

Performing Mindful Creativity: Three South African Case Studies

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Abstract

This essay is grounded in the practical experience of three South African theatre practitioners who have all had some experience of mindfulness. It's based on interviews conducted with a performer (Andrew Buckland), a director (Janni Young), and a designer (Illka Louw). The aim of my conversations with these three was to explore ways in which mindfulness continues to enhance artistic practises, seeing our dialogues as a springboard to exploring intersections between creative practise and theories about mindfulness. To assist me in this process, I also interviewed Rob Nairn – co-founder of both the Mindfulness Association (UK) and Mindfulness Africa (RSA) – about key issues highlighting convergences between creativity and mindfulness. Some of the issues which are addressed include: the artist's relationship with fear, differing definitions of the value of *conceptualisation*, as well as whether or not the *monkey mind* (that is, the wandering mind) might hamper or help creativity.

Keywords

Mindfulness, Creativity, Fear, Presence, Control, Awareness.

Author's Note

All of the interviews referenced in this article were conducted as qualitative, exploratory, loose form conversations. I recorded the audio in person with all of them except Janni Younge, with whom I had an audio Skype conversation which was also recorded and then transcribed. The full transcriptions of these interviews are available on request, as well as slightly edited, shorter versions from which these quotations were taken. I sent all of the interviewees copies of the full transcripts, the edited versions, and also the final version of this paper in order to ensure that they were not being misrepresented. The interviewees approved all stages of this process and have given their consent for these citations to be published. I have tried to make clear which sections are paraphrases of the interviews, and which are my own views about these ideas, however, it should be noted that the essay is largely structured according to my own commentary on the interviews conducted, rather than being simply an amalgamation or paraphrase of what the interviewees said. For the most part, the connections and themes between the different transcriptions of these interviews was made by myself, and not by the interviewees themselves.

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I've long been fascinated by possible connections between creative artistic practises and mindfulness, so I decided to embark on a series of conversations with South African theatre practitioners. I've tried to base this overview on reports of lived experiences and to move from there towards possible theories around the benefits of mindfulness in the creation and practise of performing arts. Each of the three professionals I spoke to works in a different area of theatre practise: Andrew Buckland is principally known as a performer, Janni Younge as a director and puppeteer, and Illka Louw as a designer. They have each had some experience with the practice of mindfulness, and I'll elaborate more specifically on their individual experiences and practise when I introduce each artist in turn. My own training in mindfulness comes mainly from Rob Nairn and his MBLC (Mindfulness Based Living Course), so as a starting point it made sense for me to speak to him about his understanding of connections between mindfulness and creativity.

Rob Nairn

Born in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), Rob Nairn was a Professor of Law and Criminology, before he dedicated his life to the practise and teaching of meditation and Buddhism. Since he left academia in 1980, Nairn has published four books, the first of which, *Tranquil Mind* (1997), has been translated into eight languages. He has also been instrumental in setting up twelve Kagyu Samye Ling centres in Southern Africa. In 1989, Nairn underwent the traditional four-year closed retreat at Samye Ling in Scotland. Later, he went on to become one of the founders of the first MSc in Mindfulness available in the UK, at the University of Aberdeen. Nairn also co-founded the Mindfulness Association (UK) and Mindfulness Africa and he co-wrote the course material for the standard eight-week MBLC (Mindfulness Based Living Course) offered by both of these organisations.

The MBLC was my own first encounter with mindfulness and in the last decade I've attended around 180 days of teaching retreat with Rob Nairn and other Samye Ling Teachers, as well as a further 180 days of closed practise retreat. Until mid-2016, Nairn had been spending decades touring almost continuously, teaching in South Africa, Zimbabwe, England, Scotland, Germany, Italy and Iceland. Due to ill-health, he stopped touring soon after I interviewed him on 6 March, 2016. I'd like, then, first, to introduce Rob's responses to some of my questions, before looking individually at each of the three different practitioners in order to explore whether or not there might be any common ground they share in the light of Nairn's approach.

Creativity and Conceptualisation

According to Rob Nairn, the ability to be creative is present all the time, but it can become blocked by 'thinking processes which are locked into the past' (2016).¹ Nairn paraphrases Krishnamurti, saying that 'we're always dragging the past along with us without fully realising it...for most people the present is like the past being pushed forward.' On the other hand, he says that if we could train ourselves to be 'unconditionally in the moment' then we would fully experience the appearance of the past and be able to release it in the same moment that it arises. This would then cultivate a 'greater freshness'. Nairn goes on:

As that freshness establishes itself, the mind is able to rest more in touch with the moment, and creativity seems to me to be to be a function of the moment. Then, whatever is happening in the moment is experienced more fully, and seen more extensively, and also uniquely, because you're not constantly projecting your past onto the experience of the moment. That's where a lot of creativity comes from.

Rob Nairn's classic definition of mindfulness is that it is 'knowing what is happening while it is happening, without preference' (*MBLC Course Manual*, 2013, p.6). Through developing this seemingly simple ability, one is able to free the mind from its egocentric identification with its own projections, and from its perpetual automatic reactions to whatever appears. These are typically either denial (rejection, aversion) or craving (clinging, grasping).

Nairn makes the point that creativity is always in some way dealing with the unknown. He says: 'All forms of creativity are pushing the boundaries of the known, and the known is the safe territory of the egocentric.' He makes the point that the more egocentric² one is the more one will be 'invested in the past,' which will stifle one's creativity. If one is prepared to 'let go of the past,' then 'the domination of the known territory of the conceptual mind [will be] continually challenged, and that's what we're trying to do in meditation.' In this sense, Nairn sees mindfulness as a means of challenging the supremacy of the conceptual mind which seeks to concretize experiences in terms of what has gone before. For Nairn, mindfulness bypasses 'the conceptualising process.' He says that: 'With your mindfulness you're constantly dropping conceptualising. You see the mind wanting to conceptualise, to have a thought, and you just let it go. You go back to the support.' By 'support' he means the meditation support, which in the MBLC is usually sound or breath, but which can also be body, walking, or any of the senses. Each time a practitioner notices themselves thinking, they release the thought and return their focus to the support.

Here Nairn's challenge of the 'conceptual mind' might strike one as somewhat at odds with some artistic and academic discourses. In academic scholarship, as well as in many forms of art, we're very interested in 'concepts' and often consider them as positive constructions. In critical thinking, certainly, the development of conceptual thinking has its place, and in the contemporary art world one frequently hears that *concept is king*. Perhaps this definition of 'concept' as original formulation, however, is a different understanding from the way it's being used in the MBLC. The way I understand it is that Nairn's terminology defines 'concept' as an abstract mental formation which begins to dominate lived experience by projecting expectations onto it. The term is applied to processes of concretising and solidifying a theoretical approach which overshadows present moment lived experience. This type of conceptualisation, then, solidifies thought processes and hampers the free movement of the mind, leading to a kind of ossification, getting stuck in habitual patterns.

Nairn clarifies that 'Mindfulness isn't necessarily creative,' but that training in mindfulness 'will produce creativity':

If you are constantly letting go of thought, of thinking, and bringing your mind knowingly into the moment, you are progressively freeing your mind from all the old grooves. You're freeing your mind from the known areas of activity that restrict it. In our mindfulness training, every time we bring our mind back into the moment and rest it on the support without

getting caught up in distraction, we are challenging the mind's tendency to constantly run the grooves of the past.

Nairn's sense of 'grooves' is in fact supported by neurological research. These 'grooves' can manifest as actual physical phenomenon in the brain. Studies of neurological patterning have shown that repeated thoughts leave a material trace. As David Ryback puts it: 'brain structure itself can be influenced by thoughts and feelings... The integration of mindfulness with emerging brain research leads to the possibility of modifying brain structure through conscious awareness' (2006: 476). Habitual tendencies create physical grooves in the brain itself which limit the ability of the mind to deviate from entrenched neural pathways. One of the profound psychological (and philosophical) consequences of this would be that mindfulness strengthens our ability to choose how we respond to phenomenon, thereby enhancing our capacity for free will. Mindfulness encourages the ability of the brain to alter its own patterning, which is possible because of neuro-plasticity.

One definition of creativity might see it as the ability of the brain to relinquish the entrapment of existing maps – perhaps *mazes* might be a better word – and head into uncharted territories. Creativity encourages the brain to make new connections and to discover new neurological terrain, to write new maps. This is similar to what mindfulness does. Some meditation practices have very specific aims, nurturing beneficial patterns, such as, for example, states of 'calm abiding,' gratitude, or compassion. These practises make use of a more focused and concentrated intervention using visualisation and sense experiences which effect neurological patterning. As beneficial as they are, this is a different use of meditation from the mindfulness practises being described in this essay. The mindfulness processes which I'm referring to set out to develop a basic open awareness which allows thoughts, sensations and experiences to arise and subside, permitting a measure of freedom from habitual reactive thought processes. In brief, for Rob, mindfulness is a fundamentally creative practise since it liberates one from old routines and encourages the discovery of the present moment.

I'd now like to turn to the three South African practitioners to consider their experiences of creative work and mindfulness practises.

Janni Younge

Janni Younge won the Standard Bank Young Artist award for Drama in 2010.³ She also worked for a number of years with Handspring Puppet Company, (the company from Cape Town which became internationally famous for creating the puppets for *Warhorse* [2007]). Younge herself worked on earlier productions with Handspring, such as *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997, 2009) and others. She subsequently started her own production company and most recently designed puppets for and directed a re-visioning of Stravinsky's *Firebird* (2016) which toured the United States after its premier at the South African National Arts Festival.

Janni Younge is also a member of the Tibetan Buddhist lineage to which Rob Nairn belongs, namely the Karma Kagyu lineage. At the time of my interview with her in 2016, she said that she'd been practising meditation for about 15 years. Her MA thesis 'Creating Resonance in Emptiness with Visual Theatre' (2007) was inspired by her deep connection with Buddhism and meditation. She says that 'Mindfulness plays very strongly into puppet theatre,' (2016).⁴ Since '[t]he puppet is a thing that is made to look like it's alive,' and yet 'at the same time it reveals its illusion' the puppet is, for

her, 'the ultimate Buddhist tool for theatre.' Younge sees the act of bringing a puppet to life as an intensely mindful experience demanding patience and discipline from a team. I'd like to quote her here at length, since her idea of mindfulness as a group activity challenges views which may regard it purely as a solitary exercise.

You have multiple people operating on a single object that has to imitate some form of life, and if you get it wrong the whole thing just falls apart. The collaboration and the listening are very physical and intuitive. People have to be *very* in tune with each other. They have to find each other's rhythms, and then they have to know intuitively where the other's going. You have to feel each other's energy. What is the moment when the puppet is going to take the first step? It has to be somehow communicated between three actors without anybody having said anything, and that comes down to physical sensitivity and a kind of emotional and spiritual unity that they have to develop in order to be able to do that. It's an intake of breath, it's a shift of weight. These very subtle little signals: an impulse back before an impulse forward. These are things you have to be very calm to be able to hear, and I'm talking 'hear' in inverted commas. You have to hear them physically.

Furthermore, Younge told me that her ability to create was 'very much thanks to the kind of processes that [she] learned through mindfulness.' Here's how she describes her mindfulness practise:

Meditation practice is about an active practice of being with yourself and your being as a whole, and therefore developing that relationship with whatever aspects of spirituality lie within yourself *and* outside of yourself.

Younge doesn't distinguish between 'psychological' and 'spiritual' which reflects her training under Rob Nairn who has become well known for the ways in which he's been able to access and explain Tibetan spiritual practises by means of Western psychology.⁵

Younge explains that, for her, practising mindfulness is different from 'focusing on *how* you're thinking about things'. Perhaps *thinking about things* might be a useful description of rational cognitive processes, or what has previously been referred to as 'conceptual' thinking. This is when we present a subject to the mind in order to analyse and reflect on it with a specific purpose. Our capacity to reflect and to think *about things* is certainly one of the great strengths of our species and Younge says that 'how you're thinking about things can definitely lead you into a deeper relationship with yourself and your world and everything else,' and yet she distinguishes this way of thinking from mindfulness, which she sees more as a 'being practice'. For her, mindfulness is a way of *being* in relation to the world, rather than a method of working with ideas *about* the world. This resonates with what Mark Fleishman has said about Performance as Research, in which he speaks about knowing performance 'not in the sense of "knowing about" but more importantly in the sense of "knowing with, through, or by means of"' (2009:133).

Fear

When I asked her about the benefits of her mindfulness practise to her work as a director, one of the first things that came up for her was Younge's relationship with fear, and particularly 'the capacity to manage fear within the creative process.' Interestingly, this was also one of the first things that came up for Andrew Buckland, (which I'll discuss a bit later). When I spoke to Rob Nairn, he also noted that: 'the creative process produces insecurity, anxiety, and tension'. Janni Younge describes her own experience:

What I find is that the creative process requires a certain amount of suspension of logic and allowing an instinctual, image-based response to whatever the text or the hub of the piece of work is. It's important to be in a space where I can allow things to emerge, where I can take chances, take risks, create associations that are not necessarily the forced, obvious way, but the way that's just next to it that is more provocative. In order to be able to access those kinds of things I have to be able to stop the very, very, very loud voices in my head that go, 'Ahhh! No, that's really rubbish, what are you thinking? Why are you doing that?' And it's not even a case of stopping those voices but just being able to hear that that's what's going on, to hear the fear coming, and say...'Oh, I'm just so afraid right now.' And be with that fear. And then inevitably of course when you give it space, it has its time, it moves on, and then something else can emerge on the other side.

I asked Younge if she was familiar with Meredith Monk's 'Scared Song' (1986). Monk is also a Kagyu practitioner, who took refuge with Chögyam Trungpa, and I felt that her wonderful embracing of fear in this song spoke directly to the mindful interest in facing phenomenon head on. One of the key principles of mindfulness practise is the attempt to increase our awareness of inner responses and bravely face them without suppression or aggression. The song is about Monk's experience of stage fright which had inexplicably begun, mid-career, to overwhelm her. It's personal, intimate, and very beautiful, as Monk opens up to the terror of being alone on stage in front of an expectant audience. Instead of fleeing from the situation, she puts herself right into the middle of it. The song doesn't sentimentalise or analyse fear, it doesn't attempt to explain it or debate its origins and causes. Instead, Monk simply drops straight into the fear itself and her song emerges out of that experience.

At the time when I spoke to her, Younge was in the crucible of the creation stage of *Firebird* and she talked about the fear created by her inner critic while she was at this crucial stage. She said that:

It is in that very *fragile* stage of creation that the mindfulness process is absolutely essential, to be able to *be* with whatever's going on, and also to be able to know how much there is in my mind that is not necessarily something that the Observer can dictate. It's about just gently *quieting down the Observer* and allowing the rest of this extraordinary thing that is the mind to release its images and create associations from the Undercurrent.

Here Jani Younge uses terminology which Rob Nairn introduced in his mindfulness courses, namely the definition of the Observer and the Undercurrent, which he, in turn, learned from Krishnamurti. In the course material for the MBLC (2011) the Undercurrent is defined as the arising stream-of-consciousness over which one has no control. This includes thoughts, feelings, memories, emotions and physical sensations which pop up seemingly randomly into one's experience. The qualities associated with the Undercurrent are that it is an autonomous, involuntary process which is self-arising, self-displaying and self-liberating (in that it dissolves of its own accord). In other words, if left alone, the Undercurrent appears and then disperses. The Undercurrent is distinguished from the Observer which is that aspect of mind able to be aware of what is arising. The Observer continually watches the undercurrent and actively scans it for material which it either rejects and tries to suppress, or which it is attracted to and wants to grasp hold of to make it last longer. In extreme cases, this can lead to fixation, and a kind of obsessive thinking. If the Observer is drawn into engaging with the Undercurrent, it then sets into motion habitual tendencies which keep us addicted to distraction and locked into past patterns. According to Nairn, all capacity for choice rests with the Observer, so when training in mindfulness this is the aspect of our minds that we are training. (In an update of the course manual in 2013, the terminology of 'The Observer' was replaced with a 'sense of awareness', since it was thought to be too limiting to define this witnessing in terms of a fixed identity. However, some facilitators, myself included, still find the old terminology useful as a starting point.)

At his retreats, Nairn often cites Krishnamurti's emblematic phrase: 'the seeing is the doing' emphasising that we are able to affect change by paying attention to the way in which we are witnessing or becoming aware of the content that arises. Change happens by itself, it does not have to be manipulated or forced. It is when we become more aware that we begin to gain some mastery over our responses to the mind's activities. This is where there is a possibility for freedom and creativity. When we become more conscious of the mind's manipulations they stop dominating our experiences. By noticing the unfolding of the mind's activities and giving them space without acting out on them, they are permitted to appear and also permitted to disperse. In this sense, one wouldn't use mindfulness to attempt to actively get rid of fear; and yet by being present with fear, should it arise, one allows it to naturally disperse, moment by moment.

Working with people

Another aspect of Younge's work which benefitted from her mindfulness practise was in her capacity as director to work harmoniously and effectively with her cast and crew. She says:

The drama of drama is not my thing. Being aware can enhance your ability to emotionally interpret something that's going on because you can see what you're doing that's getting in the way, or you can relate to more profound, wider levels of your own experience.

This also relates to aspects of fear, in that Younge notes that when working with people who might be difficult, who tend to 'act out' during rehearsals, one needs to be mindful of how best to respond. Younge says that:

Some people don't even know when they're afraid. They're just acting out, they're just kicking back and they don't know what it is, or they don't see that there's some sort of fear behind anger. And if theatre is about humanity, then finding all the tools that we can to help us interpret the human experience and create it more richly onstage is helpful.

Mindfulness practises have also helped her to become more aware of subtle interactions; to be able to become more sensitised to ways in which people are relating to each other besides the evidence of their more obvious verbal discourses:

In directing, there are dynamics that are seen and unseen going on in the room, and as the director you are the holder of that whole space. It's important to be able to sense where something is going and give it the next appropriate best step. To listen to the energy of the room *and* to the needs of the piece, and to be able to eliminate the things that really shouldn't be listened to in this particular moment. For example, there can be somebody that's bringing a dynamic into a room that needs to be parked. Balancing those forces that are at play is another moment when a certain level of awareness of self and other and being, and room energy, and all of those things, is really, really important.

She also finds it useful to bring mindfulness practise in as a regular discipline and part of her rehearsal process:

I regularly practice [mindfulness] with actors when I'm doing a production, about ten to fifteen minutes every day before the rehearsal starts. I do it because I believe it's important to just touch in and be present, and bring that presence into the moment—bring yourself into a moment of presence—and be aware of whatever's going on... So much of our day we spend completely unconscious, driven by forces that are just buffeting us about.

Here, again, there is an emphasis on coming out of 'unconsciousness' and into awareness; reclaiming a sense of acceptance about what is appearing in our internal and external environments.

To summarise: for Janni Younger, mindfulness practise is valuable since it helps her to be creative in the face of her fear of failure. Secondly, the content that she engages with and creates is also related to her personal understanding of being with 'humanity through mindfulness.' Thirdly, her practise assists her in working with people in difficult situations by being less reactive, that is, not automatically reacting with grasping or aversion, having more flexibility in her responses, more choice. Finally, Younger sees mindfulness as a way of creating healthy working relationships with her cast, as a discipline which becomes part of the rehearsal process, helping them to settle into their tasks and roles with presence and the ability to respond effectively to each other.

Ilka Louw

Ilka Louw is a colleague of mine at the Department of Drama at Rhodes University. She's a designer who has won multiple national awards for her work and she has

designed for productions staged at the Royal Shakespeare Company (in collaboration with Cape Town's Baxter Theatre). Louw took the MBLC course offered at our centre and has been practising mindfulness for about two years now. She is also a member of our Kagyu branch in Grahamstown.

Conceptualising and Creating

We started off talking about the idea of conceptualisation and creativity. Louw says that 'In the designing process, you can't be conceptual about something and talk it into its logic' (2015).⁶ For her, creativity has more to do with 'the immediacy and the liveness of it.' One of the ways that she tries to free up her students from over-conceptualising is by disorientating them. She described an exercise which she uses to get students out of their egocentric conceptual mind:

I blindfold them, and I let them draw with the wrong hand...They're completely out of control. *They* are not in control of what they're drawing. But they are feeling it, because I give them sound as well. I change their sensory assumptions... Bodily engaging in something, that is not necessarily a theatrical or a performance end product frees up the theatre maker to accept a little bit, to ignore criticism, and ignore the story of, 'I can't do this, I can do that. I can't do this, I don't know how to do that.' It opens that up a bit and also opens up their definition of performance....

Here, again, there was a reflection on how to approach the fear of failure, and how mindfulness could soften the overarching dominance of an inner critic which so often stymies the creative capacities of the mind. The conceptual mind seems to be equated here with the judging, critical mind which blocks the free flow of ideas.

Presence and Telling stories

For Illka, part of the mindfulness approach is to stop getting caught up in definitive narratives. She says 'The thing with working in theatre and performance is that there are a lot of stories. There's narrative left, right, and centre.' What's been interesting for her is 'the way that you experience life without a story or a narrative...without having to play a role':

A role could be – 'I am a designer' or 'I am a wife' or 'I am a sister...' But with mindfulness you just are...So this struggle has been: what is mindfulness in my work? How do I remain mindful with my definition of it, which is to remain present? How do I work with it, if what I do is create more stories?

This ties in with something Younge said, namely that mindfulness isn't disengaging with the world. It's not stopping the story, but becoming aware of what the story is that we're caught up in, and permitting that story to change while being present with what is happening while it's happening (to paraphrase Rob's definition of mindfulness). This relates to what Louw said about presence:

For me the idea of mindfulness is that it is the practice of presence: of the experience of presence, the knowing of presence, the implication of experiencing presence, and almost the responsibility of being present. What that then maybe translates into further, or is something that waves out or spreads, is that there isn't a story, except in your head...

When speaking of the Live Event, Louw says that this

requires presence of the performer, and it requires presence, not just your physical presence but your moment for moment attention, of audiences, and the performers. And for me *that* liveness was something I could work with.

As a designer, Louw emphasised the way that mindfulness augmented her work with materials, saying that she has to be 'very clear and very present with the materials' and also, 'very clear and present with the *feeling* that [she wants] to create in space.' She illustrates this with the process of drawing, finding that 'The act of drawing is an extremely mindful process because there's something that happens with your engagement with the materials.'

To summarise, then, for Illka Louw, her development of a mindfulness practise has helped her, firstly, to relate to an embodied rather than a conceptual thinking when in the creation stage. Secondly, she appreciates the capacity of moving out of a 'narrative' mode and more into an 'experiential' way of being. Thirdly, mindfulness increases her awareness of her engagement with materials. Also, it enhances her ability to relate to the felt liveness of both audience and performer.

Andrew Buckland

Andrew Buckland is one of South Africa's leading physical theatre performers. He's worked for forty years in the industry and has achieved that wonderfully warm and singular accolade of being called a 'national treasure' (Ubom, 2009). He's particularly known as a mime artist and his one-man shows have won numerous national awards as well as three Fringe Firsts in Edinburgh (1989, 1993, 1995) and a Perrier Award (1989). Buckland also spent a year working for *Cirque du Soleil* in 2008. At the time of writing (mid-2017), he's representing South Africa in two shows at the Edinburgh festival. He is a director, writer and Associate Professor in the same Department of Drama where I teach.

Andrew Buckland has not been a long-term meditator, but he did undertake the daunting ten-day silent Vipassana course started by S.N. Goenka in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin. Also, in his teaching and performing, I believe that he already intuitively embodies many aspects associated with mindful practice. In our discussion, I spoke to him particularly about his experience on the retreat and asked about facets that he felt might be helpful for his work both as a performer and as a teacher.

Control

We first spoke about the aspect of 'control' that often causes some ambiguity when talking about mindfulness. One thinks of the aphorism that: 'The mind is a wonderful servant but a terrible master,'⁷ and surely, we hope to gain some sense of mastery over our minds so that we're not overwhelmed by its addiction to not only distraction

but sometimes downright destructive tendencies. We begin mindfulness practise in order to attain some stability, and yet the idea of actively manipulating our minds in some way is also contrary to the aims of basic open awareness, the specific mindfulness technique which I've been discussing here. The effort to *control* could also be seen as an attempt to dominate our environment and to force the mind to experience a preferred state of being. In this sense, overt attempts at controlling experiences of the mind can lead to denial, repression and non-acceptance of an ever-changing present. It can lead to egocentric delusion which subscribes to a kind of enforced fiction painting over continuously arising and subsiding phenomenon. This could lead to severe repression, projection and the creation of a potentially powerful unconscious shadow aspect.

Drawing on his experience at *Cirque du Soleil*, Buckland compares the definition of 'control' to the process of acrobat training:

You don't want to say that there's control, because it looks completely free and loose. But the control comes in the discipline of practising every day until you're able to focus the attention. Just from repeating it over and over and over again one can cultivate that ability to concentrate. (2014)⁸

In this sense, mindfulness training becomes a training to be in the world, rather than simply a skill to develop in and of itself. One trains in harnessing the habitual tendencies of the mind in solitude so that one is able to interact skilfully in an ever-changing environment, whether this is on stage or at the supermarket. Perhaps a daily mindfulness practise might be compared to a musician practising his scales, or a physical performer working her body. It's training one's emotional, discursive and experiential mind to not be swept away by thoughts (memories, projections, analysis), feelings (positive, negative, neutral), emotions (especially destructive emotional states) or physical sensations. Paradoxically, the discipline of permitting these all to come into awareness (complete acceptance) allows one the psychological dexterity and the mental flexibility to not over-identify and become dominated by them. We are then able to avoid becoming obsessed with a particular distraction, or being lost to the pull of a suppressed undercurrent, both of which drain the present moment of its liveness, freshness and presence. This can, at first, appear paradoxical, since people might feel that by refusing to accept what happens to them they are exercising a degree of self-determination. And yet it is precisely the acceptance of whatever arises without preference, obsession or suppression that creates the capacity for self-determination and freedom from reactive patterns.⁸

Training Awareness

In writing earlier about Rob Nairn's model of the Observer and the Undercurrent, I wondered if there might be a usefulness in developing what has been referred to as the *double consciousness* of the performers' need to be in the moment while remaining aware of themselves as actors playing roles. Buckland agreed with this:

When I had the occasion to teach acting, I would always talk about this; these two layers of concentration. It's got to be one hundred percent in the moment. And if you're playing a character the character's going off and you're just yourself there. But at the same time [you have to be]

absolutely aware of the space and the bodies there and how the communication's playing: what's the rhythm, what's the music, all of that.

Similar to Janni Younge's relationship with her actors, Buckland is also keen to take the practise onto the rehearsal room floor and at the start of a rehearsal, he said he would like to 'spend a few minutes just focussing attention through mindfulness and mental stillness.'

Self-Consciousness / Fear

For Andrew Buckland, one of the positive results of mindfulness practise is to 'come to egolessness' and be able to drop self-consciousness. Here one might make a distinction between self-consciousness and self-awareness. The former is egocentric, concerned only with bolstering a sense of personal identity and the maintenance of what is perceived to be – or hoped to be – an essentially permanent entity. In contrast, the latter encourages a broader vision of one's place in the world and an awareness of context. It is a non-judgemental acceptance of both an internal and an external environment which presents itself to awareness. Self-consciousness could lead to fear, embarrassment or a sense of not being worthy. Paradoxically, it could also lead to an inflated ego and a sense of one's superiority. Ironically, a low self-esteem is as egocentric as an exaggerated sense of one's own importance. Both solidify a sense of one's identity as essentially immutable. On the other hand, self-awareness can lead to acceptance and a more supple mind which is at ease in the moment, whatever it might be, and which can therefore act with greater confidence.

For Buckland, mindfulness 'encourages a more robust mind'. He goes on to say that the sort of mind encouraged by mindfulness practise becomes 'more agile' allowing one to have more energy once the energy becomes focused. This reminds me of what Trungpa calls 'subconscious gossip' (2004, p. 40), which siphons off the energy of one's attention. Buckland puts it this way: 'If you can focus your attention and concentration and stop the chitchat,' you will have more energy and be able to direct it more powerfully. He goes on to say that 'most of the time that chitchat is fear...' Mindfulness helps 'to focus ... attention in an appropriate and creative way, rather than just [being] distracted [in an] ego-driven, fearful way'.

There is thus a correlation between the fear of creation, the fear of the judgement of one's inner critic, and the fear of embarrassment caused by the creation of a strong ego-centric mentality. This overcoming of distraction is often put forward as one of the basic tools of mindfulness, to be able to rest the concentration with a support despite the pull of numerous habitual emotional, physical or discursive habits. This also enhances the ability of the performer to be present. As Buckland says, 'You're just trying to be [where you are] ...and not be distracted or overcome with fear.'

Is the Monkey Mind Creative?

During his ten-day Vipassana course, the one thing that did strike Buckland as seemingly counterintuitive was the metaphor of the 'monkey mind'. Many of Buckland's solo productions are highly inventive and often quite bizarrely imaginative and when creating a show he allows his mind to 'run wild', saying that:

In the work that I do, you train your mind to imagine 'cause you're after the next thing, you know? You're chasing constant stimulation. And in a

way as a theatre maker, I'm sort of trying to do that. Even if I'm just sitting and I get an idea and the thought develops...it goes to another and then another and then another...

Buckland said that he at first resisted the suggestion that this was not an ideal way for his mind to work. Claire M. Zedelius and Jonathan W. Schooler (2015) also draw attention to this apparent dichotomy:

On the one hand, creative individuals are often made out as being creatively successful because they exhibit high levels of concentration and are able to devote their full attention to their creative work. On the other hand, creative individuals are often portrayed as highly volatile and easily distractible characters with scattered minds. These stereotypes describe remarkably different styles of thinking.

Zedelius and Schooler identify the first of these traits as 'a tendency toward *mindfulness*', while they see the second as 'a tendency toward *mind wandering*,' which might be seen as its opposite. Buckland proposed a way in which he might be able to make use of both of these processes. First, he suggests that the mind could be trained like a muscle to become even more effective, describing mindfulness as:

a really useful, creative skill: as a way of exercising the muscle of your mind, so that you spend some time with your mind saying: 'It's ok, relax. You can't go there now, but when you go there you'll have a really good time'.

He describes it like keeping a dog on a leash and training it to be still and calm, so that it can become even more effective when it's time 'to hunt'. Buckland goes on: 'If it's always hunting—and the ego is free to hunt as well – you're not going to ever be satisfied, it's going to just chase everything, whatever it is.' This seemed like an interesting point, suggesting that there might be a selective usefulness of the 'monkey mind,' at various stages of creative exploration. However, when I asked Rob Nairn if he thought there might be a place for the 'monkey mind' in generating new ideas (in terms of brainstorming, and so on), he replied that in his experience 'creativity doesn't start until that chattering mind subsides.' For Nairn, the chattering monkey mind is 'siphoning off energy all the time.' If one can settle the mind and allow that restlessness to subside, 'then the energy flows back into the mind, and the mind becomes a more intense energy system. That's when a much deeper level of creativity is touched...' Nairn went on to emphasise the link between creativity and being in an open and aware state, saying that: 'It's thinking that drains the creative potential away, and the more you do mindfulness the less you think.'

I'd be interested in further exploring the creative uses of concentration and intuitive 'wandering' at a later stage, possibly in another research essay, since it's a subject that seems to warrant more investigation. For now, let me summarise some of Buckland's main points: Firstly, he felt that mindfulness was useful in helping to develop a more 'agile' and 'robust' mind. Secondly, he felt that this would assist performers in attaining different levels of awareness – of their place in the world of the play, as well as in the reality of the time and space of the performance. Thirdly, he also

felt that mindfulness helped to deal with the fear created by egocentric self-consciousness.

Mindfulness and Embodiment

A final point that all three of the theatre practitioners I interviewed spoke about was the embodied physicality of the mindfulness process. For example, Janni Younge described the mindfulness practise as 'not just in your head', but rather related it to the whole spectrum of awareness. She says:

Where does awareness come from? Well, it starts with your sense of touch. Where does your sense of touch come from? Well, it's right down there in your feet. Taking the time to be with your mind, as in that your mind that is the sensitivity of your whole body, and the being of your whole being, is a whole body experience...a whole *being* experience.

Younge also emphasised the value of physically sitting down together with her performers and sharing in a physical mindfulness experience. Similarly, for Andrew Buckland, the relationship with embodied performance and mindfulness was evident. He said that during his Vipassana training: 'You are absolutely focussing your attention on the physical, on your body in the present moment.' As a physical performer, the benefits of mindfulness to his work with the body became clear.

Conclusions

I'd like to close off by trying to summarise some of the views of these three theatre makers, to highlight areas for further exploration. Admittedly, they did not all have the exact same mindfulness training,¹⁰ however, the basic principle in all of their practises involved settling the mind by allowing it to rest on a particular support. The key areas of a mindful approach to working in theatre that emerged from these interviews include:

- (a) allowing the creative mind to cope with fear of failure
- (b) allowing creativity to flourish by acceptance of the present moment
- (c) checking the ego-centric mind's fear of embarrassment and self-consciousness
- (d) enhancing one's working relationship with performers and crew,
- (e) being able to be more aware of (and therefore less reactive to) the dynamic interplay of relationships with others
- (f) creating discipline and a new relationship to habitual reactivity
- (g) nurturing presence
- (h) an enhanced ability to work with materials – whether these are props, puppets, costumes, or other elements of design, to become more mindful of the world of objects in space
- (i) being able to share a sense of embodiment through sitting practise

Clearly there are many more areas of exploration. I was also left with the feeling that Younge, Louw and Buckland are interested in a kind of theatre that offers more than entertainment, that comes from a deeply empathetic response to their place in the world. I felt that these artists are seeking to create works which contribute something

fundamentally human to the society in which they find themselves. What they want to share includes aspects of presence and awareness, and they've found that the practise of mindfulness – for themselves, their students and their casts – has been one way in which to facilitate and assist with this work.

End Notes

1. Our conversation took place on 6 March, 2016. The full-length transcript of my interview with Nairn (around 10 000 words) is available on request.
2. On his retreats, Rob Nairn frequently refers to what he calls the EPS – the egocentric preference system. This is a psychological mechanism which constantly scans the environment and only accepts what one wants to see and rejects what does not suit one's preferences.
3. The Standard Bank Young Artist Awards are the highest national awards for artists under 35 in South Africa. They are awarded every year at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown.
4. All citations from personal interview, January 2016.
5. Rob Nairn's official bio on the South African Kagyu site reads that 'His unique mix of training and experience in law and psychology as well as having been instructed by eminent meditation teachers enables him to explain traditional Buddhist concepts from a Western psychological perspective.'
(<http://randburg.kagyu.org.za/rob-nairn>) Accessed 27 January, 2017.
6. All citations from personal interview, 2015.
7. Or, as in the title to Osho's essay: 'The Mind: A beautiful servant, a dangerous master' (2012). New York: Osho Media International.
8. All citations from personal interview, 2014.
9. For example, David Ryback notes the strengthening of 'self-determination' created by mindfulness practises in his essay 'Self-determination and the Neurology of Mindfulness' (2006, p. 474).
10. Young and Louw both practise a form of *Shamatha* taught by the MBLC, whereas Buckland trained in *Vipassana*.

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