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Rising and Falling:

Phantom Projects and the lived experiences of funding failure

. . . when my soul sees and experiences these wonderful things my mood changes and I forget my sufferings and tribulations . . . and my soul draws up what I see and hear in the vision, as if from a fountain—a fountain which always remains full and inexhaustible.
—Hildegard von Bingen, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*

I almost. I almost made it. A little more and I had grace and all.
Every day I hope the next day to be called upon by the authorities to create the opera of the creation. I wait. You can see the mistake: I should not have thought. To want to do well, what presumption!
—Héléne Cixous, *Hyperdream*

When applying for subsidies or funding to support the creation of new theatre and performance projects, the independent theatre practitioner—whether director, writer or performer—must provide details about the ensemble or group that they have confirmed for the project. Mirroring the Stanislavskian questions, the artist must outline what, where, who, how and why. To demonstrate the viability of a project, the applicant creates budgets; letters of confirmation and biographies indicating the team has the requisite expertise; and confirmation letters from presenting partners, venues and other supporters. As they comply with these administrative tasks, artists are drawn into the speculative project; an ensemble is indeed created. The process of applying for subsidy summons the project into being.

When subsidy or funding does not eventuate, the theatre maker is left to deliver the bad news to her team. For the ensemble, the hopeful prospect of short-term employment evaporates, and the presenting partner or venue is informed that the project won't be ready for the next season or festival program. But another effect—more insidious and troubling—nags the project originator. The speculative project is akin to Rayner's

reflections on the "missed encounter" (Rayner 2006, 11). The project still lives within the theatre maker, following her around like a phantom, watching over her shoulder as she turns to other projects and professional obligations. Like the ghost of Hamlet's father, the phantom project whispers "Remember me!", and as the practitioner gets on with the busy patchwork life of freelance work, the phantom project becomes strangely solid—as if it has already happened. As the years pass, the theatre maker is surprised by the gaps in her curriculum vitae. Her mind colonised by phantom projects, she momentarily misremembers, and asks herself "Did that happen? Did we make that project/show/work?" Phantom projects are the ones that were dreamt into being, but never became reality.

This article is a shadow sibling to Anna Tregloan's *The Impossible Project* (2020), which "captured an imagined but unrealised future" through an immersive exhibition documenting arts projects which had become impossible. With the arrival of the pandemic and the associated spreading infection of cancelled arts projects, *The Impossible Project* was propelled by a new urgency, as Tregloan responded to "rapidly fading moments, many of which were quickly disappearing from websites or being buried in the groundswell of "online offerings" (Tregloan 2020). The psychological labour of carrying (or abandoning) unfinished theatre projects is a subject that we thought worth investigating. Does funding failure create a sense of artistic failure for the artist who is leading a project? Where Tregloan has created a melancholy archive of projects which were cancelled because of the Covid pandemic, here, we focus on the experience of theatre makers who have continued to practice, despite failed attempts at funding. Our approach has been to explore how artists live with funding failure, and how they honour or forget the phantom projects that were never made. What are the long-term effects of living with phantom projects? Is there a residue of regret, or loss that theatre practitioners learn to live alongside? Is persistence in the face of "funding failure" a professional skill, acquired over time? Does artistic practice, and creative inspiration remain "full and inexhaustible", like Hildegard's visions (1989, 23)? How many times can a theatre maker be unsuccessful in applying for funding, before the energy to reapply, to bring a team together, dwindles, and the project becomes a phantom?

As theatre practitioners, both of us directors and producers of independent theatre projects, which are resourced by our own unpaid time, in kind support, and smaller grants from a variety of sources, the invitation to examine the art of subsidy and the subsidy of art suggested to us the shadow side of subsidy. The labour of preparing and writing an arts funding application is well known, but the heaviness and fear of failure is something that we live with, rather than speak about. Julian Meyrick, Ben Eltham, and others have written about the effect of reduced arts funding on the creation of new Australian work, and the financial challenges which are borne by independent theatre practitioners throughout their careers. Due to the delicate nature of the conversation, we did not throw a wide net. We approached peers, former collaborators, and colleagues—highly successful practitioners, notwithstanding the ups and downs of their careers.

Jane Longhurst, Maude Davey, Peta Murray, Peta Hanrahan and Görkem Acaroğlu are theatre makers who have worked for several decades in projects ranging from the small to medium theatre sector, as well as larger projects with major performing arts companies and festivals; and Pony Cam, a Melbourne based company, who have been creating independent theatre and performance for a decade. We asked them to reflect on the phantom projects that continue to pester or are laid to rest. What emerged is by no means exhaustive. This is an intimate data set, which we invite others to embellish, and to gather stories of funding failure and its effects on artists. We did not interview artists who have left their practice or no longer seek funding—all our interviewees have continued to dream and plan new works and continue to engage with various arts funding programs to support their work. What follows might be regarded by performance studies scholars as rich data for further research. For practitioners, the stories of disappointment, incredulity in the face of bureaucratic inanities, and resilience in the face of funding failure, will be very familiar. It is our hope that this article, written in the spirit of artistic and practice-based solidarity, and a desire to enter the inner landscape of artistic practice, will enlarge the way we think about funding failure. Here, we reflect on the way in which Australian arts funding processes ask the artist to weave shirts from nettles, or spin straw into gold. While art creates conditions for possible new realities, bureaucracies create conditions for the impossible: a state of fraught need which can break or temper artistic vision and disrupt artistic identity. It can be hard to talk about the structural issues inherent in arts subsidy from an individual point of view, partly because systemic failings are sometimes buried under overwhelming feelings of personal failure or regret. The practitioners we spoke to emphasised that they did not want to appear bitter, entitled, or churlish, and it is clear they are none of these things. Rather, as we witness the artist treading her path through the world—despite the obstacles inherent in a society in which, during the pandemic, the federal government asserted that all artists and creative people were “non-essential workers”—words like humour, resilience, toil, and vision come to mind.

Ski Jump: In-run and take-off

While trying to explain distance in the milky way, an old friend recounted a story about a ski jump getting built near a village where he grew up in Allgau, Bavaria. The village was in the process of building the largest ski jump in the world at that time and they calculated that the incline and length of the in-run would launch the skier off the edge of the take-off at a speed of 100km per hour. Here, they hit their first mogul: the ski jump designers weren’t sure how such speeds would affect the human body. Would the skier be able to breathe? What would happen to their arms, their face, their legs? To control the test, my friend said, a skier, clutching two skis, crouched in the in-run position in the back of a convertible, while the vehicle, driving down the autobahn, accelerated to 100km an hour.

This story was delivered as part true story, part village folklore, and the intention in the telling was to prompt us to think about the necessity of embodied forms of knowledge as a way of comprehending the possible. At a certain point, speculation falls short, and we have to *try*. The story can also be a metaphor for the role of subsidy for artists. To realise a new work, we need to experiment, test, and try (and fail). We need to stand up in the back of a convertible, clinging to ski poles, and go 100km down an autobahn, to know, once and for all, if we can breathe. The analogy of the ski jump test speaks to the courage of arts practitioners—especially those in the small and medium sector who leap from project to project; swerving obstacles and plugging fiscal gaps as they reach for the unknown; spinning ideas from the frayed edges of the zeitgeist. Who wants to go 100km an hour with their face bare to the wind? Without opportunity and without support, ideas are often not made solid. We are not suggesting that artists do not develop work without subsidy (or pay), however, for most, in an ongoing way, money is desperately needed to keep making work (and continue to pay rent or a mortgage).

Refusing to give up and go away

Writer and theatre maker, Peta Murray, whose career began in the early 1980s on the Gadigal lands of Eora and now lives in Naarm/Melbourne, writes that early in her career she was spared the task of writing funding applications to support her writing practice:

> In the 1980s and 1990s, there were still enough small- and middle-tier companies around. They were the ones who did the grant writing, and only when they had the funds would they commission me to deliver a new work. But since approximately the year 2000, under a succession of vandals in the form of conservative governments, that middle tier disappeared and, with it, those support systems for artists. And now it's back with the independent practitioners to source their own funds. And its soul destroying and so regularly fruitless.

Murray observes that the arts funding process has "an accompanying folklore: that it is only after serial trials that one will succeed." She used to believe this, and would advise her students and emerging writers that "it was as simple as refusing to give up and go away." But now, Murray is less convinced. "Things go in and out of fashion, and no matter what the system says about itself, it's still gatekeeping by any other name."

In the 2000s, theatre practitioners continued to create and enact hope in a desiccated small-to-medium sector, and occupy the vacuum left by the vanishment of small- and middle-tier companies. Without these companies advocating for, and employing emerging and diverse theatre practitioners, inherent structural flaws in state and federal arts funding programs were more visible. Peta Hanrahan was Artistic Director of The Dog Theatre Inc from 2008 to 2012, in Melbourne's western suburb of Footscray. Hanrahan has re-established The Dog Theatre as a regional theatre company in

Gippsland on Gunaikurnai land. She says that her practice as director and theatre maker remains informed by her working-class background, and this is maintained in the ethos of The Dog Theatre: an awareness of structural inequality, and a desire to support a diverse range of artists. She reflects, "I am deeply, even still, influenced by a lack of education in my formative years and my working-class, immigrant origins." At the Dog Theatre, Hanrahan strove to "create a humble, yet loving platform for professional independent theatre practitioners to give birth to their previously rejected funding projects. Much in line with the La Mama model, we delighted in conversations with gorgeous artists about their dreams, and when we could, we produced, wrote funding applications for, and nurtured ideas and careers." Hanrahan notes that some of the artists she worked with had never written an application for arts subsidy. She believes that one of the reasons for this was because "the funding rules are an intrinsically middle-class structure, a clerical take on the world", and this made the process mystifying and inaccessible for many. As Hanrahan indicates, the process of applying for arts funding is perhaps not a level playing field—applicants with more resources can represent their projects more effectively.

Performer and theatre maker, Jane Longhurst, based in nipulina/Hobart, found that her experiences on Australia Council funding panels opened her eyes to the resources expended by some artists to help craft and present their funding applications. "It's clear that strong applications are really sophisticated, and a lot of organisations—and sometimes artists—have resources to ghost write them. And as a panellist you must really find reasons to discount it. Sometimes they are such small reasons, which don't speak to the worthiness of the work." Theatre director, Görkem Acaroğlu, now based in regional Victoria on Dja Dja Wurrung country, observes that "In the non-white arts community, we tend to see a lot of money for development, but much less money for presentation. It's like a joke. As though we need to be constantly developing because we're not good enough." In Acaroğlu's article, "Shadows of the Australian Performing Arts Ecology", she articulates her experience of "othering":

> One of the biggest barriers for artists from non-Anglo backgrounds is the lack of support from the industry itself. As Australians, we have been taught to see non-Anglos as less than, as not as smart or competent or capable as White others. Leaders in our industry help people who look and feel and have worldviews similar to their own. (2022, 72-92)

Performer and theatre maker, Maude Davey, based in Naarm/Melbourne, reflects on her own privilege, counterbalanced against the privilege afforded theatre made by white male practitioners. "I'm a middle-aged white woman. So, I have a whole raft of privilege that is not afforded to other people, but I'm not a middle aged white dude! I think about Robert Lepage and his autobiographical piece *887*. Seeing this was formative for my conception of the *1986* project." Lepage's work, programmed in the 2016 Melbourne Festival, led Davey to reflect on "the primary gesture of a show", and wonder about the resources which are essential for work that is grounded in truth.

> I paid a fucking a fortune to go and see it and looked at it, and just marvelled at that amazing, transformative set, which was a fucking working kitchen in one moment, and then a panorama of a city in the next. The impulse to make that was—it's Rousseau's *Confessions*. It's a memoir. It's not a grand impulse, it was a personal story. As though Lepage was telling us: "That's what it was like, this is my life, and this is what it's been like. Perhaps if I share it with you that will illuminate aspects of your life which will make us both feel slightly more loving, or something." That is a humble intimate offer. And yet it was given this incredibly grand staging, and massive status, and technology, which frankly, I don't think it deserved. I think it was a fabulous piece of theatre. But really, we're gonna watch a middle-aged white dude talk about his life, and we've paid more than $100, and he's not even my grandfather?

When asked the question, "What unmade project or projects haunt you?", Davey names *1986*, a work based on her diaries of that year. This was a project she tried to make in various ways. The idea for *1986* came from a sentence in a funding application for *Retro Futurismus* (2017). While the project "eventually got funding", and was produced at fortyfive downstairs to acclaim, Davey laments, "it wasn't quite what I said it was going to be, so what I said it was going to be still haunts me." The sentence from the funding application was: "A portrait of the last 50 years of feminism through five female identified bodies."

Davey describes how the sentence "caught" and she thought, "I really want to do that." Asked to contribute a reading to a performance, she thought of the 177 diaries under her bed, which she had written since she was 16 years old.

> Somebody said, 'We'll give you 100 bucks. Come and do a reading of something', and I thought 'Oh, fuck! I've got nothing to read. I don't want to write anything—I know, I'll read my diary from 1986.' They wanted six minutes—dreams and reflections, so I said, 'Well, start the clock, and at six minutes I'll stop.' And so I just read out all the dreams and reflections I had noted in my 1986 diary for six minutes. And I thought 'Oh, fuck, this is so good, this material is so great! You can see where I come from! I can see what I am, what I was, what I am!' I decided that I wanted to make a major work called *1986*, which was looking at 50 years of feminism, but looking at, looking at how my dreams related to what was happening in the world, and the context of the dreams and how they talk about my navigation of the world, and identity and subjectivity, and colonialism and Australianness.

Davey has applied for funds for the 1986 project twice, and it has always been knocked back. When she requested feedback on her application, funding program officers offered a standard response, and she is blunt about the usefulness of this feedback:

> 'But it was just so competitive', the funding bodies tell you. 'What could I have done better?' I ask. 'Well, you could have been clearer about the impact on the community or the impact on your practice . . .' Impact on my fucking practice! It'll pay me for five weeks of work! That's the impact on my practice. It will enable me to pay my fucking mortgage!

Figure 1: *My First Bike* by Maude Davey, La Mama Theatre, 2023. Image: Darren Gill

Görkem Acaroğlu also reflects on her phantom project, *Silence: The Musical*, which she and Greg Ulfan developed when their company, Metanoia Theatre, was in residence at the Brunswick Mechanics Institute in Naarm/Melbourne. “As it was an artist-led company, and as we were running a venue, we were able to generate income to create work, even though it was never enough money and we weren't able to pay people award wages. But we were able to generate money to pay people. So, we weren't actually as reliant on funding as we are now that we are independent.”

Acaroğlu and Ulfan were able to pay their ensemble of performers for a week's development of *Silence*. “And then we hoped that, using the documentation from the creative development, that we'd be able to get presentation funding. We were never able to get presentation funding. And so that's the one that really hurts me the most, because we did a development.” Acaroğlu and Ulfan applied for funding from several funding programs, “and we just didn't get anything. And it was just very upsetting, because we had already done so much work, and it was such a great team as well.”

Figure 2: Publicity image for *Silence: The Musical*, Görkem Acaroğlu and Greg Ulfan, Metanoia Theatre. Image: Deryk McAlpin

Acaroğlu reflects that she has many phantom projects. She notes that her current laptop holds folders containing the paperwork and dreams for ten projects dreamt up over the past four years. Throughout her career, there have been a number of projects funded with small amounts for a development that haven’t gone to full production. “They’re the ones that stick because I actually created something, and I could *see* what the work was

going to be. I could really *see* it, and even had documentation. But then, I was not able to get funding to produce it."

The phantom project that pesters Peta Murray is her long form performance work, *Things that fall over* (2012–14):

> It haunts me, even though it had its one glorious showing, its five hours in the sun. It is my Passion Play, epic and impossible. I worked on, with, around, and under it for about three years and it almost crushed the life out of me. So near and yet so far. Never was a work—it's not really a play, more an extravaganza—so aptly named as *Things That Fall Over: An anti-musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio-as-coda*. It wanted to be all the things. I wanted it to be all the things. It grew a community of believers around it. We were in endless talks—the Victorian Women's Trust gave us seed funding, we tried crowdsourcing via a huge event at the State Library of Victoria, we got development funds from [the Australia Council] and from City of Melbourne and the Besen Foundation, which allowed us to show bits of it, but when it came to the crunch, we couldn't ever get the funding to mount it at scale.

Despite despair, disappointment, and all the feelings that fall between these two poles, artists continue to flex and bend as they travel down the in-run, gathering the velocity required for a project to take-off.

Figure 3: *Things that Fall Over* by Peta Murray.

We're all in this together

The 2022 Rising Festival called for works that were ambitious, epic, and transformative. The Rising Festival invited artists to dream big; to propose a large-scale ski jump, with a long in-run, and an epic take off. Dreaming new works from their locked down apartment rooms, from lives and worlds that had folded in on themselves, the call from Rising for brave, big works of epic scale was in stark contrast to the small closed down domestic spaces so many had existed within throughout Melbourne's interminable lockdowns. The Rising Festival was a call to action in the quiet reflective time after Melbourne's extensive lockdowns. Rising's "Call to Artists" asked for "Ideas that are radical and ambitious" (Rising 2020), where in the most epically intimate and transformative moment, the pandemic had changed us, in ways we still haven't reconciled, so whatever was made from that would by necessity be all those things. If it was made or allowed to be made.

Dominic Weintraub and Hugo Williams of Melbourne performance collective, Pony Cam, had not told anyone about their rejection from the 2021 Rising Festival, because, as Weintraub says, "We thought it was shameful." When they heard that projects pitched by their mentor, and the mentor of their mentor, were also rejected (along with many other artists), they started thinking about all the possible projects that had been rejected by the Rising Festival, across diverse artforms and practitioners. They wondered about where these unmade projects were recorded, and what they could have been. They decided to organise a faux launch of a phantom festival, made up of all the proposals rejected by Rising. They called it "Falling". They put a call out for the rejected proposals on Instagram and received 60 replies.

The replies were vast and varied, both intimate and epic. The projects rejected by the Rising Festival haunted Williams, and returned to him when talking about other projects. Williams said he felt as though he was holding the ideas of 40–50 people inside him, "Which was odd. I still sometimes talk about an idea like it's new, and then realise I've taken someone else's or part of someone else's idea from those pitches." There is a gentleness in the way that he acknowledges this; that he is caretaking the ideas, being mindful when he tries to claim them. There is an implicit understanding of the effort involved in simply dreaming a new thing up. "There was generosity and catharsis in sharing ideas that had been rejected", Williams says. Pony Cam had planned to hold Falling at Melbourne's Siteworks, where they had a residency. They wanted the artists to read their ideas aloud and then burn them in a fire pit with others looking on. This would be a public acknowledgement that the ideas existed, that the projects were heard, before disappearing. They scheduled Falling on the opening night of Rising; a sardonic celebration of unmade work. As it transpired, both events were unable to continue as Melbourne was thrust into another lockdown.

Undeterred, Pony Cam moved Falling onto social media. In May 2021, the night before Victoria went into lockdown once again, a starkly lit dark figure sat framed in the middle

of an Instagram live stream and read out 60 proposals for projects. Williams describes the figure as "a judge in a horror dream, elevated. Just one person deciding if your idea will go ahead or not." People at home listened in and commented on ideas. Weintraub recalls that at the end they took all the ideas outside to a fire pit and burnt them, then panned up to the moon, which just so happened to be a blood moon, a full moon—the inverse of Rising's crescent symbol—and with that, the launch of Falling concluded.

Williams and Weintraub imagined Falling as the collective coming together, making something out of straw, then setting it alight together—as catharsis, acknowledgment, and grief. Pony Cam created a ritual to honour phantom projects, using humour, which, as Williams says, "builds an antagonist of the rejector." But the ritual did more than that; it showed us we have community and that we are invested in each other's works. The solitary nature of believing in a work, applying for funding, and finding places it might fit, is exhausting; the pandemic, then, only intensified this isolation. Falling is an example of how artists can share unmade work and honours the possibility of what a work might have been—even though this hopeful impulse does not resource new work, or pay the bills. Falling is an example of the ways in which we might continue to acknowledge ideas, challenge who chooses which ideas are made, and create community outside of bureaucracy.

Figures 4 & 5: *Falling*, Pony Cam

Money v. time

The artists we spoke to had painful and pragmatic associations with projects that had received funding towards the development of a new work. Typically, a grant to develop a new theatre work involves working with a team of artists for one to two weeks, with a showing of work in progress for an audience of invited friends and colleagues. The accounts of these experienced theatre makers tell a contrapuntal story about creative development funding becoming a de facto rehearsal wage for performers. Similar narratives and feelings weave through them: experiences of risk, toil, loss, success. Davey reflects on *Retro Futurismus* and the minimal resources she had to make the work, notwithstanding the support of Melbourne's fortyfivedownstairs:

> At that time, I didn't have much energy and will for self-producing. Mary Lou at fortyfivedownstairs really wanted us to come in and do a season. And so, she made it happen, and she kind of dragged us in. And so, I was a reluctant producer, and I did that, and I worked. I got creative development money, and I did all that kind of stuff, and then I kind of just hid under the blanket and didn't think about the box office, and I lost $7,000. And so, I bought that loss, and the performers did as well, because they basically, having been paid well for creative development for two weeks, they didn't get paid anything for three weeks of performance. I think we got $400 each, or something like that. But they were all happy with that, because you never get paid to rehearse a short form variety show.

The protracted time frame of applying for creative development funding, completing the development, reporting on the project, and then applying for funds to present the final project, draws out the life or the energy of a work. Görkem Acaroğlu, prefers to expend creative energy within a tighter time frame:

> I'd rather just make the work so it responds to the moment, rather than trying to make something which will still be relevant three years' hence. I like moving fast, and because I've got lots of ideas, I find it very hard to keep things alive if I get funding for a development and then go for presentation money, and then I don't get it. I find it very hard to keep trying to drag that out because once we've made the development, I have made the show I can see the show, so it's there.

Peta Murray also speaks about the difficulties of, on the one hand, obtaining funding for a creative development and, on the other hand, not being able to see it through to fruition. "The most bitter blow was securing the development funding from [the Australia Council] and then not getting the follow-through funding to stage the behemoth."

The relationship between time and iterative practice, and the economies of making, plays out in a different way for Davey. Over the past four decades, her creative practice has been a mix of other people's work and her own, which tends to the solo. "It's very self-reflexive and generated over a long time. I never think that it's worth anything, so I always pitch it to La Mama, because then I know I won't lose money. Those solo works, which are the most important works I make, are the least valued in the economies of making in which I practise." Deep time, deep investigation, the interior life of the artist, and how this might be theatricalised in a solo or ensemble work, the reflexive state of Cixous' waiting, hoping, or wishing for "a little more", do not chime with the frequencies of the neoliberal scale.

Acaroğlu is pragmatic about the unsustainable labour of the director or project lead, running on empty in order to make work that speaks to its cultural moment on a shoestring budget:

> I usually end up just getting 30, 40 grand, and make a show with that from scratch, paying myself nothing. I can't pay everyone properly because I just want to make work. I prefer that, even though it's exhausting and difficult, and all that stuff. I prefer that because making a work—it's about now—it's not about what life is going to be like in a year and a half, or in two years. By that time, God knows what's happened. So, if I've got a concept for something, I have to do it now. I can't do it in two or three years.

However, she notes that when crafting works of a larger scale, the task of writing multiple applications to a range of funding bodies, each with their own slightly different criteria, requires substantial dedication of time and resources. Reflecting on the scale of a site-specific project planned for the Castlemaine Festival, Acaroğlu exemplifies how the director holds a large project, and undertakes the unpaid labour of writing many funding applications. "I thought, 'I'm going to get seven grants!'" Thinking big and thinking about what it really costs to make a big work, she also included a budget line for childcare, something she has rarely done in the course of her career. "But then it's just so exhausting writing all those applications, and so unlikely that you're going to get seven grants. You're never going to get that." As a lead artist she observes that she might, at the outset, be realistic about the real cost of making large scale work, and pledge to put the right value on the work, "but then you're going to end up doing it with less, anyway."

Shame, fury and detachment

Often several attempts to secure funding are not successful. Is failure to attract funding experienced as a form of artistic failure? Sarah Cole writes that "failure is a vital driving mechanism to the creative process, and indeed the creative person must make a lifelong commitment to failing" (Cole 2014, 184). Phillip B. Zarrilli also reflects on failure as part of the artistic process. He writes that the studio is "a place where, at times, failure, and its risks, should not only mean more but count more than 'success'" (Zarrilli 2002, 161). Yet Cole's "lifelong commitment to failing" and Zarilli's "failure, and its risks" are statements that are easy to read, but harder to experience.

Peta Murray distinguishes between funding failure and artistic failure. Her experience of the failure of another artistic collaboration, with the subsequent return of funds to the funding body, is, she writes, "a blow to one's identity as a practitioner." Murray elaborates on the feelings attached to different kinds of "failure", and suggests that often it is the artist who is the harshest judge of their work:

> It feels firstly like shame, later like fury. Artistic failure is another kind of wound, and it goes with the territory, bound up with the inevitable sense that one must always fall short of one's vision. It's a blow to one's psyche, played as a low, sustained note of permanent disappointment in oneself, in one's own eyes. Funding failure is a blow to one's ego and is experienced as being scrutinised and found wanting. It drives me into a state of retreat while I work through the shame of being once again insufficient. That's the main distinction for me. Who's the judge?

Jane Longhurst identifies funding failure as separate to her own artistic practice: "I don't see failure to attract funding as failure, because I believe in the work too much. I don't ever think of it as the application failing. Or me failing. Because I know it's hard for artists to grow in this country and an important part of growing is failure." Some artists grapple with having and not having, success and failure, throughout their careers, and the relationship between artistic vision and funding success is more troubling. Peta Hanrahan, having relocated to regional Victoria, reflects on her long practice as a director and artistic director, and the projects that were never made. "We are fighting over my consciousness; who will have domination over my everyday thoughts, me and the life I have now chosen; that of escape, of good thoughts, of gratitude and good health, or the darkness, bloody horror, and anger that has been driving my artistry for nearly four decades?"

Figure 6: *The Waiting Room*, by Born In A Taxi, 2010. First performed at The Dog Theatre for the Melbourne Fringe Festival. IMAGE: Peta Hanrahan

The artists we spoke with have developed strategies for living with, or responding to, funding failure. It is evident that resilience in the face of funding failure, and their self-concept as artists, powers their desire to continue making work. Sometimes resilience is expressed through grim humour, and Acaroğlu shows this when she describes how she makes peace with funding failure.

> I have many problems with our system of arts subsidy and funding. However, I think we have a lot of systemic problems in the arts, and in our society, so I don't take funding failure as personal failure. I don't allow myself to think. 'Oh, my projects and my artistic ideas aren't good.' The issue for me is, 'how much energy do I have to keep hitting my head against the wall of a system that is really quite flawed and problematic?' I have a lot of belief in my own artistic capacity. My problem is with the system. Or at least that's how I survive, you know. Maybe it *is* me. Maybe I'm just a bad artist, and maybe the system is great. But that's how I survive, anyway.

Brunt

Mike Alfreds writes that a theatre rehearsal process enables "a group of people to exercise their imaginations collaboratively as well as individually" and allows them to "grow, develop and extend themselves until together they coalesce as a unique creation, a world true to its own specific existence and only possible because of these particular people" (Alfreds 2007, 339). The practitioners we spoke to tend to be the lead artists, innovators, and makers who bring something into being from nothing, and invite their peers and colleagues to coalesce into a unique creation. Leading projects and writing applications for funding, they create the ensemble, cast the project, and assemble the given circumstances from which the work will be made. On receipt of the dreaded "On this occasion, your application was not successful" letter, the lead artist must share the news with her team. How do practitioners nurture relationships, and protect collaborations in the face of disappointment? For Murray, experience has taught her to seek out support, and use the services available for artists to support wellbeing.

> Almost all my work is collaborative these days, and with rare exceptions, I find this far less tortuous on my mental health. Highs are shared, but lows are too, and that disperses some of the agony. We cry on each other's shoulders, rage and curse and drink together till we're over it.
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> Recently I have actually taken advantage of some of the services available for artists through Support Act and the Arts Wellbeing Collective. Trying to work through the pain of the creative 'divorce' with a collaborator has been much harder than I'd anticipated, and it took me a while to realise what kind of a toll it was taking, mentally, physically, and

> spiritually. This is a major change over the past ten years or so: the fact that we now recognise the cost of our work on our wellbeing and mental health, and the fact that there are now some resources to call upon. I think this is a good thing.

Another by-product of funding failure is that the artist may begin to see themselves as a Pollyanna, believing in a thing against the odds, despite the evidence. Going back to peers and collaborators with requests to support a second or third attempt at funding is the awkward manoeuvre of clambering back onto the ski jump. Acaroğlu speaks about the sense of responsibility towards a project team, and the reluctance to resume the funding application process again. "It does affect you, when you bring together a team of people that you haven't worked with before and if you don't get money, you think: 'Oh, God!' Now I have to go back to them, and say, 'do you want to work on that project again that might not get money?'" Acaroğlu describes the difficult feelings attached to requesting colleagues to "write me a letter", and "will you do this? Will you do that?", while at the same time declaring, "It's probably not going to happen!" She calls this double state "the de-escalation of passion". Reflecting on *Silence: The Musical*, Acaroğlu is clear that this project still has flickering life. But the labour of rewriting funding applications, of going back into the bureaucratic process, of framing the artistic vision through "a clerical take on the world" trips her up, as well as asking her colleagues to believe once more, in the face of all the odds:

> It's also about people—going back to peers. That's the part that I find really hard, is going back and saying, 'Hey, remember this project, that amazing thing? I'm gonna try and get more money for it again!' It makes me feel like I'm a lunatic—'I really believe in this crazy thing!' Even though I know that my colleagues are not thinking that about me, or the project. So that's the reason that the *Silence* project is not happening—because I can't bear it!

Murray writes that supporting collaborations through shared labour makes the task of creating new work possible. "You try to share the meagre resources you have. You try to be equitable with the distribution of the workload and take your turn at the grant application wheel. Brunt is the perfect word for this duty; it is heavy and dangerous and unsung work; it is the real labour of art-making."

Full and inexhaustible

Reflecting on Hildegard's "full and inexhaustible" visions (1989, 23), we asked artists about the balance between their own creativity, and the ambition or will to bring projects to fruition via funding applications. We were interested in how ambition for their work might shift over the course of a career. Murray is frank about her desire to make her mark in the world.

> I hoped I had parked my ambition long ago, but I am probably kidding myself. I would venture that I am no longer ambitious for me, for success, fame, or money. My ambition these days is quite simply to sustain and continue to practice. The big shift for me came when I moved away from the solo enterprise of the lonely playwright.
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> Over an almost forty-year career I can see how I've ridden the currents, and I must have acquired tacit skills and strategies through the highs and lows that I still call upon. I've long joked that it's seven years of feast, followed by seven years of famine, and I am pretty sanguine about that these days. Age sorts lots of this stuff out.

Child rearing also shapes creative outputs and the energy to realise them. Acaroğlu notes that in the early years of her career, before she had children, "it was much easier, if I was really passionate about a project, to keep applying for years and years." She describes her durational work, *The 24 Hour Experience*: "It took me 3 or 4 years to get money, and I needed quite a lot of money for that project. But I was so committed to that idea that I just didn't want to let it go. But as you get older, and as you have more commitments, such as families and children and mortgages, it's much harder to keep telling yourself 'It's gonna happen, no matter what.'"

Figure 7: Jane Longhurst in *Request Programme*, by Franz Xaver Kroetz, Directed by Robert Jarman. Image credit: Tony McKendrick. As producer and performer of this solo work, Jane Longhurst was successful in obtaining support for *Request Programme* from Arts Tasmania and the Regional Arts Fund. She also received support from Creative Partnerships Australia as a MatchLAB participant, and via the Australian Cultural Fund from 100+ donors. The project received in kind support from Detached, Beaker Street Festival, and Blue Cow Theatre.

When presented with the proposition of an offer of a million dollars to make the work that haunts them, Davey, Murray and Acaroğlu had phantom projects that quickly came to mind. Davey declares, "A million dollars. That's a lot of money, a lot of money. And in some ways, I think it's almost obscene to spend a million dollars on a project." But what she would do with this phantom funding, is not a named project, but a collaboration; a community of practice. "What I really want is an ensemble. Like Ariane Mnouchkine. Have a little space by the docks, and pay artists to come in and spend eight months developing a work. That'd be amazing, instead of the hurry to produce." Murray would return to *Things that fall over*. "I would make some kind of broadcast quality recording, so it has a chance at some kind of posterity. The songs need to be kept alive. The text, maybe less so, although I still think it's one of the best things I've ever written." For Acaroğlu, the phantom million dollars would allow *Silence* to be realised. She says, "If someone gave us the money, we could totally do it today, I would start work on it instantly."

Further research into how funding failure affects artists might investigate the long-term effects of insufficient financial resources. How does funding failure affect artistic identity? What are the inner resources that artists develop to counter notions of failure, and what is the effect of the ghostly and physical archive of work that artists carry through their lives? While our focus has been on theatre projects that have not yet been realised, we wish to emphasise that the artists we interviewed are not in any way powerless victims. The artists we spoke with are professional, visionary, forward-thinking, hard-working citizens, with riches to give our communities, and Australian theatre culture. Like Cixous' narrator, they wait "to be called upon by the authorities to create the opera of the creation" (2009, 9); to present us with new ways of being, show us who we are, and challenge the fashion of the day. In an impulse to assuage feelings of loss or failure, and to make impossible works possible, we like to imagine what could happen if our speculative million dollars for each artist was made real. What would we see, if each had a million arts dollars to spend? As these artists entered the in-run, with the momentum of resources pushing them forward, we could watch them take-off. We might see some glorious phantom projects come to life.

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