Failure Theatre: An Artist’s Statement

By

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Abstract

*Failure Theatre: An Artist’s Statement,* is an invitation to a rumination on failure. The project is divided into four discreet offers that combine together to form a portrait of failure. A full play text, a manifesto and a choreographed response to research as well as an Artist Statement merge into a pastiche that sheds light on failure’s possible position(s) within the Canadian theatrical milieu. Basing the overall approach on work by Judith Halberstam, Sara Ahmed, Ann Bogart plus several other Feminist, Queer and Performance authors, this thesis examines failure as a force for resistance and change.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Natalie Rewa, for the constant guidance and insight so freely offered, for her rigour and for her pursuit of excellence in all manner of investigation.

I wish to dedicate this MA to my mother, Anne Seymour Raynsford Stanley, who passed away March 23, 2012 and to my father James Paul Stanley who remains a constant inspiration.

I want to acknowledge Anne Hardcastle who was my first drama professor at Queen’s, without her encouragement and brilliance none of it would have been possible.

Finally I would like to thank the theatre for giving me a home. I am forever grateful.
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* The Manifesto is included here with the permission of Laura Levin, Managing editor of CTR
** An Archival Video of the performance of *the Failure Show or: a 13-point manifesto for the consideration of failure* was made available for the defence and can be accessed by contacting me directly at sarahgartonstanley@gmail.com
Chapter 1: Introduction

When I write I am trying to express my way of being in the world. This is primarily a process of elimination: once you have removed all the dead language, the second-hand dogma, the truths that are not your own but other people’s, the mottos, the slogans, the out-and-out lies of your nation, the myths of your historical moment – once you have removed all that warps experience into a shape you do not recognise and do not believe in – what you are left with is something approximating the truth of your own conception.


The above quote was taken from an article entitled “Fail Better”. I trust it will stand as worthy sentry to the approach I have taken with this submission. Herein I have fulfilled the various requirements laid out by the department and my supervisor, but as well, I felt a certain urgency to include with these document a few additional pieces. I was charged with including my manifesto, a DVD of my show, and an artist statement. All three are found herein. But I have also included the script for the show and the choreography of my failure dance.

First play-itis. That is what we, in the theatre world, call it. It is the affliction whereby the new playwright wants to get every idea into their first play. There is a whiff of this here and for this I apologize. I have endeavoured to calibrate it by the divisions. This submission documents the realization of the Major Project Option for my MA requirement in Cultural Studies at Queen’s University.
Chapter 2: Manifesto

Failure Points

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Failure Points
by Sarah Garton Stanley

I am good at failure but I would like to be better. Please do not misunderstand: I am not suggesting that I generally believe myself to be a failure. But it is possible that as a director (and consequently as a human), my chief interest lies in an examination of failure. My creation and rehearsal process includes failure, and to the detriment of my professional success, may well be led by it too. I am inextricably linked to the following question: How far can I go before hitting the failure point? And having hit it, will I know it? And why am I thusly intrigued? Because truth, for me, lives here. This failure point is one of the two sacred gateways. The fact of my birth remains mysterious to me and the inevitability of my death equally so. I exist between these two points. Just like the moment. Being in the moment is the free space won on the battlefield between success and failure. And this, to me, sounds like the essence of truly great theatre.

Failure is, I think, a case of degrees and time. In coarse terms this means: how far off the mark was it? And how long after “it” occurred, will it be legible as a failure? And when, after this, can it be recycled as a necessary stepping stone to success?

Success gets a party. Failure gets to hear about the party from the silence that erupts when she walks into the room. There is laughter in failure, after the fact, far into the future. Failure is impatient to get the laughter starting closer to the moment. Success gets a party, it’s time to give failure a wake.

A Thirteen-point Manifesto for the Consideration of Failure

1. **Failure is a metaphor.** Be it resolved that *actual* failure—like *actual* success—does not exist. Failure is the shadow on the thing. Success is too. The major
difference is that success gets a party. While failure is simply one of the strongest agents for change the universe has to offer.

2. **You are a failure.** You will never be as good as you can be. Ever. You have therefore already failed before you even begin to try. You are a failure. Of this you can be absolutely certain. Which will leave you feeling successful for a brief instant … the instant before understanding the perniciousness of this particular lie … a lie told to self as you stand perfectly poised between two points … all before taking a direct route back to failure. In other words, success is the straightest route to failure. So if you are not a failure in this minute you may well be in the next, or you might have been in the last. In between, a seat belt is recommended.

3. **Failure is beautiful.** One of the best moments of an otherwise uninspiring show was when one of the English language’s finest living actresses was beset by a tickle in her throat. A clearing … No, not enough … An outright coughing … Then … Poised … A sip … then another … of water. An entire audience held rapturously in the *failure of this moment* to suspend our dulled loyalty to the doldrums of disbelief. What a moment! She coughed! Life! I would pay top dollar to see that again. But not the show that surrounded it. No, not the show.

*Photo by Bertrandb. www.dreamstime.com*
4. **Failure is like gravity.** It exists. There is no way to disprove its existence. My crystal goblet falling from my hand will never not fall. Whether or not it smashes into a million shards is completely dependent on the other factors that make up moments of life. Failure is inevitable but it won’t happen in all instances. But like gravity it will happen, and this is neither good nor bad. The results of the falling glass are—however—inflected. And this is where failure departs from gravity. To steal from Miller, gravity exists already but failure comes *After the Fall.*

5. **Failure is for sharing.** Unless you wish to end up unproductive and alone with your ideas, I suggest you tell all to those who will listen …
about the details of your thinking. Failure must be shared. This is an imperative. Spare no information in the telling. And always endeavour to tell the person you would least want to tell. In the first instance, what a gift! Your nemesis (for you are certain you are speaking to your nemesis) receives the extraordinary gift of your recent (or future) fiasco, while you get to rid yourself of your biggest fear: that your nemesis and carbon copies of said nemesis will find out.

6. **Failure hurts.** If it doesn’t, try harder. There is nobility in failing but you won’t get to feel it. Or if you do then you really aren’t failing. Failing requires incredible determination. It demands all of you. There can be no room left for anything else. If you are reading this, having thought you had failed, and thinking, “it didn’t really hurt that much” well, you haven’t actually failed yet … Lucky you! You still get to feel it for the first time! Once felt … I can assure you that it is an experience you really cannot wait to look back on. It is rear-view mirror learning at its very best.

7. **Failure is mistaking a mole-hill for a mountain.** Don’t set the bar too low. Please don’t make this mistake. The problem with this one is that failure is felt by degrees and having failed without having sought to try is one of the most demoralizing and possibly least productive parts of failure. It is closer to depression than failure and this makes action difficult. Look for very high mountains to climb.

8. **Fear of failure metastasizes.** Actual failure happens one incident at a time. Failure is so much easier than what we think it is. Be it resolved that which scares us the most will prove to be one of our greatest teachers. Be it further resolved that failure is terrifying. And further to this that the fear of the terror is worse than failure. In fact failure in this instance is the cure.

9. **Failure is both it and its opposite.** Sustaining anything is impossible. (Even a fixed idea of failure.) It is also a mark of great success. Choose failure. It will allow you to be in sync with the universe. When that chunk of civic engineering—say some bridge cement—suddenly (after thirty plus years) fails, you could be the first to think
about what might be the best thing to do now, rather than trying to figure out what went wrong then. The world shifts, we spin on an axis. Failure gets this.

10. **Failure feeds on certainty.** We can’t help but wish to know, and yet as soon as we do, we die a little more. Being lost only feels good if you know you will be found. But not knowing you are lost means you are not waiting to be found, and this is where the real magic lives! Walking out into the middle of nothing, braving placing yourself in the opening shot of *No Country For Old Men*, and in so doing, just walking out into the vast openness of the unknowable desert, why not? The fear of walking out, the fear of not knowing—failure lives here. What’s to know? Everything! But we never can! So what are we going to do? Failure feeds on certainty. So ignore the reality of uncertainty, and you will have succeeded at failing. There is success in this. But if you choose failure it will get you from here to somewhere else. And it may give you the odd sensation of failing at failure.

11. **Failure is a contagious dis-ease.** This is a good thing as it tells us to do
something different. But it is also difficult when you are looking to collaborate. Failure is part of the collaborative milieu and it will infect you. But in the manner in which a vaccine protects you against, say, polio, it also makes you feel a little symptomatic while your body adjusts. So too it is with the taint of failure. Make friends with the dis-ease. Lean into the failure. It is simply an agent, it is not a fact.

12. **Failure will change your life.** Who doesn’t crave that? In loss comes gain. It is like a clearing-house. Emptying the picture frame of what the future holds allows the most thrilling creative acts. Imagine letting go of the result, sitting in the nausea of the unknown. Why? Because risking the failure is a life-affirming action. You will fail. But the next thing you do will be to succeed.

13. **I usually don’t know.** The “beautiful/ugly” of failure is that it is not ours to know. In the way that love is supposedly ours if it returns after the “set-free,” the same might be true of failure (of course without the celebratory feelings). One’s own failure may act as a gift of sorts, as it points others away from it, onward in the journey toward possible success. This might mean that failure is the leader that others can follow away from. But like I say: I usually don’t know.

*Illustration by Ruslan Kokarev. www.dreamstime.com*
Chapter 3: Play Text

The Failure Show: or a 13-point manifesto for the consideration of failure
By: Sarah Garton Stanley

Performed February 8-12, 2012 at the Rhubarb Festival, Buddies in Bad Times, Toronto

The Failure Show was directed by Michael Rubenfeld and Video was designed and executed by David Hanes. Michael Rubenfeld did the sound design.

Michael stands at the door as the house opens. He is holding a bucket and asks the audience to put their failure into it as they enter the space.

(There is a table on the stage with a chair behind it. On the table, some papers and a desk lamp. Next to the table is a green garbage bag on the floor)

A projection: The Failure Show slow scroll to M83 “Where Boats Go”. “Failure” enters in silhouette while the music plays and crosses from SL to SR. Just before I start to speak ACT 1 is projected. The lights go to black and the song ends.

In the darkness and over a microphone.

Failure:
Welcome to the land of Broken Dreams. Thanks for coming. Welcome to my home. Welcome to Failure.

It’s got me thinking about Detroit during its high times. Its before the fall times was referred to as the Paris of the West. The wide boulevards, the stunning architecture still there now only in ruins. Detroit where the weak are killed or eaten. This was a popular t-shirt in Detroit. And Arson a popular sport. In the 1970’s the mayor of Detroit said that “to a unique degree, Detroit had buildings to burn." This could be seen as a one off for down in the dumps Detroit but it is also historic. In 1805 the city was also flattened by fire. Is Detroit always on fire? I talked to a woman in Detroit who said “you know I love it here and whenever I go away I get homesick to be home this is a great place to live” We return to places of comfort - even in ruins. And that is precisely how I feel about failure. We fall back to the ground. We go to what we know. And by we I guess I mean me as I cannot speak for you but I like everybody else does this all the time. Because this is just what we - I - have been taught to do. So I fall back to the ground and roil around in failure because it feels good.

I was so worried that no one would show up tonight. And I was so worried that someone would! Hello????
So. Why have you come? What can I do for you? Because I do want to be able to do something for you and - culturally speaking – if you will permit me to speak in this way- I can tell you that I live in fear that I will be incapable of so doing. Failure, afraid of failing you.

I mean what will they say you say about the taxes you pay? Because love me or not, get from me or not, your tax payer’s dollars are going to pay for this – The Failure Show

(The lights come on and dance music blasts as she strips naked and dances in front of the audience pointing to the failure branding written in sharpie all over her body. AS the music cuts out and the lights fade we watch her replace her clothing again. The lights go to black)

Failure:

And that my friends, is what we call “show business”.

You are all here and I am too. You have taken the trip into Failure. Why? Are you taking one for the team? Being Brave? Offering up a kind of cosmic hug? But for the grace of god go I? Hoping for a laugh?

How’s this? Success is 99% failure.

But seriously! Why? To see what it looks like? To watch it happen to someone else? Well the lights were on. You saw. Schadenfreude City? Epicfail.com? Is that why you came? Like going to a strip club? Watching someone else take it all off for you? And then…You get to leave me here and go on home? I am okay with that – by the way – I would love to take your failure and tie it up in a bow and hold onto it for any and all of you. I would love to do that. I love your failure.

She picks up the bucket of failure that was placed DSL and hugs it to herself.

Failure:

(To the booth) So let’s vote for turning the power back on in Failure! Can you turn the lights back on?

(To the audience) See! The lights still work! It is just a show after all. None of this is real. And Failure is apparently just a state of mind. The lights will keep on working – right? Why wouldn’t they?

(“Failure” goes and sits behind a big large rectangular table and turns on the desk lamp She notices that the light did not come on. She tries again. No luck. She unscrews the light bulb and She pulls out another one and screws it in)

Failure:

I really hope you liked the show. In fact I hope you loved it.
These light bulbs make like so much less than .01% difference to overall carbon emissions. It is—so far—the only campaign in Canada that has really been successful in the fight against the end of the planet. I am given to exaggeration. Occupational Hazard. I always feel my stories failing so I add outrageous detail to make them feel more real.

I set out to write a manifesto in order that I might be able to create some steps that you could follow. A path that could help to make it all make sense. A guide that I could give to you. – A take away… A failure take away. An evaluation of the importance of failure. Because if it is inevitable then it is probably worth seeing if it has any purchase before spitting on it, hiding it, kicking it, scorning it, fearing it…I mean that kind of response is so done already! So this is something new

(gets up and perches on the corner of the table lean into the audience)

Failure:

There is a strange thing with Failure in that it feels wasteful to talk about it. Like talking about being queer. Unless you are Quentin Crisp and Warning: He died doing it. Talking about failure feels like coming out – all over again. The giddy excitement then the horrible sadness when you see that life goes on and indifference and discomfort rule. And yet WE KNOW that not talking about anything doesn't work. WE KNOW this. Just ask any queer kid who stopped believing that it could get better. And yet, here we are, just doing the same things with other things. And I think failure is one of those “other things”. Fail Better. Every body cheers. But then you go and do it and—well—fuck—I don’t need to tell you or you or you. It’s a relief that it is NOT you! But unlike being queer—Failure is one thing we all share. We cannot get through life without doing or being a failure. So. Why not shed a little light on the monster? Why not spend a little time looking it in the eye. Why not make a little show? I want the world to know

(The intermission - Diana Ross “I’m coming out” She picks up the green garbage bag and dumps out the toilet paper rolls. She sets up the toilet paper rolls along the front of the table - 13 of them and then goes back to behind her desk - the music stops and projected behind her is ACT 2)

And now Thirteen Point manifesto for the consideration of failure

(She discovers a set of papers on the table and picks them up to read them. Also for each point she will unroll a toilet paper in front of the desk that has its title on the toilet paper roll)

Failure:

1. **You Are a Failure.** You will never be as good as you can be. Ever. You have therefore already failed before you even begin to try. You are a failure. Of this you can be absolutely certain. Which will leave you feeling successful for a brief instant… the instant before understanding the perniciousness of this particular lie…a lie told to
self “success” as you stand perfectly poised between two points... all before taking a direct route back to failure. In other words, success is the straightest route to failure. So if you are not a failure in this minute you may well be in the next, or you might have been in the last. In between, a seat belt is recommended.

Here is the thing. What you need to know. I am a failure, I have been called a failure and I come from failure.

Maybe an upbringing problem. A lack of love problem. Makes me a cold son of a bitch, born into it, my inheritance, unwanted, unplanned. A kind of an end of an era detritus. Garbage. Have you ever really looked at garbage? Spent time in a garbage dump? The birds are pretty as they circle above, the blue sky framing their black and white wings, but it is the stench, the slime, the spew that lives below. Failure is the garbage dump. Because only a little foresight would have indicated to anyone wishing to see that once the idea for a garbage dump starts then the garbage will continue to grow.

So that’s me.

And what about you?

All this “belowness” beneath the “aboveness” of the birds that you see this “belowness” is coming from you, this is what failure looks like. You. I find it beautiful.

Failure:

2. Failure is Beautiful. One of the best moments of an otherwise uninspiring show was when one of the English language’s finest living actresses was beset by a tickle in her throat. A clearing... No, not enough... An outright coughing... Then...Poised... A sip... then another... of water. An entire audience held rapturously in the failure of this moment to suspend our dulled loyalty to the doldrums of disbelief. What a moment! She coughed! Life! I would pay top dollar to see that again. But not the show that surrounded it. No, not the show.

(She coughs and drinks some water)

Failure:

That wasn’t planned. Sorry. That probably looked like it was. I am so suggestible it seems. Failure follows me everywhere.

3. Failure is a metaphor. Be it resolved that actual failure—like actual success— does not exist. Failure is the shadow on the thing. Success is too. The major difference is that success gets a party. While failure is simply one of the strongest agents for change the universe has to offer.
I am going to give you an example if I tell you that I ma going to clap my hands and then I do this we’d call that a success but if I were to say that I was going to clap my hands and did this. You would call that a…? Right! A failure

If on the other hand I say here we don't like it when things connect and I do this (hands don't connect) then it is a success but conversely if I do this (hands connect) it is of course a failure. Same hands different result. So it is with failure and success.

(She gets up to move to point 4 of the manifesto and remembers…)

**Failure:**

Oh one other thing Success feels great but failure gives you something to do

4. **Failure is like gravity.** It exists. There is no way to disprove its existence. My crystal goblet falling from my hand will never not fall. Whether or not it smashes into a million shards is completely dependent on the other factors that make up moments of life. Failure is inevitable but it won’t happen in all instances. But like gravity it will happen, and this is neither good nor bad. The results of the falling glass are—however—inflected. And this is where failure departs from gravity. To steal from Miller, gravity exists already but failure comes After the Fall

(Dropped glass on ground goes to pick it up and puts empty glass back on table)

**Failure:**

Now at this point you might be thinking that this is a total contradiction to what went before. Which is true? I think they both are. Loving failure means loving failure

5. **Failure is for sharing.** Unless you wish to end up unproductive and alone with your ideas, I suggest you tell all to those who will listen… about the details of your thinking. Failure must be shared. This is an imperative. Spare no information in the telling. And always endeavour to tell the person you would least want to tell. In the first instance, what a gift! Your nemesis (for you are certain you are speaking to your nemesis) receives the extraordinary gift of your recent (or future) fiasco, while you get to rid yourself of your biggest fear: that your nemesis and carbon copies of said nemesis will find out.

So again. Thanks for coming. Now you know.

6. **Failure hurts.** If it doesn't, try harder. There is nobility in failing but you won't get to feel it. Or if you do then you really aren't failing. Failing requires incredible determination. It demands all of you. There can be no room left for anything else. If you are hearing this, having thought you had failed, and thinking, "it didn't really hurt that much" well, you haven't actually failed yet... Lucky you! You still get to feel it for the first time! Once felt…I can assure you that it is an experience you really cannot wait to look back on. It is rearview mirror learning at its very best.
I hurt all the time. There are few moments that I don’t find painful. Am I a failure because I hurt all the time? Or do I hurt all the time because I am a failure?

Example. I used to run this place, this theatre, Buddies in Bad Times Theatre but I don’t anymore. I fired myself. Arson. So where’s the failure? Where’s the pain? It is right here. I am failure and I hurt all the time.

I am sorry. So deeply sorry for failing

(PJ Harvey “Written on the Forehead”. The lights dim down low. I sit in the failure until it transforms, I light a lighter, a rock concert attempt, finally I just signal to the booth to cut the music and the lights come back up and I continue on)

Failure:

7. **Failure is mistaking a mole-hill for a mountain.** Don’t set the bar too low. Please don’t make this mistake. The problem with this one is that failure is felt by degrees and having failed without having sought to try is one of the most demoralizing and possibly least productive parts of failure. It is closer to depression than failure and this makes action difficult. Look for very high mountains to climb.

Any questions?

8. **Fear of failure metastasizes.** Actual failure happens one incident at a time. Failure is so much easier than what we think it is. Be it resolved that which scares us the most will prove to be one of our greatest teachers. Be it further resolved that failure is terrifying. And further to this that the fear of the terror is worse than failure. In fact failure in this instance is the cure.

Failure:

This is hilarious right? I am suddenly afraid that you will know me to be a failure. But I have already TOLD you this! I am called it, I am from there, I am it, and I am still afraid that you will think that I am failure. So sorry – I mean thanks – we are almost through the manifesto – so thanks…but um…

(She throws the 9 and 10 roll together the ground and then)

Failure:

I think the point of the manifesto is that there is an opportunity. That I offer that. I may not offer a party but I do offer an opportunity. I mean maybe I wrote it because when you spend your life identifying with something – like failure - then it starts to make sense – to me anyway – that there might be a reason for it. That something good might come of it. And in the same way we don't get to feel ourselves be ourselves and we can’t. AARGH. So. I ask you now. What would
you like to have change? The lack of clean air? The poverty that surrounds you or lives within you? The shape of your head? The lack of love in the world? Use me. I am Failure. I cannot throw you a party but use me. You might be able to use me to make that change.

11. Failure is a contagious dis-ease. This is a good thing as it tells us to do something different. But it is also difficult when you are looking to collaborate. Failure is part of the collaborative milieu and it will infect you. But in the manner in which a vaccine protects you against, say, polio it also makes you feel a little symptomatic while your body adjusts. So too it is with the taint of failure. Make friends with the dis-ease. Lean into the failure. It is simply an agent, it is not a fact.

I can’t stop myself. Because I know that talking about it tends to release something in those I speak to about it. That stories and feelings start to erupt. That things start to shift. That things get released. That in some instances oxygen returns to fight another day with those green house gases. And yes, I know I am not the person you want to bring to your party but I am a good person to have on hand when things start to feel a little…feel a little…feel a little

12. Failure will change your life. Who doesn't crave that? In loss comes gain. It is like a clearing-house. Emptying the picture frame of what the future holds allows the most thrilling creative acts. Imagine letting go of the result, sitting in the nausea of the unknown. Why? Because risking the failure is a life affirming action. You will fail. But the next thing you do will be to succeed.

When I describe my show – not hard really, I just say the title, The Failure Show or a 13-Point manifesto for the Consideration of Failure people say (having first laughed) well that is bound to be a success!

Before he died, Quentin Crisp said this: If at first you don’t succeed failure may be your style!

Failure:

13. I usually don't know. The “beautiful/ugly” of failure is that it is not ours to know. In the way that love is supposedly ours if it returns after the “set-free” the same might be true of failure (of course without the celebratory feelings). One’s own failure may act as a gift of sorts, as it points others away from it, onward in the journey towards possible success. This might mean that failure is the leader that others can follow away from. But like I say: I usually don’t know.

So I guess there is one last question. Do you think you can hold me?

Sammy Davis Jr. Plays. Generally people come up from the audience and hold Failure.

The END
Chapter 4: Artist Statement

Failure Theatre: An Artist’s Statement

It’s a long drive towards mastery. Throughout this expedition four sturdy tires have kept my chariot of failure on the road: Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) and within it two of his assertions in particular: that lesbians are the perfect embodiment for failure and that failure is the perfect form of resistance in a capitalist model gone wild. Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), in which she asks us to examine the cultural oppression that a promise of happiness creates. For the back of the car I rely on two texts (along with accompanying performance texts) from two powerful American artists. One back tire goes to Julie Taymor and follows her through her creating of -- to her being fired from -- *Spiderman: Turn off the Dark.* (2005-present) The other goes to Mike Daisey’s near firing from his own personality (!) with the unhinging of the veracity of his *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* (2011-present).\(^1\) This was all brought about by a decision Daisey took to present his play as journalism on the NPR radio show *This American Life.* These four tires have kept me motoring towards the completion of my MA in Cultural Studies at Queen’s University. It has been a good year.

Throughout my life I have struggled with my perception that I am not, nor ever will be, good enough. Failure before the starting pistol even cocks. The criteria for determining “good enough” has shifted over time, and continues to do so as I write these words here. Judith Butler speaks to this “shift” in her ground-destroying work *Gender Trouble* (1990). The irony is that

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\(^1\) Mike Daisey, a monologist - was discovered to have fabricated sources in his exposé of working conditions in China. The story broke after he was interviewed on *This American Life.* While Daisey admits to certain fabrications the controversy over fiction and journalism continues.
over time, the nature of her brand of shifting seems positively mechanical in the face of the digital fluidity we now inhabit. So while I still blame her for an essential unhinging of a shared psyche, the fact that I continue to reference her work now, literally generations of thought past its puissance, serves as a compelling launch pad with which to highlight my affinity with failure. This sense of failure connects best in poetic places, as it is here where the painful rubbings of my inability to understand and act simultaneously are best represented. Butler’s time is past but I cannot let it go. Mainly because now I am ready to understand it, even while during the time of her writing it I was living it. Too bad the parade has already left the square, and no amount of sprinting will allow me to catch up. My inability to capture all time - so central to T.S. Eliot’s astonishing “Burnt Norton” - roots my constant sense of failure:

Desire itself is movement
Not in itself desirable;
Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and end of movement,
Timeless, and undesiring
Except in the aspect of time
Caught in the form of limitation
Between un-being and being. (161-168)

That the totality of experience happens in a moment, and as humans, we are nothing more than vessels for holding moments, and that the quality of these moments can shift from peak to valley in the blink of an eye. What are we to do?

I decided to dedicate a portion of my life’s moments to an investigation of my obsession with failure. Returning to the academy has armed me with a host of words: parse, lens, unpack, tease out and hive. With these word-bullets housed in the chambers of my academic arsenal, I can now deploy these conceptual carvers in the service of identifying a statement that in the fullness of time may one day become a theory. Because I do have a statement to make, I feel capable of making it now; I could not have made it before returning to school. It will take me the
length of this Artist’s Statement to make it but the success is that I have it to make. Before returning to school I was a theatre professional: a successful director, dramaturg, creator, performer and teacher. I remain these things but am changed. My muted sensibility as an artist has receded and with it my criteria for success has altered. Previously I understood success as a felt thing, now I appraise it more critically; separate from my feelings, for example the results of an investigation of my habits (Bourdieu’s habitus) suggests that I am successful. If my goal was to forge a career in a sector of my choosing, and continue to be able to support myself in pursuit of this choice, then I am hard-pressed in any paradigm to understand how this could be seen as anything less than successful.

What makes writing this frightfully complex is my own dis-ease with notions of success and my major attempts, throughout my career, to trade my wares in a kind of failure market. Before returning to study I was unclear that such a market existed and was equally uncertain as to whether or not any of my actions could be traced for purpose or intent. In other words my identification with failure was such that I was unable to see my actual questing towards it or the placing of my hand in this quest. I have come to understand that my feelings surrounding failure have next to no purchase in the marketplace of failure. This comes as both a relief and a shock. If the “I” that is me can feel ill about something that succeeds and feel well about something that fails then it becomes necessary to parse which values are being attributed to what. The value of success has always appeared easy to ascertain. It connects people, and in most circumstances it is that which is aspired to, as well as the engine that continues to fire those aspirations. In other words success is the very virtue/value that fuels the dominant culture. While the marketplace metaphor is mine, I cannot lay claim to the seed of the thought. I owe that to Judith “Jack”

\[2\] For further discussion of how habitus relates to ideas of personal success and failure please see Bourdieu’s *The Logic of Practice* (1990).
Halberstam and his brilliant *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Without this formidable and extremely fun work I might have never understood failure as a form of passive resistance.

Halberstam’s words took on ever deeper resonance where through happenstance of an 11th hour discovery of Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: As social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1992).

I was able to steal from, and then engage with a William Gibson influenced type of *Pattern Recognition* (2003). Bourdieu would - I think - believe that my discovery of his writing was bound to happen, given my education and other *Outliers* (2008) –to snatch from Malcolm Gladwell – guiding my path. I confess to finding it profoundly funny that my obsession with failure has led to theories as to why I might be so obsessed. In the closing to his introduction in *Distinction: As social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* Bourdieu says; ”That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (Bourdieu 7). And so it is. And so it is too with the traceable trajectory of failure in my work – and by extension -- contemporary theatre at large.

But let me interject here that while I have felt like a failure because I was not the first to write any of these thoughts or to get any of my own books about failure written before the relevance of the topic wears thin, I am also prepared to say, as a preface to my statement, that hived from emotional response, I have begun to see that failure fails. I will return to it.

Bourdieu’s dexterously articulate examination of the parsing potential of taste was first published in 1984. The symbolic nature of this year stays with me; we now reside in a reality

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3 This was the date of publication for the English language translation cited in this essay by Richard Nice.

4 It was heartening to discover this thread of impactful indicators running through these works. A line that traces the various determining features in deciding a person’s place or role within a society. In some ways these factors appears to predetermine my discovering of this thread in the first place, and indeed connect to the kinds of artistic practice I have been guided to.
whose lens was trained by George Orwell’s dystopic visioning. But even more concretely (I believe this word – concrete - will lose its potency in the coming years as we reside in the aftermath of the fluid self as proposed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), and her assertions are prefigured by other writings on the loss of materiality that – for example - I think Walter Benjamin in 1936, presciently foretold it in *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [2008]) we live at a time in history where the phrase “working people” seems like a fictionalized account of people without money. The now famous 99%.\(^5\) In other words, Bourdieu along with theorists who formed Cultural Studies (Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, *et al*)
could not help but base their understanding of the economic, sociological and cultural landscape on a society that included working, laboring or bourgeois classes. This Marxist methodological approach now shows us how distinctions based on materiality have fallen into the time slip. And the crowning trope of “Banks too big to fail”\(^6\) is the very statement that outsmarted even Beckett’s now clichéd “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail Again. Fail Better.”(Worstward Ho, 1983) The marketplace of failure both literary and figurative has begun to be coopted for and by mainstream culture. And so, while I write this, I can share that *I feel a failure* but I can also see how failure as a potential source of resistance has also begun to fail. Yet with failure (as with success) comes the capacity to document, because at the end of the day, both words serve a classifying purpose. Today we live in a time of absolutes but nothing concrete remains upon which to pin these absolutes. Our money is invisible, our food seems destined for the digitizer, even our very selves are decodable into bits of information. Have body

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5 This refers to a turn of phrase used to capture a sense of the people without the balance power in the democratic process. It came into play during The Occupy Movement that began in New York City Zuccotti Park on September 17, 2011.
6 *Harvard Business Review* dedicated an entire issue to this question in April 2011 (Volume 89, Issue 4). It was simply called *The Failure Issue*. The Editor-in-Chief’s opening remarks are titled “When we Fail at Failure”(Adi Ignatius, 12).
will travel seems like as good an update as any. I raise this dystopic stream of thought in an
effort to paint a moment in time where failure has become a fixed spot, a solid concept upon
which to attach things, an attributable and necessary entity that can help give form and substance
to a neo-liberalized culture in need of it.

It is because of this failure reification that I want to attempt a link not just between my
*Failure Manifesto*, my *Failure Show*, and my failure studies in general, but as well to make a
link that attaches to a theatrical style that I will call *Failure Theatre*. In my manifesto, and my
show there are, apparent to me now, kinds of perversity and contrariness that defy logic. In this
sense logic is a word and concept that fuels a world driven by the engine of success. For fear of
leaving things too wide, I will attempt here to narrow the field and say that it is only through the
purview of hindsight and the benefit of this recent education that I am now able to piece together
the beginnings of this idea. And to add, in a cursory way, some observations as to how I would
like to begin to define this kind of theatre.

In the first instance *Failure Theatre* must not be able to make money. Further to this, it
should actually cost its maker money to make. On top of this the creation should befuddle the
creator as much as its audience and yet the imperative for creation, and the desire that this
creation be witnessed, must be present at all times. It is essential that the work not be judged
approvingly by the critics of the day, as they might have sway within the marketplaces of success.
Lastly, *Failure Theatre* must have what appears to be a consensus on its lack of taste. When the
above attributes become fashionable, or necessary to a society in the throes of recalibrating itself,
then it must be said that *Failure Theatre* has made it to the big time and in so doing fails.

So, my Artist Statement is that even failure fails (or as I point to in my manifesto, that it
can be the quickest way to unintended success). Further to this that on its way to failing failure
gains value that outstrips its actual worth. In the future, and when I make my next return to school, I want to do a full out portrait of Failure Theatre as chiefly characterized by creators such as me during the first decade of the 21st century, but for now I would simply like to state that I know Failure Theatre exists, and now, thanks to my time in the academy, I have the tools to begin to be able to consider how I might someday prove it.

As to the four tires that upheld my journey, well, they did. Deeply and supportively and while I know it unorthodox to raise sources and not employ them, I hope that in these liquid days, my having mentioned them might encourage you to take a drive in the failure car to see where you are.
Works Cited


---http://faculty.sunyduchess.edu/oneill/failbetter.html accessed October 17, 2012


Chapter 5: The Choreography

Choreography for the Failure Dance

Annotated Bibliography

**Ahmed**


   Here the author asks us to examine the oppressiveness and potential for social control housed in the notion of striving towards happiness. She looks at popular film and literary references to build a context for the characters that turns away from happiness and examines the cost of this decision. She places her inquiry within feminist, queer and anti-racist paradigms.

**Bailes**


   In this book, Sara Jane Bailes looks at failure as a performance and creation strategy. She focuses her inquiry on three companies; all of them successful in the international touring circuit, all of them creators of new work that are renowned for their distinct processes.

**Bogart**


   In this book Anne Bogart refers to the power of embarrassment in the work. She is speaking from the perspective of the director. She uncovers a brutality in the urge to create and shape work. The major affect she explores here is embarrassment and
how it directly connects to process. This idea acted as a trigger to my thoughts on how failure might function in the creative process.

**Butler**


This book, more than any other listed here, has set the stage for how I consider sexuality and personhood in 2012. It was Butler who came to the forefront of rethinking gendered roles within society, separating biology from those roles and looking at what is practiced as separate from what is “normal”. Butler brings heteronormative into our modern speak. Her belief in fluidity within the self paved the way for a totality of uncertainty that has fed my work while unhinging my being.

**Cixous**


Prior to returning to school I knew only of this person’s work through a friendly connection to one of Cixous’ current translators. I did not understand the legacy of Cixous work. This reader is a comprehensive look at many of her greatest hits and is an excellent resource to help me to put her manifesto into a larger context with the rest of her oeuvre.


For the manifesto. The power of her words, the fearlessness of her questioning. The rage. These are just some of the reasons.
During this performance I was struck by how trapped the actor appeared to me to be. It was as though he could not get out of his own story. I commented on this to several of my colleagues. I saw this show after the airing of the original *This American Life*, but it was before I had heard it. It was also before the revelation of the inconsistencies in his story that aired on *This American Life* surfaced and the retraction that soon followed in a subsequent show.

This is the full text of the play that was made available without cost to the public to be performed by whosoever chooses to perform it. This was the version that was in play when the *This American Life* story broke. It was also the version used by David Ferry (playing Mike Daisey) and Mitchell Cushman who directed him that played in Toronto and Montreal this past spring. I was quoted in this production and was told by one friend that I would not have been pleased with how my words were represented.
This book is a great quick read on the position sexual identity holds in the creation of theatre and the representation of LGBQT archetypes and concerns in the world of contemporary performance in the US and UK.


This was one of the first books I read as I was making my way into Grad School. I found Dolan’s voice inspiring. Here was a person who unabashedly loved the world of performance and appeared tireless in her earnest desire to capture a minority voice in a mainstream way.


http://feministspectator.blogspot.ca/2011/05/tony-awards-2011.html

In this entry, Ms. Dolan makes reference to gender trouble as the root cause of Julie Taymor’s firing from *Spiderman: Turn off the Dark*. The comments section is not entirely in agreement with Ms. Dolan’s assessment. I was able to learn of more writing on the Taymor story as a result of this blog posting and entered my own response to it.


This manifesto was the impetus and the inspiration to my own failure manifesto. The author makes clear succinct points. It is an 8-point celebration of feminist performance in 2011.
Ehrenreich


This book is referenced by Halberstam but it was also one of the first books I came across when I began exploring my interest in failure, and it acts as a good team mate to Ahmed’s book as well. In some ways it can best be described as a book that looks at the negative impacts of an unexamined belief in the power of positive thinking.

Foucault


I read this essay in my Historiography class and it introduced me to Foucault and his ideas of governmentality. I was struck by how similar this was to my memory of Augusto Boal’s work, particularly as it pertained to the westernized “cop in the head”. I was also taken with how, in this essay, Foucault was able to capture the necessary coordinates for capturing “the moment”.

Glass


Originally aired 01-6-2012

This is fascinating. There is no audio remaining on the Website of *This American Life* but a decision was taken to let the words stand in transcript format. It allows interested parties the opportunity to review what was said in light of the retraction episode and in tandem with Mike Daisey’s play.
This is a 3-part exposé of how *This American Life* failed to provide its audience with the truth. In the first section we hear how the story claims that Daisey made got unravelled, then we are treated to a second interview with Daisey, and then we are left with a *New York Times* reporter, who lets us know that, at root, what Daisey beseeches us to think about remains true. The episode attempts to get to the bottom of the nature of truth. And Daisey is the fall guy. His credibility goes up in flames even as the power of his story remains intact.

**Halberstam**


This is the book I wanted to write. Its tone, content and inquiry align with my sense of both failure as an entity but also an approach. In this book Halberstam makes reference to both Foucault (Failure as a way of Life) and Crisp (Failure as a style). While many great points are made, I am - personally - most pinned by how the lesbian gets placed in terms of failure.

**Hall**


This wide-ranging title gives an excellent overview of Cultural Studies in general and Hall’s entry into it in specific. It also contains his ideas about High and Low culture and this is something that Halberstam incorporates into her understanding of failure.
Haraway

In this work, Haraway puts the scientist back into the picture. This groundbreaking work unmask a hitherto unexpressed sense that “god” is determining what is scientifically relevant rather than people. She posits that it is through the unexamined use of this sleight of hand, that data is being accepted as truth rather than simply a perception of truth.

Mayne

This book charts the chronology of lesbian film-maker Dorothy Arzner, and attempts to contextualize her demise in a post World War II American context. Arzner’s story is of interest to me as it was captured in a role I played in Toronto, at Buddies in Bad Times, and it was a life story that I felt deep connections to and with. (It was also a role that the critics felt I failed to inhabit)

Román

This wide-ranging book covers a lot of ground in contemporary performance trends in the US from the 1990’s until post 9/11. The framework is queer and the inter-relationship between dance, theatre and performance is explored throughout the book. How both damage and illness figure in contemporary work is relevant.
Rubin


This work is most helpful when considering the hierarchy of sexual practices. Rubin displays, with real clarity, how each person is categorized based upon their sexual expressions. The closer to normal (or heteronormative) the practices are, the more likely the individual is to be situated at the top of western societal/cultural/classist food chain.

Smith


In this article the author explores the power of the flaw in contemporary theatrical performance. He looks primarily at Robert Lepage’s interpretation of *Das Reinghold* at The Metropolitan Opera in New York City in 2010 and secondarily *Spiderman: Turn Off the Dark* roughly a year later. He makes a compelling case for the unintended flaw (or gaffe) being the only life giving force in these highly mechanized theatrical endeavors.

Spivak


This is one of the strongest and most compelling pieces of academic writing that I have encountered since returning to school. It holds a horrible yet true story at its center, and one that is both insoluble and terrifically strong as metaphor for the unceasing struggle to be heard.
Stanley


This is a 13-point manifesto that looks at failure from the perspective of seasoned theatrical professional.

26. ---. *The Failure Show or: a 13-point manifesto for the consideration of failure.* (Performed at Rhubarb! February 2102)

This is a one-person play that endeavors to capture the character of failure.

Taymor

27. Taymor Julie, Berger Glen, and Aguirre-Sacasa Roberto. *Spiderman: Turn off the Dark.*


This production and its history has become the backbone to my investigation into failure. This is a mega-musical that did not succeed in a traditional sense, and yet still sold the house to its maximum. I saw this production after its first closing and after its official opening. This means that Taymor had been fired by the time I witnessed the production.

Tate


This text examines two kinds of contemporary lesbians and helps to frame an approach to how different women (Cis-gendered or Trans gendered) can find
themselves within these proposed polarities. This is of particular interest to me as it pertains to Halberstam’s contention that to be a lesbian is to be successful as a failure, and, as well, to Taymor’s situation which strikes me as gender trouble painted with lesbian overtones.

**Thompson**


This text acted as a perfect mate to the production. The published version I own is missing pages and was bound out of order. The document suggests that there was something essentially flawed that needed/wanted to assert itself at every step of the process. This compelled me even more. The flaws drew me more deeply into the text in an attempt to unpack how decisions got made, how failure got enacted.


This performance started it all. I was so compelled by the way(s) in which this production did not connect with its audience, but all the while I connected to it so profoundly; it was like watching a natural disaster unfold. I was moved to understand why I deemed this production a failure. I was also riveted in ways that pieces more traditionally pleasing were unable to reproduce. And I was further intrigued by the ambition within the production to capture something essential about the emotional geography that is Canada.

**Vaughan**

This is a play I was in. It is about a woman who walked away. This text looks at the disappearance of Dorothy Arzner. She was a very successful filmmaker in the early days of “the talkies”. She was a lesbian and found herself in increasingly more difficult situations that limited her career options. In the play she walks away.

**Wittig**


Print.

Imagine asking whether or not a lesbian can be considered a woman. Imagine, further to this, asking whether or not a woman can only be defined by virtue of her relationship to man. It is for this reason, these questions, that I am including this book on my list. I have been captivated and swayed by the power of her assertions and believe, as well, that they feed directly into Halberstam’s work and my sense of self in my own work. Do I exist? This ground-shaking work offers tangible insight into why I, and my mother, and her mother etc., asked this same question.