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**Javaad Alipoor – curator of the Achates Philanthropy Foundation’s first virtual Symposium**

**Keynote Lecture: *All that’s been revealed*…**

**17 November 2021**

In developing the theme for this Symposium, *All that’s been revealed…* I wanted to offer a space to pause and consider what we have learnt during the last two years and then how we might ensure that we apply it. I want to suggest to you that we are at a fundamental moment of rupture in the cultural sector, which relates to the cataclysmic shifts going on in wider society, and that we have a unique moment of opportunity to recognise this and to make a change. What has been revealed are, of course, fundamental truths which were with us before the pandemic, but which we had managed to hide in the structures of our daily lives. I also want to make a call to arms: a call to arms for fresh thinking and fresh approaches to how we might operate as a sector. I am going to speak a little about my work and my company, and why and how we do the work that we do. I want to lay out ab argument which I think points to the future- for our sector itself and for what role we have to play socially. Fundamentally, I want to talk a little about why I think that as artists and leaders our work should be ideas led- and what I think that means for the challenges we face today.

My company,The Javaad Alipoor Company is one of a growing number of arts organisations to develop a manifesto. T we had to begin with a space that could be led by ideas. This is because a lot of the structures that we operate within – as artists, as arts organisations and as arts leaders – are structures that we have inherited from a specific past. So, often when we talk, for example, about the artistic policy of a theatre or a venue we are talking about something that grows from the tradition that they’re operating within. That’s an infrastructure that’s been left over; it’s a historic framework within which the organisation is doing its work. I think the really strong thing about writing the manifesto is that it’s taking a bit of a step away from that historical context and stating: this is what we think is going on in the world, this is what we want to achieve with our work, and this is what our real principles and commitments are. It allows you to lay out a sense of vision and a sense of responsibility and a sense of where you want to go in a way that feels different to the commercial pressures or funding pressures, and it allows the ideas that are driving the work you’re doing to take the wheel instead.

And I think that it is really important that ideas are in the driving seat right now for, for a number of reasons. First, that heritage I spoke of and that we operate within is collapsing all around us. Now, if you don’t examine that heritage, you’re going to carry on doing the same thing you’ve always done. And we cannot carry on doing what we’ve already done now. That’s not just me being edgy. This is objectively true on a number of levels. I don’t need to go into the economic and financial challenges we face. Still less the climate crisis. There's a very strong argument that COVID can be described as part of anthropogenic climate change – climate change caused by us human beings – both at a macro, and also at the more finely grained policy level – that the reality of the situation is that large sections of our communities are getting poorer. And at the same time, our institutions are getting poorer, by any measure in real terms. Since 2010, everyone's budgets have been cut. So in effect, as resources get tighter, as more and more pressures come to bear, if you keep doing what you're doing, you're going to keep doing it for less returns. So even if you want to keep doing the traditional thing that you’ve always done, you need to articulate why that's important and fight for it. Things just can't carry on as they were.

The second reason that we need to break from the models and ideas we have inherited is the political context we sit in as artists and creatives. Broadly speaking, in European countries we have a model of how art works where a certain kind of artistic visionary is privileged and empowered by a combination of state funding and various other forces. It’s a sort of combination of John Berger’s reading of the post-romantic artist as a secularised priest, and the post-war social-democratic idea of art as a social good that needs to be shared, redistributed, from those who have it to those who don’t. Clearly, the context of the second part of this – that liberal, social-democratic post-war infrastructure – is on the point of collapse. There are all kinds of other things rupturing through.

Such ruptures, and the ability of artists to surf them or help to shape them have defined some of the most important moments in the history of British theatre. I’ll give two very obvious examples. If you think about the major changes that occurred at the end of the Second World War, such as access to higher education for working-class kids, enabled by the 1944 Education Act, this led to the period of Kitchen Sink realism and the so-called Angry Young Men that meant that the voices of the working classes were finally heard, changing British theatre for ever. And, here’s the second example, it’s not coincidental that theatres like the Manchester Royal Exchange and Sheffield Crucible and Citizens Theatre in Glasgow were at their most radical during the 1970s, the same decade that saw punk rock, and the miners bring down a government. But right now, there is no large scale emancipatory, radical political movement breaking through, certainly not in England. Quite the opposite. Which means that rather than surfing and shaping waves, we need to carve out a specific space where we can put ideas, principles, and vision first. This is one of the ways we try to use our manifesto.

I think the space for the ideas we are trying to build has to be political. As we say in the manifesto, it is also important that everything that the company makes speaks directly to contemporary politics. I happened to be a political artist, but I think fundamentally almost all is political- and that art has a special role to play in politics and society.

When I was a kid, I always wanted to be in a band, and like a lot of kids of my age one of my big loves was the band Rage against the Machine. In an interview with Tom Morello, the guitar player, the interviewer said, ’You never write, you never write love songs?’. And he said, ‘The thing is, love songs can be good, but a great song should make you want to burn down a police station.’ That experience has been mediated by a lot of other experiences, but the viscerality of art’s relationship to politics and politics’ responsibility stays with me. I’m not drawn to that Agit Prop model anymore, but that sixteen-year-old who wants to be Tom Morello has given way to someone who still feels that pressure to tell a kind of truth artistically that it’s impossible to tell any other way. I think our job, as artists, is to take challenges that we usually come across intellectually and connect them to the hearts and guts of our audiences.

A political artistic practice brings a certain lens, and a certain way of thinking that has throughout modernity had a really crucial relationship to politics; in many ways they are the same thing but refracted through different lenses. And I think this particular lens can help to problematize and undo some of the sterility and cliché of contemporary politics. The French philosopher, Alain Badiou, talks about how both politics and art are different ways of trying to tell the truth: you can think about genuinely emancipatory politics, he argues, as an attempt to mobilise the truth in a certain way. And as an artist you're always trying to mobilise the truth. The thing that art is really good at doing is looking at things askance. I think this comes from its having a sense of ‘form’ as well as ‘content’. That means artistic work is well placed to explore the form of things rather than the context of things. And after all, it’s in the form of a social structure, or a mental state, that we can describe shared properties – it’s the magic place where the complicity between the subjective and the objective is seen. And also, if you like, the complicity between the head and the heart. That’s why I think art is at its most contemporary when the hard distinction between audience and artist is made more permeable – because that echoes, productively, all those layers of interaction and complicity I’m talking about. After all, the real social context of the increasingly dominant way in which people express their politics in the UK and the global north; whether, ‘social justice identity politics’ on the left, or the brutal rise of majoritarian ‘identity politics’ on the insurgent right is the increasing advance of digital technology. Social media, double screening, shouting into the Twitter void during question time – all these are ways that our present political and social reality changes the relationship between actor and audience.

As an older millennial I am part of a generation that grew up in the shadow of the Iraq war and was at university in the times of the campaigns against tuition fees; exactly the same kind of people who have been mobilised by the SNP successes in Scotland, or excited by Jeremy Corbyn. For me, as an individual, I come from a generation where everything is political because we grew up at a time when the Blair / Clinton vision of the world was falling apart, when ‘the end of history’ had definitely ended

At the same time, we are living through a moment where a lot of people talk about there being a renaissance of political art and in particular political theatre. And whilst there is a tremendous amount of work which is inspiring, there is always a concern for me that this political theatre also needs to be of quality artistically. And the distinction in the quality of work is specifically about the relationship between those the two modes of truth. Theatre has to look at a question askance to be successful. There's always a challenge when, for artists, their art is their politics, because what then tends to happen is you end up with work that can be quite didactic – where the distinction between art and politics has been collapsed and if you're trying to convince someone of the truth of something, curating an exhibition or putting on a show is an incredibly inefficient way of doing that. There is a role for art in exploring deadlocks and exploring problems. Having a manifesto helps us bypass this problem- as it lays out the politics outside of our artistic work that we are trying to shape and respond to.

As I write this, I am in the very early stages of making a new show and talking with my collaborators. We make no bones about being an ideas-driven company, we are ideas-driven artists. Where the work might start to be generative and productive is when we say, there's a deadlock here. When there is a thing that we can't unravel, when there's a contradiction, a deadlock that we can't talk our way out of. Ideas on their own are simply less generative. For example, the show explores ideas about refugees. And of course, as a refugee, or a minority of colour, one has less privilege than many in this society, so one is more likely to be the subject of political violence. Well, we know that, of course, because it is the job of really good journalists to expose that in detail. It's not the job of artists to shout at people about it. Our job is different – it’s to explore why we feel stuck in stories like this – why we see what happens in the world but can’t seem to do anything about it. In a way, our job is to show how something like the treatment of refugees, which might feel terrifying but far away to white people, or me as the mixed race descendant of refugees or settled minority communities, say, is actually bound up with the thousands of thoughts and decisions we go through every day.

So it seems important to point out that when I say our work and ideas have to be political I don’t mean any of that pedagogically. And not least because I'm not sure how much cleverer I am than the people who come to see my work.

As artists, one of the things we're able to do is to hold contradictions in a way that other kinds of intellectual and emotional human practices aren't able to do. We live in a world that has seen Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump, that is post-truth, and fundamentally fractured, and so on. And as a result we end up with quite an arid discussion, where there is on the one hand contempt for some factors that have led to this situation, and on the other a very simplistic, idea that things are just capital ‘T’, true. And what gets lost in the middle of all that is the idea that things can be true in different ways. The recovering philosophy student in me wants to say that, you know, it's true that I love my mother. It's also true that this table is made of subatomic particles. It’s also true that it’s solid wood. All these things are true ­in incredibly different ways.

And this idea of what art is for and what it can do is important because we live in a moment when culture wars are being fought. It is also important to understand that this is not a particularly new thing; it's a new iteration of something that's been happening since the 1960s, if not before. If you think about how the UK has changed, and in almost every respect it's changed for the better, you can think of culture wars as being at the heart of that change. I think the iconic example was in the run-up to Thatcher being elected in 1979, when we saw the rise of musical forms like ska and punk and the associated youth culture in the face of a reality that we look back on more nostalgically now: of David Bowie making a Nazi salute and Eric Clapton making a racist speech. We may have forgotten that about Bowie and someone of my age might find Eric Clapton laughable today, but in that moment it mattered immensely. There were bands that were coming through which were using racist messaging and pushing a certain idea of what British culture meant which led to there being a very concerted series of campaigns largely led by the anti-Nazi league and Rock Against Racism, with bands like The Specials and Sham 69. Bands who were prepared to go on stage and say, that’s not cool. That definitely seems like a culture war to me, in the sense of a war over the basic meaning of the basic coordinates of culture; who pop music is for, what being young and rebellious means. And these have even more important corollaries, what kind of thing is freedom, is it the freedom to offend minorities or is it the freedom of a young kid of colour to not be harassed by the police? What kind of thing does England mean? and so on.

At the same time, the terrain of the culture war in no way reflects the reality of the situation of this country demographically. There still is, by almost any measure, a numerical majority for something like social liberalism in the UK, but we toil under an incredibly outdated and laughable electoral system, which means that a majority is never, ever delivered on. There are basically two demographic tilts at work. Younger people who receive a higher education tend to end up socially liberal. OIder people without that higher education, especially when they own homes, tend to be more conservative. Which is why we see a revanchist conservatism able to advance in places like Durham and Middlesbrough – whilst once Tory suburbs outside places like Manchester and London more and more have the values of the big left-liberal cities. In the context of a first past the post electoral system, however, this isn’t anything like a fair race. There are many more constituencies that are like Middlesbrough South than are like Stockport or St Albans.

 This means that we end up with a situation in which people like Stormzy and other grime music artists, largely black artists from big cities, can transform what contemporary English music sounds like, but we also have a political establishment that seems to be from another decade in its views on art, diversity and so on. In weight of numbers, the majority of this country is like London or Manchester or Sheffield or Leeds or Newcastle or Liverpool. And my frustration with that is, unlike the 1970s moment I described, we just haven't been fighting the culture war, we’ve just given more and more ground. The idea that bigotry and racism are views that need to be understood, that it’s the truly oppressed ‘left behind’ whites who need to be empowered, and that ‘optimism’ about the nature and history of this country, is a virtue is weirdly uncontested, especially head on by most of our artists, artistic organisations and cultural organisations.

When I talk about the ideas of the liberal left, I’m pointing to a hugely broad scope of people. And it includes, very upper middle-class, white liberals, all the way through to the inner-city, labour-voting, multi-ethnic working class. One of the challenges is, I think, in the responses of some of the most privileged sections of those groups, because I sense that some of them would rather give ground to ideas that on one level, they find repugnant, rather than deepen their sense of commitment and responsibility to and solidarity with more working-class, more multi-ethnic people.

In terms of Brexit, broadly speaking, a simple majority of people who voted for ‘remain’ think that feminism, ecology and the internet are good things. A simple majority of people who voted for Brexit think that feminism, ecology and the internet are broadly bad things. So there's a social attitude difference there, obviously. The liberal left in culture is, broadly speaking, people who think liberal freedoms are a good thing; that women should have more equal status in society, there should be more diversity generally, that capital punishment is a bad thing. But one of the things that's happened in the past few years is that there's pressure from the right to redefine ‘diversity’ to mean diversity of thought. So the idea goes, ‘Oh, you all talk about diversity, but actually, you might be Turkish from Tottenham or Pakistani from Bradford, but you all think the same thing so your diversity of views can all be represented as one.’ This is clearly nonsense. Apart from anything else, your commitment to say, immigration as a social positive is, by definition, much more existential. But what this idea of ‘diversity thought’ does is really articulate England as a country where there are only two kinds of people, one of whom is a white person with a decent university degree who goes on European holidays, and has some foreign friends, the other of whom is a white person without a university degree. He lives in Stoke and is quite angry. But the thing is, both these ideas are the ideas of white people. I'm saying that there is a working-class, very ethnically mixed constituency of people that just doesn't figure in that narrative. So one of the problems with that, is that the culture war aims to whiten people of colour. I sometimes feel like my job with white liberals is to hold their feet to the fire. If you're a white liberal, I want you to come down on the liberal side of that, not the white side.

So I think one of the reasons that the liberal left gives so much ground, is that the people who are in the positions of leadership are not the ones with the most to lose. They tend to be the upper middle-class and higher whites. At the same time, they have less experience of actively fighting to defend their rights. They have had to do so less. Is it any wonder then that such people cave when a policeman tells them a play they have commissioned is likely to ‘radicalise’ young muslims or when a certain kind of right-wing journalist comes for them on culture-war grounds. At the end of the day, the way in which immigration is being talked about might be offensive and upset you if you're a white upper middle-class liberal, but – without being too histrionic about it – it is borderline life and death if you are an Afghan in London who is wondering if your family is going to be able to come over. Yeah, it is, in fact, life and death to me.

None of this is to hammer people, or to ask people abstractly to ‘check their privilege’. It’s to say that the actual lived diversity of the voices we bring together is important and that some of the political virtues we have largely taken for granted are under threat. It’s to reiterate that we need to find a space in which we can be really honest with each other- and put our ideas together clearly.

The fact that certainties of the 20th century are gone, should not just encourage us to think about the future but also to consider the older ideas. The philosopher John Locke's theory of liberty differentiates freedom and liberty and whilst freedom primarily concerns expression of free will, liberty requires responsible use of freedom without impinging on the freedom of others. In the cultural sector, I don't think we are thoughtful enough about what we actually want. And I think you can see that working in a number of different ways. For instance, if you think about the #MeToo movement, clearly practical changes have actually happened in the world: Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey are gone, other less well-known abusers also. However, has it led to a big cultural change? I don't think so. Not all the way down. And I think part of the reason for that is because there's not been any space in which the women who have been at the heart of that movement have been put in a position to articulate exactly what the change they want to see looks like. And this is because that's not an easy thing to do. So clearly, there is the need to address issues of sexual assault and sexual violence. Obviously, what we know is that sexual assault and sexual violence are very problematic in terms of criminal justice more broadly. And the classic feminist argument about rape goes like well, obviously, as a liberal, you do think that everyone should be perceived as innocent, until they're proven guilty. The problem is that, in actual practice, prosecuting rapists often comes down to this person says this, that person says that, which is structurally a position that works against women in this situation. And so it's a fundamental problem that comes from the intersection of patriarchal violence and liberalism. Some people's behaviour has been called out and that's led to their career being ended, quite rightly. But in other cases, alleged abusers have carried on as before, after a little bump in their reputational road.

The thing is it’s very difficult to actually improve this situation without some really fundamental arguments. How should people be punished? In principle, if it's possible for people to make amends, how should they make amends? What are the exact sort of changes that would empower women to not have to be in that situation in the future, and that kind of finely grained thinking hasn't happened yet. Looked at from the perspective of race, I think we can get into a situation where there is a slightly histrionic quality to the discussion where people are trying to tell you what being an active anti-racist means. And what you never get any space for is the finely grained analysis of how race as a concept actually operates in the UK.

So what's interesting about the question of rights and responsibilities is that it lets us do a bit more finely grained thinking about what change would actually look like, as opposed to the sometimes quite histrionic idea that we already know what the right thing is. And we're calling other people out, instead of doing it. The terrible thing is that in terms of the culture war the people who are on the more progressive side of politics just keep losing; that's just generally true. And as they keep losing, we're still getting punched in the face. There's like an old iron law about these things: when you are winning it’s easy to be united, when you're losing it’s easy to be fractious. And so we end up with a kind of politics where – and here I do sort of agree with some right-wing commentators – there is a sort of urge to purity. We can't control anything outside of this space – we have no cut-through to that – but what we can do is, more and more ruthlessly, police some idea of purity within the space. And I think that the thing that excites me about the idea about rights, or the kind of Lockean position, is that it maybe refers outside of that a little bit. Of course, the kind of post-colonial thinker in me would want to say that it is not coincidental that Locke's theory of rights is developed around about the same time that the British colonies in the Americas and it does a little bit of lifting for you in terms of how and why.

I spoke of a broad group of people from the upper middle class liberals to more working class left people of colour. I am speaking to you today, partially from the vantage point of someone who come from the parts of the world that were on the receiving end of the European colonialism and Imperialism. I’m also lucky enough to count amongst my closest friends and colleagues some of the people of colour who have done most to reshape the landscape of British theatre and culture. So it would be amiss of me not to point out that there are historical limits to this discourse of rights. Apart from anything else, the role of Locke’s theory of property rights, and its entanglement in the colonial genocide of native Americans and the transatlantic slave trade are well documented.

So in a sense, there has to be something more radical to say about race and the heritage of empire. There can’t be any alliance built across those groups of people without reconning with that. Like a lot of people recently I have been re reading Franz Fanon’s work, and its struck me more and more how one of the cores of his work is a radical testament of something which I think can be taking as a really vital supplement to this idea- certainly something that we try and think through in our manifesto. Fanon says words to the effect that rebellion or resistance doesn’t come in the name of a specific culture, but from the urge to breathe freely. This isn’t someone asking to have their equality recognised form a position of weakness but making an existential commitment to carve some space for themselves.. Nietzsche, who Fanon engages with deeply throughout his career said “no one is more inferior than those who insist on their equality”. You say a great moment of this when Donald Trump was taking offense at the New York Times coverage of him in comparison with Barack Obama, and he said something like “they have to respect me, I’m a president too”. In our manifesto we talk about how Rachid Taha, the great Algerian Rai rebel covered The Clash’s Rock The Casbah, sublated its orientalist cliché into something much greater, and then used to tell a story about how Joe Strummer had actually stolen the song from him. I think those of who face specific forms of oppression change the world the most when we claim space and show who we are, and make people follow us.

And I think the intersection of these two ideas can open up the increasingly arid discussion about so co called cancel culture in art. We twist ourselves up about this. But the reality is that if we engage with working class life outside our sector- we how people who face particular kinds of oppression engage with offensive things that punch down at them. I remember once being in a theatre during a sharing of work in progress by a clown company which was exploring how children in the Third World are oppressed through making children's toys at Christmas. There are two characters. The first is a white guy playing Father Christmas. The second is a white guy playing an Indian, and the white guy playing the Indian character comes out wearing what I imagine is supposed to be a longi, made out of a shower curtain, some kind of ridiculous turban and mud smeared on his face. Now, that’s in central Manchester, so for me the question is simple – do that outside and see what happens. Equally, there's some simple stuff in terms of how women are treated, like the sleaziness of certain directors. Just take it outside of theatre to a street with an Asian community in Bradford or Birmingham and see how far that gets you. For me we lose our way when we talk about safe spaces and cancel culture. It’s a kind of a bizarre perversion that's come about through all of the ingrained privileges and hierarchies that we're talking about. For me that’s the litmus test, take it to the pub and Bradford and see what happens.

For me, it’s not cancel culture which is a real political problem but ‘agreement culture’. Something which I think is promoted on social media, amongst other forums. I'm struck by a certain kind of discussion in which it's almost impossible to really disagree with someone. So you know, you'll be having a discussion with someone about state of world politics or whatever and I'm struck by the idea that one of the ways a lot of that discussion works is everyone's agreeing with each other all the time. It's a very difficult to say I think a different thing to you. It’s often a case of people saying, I'm not disagreeing with you, or you've misunderstood what I've said, because agreement culture is clearly the way that the algorithm works; the algorithms of the internet work dig deeper into things that you were interested in the first place. Generally, what doesn't happen with the internet is a sense of surprise that you're into something that you didn't know, before. It can get you more and more neatly into stuff. And can be beautiful. But it can also just mean more and more close agreement with fewer and fewer people. And then you do see, for instance, a practical way in which that erodes people's ability to fight for the politics that they want.

It’s so important that young artists in particular can clearly articulate their own politics. It has to be more than ‘I'm outraged that you don't already agree with me’. The problem with being outraged is that it is merely stating that you don't agree and it just doesn't cut through, and on that basis we’re never going to win. And the whole point of politics is to change the world. So that doesn't really make any sense. I think there's a combination of things at work: the logic of social media, which is about agreement more than it's about disagreement. This is combined with the certain factors which are symptomatic of current radical left liberal politics.

These are a politics and discourse which are historically derived, from a certain kind of American campus college radicalism and radical American academia. Take for instance the idea of intersectionalism – which is an incredibly important tool of analysis and also a moment of intellectual history which comes from a specific place – namely radical African-American jurisprudence. But which is not used as a sort of broad metaphor to mean someone who thinks about different axes of oppression. Now there must be a specific genealogy to the way that idea became internationalised and, to be honest, shorn of meaning. But for the contemporary left, adherence to it performatively seems more important than that finely grained thinking.

Combined with more undergraduate activist ideas about ‘looking after yourself’ and ‘self care’, a sort of general commitment to equality means that if people aren't immediately agreeing with you, it's incumbent upon you almost politically and morally to remove yourself from that space. But of course that's literally not how you change the world. That's the opposite of how you change the world. And it's uncomfortable to do that in the context of social media that is looking for agreement.

What I’ve tried to lay out here is how some of the experiences of founding my company, might be of use to the rest of our sector. First and foremost, that’s about being honest that to coin the cliché there isn’t a normal that we can build on, our heritage models are delivering decreasing returns and that we are free, like we are in the studio or rehearsal room, to invent however we want. That’s our responsibility. At the same time this freedom and this dizzying sense of responsibility and possibility means that we need to find a way to be explicit about what we are doing and why. This doesn’t mean we have to be didactic. In fact, the opposite. Whether it’s my company’s manifesto, or the one written by Milo Rau for NT Gent, these ideas, like the work we make, stand in a varied and you might say fractal relationship to the political and social context we operate in.

Leading on from this, I think we have to think about what the role of art is in this moment. I think that’s about having a slightly different relationship to truth, a different model, than the reductive debate between a radical ‘post truth’ subjectivism and the restatement of there being one objective truth.

And obviously, the political stakes of this moment are incredibly high. On the one hand, we need to be clear sighted about the real coalition of people who share the basic ideas within which the equity, freedom and diversity necessary to reimagine work depends on. On the other, we need to hold ourselves to a higher standard. We need the most privileged sections to be clear about what side they are on, and to open the way for those of us from other backgrounds. The middle-class fuzziness that doesn’t recognise racism when it dresses up in brown face, or takes the most socially backward elements as somehow constitutive of the most socially oppressed people, doesn’t help anyone. And neither does the importation of what once was finely grained social analysis – intersectionalism – and its universalisation as a principle which divides ‘us’ from ‘them’.

Ultimately, I’m struck by the fact that there are fewer and fewer and spaces in our sector where we are able to ask ourselves fundamental questions; about the world we want and the future we envisage. On a very practical level things cannot carry on as they have been doing. There is a freedom to that. And a responsibility to put ideas first- to test them and rethink them. There is no guarantee that there have to be theatres, galleries or arts spaces in twenty-five years time. We need to ask ourselves why we do what we do, who we do it for, and fundamentally who will be stood where I am, in ten or twenty years’ time?