

Fairlith Harvey Of Dreamqueen Collective On How Live Arts Helped Teach Courage, Authenticity, Vulnerability & Career Success

An Interview With Vanessa Ogle



Vanessa Ogle · Follow

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...

The stage is a powerful platform for personal and professional growth. Through live arts, individuals learn to embrace vulnerability, project authenticity, and muster unparalleled courage. These experiences not only shape artists but also prepare them for varied career paths with a distinctive edge. From actors and dancers to directors and behind-the-scenes creators, the lessons learned in the limelight often translate into profound career success beyond the footlights. As part of this series, we had the pleasure of interviewing Fairlith Harvey.

Originally from North Vancouver, Canada, Fairlith Harvey is an award-winning artistic creator who has spent over fifteen years using glitter, inclusivity, warmth, and pure imagination to create themed entertainment design, immersive art, original dramatic works, burlesque shows, and musical parodies. A graduate of New York's American Musical and Dramatic Academy, Fairlith's live arts credits include programming for the immersive Times Square dining experience Mars 2112, Whistler Village, and Disney Cruise Lines. She also founded New York's 'Company 1B' theatrical troupe and Vancouver's Geekenders. In Canada, over 180,000 audience members have witnessed Fairlith's work while over 10 million YouTube viewers have discovered her work online. Her newest theatre project is

"The Last Resort", a vivid immersive exploration of mortality.

. . .

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series. Before we dive in, our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you share with us the backstory about what brought you to your specific career in live arts?

I was exposed to theatre from a very young age.

My father died in front of me when I was four, and a “Distract Fairlith” campaign began. It had limited success, as I’ve been thoughtful about mortality ever since, but the relief of putting everything away for two hours so an ensemble of people could tell me a story has stayed with me throughout my life. Theatre was all that worked to make me feel better at that time.

Theatre is a gift that takes us away from the world better than any video game or television show. It’s immediate — an ephemeral shared experience that can never be exactly repeated again. It’s really magical. People need it, even if they don’t know. They do.

I chose my career when I was five, at a community theatre production of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta I watched with rapt attention. I started working hard under my own steam when I was six, when I was allowed to begin dance lessons. I danced, sang, and took acting lessons full time, convincing my classmates to put on plays with me, and later going to New York to study musical theatre in college.

When I was ten, I saw Andrew Lloyd Webber’s “CATS”, which is a divisive piece of art to be sure, but I was transported. Immersive theatre is trendy now, embraced by the artistic community worldwide, and I’m happy it is, but what “CATS” did with immersing its audience was and continues to be revolutionary. The performers in the aisles, interacting with children who are so eager to suspend their disbelief, the guts of the New London and Winter Garden theatres being ripped out to make way for comically oversized fish skeletons, burger boxes, and truck tires for the actors to cavort upon has stayed with me forever. Theatre chairs nestled amongst the meticulously crafted junk, green eyes staring at you from every nook and cranny, stars and the moon hanging overhead, you can forget the world, especially when you’re ten. I’ve seen that show live (I think) thirty-eight times and performed in it at least that many. “CATS” took me away from the struggles I was experiencing at home, not the least of which was being an undiagnosed neurodivergent latchkey kid who needed to be an artist and got beat up a lot for being odd. “CATS” filled my chest with champagne bubbles. I never recovered and have been chasing those champagne bubbles ever since.

For fifteen years, I created themed variety and cabaret shows with the Vancouver-based theatre troupe I founded, Geekenders, with the goal of getting passionate nerds (like myself) out to live theatre when they might not otherwise seek it out. People got so excited about there being curated safe spaces to try out clubbing, partying, musicals, burlesque shows, and they started selling out immediately in 2009.

We were very lucky: over fifteen years of work, more than 180,000 people saw those pop culture-themed shows live, another 10 million watched on YouTube, and we toured to New York, Whitehorse, and all sorts of cities in between. I learned everything on my feet: marketing, writing, production management, people management, graciousness.

I’m deeply proud of that period in my career, and feeling like a rockstar walking the streets of East Vancouver throughout my twenties was an amazing experience that I’ll remember fondly forever. The reaction to my shows taught me that people love being remembered, love being made to feel important, and love to be in on the joke.

The difference between the art I make now and the art I made then is that I create to fulfill me now, instead of just creating for others and forgetting myself. I create now for that lonely 10-year-old in a party dress who just really needed to see “CATS” that night.

People still relate to what I imagine, and that’s a relief, because it makes me feel less alone. I hope the feeling is mutual.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you started your career?

I never let myself do anything uninteresting! I sometimes imagine myself on my deathbed, grinning away at the thought of all my adventures.

Doing two hours of “Star Wars”-themed stand-up for surprise audience member Kate McKinnon was pretty cool.

I was the Empress of Mars in a Mars-themed restaurant in Times Square for two years. I met all kinds of celebrities, like David Beckham and Guy Ritchie, but I was painted blue.

Living in a vintage train car inside the Railway Museum of British Columbia for two months while I spent all day and night climbing steam engines to hang lights, designing a train trip to the North Pole, was an experience.

Sword-fighting Michael Buble on a pirate ship marauding around False Creek... fun!

Hiring a real mini-donkey for my immersive production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” that saw the actors rehearsing improvisation in iambic pentameter... surreal!

For me, perhaps the most interesting thing is a moment that carried a lot of meaning.

After receiving an email from her parents, I once road-ripped to Calgary to meet the family of a young fan of a musical I’d written, hung out with her for three hours at the airport answering questions, and gave her a bunch of props and costumes from the show.

That was the moment I truly absorbed that even on days when I feel irrelevant, unheard, and lonely, the art I make has an impact. I think that’s a lesson that every human being should contemplate — the butterfly effect of every choice we make, every wacky sculpture we make out of egg cartons, and every joke we practice to tell our friends.

Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you please share a story or example for each?

Integrity: It’s an incredibly important quality in any leader, but it won’t make you famous. Making theatre is a vulnerable exercise, and I want to be a safe person to explore and tell stories with, more than anything. If someone tells me something in a show makes them uncomfortable, for example, it’s no skin off my nose to examine that and change it. I like dealing with challenges.

Authenticity: A college professor once looked at me and said, “You’re so strange,” and at the time, it felt awful. I’ve been othered my entire life but have never been able to be anybody else. Learning to love myself and my idiosyncrasies proudly and unapologetically has made me successful. Committing to being myself has helped my art to mature alongside me, and I hope my authenticity helps others feel courageous.

Belief in Myself: A hard-won skill, but the most important one. I have unwavering confidence in my ideas. Even when I feel bad about myself or a little depressed, or things aren’t going the way I wish they would, I always believe in my imagination. I think that’s the most important thing about being an artist: having an impenetrable safe in your soul where you keep your belief in your art, your vision, your certainty about what it is, why it matters, and why it’s amazing.

Ok, thank you for that. Let’s now jump to the primary focus of our interview. How has a live performance experience directly influenced a critical decision or leadership style in your professional career?

I graduated from post-secondary in New York in 2008. At that time, they lined us up and typed us: ingénue, ingénue, leading man, character, character, ingénue, character. They assigned us to boxes, supposedly for life, based on what they felt we looked like. I balked at being cast in school as Cinderella’s stepsister. I wanted more than anything to be Cinderella.

When I started putting together my own productions right out of school, the best advice I ever received was to create your own work instead of waiting to be chosen. I invited people to audition for characters they related to, and to express themselves as they saw themselves.

Similarly, emboldening audiences to express their feelings at my productions, to cheer and react as if we’re at The Globe Theatre and it’s 1597 has been instrumental to my artistic practice and to the success of my work.

This way, everyone is included and part of the moment, and the energy exchange is truly reciprocal. I don't encourage heckling, but always welcome booing, cheering, and "oh no". I love group projects, when everyone is equally excited. I love to see others enjoy themselves.

Can you describe a moment on stage that taught you a profound lesson about vulnerability and how you've applied that lesson offstage?

In my immersive show, "Alice in Glitterland", which adapted "Alice in Wonderland" to take place in a seedy retro cabaret, we explored what "we're all mad here" means in the 21st century, and I interviewed three dozen neurodivergent people about what loving and being loved meant to them.

In the course of those interviews, I universally heard a lot about the honour of someone trying to know, love, and understand a person who struggles, so in "Alice in Glitterland", characters would, from time to time, take audience members away to learn about them and have a simple, short conversation about their life. Audience members would often cry and sometimes confess very intimate secrets.

I learned, throughout my past decade of making immersive theatre, to try to be interested instead of interesting.

We all just want to feel important.

In what ways has the discipline and creativity demanded by live arts shaped your approach to career challenges and opportunities?

I used to work until I was in a constant state of cyclical burnout; it was drilled into my head at school that someone would always be working harder than me, and that I'd only succeed if I worked harder than anyone else. You're told over and over: if you don't want it more than everyone else and give up everything, you won't succeed.

I did give up just about everything in my twenties so I could live for making art, and I regret it, though it was a romantic way to live for a while.

I believe, now, that high-level success is entirely based on luck, and that if I want to be creative and disciplined, I have to rest. 'Discipline' does not mean behaving like a machine.

I've made myself sick many times, and with the progression of my own chronic invisible illness, I've had to adapt my artistic practice and trust others more as a direct result. I hustled like mad throughout my twenties. Now, I can't do that.

As scary, frustrating, and tiresome as that can be, it's allowed me to open up and build a more collaborative practice, wherein everybody contributes differently based on their expertise, passion, or even just what they wish to work hard at and learn. I've let go of the need to hold everything up myself and become better at identifying excited artists with a collaborative nature who wish to work in a reciprocal fashion.

What a relief, to give myself permission to be helped. And how beautiful, to learn to trust and to allow myself to rest.

Caring for yourself, in my opinion, is the most important part of creation. If I'm constantly working "like [I'm] running out of time" (to quote "Hamilton"), then I don't have the time to consider my ideas and hone them until they're my very best effort. A best effort takes time.

It's also key to remember that art is never "finished". You just decide to stop chipping away at it, and that takes a lot of discipline in and of itself.

How do you think the authenticity required in live performances has impacted your personal brand or leadership identity in your career?

I was initially attracted to the performing arts because it allowed me to explore different sides of myself, but over time I've come to realize that to me, authenticity means releasing myself from perfectionism so that I can enjoy creating and don't feel pressure to grind myself into the ground.

I also found that the more my productions reflect my dreams and the whimsical aesthetics I imagine in my head, rather than guesses about what an audience would like, the more people react joyfully to my art. The dark side of glamour, thousands of hand-placed rhinestones, attention to detail, themes of growing up too fast, dry humour, all are authentically me and that I have an outlet to express my feelings and have people respond passionately

is a terrific privilege.



Based on your experience and research, can you please share “5 Ways That Live Arts Helped Teach Courage, Authenticity, Vulnerability and Career Success?” If you can, please share a story or an example for each.

1. Ask.

Maybe you'll get a yes. More often than you'd think!

I'm producing an immersive show about Purgatory as a tropical resort (“The Last Resort”) at Vancouver's historical Waldorf Hotel, one of my favourite spaces in the whole city. I wouldn't be if I hadn't simply asked them if they were interested (and explained what immersive theatre is), asked them if we could rehearse on weekdays, asked them if I could put dancers behind/on the bars, asked them if I can stock their bar with bottles labeled 'Ennui' and 'Schadenfreude', and asked them if we can completely transform the space.

And you know what they said?

“Sounds cool!”

Incredible.

2. Learn not to be invested in being liked.

I'm not suggesting to be mean. I'm suggesting that I suddenly find myself with 800 best friends whenever I hold an audition! Know who loves you, hold them close, be the best person you can, and get the work done. Everything else is fluff. I believe in my vision, and I believe in my talent, and the most important thing to me now is being trusted. If my actors trust me, amazing things happen. That's the most gratifying feeling there is.

In my current project, the sixteen actors perform simultaneously, and the audience explores the space while the story unfolds around them. This makes up approximately two hundred and fifty discoverable scenes. No one had any idea what was going on until about the third run-through... but I did. And their trust was worth everything to me, because they were flying blind, and then it very suddenly came together. People trust you more, I've found, when you're busy with their best interests in mind. If you're busy trying to make them like you, their best interests become secondary.

3. Blowing out someone else's candle doesn't make yours burn any brighter.

Jealousy and competition serve no one; focus on your own vision and trajectory.

I've had colleagues get weird about times when I'm successful, and I dearly wish I could give them the perspective I have, of the amount of work and failure that those successes were built on, and the amount of failure that happens in between the successes.

It doesn't bother me when people copy my work or talk about me because I'm focused on my own artistic practice, but it makes me sad for them; creating based on someone else's art, or feeling like you should have what they have, isn't about being true to yourself and your vision or identifying your own creative voice.

I once caught wind of someone declaring to their audience at their new theatre venture that "the world needs a better Fairlith and [she was] going to be that better Fairlith".

That's just no way to be an artist. I'm the best Fairlith there is, because I'm the only one. Be the best you that there is. Don't waste time on Earth trying to be anyone else.

I compete with no one but myself, and I'm not even really competing with myself! I'm making art I love because that's what I've needed to do — for some reason — for my entire life. I like to challenge myself to grow and do more as I learn, but I'm proud of my past work and my present work. I'm just proud of myself for being consistently authentic. I'm not interested in competitive social dynamics, and I want to include people and just have a good time.

In the end, my definition of "success" is having fun, twirling in rainbow light to classic rock songs, and building an amazing, strange life story to look back on from my deathbed. Other artists don't enter into it, and neither does the "luck" of fame, which comes and goes anyway.

4. Reject labels like "magical".

It's a compliment to be called "magical", and a delightful one, but the word implies that I don't have to work hard, that I can be leaned on beyond my capacity, that my feelings can't be hurt, that I snap my fingers and a fully-realized project appears, and that I didn't study theatre full-time from the age of six.

It seems to me that calling a skill "magic" makes that magic feel inaccessible to others, as well. Study dance. Study comedy. Study improv. Study writing. Grow and grow and grow.

It's not magic; it's tenacity and a lot of list-writing.

I can't overstate the importance of this lesson.

5. It's cool to try hard and care.

It's cool to take pride in yourself and pride in your work. Society is obsessed with being casual and not caring too much about anything! I am not about that, and if I were, I would have achieved nothing.

You can't be an artist while pretending nothing matters. Any success I've achieved is a direct reflection of my willingness to try and to fail, very loudly and publicly.

You are a person of great influence. If you could start a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

I would completely do away with tiered curtain calls that start with the ensemble and end with a "star". I only have group bows in my productions, and it's something I'm very proud of. If I could choose any small legacy to spread, it would be that one!

I would also want every performing arts degree to require a year of production team training, stage management, writing, everything that isn't acting. No part of theatre production is easy or unimportant, and no theatre production is successful without a small army of passionate, dedicated eccentrics. Theatre is the ultimate team sport.

I would also want every performing arts degree to end with a semester of contract law and grant writing so artists can better advocate for themselves!

How can our readers further follow you online?

They can follow me on Instagram @fairlith or visit fairlith.com or the website for my newest show "The Last Resort" at thelastresortvancouver.com

Thank you for the time you spent sharing these fantastic insights. We wish

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Vanessa is a writer, entrepreneur, inventor, and songwriter. She is the founder of Enseio, Catapult Technologies, Higher Hill Studios and Higher Hill Travel.



What are your thoughts?

A smiling woman with glasses and a blue jacket stands in front of a building with a 'TASK FORCE' sign. The jacket has a 'MAGNET' logo on the left chest.



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