Mission Statement

Anxiety is a mental illness that, in recent years, has become widely known in our modern society. Anxiety is now considered to be the most common mental illness in the UK, with up to 3 million people suffering at any one-time. According to mental health charity, *Mind* (2017) 'Approximately 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year. In England, 1 in 6 people report experiencing a common mental health problem (such as anxiety and depression) in any given week.' (Mind, 2017, accessed 21 May 2018). Larry Rosen from *Psychology Today* (2017) also talks of the 'epidemic', he states 'On June 11, a *New York Times* article, ''An Anxious Nation'' chronicled how our society has seemingly become one where the diagnosis of anxiety now rivals that of depression. Poignantly the article suggests that, "Anxiety is starting to seem like a sociological condition, too: a shared cultural experience that feeds on alarmist *CNN* graphics and metastasizes through social media".' (Rosen, 2017, accessed 21 May 2018). Anxiety Disorder has been seen in younger generations, with a rising view of anxiety within the educational sector. Adults, too, have a seeming increase in anxious symptoms, highlighted by the stresses of modern society and politics. It is now that we question this sudden upsurge in anxiety and explore how this is affecting our younger generations. Søren Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Anxiety* (2015), translated by Alastair Hannay, refers to the dizziness of choice, a point in which there are so many options presented to us that it creates an overwhelming sense of unease and dread, fearing both action and consequence, Kierkegaard states 'Anxiety can be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down the yawning abyss become dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down.' (Hannay, 2015: 75). It is this notion of choice, combined with societies pressures and growing technologies that we created the performance workshop, *Anxiety* (2018).

My research around *Anxiety* stemmed from a conversation that I had with a secondary school teacher, he expressed his growing concern for anxiety in his students, targeting his fear at year 7, ages 11-12. Following this conversation, I found many other adults in the educational sector felt the same way about the younger generations, and often expressed their concerns of feeling underqualified for the worries of young students. Jerrell Cassady in *Anxiety in Schools: The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions for Academic Anxieties* (2010)

explains, 'We all encounter a measured response to evaluative situations that can be characterised as tense, uneasy, disquieted, nervous, fearful and simply anxious.' (Cassady, 2010: 9) but goes on to explain 'However most of these students do not have a conception for the pervasive and detrimental role test anxiety plays in the educational and academic experiences of sizable portion of the population.' (Cassady, 2010: 9). As a theatre company that creates performance on mental illness, we were inspired to devise a performance that responds to the upsurge of anxiety and raises awareness for the younger generation; a performance by which can educate, inform, and raise understanding. Veronica Baxter and Katherine Low talk of the impact of theatre in *Applied Theatre: Performing Health and Wellbeing* (2017) 'It is here that theatre, performance and art-making can make a powerful impact. Theatre-making in response to particular health situations, and as part of a creative human process as a human right, has been long standing.' (Baxter, Low, 2017: 5). With the knowledge that there is the possibility of an impactful production that responds to health situations, our inspiration led us to the creation of *Anxiety*, by which we could home in on our research and development and explore different elements of the performance via peer response and seeding workshops.

The presented performance workshop is not aimed to create fear *of* anxiety, but create a space where anxiety is a state that can be spoken about. In *Kierkegaard and Existentialism* (2011) Jon Stewart discusses the views on anxiety interpreted through various philosophers, including Kierkegaard, saying that 'Anxiety is in a certain sense not being anxious about nothing. For in the anxiety experience, Heidegger writes, nothing functions as that in the face of which one has anxiety … that in the face of which one has anxiety, is identified as being-in-the-world itself.' (Stewart 2011: 110) This applicable notion, highlights our workshop as a mode of de-stigmatisation, and communal involvement: through a guided experience of both passive viewing and active spectating, the audience are taken through four elements of work with the aim to raise a deeper understanding of anxiety in the younger generation, alongside external cause of our modern societies. The four distinct sections of *Anxiety* include; a performative introduction, a spectated theatre performance, a curated practical workshop, and a reflection. Firstly, the introduction, which introduces the subject matter and context of the performance workshop: the participants are initially given a notebook, which is gifted to be taken home and written into any time that they feel

particularly anxious within the next month after the workshop, and why they feel this way. Lily Marsh in *Understanding Anxiety and Panic Attacks* (2015) suggests 'You may find keeping a note of what happens each time you get anxious or have a panic attack can help you spot patterns in what triggers these experiences for you, so you can think about how to deal with these situations in the future. You could also try keeping a note of times when you are able to manage your anxiety successfully. This might help you feel more in control of the anxiety you feel.' (Marsh 2015:16). In an aim to make this a long-lasting project, after one month the participants are asked to take a photo of certain elements of their diary if they are comfortable to do so, which will then be used as, not only feedback for our ongoing project, but an online support for those who suffer with generalised anxiety. Here we are exploring whether anxiety has become something in which we all can suffer, this then touches upon the boundaries between diagnosed anxiety disorder, and generalised anxiety.

The second element of the performance is performative, allowing the participants to spectate. The initial element of a news report shows a report of a missing person. In an aim to make a gender-neutral production, our character is named Alex, a name often used for both men and women, the decision for a new gender-neutral performance helps solidify the notion that everyone can be affected. Our news report not only sets up the upcoming performance but is used to highlight the use of media and technology that can often cause anxiety in the comfort of our own surroundings. This element of the workshop is short, and leads into to the second performance, a piece that is designed to portray the anxieties of our younger generations and serve as a platform for the participatory workshop. Our performance is based largely on technology, which is a representation of how we might rely on technology in our day and age, and in consequence how these external pressures that largely include technology can cause anxiety in young adults. Megan Moreno and Ana Radovic in *Technology and Adolescent Mental Health* (2018) conclude that 'across all media platforms, younger generations were more anxious than older ones, and the most anxiety was prompted by being about to check text messages, cell phone calls, email, and social networks, in that order' (Moreno, Radovic, 2018 :106). Cassady also explains in *Anxiety in Schools: The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions for Academic Anxieties* (2010) 'The fear would seem to be related in digital technology, including mobile [cell] phones … as using technology becomes an intrinsic part of many educational and occupational settings, it

becomes essential to understand the effects of this computer based anxiety' (Cassady, 2010: 28). The performance section is set around a marked box, by which our performer does not leave, this box is aimed represent the confinements of the 21st century and the space in which we find ourselves when struggling with anxiety. Looking largely at what existentialism means, the space inside our box is one of emptiness and confusion, highlighted by absurdist dialogue.

With that being said, we lead into our third element, audience participation. Whereby we intend for the audience to reflect on their own views of anxiety and question whether they sympathise of empathise; we challenge audience relationships by asking them to work together, one person is told that they suffer with anxiety and is placed into their own 'existential box', the other can care for them or leave. This participation is vitally important for us as it's aimed to allow reflection and thought, for an understanding in which they themselves decided upon. Maria Delgado and Caridad Svich in *Theatre in Crisis? Performance Manifestos for a New Century* (2002) talk of the importance of intention in performance and the relationship between performer and spectator. They state,

'In order to avoid the rut, an artist must find a way to sustain a constant state of creative energy. For me, this means identifying the principles of live performance I hold most dear – the principles that make what I do essential for the well-being of the world. At risk of making a brash generalisation, I'll proclaim that all the principles which I hold dear can be boiled down the notion of immediacy: of the writer/director/performer's intentions, of the relationship between performer and audience, of the relationship between an audience of strangers gathered together to witness the theatrical event, of their surrounding theatrical space.' (Delgado, Svich, 2002: 164)

With the importance of performer/audience relationships, I wanted the emotional response of the participant's to be forefront in my mind when creating the performance workshop. We are careful to look at the response of the participants, whether they feel a deeper understanding towards anxiety disorder and the concept of mental illness, or whether the methods in which we use have little impact to changing perception.

Finally, the participants are given 5 minutes to reflect on their experience in their gifted note books, they are encouraged to either chat amongst each other or reflect by

themselves. This writing will not be shared amongst the group or shown to the curators. The written reflection is the start of their personal diaries over the next month. In conclusion, the four elements of the Performance Workshop allow introduction to the subject, a view from the spectators stand point, a self-situational circumstance, and finally a reflection of the experience with the chance to write down their viewpoints and feedback, all of which will aim to provoke a larger understanding of anxiety and recognise the external pressures in which we, and our younger generations, can face.

Stand Tall Theatre (2015) was co-founded by myself and Stevie Williams, with the aim to create theatre performance that raises awareness to mental illness. Besides a personal connection to mental illness, my passion lies in the history of mental illness, how perceptions have changed through time, and the outcome of stigmatisation. With the view that theatre has the power to make an impact and explore topics in a variety of educational and engaging ways, it can be viewed that addressing mental illness through theatre allows for a deeper understanding of the subject, one that may be more accepting from an audience. Gretta Hoffman in Mental Illness through the Lens of Theatre (2017) states 'Mental Illness is treated as taboo. We often see mentally ill people on news and TV shows who commit violent crimes and hurt others. There's this unshakeable negative light on them in most media. Theatre, on the other hand, places people with mental illness in the spotlight. There's a warmer, more positive view that gives the mentally ill their humanity back. The audience can relate to them as fellow people.' (Hoffman 2016: 3). Veronica Baxter and Katharine Low also explain in *Applied Theatre: Performing Health and Wellbeing* (2017) 'While Blum draws attention the difficulty of communicating with another ones pain or experiences of ill health, the focus on alternative ways of communicating understandings of health is exciting as it encourages the possibility of recognising other means of sharing understandings and experiences of health, pain and wellbeing, not simply verbally but rather through performance, movement and art' (Baxter, Low, 2017: 15). Stand Tall Theatre has currently worked towards a multitude of avenues that promote mental health in a positive light and focuses on building confidence and self-esteem through drama techniques. Ventures include a full-length production about the dehumanisation of mental illness, schizophrenia, performance art portraying the history of mental illness through the public eye, and the regular running of workshops for children to aid in confidence building

through drama. The process of devising performance workshop, *Anxiety,* is a natural progression towards an impactful production for schools and colleges.

Once research and development had undergone and we were comfortable with the avenue of our workshop, we focused on creating each element and were able to experiment through the seeding workshops. The seeding workshops generated many discussions on the desired outcome of the final performance workshop, we questioned what the participant was to experience during the workshop, and the wider engagement and relevance of the work. We found that our ideas were too broad and needed to be focused on a specific area of concern, which narrowed my focus onto the cause of generalised anxiety in relation to our modern society. This sparked an interesting discussion of what anxiety is, the history of anxiety and individual thoughts on what is causing the upsurge of anxious feelings across generations, it was clear that there was a wide scape in which we needed to narrow our energies. The seeding workshop process and peer feedback allowed us to focus on 'why' – Why anxiety? Why now?

During the phase of our seeding workshops, we were able to experiment with the participatory element, which resulted in positive feedback. It was told that the feel of the boxes in which we created was therapeutic and ''safe'', whereas those outside the boxes were happy to follow their rules and chat to the person in the box. Everyone felt safe in what they were doing and were *waiting* for something to happen. This was a great connection to our inspirational artwork, Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot (1949), whereby the audience were lured into a false sense of calm. Harold Bloom's analysis of Waiting for Godot in *Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot* (2008) explains the plays use of time, Estragon and Vladimir are in a situation whereby they must wait, even faced with thought that they *can* leave, they choose not to.

 'The scenic counterpart is the time bracket ''dusk-darkness'' - that portion of the day when they must be at the appointed place. But even when night falls, and they are free to go, our last glimpse of them in each act is:

ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

… what emerges is a strange solitude.' (Bloom, 2008: 12)

This awareness of time further inspired our creation of an existential vibe.

Throughout the participatory element of our workshop, we also tried our soundscape, allowing natural progression between each stage of the workshop, and shared our rules for the participatory element, stating what each partner should or shouldn't do. Following this, we felt that instructions, as a form, worked for our performance workshop– the participant was not once told that they had to obey the instructions, therefore they held their own choice unknowingly.

Evaluating the delivery of *Anxiety* performance workshop, it became clear how some elements portrayed the effects of generalised Anxiety, whilst other key points were not as clear. Anxiety is a broad term, and can be split into many factors, including diagnosed anxiety; social anxiety and panic attacks, or generalised anxiety; a type of anxiety in which we can all experience in response to the happenings around us. The engagement of the workshop allows me to refine my agenda of the workshop outcomes, specifically for younger audiences. The general feel of the performance workshop was a knowledge of anxiety but was also paired with a level of boredom from the participants. Whilst the idea is to slow down the pace of our chaotic life styles and allow the audience to feel the length of time by waiting, there also needs to be a faster pace for participants which are younger. Therefore, within the next coming months, before *Anxiety* performances and workshops release into schools, I will focus on adding a stronger structure and variety of elements to the participatory section, with the aim to increase interest, and improve on the educational element of the workshop, with various anxious symptoms being explored for a deeper awareness.

The long-term goal of the performance workshop is to become a 40-minute participation section after a separate full-length performance has been viewed, the full-length performance has been devised by myself and Stevie Williams and is an in depth look at the current causes and stresses of generalised anxiety and diagnosed anxiety with live dialogue and stylised performance. The workshop to follow, by which we have now engaged with, is aimed to cause a reflection of the spectated performance, with an added Q&A section. The

fact that the performance workshop does not have much adaption to its younger target audience was something in which we wanted to try, highlighting that as children or adults, anxiety is still an effect to the wider population. The engagement of the workshop has confirmed that the aim is not to say that everyone has diagnosed anxiety, but to highlight the types of anxiety that now exist in response to our modern society and which is now increasingly affecting younger generations. This inherently touches upon diagnosed anxious symptoms due to its increase in diagnosis over the past years. Jenny Kennard talks of separating anxious feelings with psychological illness in *Overcoming Worry and Anxiety* stating that 'Too much focus on the symptoms of anxiety can distort perceptions. Feeling anxious, even for a protracted period of time, may be uncomfortable but it is not necessarily a sign of psychological illness. We have to account for the context in which symptoms occur before being tempted to label ourselves, or others, as having some kind of anxiety disorder.' (Kennard 2014: 2). Without wishing to promote anxiety, our goal is to raise awareness to generalised anxiety, touching upon its deeper forms to highlight what anxiety is and methods of coping. The difference between worrying over something and a feeling of anxiousness is vastly different, therefore some may not feel anxiety, by which these performances and following workshops can raise awareness regarding those around them. 'People often use the terms *worry* and *anxiety* interchangeably, but they are very different psychological states. Although both are associated with a general sense of concern and disquiet, how we *experience* them is quite distinct—as are the implications they have for our emotional and psychological health.' (Winch, 2016, accessed 11 June 2018) as said by Guy Winch from *Psychology Today* (2016), he goes on to say that 'This difference is important, as emotional mental images such as those associated with anxiety provoke a much greater cardiovascular response than emotional verbal thoughts (such as those associated with worry). This is another reason why we experience anxiety throughout the body.' (Winch, 2016, accessed 11 June 2018). The latter discussion and differentiation of my desired agenda is certainly a result of the engagement and responses from the performance workshop delivered.

Furthering this research and engagement into my dissertation, I will delve into the cause of modern anxiety, through theorist Karl Marx and his views on capitalist societies. My interests lie not only in the perception of those with mental illness, but also the growing

communality of experiencing high levels of anxiety. I aim to explore the means in which theatre could provoke a deeper understanding to its audience, but with a more defined agenda know that I wish to talk of how this response effects the view of anxiety disorder and mental illness in general. Many educational systems are struggling with the growing reality of anxiety, depression, and suicide rates, pressure is felt on both students to do well and for the educators to remain in charge of a healthy atmosphere and establishment, therefore following this workshop performance I aim to take a full-length production and post workshop designed for secondary schools. However, within my dissertation I wish to widen my research and explain how theatre on anxiety could also be important for an adult demographic, and the need for theatrical work on this topic. I will delve into the deeper history of mental illness, to then explore the current day with its effects of 'dizziness of choice', and current pressures for children and adults in the 21st century. I will question the cause and effect of generalised anxiety alongside its inherent connection to diagnosed anxiety, and explore audience response to theatre on this topic.

'Keirkegaard's lesson so far is that anxiety secretly dwells within innocence as its innermost affect, placing every one of us before the ''abyssal possibility'' of being able. Moreover, given the co-existence in it's gist of pleasure and repulsion, anxiety coevally obeys ''the law of pathos'' and it susceptible to ''the vertigo of freedom''. In short, in anxiety the ardent gift of life intersects the bodily ''I can'' of the transcendental Self.' (Stewart, 2011: 141).

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