ungleichverteilung auf bestimmte Menschengruppen unterscheidet. Unsere sowohl deskriptive wie normative Sondierbewegung folgt dem Desiderat als auch unserem Anliegen, Vulnerabilität stärker in den Blickpunkt der theaterpädagogischen interkulturellen (Proben-)Praxis zu rücken. Wir schließen unseren Beitrag mit einer Verknüpfung von Vulnerabilität und Gemeinsinn.*

Note/Disclosure Both authors were involved in the Border Busters theatre project in their capacity as theatre pedagogues/ facilitators. As such, we have made a deliberate decision to write in two voices to underscore our belief that true interculturality[4] necessitates the rough and tumble of diverse cultural contexts and restless perspectives.

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3 Ein populäres Beispiel dafür ist Brené Browns TED Talk »The Power of Vulnerability« vom 1.6.2010, abrufbar unter: https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability

4 For a critical discussion of the term 'intercultural' in theatre and performance contexts see the anthology The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures. Beyond Postcolonialism. (Fischer-Lichte et al. 2014)

1 Preconditions: Vulnerability as a human condition (MK)

> The buzzing sound of a low-flying helicopter. Sirens. Then rolls of thunder and heavy rainfall blend in. A few seconds into the track, a news jingle fades in, instantly followed by layered headlines spoken by the actors and actresses in Kannada, Hindi, English, and German. In the sound collage that hovers above the stage the voices of the players soberly speak of war and the perils of seeking asylum, the global ecological crisis, sexual abuse, and recent and wide-spread lurches to the right – to name but a few. On stage, the 16 young actresses and actors from India and Germany embody an array of physical reactions to the soundscape: On the left, five people huddle together, half-crouching, all the while letting their heads follow the erratic and restless trajectory of the light cone from a moving light. On the right, a young actress, seen in profile, appears to bang her (fore)head repeatedly against the wall of the proscenium arch. Confined by the space of the stage, six players pace ceaselessly from one side to the other, seemingly unable to make an escape/ quit the scene. Scattered across the stage lie three players curled up in fetal positions, all squeezing their eyes shut, one covering her ears with her hands, the other two placing their head between their arms with their hands interlocking at the back of their heads. One actress sits on the floor, her arms wrapped around her pulled up knees, her head resting face-down on her knees – only at the end of the scene she looks up and calmly faces the audience.

It is the second to last scene of the Border Busters performance on »Reduced Inequalities« that premiered on April 19th, 2023, at the Schauburg theatre for young audiences in Munich, Germany. While we may be reproached for preluding an article centered on the rehearsal process with a description of an already fully rehearsed scene, we opted to do so in order to highlight central aspects that provide the basis for our ensuing contemplations: While the soundtrack seeks to raise awareness of how unequally we are affected by real life manifestations of the spoken headlines, the breadth of physical reactions to them by the players on stage suggests that as human beings we are unified by the cardinal condition that we are all vulnerable. In more general terms: While the objects and degrees of (our) vulnerability (historically) differ, vulnerability as a (transhistorical) human condition remains an uncircumventable fact, that is: an anthropological constant (for example Dederich and Zirfas 2022, pp. 3–4; Burghardt et al. 2017, pp. 7–8; 34–36). However, as Ulaş Aktaş (2020, p. 8) points out, conceiving vulnerability as an anthropological category, i.e. as

a transhistorical condition of being human, does not mean that human beings are simply and somehow subjected to vulnerability without any presuppositions. Following Judith Butler, Aktaş argues that human beings are vulnerable because of their (our) existential dependence on others (for care and reproduction, as Aktaş specifies). We are born into dependence on others, without whose care, we couldn't survive. While this »primary helplessness and need« (Butler 2004, p. 32) of any infant is commonly accepted, irrebuttable, in fact, this existential dependence on others continues through all stages of human life and cannot be »will[ed] away« (Butler 2004, p. 29). However, Butler does not regard vulnerability as a natural defectiveness or predisposition of every living being. Instead, she locates the potential to make vulnerable and to vulnerate in the social structures (and its actors) – that is: in our sociality and relationality. This primary, ontological, and existential vulnerability that all human beings share because of their (our) sociality, Butler calls precariousness (Butler 2009, pp. 13–14).[5] However, politically motivated decisions cause some to face disproportionately more precariousness than others. This »politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death« (Butler 2009, p. 25), Butler calls precaritiy. While precariousness, according to Butler, refers to an ontological vulnerability that due to human interdependency can never be fully eliminated, precarity is a specifically political term that applies only to particular populations. Thus, precarity can and even must be tackled.

To conclude this introductory section, we briefly want to summarize how we use the term vulnerability in this article and consider how it is embedded in the context of this anthology. Our use of the term vulnerability encompasses four aspects: (1) We follow Burghardt et al.'s (2017) conception of vulnerability as an anthropological category: Human beings are injurable – physically, and mentally – and capable of inflicting injuries on others (as well as on themselves). (2) To emphasize human interdependency, »the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the others«, as the source of (human) vulnerability, we use Butler's (2009, 14) term precariousness. (3) To underline the fact that unequal distribution of vulnerability/precariousness makes certain populations more prone to its potentially negative effects, we use Butler's term precarity. (4) When speaking of intercultural vulnerability, echoing Burghardt

5 To put it overly broadly, it is due to this inescapable interdependency that Butler also criticizes the idea of subjects as autonomous entities.

et al (2017, p. 130), we refer to injurability that can potentially arise from interaction(s) of members of different cultures.

In analyzing specific occurrences of intercultural vulnerability during the joint creation of the Border Busters theatre project, we argue that the reciprocal acknowledgment of each other's vulnerability can contribute to forging a sense of community in an intercultural artistic community of practice. This sense of community, as we understand it, is not imposed by outside forces; rather, it is a dynamic process of negotiating and recalibrating cross-cultural relationships from within an intercultural group or ensemble.

2 Vulnerability in the Indian context (KK)

On the Indian subcontinent, life is largely (we use the word with caution, for among some classes, there may exist a resistance to vulnerability) lived with the ontological knowledge of vulnerability.

On an apparent level, it could be the precarity that comes from being a large democracy that must navigate multiple languages, castes, classes and economic strata while making the move from a socialist state to a globalised one. This brings all the vicissitudes that Paolo Virno tersely describes in A Grammar of the Multitude (2007) as »capitalism's capacity to engender a pervasive sense of global insecurity« (Joronen and Rose 2021, p. 1402). Indians are aware of their corporeal vulnerability through disease, civil strife and other realities of survival; of economic vulnerability from employment issues and an inadequate social security system; of political vulnerability from being a 70 year old democracy born of a bloody, anguished cleaving that was the Partition of India, Pakistan and later, Bangladesh. Add to this the ignominy, on a global stage of political influence and power, of continuing to be a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, not for lack of trying. It's a lot. But perhaps because of East Asian dialectical belief systems (Neti Neti, a Sanskrit phrase at the core of Advaita (e.g. The Upanishads: Eknath and Nagler 2007), means »Not this and not that either«), and because Indian metaphysical and aesthetic identity is enmeshed with, amongst other things, antiquity, Advaita Vedanta, and serial invasions, the Indian subcontinent has, historically, had a very different engagement with vulnerability.

The opening moments in the Bhagavad Gita—a dialogue between the Pandava warrior prince, Arjuna and his charioteer, Lord Krishna, that takes place on the battlefield of Kurukshetra—could be read as an early philo-

sophical exposition on the value of vulnerability in navigating life. Arjuna, in despair and at his most defenseless, reveals his fears and dilemmas about war, asking Krishna for a way forward. Krishna's answer, which forms the heart of the Gita, emerges through the synthesis and acceptance of different human paths whether they be paths of action (karma), knowledge (gyaana), or devotion (bhakti). Thus, the Gita locates Arjuna's recognition of his own vulnerability as an important moment, signifying the start of a journey that aligns with his Self. As for the Self (a word like ›woke‹ that is popular in the zeitgeist), rather than being epistemologically connected with individualism, it is, conversely, affiliated to the universal. Consider this: If Brahman (not to be confused with Brahmin which refers to the priestly, dominant caste) signifies universal consciousness, Atman, signifies individual consciousness. But, as Ram Ramanathan in his millennial-friendly website Coacharya says, the Atman is not a discrete entity but simply a sliver of Brahman (Ramanathan 2019).

Thus, we analyse Border Busters through the framework and within a continuum of performance-making approaches that, even within examples of contemporary pop-culture like Bollywood, still prioritise an emotional response as per the theory of Rasa and Bhava from the Natyashastra.

3 Vulnerability in the German(-speaking) context of (contemporary) theatre/pedagogy

Since antiquity, pedagogy, in its various manifestations, has been committed to striving against the imperfection(s) inherent to being human: through imparting knowledge, skills and experience; through developing (concepts of) morality, reason, and aesthetics; through fostering cooperation and collaboration; through building resilience to endure hardships, among others (Burghardt et al. 2017, p. 68). In that sense, pedagogical practices can be seen as sets of coping techniques or remedies against human vulnerability, that is, against injurability (physically and mentally) and dependency (socially and economically). Vulnerability, in this view, is not (any longer) an unalterable fate of humankind; rather, through the lens of pedagogy, it is a potentiality which can be countered through practices of empowerment and prevention. While the emphasis of German contemporary pedagogy lies on empowering as well as on strengthening competence and resilience, vulnerabilities of learners and teachers in the widest sense of the word are often implicitly addressed

as the flipside of the former (ibid. 2017, p. 7). Efforts to study vulnerability as a fundamental (theatre) pedagogical category are only beginning to gain momentum (for example Burghardt et al. 2017; Aktaş 2020; Dederich and Zirfas 2022).

Against this backdrop, looking at contemporary German(-speaking) theatre pedagogy as a discipline of cultural-aesthetic education reveals a rather dialectical relationship with vulnerability. As the compositum already indicates, theatre pedagogy brings together educational tasks and artistic endeavors. While in the practice of theatre pedagogy the lines between the two have ongoingly been blurred since the beginning of the 21st century, cultural policymaking tends to prioritize the educational benefits to legitimize the implementation and funding of projects and institutions (for example Vaßen 2012, p. 55; Hentschel 2012, pp. 69–70). A prominent argument underlining the educational benefits of participating in theatre projects is the development of (social) competencies, that is, abilities and skills to help young participants (better) navigate the different realities and challenges of their off-stage life. Discussions on the development of (social) skills in youth theatre projects tend to highlight either the individual's benefits of participating or the benefits to society. Competencies that (potentially) benefit the individual often imply an economic usability (even profitability), while expected benefits for society are mostly connected with upholding democratic values for (better) social cohesion. For such competencies to emerge, the rehearsal is conceptualized as a safe, non-judgmental, empowering space for young actors to explore different versions of themselves, different corporealities and ways of acting, varieties of human relations and conflicts, for example. To create such a space, theatre pedagogues are committed to principles of cultural and aesthetic education such as voluntariness, participation, error friendliness and strengths-based learning, openness to diversity, publicness and recognition, building self-efficacy, and lifeworld orientation (Braun and Schorn 2013). The latter is particularly indicative of the dialectical relationship with vulnerability: In contemporary German(-speaking) theatre pedagogy it is common practice to create plays or performances based on the young actors sharing personal experiences; biographical elements; personal attitudes, hopes, dreams and/or fears (for example Köhler et al. 2020). This dual role of actor and author of the performance requires participants to make themselves vulnerable in that they share and show parts of themselves. To encourage and support players during that process, theatre pedagogues emphasize the notion of the rehearsal as a safe space.

To sum up, investigating vulnerability as a fundamental category of theatre pedagogy is still a desideratum to which we hope to offer a contribution with this article.

4 Project description: The Border Busters project (MK)

A co-production/ collaboration between Theatre Lab Youth in Bangalore (India) and the Schauburg Theatre for Young Audiences in Munich (Germany), the Border Busters project spanned a period of sixteen months of rehearsal time from January 2022 to the end of April 2023, after having been delayed by a year in the wake of the COVID pandemic. As part of Germany's development cooperation activities towards implementing the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Border Busters, as a Youth Exchange Program, was funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development through the program »weltwärts – extracurricular exchange projects in the context of Agenda 2030«. The fulcrum of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – addressing the acuteness to act on a global economic, social and environmental level – to whose implementation all United Nations Member States commit themselves in a joint effort to end poverty »in all its forms and dimensions« while equally seeking to »heal and secure our planet« (UN General Assembly 2015, p. 1). Bringing together perspectives of the Global South and North, the participants of the Border Busters project attended to SDG 10 »reduce inequality within and among countries« through identifying and challenging realms of privilege and disadvantage based on sharing and exchanging personal experience and observations as well as undertaking research into the matter.

At the heart of the project lie two encounters. The first took place in August 2022 at Infinite Souls Farm & Artists' Retreat, a (mostly self-sustaining) rural space entirely devoted to artistic creation, located two hours west of Bangalore with an open rehearsal space only surrounded by picturesque, rich local flora and fauna. The second encounter took place in April 2023 in the city of Munich within the facilities and the infrastructure of a municipal theatre, the Schauburg Theatre for Young Audiences. In between the two encounters both groups rehearsed in parallel in their respective home countries (typically for a full weekend per month), while holding regular digital meetings to exchange and align ideas, to share findings and plan the next steps. The rehearsal process can be described in four phases. The initial phase was dedicated to *fa-*

miliarizing with (each other) and *exploring the dimensions of* the *subject matter.* The Indian group additionally organized the program of the first encounter in Bangalore, India (1). The second phase equals the first encounter and was dedicated to *co-creating a common, yet liminal frame* for a performance; a frame that would be created, shared and inhabited by both groups. A joint performance of the co-created material at Infinite Souls Farm & Artists' Retreat to a group of invited spectators marks the end of the first encounter (2). In phase three, both groups kept *practicing* and *further developing* the *jointly developed performance material* in parallel in their respective home countries. The German group additionally prepared the program for the second encounter in Munich, Germany (3). The final rehearsal phase equals the second encounter in Munich. This phase was dedicated to *fixing and rehearsing the material for the final performance* on the big stage of the Schauburg, on April 19th, 2023 (4). Both encounters included excursions to historically and socio-politically relevant sites, to local theatre performances as well as meetings with thematically important actors (for example at the APSA[6] shelter in Bangalore and the Bavarian State Parliament in Munich).

5 First Encounter (KK)

> »Can I eat with my hands? Does it bother you? Ah no, I don't eat meat/ don't worry it wasn't my choice/ my religion insists. The curry didn't seep into the sabzi this time, I bought a bowl. I didn't need to wash my hands this time, you gave me a spoon. But… it snagged my lip.« – Abha Vaijnath, age 17, Bangalore, India

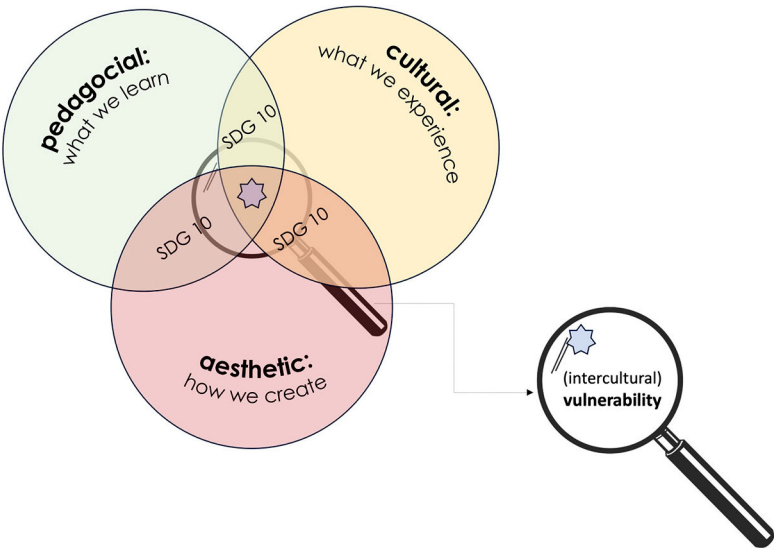
A **modular, multi-pronged** program had been designed, keeping in mind the following:

- This would be the first offline meeting between the Indian and German team.
- Indian cultural and social traditions would be integrated into the entire experience, from farm work, scheduling and food, to skills, discussions and field trips.

6 The Association for Promoting Social Action (APSA) is an NGO devoted to helping children and adolescents in need of care and protection.

- The objectives of the project were ultimately pedagogical, cultural and aesthetic.

Figure 1: Components of the Border Busters project with vulnerability at the intersection



Source: KK/MK 2023

In the overlaps of the basic Venn diagram above, the necessity for an intersectional understanding of the ›Other‹ in the hope of making a better world, is apparent.

We call it a **modular** program, because the exercises were building blocks—the first exercise offered the foundation for the next and so on. Thus, they began with a durational led/be-led Blindfold Trust exercise in mixed pairs. This enabled an intercultural meeting as well as an exploration of the geography, history, and biology of an area of South India that, in contrast to Bengaluru or Munich, is rural, agrarian, feudal and with multiple folk traditions. All participants wrote poems following the experience. Here is a sample of group choral text that emerged from the exercise:

I lost a sense of direction.
Then I lost the space around me.
You guide me through where I can't see,
So don't eat the fish, the fish eat you.
The sun tells you rainbows
The sun tells me warmth.
You talk and turn and gift me your gaze/ as I don't look around.
Freedom to wonder.
You kindly showed me the unknown.
You walked me through a world of dreams.
The edge was but a step away
But who knew that that's where home lay.
In darkness could the world grow bright
I found out how I was laughing.
Es scheint mir:
we are all insects.

Multi-pronged, because it was designed to use as many entry points as suitable—aesthetic skills, social research, field trips—for an understanding of the existing reasons for global and local inequalities and power hierarchies.

The activities fell into four broad categories:

- **Theatre:** Trust exercises, foundational theatre games, physical theatre training, improvisation, and devising approaches inspired by situational improv, authentic movement etc
- **Training:** Skills building with a focus on Indian offerings such as Konnokol, biomechanics and farm work/labour etudes etc
- **Research:** Focus Group Discussions, conversation, and research on issues of SDG 10 such as caste, gender, race, global waste management
- **Exposure:** Field trips to the APSA Shelter for working and migrant children, Magadi rural market etc

For this analysis, we will focus on **konnokol**, an exploration of **stereotypes** and the politics of **waste management**. We are offering background to underline its pedagogical location in the proposed program.

5.1 Konnokol

Konnokol is the ancient art of performing percussion syllables, vocally. It is practiced by upper caste Carnatic (South Indian classical) musicians who play skinned percussion instruments called mridangams. But the instruments, per se, are first made by lower caste Dalits because of the animal skin involved, which is considered impure by the upper caste. The Carnatic vocalist, TM Krishna, in his book, Sebastian and Sons, writes about the caste and religious discrimination involved in the tradition. Edwin Sebastian, a mridangam-maker, says: »The upper caste artist would finalise the leather from a distance and would touch the mridangam and allow it inside the house only after it was fully crafted.« (quoted in Swaminathan 2022) Konnokol has now become a globally popular art with western musicians such as John McLaughlin, Bernhard Schimpelsberger and Steve Smith having promoted it on international platforms.

For the Border Busters actors and actresses, the objective in learning konnokol, would be to subvert the caste narrative and create interesting phrasing for the performance of text and movement in contemporary theatre. The rapid movement of the tongue and its clipped, percussive articulation of syllables in a variety of mathematical combinations and permutations while simultaneously being physically aware of the meta structure of meter (tala), can be read as a metaphor for Indian dialectical thinking which values the role of contradiction, change and synthesis. It was taught to both teams as a language, with the intention of building rhythm phrases with the alphabet.

The unfamiliar sound and mathematical system met with resistance from the German actresses and actors and a responding heightened vulnerability from the Indians. Had it been a traditional, didactic gurukula approach to Indian music pedagogy, there would have been no questions asked and all participants would have had to accept learning as per the guru's requirements. This is evident in the numbers of Europeans and Americans who come to India to study yoga, dance and music in gurukula-like systems that don't necessarily accommodate the needs of the individual. Despite the relationship to authority implicit in this didactic approach that may be ›unsafe‹ to a western mind, something about the colour and sanctified ritual of Indian traditions obfuscates modern misgivings. But in this particular case, because Border Busters was functioning within a modern and democratic framework of theatre pedagogy, it was decided to respond to the resistance by dropping the learning of konnokol. The question lingers about the implication of the resistance. If we ex-

amine it through the lens of culture, it becomes an issue of race. If we examine it through a lens of democracy, it is perfectly acceptable for actors and actresses to resist. How do we then conflate the two? We don't. Instead, we examine the German team's vulnerability about feeling unable to effectively learn a foreign skill, as well as the Indian team's vulnerability about their cultural heritage, and then assess how to prioritise vulnerabilities. The German action was to suggest playing football instead of learning konnokol.[7] The Indian action was to acquiesce. It is these contours of the interaction that we may reassess in the interest of intercultural understanding. That there still exists a global colonial bias that causes cultural assumptions of primacy on the one hand and insecurity, on the other. This calls for a much more reflective and cognizant theatre pedagogy to create an equal, if not clean, slate to start with.

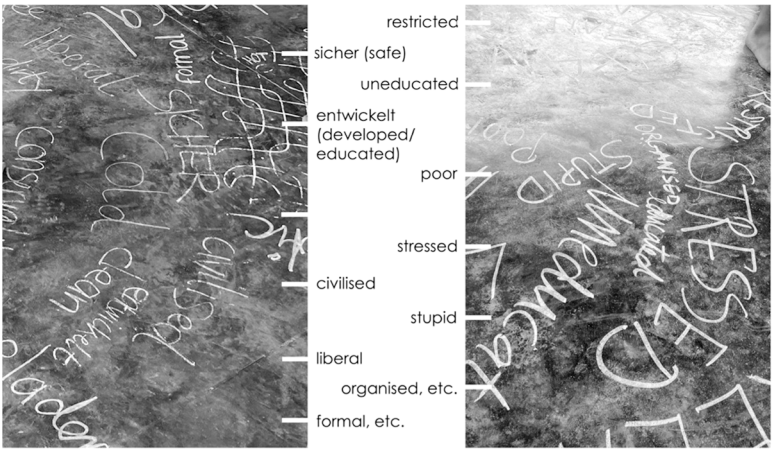
5.2 Playing with Stereotypes

In the first week of Encounter 1, we began with a devising exercise to lay out stereotypes about the self (not the Other). Locating it within two physical spaces, Majestic, Bangalore and Sendlinger Tor, Munich, the actors and actresses were invited to use chalk and inscribe on the Rehearsal Space floor, words/adjectives that they felt could be used to describe the collective ›us‹ in a stereotypical fashion. By 1) instituting self-awareness and 2) playing with broad-stroke comedy not literal representations we hoped to avoid the sting of offence yet offer a version of truth. E.g. Indians eat curry, Germans eat Wurst etc. See figure 2 as an example.

By the second week, despite many circles for discussion, the teams expressed that there were still gaps in understanding caused by cultural hypersensitivity, or, not wishing to offend the Other. Admirable, but it wasn't getting the job done in terms of finding a common ground to truthfully discuss the larger context around global inequalities. A group exercise in embodying stereotypes of the Other was initiated, but most felt uncomfortable, fearing judgement if they revealed their honest impressions, even within the gamut of play. One evening, a few actors volunteered to participate in an introspective movement exercise inspired by Authentic Movement.

7 We want to point out that perception is divided on this issue, as members of the German group maintain that the suggestion was not made in direct response to konnokol, but as an alternative warm-up game.

Figure 2: Adjectives associated with two public transportation hubs, Sedlinger Tor (left) and Majestic (right)



Source: MK

The exercise used the trope of Sakshi or, the Eternal Witness. Actors worked in pairs, in a timed exploration, each taking turns at being the one who moves and the one who witnesses. The one who moves, would have their eyes closed. The first impulse offered was dreams and childhood memories, and the actors and actresses were invited to let their physical impulses guide their movement. Each exploration was followed by a discussion with the partner who first objectively described just the physical movements and then embodied them. Then they spoke in the circle about how they felt when moving and when observing. It was a sensitive moment and two members of the group, one Indian and one German shed tears when relating what they had experienced in the course of the exercise, including emotions of loneliness, anger and fear. Listening to each other speak truths about their lives and emotions, amidst the night sounds of cicadas and frogs, a certain new intimacy was present. Allowing vulnerability and discomfort a place in the rehearsal room had precipitated a shift in the group dynamic. This was a transformational and for the first time, we had a group and not two teams.

Part of the actor's training in India, involves understanding the flow of energy in the Navarasa (Nine Emotions) (Bharata Muni and Unni 2014). That even

while the purity of a single expressed emotion is valuable, two or more emotions can co-exist in complex ways.

1. Sringara (Love / Beauty)
2. Haasya (Laughter/ Comedy)
3. Karuna (Sorrow/ Compassion)
4. Raudra (Anger/ Fury)
5. Veera (Heroism/ Courage)
6. Bhayanaka (Terror/ Fear)
7. Bibhatsya (Disgust)
8. Adbutha (Surprise/ Wonder)
9. Shantha (Peace/ Tranquillity)

Actors study how to offer physical stimuli to evoke emotion. In theatre this coded language of communication is devised through a variety of eliminations.

- Only voice
- Only body
- Only face
- Only hand gestures
- Voice and body etc

All of this is always in the service of a reciprocal bhava, or emotional transportation, in the audience. But to devise an abstract value such as ›love‹, or ›fear‹, or both ›love and fear‹ in the body, necessitates an experience of the emotion. Or, as in Method training, to have at least a memory or observation, of the emotion. This is where vulnerability in the rehearsal room becomes vital. When defenses are drawn in anticipation that a resulting emotion may be uncomfortable, firstly, the creative flow is stemmed. Secondly, empathy takes a back seat because at that moment in the rehearsal room, the actor or actress who has drawn up defenses, can only feel for themselves. They are protecting themselves from a perceived imminent danger, while remaining un-empathetic to the very real dangers faced by people in the larger world. For example, while researching the politics of garbage, to disengage in the rehearsal room because the subject may make one ›guilty‹, prevents one from understanding the real dangers a rag picker at the APSA shelter suffers from. It would be better to express guilt or the fear of not knowing, rather than disengage to preempt discomfort. So, vulnerability, the defenseless Self, is valuable, and brings to the

rehearsal room an openness that will in turn allow for the resolution of emotions.

5.3 Politics of Waste Management

Figure 3: Rehearsal space at Infinite Souls Farm & Artists' Retreat, Vardenahalli village, India

Source: MK

In the first stereotypes exercise described above, the Indian team had inscribed words such as dirty, messy, chaotic and garbage, on the floor, to describe Majestic Bus Stop. The German team had inscribed words such as educated, clean, cold, civilised to describe Sendlinger Tor station. Much later, when there had been some discussions about SDG 10 and its resonance in India and Germany, the subject of garbage came up. The most obvious consideration, based on the piles of visible garbage in Bangalore, would be that India is ›dirty‹ and Germany is ›clean‹. Therefore, this felt like a good intersection for discussions on caste and manual scavenging for the Indians and discussions on ›where, in fact does our plastic waste go?‹ for the Germans. One morning, the Indians read out the Dalit poet, Namdeo Dhasal's classic Marathi poem, Man You Should Explode (Ḍhasāḷa and Chitre 2007), to galvanise the discussions. It served only to shock the Germans who seemed to feel removed from the subject matter. Later, one of the Germans said that waste management was less of an issue in Germany and the argument was brought up to only focus on themes that affect both countries in similar ways (the keyword is similarity). So the politics of waste management, as a potential focal point for the play, was dropped. Later, one of the Germans said that waste management was less of an issue in

Germany and the argument was brought up to only focus on themes that affect both countries in similar ways (the keyword is similarity). So the politics of waste management, as a potential focal point for the play, was dropped. In retrospect, this appears to have been a missed opportunity. With 20/20 vision of hindsight, we should probably have pushed on to join the dots between the visible garbage in India and the successful waste management policies in Germany. We might have asked questions about plastic and the free market, about resource management and plastic waste exports. We might also have been able to connect the rag picker girls the group met at the APSA shelter to the politics of waste management.

6 Second Encounter (MK)

It is one week before the final performance. We all sit in a big circle on the floor of the rehearsal space (which in German-speaking theatre contexts is called a ›rehearsal stage‹) – the customary positioning when jointly discussing matters. The Indian group called this meeting to share suggestions for the remaining rehearsals leading up to the performance. »Another thing that we wanted to talk about are the education biographies«, turns a very experienced young actress from Bangalore to the group and directs the focus towards the dramaturgy of a particular scene that later will be titled ›biographies‹. Initially called ›education walk‹ the architecture of the scene is very similar to that of a privilege walk. All actresses and actors form a line at the back of the stage, facing the audience. Konarak Reddy, live musician of the production, calls out the ages from one to 26 (corresponding to the age range of the players) through a microphone. Following the personal timeline from birth to present, the players take a step forward towards the apron for every called-out age. Each player shares three personally significant moments in their education, from early kindergarten to university, depending on their age, in a pre-established order. Once players reach their current year of age, they stop at that position. »I feel like, if we bring forward biographies that are more personal and cultural to us rather than just education – because it feels like education is a bit limiting –you'll see a lot more cultural differences and that will make the piece a lot more powerful in a sense. For example, spanking in India is a very normal thing […].«After a brief moment of jumbled murmuring, a German participant raises her hand to address the risk of then outdoing one another as in who has experienced »more cruel aspects« in their life. (When working on the scene in August 2022 in India, a German theatre pedagogue

> had stressed the importance of also sharing »light moments in between the heavy ones«, so not to overwhelm spectators.) A young German actor, calmly sitting on his heels, summarizes the two attitudes: »I would say: differences, sure, but also similarities, we want to show also the similarities, no!?« Shortly after the discussion, the entire group takes a vote by show of hands and decides that all those who wish to share significant moments from their upbringing beyond the realm of education (e.g. »Age 10, I saw my parents hit each other for the first time«) are welcome to do so. Conversely, those who prefer to stick with education can continue to do so, too.

The two prominent notions being negotiated here are similarity and difference. Both are right at the heart of what Burghardt et al (2017, p. 130) discuss as intercultural vulnerability, defining it as potential vulnerabilities that (can) arise from encounters, both real and imagined, between members of different cultures. Difference or differentness, as the opposite of similarity, is prominently encapsulated in the figure of the Other.And it is by looking at the figure of the Other, as Burghardt et al (2017, p. 134) point out, that two sides of vulnerability can be discerned: one pertains to the subject (that becomes vulnerable vis-à-vis the Other), the second concerns the Other (that becomes vulnerable in the face of prejudice and racism). With this in mind, we want to take a closer look at the two positions that the two groups take in the rehearsal described above. While the Indian group seeks to accentuate (cultural) differences (in upbringing) – and with that the depth of particular vulnerabilities – beyond the common realm of education, the German group[8] strives to emphasize alikeness or commonality (of vulnerabilities) alongthe shared experience of education. Let us look at the two positions through the lens of Butler's distinction between precariousness and precarity. We argue that the German group's initial preference for keeping education as a common and shared thematic frame or point of reference for the scene pertains to the realm of precariousness. In fact, we suggest regarding it as an attempt to stress precariousness; to stress the shared vulnerability vis-à-vis the common point of reference, that is education – a system that itself is ambivalent in that it arguably helps building resilience to the multifarious challenges of human life through fostering knowledge and capabilities, while, conversely, having the power to make vulnerable or to vulnerate

8 Homogeneity of each group would need to be analyzed separately in detail as not participants always voiced their opinion. For this article, we claim/construct homogeneity based on voiced majority opinion of each group.

its recipients. When the German group advocates focusing on experience that is relatable for both groups, as was assumed to be the case with shared challenges of navigating education systems in various forms, they seem to seek a point of commonality, a nondiscriminatory unifying quality. This, however, comes at the risk of disregarding othering structures and praxes. Conversely, it means seeking intersections or overlaps with the other group, with the ›You‹, based on the familiar, based on what the ›I‹ knows. This raises the question whether the quest for similarity is only possible in relation to a familiar, even normative frame – which here would translate, one could argue, into an underlying Eurocentric perspective.

The Indian group's quest for recognition of differences, we suggest, can be understood as an attempt to highlight precarity – the very particular and disproportionately distributed vulnerabilities that people in the Global South must face due to discriminatory political decision making from the Global North as well as its realization and reproduction in social praxes. We posit that the quest for recognition of differences does not equal creating distance or negating similarity. On the contrary, we argue that it is a step towards a holistic encounter through which commonality can be discovered. It is through jointly and reciprocally recognizing the vulnerating structures and praxes that divide living beings into (more) privileged and (more) disadvantaged that an authentic and truthful encounter becomes possible. In other words: By sharing and recognizing the scope of our vulnerabilities, we can discover at least one commonality: As interdependent living beings we reciprocally make each other vulnerable.

Figure 4: Rehearsal space and view of stage at Schauburg, Munich, Germany

Source: MK

7 The Porous Space (KK)

> As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its ›thus and not otherwise.‹ (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, pp. 165–166)

The rehearsal space at Infinite Souls Farm is built as per the proportions of a traditional kalari or training space for the Kerala martial art, kalaripayattu. 42 feet x 21 feet. It has a grey cement floor and a tin sloping roof that is held up by slabs of rough granite, hewn from the nearby hills. It has seating all around and is open on four sides to the trees and hills that abound. In the mornings, the space is witnessed by peacocks and parrots and in the evening, the sound of the cicadas fills it. Passing villagers, shepherds, grazing cattle can all witness artists and their practice. It is a porous space, in this way. Allowing in both elements and the changing visuals as per the angle of the sun and the waxing and waning moon, allowing out the theatre that is made within. Hence, it is referred to the Rehearsal Space, not Room, the word challenging the anthropocene in its porosity, to include the botanical and zoological.

Indian theatre has historically included performances in porous spaces such as temple courtyards, beneath trees, in open fields etc. The phrase used for a performance space is *Raṅgabhūmi*, a compound word comprising Ranga, meaning colour and *Bhūmi*, meaning earth. By association, the ground where art is performed becomes sacred and transformative, hence the action of seeking the blessing of the stage or ground before placing a foot on it. Even today, proscenium and closed rehearsal rooms are only available to an urban elite.

The objective of SDG 10 is to »Reduce inequality based on income, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, class, ethnicity, religion and opportunity within and among countries« and in the words of the United Nations, this requires transformative change. Here, a Porous Space becomes more than a room, it is a metaphor for future possibility. A space sans barrier that allows the Self out and the Other in. That unites the Atman (Self) and the Brahman (Universal Consciousness/Other). It challenges both mind and body to embrace vulnerability and step outside the safety of a closed ›Rehearsal Room‹.

We observed that the Indian actors and actresses were more willing in terms of writing, improvising, creating material and relating real life experiences, while the German actors and actresses were more shy and reluctant. The Indian team was keen on the final play and the German team was keen on the time spent together. Whether these are cultural differences or constructed barriers bears investigation, especially in intercultural collaborations. How much of the Indian desire to express and have a final product comes from Global South post-colonial aspiration? How much of the German reticence comes from Global North privilege? Does aspiration in time become aggressive? Does privilege come with its own drawbacks and is seeking distance from intensity one of them?

In unwrapping this, we forward the idea that intercultural theatre pedagogies for young people must be better intellectually equipped and globally aware, to radically move with the times and challenge the bogies of colonial thought. One such radical move, would be understanding the value of vulnerability in creating a common ground in the rehearsal space. The willingness to be vulnerable, on the part of all collaborators, averts the possibility of a relationship that remains stuck in a hierarchical social model, that repeats old patterns and doesn't blow away the dusty old cobwebs of habit.

8 Epilogue: Building sense of community through vulnerability (MK)

In this article, we analyzed manifestations of intercultural vulnerability in terms of their impact on the artistic/ pedagogical process. Drawing on Butler, we analytically oscillated between looking at vulnerability as a universal human condition and as an effect of imbalance of power, (thus, as a notion of the political). In doing so, we implicitly distinguished two vectors of (intercultural) vulnerability: an equalizing from a dis/privileging one. The cases we analyzed can be broken down into negotiation of these two binaries. Ascribing homogeneity and heterogeneity, essentializing cultural differences or idiosyncrasies, contrasting similarity/commonality with difference/differentness, feeling of decolonial anger that is met with sense of white guilt – negotiating these polarities (or constructions of an ›us‹ and ›them‹ dichotomy) not only dynamized the creative process, but also contributed to building sense of community. Sense of community, as we understand it, echoing McMillan and Chavis (1986), is a dynamic process of continuously negotiating different needs and perspectives, privileging collective over individual interests while

not diminishing any individual member's influence on the community.[9] We do not see it as a – once built – fixable achievement; rather, we regard it as a dynamic process, as being created performatively, in actu. Vulnerability, again in a dichotomous manner, is prominently woven into the fabric of sense of community – as both hinderance and enabler: On the one hand, sense of community is not only vulnerable to destabilizing forces itself; it is also prone to vulnerate others through exclusion. On the other hand, vulnerability can serve as a basis for sense of community to be built upon. Our analysis has focused on the latter: We argue that, it is through admitting, sharing and recognizing vulnerability, that we can challenge »the binaries of us and them to form new communities of the ›we‹ beyond the national« (Singleton 2014, p. 85). After all, as human beings we are porous, that is, we are dependent on and exposed to others. Echoing Butler one last time, we are vulnerable to violent acts of others but equally available to their care and support (Butler 2004, p. 31). Against this background, it is our hope, that laying focus on (our) common vulnerability will help and raise awareness to tackle the inequality and injustice of its disproportionate and differential distribution (precarity). If this means leaning into passing discomfort, we say: Let's. We believe it is worth the effort – in intercultural theatre projects and beyond.

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9 Sense of community as defined by McMillan is »a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together« (McMillan and Chavis 1986, p. 9).

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