

THE CEO OF THE STAGE

WHAT WE CAN LEARN
FROM THEATER DIRECTORS
IN OUR ROLE AS LEADERS
OF AN ORGANIZATION

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PUBLISHED BY



THE CEO OF THE STAGE

“I want to give the audience a hint of a scene. No more than that. Give them too much and they won't contribute anything themselves. Give them just a suggestion and you get them working with you. That's what gives the theater meaning: when it becomes a social act.”

Orson Welles



Prologue

I don't know what the first play I ever saw was. But for years now, I cannot imagine my life without going to the theater.

When I was in school, or maybe college, I dreamt of studying acting, I wanted to be an actress. But the closer I got to that stage (as a devoted spectator), I was increasingly aware of what it meant to stand up, act and make the spectator feel something. In a comedy, a drama or a musical, whatever the story being told, I could only feel great admiration for the actors and terror just imagining myself there.

Over time, I now admire not only the actors (with certain favorites) but also the directors. They design in their head, paint in their imagination, dream what we then see on stage. This essay, article, or whatever you want to call it, is a way of bringing together two of my favorite things: theater and internal communication.

I arrived at my second passion as if by chance. After my time studying preschool education, changing to journalism and then a Master's in Human Resources, I finally arrived at this form of communication that thinks of a particular type of spectator: the employee.

A little over two years ago, I started thinking of how a director is able to tell their story, how they can get everyone, the leads, supporting actors, producers and costume designers, etc. to bring to life the script they wrote or adapted, and make each and every one of them feel like part of this project, no matter what their part in the play.

How do you make everyone a leading role?

What makes a play successful?

What do you look for in your teams?

What characteristics does or should an ideal director have?

With these and other questions, I decided to contact directors that I follow, that I admire, and others I had recently discovered through spaces for new work like Sala de Parto.

Thank you to Mariana de Althaus, Gonzalo Benavente, Juan Carlos Fisher, Franco Iza, Sergio Llusera, Diego López, Gino Luque, Norma Martínez y Vanessa Vizcarra*. Without their stories, time and generosity (and in some cases, patience with my insistence), I would not be able to share this.

Thanks to them for letting me tell this story, and through their experience and vision, share the similarities between the role of a theater director and a general manager, CEO or leader of an organization.

In each of the topics I touch on, you will find pieces of their interviews. Ideas that invite us to rethink and reflect on the way we address others in order to execute any number of projects.

(*) The interviews were conducted between August 2015 and April 2016

THANKS TO MARIANA, GONZALO, JUAN CARLOS, FRANCO, SERGIO, DIEGO, GINO, NORMA AND VANESSA



VANESSA
VIZCARRA



MARIANA
DE ALTHAUS



GONZALO
BENAVENTE SECCO



JUAN CARLOS
FISHER



DIEGO LOPEZ



SERGIO LLUSERA



FRANCO IZA



GINO LUQUE



NORMA MARTINEZ

I ENJOYED AND LEARNED A GREAT DEAL IN EVERY CONVERSATION WITH THEM. THROUGH THEIR EXPERIENCE, I REAFFIRM MY PASSION FOR THE THEATER AND FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATION. THIS PROJECT ALLOWED ME TO KNOW AND ADMIRE THEM EVEN MORE.

Photos Mariana de Althaus: Úrsula Pizarro / Photo Sergio Llusera: Paola Vera / Photo Gino Luque: Carlos Galiano / Photo JC Fisher: Giuseppe Falla



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TO DIRECT

AND NOT DIE

TRYING

Every company has a story to tell, actions to carry out. To do so, it defines a plan, recruits people, creates products or services, and more. At the head of this project there is a leader, a director, the person in charge of *“guiding collective efforts in order to tell a story”*, because his or her ultimate goal is for the story to be told according to a particular vision. So, you got the position, you are the manager, and in addition to ensuring the business’s efficiency, profitability and sustainability, you must guarantee that the team you lead – directly, the first line, and the larger team comprising the company – are able to carry out the strategy, focus, reach the objective. To have a full house and applause ringing throughout the theater. It is not easy, but we can build on the reflections of theater directors and remember that directing is not just a matter of giving instructions.

“Being a director is not only directing your actors, it is directing the vision for the play, approving lighting, costumes, stage design. I would sum it up as finding harmony between all of the parts.”

“THE THEATER IS COLLECTIVE, EACH PERSON CONTRIBUTES THEIR PART AND YOU, AS THE DIRECTOR, HAVE TO MAKE ALL OF THAT WORK.”

“They have a vision about how the play should be executed in terms of staging and concept. In the theater, as an open canvas, the interesting thing is seeing how the story flows. (As directors) we are in charge of creating the whole project, from something as simple as how many weeks of rehearsals are needed, to graphics or the aesthetics of the stage design.”

“In the theater, there are many people doing work that enriches the process, and the idea is to direct all of these efforts toward the same direction. A director should identify each team member’s strength in order to maximize it, be they actors or technical crew. If any part of the system does not work, what do we do to fix it?”



“Knowing how to listen, not just to words but as a creator, within their context. It is about constantly listening, being open to receiving and encouraging dialogue. Knowing how to read people’s emotions and actions...”

“THE DIRECTOR’S ROLE IS TO CREATE A FAVORABLE SPACE FOR FREEDOM, SECURITY, SUPPORT AND JOY, FOR THE ACTOR TO FEEL FREE AND BE GENEROUS WITH THEIR CREATIVITY AND ABILITIES. IF NOT, THEY WILL HOLD BACK.”

IT'S NOT THEM, IT'S YOU

7 THINGS THE IDEAL DIRECTOR DOES

People quit their bosses. We have heard this phrase over and over again, so many times that I think it loses strength with each repetition. But like kryptonite was able to deplete Superman's powers, statistics show that a bad, non-existent or lacking relationship between bosses and employees is directly related to low levels of employee commitment and performance.

What works for theater directors? How can they reach perfection in their productions? Like in companies, theater directors are also working with a group of people – young people directing actors (and directors) with several years of experience, directors working with family members, with actors who are just starting out, or some actors with more complicated personalities than others, in addition to production, marketing and other teams. Also, remember that actors, more than any other professional, are usually in constant contact with their emotions. So, we start by taking a deep breath and ...

...getting a pen

#1 KNOWING

Just like a theater director needs to have clarity on the play they want to put on as a whole, the CEO must be clear on the corporate strategy they want to implement. Knowing what they want and, better yet, what they do not want. In the theater, one thinks in terms of actions, in what you want to achieve in a particular scene: fear, tears, hatred, laughter. In the corporate world, we must think of what we want from the public and how we are going to achieve it. And the starting point will always be knowledge. **Simply put: don't be a guest at your own party. You are the host.**

#2 LISTENING

Knowing when it is your turn to speak. In the words of my interviewees, theater directors' guide, orient, accompany, support, motivate, empower. Don't we ask the same of bosses and their teams?

To which they sometimes respond: *"I don't have time for that."* In response to that sentence, I think Mariana de Althaus said it all, and it applies to both theater and organizational life:

"A director who does not listen to other creators is not a director."

#4 OTHER SHOES

Try thinking, *"If I was in their shoes, with their experience, age, and everything, could I handle it or not."* Sergio Llusera explained: "It is remembering when you were new to this, and it's up to you to do it, whether you want to or not."

Think about it: Are you in a leadership school? Have you discussed empathy? Because if, like Sheldon Cooper, you never leave your comfortable "spot", then don't blame the program, the person who does not understand you, it is also a question of attitude.

#3 COMMUNICATING WELL

A director must know how to communicate in a way the actor will understand. Verbalize what they imagine, what they dream of. Choosing the right metaphor or word for a particular person, taking into account their age, prior experiences, personality, context, etc.

Tip: If you can explain what is in your head to a five year old child and they understand, you have succeeded. Communication is what the person listening understands. It is not enough to prepare your speech with key messages. Can you imagine a great script without a good director and actor?

#5 TRUST AND BE TRUSTWORTHY

Even if they wanted to, a director does not get on stage after third call. Once the play starts, cellphones are not allowed and the “boss” is not allowed to stop the show and make corrections himself. *Micromanagement* is unimaginable on stage and the same should apply within companies. You have to trust in the people on your team, in their abilities.

And also be trustworthy, give the team reassurance, show them clarity. Gonzalo Benavente Secco said that sometimes, on the show he directs (*Historias de Papel*) or when he directed his movie (*Rocanrol 68*), “you ask (the actors) to do weird things and they trust you. (..) Sometimes, they don’t know how it’s going to turn out, but they trust you anyway.” The ending may be shot at the beginning of filming, and the scenes may not be shot in chronological order or in sequence, and they still take a chance.

Close your eyes and let yourself fall, your team is behind you to catch you.

Do you let go or not?

Would you trust them? Would they trust you if it were the other way around?

#6 WORK AS A TEAM

Theater is collective and every person is a part of the story. If the sound engineer forgets to press play, the scene is not complete, or if a cellphone rings and another actor forgets their lines...you do not cry, you do not scream, you do not stop. Everything keeps going, everyone supports each other. No one person is more important than the other. It is true that there are leading and supporting roles, but each and every one is essential for the play.

Why is it hard to bring this philosophy to companies? One possibility is that as leaders, sometimes we find ourselves far away from the field, from the stage.

“I think the projects which are most likely to fail are those where the director feels he or she is above the rest. The truth is they really are not. They are responsible for guiding everything toward their particular point of view, but that does not make their job more important than everyone else’s.”

Gonzalo Benavente Secco

#7

BE PRESENT, BE AVAILABLE

A director is not someone who stays in their hideout, who only speaks when something goes wrong or once during the first rehearsal and once before the opening. They are there to answer questions, give directions when needed, incorporate the actors’ ideas.

A director is a visible and horizontal person, who is on a shared journey with the team, making this an unrepeatable experience.

“You have to approach each person according to their personality, how they are going to take what you have to say. A director’s job is a **human resources management position**, it is being a psychologist. (...) **Knowing the person behind the character** because, they are not offering something concrete to achieve the character, they give their humanity, their body, their voice and their soul if you will. So, how do you guide them in that direction?”

Gonzalo Benavente Secco

“It has a lot to do with **trust** (when talking about a director’s skills). I was able to work with my father (Miguel Iza) because there is trust. (...)It is about listening, making them feel comfortable and feeling comfortable yourself. It is about **being able to trust, showing that you are trustworthy, listening, and knowing when you have to speak.**”

Franco Iza, who directed his father, Miguel Iza, and Javier Valdés in *El análisis*, a play that won the Sala de Parto Contemporary Peruvian Playwriting Festival in 2013.

“A director should not tell actors how to say their lines... get exasperated and make them copy him. **You have to give them actions...** what it is that you want to achieve with the lines. (...) Not end up wanting it all to be a projection of him or herself.”

Gino Luque

“The ingredient, when you are working as a group, is **communication**. Knowing from the beginning what it is we are talking about, for all of the objectives to be clear. Clear bases for both the actor and the director. (...) and also, the **quality of listening** is very important.”

Vanessa Vizcarra

Second Call

1. YOU HAVE A TEAM, GET USED TO IT

Yes, on stage there are leading roles and others that are not, but everyone is important, so apply these directors' recommendations:

- Emphasize other people's skills and achievements
- Apply their suggestions
- Value and recognize work
- Acknowledge individual contributions

"Everyone has a role and (the play) must work like a machine. (...) Listen to them and identify what they can contribute. I was equally demanding and rigorous with everyone, so they felt they worked in a fair environment, though there were higher and lower positions."

Gino Luque

*"They must feel their work is important, not an unnecessary complement but essential to telling the story. **All of the elements: wardrobe, stage design, actors...everything has to tell the story.**"*

Diego López

*"If you are the boss, **you have to understand what kind of actors they are.** If they like for you to give very detailed instructions or if they like to make suggestions, how they like to be told, what they find offensive or not. (...) **Also, motivate them and have a clear vision, as clear as possible, of where I want to take the project.**"*

Juan Carlos Fisher

"If we make mistakes, we admit it...What I did was accept an idea that was useful, and the play (El Análisis) grew... it would not have been the same if I did not embrace that."

Franco Iza

"From the outside, one sees a hierarchy, but there is no such thing as unimportant or insignificant roles. Everything crumbles (if someone does not show up), if the lighting guy does not make it."

Vanessa Vizcarra

2. YOU SHOULDN'T ALWAYS HAVE THE FINAL SAY

Leave your ego out of it. Be humble. Do not take credit for ideas or achievements that are not your own. Apologize. Listen. In other words, if you have a team, make them part of the process. Explain what you are trying to achieve. Make the most of the space you have created for these interactions. Simply put, if you are the kind of person who organizes a brainstorming session and then rejects all of the ideas, just because, then remember:

"IF THE MOVIE TURNS OUT THE SAME AS THE SCRIPT, YOU DID NOT DO YOUR JOB WELL, YOU DID NOT MAKE OTHERS CONTRIBUTE NEW IDEAS OR BUILD THEIR TALENTS. THE SAME THING APPLIES IN THE THEATER. (...) IT IS ALREADY A BETTER PLAY THAN IT COULD HAVE BEEN BECAUSE SOMEONE ELSE HAD A SAY. IT HAS YOUR NAME ON IT, BUT IS GREATER THAN YOU."

Gonzalo Benavente Secco

"Staging a successful show is very hard. If someone had the formula, they would all succeed. Maybe it is about honesty and listening. I think it has a lot to do with listening, asking for others' opinions. (...) Sometimes we think our ideas are great, but we don't talk about them with other people, ending in very poor results."

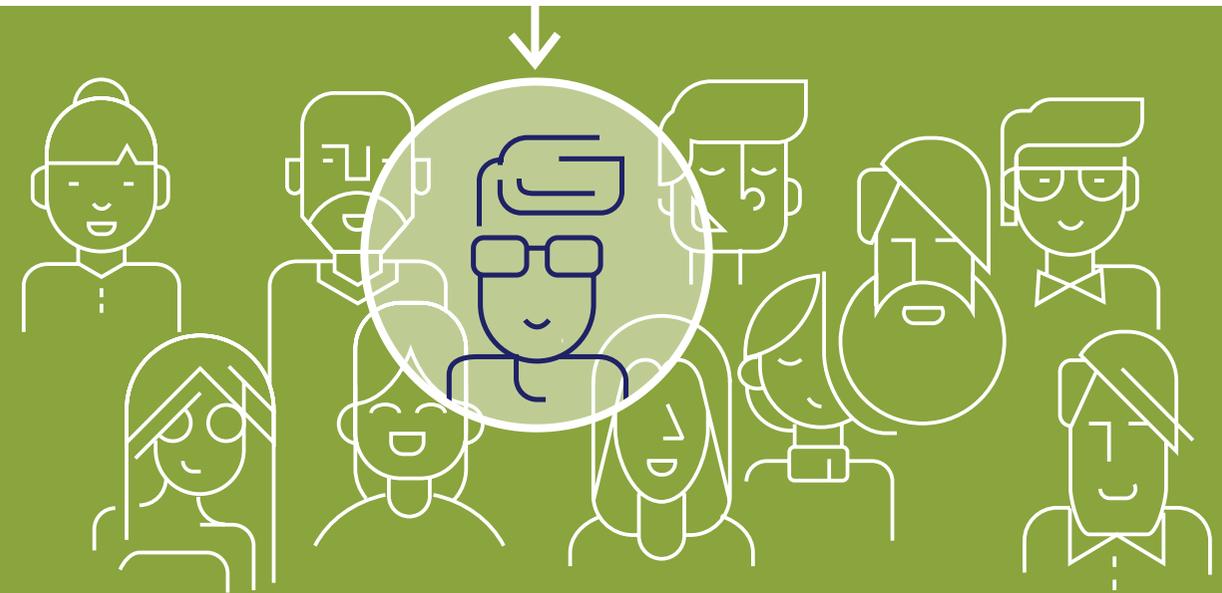
Mariana de Althaus

3. LOOK FOR MORE THAN TECHNICAL ABILITY IN CASTING

Putting together the perfect team is not easy. Not in the theater, not in soccer... so why would it be for a company? We all want the best. We define the profile for the position (sometimes to the point of delusion, asking for contradictory things like "strategic vision" and "proficient in Illustrator and Office programs" in job postings).

But who do we really want? What do we do when they are already with us as a cast member? Do we let them go? Do we honestly do our best to make it work?

To get the best, we start by showing what we can offer for their personal and professional development. The candidate's experience starts with the job posting, with a promise that is often simplistic and empty. And once inside the organization, the only effort we make is timely and full payment.



“THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS THE ATTITUDE OF WANTING TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THE DIRECTOR WANTS, WANTING TO COLLABORATE, TRUSTING THE DIRECTOR, COMMITTING. (...) FOR ME, A GOOD ATTITUDE IS VERY IMPORTANT, FOR THERE TO BE A SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY, TEAMWORK. WHEN I SEE A BAD ATTITUDE I PREFER TO NOT DO ANYTHING AT ALL. I CANNOT IMAGINE DOING THEATER THAT WAY (...) EVEN IF THEY ARE EXTRAORDINARY OR THE BEST ACTOR IN THE WORLD, IF THEY MAKE IT A BAD EXPERIENCE, I WILL NEVER CALL THEM.”

Mariana de Althaus

*“For them to be **willing to try things**. If they are not open to experimenting I don’t think it will work. Second, if they feel something is not right or they don’t feel comfortable, for them to tell me. Also, for them to respect their co-workers. (...) **they may be great on stage, but behind the scenes, they are making trouble for me.** (...) Theater is collective.”*

Franco Iza



*“Casting is like grocery shopping. You **choose (an actor) because you think they can be transformed, that they have potential.**”*

Gino Luque



*“For them **to be happy to be here**. They have to be happy to be in that play, to want to be there with you, telling that story. The attitude toward the work (is different), if they really want to do it.”*

Vanessa Vizcarra

Third Call

EXECUTING THE PLAN

It is up to you. You have your dream script and cast, clear actions. You have been successful with other shows, but this year, how can make sure you are ready by third call? Closing the year with good reviews, a satisfied public and team.

When asking how they make the play they imagined a success, I learned many things... experiences had by the people I interviewed that apply, without exception, to corporate life.

And I don't think we need many paragraphs to share their ideas with you. I don't want this to get tedious and longer than necessary. When I started this project I read that Mariana de Althaus quoted Peter Brook in several interviews, and read some things about him. And I am starting this part with the following quote of his:

**"THEATER IS LIKE SILENCE.
IT DISAPPEARS WHEN YOU TALK ABOUT IT."**

PETER BROOK

What about if we stop repeating, like a chant and without conviction, phrases like: *'Walk the talk'*, *'Actions are louder than words'*, *'Good leaders communicate through example'*. Enough *bla bla bla*, let's stop talking and start doing.

1. IT IS ABOUT ENJOYING THE JOURNEY

After high school, I got into the PUCP Early Education School, and I wanted (or I was naively convinced that I wanted) to teach children. By the sixth semester, and thanks to my fellow classmates chants of, "A lion walked through the jungle...", I ran to the bus that would take me from San Miguel to Surco, to prepare the speech to drop out of Education and tell my parents I did not know what I wanted to study.

I was scared. I thought how my plans – to graduate at 21, work and get a Master's Degree – were going down the toilet. That my parents were not going to let me quit because of the Lion King and my latest failures at making rattles in Music Education 1. But my father said something he has continued to repeat until today, at ages 36 and 66, respectively: "Whatever you do, do it because you like it. If not, what is the point?" It's about enjoying studying and then practicing a profession. I had a hard time reaching that point, but that has been my motto ever since.

"You never know what is going to work. I think a successful play is when there is a happy process. That has a big impact on the results (...) If theater were predictable, we would be on the stock market, but there is no way to know... at least you know you had a happy experience."

Juan Carlos Fisher

"One that has the ability to change people (...). That magical moment theater can have that is transformative and stays with you forever (touching chest). For me, that is success in the theater."

Norma Martínez

"One I enjoy, that is fulfilling. For me, that is a successful play."

Diego López

"A theater experience that impacts the spectator, that brings up questions. For them to feel, be it intellectually or emotionally. I don't mean feeling just one given way... each person can make that experience their own. It is not about them seeing what I imagined, but each member of the audience seeing something different which they find stimulating."

Vanessa Vizcarra

"You do it because it makes you happy, and if you bring in people that don't contribute to that, there is no point."

Gonzalo Benavente Secco



"I DO THEATER BECAUSE IT IS FUN, BECAUSE I ENJOY IT. IF I AM NOT GOING TO HAVE A GOOD TIME, I'LL BECOME AN ACCOUNTANT."

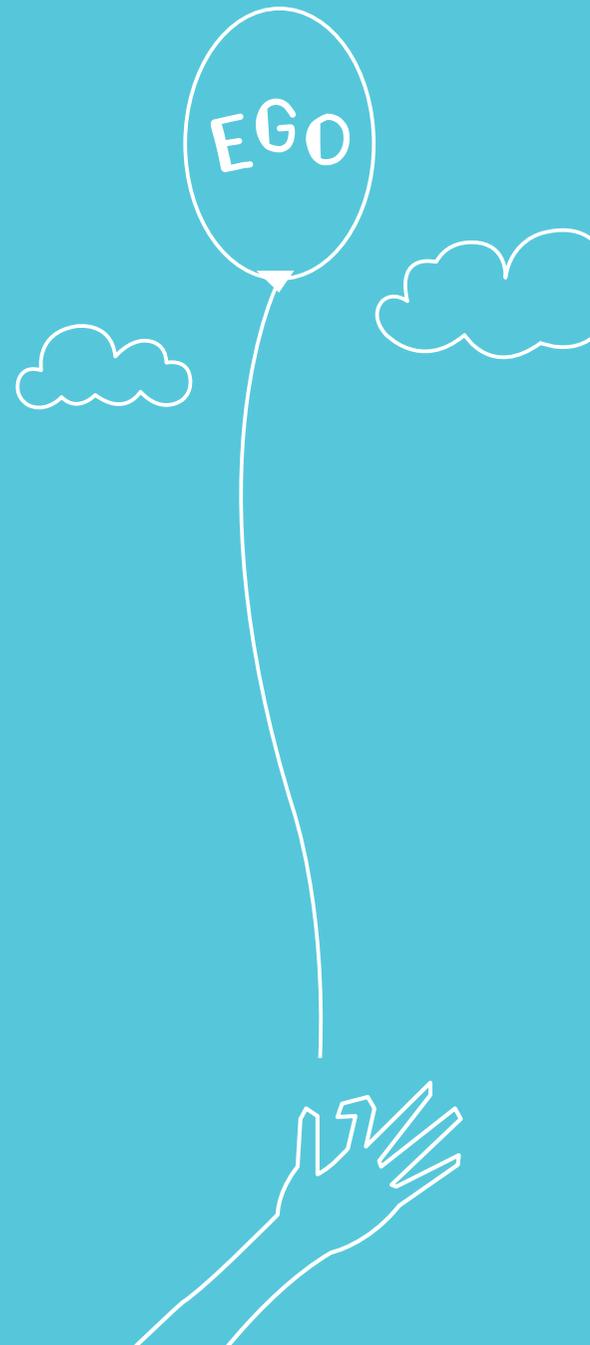
Franco Iza

2. LEAVE YOUR EGO OUT OF IT

It's good for us to develop self-love. That is the starting point, without a doubt. However, many times as bosses we believe ourselves to be all-knowing, all-powerful and ever-present. You look only to yourself, and the only things you consider good or okay always come from you. Close, open and frank communication cannot be built on egos. So, before discussing performance with your team, remember that this is a barrier you must break.

"THE EGO IS FRUSTRATING AND UNBEARABLE. THE BEST ACTORS HAVE A NORMAL HEALTHY EGO, LIKE ALL OF US. EGOS ARE A PROBLEM FOR ANY DIRECTOR OR CREATOR BECAUSE THEY BUILD WALLS."

Mariana de Althaus



3. CRISES ARE ENLIGHTENING

You had everything planned, but in the moment of truth the actor forgets their lines, does not show up, a phone rings, the music does not start on time. In your mind it is the end of the world, but in reality it is not. People who have managed crises know that preparation is key: of spokespeople, of messages, of prior awareness of potential risks. Both in the theater and in a company, a crisis can be triggered in a matter of seconds. By a 140-character comment or a post shared by influencers.

In rehearsals, if there is a crisis, if you have a good attitude, that crisis always leads you to something great, it awakens your creativity, whatever the circumstance or crisis. (...) During the show, that is the defining characteristic of theater. I think both actors and directors love that, the feeling of vulnerability (...) The great thing is that you are always saved in the theater."

Mariana de Althaus

.....

"The risk that theater involves is not present in films at any stage. It is great. It is almost like an adventure sport, because there is the fear that it could all go to hell."

Gonzalo Benavente Secco

.....

"Practically no other art has that risk, that feeling of something fatal. On the one hand, since you live with that, everything is very serious. The ideal is to always stay cool because everything has a solution and if it does not... 'It's just theater' (laughter). But I cannot imagine myself doing anything else. In the theater everything is possible, it does not impose a ceiling, limits."

Vanessa Vizcarra

4. MAKE SURE TO PUT ON A SHOW

As Gino Luque says: you have to make sure there is drama. In classical theater, drama as a conflict. In the words of Mariana de Althaus, you must achieve a real and complete show.

Within a company we could say that the show must be based on the organization's cultural pillars, and focused on its strategy and its audience. Not all shows are the same, the setting varies, they include audiovisual elements, dance, etc., according to what story we want to tell and who we want to present it to.

I think we can only tell a well-rounded story and reach its climax when we are able to answer the questions: What is the show-company's purpose? What do we believe in? What do we want to say?

5. AND IF NOTHING WORKS: SPEAK!

"The easiest thing, which no one does, is to speak. There is nothing more practical than that. Even if it is just a silly thing, even if there is no time, you have to do it. (...) The theater is a place where you can speak, at least it should be. I can't imagine bosses asking their employees, 'What's going on with you?'"

Franco Iza



PETER BROOK
SAID THAT IN
THE THEATER
“ANYTHING CAN
HAPPEN AND
SOMETHING MUST
HAPPEN”

JUAN CARLOS FISHER

How do you respond to an incident? To something unexpected.

What do you do so your actors do not panic and the show can go on?

It is something so inherent to them. It is part of their nature. And that is why I admire them so much. Each night's show is unique. From the unexpected reactions in the audience to a cellphone ringing, to a particular connection with them, each production is unique and each and every performance is different, and they are prepared for that. I think that makes them more alive than ever, because if not, they would be on auto-pilot.

If your show runs 300 performances, the time comes when you need that (auto-pilot), but if they are the actors I like to work with, they are alive on stage, and each performance is unique.



BONUS TRACK

THE AUDIENCE

THEATER IS FEELING SOMETHING, FOR THE AUDIENCE TO FEEL SOMETHING

What role does the audience play? What is their part in the play? What do you expect from them?

GONZALO BENAVENTE SECCO:

The whole package is for them to be moved and laugh. If you achieve that full range at some point, then you did it. The theater experience is very special. For people to buy a ticket is already an honor and a responsibility. (...) I think it is your responsibility to say something about your country or your experience in society, or if it is foreign, for it to have some meaning. It's not just, *"I am going to put on Hamlet, and that's it"*. It is a responsibility.

JUAN CARLOS FISHER:

I hope they connect with the story, for them to get something out of it. The director is supposed to be the first spectator, and my hope is for the audience to feel the same as I do when I am in rehearsal. If that happens, if it resonates or gets you thinking, then it's special, no matter what play it is.

(...) Feeling that connection, theater is much more powerful. Alberto (Isola) says that you can have fifty favorite movies, but when a play moves you, it stays with you for ages, and that is why it's an art with an audience that has been going on for thousands of years, and remains through it all, despite movies and television.



APOYO
COMUNICACION