

The NHS really taught me everything

Tarek Iskander is drawing strength on the experience of his former life as he builds on David's Jubb's legacy at Battersea Arts Centre

The Evening Standard - Thursday 17 October 2019 – Jessie Thompson

Battersea Arts Centre is one of the most beautiful theatre spaces in London. It's also one of the most constantly surprising. Down a corridor, nestled behind a door, there's a giant, bronze heart; listen closely and you'll hear it beat. It's part of a trail of hidden installations dotted around the building, and the heartbeats have been recorded from the firefighters who saved the building from a devastating fire in 2015. This unexpected intervention perfectly captures the spirits of BAC: creativity, community, and a desire to nurture heritage and fight for the future.

Someone who intrinsically understands this is Tarek Iskander, BAC's new artistic director and chief executive. He left his job at the Arts Council to take over from David Jubb in May, and today he announces a new season of work that maintains BAC'S spirit of experimentation and risk. I've never seen an artistic director – especially a new one – who seems so chilled, but that might be down to years of dealing with constant crises in a former career. More on that later.

The season has a lofty banner: Going Global. "It's an ambitious title, and also a bit tongue-in-cheek. We were thinking: at a time when the country is looking inwards, what can we do to look outwards, with a really positive message, making connections?" Iskander, 45, tells me when we speak in BAC's offices.

There are treats in store. The surge in youth activism is reflected in When It Breaks It Burns – 16 students from Brazil will tell the story of the high-school occupations they led, with dance, music and performance. Site-specific company dreamthinkspeak will make a show with learning-disabled artists using virtual reality: unReal city imagines a living space that is fully accessible. Daughter, an explosive show about toxic masculinity, will arrive in London, and subversive performance artist Lucy McCormick will make a new show centered around an immersive pop concert.

He didn't take on the job to direct work. "In fact, the opposite. I used to direct work, and now I've decided not to. Because that's not what this place is about. He sees his role as curatorial. His appointment at BAC is just the latest moment in an extraordinary trajectory. Born in Sunderland to parents born in Egypt, he moved to the Middle East when he was five, and returned at 17, escaping from the Gulf War in Kuwait. He studied engineering before beginning a management career in the NHS that lasted more than a decade. "I fell into theatre by accident," he explains. "I got cast by mistake in DEBORAH Warner's Julius Caesar at the Barbican, so I was performing in his show for three months with Simon Russell Beale, Fiona Shaw, Ralph Fiennes – and I just got hooked on what theatre was about, watching the

directors work.” Obviously, he must elaborate on how he got cast in a Deborah Warner production by accident. It turns out he went to the auditions to support his partner at the time, and Warner asked to audition him too. He got the part; she didn’t. Oh no. Did that end the relationship? “I don’t think it was the catalyst,” he says politely.

That experience led to Iskander trying to break into the industry. It also meant he worked two jobs for a long time to pay the rent. In 2006 he staged an acclaimed production of Macbeth at Theatre Technis: by 2011, he had co-founded The Yard in Hackney Wick alongside Jay Miller but had to leave because he ran out of money. Three years ago, he ended up quitting theatre again because he just couldn’t afford it (his partner encouraged him to give it one last try).

Having a career to fall back on let him make it this far but he points out how hard it is for people from difficult socio-economic backgrounds to break into the industry. What did working in the NHS teach him about theatre? “Everything, basically. I think what NHS hospitals are really good at is being relevant, because they are obviously relevant to everyone in a way that’s deep. The whole system is set up around the people they’re trying to support. Theatre sometimes does that well but a lot of the time we don’t.

“It’s changed how I think about buildings and organisations.” I wonder if he thinks the arts could benefit from more leadership from people with experience of other sectors. “All I can say is it’s served me well,” he says.

“On the flip side, I spent a lot of time feeling I was behind because I never had a formal education in theatre. Sometimes I’m envious of people that background but I sometimes wish more people working in performance had a nine-to-five job at one point to see what that world is like.” His advice to anyone else working two careers – and he reminds me that there are far more than people think – is to be patient. “I don’t think there are really any shortcuts. But it’s so rewarding, it’s worth sticking with.”

He describes his handover from Jubb, who spent 15 years in the role, as “unbelievable,” saying: “It was the best possible example of how to hand over the reins to another artistic director. I wish other people would learn from that,” he tells me. “The first thing he said was: ‘Ignore everything I’ve done. Do it your way.’ The other thing was that he wasn’t going to come back to the building for at least a year to give me space to do what I wanted to do.”

Iskander’s appointment at BAC coincides with a significant changing of the guard at London theatres. He thinks the timing may be down to the fact that the future feels uncertain, and people are asking questions about culture’s very purpose.

“We can’t keep working on the assumptions we had before,” he says, Such as? “What people might be interested in. How to engage people. What we should programme. Whose voices should be amplified. How do we include people who may

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have felt excluded in the past. Why are we doing it.” He laughs. “Yeah, just the basics.”

I ask him what worries him and what excites him at BAC. “I’m not really nervous about anything, to be honest with you. I think the thing I’m most excited about is that I don’t know what’s going to happen next. That’s what I love about it. I walk into BAC, and I feel like anything is possible.”