

# ADS81



OCTOBER 2022  
AUSTRALASIAN  
DRAMA STUDIES  
QUEER PERFORMANCE

# ADS81



OCTOBER 2022



## AUSTRALASIAN DRAMA STUDIES QUEER PERFORMANCE

EDITED BY JACOB BOEHME,  
JONATHAN BOLLEN, ALYSON CAMPBELL  
AND LIZA-MARE SYRON

*ADS* is sponsored by ADSA, the Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies, and published online at <https://www.adsa.edu.au/ADSjournal>.

**Editor:** Yoni Prior

**Previous Editors:** Founding co-editors Richard Fotheringham, Veronica Kelly and Jeremy Ridgman; Geoffrey Milne; Julian Meyrick and Meredith Rogers

**Principal Advisory Editors**

(Australia): Emeritus Professor Joanne Tompkins

(New Zealand): Dr Nicola Hyland

**Reviews Editors**

(Australia): Dr Sarah Peters: Flinders University

(New Zealand): Associate Professor Hilary Halba: University of Otago

**Australasian Drama Studies: Advisory Board**

Katharine Brisbane: Currency House, Sydney

Emeritus Professor Tom Burvill: Macquarie University, Sydney

Professor Peter Eckersall: The City University of New York

Professor Helen Gilbert: Royal Holloway, University of London

Associate Professor Laura Ginters: University of Sydney

Professor Helena Grehan: Murdoch University, Perth

Emeritus Professor Julie Holledge: Flinders University, Adelaide

Dr Mary Ann Hunter: University of Tasmania

Professor Jacqueline Lo: Australian National University, Canberra

Professor Mary Luckhurst: University of Bristol

Emeritus Professor Gay McAuley: Royal Holloway, University of London

Associate Professor Glen McGillivray: University of Sydney

Professor Julian Meyrick: Griffith University, Queensland

Professor David O'Donnell: Victoria University, Wellington

Dr Meredith Rogers: La Trobe University

Professor Elizabeth Schafer: Royal Holloway, University of London

Professor Denise Varney: University of Melbourne

Publications Officer: Dr Sarah Woodland. Copy-Editing: Diane Carlyle. Typesetting and Design: Upside Creative. Web Design: Virtual Creations. Web Management: Allie Kneebone.

Cover Image: Ben Graetz as Miss Ellaneous in *Black Nulla Cabaret*, Koori Gras, 2019. Photo Jamie James.

ISSN 2209-640X

*Australasian Drama Studies* is indexed in AUSTLIT, the Australian literary database; in APAIS (Australian Public Affairs Information Service); the MLA Bibliography; Australian Literary Studies; Modern Drama and the International Bibliography of Theatre.

Online retrieval of articles available from APAFT (Australian Public Affairs Full Text Service) and from Informit (RMIT Publishing), Proquest and EBSCO.

Acceptance for publication implies assigning rights to *ADS* to publish material in any format. Copyright and moral rights remain with authors.

## CONTENTS

Editorial <i>Jonathan Bollen, Alyson Campbell and Liza-Mare Syron</i> . . . . .	1
Koori Gras: A Radical Celebration of Sparkling Defiance <i>Liza-Mare Syron</i>	11
An HIV Love Story: Jacob Boehme's <i>Blood on the Dance Floor's</i> Queer and Indigenous Revolt <i>Jacob Boehme, Alyson Campbell and Jonathan Graffam</i> . .	39
Tracing Transitions <i>Stace Callaghan and Leah Mercer</i> . . . . .	69
A Queer Performance New Wave in Sydney: Inside <i>cLUB bENT</i> 1995–1998 – Exploring Hybridity and Community <i>Catherine Fargher</i> . . . . .	98
The Future is Now: Queer Utopian Longing and the Utopian Performative in Today x Future in Metro Manila <i>Ian Rafael Ramirez</i> . . . . .	127
Show Me How You Do It Down Under: Realness at The West Ball II <i>Billy Kanafani</i> . . . . .	154
Theatre as a Space of Resistance and Protest: Queer Politics and <i>Colour of Trans 2.0</i> <i>Neethu Das. K and Vellikkeel Raghavan</i> . . . . .	179
'We'll Meet You Underground': Transcultural Performance Practices in Queer Space and Time <i>Jeremy Neideck, Nathan Stoneham, Younghee Park and M'ck McKeague</i> . . . . .	203
Birds of a Feather: On Queerness, Performance, The Coming Back Out Ball and The LGBTIQ+ Elders Dance Club <i>Peta Murray, Adelaide Rief, Marnie Badham, Tristan Meecham, Bec Reid and Lenine Bourke</i> . . . . .	237

A Rainbow in the Age of Covid: Contemporary Queer Theatre in Aotearoa  
*James Wenley and Nathan Joe* . . . . . 271

Reviews . . . . . 303

JONATHAN W. MARSHALL, *Metatheatrical Dramaturgies of Violence: Staging the Role of Theatre*, by Emma Willis; PETER BEAGLEHOLE, *Australia in 50 Plays*, by Julian Meyrick; JANE WOOLLARD, *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus*, edited by Gillian Arrighi and Jim Davis; JAMES WENLEY, *Maria Dronke: Glimpses of an Acting Life*, by Monica Tempian

Contributors . . . . . 331

## EDITORIAL: QUEER PERFORMANCE

JONATHAN BOLLEN, ALYSON CAMPBELL AND  
LIZA-MARE SYRON

It is time to pay attention to queer performance across our region. There are rich histories and thriving cultures of LGBTQI+ performance, including an explosion of queer performance from Indigenous artists. Queer performance is eclectic and tenacious, persisting as a field of innovation and continuing to sustain LGBTQI+ artists and their audiences despite contexts of ongoing homophobia, transphobia and criminalisation.

Much queer performance, however, goes undocumented, overlooked in mainstream reviews, unrecorded in formal archives, or given scant scholarly attention. Indeed, for the most part, documenting this work has been the responsibility of the artists themselves – as demonstrated by many contributors to this issue – and as a mission taken on by grassroots organisations like the Australian Queer Archives (AQuA).

For this issue, we called for contributions to a long-overdue collection of critical thinking about queer performance in these parts. We envisaged an intersectional collection of essays, interviews, recollection-reflections and performances-as-publications, and other forms that emerge.

We hoped through the collection to trace the LGBTQI+ desire-lines linking artists and audiences – crossing social, cultural, political and regional boundaries and reaching out queerly across time and place. We wanted to remember, record and grapple with what emerges in intersectional-queer dance, theatre and performance that transforms us and envisions new worlds. We sought to ask: how do queer practices in performance proliferate diversity in our ecologies, sustain us as communities, invigorate creativity for our survival and generate lifeworlds of transformation?

The editors of this current issue are all queer-identifying and invested in finding our ways to stake a claim to our queerness and the ‘queer effects’<sup>1</sup> of performance, through performance-making, scholarship and teaching – and articulating all as forms of queer activism. In stating our positionality as queer artists and/or scholars we can claim a space for ourselves in academic circles and scholarship that was not always possible. This marks a moment in the ‘histories’ of queer performance scholarship in the region, following in the wake of our predecessors who led the way. We look back to them as we look to the future that is held in view in this issue.

## QUEER REGIONS/GEOGRAPHY

One of the challenges in calling for contributions from across our region is the sheer size of land and sea. The queer scenes are vastly different between Sydney and Melbourne, two metropolitan areas an hour apart by air; further differences distinguish the scenes in Brisbane, Auckland, Wellington, the Philippines, Korea, India and beyond. We have been inspired, in part, by Gayatri Gopinath's idea of 'a queer regional imaginary', in 'contradistinction' to the national imaginaries in our region that are strongly marked by colonialism.<sup>2</sup>

We were overwhelmed by the response from artists and scholars keen to document queer performance, both their own and others' work. We received three times the number of submissions that we could include in one volume, which attests to the richness of the field. We have included contributions from and about Indigenous artists, women, trans and non-binary artists, multi-generational work, and from across Aotearoa, Australia and the Asia Pacific region, but know that there are, inevitably, absences.

It is clear, from our own experience and the literature, that the LGBTQI+ community has felt the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in specific ways, and artists have had a particularly difficult time with projects being repeatedly disrupted.<sup>3</sup> This presents a specific set of challenges to queer artists. The pile-up of multiply postponed work, illness, isolation and other pandemic disruptions has meant that we lost the work of some artist-scholars. We hope that all those contributions – the ones we couldn't accept at the start and the ones we



lost along the way – come to see the light in future scholarship. We need it. This volume is just one small contribution to the regional scholarship in this field and we hold on to a queer utopian hope that future projects will offer long forms of scholarship addressing the intersections between trans, Indigenous, disability and intergenerational work and trace the developments in queer performance.

### PAST/HISTORIES

It is twenty-five years since *Australasian Drama Studies* published an issue on ‘Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theatre and Performance’. The 1997 issue, edited by Bruce Parr, Tim Benzie and Shane Rowlands, was shaped by some ideas that we carry forward in this issue, and some ideas which we let go.

The main idea we carry forward is what Parr, Benzie and Rowlands termed ‘movements between’, which continues to characterise scholarship on queer performance in our region. This is seen especially in the way queerness arcs across the social-biographical and the artistic-representational, reconfiguring relations as urgent, honest, confronting, unsettling, and embodied in experience. In the forms of scholarship, these ‘movements between’ are evident in the dialogue documented in interviews between artists and scholars – exemplified, here, in the recollection-reflection between Stace Callaghan and Leah Mercer (Callaghan’s script for *still raw* was published in the 1997 focus issue); and in the conversations between

artist, audience and scholars sustained by Jacob Boehme, Alyson Campbell and Jonathan Graffam.

In relation to queer performance in Aotearoa, contributors James Wenley and Nathan Joe quote director Shane Bosher to ask, ‘Do we even know our history?’, and this question resonates across all parts of our region. It is part of the issue of being a marginalised and, often deliberately and strategically, subcultural field. But in the twenty-five years since the last focus issue, with the proliferation of new work and recovery of past work, we *do* have histories of queer performance now – as Maude Davey demonstrated in an article on queer cabaret in Melbourne for this journal’s last issue, and which Catherine Fargher continues here in her account of the ‘queer new wave’ in Sydney.<sup>4</sup> We were keen to include more from the archives but, of course – and it’s exciting to recognise – the work covered here is a drop in the ocean.

There is a longing from both directions – older artists/makers and their young or emerging counterparts – to document and understand what has gone before.<sup>5</sup> Older queer artists have an urge to document their work, experiences and lives before they are forgotten, and so that a new generation can carry their work forward. There is an urgency to some of this transfer of experience between generations that feels palpable in connection with the intimate interweaving of queer performance and our histories of HIV and AIDS. It is also connected with the emergence of Indigenous contemporary performance locally and regionally, and with the rich diaspora of

queer artists who have migrated to live and make work in this region.

This focus issue, then, is only one timely – and overdue – contribution to what could, and should, be a much broader endeavour to attend to – to articulate, analyse, archive and celebrate – the queer performance that surrounds us.

### EMERGING THEMES

In engaging with a diverse range of submissions, we have been interested in identifying the new and emerging aspects of queer performance across the region today. First, the regional extent and cultural diversity of submissions marks a departure from earlier scholarship in the region that often worked through strategies of queering the (Eurocentric) canon and looking back to cultural capitals of imperial power such as London. There is now a sustained intersectional anti-colonial current flowing through the analyses of queer performance, testing systems of oppression. Across the issue, there is also attention to relationality, to practices of kinship and care, and to the ideas of transition and queer utopia.

In contemporary curatorial and dramaturgical innovations, Indigenous queer performance takes aim at Western sex/gender norms inherited from the colonial project. In ‘Saving Lives: Mapping the Power of LGBTIQ+ First Nations Creative Artists’, Sandy O’Sullivan notes Gomeroi theorist Alison Whittaker’s ‘proposal that the colonial system is tested by queerness, and often found lacking

in its willingness to understand the complexities of First Nations Peoples'.<sup>6</sup> What this issue brings into view is that Indigenous artists are testing the system by exploring what it is to be queer-Indigenous in navigating the complexities of creative practice, through activities that often occur at the margins of margins, outside of broader queer milieux. Indigenous queer performance locates and centres an Indigenous presence, perspective and proximity, challenging erasures of the white colonial systems that failed to record their histories, and the lack of existent stories about Indigenous queer lives.<sup>7</sup>

*Queer kinship and care.* The intensely distinctive relationalities of queer life-forms and life-experiences energise how artists work in collaboration with other artists, and with audiences in their communities, to produce unexpected affinities and relations. These are expressed queerly in the language of 'kinship' and 'care' across diverse performance contexts – from the Black Nulla cabarets of Koori Gras described by Liza-Mare Syron and the position of 'affect alien'<sup>8</sup> taken up in the relational contagion forged by Jacob Boehme's memory-work in *Blood on the Dance Floor* to the queer *communitas* generated from the 'flighty interminglings' of intergenerational relations in *The Coming Back Out Balls* staged by All The Queens Men.

*Transitions and queer utopias.* Callaghan and Mercer begin with the 'life-affirming' idea that 'everyone is constantly transitioning' in discussing their collaboration over three decades on queer/trans performance. The transitive ideas of 'queer kinaesthesias' and 'sexed flesh' that confound heteronormative conventions of embodiment

developed with the uptake of queer theory by scholars in theatre, dance and performance in the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> These ideas were extended across intersections of gender/sexuality/race in queer scholarship on ‘utopian performatives’ by José Esteban Muñoz and Jill Dolan among others.<sup>10</sup> This utopian impulse translates into the politics of queer performance in this issue – most evidently in the ethnographic mode of Ian Ramirez’s study of queer futurity at a now-defunct nightclub in Cubao, Quezon City, Metro Manila in Duterte’s Philippines, and Billy Kanafani’s regional approach to ‘worldmaking’ among the participants from diasporic cultures performing ballroom at West Ball II in Western Sydney.

*Regional extent and cultural diversity.* James Wenley and Nathan Joe’s account of cultural diversity in queer theatre and performance during pandemic-era Aoteaora colours the queer utopian aspiration as ‘offering a rainbow of representation, rongoā [healing] and hope for audiences’. Practical innovations in performance-making also bring utopian aspirations from across the region within reach – in Jeremy Neideck, Nathan Stoneham, Younghee Park and M’ck McKeague’s account of friendship-as-dramaturgy in recreating for festival audiences in Brisbane the elusive-inclusivity of a nightlife bar-scene from Seoul in South Korea, and in Neethu Das and Vellikkeel Raghavan’s account of a Boal-inspired postdramatic dramaturgy devised by the artists of Panmai to claim space in Indian theatre for transgender life-stories in *The Colour of Trans 2.0*.

## PERFORMANCE PRACTICE, CREATIVE PROCESS AND DRAMATURGICAL AND CURATORIAL INNOVATION

The focus on performance practice and process in this issue is connected with the emergence of creative arts research in the academy over three decades, which has provided an avenue for queer artists to find ways to explore what they are doing and to articulate it. In placing the experience and identity of the maker into the work they are making and analysing, this methodology opens up ways for makers to document work that is routinely ignored in mainstream reviewing practices and scholarly histories.

Much of this work crosses dramaturgical and aesthetic practices with auto/ethnographic approaches that have much to say about contemporary queer life and, indeed, the growth of queer practitioner-scholars across our region points to the capacity for the documentation of queer work to be done by queer artists and scholars themselves. Their attention lands on process as much as, if not more than, the performance itself, analysing the material relationships and collaborations that lead to dramaturgical innovation or some sense of queering in resistance to heteronormative modes.

The contributions in this issue converge on negotiating matters of performance practice, creative process, dramaturgical and curatorial innovation alongside questions of their own identity. In this regard, they are less interested in how queer subjectivities play for straight audiences in mainstream venues than in tracing an emerging queer ethics of generational-relational aesthetics and a

focus on what performance can do. This is an exciting moment for queer performance and its scholarship across the region.

## NOTES

- 1 Amelia Jones, *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2021) xvi.
- 2 Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2018) 5.
- 3 ‘The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Human Rights of LGBT Persons’, Report to UN General Assembly, 2020. Online: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Impact-COVID19LGBTpersons.pdf>; full report at <https://undocs.org/A/75/258>; ‘Impacts of COVID-19 on the Cultural and Creative Industries: Arts and Cultural Audiences, Organisations, Artists and Creative Workers’, Australian Council for the Arts, Australian Government, 2022. Online: <https://australiacouncil.gov.au/advocacy-and-research/impacts-of-covid-19/>.
- 4 Maude Davey, ‘Before Neo-Burlesque There Was Queer Cabaret: Revisiting Queer Performances from Melbourne in the 1990s’, *Australasian Drama Studies* 80 (2022): 42–71.
- 5 This longing and attention to the past has been theorised in the work of queer scholars such as Ann Cvetkovich, Elizabeth Freeman and Heather Love, who suggest that it is productive to look backwards and to put the past in dialogue with the present, rather than disregard queer history as a place of trauma only. See, for example, Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); and Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 6 Alison Whittaker, ‘The Border Made of Mirrors’, in D. Hodge (ed.), *Colouring the Rainbow: Black Queer and Trans Perspectives, Life Stories and Essays by First Nations People of Australia* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2015), 223–37, quoted by Sandy O’Sullivan, ‘Saving Lives: Mapping the Power of LGBTIQ+ First Nations Creative Artists’, *Social Inclusion* 9.2 (2021), 61–4, at 61.
- 7 Nat Woodall, ‘Black Queerness: A Mutually-Assured Construction’, *IndigenousX* (26 January 2022). Online: <https://indigenoux.com.au/black-queerness-a-mutually-assured-construction/>.
- 8 Sara Ahmed, ‘Happy Objects’, in Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) 29–51.
- 9 Jonathan Bollen, “‘What a Queen’s Gotta Do’: Queer Performativity and the Rhetorics of Performance”, *Australasian Drama Studies* 31 (1997): 106–23; Peta Tait, ‘Interpreting Bodily Functions in Queer Performance’, *Australasian Drama Studies* 31 (1997): 48–56.
- 10 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: University Press, 2009); Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Jill Dolan, ‘Performance, Utopia, and the “Utopian Performative”’, *Theatre Journal* 53.3 (2001): 455–79.

# KOORI GRAS: A RADICAL CELEBRATION OF SPARKLING DEFIANCE

L I Z A - M A R E S Y R O N

What is a queer black drag aesthetic? Who are the architects of this work? How do you go about producing or curating an event that celebrates queer black drag culture? These are questions that emerged when, quite by accident, independent producer Harley Stumm (Intimate Spectacle) approached me as a then Co-Artistic Director of Moogahlin Performing Arts, inviting the company to curate an event for the Near and Now Festival at 107 Projects in Redfern.<sup>1</sup> The time slot offered was 24–25 February 2017, right in the middle of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival season. After extensive consultation with members of the Moogahlin artistic leadership, and with various black LGBTQI+ community members, it became clear that there was a need for and interest in initiating a queer black arts programme to be presented in Redfern on Gadigal land, an area that historically has been



known as a gathering space for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from across the country. As the lead creative, I never intended to view the project as research. However, this special issue has provided the opportunity to reflect on the process of creating and producing a queer black event, and subsequent events, and to contribute to the discourse on Indigenous queer performance in Australia. This article is therefore assembled from my memories and experiences, though partial, of curating four annual events known as Koori Gras.<sup>2</sup> In framing this discussion, I am informed by the writings of Gayatri Gopinath, specifically in relation to the idea of curation as a practice of ‘care’, and extend this notion to also include the concept of ‘kin’ when investigating Indigenous queer curation and a black drag aesthetic in Australia.<sup>3</sup> I am similarly influenced by the critical writings of Indigenous scholars such as Sandy O’Sullivan<sup>4</sup> and Nat Woodall<sup>5</sup> in consideration of the social, cultural and political aspirations of black drag performers in Australia. In addition, I include a timeline of Koori Gras and list the key creative personnel and performers who contributed to the overall success of the many programmes that Koori Gras platformed. This documentation is constructed from materials sourced from project production schedules and contact lists from Moogahlin company archives.

## HOW IT ALL STARTED

The idea for an Indigenous queer event in Sydney was first seeded when visiting Toronto Turtle Island, Canada, attending the 2016 Weesageechak Begins to Dance development festival. Produced by Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) and then-Artistic Director Ryan Cunningham (Cree/Metis), the Weesageechak Festival programme included a Two-Spirit Cabaret night at a downtown venue called Buddies in Bad Times.<sup>6</sup> The Two-Spirit Cabaret programme was a variety format with short stand-up monologues; some were comedic while others were moving accounts of growing up and living as two-spirit; there were also acoustic musical performances. Representing Australia that year, and the only ‘drag act’ staged that night, was Ben Graetz (Iwaidja/Malak Malak) who performed as Bogan Villea – the beer-loving, footy shorts-wearing drag queen – who lip-synched to the iconic Australian AC/DC song ‘Thunderstruck’. Bogan Villea that night was strutting up and down across the stage, with a cigarette in hand and sipping beer. Dressed in a blue bonds’ singlet, football shorts and thongs, her feet slapped hard against the stage floor as her head whipped back and forth to the Young brothers’ relentless and rapid rock beat refrains. This sequence was repeated until Bogan Villea took a huge swill of beer and irreverently sprayed the contents of her mouth into and over the audience. Like a head-banging girl from a down under mosh pit, I found my fist punching shamelessly skyward, soaked in beer and spit. I had just witnessed a drag punk rock finale punctuated by a ‘fuck you’ and I could not help but celebrate its cathartic potency.

For the Australian contingent I was travelling with, there were also screams of joy. From the mostly Canadian and First Nations audience, however, there was a polite applause. This may have been due to many reasons, on which I can only speculate. Perhaps there was a perception in Canada that drag only belonged in a night club venue and not at a performance event; or maybe a drag act didn't meet the shared queer aesthetic of the evening; more than likely they were just recovering from being spat on. Whatever the case, the audience that night seemed a little stunned. I, on the other hand, thought the performance was brilliant and inspiring for its social and political efficacy, which I discuss later in this article. What was apparent to me after witnessing the two-spirit cabaret was that I had never experienced anything similar in Australia, and I wondered why there wasn't an Indigenous queer performance platform at home, given that Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (SGLMG) was a nationally and internationally known platform for Australian LGBTQI+ artists.

Historically, First Nations LGBTQI+ people and communities have had a long association with the Mardi Gras Festival through several platforms – such as First Nations-specific exhibitions run by the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative and various alternative parties like Klub Koori presented by Koori Radio. Although supported by SGLMG, these events were never included in the official festival programme. Why this was the case is not the focus of this article. Although not always visible in SGLMG Festival programming, First Nations LGBTQI+ people had, however, marched alongside non-In-

digenous LGBTQI+ communities in solidarity from the early days of the CAMP street protests and later in parade entries celebrating their identities in very public ways. Dharug artist and activist Chris Burke was a ‘78er’.<sup>7</sup> Today, First Nations LGBTQI+ communities lead the street parade following after the Dykes on Bikes. In archiving the *History of First Peoples Entries in the Sydney Mardi Gras Parade*, local ally Tim Bishop has created an online site with content assembled from SGLMG photo archives, contributions from First Nations LGBTQI+ community members, and materials gathered from partners and families.<sup>8</sup> I knew of the project and invited Tim to a meeting to discuss the idea of creating an exhibition from his archival project as part of the inaugural Koori Gras programme for the 2017 Near and Now Festival. Tim was excited about the possibility and suggested that we also invite Mish Sparks (Bundjalung) from Studio Mod, a media company that specialises in creative storytelling and experiences across various platforms, to assist with the curation of the programme. Mish had worked at the AIDS Council of New South Wales (ACON) as the Community Development Manager supporting the Indigenous SGLMG float entries from 2008 to 2010. Mish continued to manage this task until 2019 as a contract consultant for ACON. As part of this community consultation, I also spoke to my cousin Sue Pinkham who, like me, has family ties to the Biribay people.<sup>9</sup> Sue has a long history of participation in SGLMG parades and was instrumental in forming the Koori Wirguls, a First Nations LGBTQI+ women identified parade entry. Although not interested

in joining the curatorial team, Sue was happy to offer advice and support to the project.

At the first meeting with Tim and Mish, we spoke about our aspirations for the event and what were some important elements to consider.<sup>10</sup> Our initial aims were to create a pop-up site in Redfern for interstate and national Indigenous LGBTQI+ visitors to Sydney to gather and meet during the Mardi Gras Festival. We also wanted to create a space for discussion and debate on the needs of Indigenous LGBTQI+ peoples and communities. We spoke about raising the visibility of Indigenous LGBTQI+ peoples and their communities, and of celebrating black queer culture and performance. We agreed on a programme of events that included an exhibition highlighting key images and artefacts from the First Nations Mardi Gras Parade history site, a cabaret drag night called Black Nulla (club), and a forum/yarn up called Black Point. We named the event Koori Gras.

There were several serendipitous events leading up to the first Koori Gras, such as the offer from Harley Stumm to produce an event for the Near and Now Festival in Redfern, the timing of the festival, and the recent appointment of Therese Cassu as the new CEO of SGLMG in 2016. Cassu had worked with Moogahlin in her previous role as Managing Director of Performance Space. She understood the concept of self-determination and sovereignty regarding making and presenting Indigenous programmes and events. We discussed with her and then SGLMG Festival Director Greg Clarke the possibility that the event might be included in the

2017 SGLMG Festival programme. They were both very interested and offered some financial support towards that aim. Moogahlin also contributed a small amount of core funding towards curatorial fees and production costs, as did 107 Projects through the City of Sydney Council. The inaugural 2017 Koori Gras took place at 107 Projects in Redfern, Sydney, produced by Moogahlin Performing Arts in association with Intimate Spectacle, 107 Projects, Studio Mod, SGLMG, the City of Sydney and ACON. Although the co-curators' fees, the performer and production costs were all covered by the project budget, the event was primarily created with in-kind support from community volunteers such as Jinny Jane Smith (Wiradjuri), Lawrence Shearer (Murrawari), Mary Munro (Kamilaroi), Annie Winter, Michael Agzarian, and Michela Ledwidge (Studio Mod).

The curation of the exhibition began with choosing key images from the Bishop Collection. It was then necessary to seek out permission to exhibit these photos from participants, as well as from family members, and partners of those who had passed away. Bishop led much of this process, which took many months and careful consideration of family concerns about showing images of deceased loved ones. Many of the images selected for the exhibition never made it to print due to these concerns. The rest were framed and hung in the 107 gallery space with 78er Chris Burke at the centre of the exhibition. The 107 exhibition included images of community members in workshops making costumes, banners and flags for parade entries. There were photos of parade placards such as 'Stop

Police Attacks on Gays Women and Blacks’, and archival materials like ‘The Koori Wirguls’ banner and a giant sequined Aboriginal flag once used in an SGLMG parade. We also commissioned a twenty-minute in-house video composition of all First Nations parade entries from 1988 to 2016 that played continuously on loop for the duration of the exhibition, which opened on Saturday 18 February and ran until Sunday 26 February 2017.<sup>11</sup>

The Saturday night opened with the Black Nulla drag event hosted by Nana Miss Koori (Graham Sims – Gadigal) and Miss Ellaneous (Ben Graetz), with performances by local black drag artists Dreamtime Divas Lacey Dunaman (Tim Towns) and Nova Gina (Dallas Webster – Bundjalung), Destiny Haz Arrived (Colin Roberts-Bundjalung) and Solid Gold (Beau James – Mununjali). The event began with a Welcome to Country by Donna Ingram (Gadigal/Wiradjuri). We also invited the Sydney Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence to perform a Holy Dingo ceremony, as they had a long history of supporting Indigenous LGBTQI+ communities and often officiated at SGLMG events. Phill Downing was on lights and DJ Black President (Leo Tanoi – Samoan) curated the after-party dance music. Over 125 people attended the sold-out opening event. On the Sunday, we held an intimate and closed lunch on site for the community to come along and talk about their identity experiences of being Indigenous and LGBTQI+ with host Alan Clarke, a Murriwarri journalist from Buzz Feed. The concerns raised in these discussions are confidential and cannot be shared in this article. After the success

of the first Koori Gras event, the then-company leadership team at Mooghalin decided that it was important to continue to support the creative development of local Indigenous LGBTQI+ artists.<sup>12</sup> So, we went back to SGLMG with a project report outlining the need for continuing support from them to build the Koori Gras programme. Cassu and Clarke agreed to continue their investment and they did so until they left the organisation in 2020.

### KOORI GRAS AS FIRST NATIONS QUEER CURATION OF ‘CARE’ AND ‘KIN’

In discussing the curation of Koori Gras as an act of ‘care’, I draw on the work of queer studies academic Gopinath, who articulates ‘care’ as ‘a kind of intimate, intersubjective, interrelational obligation’.<sup>13</sup> For Gopinath, queer curation involves an attending to the queer aesthetic, and to acts of ‘caring for’ and ‘caring about’ others. Queer curation also implies the obligation to document this work, ‘to analyse, archive, and value the small, the inconsequential, and the ephemeral, so much of which make up the messy beauty and drama of queer life’.<sup>14</sup> For queer black events like Koori Gras, documentation is especially important as such activities often occur at the margins of margins, outside of broader queer milieux. I have also come to understand that in Indigenous context, the concept of ‘care’ includes an expression of kinship – ‘kinship’ in this sense meaning an acknowledgement of common experiences, honouring



ancestors, and a responsibility towards supporting and empowering communities. This section of the article focuses on what constitutes care and kin in relation to Indigenous curation, and what constitutes a queer black aesthetic in Australia.

In conceptualising a First Nations queer event, the first steps involve embedding community protocols of consultation with relevant community members and seeking advice to ensure endorsement for the project. Nothing happens in community without community. Endorsement can be demonstrated in many ways, such as in community participation, assistance and event attendance. I felt that there would be support for the project, having already been in conversation with Gadigal Elder and drag artist Graham Simms. I was unsure, however, about the broader First Nations community audience given that a famous Indigenous sportsperson had recently spoken out against homosexuality in the community.<sup>15</sup> I discussed my concerns with Graham, who assured me that, as far as a Black Nulla drag cabaret event went, this was something that the broader Indigenous community was very familiar with. He then informed me that he would be performing that weekend at the local Redfern Returned Services League (RSL) club, and that I should go along. I had seen drag before, of course I had, growing up as a lesbian in Sydney. But I hadn't seen black drag for some time, as it was not something one might generally see or experience in Sydney LGBTQI+ venues at that time. As mentioned, black drag was largely marginalised in Australia, and for reasons I discuss later. It had, however, found a

home in local clubs that service many regional and country Australia towns and communities, like the RSL and the League Club circuit. My then partner and I rocked up to see Graham perform as Nana Miss Koori at the Redfern RSL that weekend. I was surprised by Graham's drag performance. Unlike Bogan Villea's rawness, Nana's style was built on seduction, humour and grace. Nana lip-synched to Shirley Bassey's rendition of 'Big Spender' and held the mostly older and white audience in awe that night. Perhaps it was the radiance of her sequined black and red dress that stunned them in unanimous rapture, or maybe it was the shock of a black man in a frock, but this audience loved every minute of Nana's routine, which they demonstrated by a standing ovation. I knew then that a black drag night would be an essential element of the Koori Gras programme and that Graham would be central to the success of the event.

Not long after talking with Graham, I spoke to Ben Graetz, who at the time was in pre-production for the inaugural Miss First Nations Pageant in Darwin, Northern Territory. Together Nana Miss Koori and Miss Ellaneous would come to be the drag matriarchs of Koori Gras, inviting and caring for the guest performers from all over the country and ensuring that audiences felt welcomed and involved. This care for community was evidenced in creating an intimate relatedness with the Indigenous audience in attendance through calls of solidarity such as 'we're black and deadly', and 'lovely to see all you mob here tonight'. But there is a tension inherent in this approach. For although gestures of care form part of the performance of

queer black drag, there was another aim of the night, which was not to appeal nor to mesmerise the audience in suspending their disbelief of a cross-gendered performance. Drag offers a seductive bedazzled charm, but is foremost a political act, a radical work of gender dissonance meant to unsettle audiences. It is a messy collision of beauty and horror that takes aim at Western sex/gender norms inherited from the colonial project. It is a defiant celebration of survival. For example, in interview with Emily Nicol for National Indigenous Television (NITV), Graetz described the character of Bogan Villea as being not just about entertainment but as a politically potent statement, a satirical reflection of Australia. He explained:

[I]t's a bogan white Australian character played by an Indigenous person. People really getting into this bogan side of it ... Well, there's also a deeper level. It's great because it allows me to work in a political way as well as an accessible sub-conscious way, which I love.<sup>16</sup>

For Graetz, Bogan Villea is multilayered. On the one hand, his performance is defiant and confronting, interrogating the gaze of the Other, looking back and naming what he sees.<sup>17</sup> As a satirical portrayal of whiteness that mirrors the cultural stereotypes used to portray the Other, his performance aims to counter-shame by drawing attention to those very traits that have been a source of despair and social rejection.<sup>18</sup> Bogan Villea is a performance of

protest; it is confrontational and ‘in your face’. It is all about sticking it to the man, and an unadulterated demonstration of frustration and rage fuelled by decades of toxic subjugation and colonial rule. Performing black drag also brings attention to Australia’s history of colonial erasure. As transgendered Nat Woodall argues in their article, ‘Black Queerness: A Mutually-Assured Construction’, ‘the presence of black fullas with diverse or complex sexualities/identities suggests that, like many other facets of our rich cultural history, these stories have been buried through the process of genocide and assimilation’.<sup>19</sup> First Nations queer academic O’Sullivan argues that ‘black performance aims to challenge symbolic annihilation by locating and centring our presence as a challenge to colonial erasures’.<sup>20</sup> For O’Sullivan, kin is all about bravely standing up in solidarity to the white colonial gaze that failed to record our histories.<sup>21</sup> For Woodall, there is also a causal grief and a feeling of displacement associated with the lack of existent stories about our queer ancestors.<sup>22</sup> Not only do Indigenous LGBTQI+ people have to deal with the immeasurable losses associated with colonisation, but they must also endure a double erasure of their own identities, as queer black. The sense of (un)belonging for many First Nations LGBTQI+ people can express itself in feelings of depression and in self-harm related instances. According to a recent US study on Black LGBTQI+ Youth Mental Health, ‘while many are thriving, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) youth are more likely to report depression and suicidality compared to straight/cisgender peers,

1–3 challenges experienced by LGBTQ youth may be particularly salient for those who are also Black'.<sup>23</sup> I would suggest that there is a similar situation in Australia and is the case for many young black queers living in regional and remote areas of Australia. Some of the Black Nulla drag performers certainly had lived experiences of such trauma or knew of young men and women who have lost their lives due to coming out to family and friends. Dallas Webster (Nova Gina – Dreamtime Divas) knows this story well. He explains, 'Well, I grew up in Kempsey and it was very hard being gay. Don't want to go into it, but I left town at 15.'<sup>24</sup> Webster also had a nephew, Baylin Hoskins, who committed suicide just three weeks from his nineteenth birthday after coming out to family and friends. Baylin, who lived in a small town, suddenly found himself having to deal with the withdrawal of people who were once close. Baylin's mother faults his sense of isolation as the cause of his ensuing depression.<sup>25</sup> In a press interview, Webster also spoke openly of how Baylin had left letters to his family explaining that he could not come to terms with who he was.<sup>26</sup> Baylin's passing had a profound and lasting impact on Webster. Like Webster, many black drag artists who originally hailed from small communities are affected by similar experiences. Therefore, they now often perform at local clubs across Australia to counter the lack of support for First Nations LGBTQI+ youth, and to normalise black queer identities in their communities.

As mentioned, black drag as performance is also a culturally informed practice taking on many of the principles of Indigenous

performance traditions such as in acknowledging country, and in honouring the local community and their ancestors. It was Graham Simms as a Gadigal Elder who performed the welcome as Nana Miss Koori at the second Black Nulla event in 2018. This was a controversial act as there had never been a drag welcome on Gadigal land before. Black drag artists are aware that they are challenging cultural norms within their community, while also defying hetero-normative values inherited by colonisation. They are mindful of the challenges that many Indigenous LGBTQI+ members face in small communities. Black drag requires a careful appreciation of the complexities of their position which they negotiate with a deep respect and sensitivity.

Over the four-year history of the Koori Gras project, I had the opportunity to observe intimately several black drag performers and performances, while also witnessing first-hand the care that informed the creation of their drag personas. For the 2019 Koori Gras programme, presented at Carriageworks in Redfern, Sydney, there was a week-long creative development workshop for five emerging black queer artists to explore, play and refine their performance practice with guest facilitator Fez Fa'anana (Samoan) from Briefs Factory, as well as Ben Graetz and Graham Simms.<sup>27</sup> (The names of workshop participants and their resulting drag personas are listed at the back of this article.) The 2019 workshop programme focused on developing drag characters and covered such topics as make-up, movement, styling, branding, and a reflection on what constitutes queer community leadership. The leadership workshop

run by Graham Simms covered such topics as community safety, navigating social media platforms, and encouraging collegiality among the group. In 2019 we also organised a large green room/dressing room at the back of the performance venue (Track 3) to allow space for the more experienced drag artists to dress beside the emerging drag workshop participants. It was the first time that we had the opportunity to observe and document the making and creation of black drag, and Moogahlin's resident photographer Jamie James spent the day capturing the process in photographs (Figures 1–6).<sup>28</sup>

What most struck me first about the creation of black drag was the investment, the precision and concentration required. For a drag king, the method of transformation seemed less intensive but involved the same attention and care. This attention to the form or design of drag is not unusual, but there are some differentiating details that can be attributed to the specificity of black drag. The general aesthetic leaned heavily toward clown or buffoon, though not in a traditional comic sense. There were large wigs, big shiny shoes, sparkly dresses, humongous fake rubber breasts, and hip and bottom augmentations. Eyebrows were painted high on the forehead, reflecting a surprised yet desiring look and all sex signs were tucked away and concealed. The drag kings had strapped-down bosoms, augmented packages between their legs and painted face hair. What then set them apart from the broader drag aesthetic was their costume choices that reflected the red, black and yellow colours of the Aboriginal flag, or the blue, green and white of the Torres Strait Islander flag – colours that were contoured in

a myriad of sequined patterns and designs. Sparkling like Mimi lights dancing in the night, these creations announced their identity and pride as Indigenous people. For their choice of song to lip-sync to, most of the performers chose uplifting songs about rising above adversity and most of these songs were sung by women of colour or from culturally diverse backgrounds, such as Tina Turner ('Proud Mary'), Whitney Houston ('I Wanna Dance With Somebody'), Jennifer Hudson ('Feeling Good') and Cher ('Turn Back Time'). Local Indigenous talent was also represented in songs by Christine Anu ('My Island Home') and Jessica Mauboy ('We Got Love').

I sensed a deep respect in these song choices, for the women of colour, and in honouring family and community. For example, in a recent Facebook post, in interview for the *National Indigenous Times*, drag king Bee Cruse spoke about her first drag performance and the choice to perform one of her father's favourite songs, 'Cream' by Prince.<sup>29</sup> It was this recollection that informed the creation of Beedazzled Shanks – The Prince of Redfern. For her inaugural performance, Cruse wore an unbuttoned sparkling red tuxedo and yellow top hat. Their breasts were covered by two black crosses. Wooing audiences with their seductive charm, they casually slinked across the stage to reveal two large cans of whipped cream, which were unceremoniously released into the audience, whipping them into a screaming and salacious frenzy.

Kinship as expressed by the Black Nulla drag artists was evident in their acknowledgement of their families and ancestral



genealogies as existing prior to settlement, while also recognising their connections to Indigenous LGBTQI+ people and communities across the country. For Native American scholar Mark Rifkin, kinship and sovereignty are intertwined in Native American communities as each aims to disable social functions that do not readily fit the dominant narratives and ideologies within Anglo-settler states.<sup>30</sup> Kinship, like sovereignty, is a translation, both articulating Native [Indigenous] existence as polities that ‘precede and exceed’ the terms of settler state jurisdictions.<sup>31</sup> Black drag as an expression of sovereignty speaks to a need for a political identity and to emphasise its distinctiveness in creating space within dominant queer/drag aesthetics and traditions in Australia. This politic is most evident in the use of the colours of the Aboriginal flag, and in the satirical performances like Bogan Villea. It could also be seen in new creations and performances emerging from the 2019 workshop participants. Katie Leslie’s character Bran Nu Boi lip-synched to ‘Nothing I Would Rather Be’ from the famous black musical *Bran Nue Dae*, an upbeat song with an ironic message about the experience of colonial violence in Australia. Terrence Murphy created Carry on Kennerley, a parody of Kerri-Anne Kennerley, a famous and fading Australian daytime television host who had a history of racial blunders, especially relating to Aboriginal people. Her most recent controversy at the time was being accused of breaching the Australian Communications and Media Authority Code of Practice by provoking serious contempt of Indigenous people based on race, suggesting that there was endemic sexual abuse

in Indigenous communities. Television reporter Yumi Stynes publicly accused Kennerley of being racist.<sup>32</sup> Murphy's Carry on Kennerley persona was a dishevelled blonde wearing an 'I Love Yumi' T-shirt over a pink pinafore uniform, suggesting that Kennerley was nothing more than trumped-up, and ill-informed, 'white trash'.

## LEGACY

Black drag reminds us that queer Australia has a black history. Their legacy is a beacon for inclusion, and a celebration of black pride. They bring focus to the ongoing effects of colonisation on LGBTQI+ Indigenous people in their communities, and they do all this while seducing us with their bedazzled charm. In drawing on Western and European traditions of drag performance, black drag performers have created a new aesthetic, one that is deeply informed by their identity and pride as Indigenous people, by their connections to family, and in demonstrating a respect for culture. As the front-facing event of Koori Gras, the Black Nulla cabaret was the most attended by local audiences. However, it was the out-of-sight happenings such as the emerging artist development programmes, and the closed community gatherings, that had the most impact for the Indigenous LGBTQI+ artists and community leaders who participated in those events. We held space for the sharing of experiences and room to reflect on ways to strategically respond to current challenges in our communities. Space was also provided for intergenerational knowledge exchange and transfer

to occur between experienced drag artists and emerging performers.

In acknowledging that the event emerged from the First Nations LGBTQI+ community and that Moogahlin simply had carriage of the event for four years, in 2021 the project was handed back to community by creating space for similar events to emerge across Greater Sydney, such as *Kolour Me Kweer* – a kind of *Diva for a Day* event produced by Stevie Ross (Wamba Wamba) with Blacktown Arts in Sydney’s Western suburbs. A local queer bar in Redfern, the *Bearded Tit*, also recently curated a First Nations queer programme led by Graham Simms as part of the 2022 SGLMG Festival, though not in the official festival programme. It is no longer a surprise to see black drag artists perform at major LGBTQI+ events across Sydney, and today we now see a local Gadigal Elder dressed in drag performing a *Welcome to Country* at the opening ceremony of the SGLMG Festival. In recognition of and care for this legacy, I now list the key creative personnel and performers not mentioned in the article who contributed to the overall success of the many programmes that *Koori Gras* platformed.

## KOORI GRAS KEY CREATIVE PERSONNEL AND PERFORMERS

**Date:** Friday 23 – Sunday 25 February 2018

**Venue:** Carriageworks, Sydney

**Events:** *Koori Gras Development Workshops*: Facilitators were the Two-Spirit performance-maker Cherish Violet Blood

(Blackfoot) and musician Lacey Hill (Six Nations) from Turtle Island, Canada. Workshop artists included storyteller and filmmaker Bee Cruse (Yuin), dancer Katie Leslie (Kamilaroi), magician-performer Bana Hankin (Torres Strait Islander), and performance-makers Simone Saunders (Jawoyn) and Colin Kinchella (Kamilaroi).

*Black Nulla Cabaret*: MCs Nana Miss Koori and Miss Ellaneous, with Destiny Haz Arrived, the Dreamtime Divas plus workshop participants.

*An International Black Speakers Panel*: Making black queer performance. Facilitated by Dr Sandy O’Sullivan (Wiradjuri) with Cherish Violet Blood, Brian Fuata (Samoan) and myself.

*Black Point Community Dinner* on First Nations LGBTQTI+ issues in regional and remote areas of New South Wales and beyond.

**Date:** Friday 22 – Sunday 24 February 2019

**Venue:** Carriageworks, Sydney

**Curators:** Jinny Jane Smith (Bundjalung) and Graham Simms.

**Production:** Amber Silk and photographer Jamie James.

**Events:** *Creative Development Workshops*: Facilitated by Fez Fa’anana, Ben Graetz and Graham Simms. Participants included Katie Leslie (Bran Nu Boi), Terrence Murphy (Carry on Kennerley), Jayla Shae and Colin Kinchella (Bear

Essentials).

*SGLMG Panel:* On making black drag. Facilitated by Daniel Browning with Dallas Webster, Ben Greatz, and Shawn Cady.

*Black Nulla Cabaret:* Josephine Baker (Joseph Cardona, Gurindji/Malak Malak), Jo Jo Zaho (John Ridgway, Biripay), Nova Gina, MadB (Shawn Cady, Djabuganydji/Kaurareg), Destiny Haz Arrived, Chel Torres (Bana Hankin), Beedazzled Shanks – The Prince of Redfern (Bee Cruse), and Felicia Foxx (Wendell French, Kamilaroi), and workshop participants.

*Stephen Cummins Scholarship:* Moogahlin also partnered with Performance Space to offer one of the workshop participants a scholarship to participate in their Queer New Work programme. The winner of the 2019 scholarship was Bana Hankin.

*Black Point Community Dinner* on First Nations LGBTQI+ issues in regional and remote areas of New South Wales and beyond.

**Date:** Friday 21 – Sunday 23 February 2020

**Venue:** Seymour Centre

**Producer:** Sonny Dallas Law (Wakka Wakka), Jamie James (photographer) and Liv Anstis (Production Manager).<sup>33</sup>

**Events:** *Yellamundie Queer Black Writing development workshop.*<sup>34</sup>

Led by Pasifika playwright Victor Rodgers, these workshops explored the 2020 SGLMG theme What Matters.<sup>35</sup> Participants included Sonny Dallas Law (Qld), Bee Cruse, Jayla Shae, Aiden Rowlingson (Butchella, Qld), Shawn Caddy (ACT), and Bana Hankin, with self-funded guest Daley King (Maori). The Yellamundie Queer Black Writing presentations were held at the Seymour Centre Sound Lounge.

*Diva for a Day:* Facilitated by Ben Graetz, John Ridgeway and Graham Simms. The Diva for a Day format for community members to explore their hidden Drag King or Queen.

*Black Nulla Cabaret:* Co-curated by Graham Simms and Ben Graetz with Josie Baker, Beedazzled Shanks – The Prince of Redfern, Jo Jo Zaho, Destiny Haz Arrived, Chel Torres, and MadB, Anna Mai Tuckherbox (Palawa) and Shanequa (Tiwi Island).



**FIGURE 1:** KATIE LESLIE PERFORMING A WORKSHOP MONOLOGUE AT KOORI GRAS 2018 – BLACK NULLA CABARET AT CARRIAGEWORKS, SYDNEY. PHOTO BY JAMIE JAMES.



**FIGURE 2:** BEE CRUSE AS BEEDAZZLED SHANKS – THE PRINCE OF REDFERN. KOORI GRAS 2019 – BLACK NULLA CABARET AT CARRIAGEWORKS SYDNEY. PHOTO BY JAMIE JAMES.



**FIGURE 3:** BEN GRATZ AT KOORI GRAS 2019 – DRAG DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS AT CARRIAGEWORKS, SYDNEY. PHOTO BY JAMIE JAMES.



**FIGURE 4:** BEN GRAETZ AS MISS ELLANEOUS. KOORI GRAS 2019 – BLACK NULLA CABARET AT CARRIAGEWORKS, SYDNEY. PHOTO BY JAMIE JAMES.





**FIGURE 5:** JOHN RIDGEWAY AS JO JO ZAHO. KOORI GRAS 2019 – BLACK NULLA CABARET AT CARRIAGEWORKS, SYDNEY. PHOTO BY JAMIE JAMES.



**FIGURE 6:** GRAHAM SIMMS DRESSING FOR NANA MISS KOORI AT KOORI GRAS 2019 – BLACK NULLA CABARET. CARRIAGEWORKS, SYDNEY. PHOTO BY JAMIE JAMES.

NOTES

- 1 107 Projects is an artist-run venue in Redfern, an inner suburb of Sydney. Moogahlin Performing Arts is a New South Wales Aboriginal performing arts company and is in residence at Carriageworks, Redfern. Online: <https://www.moogahlin.org>.
- 2 Throughout this article I use the terms 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', 'Indigenous' and 'black' to refer collectively to the First Peoples of Australia and the Torres Strait. Where possible, I also identify individual clan affiliations of artists. I use the term 'Koori' when speaking about Aboriginal people of New South Wales. I use 'First Nations' in reference to First Nations communities of Turtle Island, Canada.
- 3 Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (London: Duke University Press, 2018) 4.
- 4 Sandy O'Sullivan, 'Saving Lives: Mapping the Power of LGBTIQ+ First Nations Creative Artists', *Social Inclusion* 9.2 (2021): 61–4.
- 5 Nat Woodall, 'Black Queerness: A Mutually-Assured Construction', *IndigenousX*, 26 January 2022. Online: <https://indigenoux.com.au/black-queerness-a-mutually-assured-construction/>.
- 6 'Two-spirit' refers to a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit and is used by some First Nations people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity.
- 7 The '78ers' are the participants in the protest events that took place in 1978. These include the first Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade on 24 June 1978, the protest at Darlinghurst Police Station and Central Police Station, 25 June 1978, and the protest at Central Court Sydney, 26 June 1978. Taken from website <https://www.78ers.org.au/the-78ers>.
- 8 Tim Bishop, *History of First Peoples Entries in the Sydney Mardi Gras Parade*. Online: <http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/590976/History-of-First-Peoples-entries-in-the-Sydney-Mardi-Gras-Parade/>.
- 9 Birribay country is located on the Mid-North Coast of New South Wales.
- 10 The meeting took place at 107 Projects, Redfern Street, Redfern, on 10 September 2016.
- 11 The video was edited and produced by Michela Ledwidge and Michael Agzarian.
- 12 The Moogahlin company leadership team included Lily Shearer, Fred Copperwaite and Liza-Mare Syron as Co-Artistic Directors and Alison Murphy Oats as Managing Director.
- 13 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 4.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Jonathon Moran, "'Hang Them Suckers'": Anthony Mundine's Offensive Anti-Gay Rant', *The West*, News Corp Australia, 9 February 2018. Online: <https://thewest.com.au/entertainment/tv/hang-them-suckers-anthony-mundines-offensive-anti-gay-rant-ng-cc3a0ef591c-1476c13efc838f495608b>.
- 16 Emily Nicole, 'Meet Miss Bogan Villea: The Beer-Loving, Footy Shorts-Wearing Drag Queen', *SBS*, 2 March 2018. Online: <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2018/02/27/meet-miss-bogan-villea-1>.
- 17 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 116.
- 18 Amalia Ziv, 'Performative Politics in Israeli Queer Anti-Occupation Activism', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16.4 (2010): 537–56.
- 19 Woodall, 'Black Queerness'.
- 20 Sandy O'Sullivan, 'Saving Lives', *Social Inclusion* 9.2 (2021): 63. Online: <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion/article/view/4347/0>.
- 21 The idea of 'kin' for First Nations Australians does not follow a Western understanding as defined through a paternalistic linear authority or origin (Name of the Father). Neither is 'kin' conceived in a manner described by

- Judith Butler in her chapter ‘Bodies That Matter’ (1993), in relation to ‘being named’ such as in the film *Paris Is Burning* (72). Instead, ‘kin’ is understood in Australia in terms of genealogy (family) and relationality (clan). However, there are families of choice such as ‘gay’ or ‘queer families’, and for many Indigenous Australians these families may also be viewed as ‘kin’.
- 22 Woodall, ‘Black Queerness’.
- 23 ‘Black LGBTQ Youth Mental Health Report Summary’, *The Trevor Project*, 13 March 2020. Online: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/black-lgbtq-youth-mental-health/>.
- 24 Damian Murphy, ‘Dreamtime Divas, and the Drag of Being a Drag Act in a Country Town’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 February 2017. Online: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/dreamtime-divas-and-the-drag-of-being-a-drag-act-in-a-country-town-20170216-guept8.html>.
- 25 *Baylin’s Gift*. Website: <http://www.baylinsgift.org/baylins-story>.
- 26 Dallas Webster interview with Andrew Creagh, ‘NAIDOC Week: All About Nova Gina’, *DNA* 241, 11 July 2020. Online: <https://www.dnamagazine.com.au/all-about-nova/>.
- 27 Briefs Factory is an Australian collective inspired by circus, drag, dance, burlesque, music and comedy. Briefs Factory develop and tour their brand of award-winning, genre-defying, political party punk around the world. Online: <https://www.briefsfactoryinternational.com.au/about>.
- 28 All photographs were taken with written permission from Black Nulla performers.
- 29 Bee Cruse, ‘More Blak Drag Queens and Kings’, *National Indigenous Television NITV*, 6 March 2022. Online: <https://fb.watch/bXLMD3LCaM/>.
- 30 Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 17.
- 31 *Ibid*, 18.
- 32 As reported by Amanda Meade, ‘Yumi Stynes’ Challenge to Kerri-Anne Kennerley Helps Clear Channel Ten of Racism’, *The Guardian*, 7 October 2019. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/oct/07/yumi-stynes-challenge-to-kerri-anne-kennerley-helps-clear-channel-ten-of-racism>.
- 33 Wakka Wakka country is in the Southwest of Queensland.
- 34 Yellamundi means ‘storyteller’ in the Bundjalung language of Northwest New South Wales. Yellamundi is the name of Moogahlin’s national creative development bi-annual festival.
- 35 Victor Rodger is a playwright and producer of Samoan (Iva) and Scottish (Dundee) descent. As a writer, he is best known for his award-winning play *Black Faggot*, which has been performed throughout New Zealand and internationally.

AN HIV LOVE STORY: JACOB  
BOEHME'S *BLOOD ON THE DANCE  
FLOOR'S* QUEER AND  
INDIGENOUS REVOLT

JACOB BOEHME, ALYSON CAMPBELL  
AND JONATHAN GRAFFAM

INTRODUCTION

This article is part of an ongoing conversation between Jacob Boehme, Alyson Campbell and Jonathan Graffam about Boehme's play *Blood on the Dance Floor* (Melbourne and Sydney, 2016; Australia and Canada tour, 2019),<sup>1</sup> and we see it now as a kind of queer collaborative musing that we are doing together to think through how the production works. While we have published some of our thinking on the play before,<sup>2</sup> we realised that none of

us was finished trying to articulate how it was created (Boehme), and the impact it had on us as spectators (Campbell and Graffam) and, indeed, that there was still so much to unravel in terms of its place in the context of queer performance in Australasia. In this article, we focus on key decisions made during the dramaturgical process of composing two sequences from the production, ‘Sandridge Beach’ and ‘Anthony’. In examining the production’s ‘dramaturgy’, we refer both to the structure and content of the piece and the processes of decision-making that are key to composing the work. While the term ‘dramaturgy’ is used to describe the selection of material in crafting and organising new work, on another level it seeks to make explicit the relationship between the artistic composition and the socio-political and cultural context in which the work is staged. There are multiple ways to approach any framing of *Blood on the Dance Floor (BOTDF)* – Indigenous identity, queerness and HIV – and, though we start from the perspective of queerness for this special issue, they are as inextricably interwoven and inseparable as the double helix of DNA. In our conversations for this article, what emerged most strongly from Jacob were ideas of love, the complexity – or, perhaps more precisely, absence – of Indigenous sexual lives from stage and other representational forms, and queer kinship.

## METHODOLOGY

We use a queerly hybrid methodology that incorporates autoethnography and performance analysis, drawing on recent waves of queer theory to trace threads through the work. We write collaboratively, but at times Jacob's individual voice comes through so that his perspective as the writer, performer and lead artist driving the work, and whose lived experience is the basis for the show, is anchored throughout. In adopting autoethnographic modes of writing to trace the emotional and embodied experience of the performer (Boehme) and audience (via Campbell and Graffam), we jump at times between first and last names to better capture and inflect the personal nature of such reflections.<sup>3</sup> In this way, we (auto) ethnographically trace the queer aspects of making *BOTDF* and its encounter with audiences.

For this article, we explore the distinctly queer dramaturgical strategies employed by Boehme in staging the production and position these against a history of HIV and AIDS theatre and performance and Indigenous representation. It is not our intention to separate ideas of queer/ness or queer performance from Indigenous methodologies and identity or HIV experience. Instead, we aim to identify how these layers exist together as the dramaturgical fabric of the work, functioning simultaneously to convey meaning and affect, and consider how it is functioning in unique, new and vital ways.

## CONTEXT: INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCE AND HIV

There is very little writing from within or around Indigenous performance about HIV.<sup>4</sup> A report recently made available (with open access) via the Figshare repository by authors Campbell and Graffam, with their research partner Jennifer Audsley, identifies major gaps that exist in the field: first, in the way that traditional (colonial) methods have previously failed, and are continuing to fail, at recording and documenting examples of live performance in this area; and second, that historically such performance work is most usually bound up in targeted health campaigns, so it appears that Boehme's production might be the only example of Indigenous Australian theatre examining an experience of living with HIV made specifically for the arts sector.<sup>5</sup>

Jacob describes his dream audience for the piece: queer, Aboriginal and living with HIV. In reality, he notes that he performed mostly for straight white people; however, his drive was to find ways to speak to, or touch, that dream audience. This drive becomes more and more apparent as we dig away at the layers of dramaturgical decision-making in the process of making *BOTDF*, and there is value for us in returning to select moments for further analysis, especially in adopting a queer theoretical lens. Distinct findings emerge that broaden our collective understanding of how the work functions, and how Boehme's queer identity has shaped the dramaturgical composition; importantly, for Jacob this leads to realisations about his practice being intrinsically queer and how this queerness interrelates with Indigeneity and Indigenous performance.

The *BOTDF* creative team consists of writer and performer Boehme, director Isaac Drandic, choreographer Mariaa Randall, spatial designer Jenny Hector, sound designer James Henry and videographer Keith Deverell. The team draw on a multidisciplinary practice to stage Jacob's stories, weaving together elements of ceremony, theatre, dance, monologue and moving image, consistently drawing in traditional Aboriginal modes of performance. Jacob switches character fluidly and frequently and, importantly, often addresses the audience directly as himself.

JACOB: To define what might constitute the Indigenous-led, informed or embodied dramaturgies and/or performance making methodologies the creative team drew on during the making of *BOTDF*, perhaps I first need to distinguish the differences between Indigenous process and Indigenous performance, in particular, performed Indigeneity. In traditional and customary dance practices, danced across lands now known as Australia, in a larger ceremony or song cycle, the song you hear ignites facts and memories of the story, which links to a place, landmark, boundary or territory, in part visually represented in the body paintings on an individual dancer. This identifies his relationship to that story through matrilineal, patrilineal, skin or totemic kinship, by symbols and design, and is further defined by and in direct relationship to his place or belonging to the story, by the sister, cousin-sister, aunty, mother, who dances behind him with specific hand and arm placements that signify to you the audient, her relationship to him.



This complex series of simultaneous symbols and signs found in one song, one dance, within a wider song cycle of traditional Aboriginal ceremony, articulates an attempt in this work at embodying Indigenous dramaturgical processes, derived from cultural and ceremonial dance training, which guided the creation and creative team of *BOTDF* but for a Western theatre stage. It is a framework that draws on notions of place and identity, of belonging to community and country, and of kinship. It speaks to Indigenous knowing and knowledge systems based in the collective, the circle and connectivity.

This framework determined ways in which script writing was approached, or rather, ‘scoring’, as I came to call it. It guided directorial decisions in how we staged and ordered ‘episodes’ in the script and it manifested itself in our approach to making choreography. It also contributed to the aesthetic and storytelling choices and conventions, realised in the form of a cinema screen which became a proxy for the body paint I otherwise would have worn had we produced a more ‘traditional’ form of ceremony.

The performance is intentionally missing theatrical tropes we have come to associate with both traditional cultural events and contemporary Indigenous dance and theatre: gum leaves, smoke, ochre, regional footwork and dance styles. To steer away from these obvious and expected tropes by using a hybrid form of traditional dance for Western stages was

probably the boldest application of Indigenous dramaturgy that the team implemented and adhered to. In order for us to find our authentic selves and an Indigenous dramaturgical approach which honoured the team's origins – a mixed team of Indigenous creative leads belonging to nations and clan groups from across the country – we deliberately avoided the *performance of* Indigeneity, but rather strove to build foundations in the work's dramaturgy, conventions and approach that drew on over sixty thousand years of ceremonial performance and creation.

Building from this analysis of how Jacob understands his dramaturgy and making methods as Indigenous, we (authors) can draw some parallels with what it is to make queer work, or make work queerly. In turning now towards 'queer', the argument arises for us that in terms of functioning to resist 'normative' traditions of Western theatre, Indigenous and queer dramaturgies become sisters, working dually towards the decolonisation and subversion of theatre spaces and practices that have historically marginalised Indigenous and queer peoples, poking at the established status quo from multiple angles. For Jacob, challenging his own ideas, challenging collaborators, venues, the creative process and producers was a constant rallying against heteronormative and colonial theatre-making conventions and expectations. Instead of distinguishing between Indigenous and queer dramaturgies, we prioritise tracing how Jacob's own queer ori-

entations and/or sensibility – particularly as gay/queer, Blak and poz – simultaneously drive the content and artistic choices through a deeply personal, embodied and *felt* approach to making. We move to two selected moments from the production to conduct our analysis.

### ‘SANDRIDGE BEACH’

Our first moment is the ‘Sandridge Beach’ sequence. To introduce it, Jonno, who is a white, gay, cis-male theatre-maker, reflects on his experience as an audience member. We use this – Jonno’s embodied recount – to position the relationship between the queer material, its queerly affective aesthetic form and a particular, personal, reception from a gay/queer spectator. We weave excerpts from the *BOTDF* script through Jonno’s writing to offer the reader a better sense of how the performance’s textual and material components function together. For accuracy, Jonno has accessed a video recording of the production to inform his descriptions while holding firmly on to his original in-person experience of the work. This description is then situated alongside Boehme’s intentions for making the sequence and an examination of how queer impulses drive the writing and underpin the aesthetic composition of its performance.

JONNO: From darkness, projected visuals fade in, filling the entire scenic backdrop of the stage: a fading sun reflecting off the lapping waves of a shoreline. A figure stands onstage in darkness, shadowed by

the dim projected light. An ominous sub-bass thumps through the space, paired with high-pitched ringing and synthesizer, casting an unsettling effect over the visuals. The soundscape builds and cascades – a swirling effect – and through this sonic movement a heartbeat can be heard. Warm light comes up on the figure standing still onstage, performer Boehme, his speech carrying over the soundscape:

Sandridge Beach  
 2am  
 A new moon  
 A million eyes spark above  
 Streetlights flicker  
 Trucks and cranes  
 Out on the Port  
 Been into the night.<sup>6</sup>

Night-time visuals emerge and dissolve in projections behind Boehme: city lights over the water, a sandy beach, streetlights overhead, trees and leaves – coalescing and blurring in sudden, staggered movements. The performer's voice rises and his pace quickens,

She-oaks and tea trees  
 Become prowling men  
 Snapping twigs  
 Keep the nerve on guard

Cologne  
Piss  
Clouds of amyl  
Anal sex  
Rabbits and fags  
You can smell them  
Hiding  
Hunting  
You feel their stares  
Their breath  
Panting  
On the back of your neck

Sitting in the audience my throat tightens and my back arches in discomfort. This feeling is all too familiar. The sexual tension and drive of this moment is rising. And boy have I been here before. It's all the times I've not been able to control the urge, the thumping and insatiable desire. It's the familiar gay male hunt. I look online. I go to parks and beaches. I go to bars and clubs. I go wherever I can. I'm looking to fuck. Reckless, dangerous, 'out of character' – I don't care. I need it and I'm gonna get it. But in this moment of performance, *we're* gonna get it: *we're* on the prowl. *We're* looking to get fucked. We're in this moment together, with Jacob.

Boehme's poetic vocals continue,

You weave and duck around trees  
Stumble across men on their knees  
Tragic old queer cock in hand  
Too old for luck  
Too old to fuck  
Tall dark shadow leans against a tree  
Shoulders broad  
Rounded chest  
Long strong arms  
Long lean legs  
The perfect stranger  
Draws you in  
Soft lips  
Spearmint  
A rush of blood to your skin  
He grabs your waist  
You slam his hips  
Rip off his shirt  
He throws off yours  
His armpits are ripe  
Sunblock lingers on skin  
Hands like spiders  
Creep down your back  
A tentative finger tests the edge  
You signal,

'Yes'  
Blood racing  
He works his way in  
Blood pumping  
You buckle again  
Then  
Deeper  
Constant  
Deeper  
Slow  
Constant  
Steady  
Deep  
Ready  
'Fuck me, please'  
'You want it?'  
'Yes, fuck me'  
'Raw? ... Are you Clean?'

The sound design coalesces into something of a drum and bass track: bass and sub-bass lines are heavily overlaid with a range of synthesizer samples. It's reminiscent of what you encounter at a seedy, underground basement club at 3 a.m. while wired on cocaine, pills and/or the cheap thrill of raw lust. Here, Boehme merges the outdoor hunt for sex with indoor, early hours (twilight) queer club energy.

Post-date fuck  
Invites you up  
Candles burn  
Making love  
On the bed, the couch  
The kitchen floor  
'Man, I'd love to fuck you raw  
Are you clean?'  
In the club 3 a.m.  
A wink  
A nod  
You follow him in  
A chemical rough  
Against the door  
He wants it raw  
'Are you clean?'  
Online bud  
Wants to hook up  
Digs your pic  
He's free  
And quick  
Are you clean?  
Are you clean?  
Are you clean?



The tension builds to the point it transforms into something beyond intense sexual energy and spills into rage. Boehme, who has so far stood still, lifts his arm and points a finger at individual audience members: ‘Are you clean? Are you clean? Are you clean?’ His voice and finger quiver with anger, he crosses the front of the stage staring unflinchingly out at his audience.

This is the moment the performance reaches its first affective climax.

As the music hits its peak and as Boehme continues to point and shout, ‘Are you clean?’ there is a slow slide of synthesizer, the intensity of the bass and sub-bass lowers and the visual projections fade to black. The moment, the *feeling*, is changing, a pressure valve is turned: relief. Boehme stands in silence, breathing. He speaks,

T-Cells on guard  
He turns, pulls away  
Catches your eye  
There it is  
That look  
Pity  
And fear  
They always run

Lingering sub-bass notes carry through this, entwined with something of an abstracted siren – a slow, pain-filled wailing that sits

underneath his poetic text. Disembodied voices fill the space, pre-recorded and playing over the speakers. The warm light over Boehme's front dissolves and is replaced by a cold profile that catches him from the side and casts a shadow over half of his body. He stands still. The voices and phrases continue, they are repeated and begin to overlap, surrounding Jacob and filling the entire performance space.

'We could've been really good together'

'I think you're a great guy'

'Can we be friends?'

'But you don't look sick'

'Yeah, I like to top but I'm mainly a bottom. How's this gonna work?'

'You didn't use my toothbrush, did ya?'

'You fucken sick cunt'

'You're the ones that give us all a bad name'

'If I see you online again, I'll let them all know exactly what you are: a fucking vampire'

A reverb effect is added to the voices, giving the sequence a surreal quality. Close-up shots of a male figure appear in flash projections behind Boehme: a neck scratch, a rubbing of the chest, a turn of the head. Jacob remains still in the centre of it all. The disembodied voices gather and repeat, building and blending together into one vicious assault. In this culmination, the increasingly

reverb-altered voices coalesce so that while the voices themselves eventually fall away, the sound carries on and transforms into a form of vibrational energy that, to describe it, resembles something like the force of a freight train coming straight for us. The soundscape hits a peak and suddenly plunges into silence while, simultaneously, the visual close-up of an eye flashes on the screen behind Boheme.

We, the audience, sit with Boehme through these shifts as the performance reaches its second affective climax in a sequence that lasts a total of less than six minutes.

Since attending the performance at Arts House in 2016, this particular sequence has stayed vivid in my embodied memory of it: a sense of danger and thrill in the seeking of random sex; the imagined smell of amyl, sweat and anal sex against she-oak and eucalyptus; an increase in my breath; perspiration and heat around my neck; the nauseating turn of the gut as Boehme shouts, 'Are you clean?'; the brief lapse into calmness before another intense sonic and visual episode that leaves my mind shuttering, overwhelmed and under attack; and, finally, remembering feeling an exhaustive collapse into rest as the production once again adopts a slow and relatively calmer tone as it moves out of this moment and into something else.

## QUEER DRAMATURGY

To skip from the perspective of spectator back to Jacob as maker, in discussion it emerges that this sequence is one that nearly did not

make the dramaturgical cut. It caused some discomfort, or maybe confusion, among the creative team and, in piecing this together in retrospect, Jacob notes that he was the only queer person in a team of mostly straight/heterosexual Indigenous artists. As such, he was obliged to articulate the queer need for this moment that his collaborators might deem ‘too gay’, ‘slightly pornographic’, ‘too explicit’. Here we start to find the crux of what it means to be a queer maker bringing that perspective into the room. Years of watching straight sex and ‘romance’ have made it still so necessary to see ourselves as queer people on stages and screens (of all sizes). For Jacob, this raw, unashamed celebration of the hunt was vital.

**JACOB:** It feels sometimes like we, as Indigenous peoples, portray ourselves as part of a canon of archetypes or Indigenous theatre tropes. Not one of them is sexualised. If they are, they are usually domestic servants and female victims of rape, or drunken male perpetrators. Rarely is our sexuality celebrated without drugs, without alcohol, or without force. This was one of the reasons to really advocate for the ‘Sandridge Beach’ sequence to remain in the work. It’s very much a celebration of the hunt, a celebration of cis-male gay sexual behaviour: unashamed, raw and unapologetic.

## AFFECT STICKS

From an audience perspective, we feel it in various ways: familiarity for some, the unfamiliar for others. It is as this moment moves towards its climax that there is a specific familiarity – recognisable only to the dream audience Jacob is making the work for – of the stigma, shame, violence and rejection of living with HIV. Empathy and other traits of ‘character’ and identification are in there, but the particular affective and verbal structuring of sequence means that any of us who sit outside that specific group are still obliged to *feel* it, to be placed in that moment and understand in a new way the impact of the repetition of judgement and rejection. This feeling emerges through both the affective builds that Jonno has evoked so viscerally, but also through a semantic switch in the narrative that moves the protagonist from ‘I’ to ‘you’. We discuss this idea in our previous publication<sup>7</sup> but it’s worth reiterating here in terms of the queering taking place. The dramaturgical sleight of hand – placing the audience on the receiving end of that brutalising question, ‘Are you clean?’, disorients us. How did I (audience member) end up here? When did it flip? Your brain can’t quite catch up – but we know something happened, it felt *different*.

We keep coming back to the ‘Sandridge Beach’ sequence because of its lasting impact on us. We understand this has to do with its affect and what affect theorist Brian Massumi would refer to as the strength of the image: visual, aural, verbal – however that image is composed – making an impact that is initially ungraspable,

but which insists on returning to be dealt with through what he calls a ‘backward referral in time’.<sup>8</sup> It’s not that these intense images are meaningless; on the contrary, the affective strength means it lingers with us demanding to be made sense of. Feminist theatre scholar Elaine Aston theorises this kind of impact as producing a ‘post-theatrical sequel’.<sup>9</sup> Writing about Sarah Kane, whose work was widely misinterpreted early on as having no political aim, Aston writes:

[A]s [she] considered that contact with ‘art’/theatre could bring about change, this meant that she worked with a view to theatre having a post-theatrical sequel: a reawakening of perception, an invitation to see differently.<sup>10</sup>

Queer feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed’s essay ‘Happy Objects’ also offers us ways to understand how affect works here. She writes, ‘Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects’.<sup>11</sup> In this particular essay, Ahmed notes ‘the slide between affective and moral economies’, identifying as ‘affect aliens’ those who do not reproduce normative values: ‘feminist kill-joys, unhappy queers, and melancholic migrants’.<sup>12</sup>

In examining the ‘Sandridge Beach’ moment, we posit that Jacob places himself in the risky role of affect alien: the queer, Indigenous man with HIV who is angry and hurt and makes sure the audience knows it; makes sure they *feel* it. It is perilous for a performer to be the affect alien, as this risks the ‘good will’ of their

audience (let's call it good will for now), or 'kills their joy'. But in *BOTDF*, Jacob makes use of affect to work as contagion<sup>13</sup> or as what Campbell and co-writer Dirk Gindt have called 'viral dramaturgies',

The term 'viral dramaturgies' is indebted to sexuality and English studies scholar Tim Dean's study of barebacking culture in which he conceives material and metaphoric 'viral consanguinity' as a new, experimental form of (gay) kinship that turns 'strangers into relatives' (2009: 91). We suggest that the affective potential of live performance might also be thought of as a mode of turning 'strangers into relatives': dramaturgically, performance works like a virus as it moves initially into the individual body's system, producing change at a physiological level, such as shifts in body temperature, hairs standing on end or an increase in heartbeat, as theatre phenomenologists and affect theorists would argue (Gilbert 2004; Massumi 2002; States 1985, 2007).<sup>14</sup>

As outlined above, this affect does not float aimlessly, but returns to insist on sense-making. In the meantime, however, as queer performance theorists Jill Dolan<sup>15</sup> and José Muñoz<sup>16</sup> would argue, these intense moments of performance can produce affective communities, in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public.<sup>17</sup>

As a theatre-maker – a queer as well as Indigenous one –

Jacob knows both how to build this affective community *and* how to structure this moment of affective alienation from it within the wider dramaturgy of the whole piece. Building a sense of affective community might include the moments of humour, particularly at the start; direct eye contact and speech; and close physical connection, by starting in among the audience. The affect alien does not present as ‘so queer’ or so angry throughout the whole show, but allows moments of vulnerability and lightness to keep us with him and bring us up to and out the other side of this moment alongside, rather than against, him. In this way he can be simultaneously affect alien and generous guide through this experience of being the affect alien.

### ‘ANTHONY’ – QUEER KINSHIP AND LOVE

We turn now to our second moment from the work, a sequence in *BOTDF* titled ‘Anthony’. Importantly, this moment follows another in the show that has the character Jake conversing with his father; Boehme performs this by shifting between embodying them both. The father requests that when he passes, Jake take him to country, lay him in a boat, light it on fire, and send it off into the horizon. ‘Your sister and brother might want to come too, ey? ... But you gotta organise it. You. The eldest son of the eldest son of the eldest son.’<sup>18</sup> A soundscape of abstracted choral chanting (the voice of singer Charley Pride) sits under this scene and continues as Boehme sits crossed-legged, hands-on-knees, staring out to his audience. His face is bathed in the warm



glow of light which casts shadow over his body. Behind him a campfire is projected in black and white – flames dancing and flickering. He speaks softly and slowly, his words heavy in the air:

**JAKE:** Anthony. Beautiful dancer. Limbs long and sinewy, like a grasshopper.

And eyes! Beautiful green eyes too good to be on a man, women would kill for 'em. We'd go to the Shift every Friday after class, same table, by the window, perfect spot to catch every passing bit of trade. Donna Summer blaring, disco lights going off like it's 3 a.m. Something's up.

'What's wrong with you?' 'Nothing' 'What's up?'

'I got my results back ...' I look at him. He turns to me and says 'That. That look. I don't want that. I don't need anyone's fuckin' pity. I don't want that look, right.' I didn't know what to say. I'd never ... I hadn't come across ... Week later he asks me to drive him back to his country. He wanted to go back to country. We get there and his family calls him sick, disown him, ask us to leave. Month later, there he is, in his bedroom hanging from the ceiling fan. They allow me to collect him from the morgue. When I get there, they give me two garbage bags. They cut him up for research. Took everything. Took his liver, his kidneys, took his lungs, just sliced him up. They even took his eyes, those beautiful green eyes.

I just wanted to give him a hug. All that was left of him was two cheap, black garbage bags. And then he was gone. Disappeared. No one ever mentioned his death. And no one ever spoke his name again. Anthony.<sup>19</sup>

We focus on ‘Anthony’ in a turn toward ideas of queer kinship and love. Such discourse sits strategically and usefully next to notions of familial kinship, just as Boehme positions Anthony’s story alongside those of his own blood-relatives.

Anthony’s story and Boehme’s memories of the relationship that the two shared were a significant driver behind Boehme’s commitment to making *BOTDF*. It was another sequence that was highly scrutinised by his non-queer collaborators, with the suggestion it be cut from the show due to its apparent lack of dramaturgical cohesion with the rest of the content. But, as Boehme articulates, as well as acknowledging Anthony’s story, and his influence on the creation of *BOTDF*, there are too many vital ideas and feelings raised in this moment for queer and HIV-positive audiences that may not necessarily be apparent to collaborators (or audiences) who are not involved in gay/queer and HIV communities. Jacob’s writing here chimes again with ideas of the affect alien.

JACOB: In the show up until this point – not just with Percy, the melodramatic drag queen who opens it, but also the character Jake, who we meet once Percy disrobes and becomes them – I am affecting

the trope of the ‘funny gay’, a ‘normal gay’, one of the ones that is easily digestible. For me, as a writer, performer, and as a queer and Indigenous man living with HIV, I feel I get released from this when I talk about Anthony. It is the one time I get to be queer, Indigenous and HIV-positive without it having to be tokenistic, an issue, or a box. When I talk about Anthony, his death, and the life I knew with him, it feels like all those identities come together in this moment. It’s in depicting chosen family, specifically for Blak queer community living with HIV. While it’s a celebration of those chosen families, it’s also an exposé of the failure of Blak community: the ignorance and willful discrimination of the ‘other’, and the effects of colonisation on this. Aboriginal communities have become so Christianised that homosexuality, which was once acceptable, has now become condemned because of Christian and colonial influence. Importantly, Anthony’s story in the work is also not about queer sex or desire, it’s about queer love and kinship. Every time we encounter a story that ‘memorializes’ HIV, or those who have died from AIDS, it’s about sex and shame. I wanted this to be an HIV love story, not an HIV death story or sex story.

Boehme’s desire to write a ‘new’ version of an HIV play – an HIV love story – sits purposefully against popular mainstream artistic representations of the AIDS crisis typically framed through the gay white male lens (see, for instance: *It’s a Sin*; *Holding the Man*; *Angels in America*).<sup>20</sup> Following activist and author Sarah Schulman,

Campbell and Gindt argue that such works can be seen as part of a ‘process of gentrification, or a selective amnesia that sanitises, rationalises and normalises the narrative, potentially producing a misleading representation of the AIDS crisis and eliding the ongoing conditions of living with HIV’.<sup>21</sup> While a nostalgic turn back to this era might permit what Schulman terms a ‘disallowed grief’,<sup>22</sup> for artists living with HIV, like Boehme, a burning question remains: why not write stories about now, about a contemporary HIV moment? Literary and HIV activist scholar Marty Fink suggests, ‘Telling and retelling easily accessible stories can obscure the violence of erasing histories that are harder to find’.<sup>23</sup> Staging Anthony’s story, within the wider framing of the *BOTDF* production, can thus be seen as a refusal from Boehme to allow Blak queer lives – and stories – to be violently discarded and buried by dominant HIV and AIDS narratives. We also posit that such caretaking of queer and HIV (hi)stories constitutes an act of queer/HIV kinship and love.

In *Families We Choose*, anthropologist Kath Weston proposes that lesbians and gays align themselves with and within ‘families of choice’, which sit in distinction to ‘biological family’.<sup>24</sup> As Elizabeth Freeman posits, for Weston such chosen families do not seek to imitate or replicate biological families but their constitution ‘appropriates and transforms the terminology of “straight” kinship, emphasizing the elements of freedom, creativity and flexibility ... Gay kinship, then, transforms rather than merely derives from its heterosexual corollaries.’<sup>25</sup> Queer interventions in kinship studies thus demand new models of family, the recognition of

friends as family, and a reimagining of the roles that queer people take up in family. Scholar Jack Halberstam advocates for the forgetting of ‘family’ altogether to allow for other modes of relating, belonging and caring.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on a selection of popular films, Halberstam illustrates that in many communities (including wild animals), the collective will and survival of a population forces individuals to adapt or abandon their familial roles according to their needs or those of others. This shift towards community and away from familial units can be understood as vital for the survival and longevity of queer people.

Crucially, the notion of adaptability and shifting relational dynamics within queer chosen family points to the kinds of caretaking that are necessarily carried out and shared by individuals at different times. In *Forget Burial: HIV Kinship, Disability and Queer/Trans Narratives of Care*, Fink asserts that HIV-chosen families, particularly within Black, Indigenous, and other minority and underserved communities in the United States, emerged as a grass-roots response to the devastating failures of biological families, government and health services, and were essential for meeting their medical needs.<sup>27</sup> The HIV narratives unearthed by Fink through archival work

also uncover disappointments about inadequate care and the harm that occurs when care fails. HIV narratives thus further expose the ways in which capitalism and neoliberalism, racism and colonialism, and anti-queer and anti-trans violence create barriers to giving and receiving mutual care.<sup>28</sup>

Anthony's story, as told in *BOTDF*, can be understood as a powerful example of a series of devastating failures of care by biological family, non-queer Indigenous community, governments and health services – in his death but also in the refusal to acknowledge or mourn his death. In opposition to this, the patrilineal expectation set up by Boehme of caretaking for the father's funeral ceremony appears natural and expected of the 'eldest son of the eldest son of the eldest son' – an honour. Anthony, however, is forgotten, erased and discarded. Jacob, then, is not only caretaker for Anthony's physical remains but, in insisting on the inclusion of Anthony's story in *BOTDF*, as a theatre-maker he is taking on a (queer) role of caretaking for his memory. Jacob ensures that Anthony's name is not forgotten – that it is spoken, kept alive in the world – and, by telling his story in such a way, Anthony's life is unburied, unhidden, brought into the present, and celebrated in a moment of queer/HIV kinship and love.

## CONCLUSION

Having lingered again on the 'Sandridge Beach' and 'Anthony' sequences, after obsessively – perhaps queerly – returning to them over and over again, we are hoping through this article to identify and celebrate how queerness inflects Jacob's dramaturgical decision-making and, ultimately, the way the performance works for/on audiences (dream or otherwise) through its affective strength. While the article responds to an ongoing gap in literature surrounding

Indigenous Australian performance on HIV and AIDS, Jacob's articulation of contemporary Indigenous dramaturgies and the queer impulses driving his creative adaptation/evolution of traditional and customary Aboriginal dance forms in making this work stands on its own as a new and vital contribution to theatre and performance scholarship. *BOTDF* is a crucial part of the lineage of queer performance in Australasia, taking up space for Blak, queer and HIV histories in mainstage environments and touring internationally, remembering queer kinships and simultaneously creating new ones.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the *Blood on the Dance Floor* team: Isaac Drandic, Mariaa Randall, James Henry, Keith Deverell, Jenny Hector, Kelsey Henderson, Rinske Ginsberg, Chris Mead, Mari Lourey, Brad Spolding, ILBIJERRI Theatre Company and Insite Arts International. Thanks also to the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, for funding Campbell's time on this work through a Research Acceleration Program grant. Graffam's time is supported by a Monash Graduate Excellence Scholarship and Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

## NOTES

- 1 *Blood on the Dance Floor (BOTDF)* premiered at Arts House in North Melbourne in June 2016, followed closely by a season at Carriageworks as part of Sydney Festival. Boehme toured the production to Canada in early 2019, where it was programmed in a range of Indigenous performance festivals, and later the same year toured the work to Darwin, Canberra, Adelaide and Melbourne, as well as a range of smaller cities and locations across Australia. The production proved highly successful by both community and industry standards; see, for instance: Cameron Woodhead, 'Blood on the Dance Floor Review: Artistry Resounds with the Pulse of Life', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/stage/blood-on-the-dance-floor-review-jacob-boehmes-artistry-resounds-with-the-pulse-of-life-20160602-gp9onj.html>.
- 2 An interview with Boehme about *BOTDF* has previously been published by Campbell and Graffam in the volume *Viral Dramaturgies: HIV and AIDS in Performance in the Twenty-First Century* (2018). In that chapter, we frame a conversation that is focused more closely on articulating the Indigenous methodologies and processes for decolonising the rehearsal space undertaken by Boehme and team. While there are some overlaps in terms of the moments of performance selected for analysis between the chapter and this article, we are careful to clarify throughout what has previously been covered while orienting our discussion now towards queer/ness and the queer dramaturgical strategies used in the making process. See Alyson Campbell and Jonathan Graffam, 'Blood, Shame, Resilience and Hope: Indigenous Theatre Maker Jacob Boehme's *Blood on the Dance Floor*', in *Viral Dramaturgies: HIV and AIDS in Performance in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alyson Campbell and Dirk Gindt (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) 343–65.
- Campbell and Graffam have recently completed a project with Jennifer Audsley that documents a history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities exploring HIV in theatre and performance work for health promotion purposes, education, or for the arts sector. The report aims to provide a useful background and history of the field for Indigenous Australian artists making work in the area. See Jonathan Graffam, Jennifer Audsley and Alyson Campbell, *HIV and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performance: A Context and Background to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performance Work Around HIV*, University of Melbourne, 2022. Report. DOI: [10.26188/623be75924913](https://doi.org/10.26188/623be75924913).
- Ethics approval for this research is from The University of Melbourne, ID: 1748612. The responsible researchers are Alyson Campbell, [alyson.campbell@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:alyson.campbell@unimelb.edu.au), and Jennifer Audsley, [jennifer.audsley@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:jennifer.audsley@unimelb.edu.au).
- 3 Campbell and Graffam have used this methodology in their work on *Cake Daddy* (2018–19) with lead artist Ross Anderson-Doherty; see: Ross Anderson-Doherty, Alyson Campbell and Jonathan Graffam, 'Baking Cake Daddy: Transforming Fat-Phobia to Fat-Positivity with a Slice of Fat-Queer Subversive Fun to Fatten the Stage', *Fat Studies* (2022): 1–18, DOI: [10.1080/21604851.2022.2049494](https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2022.2049494).
- 4 Graffam, Audsley and Campbell, *HIV and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performance*.
- 5 Ibid, 30.
- 6 Excerpts from Jacob Boehme, *Blood on the Dance Floor* script (2016–19). A full copy of the script can be purchased here: <https://apt.org.au/product/blood-on-the-dance-floor-2/>.
- 7 Campbell and Graffam, 'Blood, Shame, Resilience and Hope', 356–7.
- 8 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2002).
- 9 Elaine Aston, *Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights, 1990–2000*



- (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 83.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Sara Ahmed, 'Happy Objects', in Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) 29–51, at 29.
- 12 Ibid, 30.
- 13 Ahmed sets out the idea of affect as contagion succinctly, noting a line of scholars following on mainly from psychologist Silvan Tomkins, for example: Anna Gibbs, 'Contagious Feelings: Pauline Hanson and the Epidemiology of Affect', *Australian Humanities Review* 24 (2001): <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org>; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Performativity, Pedagogy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). See Ahmed, 'Happy Objects', 39.
- 14 Alyson Campbell and Dirk Gindt, 'Viral Dramaturgies: HIV and AIDS in Performance in the Twenty-First Century', in *Viral Dramaturgies: HIV and AIDS in Performance in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alyson Campbell and Dirk Gindt (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) 3–46, at 8–9.
- 15 Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Jill Dolan, 'Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative"', *Theatre Journal* 53.3 (2001): 455–79.
- 16 José Estaban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); José Estaban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN, and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 17 Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 2.
- 18 Boehme, *Blood on the Dance Floor* script.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Peter Hoar (dir.), *It's a Sin* (Red Production Company, 2021); Tim Conigrave, *Holding the Man* (Australia, Penguin Group, 1996); and film version, Neil Armfield (dir.), *Holding the Man* (Screen Australia, 2015); Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, 2 vols (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993–96); and TV miniseries, Mike Nichols (dir.), *Angels in America* (HBO, 2003).
- 21 Campbell and Gindt, 'Viral Dramaturgies', 22.
- 22 Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012) 46.
- 23 Marty Fink, *Forget Burial: HIV Kinship, Disability and Queer/Trans Narratives of Care* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2021) 7.
- 24 Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- 25 Elizabeth Freeman, 'Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory', in George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (eds), *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 295–314, at 304.
- 26 Jack (Judith) Halberstam, 'Forgetting Family: Queer Alternatives to Oedipal Relations', in George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (eds), *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 315–24.
- 27 Fink, *Forget Burial*.
- 28 Ibid, 8.

# TRACING TRANSITIONS

STACE CALLAGHAN AND LEAH MERCER

## INTRODUCTION

This part-interview, part-recollection/reflection between trans-masculine, non-binary queer theatre-maker Stace Callaghan and their long-term collaborator, director and creative practice researcher, Leah Mercer, was conducted via a series of curated online conversations in early 2022. Stace and Leah met as undergraduates majoring in Drama at the University of Queensland in 1989 and have continued to collaborate on and off since then.

Since 1994, Stace has specialised in writing/performing solo shows that reflect their personal, political, spiritual and creative explorations of gender and sexuality. ‘Tracing Transitions’ reflects on Stace’s four original solo works: *still raw* (1994–95); *when I was a boy*<sup>1</sup> (2000–01); *between heaven & earth* (2002–03 and 2006); and *Queer as Flux*<sup>2</sup> (2021); as well, it reflects on their freelance work with

companies as diverse as Party Line and La Boite Theatre and school touring performances.

What emerges from this conversation is the imperative that Stace's solo works be life-affirming, with a dramaturgical throughline that everyone is constantly transitioning. The recurring performance strategies across Stace's work include humour, heightened physicality, audience intervention and politicising the personal. Since this article tracks Stace's performance of their shape-shifting identities and critical and audience responses to their trans body and their body of work, the reader will note the changing language of Stace's identity markers – from boy to woman to trans-masc and from lesbian to dyke to queer. Throughout this article, we have included hyperlinks to relevant production footage and photographs to enhance the reader's understanding of what's being discussed.

One measure of the shift in trans visibility and increased accessibility to more mainstream audiences is that after seasons at Brisbane Powerhouse and The Blue Room Theatre in Perth, Stace's most recent work, *Queer as Flux*, has now been programmed as part of the Sydney Opera House UnWrapped season, 24–26 November 2022.

LEAH: Let's begin by talking about your initial impetus to devise autobiographical one-person shows ...

STACE: In the early 1990s I wasn't seeing myself reflected in any plays, movies or television shows. On the rare occasion that a boyish, queer character appeared, they usually met a tragic ending (think, *Boys*

*Don't Cry*). I'd previously performed in two solo shows, *Princess* by Carl Miller and *The Same Old Story* by Franca Rame and Dario Fo. The political and feminist nature of these works inspired me to creatively explore my own gender and sexual identities.

The first of my autobiographical solo plays, *still raw*, was created as part of a creative practice-led Honours degree I undertook at the University of New England (UNE). The late Professor Adrian Kiernander had a profound influence on me in my undergrad degree at the University of Queensland, both as an inspiring lecturer and a proudly out gay man. He encouraged me to follow him to Armidale and nurtured the creative and academic investigation of my unfolding queer identity.

In my readings on gender, feminist and performance theory, I was particularly taken by Adrienne Rich's term 'psychic disequilibrium'<sup>3</sup> because it articulated the phenomenon I'd previously experienced: the idea that you don't know who you can be until you see a version of yourself in the world. With Adrian as my supervisor, I was fortunate enough to have a teacher who not only modelled a world where queer people belonged, but also demanded what Rich called the 'strength of soul' for me 'to stand up ... be seen and be heard'.<sup>4</sup>

LEAH: How did this demand manifest in *still raw*?

STACE: *still raw* emerged from a period of identity politics in the 1990s (both in Australia and internationally) that celebrated difference.<sup>5</sup> Even though I was reading theories that *said* I existed, I still wasn't

seeing creative expressions of that. So one of my intentions was to create a performance piece based around my lived experiences of gender and sexuality.

LEAH: You can see that intention in the research questions you posed in the Introduction to the published version of *still raw* in *ADS*. You wrote:

How can I perform lesbian desires and be desirable for the audience while foregrounding the pleasures and privileges of voyeurism? How is my body marked by the history of homophobic representations and by medical, legal and religious discourses? How do I counteract this in performance? How is my body constructed by the recent wave of performance and queer theories?<sup>6</sup>

STACE: What stands out from those questions, and from re-reading the *still raw* script all these years later, is how foreign it feels to refer to myself as a 'lesbian' or a 'woman' or even 'Stacey' rather than 'Stace'. It's the equivalent of 'fingernails scratching down a blackboard' for me. It's as if I'm almost deadnaming myself – reading names and pronouns that no longer apply. Reflecting on my body of solo work I can also chart my transitioning identities throughout my life and career.

LEAH: You continue to ask those research questions in all your subsequent solo works. How did you also address them in your accompanying Honours thesis?

STACE: My thesis<sup>7</sup> was about celebrating the political efficacy of visibility. It recounts my very personal response to being seen and heard at the 1994 Mardi Gras festival, parade and party. A core tenet of both

my thesis and solo works is Richard Schechner's suggestion that 'nothing brings a group together faster ... than collectively taking action in an atmosphere of risk'.<sup>8</sup> In 1994, being out and proud was a radical and dangerous act. Being abused for being a dyke was part of my everyday life, but Mardi Gras was the one night of the year when strutting the street in nothing but a gold g-string was entirely acceptable. Theatricalising our queer otherness was distractingly entertaining and thus created a palatable weapon for political, social and cultural change, hence my thesis title 'Theatrical Rage', which I borrowed from Judith Butler's discussion of the 'increasing theatricalization of political rage'.<sup>9</sup> Think 'die-ins' and 'kiss-ins', cross-dressing butches and drag balls. In my academic and earlier creative work, I was very much a product of this time.

LEAH: In the programme note you described *still raw* as 'a practical attempt to theatrically reclaim debates concerning feminism, sex, gender and sexualities, identity politics and drag'.<sup>10</sup> How did you go about that?

STACE: Embodying diverse characters within the one play enables me to portray the fluidity of genders and sexualities, highlighting what Butler calls their 'performativity'.<sup>11</sup> So, for example, in *still raw* I played a conservative homophobic male preacher from the American South; Viola from *Twelfth Night's* famous: 'I left no ring with her ...' speech (who in this production is a dyke playing a drag queen!); a right-wing conservative male politician whose text came from the Bible and the incredibly misinformed, but very popular,

homophobic self-help book *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask*; a Drag Queen singing<sup>12</sup> '(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman' into their castrated dildo; Holly Hughes (an American lesbian feminist performance artist); gender-bending movie star Marlene Dietrich; and a stereotypical dyke named 'Stacey'.

I wanted to show ultra-conservative politicians and religious figures dialoguing with theorists, all pontificating points of view about my body and sexuality that had no relation to my lived experience. And I wanted to answer back. I wanted to bring it right down to the personal because the rhetoric of those public figures impacted real queer lives and bodies.

LEAH: We're still seeing that today with trans bodies being pontificated about by public figures who have no understanding or lived experience of what it means to be trans.

STACE: With that in mind, I felt (and still feel) that the most political act I could do was to be seen and heard as my queer self.

LEAH: One of the ways your queer self is seen and heard is that there's always a quasi-autobiographical 'Stace' character in your solo works. What are some of the other performance strategies you employ?

STACE: All my work is characterised by what I'd call 'dis-arming' and 'dis-armouring' humour, in the literal sense of 'drop your weapons' and 'take off your armour' because this is a safe space. This is based on the idea that I need to make the audience comfortable and at

ease, *prior* to stretching them beyond their comfort zone.

LEAH: In your 1998 interview with Melissa Western for her Honours thesis, ‘Liberating Through Laughter’, you discussed your strategic use of self-deprecatory humour to win over your audiences.<sup>13</sup>

STACE: Because I live my life generally feeling empowered, performing my own disempowerment creates a tongue-in-cheek back-and-forth with the audience. Unlike Hannah Gadsby’s recent reflections on self-deprecation as a disempowering form of comedy, in my experience, playing lower status is what Melissa described as a ‘deceptively intricate interplay of power’.<sup>14</sup> Besides, it’s the character of ‘Stacey’, not me, and so ‘Stacey’ divulges somewhat personal stories of insecurities in exchange for getting the audience on side.

LEAH: I also think your work is different from Gadsby’s because you transition from ‘Stace’ to multiple characters, *all* of whom you play with a sense of irreverence. There are no sacred cows, everyone’s up for scrutiny, not just you.

STACE: Yes, for example, in my third solo show, *between heaven & earth*, which you directed, I played St Teresa of Avila, St Hildegard of Bingen, St John of the Cross, a fictional New Age leader called ‘Guru Frank’, as well as my own spiritual-seeking self. The humour came from the fact that these characters were all competing to be the most enlightened and were performed at heightened emotional and physical extremes. Poking fun at the characters’ ‘over-the-top’ spirituality meant that I could disarm the audience while simultaneously engaging them in



ideas about belonging, ‘forbidden’ love and transcendence.

I should also say that my shows aren’t all thigh-slapping laughter: These characters were juxtaposed against three trail-blazing women from the early 1900s, two of whom were given Deep Sleep Therapy and Electric Shock Treatment<sup>15</sup> to ‘cure’ their homosexuality. Cushioning these stories of horrific medical homophobia against the other more playful moments is another strategy that stops the work from becoming a trauma-fest, a sort of hierarchy of suffering. Humour is a palatable weapon for cutting through potential audience resistance.

**LEAH:** In your solo shows, you often push your physical body to its limits – an adaptation of your circus training.<sup>16</sup>

**STACE:** I employ feats of dexterity and physical strength as another performance strategy to engage the audience. Since they can see my proverbial ‘blood, sweat and tears’, they know that what is happening to the character is also happening to the actor and that it entails risk. This is an exercise in authenticity because these feats can’t be faked, just like I can’t fake my gender, sexuality or spirituality – for me, they are all intrinsically embodied.

My overall strategy also arises from my practice as a therapist who works with clients physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. In line with these four aspects of self, I always aim to create works that are kinaesthetically charged, intellectually stimulating, heartfelt and life affirming, with the intention that audience members will resonate with at least one or two of these aspects.

LEAH: Critical responses to your shows often comment on their positivity. A review of *still raw* talks directly to the critic's preconceived ideas of what she expected from a self-proclaimed feminist/dyke writer/performer, namely a 'nasty, confronting act', but what she found was 'the kind of life-affirming experience there should be more of'.<sup>17</sup> Can you elaborate on how your work as a therapist manifests in your shows?

STACE: *between heaven & earth* explored the Dark Night of the Soul or what I saw as the differences/similarities between what's now diagnosed as a psychological breakdown versus what used to be considered a spiritual breakthrough. It looked at organised religion and patriarchy's systematic oppression of women and queer people. Throughout the show, I invited audience members to actively participate in transformational New Age practices under the premise that they were attending a 'Bootcamp for your Soul'. In one scene, a member of the audience was invited to 'process their anger issues' by joining 'Guru Frank' on stage to therapeutically smash a pumpkin. In addition to humour and performing physically heightened versions of characters, I also employ audience intervention as a strategy.

LEAH: Audience interaction<sup>18</sup> has always been a feature of your solo works – can you talk about the influence of Augusto Boal?

STACE: As an audience member, I generally dislike audience participation because it's usually a demand rather than an invitation, where the audience member feels singled out, but not in a good way. That's another reason why I sometimes play low status – so audience

members feel empowered to join me on stage and once they do then *they* drive the action. I want my work to be empowering. Also, I'm curious about what inspires people to cross the threshold of the fourth wall, to have agency in a space where they would usually be just an observer.

**LEAH:** This is where Boal's 'spect-actor' – an audience member who is invited to interrupt a scene in order to change its outcome – and Theatre of the Oppressed obviously inspire your approach. Audience intervention is really at the political heart of all your work.

**STACE:** Yes, because well-executed audience *intervention* moves beyond just a physical *interaction* between performer and audience to become something that motivates people to take positive action beyond the confines of the theatre. My second solo work, *when i was a boy*, was the perfect device for me to explore these ideas in practice. It was created as a result of a trapeze accident while working with Rock'n'Roll Circus [now Circa], where my trapeze partner dropped me and I broke my back. A great excuse not to finish my Masters on Training for Circus Theatre! Not surprisingly after that experience, I became interested in exploring the concept of trust: about learning to ask for help when vulnerable and finding the strength to accept help when it is offered. As a result, this show looked at how we learn to live in our bodies, especially after accidents or injuries, and how we heal.

In one scene, I'm back swinging on the trapeze<sup>19</sup> – post-accident – with a black hood covering my face, talking about my fears

and the inherent, titillating dangers of circus. I'm talking about how people like to see *other* people taking risks, but at what cost? Since *still raw*, a key motto in my life is Jeanette Winterson's 'what you risk reveals what you value', something she repeats in many of her books.<sup>20</sup> By questioning what I'm prepared to risk as a recovering circus performer, the scene was a way of asking audience members about their responsibility in always wanting entertainment that is 'bigger, higher, faster'. How this played out in *when i was a boy* was that the show could only continue once an audience member shouted 'stop!', entered the playing space and physically intervened to get me off the trapeze. The political ramifications of that in the real world, encouraging allyship, are obvious.

LEAH: This leads into ideas about collective responsibility, something that underpins all your works. It points towards bigger questions like: at what point do religious and medical discourses and political parties take responsibility for their harmful pathologising of trans and queer lives?

STACE: And when does cis/straight society take responsibility for fetishising or 'othering' trans and queer people? My work asks at what point are you prepared to intervene, to call out 'stop!' when you see someone in danger or crisis?

LEAH: Boal called Forum Theatre a 'a rehearsal of revolution', one where the 'spectator-actor practises a real act'.<sup>21</sup>

STACE: It might seem like a stretch, but we know that when people practise saying 'no' or 'stop' to the little things, they just might be able to say

‘no’ or ‘stop’ to bigger things that actually matter.

LEAH: As Boal says, since ‘the experience is a concrete one ... the rehearsal stimulates the practice of the act in reality’.<sup>22</sup>

STACE: Audience intervention reminds us that despite our differences – be they gender, sexuality, race or ability – our vulnerabilities and interconnectedness illustrate that we are always in symbiotic relationships and have more in common than we are led to believe.

LEAH: I had the opportunity to do a Forum Theatre workshop with Boal when he came to Brisbane for the World Congress of Drama/Theatre and Education (IDEA) Conference in 1995. That was a transitional moment in our work as theatre-makers.

STACE: I also remember being inspired by the theatrical/political activism of Pol Pelletier, a Canadian actor/director/writer we first saw at the 3rd International Women Playwrights Conference in Adelaide in 1994. Both Boal and Pelletier alerted me to the revolutionary potential of blurring the binary between actor and audience and politicising this exchange by breaking the rules of ‘polite’ theatre. For me, the difference between ‘polite’ and ‘political’ theatre is that one is about maintaining the status quo and the other is about breaking it.

LEAH: Boal often referred to disrupting binaries and boundaries.<sup>23</sup> Let’s talk about that in relation to your fourth solo show, *Queer as Flux*, which was originally programmed to premiere as part of the 2020 MELT Festival at Brisbane Powerhouse.<sup>24</sup> After MELT was cancelled due to Covid, we were rescheduled to 2021, but then you were forced to keep a two-metre distance from the audience. How

did you cross audience boundaries and disrupt binaries in this case?

STACE: There were lots of challenges. MELT's cabaret venue was screaming out for audience intervention. Normally a character like 'Polly Tickle' (Stace's Drag Queen Fairy Godmother who guided their evolution while simultaneously calling upon the wisdom of their trans-cestors) would have been out in the audience mingling and flirting. But because of the mandated exclusion zone, we had to find an alternative solution for Polly's audience engagement.

LEAH: Working with you as dramaturg and director over this much longer creative development period, via FaceTime rather than together in the rehearsal room, meant that we had time to precisely craft Polly's language and shape her direct address and audience patter into a wittier, more layered, alliterative tone.

STACE: Whereas my previous shows contained verbal collages of pre-existing texts and included an array of real-life historical figures, in *Queer as Flux* I created Polly as an all-knowing, politically savvy time-traveller and a sassy conduit for my love of language and etymology: words matter, they heal and harm, they can be a tool and a weapon. So I used the extra time to showcase Polly as a wordsmith,<sup>25</sup> ensuring that the audience had to engage aurally in order to keep up with her.

Another way we kept the audience on their toes was having Polly start the show in full femme drag<sup>26</sup> then completely dismantling that image within the first seven minutes so that Polly could 'birth'<sup>27</sup> a newborn<sup>28</sup> 'Stace' – thus disrupting audience expectations and

highlighting the fluidity of what they were about to see. But this also meant that we had to find a solution to keep Polly's heightened femininity visually present throughout.

LEAH: Just as *we* were forced to use technology to connect and communicate ideas due to Covid, technology seemed like the obvious solution.

STACE: Yes, as a result we endowed Polly with a bigger presence, an omnipresence via projections that photoshopped her alongside other protestors in pivotal moments of queer history,<sup>29</sup> as well as inserting her 'protesting' with humorous political placards<sup>30</sup> juxtaposed against snapshots of everyday life. She represented all previous, current and future queer political advocates as she had been there, done that and attended the rallies!

LEAH: We also created other ways for the audience to invest emotionally by having the 'Stace' character tell more intimate and vulnerable autobiographical stories.

STACE: Plus the emotional connection was helped by the fact that we were working in small, intimate venues.<sup>31</sup>

LEAH: In relation to intimate autobiographical content, in several shows you've literally written or drawn on your naked body. Shane Rowlands, in her Masters thesis, describes how this worked in *still raw* to disrupt the homophobic discourses that construct the lesbian body.<sup>32</sup> We included a quote from Jeanette Winterson in the *Queer as Flux* programme: 'Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there'.<sup>33</sup> Why has it been important for you

to embody this idea?

STACE: Jeanette Winterson's novels have always been a place where I could both position myself as the subject and feel seen and heard. I started still raw<sup>34</sup> naked, with homophobic and sexist quotes from the Bible and medical texts, as well as heart-breaking confessions and sexual innuendo (by an ex-lover) written all over my body in Nikko pen. It was definitely a homage to Winterson: I wanted to make visible all the invisible ways my gender and sexual identity had been negatively constructed by others.

In the final scene<sup>35</sup> of *Queer as Flux*, I'm once again drawing on my body in Nikko pen (a performative full circle), but this time I am holding the pen, reclaiming the 'othering' discourses that I first performed in *still raw*. I don't just mark my body within the confines of performance – I've chosen to permanently mark it with tattoos that symbolise important transitional moments in my life. I use these tattoos and scars as storytelling signposts in *Queer as Flux*. They mark the passing of time for 'Stace' and also bring positive attention to my resilient, scarred body and its life-changing physical transitions.

LEAH: Your four solo shows present a curated exploration of the nuances of being trans. How has your transitioning body informed the highly physicalised nature of your work?

STACE: The 'psychic disequilibrium' of never seeing versions of myself in the world created both an intimate yet alien experience of my body for many years. It negated and invalidated my very existence



as a trans-masculine and non-binary person until very recently, when I started to see and hear younger people self-identify as such. Words heal. As a physical performer, I have no alternative but to create work from an embodied perspective. I can't just reside in the theoretical because the kinaesthetic is how I learn and how I communicate. As a physical performer *who is also trans*, placing my body, costumed or naked, at the forefront of my work positions it as the launching pad for what an audience is about to see.

**LEAH:** By performing parts of your shows naked or nearly naked, you are clearly directing the audience's gaze to your body.

**STACE:** In earlier shows, performing nearly naked was an attempt to disrupt preconceived ideas of what the audience assume is a soon-to-be sexualised 'woman' – audiences are very experienced in fetishising women's naked bodies. As a result, in three of my four shows, a highly physicalised questioning of gender, rather than sex or even sexuality, follows. My aim is that audiences doubt what they think they're seeing or what they've been socialised to see. Theatre gives me the safety and permission to perform beyond even my own gendered comfort zone and to take the audience with me. I'm not always naked though! I also wear costumes on stage as 'Stace' that in no way represent what I'd wear in real life. By putting on and taking off these costumes and posturing my body in ways that create the illusion of extreme gender polarities throughout my work, it evokes the question 'how fixed and/or real is gender as a concept?'

**LEAH:** And are there only two options? In *The Knowing of Mary Poppins*<sup>36</sup>

[a non-autobiographical play that we worked on together], you shape-shifted between multiple characters, genders and even played animals.

STACE: If I can convince a reviewer to expect a male actor to appear in the curtain call of a show that was ostensibly performed by only three ‘female’ actors,<sup>37</sup> then it just goes to show that gender can be fluid: it is not innate, fixed or real. Shape-shifting within a play enables me to highlight what ‘Polly Tickle’ in *Queer as Flux* offers as the literal definition of trans – “‘back *and* forth”, “‘across”, “‘through and beyond””.<sup>38</sup> According to this definition, we are all constantly transitioning in one way or another – be it our gender, age, health and well-being or abilities.

LEAH: And this is all explored through the multiple expressions and appearances of your physical body.

STACE: Yes, looking back over my solo work there’s a moment in each of my shows where I set the audience up to question whether or not I have a cock. It’s a literal ‘fuck you’ to the establishment that reduces trans people to our genitalia and the salacious curiosity and fear-mongering that ensues. This not only sets a certain tone (strap yourself in, it’s going to be a bumpy ride), but immediately lets the audience know that we’re in a space where talking about gender is paramount. By also performing vulnerability, I aim to transform this salacious curiosity into a more compassionate wondering of what it must be like to live in a body that doesn’t necessarily match who I am. In *still raw* I started the show naked, except for a harness

and strap-on, handcuffed to the bed – clearly a vulnerable position. One of the earlier scenes in *when i was a boy* was of my seven-year-old self ‘packing’ a red bandage down the front of his shorts, only to painfully remove it later as a bloodied symbol for his traumatic first period. ‘Guru Frank’, in *between heaven & earth*, fondles his ‘talking stick’<sup>39</sup> throughout – in a very patriarchal demonstration of ‘he who holds the cock has the right to speak’. Fast forward to *Queer as Flux* and my seven-year-old, bed-wetting self is ‘packing’ again, this time with a footy sock, only to have ‘Polly Tickle’, my Drag Queen Fairy Godmother, gently remove it with the promise of something better to come.

LEAH: How else has your work explored living in a body that doesn’t match who you are?

STACE: It may seem contradictory for someone who eventually decides to get top surgery to have consistently performed topless, but it felt impossible at the time to talk about my dysphoric experience of my assigned gender without positioning my breasts front and centre, pardon the pun. For me, performing topless was simultaneously a form of drag (the complete opposite of how I would usually see/present myself) *and* a reflection of how, as a kid, and even as an adult, being topless was when I felt most like a boy and therefore more in line with my truth. The irony is that being topless in performance prior to top surgery would have read to an audience as quite the opposite of a boy. In *still raw*, performing topless was also a feminist-inspired reclaiming of my breasts in order to promote body

positivity and pride rather than shame and dysmorphia. In *when i was a boy*, it was charting my journey from hating my breasts, to binding them, to body acceptance, to becoming a massage therapist and being comfortable in my skin. In the final scene of *when i was a boy*, an audience member, after volunteering to rub hot ointment on my back, is invited to receive a *kahuna* massage from me in return. They go backstage, take off all their clothes and return to the stage in a sarong, feeling empowered enough to be vulnerable in front of strangers while trusting me to respectfully touch, honour and celebrate their own exposed and naked body. This suggests that together, we've created a safe space, one that promotes body positivity and acceptance for everyone, not just me.

So, to answer your previous question about nudity, it's all very well for a fully clothed academic to theorise about bodies and gender within the safe walls of a university, but in the extreme openness of Oxford Street during Mardi Gras or the intimacy of small, sweaty theatre spaces the reality is that, while you can control the gaze of the audience, you can't control how they interpret what they're seeing. For me this is not just an intellectual exercise, this is also a fully embodied, kinaesthetic, risky undertaking. There's that Jeanette Winterson idea again – what you risk reveals what you value.

LEAH: What was it like to perform *Queer as Flux post* top surgery, now that your body matched how you identify?

STACE: In the first production of *Queer as Flux* [in Brisbane, May 2021], because I still had breasts, the play's dramaturgical trajectory was

framed around my gender transitioning. This culminated in the final scene's celebratory 'reveal' that: 'I've booked in to have top surgery in a couple of weeks'. But six months later [in Perth], *post* top surgery, the throughline of the play was somewhat different.

As a fifty-year-old actor with a shaved head and tattoos playing myself as a newborn baby, a seven-year-old boy and a fourteen-year-old girl experiencing their first period, I'm already asking the audience to suspend their disbelief. One of the devices I employ to achieve this is to simultaneously enact and narrate such moments. Performing post top surgery really highlighted that playing with the audience's cognitive dissonance is a vital part of what I'm always doing, once again: 'what you're saying doesn't match what I'm seeing'. I'm also asking the audience to suspend what they might believe about trans people; to challenge their assumptions and forego their salacious curiosities and instead open their hearts and minds to a compassionate wondering that hopefully leads to acceptance.

To finally be able to perform the show post top surgery was both personally liberating and theatrically challenging (they say never work with children or animals – never work with fake nipples, they're slippery little suckers!)

There's a scene where I flash back to my twenty-two-year-old self strutting down Oxford Street at the 1994 Sydney Mardi Gras parade in nothing but a gold g-string. This was a hoot of a scene in Brisbane when I still had breasts. But when my post-sur-

gery, fifty-year-old actor self performed this scene in Perth, the audience reaction was very mixed. The lighting was such that I could see faces in complete shock, almost affronted by my ‘alien’ chest – flat, scarred, sans nipples – literally grasping their *own* breasts, clutching their pearls so to speak! Others were whooping and hollering with delight and affirmation for someone clearly at home in their own skin. Then there was a third group who seemed to be in a sort of confused limbo; experiencing cognitive dissonance, not knowing what they were looking at or how they were ‘expected’ to react. Welcome to my world of psychic disequilibrium!

LEAH: During the Perth season, we had to go through a dramaturgical gear-change to make that scene work. By upping the sense of your younger self’s nervous awkwardness at the beginning of the scene, the audience had time and permission to experience potential confusion or discomfort with the actual body they were observing. Again, playing with that sense of: ‘what you’re saying doesn’t match what I’m seeing’. This discomfort was then transformed as you took them on your celebratory march down Oxford Street.

STACE: Yes, surrounded by unapologetic Dykes on Bikes, proud gay men, fabulous Drag Queens, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and queers of all shapes and sizes, the twenty-two-year-old ‘Stace’ character evolved from shy and awkward to out and proud, modelling body-positivity<sup>40</sup> and acceptance, both then and now. This gave the audience the opportunity to undergo the same evolution.

The other important difference is that post top surgery, the trajectory of the show became less about my own gender transition and more about the universality of transitioning for us all.

LEAH: In all your solo performances, you play several characters in addition to a ‘Stace’ persona. How have you performed multiple characters who exist simultaneously and are in dialogue with each other?

STACE: Because of my recent ADHD diagnosis, I realise that there’s a certain comfort in playing multiple characters.<sup>41</sup> It’s how my brain naturally works. In the world of psychiatry and psycho-pathologies,<sup>42</sup> ADHD is considered a co-morbidity in relation to transgenderism. ‘Co-morbidity’ has such a negative connotation, but I celebrate my neurodivergence and non-binary vision of the world and recognise how strongly it has impacted my work as a solo performer who can shape-shift between multiple points of view.

I’ve already detailed all the characters that I played in *still raw*. In *when i was a boy*, I played autobiographical versions of my queer self at different ages, a shaman-like guide and a very camp activist/ terrorist<sup>43</sup> advocating political change. In both these shows it was purely my voice, physicality and slight costume changes that signalled the transformation into different characters. Once they started talking to each other, it required fast vocal and physical shifts to create the illusion of a dialogue between them.

Due to the mystical nature of *between heaven & earth*, we decided to realise three of the characters as disembodied traces of their

real selves via the use of technology: they existed as recorded video projections and modified voice-overs and interacted directly with the other embodied characters as memories and/or spiritual ‘visions’. I performed the other four characters live, with very distinct speech patterns and extremely idiosyncratic physical vocabularies.

In *Queer as Flux*, I embody my transgender selves at various pivotal moments via the ‘Stace’ character as well as my Mum transitioning with dementia and my father transitioning to become her caregiver. ‘Polly Tickle’ is performed in two ways: live, having direct conversations with these three characters and adding commentary to their scenes; and projected throughout time and space via photoshopped images to remind the audience about key moments of LGBTQTI+ history, politics and oppression. There are also two wise old whale characters<sup>44</sup> who are realised via set, lighting, soundscape and modulated voice-overs. They are environmental activists who advocate for equality and protection of all species, and from whom I received a transformational teaching in real life. *Queer as Flux* is really the culmination of all my solo work in that it highlights and celebrates the universality of transitioning and the importance of adapting to changing circumstances with an open heart and mind.

LEAH: Has gender affected how you’ve been cast in shows that aren’t autobiographical?

STACE: Historically I’ve mostly been cast as young boys, androgynous or agendered characters. I worked in primary school touring shows



with Queensland Arts Council like Drac and the Gremlin<sup>45</sup> [based on Alan Baillie's book], Strut'n'Fret's *Getting Physical* and you directed me in Bruce Keller's *Puppy Love*<sup>46</sup> – playing a four-year-old boy, a non-gender-specific physical fitness nut and a dog respectively. I also played the monstrous Caliban from *The Tempest* in Flipside Circus' *Storm in a Teacup*<sup>47</sup> and androgynous characters when I worked with Party Line on *Whet Flesh* and *Steel Fracture*.<sup>48</sup> As a thirty-eight-year-old, I was cast as a ten-year-old boy in Andrew McGahan and Shaun Charles' *The White Earth*<sup>49</sup> at La Boite Theatre and I worked with you again in The Nest Ensemble's *The Knowing of Mary Poppins*,<sup>50</sup> where I played multiple characters, most of whom were male. And a chicken! All these roles made sense to me. I've never been interested in auditioning for a female cisgendered, heterosexual role in a mainstream theatre production. I'm not that good an actor! Anytime I play anything slightly feminine, it becomes camp. I would have happily played someone like Joan of Arc, but since mainstream theatre hasn't really known where to position me, my focus has been on creating my own roles. This has been liberating in that it has provided me with a voice and sense of agency, while forcing me to craft my skills as a storyteller and writer. It's also been challenging at times.

LEAH: It's twenty-eight years since you wrote *still raw*. There was a fifteen-year hiatus between your third and your fourth solo show. Can you talk about the gestation period for each of these works and how you've managed to maintain visibility on Australian stages?

STACE: From concept to opening night generally takes about eighteen months. The majority of that is unpaid. I turn up despite the financial burden because no one else is going to write my story. Another challenge is that solo shows don't exist in a vacuum – there are many creatives involved behind the scenes who often subsidise their contribution with their full-time careers. Collaborating with other artists, without the assurance of funding, means it's a labour of love for most involved! Having to hustle for future seasons of shows that have excellent reviews and have won awards is exhausting without a producer. To have invested so much time, money and energy without the infrastructure of a company encapsulates the travails of existing on the margin. Undiagnosed ADHD didn't help me maintain focus or momentum either ...

In terms of visibility, the only real proof that *still raw* existed is the published script and the reviews. There is no surviving footage of any of its four productions, which were performed in 'the olden days' before digital cameras, iPhones, Facebook and Instagram. And yet, it's the only one of my solo works published to date and it was only published because it won the 1996 Philip Parsons Prize for Performance as Research, which led to its inclusion in the 1997 *ADS Queer* issue. And here I am again!

LEAH: That's one of the reasons I've kept *still raw* on the syllabus of the Australian Theatre Unit at Curtin University in the Theatre Arts course that I coordinate. One of the responsibilities of such a course is to show the diversity of Australian theatre by including works that

exist outside of the canon: works that are rarely published because they weren't programmed in mainstream venues and have been marginalised because of content.

Taking your four solo shows as a body of work, it's apparent that much of the content highlights the homophobic and transphobic rhetoric of religious, medical, political and legal discourses and the binary nature of the institutional structures that protect them.

STACE: Yes, all of these discourses take it upon themselves to name and have power over those who don't fit neatly into their binary boxes. The never-ending patriarchal, parochial and judgmental control of LGBTIQ+ lives has led to alarming statistics of violence and self-harm within these communities. Our bodies, genders and sexualities have been labelled by these discourses as deviant, with the negative connotation of *deviance*, as opposed to something that is simply different from the norm, with no negative implication. Language matters and so does the ability to name myself and self-identify. The whole grammatical argument against the use of the non-binary pronouns 'they /them' is the implied plurality, an anathema to those who believe that each person is a singular, fixed being. Queer theory claims that identities are not fixed – they cannot be categorised and labelled – because identities consist of many varied components. So for an audience to see me perform gender fluidity before their very eyes, to see someone transition through different characters' sexualities, genders and ages, clearly demonstrates that we exist in a state of flux, making a mockery

of the concept of fixed binaries (male/female, good/evil, sick/healthy, innocent/guilty). As I point out in *Queer as Flux*, we are all constantly transitioning.

LEAH: I remember that you were particularly influenced in the 1990s by Monique Wittig, who sought to abolish gender categories altogether.

STACE: I appreciate her even more now, as well as Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, which has become an important overarching theory that visibilises systemic and structural oppression while highlighting discrimination based on sex, race, ability and class.<sup>51</sup> As a white, able-bodied, educated, trans-masculine non-binary actor, who has had access to some, albeit limited, funding and occasional opportunities to present my work, I have a very real responsibility to be an agent of change as a theatre-maker.

My existence as a trans person enables me to speak from a uniquely informed, lived experience. In my solo work, I want to make sure that other queer and trans people can see theatre where their lives are reflected back to them, so that they don't experience the same 'psychic disequilibrium' as I did when growing up. It is empowering to speak your truth with your own voice rather than having voices saying that you can, or cannot, be who you are in the world. This is why circus was such an appealing art form for me – not just the physicality of it, but because the so-called 'freaks' have always been welcome there and circus enabled me to claim my name and stake my claim.

LEAH: Even after all these years, we still believe theatre can change people's hearts and minds!

STACE: And I hope that in my lifetime I live to see legislative, medical, political and societal changes that ensure transgender folks and all people in the LGBTIQ+ community feel equal, seen and free to be who they really are.<sup>52</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Stace Callaghan, *when i was a boy*.
- 2 Stace Callaghan, [Queer as Flux](#) highlights. MELT Festival Brisbane Powerhouse, 2021.
- 3 ‘When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you ... when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in to a mirror and saw nothing ... It takes some strength of soul ... to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.’ Adrienne Rich, ‘Invisibility in Academe’, in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (New York: Norton, 1986) 199.
- 4 Rich, ‘Invisibility in Academe’, 199.
- 5 ‘The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect “in spite of” one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different.’
- 6 Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001) 85.
- 7 Stacey Callaghan, ‘Introduction to *still raw*’, *Australasian Drama Studies* 31 (October 1997): 178.
- 8 Stacey Callaghan, ‘Theatrical Rage: Performing Politics at Sydney’s Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras’, Honours thesis, University of New England, 1994.
- 9 Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993) 9.
- 10 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 233.
- 11 Programme for Stacey Callaghan’s *still raw* at The Shock of the New Festival, La Boite Theatre, Brisbane, 1995.
- 12 Judith Butler, ‘Critically Queer’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 1.1 (1993): 21.
- 13 Lisa O’Sullivan, Stace in [still raw](#), 1994.
- 14 ‘Callaghan also ascribes to the notion that self-deprecation can be ironically empowering ... Beating someone to the punchline through self-deprecation can manifest itself as not only an important device in performance, but also in everyday life ... [Callaghan’s] subtle self-deprecation ... renders her ... vulnerable to the audience, inviting them to laugh at the naivety of the Stacey persona and surreptitiously challenging the shallow expectations of a “dyke feminist”.’ Melissa Western, ‘Liberating Through Laughter: Strategic Humour in Contemporary Australian Women’s Performance Writing’, Honours thesis, University of Queensland, 1998, 32–3.
- 15 Juanita Broderick, Stace as Muriel Cadogan in [between heaven & earth](#), 2006.
- 16 Juanita Broderick, Stace in [between heaven & earth](#).
- 17 Andrea Baldwin, ‘From Strength to Strength’, Review of The Shock of the New: A Festival of New Works, *Time Off Magazine*, 24 October 1995: n.p.

- 18 Lisa O'Sullivan, Stace and audience volunteer in [still raw](#), 1994.
- 19 Jamie Dunbar, Stace in [when i was a boy](#), 2001.
- 20 Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (New York: Grove Press, 1987): 43.
- 21 Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, translated by Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985) 141.
- 22 Ibid, 141–2.
- 23 'The Theatre of the Oppressed is located precisely on the frontier between fiction and reality – and this border must be crossed.' Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, translated by Adrian Jackson (London: Routledge, 1992) 246.
- 24 MELT: Festival of Queer Arts & Culture.
- 25 Dara Donnelly and Alison Ross, projection from [Queer as Flux](#), 2021.
- 26 Kaifu Deng, Stace as 'Polly Tickle' in [Queer as Flux](#), 2021.
- 27 Kaifu Deng, Stace in [Queer as Flux](#), 2021.
- 28 Kaifu Deng, Stace in [Queer as Flux](#), 2021.
- 29 Kaifu Deng, Stace in [Queer as Flux](#), 2021.
- 30 Dara Donnelly and Alison Ross, projection from [Queer as Flux](#), 2021.
- 31 The Studio downstairs, Brisbane Powerhouse, and the Studio, The Blue Room Theatre, Perth.
- 32 'This writing on her body functioned as "literalising" of the metaphor of how the lesbian body has been written or constructed by medical, legal and religious discourses as well as more recent post-structuralist and performance theories.' Shane Rowlands, 'Cramped Spaces: An Analysis of Some Lesbian, Queer, and Sex-Radical Performance Work in Australia since 1985', Masters dissertation, University of Queensland, 1999, 25.
- 33 Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) 89.
- 34 Lisa O'Sullivan, Stace in [still raw](#), 1994.
- 35 Kaifu Deng, Stace in [Queer as Flux](#), 2021.
- 36 Marcel Dorney, Leah Mercer, Margi Brown Ash, Stace Callaghan and Carol Schmidt, *The Knowing of Mary Poppins*.
- 37 'Callaghan ... [creates] the chilling sense of a fourth (male) actor in the ensemble (whom I was faintly disarmed not to find appearing in the curtain call).' Stephen Carleton, 'Inside the Poppins' Psyche', Review of *The Knowing of Mary Poppins* by Dorney, Mercer, Brown Ash, Callaghan and Schmidt, *RealTime* 69 (October–November 2005): 36. Online: <https://www.realtime.org.au/inside-the-poppins-psyche/>.
- 38 Stace Callaghan, 'Queer as Flux', 2021. Unpublished script, 39.
- 39 Juanita Broderick, Stace as 'Guru Frank' in [between heaven & earth](#), 2006.
- 40 Kaifu Deng, Stace in [Queer as Flux](#), 2021.
- 41 See Stace Callaghan, interview by Patricia Karvelas, 'The Drawing Room', [Radio National](#), 21 May 2021.
- 42 Dara Donnelly and Alison Ross, projection from [Queer as Flux](#), 2021.
- 43 Jamie Dunbar, Stace as the 'Unitard Bomber' in [when i was a boy](#), 2001.
- 44 Kaifu Deng, Stace in [Queer as Flux](#), 2021.
- 45 Unknown photographer, Stace and Helen O'Leary in [Drac and the Gremlin](#), c. 1992.
- 46 Unknown photographer, Stace in [Puppy Love](#), 2005.
- 47 Unknown photographer, Stace in [Storm in a Teacup](#), 2008.
- 48 Unknown photographer, [Stace in Steel Fracture](#), 2001.
- 49 Unknown photographer, Stace in [The White Earth](#), 2009.
- 50 Juanita Broderick, Stace as W.B. Yeats with Margi Brown Ash in [The Knowing of Mary Poppins](#), 2004.
- 51 Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989).
- 52 Kaifu Deng, Stace in [Queer as Flux](#), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1asHbqo7DYcSt-pnvA1eTp3CN25W-oUwE3/view?usp=sharing> 2021.

A QUEER PERFORMANCE NEW  
WAVE IN SYDNEY: INSIDE *CLUB  
BENT* 1995–1998 – EXPLORING  
HYBRIDITY AND COMMUNITY

CATHERINE FARGHER

YEAR 1, 1995

Every night of the first season of *cLUB bENT* was a spectacular performance event. Taking place at The Performance Space, Redfern, during Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (SGLMG) festival 1995, *cLUB bENT* represented a defining moment in 1990s queer performance, exploring identity, new and old performance forms, gender diversity, abject sexuality and sex positivism. *cLUB bENT* also became a site where performance forms and ‘elements’ – which I define as creative tropes, gestures and performance languages which might recur in identical yet random ways in later works – were hybridised over time and new reference points for content and form

were created among a broad community of performers and activists.

By creating first-person recollections, written in the present day, as well as contemporary reflections on my experiences within the Club, I want to explore how taking part in this ‘queer performance new wave’ – an organic evolution between LGBTQTIA+ performance artists and performances from a range of fields – as well as being part of the broader queer community at this time influenced my practice as an emerging queer performance writer/maker and activist.

According to the *AusStage* database, in the first year alone there were 103 performers and artists involved in *cLUB bENT*, including curators and directors.<sup>1</sup> The first event was curated by Angharad Wynne Jones, Jonathan Parsons, Julianne Pierce and Chris Ryan.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the season in that first year, and in later years, there were performers and performances from across the country – from Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane, as well as from Sydney.

*cLUB bENT* welcomed performers from a wide range of performance fields, networks and communities,<sup>3</sup> attracting strippers, drag queens, performance artists, cabaret artists and with them came tropes, gestures and performance languages specific to each of those fields.<sup>4</sup> These fields and/or styles of performance are listed in the *AusStage* database.

Performance, contemporary dance, drag, music and comedy. *cLUB bENT* was a meeting place between the underground performance activities sited in the gay and



lesbian communities' clubs and dance parties and the work created in our contemporary art and theatre spaces.<sup>5</sup>

Artists such as Victoria Spence, Chris Ryan, Groovi Biscuit, Imogen Kelly, Azaria Universe, Dean Walsh, Raymond Blanco, Benedict Leslie, Matthew Bergen, Cow Theatre,<sup>6</sup> Club Swing and many collectives of young queer performers would line up to be part of *cLUB bENT*.

Previous director of The Performance Space (TPS) and first *cLUB bENT* producers Noelle Janaczewska<sup>7</sup> and subsequent TPS Director Angharad Wynne Jones took a *laissez-faire* and inclusive approach to curating and producing the first year's event, with an emphasis on community building.

The audiences loved it. *cLUB bENT* was a place to see and be seen. Audiences flocked to the club to watch each other as well as the stage, identifying and being identified. It was a gender diverse space where queers, trannies, butches, femmes, tops, bottoms, pansies, clone-boys, corporate dykes and baby-butches mingled together in solidarity. Haircuts were short, peroxided and punk. *cLUB bENT* was underground and the energy was charged.<sup>8</sup> In front of the stage in the large, black-walled auditorium with its high ceiling, with seating configured in cabaret style, the audience engaged intimately with the performers, cheering on, calling out in wonder, gasping in shock.

The reviewers loved it, too.

*cLUB bENT* restores the cabaret medium to its full glory of gender-fuck and outrageous fun, yet all the time, in every act, there is something for the audience to learn.<sup>9</sup>

Images come to my mind of standout performance elements and moments – from exactly which night of the season I can't always recall.

On opening night, Moira Finucane performs her solo work, *Romeo*.<sup>10</sup> Wearing stonewashed jeans and a leather jacket, she strips provocatively as she pulls a long feather boa from her unzipped jeans and eyes the audience in a sexy and seductive way. Was this one of the first drag king acts I saw in Sydney?

Later in the season, Maude Davey performs her Ms Wicked award-winning cameo from the competition final. Naked and painted in traditional Butoh white, she walks slowly, seductively towards the audience. As she reaches us, she bends to pull a strawberry from her cunt. Teasing the crowd, yet emotionally contained throughout, she pulls another, then another piece of fruit, salaciously devouring each strawberry. This sex/body positivism in performance is electrifying. The crowd are enraptured. Their responses explosive.<sup>11</sup>

Late one night, Paul Capsis roars on to the stage riding a motorbike,<sup>12</sup> his long curly hair flying as he weaves back and forth across the stage like a crazy cat. Leaping and swooping, physical and dynamic, he jumps from the bike and screams into the microphone as Janys Joplin.<sup>13</sup> His voice alive with the feminine grit of Janis thunders toward the crowd, a partisan mob of queers, a mosh pit of physical and aural performance delights. Their energy feeds the performers as much as the audience feeds from them. This is the type of hysteria that would define the *cLUB bENT* scene for the next three years.

Azaria Universe's<sup>14</sup> naked pirouettes to Bonnie Raitt's 'Total Eclipse of the Heart', wearing nothing but dozens of strings of pearls, which cascade around her neck then swirl like a hula hoop as she spins endlessly on the spot; a rotation every time the lyric 'turn around' is heard.

Joel Markham's<sup>15</sup> turn as a decadent priest, performing with abundant explosions of whipped cream from a can.

Groovi Biscuit, Ms Wicked winner,<sup>16</sup> and assistants performing queer striptease, dancing with Dildos and extracting Rubber Chickens.

Dean Walsh dancing, naked, in drag or in character, Chris Ryan like a contemporary drag political stand-up. MCs

Victoria Spence, tall, sensational and serene, Simon Hunt as Pauline Pantsdown, Heather-Grace Jones and Von Coves, Julianne Pierce as Madame Ivana and myself as her therapist, Lois Ze’Bra.

Meanwhile, in the *cLUB bENT* backstage dressing rooms, it was all going on. The Performance Space,<sup>17</sup> with its intimate, multi-spaced interior geography, was reminiscent of town halls and literary institutes throughout Australia. Entering from Cleveland Street via a black wooden door, visitors encountered a tiled hallway, leading outside to a central courtyard. Beyond this is the main performance hall, with a proscenium arch, medium-sized wooden stage and on either side of the stage are steps that feed up towards the stage.

I recall:

On either side of the stage stairways are steps leading to two long dressing rooms, each one approximately 3 metres wide by 7 metres long. At the audience end of the dressing room sit mirrors with lights that are crowded by a jumble of performers applying grease paint, eyelashes, wearing boas and wigs. There are Strippers, Drag Queens and Kings, theatre-makers, performance artists and cabaret artists squeezed tightly together, their bodies side by side.

## EMERGENCE

For me, being part of this organic evolution between performers and performance styles and elements was formative over time.

Reflections:

The close co-habitation in the dressing room created an atmosphere of collaboration and hybridisation that grew between the *cLUB bENT* artists and led to an evolution in form of queer performance in Australia over the five years of the Club's existence. Changes I noticed in consecutive years include 'elements' or 'tropes' (both form and text), gestural languages from drag to striptease, sex positivism and abject sexuality performances with dildos and rubber chickens, as each year built on the palimpsests of the last.

As a performer, my own writing/making practice emerged as I moved from facilitating other people's storytelling and commissioned scriptwriting<sup>18</sup> to creating my own solo performance works. Increasingly inspired by international queer artists such as US artist Karen Finlay,<sup>19</sup> Michelle Shocked and Penny Arcade, I became brave enough to explore my own 'voice', also receiving encouragement from then-TPS Artistic Director, Noelle Janaczewska.<sup>20</sup>

My first solo work, *The Love Addict*, also featured during the first *cLUB bENT*. This was a fifteen-minute piece in monologue style, utilising humour and featuring photography projections and sound

recording, directed by VCA-trained performer/director/producer, the late Rosie Lalevich.<sup>21</sup> The form was comic, vaudevillian even, but not particularly adventurous in terms of exploring gender, or sex/body positivity. *The Love Addict* was a performance about a visit to the therapist. There, the client discusses their growing obsession with a woman called ‘Marigold’, who was nowhere to be seen.<sup>22</sup> The therapist’s declaration that the client is a ‘love addict’ sends the client into a panic attack. Experiencing double vision, she sees the psychologist’s bouffant hairstyle swimming in front of her ... two icebergs bobbing across the stormy ocean of her mind. This would be the first appearance of ‘Marigold’, who later featured in *The Marigold Hour*, my first one-woman show, produced by Catherine Fitzgerald at Vitalstatistix National Women’s Theatre in Port Adelaide, South Australia.<sup>23</sup>



**FIGURE 1:** *THE LOVE ADDICT*, THE AUTHOR WATCHES THE PHONE, WAITING FOR MARIGOLD TO CALL. THIS WAS BEFORE MOBILE PHONES.

\*\*\*

During the five-year period of cultural ferment and dynamic activity of *cLUB bENT*, my monologue-based, comedic storytelling style changed, influenced by other performers and performance styles,

tropes and elements, along with the concerns and conversation within the community. By the end of the Club's life, and in works following shortly after, I included a sex-positive reverse striptease, cross-dressing as 'butch', and 'femme drag'.<sup>24</sup> All of these developments led to my full-length solo work, *The Marigold Hour*, a performance that explored drag personas, sex positivism, sexuality and stripping, interwoven with a one-and-a-half-hour comic monologue. The work was commissioned by Artistic Director Catherine Fitzgerald, and directed by Maude Davey, whose work I had admired so much in *cLUB bENT*. For the premiere in my home town of Adelaide, I performed with dildos, and created over twelve on-screen personas ranging across femme, butch and even a depiction of 'trough man', photographed by Marion Moore, and costumed and made up by Vitalstatistix and the South Australian Theatre Company.<sup>25</sup> I opened the show cross-dressed as Don Dunstan, ex-Premier of South Australia.

\*\*\*

The performers within *cLUB bENT* were not the only influences on this hybridising of form. The community itself, late in the AIDS epidemic era, was also the context in which the work was created. In 1995, as the first *cLUB bENT* took place, I was moving back to Sydney after five years living in the northern suburbs of Wollongong, where I had worked as a community writer and resident playwright with various theatre companies.<sup>26</sup>



At this time, I started working three days a week as a communications officer at the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP) of the AIDS Council of NSW (ACON). I took a part-time job to enable and support my performance work and writing. I got the job soon after returning from an Australia Council-funded tour of the Philippines and southwestern USA, exploring union-based community theatre groups. In Manila, I had been confronted by my hosts, a Marxist Filipino workers theatre collective, Tambisan Sa Sining,<sup>27</sup> to 'leave my bourgeois, government-funded art practice behind', to work for organisations and make a difference.<sup>28</sup>

At SWOP, I worked as a publications and communications officer helping clients to write their stories and publish them in *The Professional*, a strippers and sex workers magazine.<sup>29</sup> In the mid-1990s, SWOP was a stronghold of activism where challenging ideas like sex positivity, sexual rights for people with disabilities, workers' industrial rights, and health outreach programmes around safe-sex and AIDS were regularly discussed to support the development of community education material.<sup>30</sup> At SWOP there were also transexual outreach workers who distributed safe-sex products<sup>31</sup> at local soliciting sites such as 'Tranny Lane' on Forbes Street and at the wall on Darlinghurst Road, as well as to sex-on-premises venues across Kings Cross. What follows is a reflection in the present day, in part a remembrance or thick description.

### Reflection/recollection:

During my time working at SWOP, I come to understand that many sex workers are ex-nurses and identify themselves as carers and healers. Many are passionate about the rights of people with a disability to enjoy healthy sex lives and sex positivity. Some sex workers are students or artists supporting their studies and art practices. Many of the SWOP clients are also strippers who perform in mainstream clubs and worked late at sex clubs such as Porky's on Darlinghurst Road in Kings Cross.<sup>32</sup> Artist Elizabeth Burton,<sup>33</sup> a legend to the younger performers and strippers, has worked as an exotic dancer in the Cross for several decades. At SWOP I see the integrity and creativity of striptease and the struggle of many sex workers. The concept of *cLUB bENT* reflects so many of the ideals that I am surrounded by at SWOP; the sex positivity movement, gay and transgender rights, and LGBTQIA+ activism.

## EVOLUTION

My own emerging queer performance practice was deeply influenced by this creative and community ferment, generating 'hybrid' elements and forms of creativity, as by 1997, in my third year of performing at *cLUB bENT*, I started to experiment with a wide range of forms, gestural languages and performance tropes. The idea of creative

‘elements’ defined earlier responds to a biological notion of hybridity, which I explored in my Doctorate of Creative Arts.<sup>34</sup> The key concept of this form of hybridity is that characteristics of a creative work might recur in identical yet random ways in later works, rather than disappearing completely. The random connections that I witnessed in many *cLUB bENT* performances allowed me to introduce, embrace and expand these elements into my own performance works. This hybridisation of performance elements also emerged as a form of cross-fertilisation between *cLUB bENT* performers and their works over time.

Reflection:

*cLUB bENT* performers’ confidence with their queer naked bodies, their sex positivism and exploration of striptease and drag becomes one of the ‘elements’ which informs my emerging queer performance work. This is one of the many elements which I begin to use in my work, along with others such as striptease and drag, that I encounter at *cLUB bENT*.

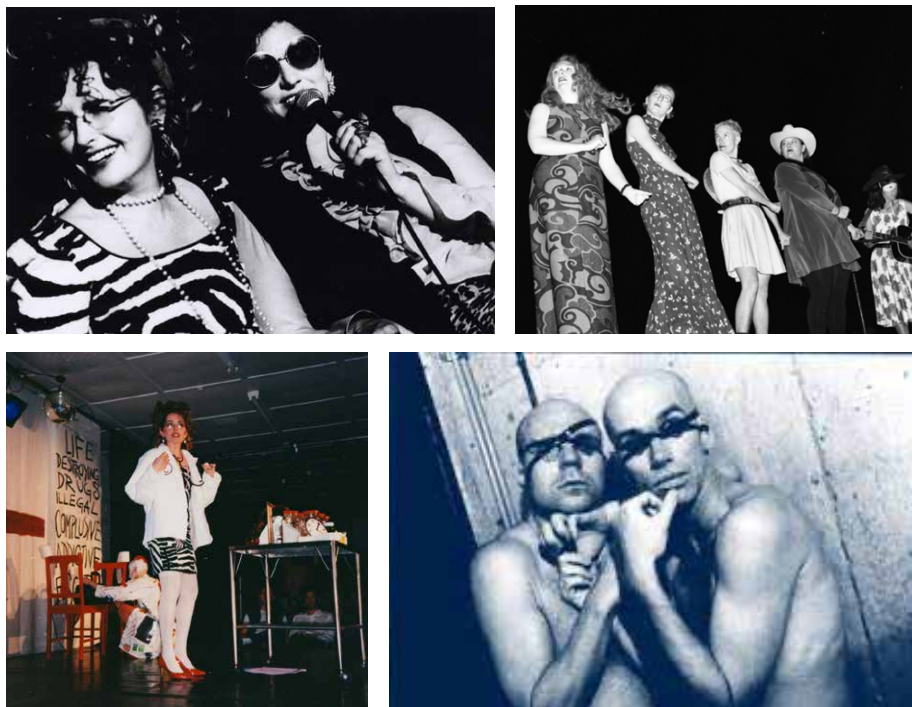
These inter-changeable elements evolved over the 1995–98 period, responding distinctly to the Proppian structuralist definition of ‘hybridity’. For Russian structuralist Vladimir Propp, in his book *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, hybridity is part of the ‘evolution of creative forms ... which can mutate and change through storytelling

style, region, historical period and migration'. He states, 'The old and the new can exist not only in a state of unresolved contradictions. They may also enter into hybrid formations' and 'hybridity is part of ... the historical development [of folktales]'.<sup>35</sup>

*cLUB bENT* became such a 'historical period' within which the annual performance of stories of queer lives and culture, and, like Propp's definition of hybridity, it has become legend, folkloric and diverse, by embracing and mutating its own internal storytelling and performance styles.

This notion of hybridity of form, having as one basis structuralist theory, was also identified by the national arts funding body, the Australia Council for the Arts, as a key focus for its funding initiatives. This framework included arts practices that were interdisciplinary, displayed a critical and innovative approach to art and its place in society, supported artists to explore emerging artistic forms, and involved the use of new technologies.<sup>36</sup>

Into the 2000s, I did go on to practise in these areas as well, including cross-fertilisation between performance, text, installation art, sound and video and some traditional forms of puppetry, theatre and radio. Later, during my Doctorate at the University of Wollongong, I also introduced performing demonstrations of 'wet biology'.<sup>37</sup> However, for the purpose of this article, I feel that the more organic notions of Proppian hybridity are more relevant.



**FIGURE 2:** *CLUB BENT* PERFORMERS AND MCS. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DEAN WALSH (ON LEFT), COW THEATRE'S VON COVES AND HEATHER-GRACE JONES, (FIRST AND SECOND FROM LEFT. IMAGE C. MOORE HARDY. AUTHOR AS LOIS Z'EBRA APPEARS WITH MADAME IVANA (JULIANNE PIERCE). AUTHOR APPEARS WITH FIONA MCGREGOR (AS NURSE JUICE) IN OXFORD STREET AIDS PERFORMANCE FUNDRAISER, 1996.

### *SUGAR SUGAR, 1997*

My third solo performance, and probably my best received *cLUB bENT* work, was *Sugar Sugar*, which explored the intricately sticky links between female sexuality, erotica, addiction and the consumption of that sweetest of all substances, sugar.<sup>38</sup> *Sugar Sugar* examined the craving, rush and light-headedness of desire; longing for nectars of

both metaphysical and manufactured varieties. It critiqued the feminisation of sugar consumption and how it has been incorporated as an aspect of feminine socialisation, ‘sugar and spice and all things nice’, ‘sweets for the sweet’ and those boxes of candy that accompany the flowers before the ‘first date’. The setting of the performance was lush, with velvet couches, satin dresses, piles of sugar and sugar raining from the ceiling; it was a cornucopia of desire. The performance was built on the comedic monologue of previous works, but the work played more with drag, reverse striptease, sexuality and gender, in this case via a ‘high-femme drag’ persona, based on *Gone with the Wind*’s Scarlett O’Hara. The performance incorporated music, layering classic songs which take sugar as their metaphor (Nina Simone’s ‘Put a Little Sugar in My Bowl’, ‘Candy Girl’). The monologue also explored addiction themes from my previous work. Recollecting once more:

Opening night. As lights come up on stage, a gown is strewn across a green velvet chaise longue, and there’s a projection of a Vivien Leigh scene, with her maid (actress Hattie McDaniel) in that same scene on a screen behind me.<sup>39</sup> Victoria Spence has directed the work for this *cLUB bENT*.<sup>40</sup>

I have found the exact replica of Scarlett O’Hara’s ‘lawn frock’ from the famous ‘corset tightening’ in *Gone with the Wind*, at a costume hire shop, home of many Australian

Opera costumes, in Abercrombie Street, Redfern. It is printed in tiny green flowers, complete with green velvet ribbons and lace.

I enter the stage, ringing my bell for a maid who never comes. The audience is encouraging, engaged. In the crowd I hear the distinctive laughs of Celia White, trapeze artist from Club Swing, and my brother Matthew Fargher, musical director of Circus Oz and Marrugeku Theatre.

Emboldened, I walk down the long-thrust catwalk stage, which has been built for this 1997 *cLUB bENT*, towards where a bowl of white sugar sits on a stand. I proceed to wash myself, underarms, inner thighs, cleavage, with the sticky granules. Finally, I blow handfuls of sugar over the crowd, and they erupt with laughter and cat-calls, before I walk back to my chaise longue and begin pulling the lawn frock over my petticoats. I begin my monologue, in a strong southern drawl.



FIGURE 3: THE AUTHOR IN *SUGAR SUGAR*, *CLUB BENT*, 1997.

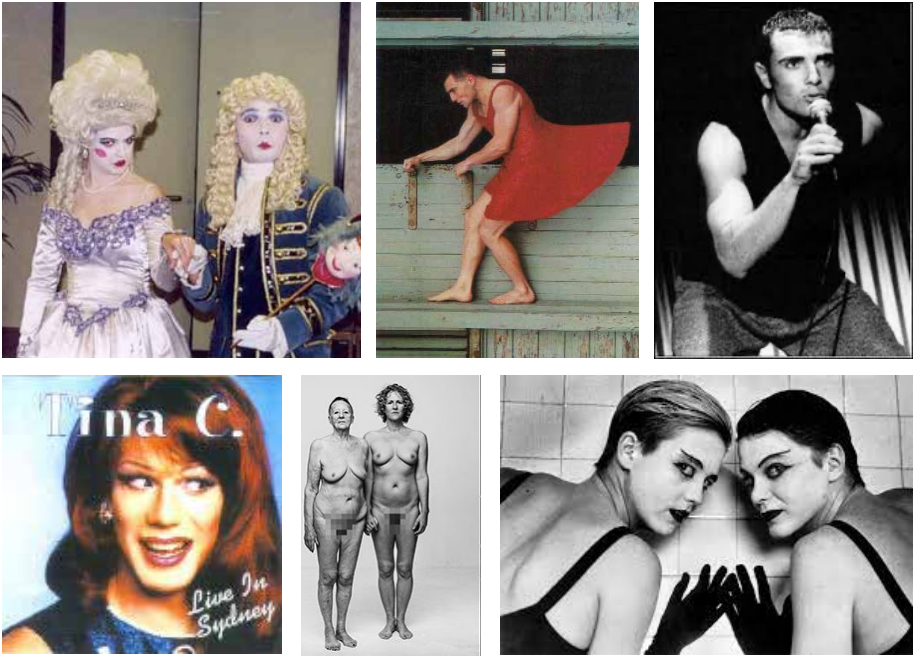
### *IT'S QUEER UP NORTH*

Perhaps because of the strong response to *Sugar Sugar*, or perhaps because of my time on the curatorial committee,<sup>41</sup> the work was chosen for the second tour to the UK of *It's Queer Up North (IQUN)*. During the years of *cLUB bENT*, a strong partnership had been forged between TPS's Artistic Director Angharad Wynne Jones and Tanya Farnam, the director of *IQUN*.<sup>42</sup> Based in Manchester, *IQUN* was founded in 1992 by two members of staff at Manchester's radical performance space, The Green Room, Tanja Farman and Gavin Barlow.<sup>43</sup> The 1998 tour was then presented at five venues



including Greenroom,<sup>44</sup> Manchester, Warwick University (academic home of Professor Germaine Greer), Club Duckie in London,<sup>45</sup> and the Tramshed in Glasgow. It was produced by Performing Lines production and touring company, led by then Director Wendy Blacklock and the inimitable Trish Stephens, who organised the tour with Mark Mitchell as technical production. The tour artists included Australians George Filev, combining physical theatre, circus and sexuality and Benedict Leslie, a radical flag twirler and movement artist. There's the 'transgender cultural terrorist' UK's Divine David,<sup>46</sup> Chris Green (also known as Tina C),<sup>47</sup> Ursula Martinez,<sup>48</sup> and New York dancers Lucy Sexton and Anne Iobst of DanceNoise.<sup>49</sup> Paul Capsis, in a separate show, also performed in Manchester around the same time.

These US and UK performers are playing with new performance elements. Divine David creates contemporary political soundscapes in a remix/cut-up form. DanceNoise perform body positivity and sexuality, working with Lois Weaver, the well-known Queer Performance maker and teacher, founder of Split Britches company, who pioneered workshop techniques exploring gender and drag.<sup>50</sup> Ursula Martinez explores body/sex positivity, sexuality, nudity and intergenerational performance, while Christopher Green explores drag, politics and comedic songwriting.



**FIGURE 4:** TOP ROW, ALL: GEORGE FILEV. BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: TINA C (CHRISTOPHER GREEN), URSULA MARTINEZ, DANCENOISE (LUCY SEXTON AND ANNE LOBST).

## QUEER PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY AS SOCIAL CAPITAL

*cLUB bENT* was not only a space to present queer work, but also a space of connection across cultural intersections, creating further hybridising of knowledge. As queer performers and activists, many of us were teachable and open to what these experiences could show us. We took risks, we copped flak and we grew, on what would now be described as ‘the edges of our comfort zones’, becoming activist by default or intention as we passed these knowledges on through our performances

and communities. The Gay Mardi Gras voted to include the word ‘Lesbian’ in its name, becoming The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in 1998.<sup>51</sup> There were community events as well as events that take queer culture to the biggest venues in town – such as the annual *Great Debate*, featuring community luminaries at the State Theatre.

Australian sociologists Pooley, Cohen and Pike<sup>52</sup> quote more recent Australian sociology theorists Winter and Stone,<sup>53</sup> suggesting that ‘social networks of quality relations can operate as a resource to collective action’, leading to specialised cultural capital.<sup>54</sup> This is reflected by the high level of activism throughout the Gay and Lesbian communities at this time.



**FIGURE 5:** *THE GREAT DEBATE*, 1998, AUTHOR, BARRIE KOSKY AND JULIE MCCROSSIN ON ‘THAT CAMP WAS BETTER THAN QUEER’.

*Word of Mouth* literary event was another of the queer creative collectives which sprung up around the same time as *cLUB bENT*.<sup>55</sup> After performing *Sugar Sugar* as a spoken-word piece at that event, I spoke with Indigenous queer activist and Birrbay Elder Aunty Sue Pinkham and her partner.<sup>56</sup> During that discussion I was made aware that I use the image of a ‘dark figure’, which plays into colonial and white supremacist tropes of ‘darkness vs whiteness’, and the white supremacist power divisions created by those distinctions.

These are the early days of whiteness and post-colonial studies, and I have never forgotten that conversation, or that lesson. Queer First Nations artists, such as *R e a*,<sup>57</sup> were part of this creative community of political/cultural collectives, and made their boundaries clear around experiences of tokenism or racism, calling them out as they occurred.<sup>58</sup> Although there was a lack of diversity on Australian stages across the late 1980s and 1990s, there were grassroots collectives, such as those of *Word of Mouth* and the Mardi Gras Festival – of which *cLUB bENT* was one example – who made consistent attempts to increase diversity, via smaller organising committees. These collectives were an integral part of this community network building within the wave of social activism and change.<sup>59</sup>

#### Reflection:

Reflecting on it now, I am aware that the queer and ‘inter-sectional’ performances that we were presenting at that time were exposing, as well as empowering. Inter-sec-

tionality in identity politics suggests that any combination of otherness – ‘i.e. race, class, ability, sexuality’ – which takes someone out of the dominant cultural identity, adds to disadvantage or potential for social exclusion. Despite many of the performers having dominant culture backgrounds, we none-the-less were pioneering forms of queer representation that opened new spaces for all kinds of gender and sexuality representations. While I started out writing this assemblage of memories, reflections and underpinning thinking and researching artists, as the writing has developed, I recognise that there are greater social forces at work, that we were part of a movement, a period of time, an explosion of gender representations of performances and their expression.

\*\*\*

In reflecting on the new wave of queer activism and performance in Australia during the mid to late 1990s, there was a convergence of fields and performers, which created a growing sense of belonging, for emerging queer performance artists such as myself, to a performance and political community. Queer performance artists were dedicated to producing new political and artistic works that engaged with ideas about queer identity, activism and community. This performance and

community building was done within spaces which were dedicated to change; to the ideal that art is a transformative medium. *cLUB bENT* personified the sentiment of the 1990s in Sydney by creating a space for queer artist activists and galvanising the LGBTQTI community to rise for inclusivity and their equal rights.

Alongside the emergence of the fourth wave of #hashtag change movements, this broad change continues to gather strength within Western democracies. The queer agenda continues to expand and look both within and beyond its shores. Notably the World Pride movement, specifically the Pride Foundation Australia,<sup>60</sup> is focusing on refugees with lived experience or risk of persecution in their own home countries, as a result of their LGBTQTIA+ identities. Growing movements around creating safe spaces for these identities to be recognised within refugee communities, and sponsorship routes for visas, are the newest agendas in this deep, continuing and passionately engaged community. Within these spaces queer performance also continues to speak – gay belly-dancers at Club Arak, queer performance initiatives for emerging artists at PACT youth theatre or Liveworks at The Performance Space, Indigenous Drag artists such as Felicia Foxx,<sup>61</sup> creating powerful political works featuring sound grabs from parliamentary speeches about the Treaty, the Voice to Parliament and the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Perhaps the wide-sweeping change heralded by the recent Labor progressive agenda victory in the 2022 election will mark a swing away from conservative politics towards a chorus of diverse

and queer performing bodies and voices, including women, young people, First Nations voices. Hopefully this can herald further performance hybridity and community building, awakening the echoes, and adding layers to the palimpsest of the powerful new wave of queer performance at *cLUB bENT* in 1995–98.

## NOTES

- 1 *AusStage*, <https://ausstage.edu.au>.
- 2 *cLUB bENT*, The Performance Space, Redfern, 15–26 February 1995, <https://ausstage.edu.au/pages/event/24568>.
- 3 I use the term ‘fields’ in this context in the same way that the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu might when describing specialised knowledge and languages. Bourdieu suggests that each area has specialised knowledge and languages; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, edited by R. Johnson (Cambridge: Polity, 1993); Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field’, in R. Benson and É. Neveu (eds), *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005) 29–47.
- 4 *cLUB bENT* attracted performers from a wide range of fields and with them came tropes, gestures and languages specific to each of those fields.
- 5 The Performance Space database, quoted in ‘*cLUB bENT*, *AusStage*, <https://ausstage.edu.au/pages/event/24568>. It is interesting to note that the term ‘queer’ is absent from the data record, which may do a great dis-service by not including LGBTQI+ as makers and creators. Arguably this community, and broad spectrum of artists, social innovators and citizens, contribute to and create many great legacies for society and performance in particular.
- 6 Cow Theatre consisted of Donna Ross, Heather-Grace Jones, Von Coves and Su Goldfish; directed by Fiona Winning; photograph by C. Moore Hardy, ‘Word of Mouth Line-up of Performers for Mardi Gras (COW)’, 1996, <https://archives.city-ofsydney.nsw.gov.au/nodes/view/697087>.
- 7 Under Noelle’s directorship, in 1988 I would curate a Sunday Salon, featuring ‘The Why Why Cry Oh Sisters’ – Katrina Sedgewick, Genevieve Maynard, Barbara Totterdell and myself (*In(ter)ventions – Performance Program*, The Performance Space, Redfern, 18–22 October 1988, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/event/142622>), as well as monologue nights, ‘Looking for Spalding’, featuring Heather-Grace Jones, Peggy Wallach, Arthur Wicks, Ian Hobbs, Megan Elliot, Victoria Spence and Mac Newson; reviewed by Steven Dunn (*Eventspace 2: Looking for Spalding*, The Performance Space, Redfern, 19 June 1996, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/event/72545>).
- 8 At this time, in an underground context, the explorations of gender were just beginning and within a decade would go on to inform the diversity and intertextuality that we now take as a given.
- 9 *cLUB bENT*, The Performance Space, Redfern, 15–26 February 1995; review text from *Australian & New Zealand Theatre Record* quoted in *AusStage*, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/event/24568>.
- 10 Moira Finucane, *Finucane and Smith Productions*, <https://www.finucaneandsmith.com/>.

- 11 Exactly ten years later, I see Maude and Moira at the Finucane and Smith cabaret at the Sydney Opera House Studio in *The Burlesque Hour*, a series of cabaret vignettes, still seductive and powerful. It has taken ten years for these queer icons to reach the Opera House. Later still, at Adelaide Festival, I see Maude and Moira in *La Cantina*; it's 2010, both are mothers of two children. It's several years after they have finished breast-feeding. Their tits are emptier, less plump than at *cLUB bENT*. They bare their bodies and sing. They are defiant and electric performers.
- 12 How did they get the bike up the stairs? Did he ride into the hall on the bike? I can't recall the detail exactly. I needed to watch the archival videos and check the black and white photos documented over the years by Maria Barbagallo and others, under the stage management of Sherridan Green, Mark Mitchell and teams, which stand as a black and white witness for this queer new wave.
- 13 'Paul Performs Janys Joplin at Slide Bar, Oxford Street, Sydney, 2010', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sk-8JTdBIc0>.
- 14 'Azaria Universe: Sound and Fury Performance', *Art Not Apart*, 2018, <https://artnotapart.com/artist/2018/azaria-universe>.
- 15 'Joel Markham', Malthouse Theatre, <https://stories.malthousetheatre.com.au/people/joel-markham>.
- 16 Running from 1987 to 1996, erotic lesbian magazine *Wicked Women* also held a competition 'Ms Wicked' won by Davey in its second year; 'Still from Ms Wicked Finals', *Australian Queer Archives*, <https://queerarchives.org.au/collections/moving-image/still-from-ms-wicked-finals>.
- 17 The Performance Space, housed at 199 Cleveland Street, Redfern, and running from 1983 to 2007 (*AusStage*, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/venue/150>), was the result of 'many individuals and the University of Sydney's Theatre Workshop who turned the hall into a theatre and it officially opened in 1983. It was later purchased by the Chaser team and home to comedy venue Giant Dwarf.
- 18 Play commissions were undertaken for Death Defying Theatre, Shopfront Youth Theatre, Theatre of the Deaf, StreetArts and MRPG from 1991 to 1995. As a community writer, I worked for Wollongong Youth Theatre, and Newcastle Workers Cultural Action Committee (WCAC), among others. The trip to the USA, mentioned later, builds on eight years as a community theatre performer, writer, facilitator and musician.
- 19 Karen Finlay toured Australia, including Enmore theatre, in the early 1990s.
- 20 Noelle Janaczewska (*AusStage*, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/contributor/8384>), director of The Performance Space throughout 1989, was a mentor of my performance and writing in the 1980s. She points out that many women are trapped into roles involving facilitation of others' work, and teaching, rather than creating their own work.
- 21 'Rosie Lalevich', *AusStage*, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/contributor/236662>.
- 22 The work also featured Marion Moore's photography, including the exhibition 'Butch Baby Butch' and 'The Lovely Mothers Project' and 'The Marigold Hour' (<https://catherinefargher.com/project/marigold-hour>) were used widely on the cover of *Sydney Star Observer* and throughout Sydney at the time. Her specialisation: drag kings, trans and gender funk imagery (see *Lesbians on the Loose*, January 1995, 10. Online: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1017298673/view?sectionId=nla.obj-1123816168&partId=nla.obj-1017330829#page/n9/mode/lup>). The Bank Hotel, a favourite Lesbian venue, had a pool competition every Wednesday night.
- 23 Catherine Fargher, 'The Marigold Hour', <https://catherinefargher.com/project/marigold-hour>.
- 24 Chris Ryan, approaching me after one performance as MC Lois Ze'Bra, says 'When your wig slipped as you walked on, it was the best drag I saw all night!'
- 25 *The Marigold Hour*, Vitalstatix National Women's Theatre at Port Adelaide Waterside Workers Hall, was directed by Maude Davey and produced



- during Feast Festival by Artistic Director of Vitalstatis-tix, Catherine Fitzgerald, designed by Cath Canton. Make-up for the photoshoot, of personas created in a Cindy Sherman style, photographed by Marion Moore, were styled by the lead make-up artist of the South Australian Theatre Company (now STCSA). The projected images depicted the other characters in the show, a technique recently used in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* by Sydney Theatre Company in seasons 2019–22.
- 26 The companies I worked at included Wollongong Youth Centre and Blacksheep Youth Theatre, as well as community centres in Port Kembla and Berkeley.
- 27 Tambisan Sa Sining, or Kilusang Mayo Uno (May First Collective) are a group of activist theatre workers who create performances and events for workers at rallies, picket lines and worker collectives throughout the islands of the Phillipines, as part of the May First Collective. They also provide exposure tours to Australian activist artists, and are assisted in Australia by Peter Murphy, a union activist, and organisers of the Philippine Australia Union Links (PAUL) – now Migrante Australia. Peter was involved in the 1978 rally which formed the Mardi Gras, and was documented in RIOT, on SBS; see Pride History Group, ‘Mardi Gras: 1978 – It Was a Riot’, <https://www.pridehistory.org.au/mardi-gras/1978-it-was-a-riot>.
- 28 My collaboration with Death Defying Theatre and the Public Service Union (PSU) was a cabaret comedy entitled *Selling Grandma*, which toured workplaces in 1991. At the time there was an Art in Working Life initiative, leading to creative partnerships with unions on issues ranging from wage cuts to New South Wales Public Service ‘rationalisation’.
- 29 ‘Sex Worker Only Publications’, *Sex Workers Outreach Project*, <https://swop.org.au/sex-worker-only-publications>; ACON and this office are funded by New South Wales Health and a strong Health Minister. The New South Wales response to the AIDS crisis has been exemplary. Public Labor federal health and epidemiological approaches are fast and effective, in comparison to those in the USA which, under Reagan, refused to acknowledge that there was a crisis. This systematic approach serves us well when the Covid pandemic hits, in 2019.
- 30 During the 1990s, the AIDS crisis has remained a major health issue in Australia since the mid-1980s, when ACON was formed. ACON and this office are funded by New South Wales Health and by a strong federal Labor Health Minister, Dr Neil Blewett. The state’s response to the AIDS Crisis has been exemplary. Public health and epidemiological approaches are fast and effective, in comparison with the USA
- which, under Reagan, refused to acknowledge that there was a crisis. This systematic approach serves us well when the Covid-19 pandemic hits.
- 31 Other material delivered included *The Professional* magazine and ‘The Ugly Mugs List’, a newsletter with warnings about dangerous clients.
- 32 Now closed, Porky’s was famous for many years; Sue Williams, ‘Neon Signs on Kings Cross Strip Clubs To Be Kept After Building Is Converted to Shops and Offices’, *Commercial Real Estate*, 17 April 2019. Online: <https://www.commercial-realestate.com.au/news/neon-signs-on-kings-cross-strip-clubs-to-be-kept-after-building-is-converted-to-shops-and-offices-45493>.
- 33 ‘Elizabeth Burton’, *AusStage*, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/contributor/421209>. Elizabeth was a stylish and talented performer, a real pro. I was witness to her art at the Strippers and Hookers Ball in 1995 and at *cLUB bENT* in 1998.
- 34 My doctorate was supervised by Merlinda Bobis and Brogan Bunt, 2008.
- 35 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1984), Vols 9–10 (Bloomington, IN: American Folklore Society and Indiana University Press, 1968; Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001) 11–12.
- 36 In 2005, the New Media Arts Fund of the Australia Council was renamed the Hybrid Arts

- Fund. This involved a radical de-funding of the original board, and a triaging policy, which diverted funds to the Visual Arts Board and the Music Board. The strategy is described by Linda Wallace in *Embodying the Information Age* (Sydney: Australia Council for the Arts, 1998).
- 37 ‘Wet biology’ is the term currently used for working with live plants or cells in the life sciences; it includes genetic modification of organisms and cell culturing.
- 38 *Sugar Sugar* was first performed for the ‘Progressive Dinner’ National Conference at The Performance Space, Redfern, in 1996. It has been performed since at the WOW Cafe, New York, 1996; at *cLUB bENT*, 1997; and at the *It’s Queer Up North* tour of Manchester, Warwick, London and Glasgow, 1998. It was recorded for ABC Radio National’s *Women Out Loud*, in October 1998.
- 39 The corset tightening scene from *Gone with the Wind* is accessible online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZ7r2OVu1ss>; the film was recently restored to HBO with a disclaimer (‘HBO Max Restores *Gone with the Wind* with Disclaimer Saying It Denies “Horrors of Slavery”’, *Today*, <https://www.today.com/popculture/hbo-max-restores-gone-wind-disclaimer-saying-film-denies-horrors-t185116>); Maria St John discusses this in light of post-colonial theory, in “‘It Ain’t Fittin’”: Cinematic and Fantasmatic Contours of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* and Beyond’, *Qui Parle*, 11.2 (1999): 127–36.
- 40 ‘Victoria Spence’, *AusStage*, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/contributor/235792>.
- 41 In the review for 1997 *cLUB bENT*, the curatorial committee is mentioned. Members were Victoria Spence, myself, Groovi Biscuit, Andy Ewing, Angharad Wynne Jones, Chris Ryan and Jonathan Parsons.
- 42 ‘queerupnorth’, catalogue description, *The National Archives* (UK), <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/b4aaf4cf-e3a2-4f4e-bd3b-8e8e22abc3ff6>.
- 43 According to the Manchester Archives, accessed via the National Archives, the name, a play on the well-known phrase ‘it’s grim up north’, was an idea borrowed from ‘Flesh’, a gay club night held at Manchester’s famous Hacienda Club.
- 44 ‘Greenroom, Manchester’, *AusStage*, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/venue/11296>.
- 45 *Duckie*, <http://www.duckie.co.uk>.
- 46 ‘David Hoyle’, *IMDb*, [https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0202862/?ref=tt\\_cl\\_t\\_l](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0202862/?ref=tt_cl_t_l).
- 47 ‘C’est Ducki’, *Christopher Green*, <http://christopher-green.net/1828-2> with Ursula Martinez at Club Duckie.
- 48 *Ursula Martinez*, <https://ursulamartinez.com>.
- 49 ‘Dancenoise’, *New York Live Arts*, <https://newyorklivearts.org/artist/dancenoise> accessed 20 May 2022; Gia Kourlas, ‘Review: DanceNoise, Lamenting AIDS and Armed With Fresh Blood’, *New York Times*, 18 November 2016. Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/arts/review-danspace-projects-platform-2016-dancenoise.html>.
- 50 ‘Lois (“Split Britches”) Weaver Solos w/ Faith and Dancing, at La MaMa, May 6–9’, *Playbill*, 4 May 1999. Online: <https://playbill.com/article/lois-split-britches-weaver-solos-w-faith-and-dancing-at-lamama-may-6-9-com-81673>.
- 51 The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras later expanded this acronym to become LGBTQIT+.
- 52 Julie Ann Pooley, Lynne Cohen and Lisbeth T. Pike, ‘Can Sense of Community Inform Social Capital?’, *The Social Science Journal*, 42.1 (2005): 71–9.
- 53 I. Winter (ed.), *Social Capital and Public Policy* (Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2000); Wendy Stone, ‘Social Capital and Social Security: Lessons from Research’, *Family Matters* 57 (2000): 10–13.
- 54 Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Social Capital’, *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986): 241–58.
- 55 *Word of Mouth* featured writer/curators Emily Ballou, Heather-Grace Jones and Julie

- Catt and Gallina Laurie. In early years, we displayed The Lovely Mothers poster project, curated by Elisa Hall, Michelle Hargreaves and myself, photographed by Marion Moore, a project funded by the Australia Council, featuring Lesbian mums or lesbians and their mums, 1990s. Online: <https://catherinefargher.com/project/lovely-mothers-poster-project>.
- 56 'Sue Pinkham', *A History of Aboriginal Sydney*, <https://www.historyofaboriginalsydney.edu.au/north-coastal/sue-pinkham>.
- 57 Previously Rea Noir, <https://rea-noir.com>.
- 58 In our Lovely Mothers project we learned that we had failed to follow clear protocols in our attempt to include several Indigenous mothers.
- 59 On the Mardi Gras Board, Dr Happy Ho was an active community member and on Mardi Gras sub-committees and organising events were CALD dancer Paul Cordiero and sound artist Panos Kouros, First Nations dancer and choreographer Raymond Blanco, and First Nations artists Brooke Andrews and Chris Bonney. Brooke and Chris were part of a Reconciliation Committee that formed at Mardi Gras during 1991–92. Further examples of representation of diversity at that time included the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust (*AusStage*, <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/organisation/188>) and the Multicultural Theatre Alliance (<https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/organisation/10647>); Indigenous artists were supported by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and Boomalli Artists collective at this time.
- 60 Pride Foundation Australia (<https://www.pridefoundation.org.au/>) are specifically developing a rainbow refugee sponsorship agenda, partnering with NGOs such as Forcibly Displaced People Network (FDPN), Refugee Advice and Casework Service (RACS), Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC) and others.
- 61 'Warrior #005' (Felicia Foxx), *We Are Warriors*. Online: <https://www.wearwarriors.com.au/our-warriors/felicia-foxx>.

# THE FUTURE IS NOW: QUEER UTOPIAN LONGING AND THE UTOPIAN PERFORMATIVE IN TODAY X FUTURE IN METRO MANILA

IAN RAFAEL RAMIREZ

Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. (José Esteban Muñoz)<sup>1</sup>

It was 2017. We had just finished wrapping up from a night of production work at the university theatre. A friend invited me to come along with him and party in Future. Future is the shortened name by which Today x Future is referred to by its patrons. I remembered him uttering, ‘*Tara Future tayo! Masaya! Andoon ang mga bakla!*’<sup>2</sup> (‘Let’s go to Future. It’s fun. It’s the go-to place for many a *bakla*.’) His



FIGURE 1: THE NOW-DEFUNCT TODAY X FUTURE IN CUBAO, QUEZON CITY, 2022. PHOTO BY RACHEL JACOB.

invitation excited me. What is this club called Future where all the bakla go to? We booked a car from a ride-sharing app and travelled

from Diliman to Cubao – home to corporate buildings, red-light districts, shopping malls and slums in the north of Metro Manila. We entered the Araneta Centre, the central business district of Quezon City, and into General Malvar Avenue where Future resides. In a seemingly abandoned commercial space beside a pawnshop and an entrance to a building parking lot, people are conversing, flocked in groups from the entrance door of the building up to a nearby thrift shop. Everything appeared strangely familiar. Strange, how a place that seems mundane and abandoned looking houses a gathering of queer individuals in the outskirts of a commercial district. In the words of a friend, it was like a mushroom that magically appeared out of nowhere. Familiar, how I felt an instant affinity with the people in the club. I felt an immediate connection to the scene despite a sense of not belonging yet. To my surprise, Future did not charge me any entrance fees, making it different from other nightclubs I had been to. Entering the space, it felt as if I were only barging into a party at a friend's house. Inside, I saw the narrow room with a disco ball hung on the ceiling. Underneath it is the dance floor where people are dancing by the DJ booth. I squeezed my body in between the crowd. The people on the dance floor greeted me with smiles and an invitation to dance but I did not fully immerse myself in the crowd yet. Instead, I proceeded to follow my friend into the bar to get some drinks. And there on top of the bar, the red neon light invited me to let loose. The signage reads in bold capital letters: **THE FUTURE IS NOW.**

I begin this article with an autoethnographic account and a recollection of memory to evoke a sense of utopian longing for a queer world. Future is no longer here. The strangely familiar queer world that I frequented shut down because of the pandemic. The only thing left in me is a nostalgia for that queer world. This affect indicates how I long to be back in that space. Or at least, to feel such ephemerality again. These traces of ephemerality serve as evidence of queer world-making.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I turn to these ephemeral traces of a utopian performative to examine the ways of being in the world of queer lives in the Philippine metropolis. I take these ‘archives of feelings’ as my objects of analysis, informed by a perspective that cultural production of queer communities is often concerned with ephemerality and therefore escapes documentation.<sup>4</sup> Embodied memories are narrated through bodies within queer spaces.<sup>5</sup> In a similar valence, I hope to transmit the potentialities of the world-making practices performed in Future via my writing.

It is important to note that remembering the performance of queer futurity in Today x Future is rooted in a critique of the present. The ill realities of Philippine queer modernity also serve as the impetus for this task of remembering. As Filipino gender and sexuality studies scholar J. Neil Garcia notes, our struggles against heteronormativity and other oppressive regimes are historically entrenched in our modernity.<sup>6</sup> Instantiating this, Jayeel Cornelio and Robbin Dagle argue that the embeddedness of Christianity into our social fabric produces spaces of unfreedom that are not safe for the

queer community.<sup>7</sup> Looking then at the present age, the prevalence of violence and discrimination against queer people, and the macho-feudal state only hinder the lack of legislation that protects them against such malign acts.<sup>8</sup> In the midst of the violence outside, Future became a safe space for many queer people in Manila. It was a place where the formed ‘we’ celebrate our identities without surveillance from a patriarchal heteronormative gaze and state violence. It was a place where ‘we’ rehearsed our radical collective potentiality of coming together in rejection of the oppressive regimes prevailing on the outside.

In this article, I foreground critical utopianism in my queer reading of Future. Particularly, my understanding of queer utopia is informed by queer Latinx performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz explains that queer utopia is a ‘casting of a picture of potentiality and possibility’.<sup>9</sup> It is grounded on the basis that something is missing in the present. Hence, in my analysis of Future, performing queer futurity is an exploration of the space as an otherwise, a forward-dawning elsewhere. Such is the radical potentiality of Future that I aim to envisage. While the utopian formation inherent to Future is what I foreground in this instance, I also make visible that as glancing moments, these utopic formations are also bound to be disappointed. For instance, oppressive regimes may intervene and disrupt what was once an inclusive space and a refuge. Moreover, I make space for possible hierarchies and disruptions to the performance of queer utopia that operates in the space throughout



the article. In their introduction to *Queer Nightlife*, Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani, and Ramón Rivera-Servera remind us that the realm of queer utopia is not simply characterised by a promise of happiness but is susceptible to negations from within as much as from outside.<sup>10</sup> These complications matter in thinking about how Future projects queer futurity. Nonetheless, I envisage Future as a space that opens the possibility of existing outside a dominant sphere. With its spirit of inclusivity, my insistence of its performance of queer futurity is that of a becoming-queer that is almost-already-here but is bound to get disappointed. Future as a space for becoming-queer evokes a sense of feeling queerness, the horizon that is not yet here as Muñoz describes. The collective experience of belonging-in-difference is a manifestation of such. I also suggest that the Philippine context and situatedness of Today x Future offer contributions to the project of queer worldmaking. I anchor my discussions in this article around these complexities of utopic discourses.

Drawing from bodily experiences and memories of former Future residents (an identifier I use for the club's patrons), I map the formation of an embodied queer community within the space as an alternative way of being-with one another. The residues of Future as archives are invitations for speculative thinking about queer lifeworlds.<sup>11</sup> I do so by engaging the task of collectively remembering the choreographies on and off the dance floor and the affective dimensions of being in the space with other Future residents – namely Jerome, Eugene, Row and Ira. What comes forth from this task of

remembrance is a casting of an image of queer futurity, a projection towards a queer horizon. In the first section, I map Future as an elsewhere and a queer space formed in its contrast with the outside. The second section discusses the performance of queer futurity in Future by looking at two spaces: the dance floor and the outdoor open space. In my examination, I consider queer gestures, choreographies of queer sociality, and the feeling of queerness. Lastly, the third section mourns the loss of Future with a hopeful glance by looking into the performative forces of the traces of ephemera.

### FUTURE AS ELSEWHERE

Zoomed out, we see Future residing in the excess of a third world city that participates in a transnational capital flow. A few blocks away from the Metro Rail Transit (MRT) station, Future can be found on the outskirts of the central commercial district of Cubao – the Araneta Centre. From the station, one may pass by commercial buildings often occupied by BPO companies (call centres), popular fast-food chains, shopping centres, and the Araneta coliseum before arriving at the seemingly abandoned building that is Future. In its immediate surrounding in the street of General Malvar, Future is circled by condominiums, a local thrift shop, an entrance to a building parking space, and a pawnshop. Amid its embeddedness in this landscape, I cast the small space of Future as a space that opens to an elsewhere. This elsewhere holds a radical potentiality towards a queer future.

This elsewhere is not a phantasmic realm but an alternative to the hegemonic systems that persist outside.<sup>12</sup> This mapping investigates the contradictions between Future and the third world city where it resides to understand their complex relations using the trope of desire. Then, I demonstrate how it becomes an elsewhere for the Filipino queer community. I suggest that the queer community reimaged an alternative here and now in their occupation of Future.

The concept of desire is inherent in mapping the elsewhere. In *Under Bright Lights: Gay Manila and the Global Scene*, Filipino scholar Bobby Benedicto uses the idea of the elsewhere as the materialisation of a third world city's desire for global modernity and progress. Benedicto regards Cubao as 'someplace else' and a contradiction of the globality that Taguig and Makati (other business districts in Metro Manila) possess.<sup>13</sup> In his words, 'Cubao was seen as a place "respectable" people did not go to at night, if at all'.<sup>14</sup> While he notes that the queer scene in Cubao desires mobility, his assertion pertains to modernist aspirations. If anything, he casts queer nightlife scenes in Cubao as 'producing ironic juxtapositions' to the global-oriented nightlife in other districts.<sup>15</sup> Benedicto further writes, 'Cubao as a whole can be taken as a reminder of how dreams are fated to fail'.<sup>16</sup> I am conscious that the 'underside of the dream of globalness' character of Cubao concerns the decline of the city from its metropolitan status in the late 1960s to the early 1970s.<sup>17</sup> However, the neoliberal critique of Benedicto recognises Cubao's participation in a transnational capital flow but fails to acknowledge the city's

complex relations with religion, a macho-feudal state, and other oppressive regimes.

I contend that the casting of Cubao's queer spaces as an elsewhere should not always be positioned as desiring 'globality'. If so, in what form does this desire in queer nightclubs, particularly Future, take shape then? To answer this enquiry, I draw from the works of queer scholars and artists on the relations between the dance floor, performance and queer desires. Haiti-born artist Jean-Ulrick Désert notes that in queer spaces, 'at a few brief points and for some fleeting moments', queerness becomes the 'dominant social narrative of the landscape'.<sup>18</sup> It is a materialisation of a desire to escape dominant heteronormative logics.<sup>19</sup> This informs us that perhaps in Future, the queer desire present is a transformative desire to reconfigure the logics of the outside. The work of Jonathan Bollen on queer performativity and kinaesthesia on the dance floor also helps us to perceive that queer desire may take place in the choreographies of the body.<sup>20</sup> In particular, queer kinaesthesia is a rehearsal through queerly stylised bodily actions of how one can perform outside the body's inscribed normative gestures. In addition to the point on rehearsal, the world-making of the dark or the night as Eddie Gamboa prefaces reorients and makes visible other forms of sensing.<sup>21</sup> I suggest that Future becomes an elsewhere via the community's recasting of the place as an alternative here and now to their modernity's failures to recognise them. It became a place for exploring new modes of performing the body and of sensing.

In my conversation with Jerome, he recalls a discussion with a friend who also happens to be a Future resident. Jerome shares that Future is like a ‘portal to somewhere else’. He then makes a point about how Future is in an odd position being only a few blocks away from corporate buildings, shopping malls, light and metro rail transits (LRT/MRT), and flyovers in Metro Manila’s major road EDSA but is still not-quite built into that space. He implies that Future is located in the excesses of Cubao’s participation in a transnational flow of capital. Flyovers, including LRTs, reproduce the experience of a transnational capital flow whereby such infrastructures provide avenues for the bourgeoisie and the working class to get transported into commercial and corporate establishments.<sup>22</sup> This is the scene of the outside in which the residents of Future participate. It is also the infrastructure that transports people into Future. The community attending its space constitutes the outside’s human capital. When the night wakes, Future serves as a place for them to dust off the outside. Every Monday to Thursday night, Future opens its doors to people coming straight from their office jobs, or simply wanting to hang out. In contrast with its party nights on Fridays and weekends, weekday nights at Future are laidback. The dance floor is set up with couches, tables and chairs, while the neon light saying THE FUTURE IS NOW conveys its inviting statement to its patrons.

In this instance, Future opens the possibility of its becoming an elsewhere. It provides a space for the sharing of feelings and forges a retreat from the hustle of the city. It becomes a space for desiring a

here and now that refuses the outside where the violences of capitalism are prevalent. Hence, Future hosts individuals who desire a potential transformation of the outside. I assert that Future's potentiality as an elsewhere enabled its reconfiguration as a queer space.

Future was originally conceived as a space that gathers Filipino creatives to converse about music, art and literature. Its becoming a queer space for the queer community was not part of the original commercial intent of its owners. One of its co-founders, Samantha Nicole Samonte, recollected in an interview for *Rappler*:

Considering how fluid, welcoming and non-judgmental Future is, it naturally attracted queer people. Everyone desires a sense of belongingness and freedom of expression, and this must really be the place! What I do remember when we started to attract more from the [queer] community is when it became like an unofficial afterparty place post-Pride march and we opened up more nights to various regulars who became our promoters.<sup>23</sup>

Samantha implies that the configuration of Future as a queer space resulted from queerness becoming a 'dominant social narrative of the landscape'.<sup>24</sup> As more queer individuals gather at Future, they took up the space and reconfigured it as a queer space.

The night opens moments for enacting 'pedagogical method(s) for imagining, practicing, and sustaining queerness itself'.<sup>25</sup> It allows

the rehearsal for queerness as it is ‘marked off from the everyday hegemonics of mundane reality’.<sup>26</sup> Eugene revealed that Future served as a comforting space for him. He narrates,

Future to me is like a coming-of-age movie but to my twenties and my gayness ... It was in Future that I became comfortable with my sexuality. Before, I was silent about my sexuality and I was not openly gay. But, when I’m in Future I can be my whole self because it’s a safe space. I don’t have to be bothered by other people and their thoughts. It’s really comforting.<sup>27</sup>

I resonated with his story. The comforting space of Future also allowed me to embrace my sexuality. Prior to coming to Future, I repress my *kabaklaan* or the manifestations of my being bakla. I do so by acting timid and shy. But there in Future, I let loose. The music on the dance floor always makes me emulate the pop girls I idolise as a young bakla. Like the Sexbomb dancers I watch on the popular noontime television show *Eat Bulaga*, I move my waist in an exaggerated manner. I learned by observing people and conversing with them in the outdoor space that I can be unapologetically myself. I remember just admiring the way some queer people in the space present themselves. As no one is policing them, they can be how they want to be, and they can wear what they want to wear. From then, I gradually learned to accept my *kabaklaan*. My encounters with

Future allowed me to fully engage with my body without inhibition. It gave me the freedom to explore my previously unfulfilled effeminate side in the comfort of a community that is free of judgement.

The freedom to explore that Future enables further casts it as an elsewhere from the outside's heteronormative gaze. With Future's non-conformity to normative modes and structures, it became an elsewhere for the Filipino queer community. Much like Eugene's and my narratives of finding Future as grounds for an exploration of our sexuality, the next section examines how the Filipino queer community took Future as a space for the exploration of what queer modernity could be and should be.

### THE PERFORMANCE OF QUEER UTOPIA

'*Tara, Future tayo.*' ('Let's go to Future.')

This statement is what my friends had used and which I later used to invite other people to come to Future. Here, Future is not a temporal concept. Rather, it is a spatio-temporal concept in which I conceive twofold: pertaining to the space of Future and pertaining to the traces of queer futurity present in the space. Considering Future as a utopian performative concept, especially if we regard '*Future tayo*' as a speech act, the utterance becomes a doing of an action.<sup>28</sup> '*Future tayo*', then, signifies not just an invitation to go to Future but an actual doing of heading to Future. I assert that the act of heading to Future implies the heading to a forward-dawning queer futurity. As one attends Future, they arrive at a



space of gathering away from the hegemonic orders of the outside. Consequently, the remark '*Future tayo*' transforms into or ends up as what the welcoming red neon light of the space says: THE FUTURE IS NOW. In this section, I turn to two areas in the vicinity of Future that illustrate where and how the performance of queer futurity lies in Future. These areas are the dance floor and the open space outside Future. I examine the performative practices present in these spaces as manifestations of a queer utopian possibility. I suggest that they echo traces of the hereness and nowness of queer futurity.

One midnight sometime in early 2018, I arrived at Future and immediately felt a sense of familiarity and belonging. During that time, I had been a resident of Future for a couple of months. The familiarity might have sprung from seeing faces and bodies whom I have encountered on my previous visits. The non-judgemental gazes of the community thriving in Future gave their welcoming comfort. As per usual, THE FUTURE IS NOW signage was there to invite me. More importantly, my body had also adjusted well to the space as I easily dived into the crowd and either danced on the dance floor or socialised. Simply put, I have gotten comfortable with this experience of queerness marked by a sense of belonging. It just felt like I had entered a friend's house again. DJ Robert Seña, who was just setting up when I arrived, oversaw the beats on the dance floor. He started off with Cyndi Lauper's 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun' and proceeded with more disco hits and popular music from the 1980s to 2010s. Everyone was singing in synchronicity to whatever music he played.

As more people occupy the narrow dance floor, the space tightened and created an intimate space for social dancing. This event enabled the mass of bodies to feel each other; it was as if our queer energies were travelling from one body to another and extending all over the place. We all moved in gestures that are otherwise circumscribed under normative modalities. In my case, I closed my eyes, sway my hips, and let my hands travel upwards while caressing every part of my body until it reaches the position like I am reaching the roof. I emulated the movements of Marimar, a lead female character in a popular telenovela. As the songs change, the people also adapt to the beat. In some scenarios, such as when Sarah Geronimo's 'Tala' plays, everyone dances to the song's choreography. It was our queer anthem at the time. For me, these gestures that I enacted are a rehearsal of movements I could not perform elsewhere. In the outdoor space of Future, people are conversing as normal while others near the door are responding to the music on the dance floor. I went outside after a couple of minutes of dancing. There, I mingled socially with some familiar faces and got introduced to others. My friend, upon gesturing towards people from the creative industry that he knows, left me to chat with some newly introduced people. After a couple more drinks, social mingling and dancing, I decided to leave with my friend and dine in at a nearby fast-food establishment. Future had again engraved an ephemerality lingering in memory. I wished that the dancing and the conversation did not stop. I hoped that the sense of belonging did not slowly evanesce as we move farther away

from Future. Nonetheless, the collective experience of being-with and among others stayed in me.<sup>29</sup>

José Esteban Muñoz argues that perceiving queer futurity requires a backward glance and an examination of its glimpses in the here and now.<sup>30</sup> He argues that quotidian minoritarian performances transcend ‘across symbolic space, inserting us in coterminous time when we witness new formations within the present and the future’.<sup>31</sup> The above recollection looks back into the feeling of ephemerality and the experience of queerness in Future. In this snapshot, the dance floor, and the open space outside Future where its residents converse are two important spaces that demonstrate different social dynamics. The utopian performativity in these two spaces, I suggest, can be perceived differently. On the dance floor, it manifests through the enactments of queer gestures. In the outdoor space, the choreographies of queer sociality matter. I assert that crossings between the dance floor and the open space are experiences of new spatio-temporal maps that illuminate ways of being in the world that exist outside dominant logic.

In my experience, seeing other queer people who are confident in their own bodies affected me to improvise ways that I want my body to feel and move. As in my recollection above, I even emulate female pop stars and mainstream Filipino female characters in my movements. Imitating fellow bakla and sensing how my body wants to move, I slowly raise my hands, sway my hips to the beat, and flick my fingers. In a flamboyant manner, I even sway and touch my hair

as if I have long hair. Doing these felt like releasing queer energies which are repressed growing up. Jerome, who happens to practise DJ-ing in Future, also noted an observation about the people's response to music, 'the people share something, and they celebrate it'. Perhaps, it is the sensing of queerness that we share and celebrate in Future. No one is policing our movements, and this enables us to move freely. The observed relationality of gestures manifests the shared connections between bodies via the awareness of each other's gestures.<sup>32</sup> This is how an embodied queer community on the dance floor is formed.

On the dance floor, 'dancing is an experience of being-in-the-world radically different from the everyday'.<sup>33</sup> Embedded in a negation of the politics that persists on the outside, queer social dancing on the dance floor imagines and rehearses an alternative lifeworld to inhabit.<sup>34</sup> I argue that queer gestures on the dance floor are traces of queer futurity by virtue of their contradictions to the normative. They serve as performative tools to reconfigure body politics via the resignification of how a body should move irrespective of its morphological structure. In Future, the freedom to move freely without judgement from the heteronormative gaze allows its gay patrons to embrace their effeminacy. The queer gestures performed in Future rematerialise formerly constricted gestures dictated by categorical divisions of the heteronormative order. This is what Selby Wynn Schwartz refers to as the 'kinesthetic practice of collective politics' – a collective labour made possible by individual bodily experiences and

the relationships formed among them.<sup>35</sup> This is the performance of a potential way of being in the world – rearticulated gestures of bodies not policed by a heteronormative gaze. It is also in the developed shared sense of moving and being-together that the performance of queer utopia becomes present.

Outside the dance floor, a different experience exists yet still illuminates a utopian performative. At this juncture, I wish to discuss the outdoor space of Future. The most distinctive memory I have of the outdoor space is the time when someone started singing a birthday song to a friend and everyone followed that cue to sing along. It stayed in my memory because Future was the only nightclub where I experienced such. Row, a friend and a Future resident, always tells me that his experience in Future is more defined by the social connections, friendships and relationships forged. I remember how he would often point out to me who is in a relationship with whom, and who was rumoured to have slept with whom. He adds,

When you from the dance floor into the (outdoor) open space, the openness of the space allows you to open yourself up to other people. Here is an example. I came from inside where I got drinks with the people whom I arrived with. Then, I go to the open space and encountered Caloy. We will chat for a moment until Ira passes behind me and invites me for a cigarette. I will accompany her to the cigarette smoking area and then there I would meet

more people. This is exactly how I met various groups of people in Future.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, Ira, another Future resident, also appreciates the welcoming feeling she gets from Future. She mentions that in times that she comes to Future alone, she always exits with a newfound friend. Sometimes, this experience even extends beyond the space of Future. Ira shares that there will be times that after meeting new friends, they would even go to a nearby *lugawan* (rice porridge eatery) at Tomas Morato, or sometimes to Tapsi ni Vivian at Anonas. Jerome also narrates a similar experience but highlights another important matter in these dynamics. He mentions that he was able to have conversations with established personalities in the creative industry and the owner of Future because of people's movements. His introduction to them is made possible because of the erasure of social hierarchies in Future. In his words, 'we are all equals in Future'.

What I, Row, Ira and Jerome describe is, for me, an experience of community formation produced via what I call the choreographies of queer sociality – the movements and flows of the residents of Future that serve as a rehearsal of interconnectedness. My use of choreography here invokes a re-organisation of the movements and flow of people. Taking the statement of Jerome that 'we are all equals in Future', I suggest that what is being rehearsed in this re-organisation is the refusal of marked differences between classed and gendered bodies. This reflects what Martin Manalansan IV, in

an interview for the journal publication *Plaridel*, explains: ‘queer is about messing things up’.<sup>37</sup> In this case, a way to perceive the choreographies of queer sociality in Future is that it messes with the social codes that hierarchise people based on their marked differences. It then becomes a manifestation of queerness in its rejection of systems that classify beings under certain identificatory categories.

Our recollections also reveal that Future was not simply a space for us to socialise in fleeting moments. Rather, we endeavour to maintain the relationships and connections forged beyond the space of Future and into our everyday. This manifestation of queer utopia is also attuned with Jill Dolan’s argument of the utopian performative as the production of *communitas* from performance. She notes that this phenomenon is inscribed in the ‘glancing moments of possible better ways to be together as human beings’.<sup>38</sup> I wish to extend this by noting that beyond community formation, such utopian performatives enabled by the choreographies of queer sociality in Future contribute to a collective politics that aims to politically transform the outside. It orients us towards ways of how we might further assert the queer presence of our formed community on the outside. In the open space of Future, then, utopic possibilities are performed as rehearsals of strategies for the interconnectedness and formation of queer communities.

The utopian performance present in Future also reflects what Jack Halberstam would describe as an act of queer failure. Halberstam defines the art of queer failure as practices that refuse

hegemonic systems and, in doing so, ‘imagine other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being’.<sup>39</sup> This, for me, is the core of the utopic discourse in Future. In their refusal of the normative, the embodied queer community of Future imagines and rehearses queer futurity.

### LONGING FUTURE

Around mid-2018, I remember coming to Future with Row. This was after a few months of not being able to come to Future. Upon arrival, we saw the addition of a door person who asks entrance fees and the barricades that regulate the crowd. Then, we echoed the same sentiment – ‘this doesn’t feel like Future’. The feeling might have stemmed from not encountering many familiar faces. Perhaps, it was also because we came at the time when the news that Austin Castañeda, one of the owners and a DJ at Future, had committed sexually inappropriate behaviour toward some Future residents.<sup>40</sup> The accounts of his victims all shared on social media that Austin would kiss them without consent, and often would buy them drinks then guilt them to kissing him. These predatory events damaged the safe space structure that Future residents have built over time. Jerome also recalled that it was around this period that Future felt the presence of the Philippine President at the time, Rodrigo Duterte. The proximal existence of police mobiles and the roaming night security department of the Araneta Centre ensured that state surveillance was sensed in Future. These events



demonstrate how Future is still constituted by the dominant powers of the outside.

On one side, the narrative persisted of Future as queer space where the queer community perform acts of refusal to the normative. However, insofar as Future orients us towards the anti-normative cultural production that it makes possible, the events I mentioned above allow us to see that alternatives to hegemonic systems are ‘embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent’.<sup>41</sup> After all, queer nightlife spaces remain susceptible to other modes of constraint, even from the inside.<sup>42</sup> In the case of Future, it may not be the existence of exclusionary practices that discriminated against class or gender but it was the disruption to its ‘safe space’ structure that further propelled, if not problematised, its utopic discourse. Particularly, in this period of 2018 onwards when shifts that changed the dynamics of the space were introduced. This informs us of the disappointment of the utopian performative in Future. While utopian performative forces live in the longing for Future, on what Future could and should feel like, the shifts that challenged the performance of queer utopia illuminate how our collective desire for social transformation bleeds into our everyday libertarian struggles even in the spaces that we forge for play and refuge. In Future, we endeavoured to manifest an embodied queer community that would create a sense of belonging, but its realisation has been disrupted by the visitation of immorality. This then damages Future’s reputation as being different from other nightclubs and spaces that enact normative

modes of exclusion and are deemed unsafe for the queer community.

The ramifications of the failed pandemic response of the Duterte regime coerced the owners of Future to permanently close its doors on 18 June 2020. In their official announcement, Future writes,

Today x Future is closing ... We don't know what the future holds but we hold on to all the unforgettable memories ... Thank you for letting us be your space, your home where you grew up, fell in love, fell out of love, discovered so much, learned a lot, met so many people we're sure you hold close until now. Thank you for letting Today x Future be part of your lives ... What is coming is better than what is gone ...<sup>43</sup>

Many Future residents turned to social media to air their sentiments about how Future served as a welcoming space for them to become their avenue for self-expression.

In our recollection of this moment, we all echoed how distinct Future is. Jerome mentioned that he lacks awareness of whether there would be other spaces in Metro Manila that are like Future. Similarly, Eugene shared that there wouldn't be any place like Future even with the presence of Futur:st, Future's sibling located in a different district in Metro Manila. I suppose we are all missing the potentiality of a queer world that Future illuminated. Future housed our queer explorations of being in the world and losing it left us only with the affect

that the horizon that is queerness marks. In our collective consciousness lies a desire for the sense of belonging in a queer elsewhere. José Muñoz argues that a phantasm for queerness is ‘linked to utopian longing, and together the two can become contributing conditions of possibility for political transformation’.<sup>44</sup> Utopian longing is a manifestation of a performative force – a desire for a radical transformation enacted via a rejection of the present. It may appear dressed in the form of wishful imagining, but utopian longing orients us towards collective politics. I suggest here that the performance present in *Future* may be reproducible in another elsewhere through a constant rehearsal of what the here and now could and should feel like. Although prone to disappointments, these moments are valuable in the radical transformation of queer modernity. In longing for *Future*, we open passages for an elsewhere that might be queer futurity.

## EPILOGUE

*THE FUTURE IS NOW* was the maxim we held on to in carving an image, experience and feeling of the not-yet that is still to come. It was a representation of our collective dreaming, hoping and imagining. Throughout this article, I enacted a queer utopian longing in my writing. I turned to the residues of *Future* that form a queer archive of memories of bodily experiences and feelings, and traces of ephemera, to examine how queer futurity is performed. I wish for the persistence of this lingering queer feeling and desire

towards a horizon in the collective consciousness of the embodied queer community formed in Future. The politics of Future lies in the capabilities of Filipino queer individuals and their allies to collectively reconfigure spaces and radically transform them into sites for imagining their ways of being in the world. In conjunction with projects of utopian imagination, disruptions to our imagining also enable us to perceive how power functions within the interstices of our queer spaces. In the case of Future, these disruptions were the issues of sexual misconduct and the fleeting sense of state control. Besides allowing improvisations of our bodies, the presence of these disruptions should nonetheless coerce our formed queer community to rethink these structures and perhaps configure how we may enact, for instance, alternative modalities of care. What I suggest is that the sense of disruptiveness or being disrupted in Future should further propel our utopian impulse and desire for social transformation. Furthermore, the susceptibility of the queer spaces we create to disruption and disappointment should serve as a reminder of our ongoing struggle toward queer futurity.

While I illustrated the potentiality of our queer spaces as sites of imagining and rehearsing alternative ways of being in the world, a project that maps the complexities of our queer world-making practices in the Philippines is yet to come. This project initiates the task of imagining the collective potentiality of our performances. The hope is to transcend boundaries between the here and now and queer futurity to illuminate, even in glancing moments, that the future is now.

## NOTES

- 1 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 1.
- 2 I refer to ‘*bakla*’ as the local identity formation in the Philippines that is commonly referred to in Anglo-American as ‘gay’.
- 3 José Esteban Muñoz, ‘Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts’, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8.2 (1996): 10–11. DOI: [10.1080/07407709608571228](https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571228).
- 4 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 245.
- 5 Fiona Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer Worldmaking* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002) 21.
- 6 J. Neil Garcia, ‘Philippine Gay Culture: An Update and a Postcolonial Autocritique’, in Mark Blasius and Richard Chu (eds), *More Tomboy, More Bakla Than We Admit: Insights into Sexual and Gender Diversity in Philippine Culture, History, and Politics* (Quezon City, Philippines: Vibal Foundation Press, 2021) 87.
- 7 Jayeel Cornelio and Robbin Dagle, ‘Contesting Unfreedom: To Be Queer and Christian in the Philippines’, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 20.2 (2022): 28.
- 8 The Philippines is far from ending systems of exclusion and serving justice to queer people. Jennifer Laude, Ebeng Mayor, Madonna Nierra and Jessa Remiendo are only a few names of murdered queer individuals. These does not include queer detainees who have become subjected to abuse by the very institution mandated to ‘serve and protect’ – the Philippine National Police. Two decades have passed yet the legal struggle towards the passing of a law that would protect the Filipino LGBTQ+ community against violence and discrimination still persists. For a timeline of the two decades of legal struggle coupled with cases of abuse and hate crimes, see Michelle Abad, ‘Timeline: SOGIE Equality in the Philippines’, *Rappler*, 28 August 2019. Online: <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/238593-timeline-sogie-equality-philippines/>.
- 9 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 125.
- 10 Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, ‘Introduction’, in Adeyemi, Khubchandani and Rivera-Servera (eds), *Queer Nightlife* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021) 2.
- 11 Madison Moore, ‘Dark Room: Sleaze and the Queer Archive’, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 31.1–2 (2001): 191. doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2021.1878510.
- 12 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) 92.
- 13 Bobby Benedicto, *Under Bright Lights: Gay Manila and the Global Scene* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) 61–3.
- 14 Ibid, 60.
- 15 Ibid, 69.
- 16 Ibid, 72.
- 17 Nelson A. Navarro, ‘Cubao’s Brief Shining Moment’, *The Philippine Star*, 13 January 2013. Online: <https://www.pressreader.com/philippines/the-philippine-star/20130113/282376921932861>.
- 18 Jean-Ulrick Désert, ‘Queer Space’, in Gordon Brent Ingram et al. (eds), *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1997) 21.
- 19 Ibid, 21.
- 20 Jonathan Bollen, “‘What a Queen’s Gotta Do’”: Queer Performativity and the Rhetorics of Performance’, *Australasian Drama Studies* 31 (1997): 106–23.
- 21 Eddie Gamboa, ‘Pedagogies of the Dark: Making Sense of Queer Nightlife’, in Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani, and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera (eds), *Queer Nightlife* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021) 91–100.
- 22 Neferti Xina M. Tadiar,

- Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order* (Hong Kong University Press, 2004) 84–5.
- 23 Paolo Abad, ‘How Cubao’s Today x Future Became a One-of-a-Kind LGBTQ+ Haven’, *Rappler*, 8 August 2020. Online: <https://www.rappler.com/life-and-style/how-cubao-today-x-future-became-lgbtq-haven/>.
- 24 Désert, ‘Queer Space’, 21.
- 25 Gamboa, ‘Pedagogies of the Dark’, 92.
- 26 Bollen, “‘What a Queen’s Gotta Do’”, 114.
- 27 This translation of the interview is mine.
- 28 J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) 6–8.
- 29 This autoethnographic account was part of my paper presentation during the 2018 Joint International Federation for Theatre Research Regional Conference and the Asian Theatre Working Group Colloquium.
- 30 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 55.
- 31 *Ibid*, 56.
- 32 Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (NY: New York University Press, 2014) 2, and Buckland, *Impossible Dance*, 93.
- 33 Jonathan Bollen, ‘Sexing the Dance at Sleaze Ball 1994’, *TDR* 40.3 (1996): 175, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1146561>.
- 34 See Kareem Khubchandani, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020) and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, ‘Quotidian Utopias’, in *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012).
- 35 Selby Wynn Schwartz, *The Bodies of Others: Drag Dances & Their Afterlives* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019) 21.
- 36 This translation of the interview is mine.
- 37 Jaime Oscar M. Salazar, ‘Queering Things Up: Interview with Martin Manalansan IV’, *Plaridel* 9.2 (2012): 110.
- 38 Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 146.
- 39 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88.
- 40 ‘Today x Future Promoter Called-Out for Sexually Inappropriate Behavior’, *Rappler*, 16 March 2018. Online: <https://www.rappler.com/life-and-style/198329-today-x-future-owner-austin-castaneda-quezon-city-sexual-harassment-allegations/>.
- 41 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 89.
- 42 Ayedemi et al., *Queer Nightlife*, 2.
- 43 Giselle Barrientos, ‘After 12 Years, LGBTQ+ Safe Space Today x Future Is Closing Down’, *Scout Magazine*, June 2020. Online: <https://www.scoutmag.ph/60640/today-x-future-closing-down-bn/>.
- 44 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 172.

## SHOW ME HOW YOU DO IT DOWN UNDER: REALNESS AT THE WEST BALL II

BILLY KANAFANI

On 13 March 2021, I attended The West Ball II held at Casula Powerhouse, an arts and performance venue in Liverpool, New South Wales. Liverpool was the city I grew up in and where I was appointed to for my first teaching job. I attended school there, hung out at the Westfield shopping mall and lined up for hours for donuts at Krispy Kreme when it first opened. I spent what feels like most of my undergraduate degree at The University of Sydney explaining where Liverpool was and why I couldn't just get a taxi home after a night out in the city. In a promotional piece for the ball, one of the hosts, Xander Silky, sets up the ball as 'reclaiming' safe space in Western Sydney for queer people, as 'no one's ever thrown queer parties in Western Sydney', and people from the area are forced 'to travel into the inner West or the city to find safe spaces'.<sup>1</sup> In identifying the ball as an opportunity to reclaim space, Xander is calling out to people

from Western Sydney to take up space in their local community and to claim it as safe space for their queer community.

Attending the second West Ball forced me to rethink what I knew of the area from my experience. Growing up (and teaching) in Liverpool, I never felt particularly safe or accepted as queer. This meant that for me (and many of my friends), my queer identity was never celebrated, and I went to painstaking lengths to avoid expressing it. Saturday nights were spent in inner-city Darlinghurst, surrounded by the mostly cis- white scene of central Sydney, and the early hours of Sunday morning were spent on the train to Liverpool station, fewer than 300 metres from the site of the first West Ball, or in a carpool, butching up my clothes and removing any traces of makeup and glitter from my body. So, to see this site – a place where kids who looked like me, who grew up in the same location as me, and who I may have taught – as one where folks were able to celebrate their queerness in their local community was heartening and deeply surprising.

In this article, I use an ethnographic approach to analyse the performances of the walkers and identify the narratives that frame the construction of the ‘realness’ category<sup>2</sup> at The West Ball II, where performers were assessed on their ability to believably present themselves as local ‘thugs’ or schoolboys. Viewing these performances through the queer regional framework of social and cultural theorist Gayatri Gopinath reveals elements that make up the experience of, and appear to be valued by, queer people of colour in



Western Sydney. I argue that the world-making performances of The West Ball II project what José Esteban Muñoz would call a utopia<sup>3</sup> that connects the queer participants to their ‘regional’ and diasporic cultures and community, and allows them to celebrate themselves, and their queerness, in those cultures. Further to this, I argue that these utopian performances actively disassociate the participants’ identities and experiences from the dominant ‘metronormative’ and ‘homonormative’ experiences of Sydney. I borrow these terms from Gopinath, whose use of the terms builds ‘on the work of Halberstam and Gerring to name the single mode of queerness legitimized and rendered intelligible by a colonial logic ... an implicitly white, urban, upper-middle-class gay subject in the global North’.<sup>4</sup>

Recent scholarship has worked to understand ballroom culture outside the framework of, and in response to, Jennie Livingstone’s film *Paris Is Burning* (1990).<sup>5</sup> Queer nightlife theorist madison moore’s analysis of ballroom translated into European contexts explores the significance of vogue ballroom performance in new locations and specifically the impact of ballroom culture on its participants. moore discusses what happens when the ‘uniquely black and brown LGBTQ culture’<sup>6</sup> of voguing expands globally and how producers work to counter cultural gentrification of ballroom, particularly in dominantly white and ‘not always queer’<sup>7</sup> spaces. Specifically, moore argues that there is ‘power’ in the translation of ballroom in cities like Paris, as it ‘creates space for black and brown Europeans in countries with low ethnic populations to learn to love their skin colour and hair

texture'.<sup>8</sup> They argue that these performances help participants to 'realise that they are desirable bodies despite growing up in majority-white environments'.

The Asia Pacific region is home to growing ballroom communities documented in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore and Tokyo.<sup>9</sup> Australian vogue ballroom sits geographically in this region and connected to vogue ballroom in Aotearoa New Zealand. Houses now operate in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Auckland and Wellington. Ballroom scholarship provides useful approaches to understanding the shape and significance of these performances translated in the Asia Pacific; however, in the sprawling, increasingly decentralised suburban capital cities of Australia, location shifts the experiences of these communities. Inspired by Kareem Khubchandani's turn to 'second-cities' to understand the experience of queer migrant, diasporic and working-class communities,<sup>10</sup> grab your Opal Card and join me at Central Station (Platform 19) for a ride down the T3 line to Sydney's South-West.

## THE AREA

West and South-West Sydney are colloquially referred to by many who live there as *The Area*. The Area Movement, emerging music producers and lifestyle brand from Western Sydney, provide the following definition:

Every big city in the world has them outer suburbs where multi cultural working-class people live. There are different names for these places. In West Sydney we call it **THE AREA**.<sup>11</sup>

The term has been used by sport stars who have ‘the whole area’<sup>12</sup> behind them and aspiring local politicians who believe that their community ‘deserves someone who truly understands the struggles of the area’.<sup>13</sup> It was also the password to access tickets for The West Ball II. While the term can generally refer to a location, the use of the phrase in relation to Western Sydney holds the cultural understandings of the above definition; it is specific to a locative and cultural community when used by those within the community. When used, the term is chosen over the naming of a particular suburb, or the term ‘region’ which is used more widely to describe zones of Sydney. It is nomenclature for Western Sydney that simultaneously disassociates the region from the dominant global image of Sydney, and names a community and the common experiences of a group of people who are culturally diverse, but mostly non-white, working-class and geographically linked.

In order to understand the significance of this definition, I draw on Gayatri Gopinath’s work on queer regions, which is rooted in both queer studies and diaspora studies, as a useful framework for understanding the area and how the narratives of the area shape The West Ball. Gopinath defines a queer region as a ‘subnational [space] that exists at the margins of dominant national and gay imaginar-

ies'.<sup>14</sup> She argues that queer regions exist at the intersection of queer studies and the geopolitical and can be usefully positioned against the more commonly used and understood 'concepts of diaspora and nation'.<sup>15</sup> Gopinath argues that dominant cartographies 'privilege the nation-state' or ignore 'spaces, and gender and sexual formations, [that are] deemed without value within the map of global capital'.<sup>16</sup>

Gopinath's use of the term 'region' draws on the work of critical regionalism and area studies scholars that use the term because it 'is a strictly relational term rather than a pre-given entity'.<sup>17</sup> She argues that narratives of the region are 'not irreducibly particular and self-enclosed, but rather are produced precisely by the collision of the local, the national and the transnational'.<sup>18</sup> As such, foregrounding 'region' and 'queer' in the dominant narratives of a nation can reveal an 'alternative cartography [which] rejects [these] dominant cartographies'.<sup>19</sup> Moving specifically to the narratives and experiences of both queer people and those 'regional' to major cities renders visible what is hidden by these dominant narratives.

In this case, viewing the dominant, metronormative narratives of metropolitan Sydney through a regional frame reveals the area as being distinct to and separate from inner-city Sydney. Layering the experiences of queer people in this region on to this understanding works to reveal the 'alternate cartography' of the area. I posit that the queer performance of *The West Ball*, including categories that 'celebrate Western Sydney's multiculturalism' by requiring you to 'include your own cultural movements'<sup>20</sup> in your performance for one

category before wearing your best TN sneakers<sup>21</sup> in another, is one way to understand some of the narratives of this queer region. The narratives privileged by these participants work to give value to what is ‘deemed without value’<sup>22</sup> in the dominant heteronormative cultures of Australia. By reading and understanding the dominant narratives that shape, and are present at, The West Ball, and the labour that creates them, the queer regions of South-West and West Sydney begin to take shape. I argue that these narratives are the foundations of the queer utopia glimpsed through this event.

Extending this, Gopinath argues that if queering the nation/diaspora to look towards the region renders visible what is made invisible by the nation, then dominant queer narratives can be similarly regionalised, and this provides scope to productively critique and reveal layers and questions of ‘race, colonialism, migration, and globalisation’ in communities of, and queer studies that centre on communities of, white ‘homonormativity’.<sup>23</sup> Regionalising these queer narratives foregrounds the experience of queer people of colour who are on the margins of white cis-queer culture and studies, like one of my interview subjects, who first met his ballroom house when he saw ‘a group of brown people in the corner’ of an inner-city night club, and approached them after thinking ‘oh, that’s fun, don’t see that too often in gay clubs’.<sup>24</sup> The reading of a queer region as simultaneously a queering of the homogenising narratives of the nation, and regionalising the metronormative narratives of queerness, becomes a way to understand the cartography of the queer region of the area.

Reading moore's work on vogue ballroom in translation through Gopinath's framework further highlights how this performance allows cultural and queer (and often both) minorities to express utopian possibilities alternate to the dominant white and hetero/homonormative cultures that they are situated in. Gopinath's work offers opportunity to understand the unique aspects in the translation of ballroom culture into this queer region and read these as significant. It similarly provides a productive lens to examine the impact forces of global capitalism and colonialism on this community, and how these have shaped the differences in the execution of vogue ballroom in the area. While the area is its own unique region within greater Sydney, the performers at West Ball II are from many different Australian cities and their performances demonstrate that there are regions similar to the area that exist on the fringes of multiple Australian capital cities, with similar cultural references. The labours of these performers are world-making, and function as a glimpse of the utopian future that they wish to see: in this case, one that celebrates both queerness and working-class migrant culture. These performances take disassembled components of the straight world and reshape them into visions of a future queer world,<sup>25</sup> creating space for these worlds to be glimpsed, where these utopias are expressed through the performative and as a critique of the straight present.<sup>26</sup> The performances at a ball snatch these utopic worlds from the horizon and, as moore argues, 'bring [them] into the here and now'.<sup>27</sup>

## THE WEST BALL II

The West Balls are all themed around the cultural experience of living in Liverpool and greater Western Sydney. The promotional material (digital flyer) for each West Ball works both to establish the overall theme and to outline the criteria for different categories at the ball which are generally ‘spelled out in flyers and are reiterated and enforced at balls by commentators and judges’.<sup>28</sup> For The West Ball II, an image of the hosts and commentators, Xander Silky and Jamaica Moana, leaning on their car in a carpark covers the front of the flyer with the title of the ball above them, made up to look like the Krispy Kreme logo. Even without the logo, anyone from the area can recognise the distinctive shape of the building in the background, and the significance of the location. This is the Krispy Kreme on Orange Grove Road, a weekend haunt for young people, located conveniently next to greater Liverpool’s first 24-hour McDonalds and late-night Harry’s Café de Wheels. From its opening in the early 2000s, the Krispy Kreme, or more specifically its carpark, has been a social destination where young people could park, socialise with friends, make new ones, and partake in some car-related ‘antisocial’ behaviours, like drag races, hooning, burnouts and donuts (both vehicular and original glazed). The flyer for the first West Ball featured the hosts sitting at a train station, with the branding and colouring of Sydney Trains on a sign above them which reads ‘The West Ball’, referencing the primary way to access or leave Liverpool, the T2/T3 train line. Read together, these flyers show a progression of each ball

towards the cultural specificity that makes them distinctive. Both flyers reference Western Sydney, but the flyer for the West Ball II places the ball in a highly specific location, at a particular time, connecting it to a particular cultural experience of being from Western Sydney.

The copy on both flyers lists categories, the gender identities eligible to compete in each, traditional titles that spell out the criteria of each – ‘beginners vogue’, ‘old way’, ‘hands’ – and descriptions that thematise the categories to create a focus on the cultural experiences of Western Sydney. Walkers are asked to ‘pump southwards down the M5’ as traffic controllers in the team runway, to wear their ‘freshest TNs’ for sneaker vs sneaker, and to ‘suit up’ for old way, because even though ‘you’re a westie doesn’t mean you can’t be classy’.<sup>29</sup> This explicit and deliberate theming works to make this ball so clearly an expression of the dominant narratives of queer Western Sydney; the organisers draw on the cultural knowledge and experience of the area’s inhabitants and challenge them to express their interpretation of this.

The West Ball II was held in the Turbine Hall of the Casula Powerhouse, a cavernous concrete space that normally functions as an exhibition space and a foyer for events held in the main 300-seat theatre, that had been transformed to a performance venue. An elevated catwalk ran the length of the hall, finishing at a judges’ table, positioned in front of an accessibility ramp which runs back and forth to take patrons up to the theatre, and formed an elongated, multi-level catwalk for the grand march which introduced each competing house.



During their category, performers walk from the end of the catwalk towards the judges, who are generally positioned as far removed as possible from the entrance and where tickets are taken.<sup>30</sup> The walkers perform to the crowd on either side of the catwalk (and in this case up to the narrow gallery that ran along one side of the hall) but are encouraged to orient their performance towards the judges, which the commentators remind them to do regularly: ‘remember, you’re selling it to the judges not the crowd’. The walkers must convince each judge to give them a ‘10’ to send them to the next round. From the second round, they must convince the judges to select them as the winner of a ‘battle’, generally with two walkers, knock-out style until one person is declared the overall winner.

## REALNESS AT WEST BALL II

The performances in the realness category at The West Ball II reveal ways that realness is culturally constructed by the experience of the participants. Realness categories celebrate the tools required to safely blend into the world outside of the ball. It is one of the most well-known categories, in part due to a sizeable chunk of *Paris Is Burning* being dedicated to the topic and, as a result of this, substantial scholarship published on the category in response to the film. In realness categories, walkers are assessed on their ability to ‘fade away [and] become imperceptible’.<sup>31</sup> Walkers need to look the part so well that they can exist seamlessly in the world outside the

ball. moore describes realness as the ‘supreme’ category in ballroom, ‘because if you walk a realness category, the whole idea is that you need to be “real” or “believable” to get your tens’.<sup>32</sup>

The realness performances of *The West Ball II* establish quotidian elements of area culture as significant; they highlight that, in this utopian future, being queer and being from the area (and celebrating these two things) is both significant and not mutually exclusive. At *West Ball II*, the realness category of the night was ‘Pretty Boy Realness vs Area Realness’, challenging walkers to present as a ‘pretty school boy heading into Livo library or the thug smoking durries out the front’. Realness is classified as a non-performance category. Non-performance categories require walkers to rely on specific skills that fit within defined criteria and not additional costumes or movement to create spectacle. Criteria for realness requires walkers to ‘minimise or eliminate any sign of deviation from gender and sexual norms that are dominant in heteronormative society’.<sup>33</sup> In each of the two versions of realness at *The West Ball II*, performers were assessed against the criteria of their selected version and evaluated against how well they have ‘unmarked [themselves] as sexually queer through [their] gender performance’.<sup>34</sup> The versus nature of this category meant that one winner was decided from the pretty boys and one from the area boys, who then competed against each other for the grand prize. Having taught both these boys, I felt that I had developed a particular eye for this highly specific category.

The first walker of the category demonstrated the expectations and criteria for area realness. Dressed in black jeans and a t-shirt, with black TN sneakers on his feet, he stepped on to the stage, inhaled from his vape, and blew out the smoke slowly as he ambled towards the judges to the cheers of the crowd. His gait was wide with mostly short steps, and his arms barely moving. He approached the judging table, walking back and forth before facing the audience momentarily, moving one of his hands behind his back, and stepping away from the table. From our seats in the gallery, we saw the judges lean forward and giggle and point to what we later saw was a ziplock bag of ‘weed’ that he dropped on to the table from his red bum-bag, with barely a noticeable move. The gag is picked up on the archival footage when a judge holds up the bag to show those in the first few rows. He steps back and forth across the table while the judges make their assessment, his curly mullet tamed by a black baseball cap, a rolled ‘durry’ (cigarette) behind his ear, and thick silver chain around his neck.

This walker, and others competing in area realness, looked the part: they all looked like the boys who you were butching up for before you made it back to Liverpool station at the end of the night, or as you walked around Liverpool Westfield ‘at late night’ on Thursday. Here, however, I wasn’t scared of them. Here, it was queer people who were being rewarded and celebrated for their ability to pass as these boys. The category provided us with some of the best mullets I had ever seen, exceptional street wear and comportment to

similar physical tropes: a staunch walk, the what-are-you-looking-at stare and hyper-masculine chest beating.

While there were only two ‘pretty boy’ walkers, they both managed to showcase multiple school uniform customisations including suspenders, polo shirts tucked into shorts and very clean white sneakers. These customisations reminded me a little too much of my attempts to police school uniform codes years before; they sat in the sweet spot of bending but not breaking school rules. The winner of the pretty boy battle pulled out a workbook and an assessment task from his backpack to show the judges during the battle and solidify that he was a pretty boy ‘heading to Livo library’.

Ricky Tucker’s work exploring ballroom ‘in its current incarnation’<sup>35</sup> argues that, in part, realness is about ‘escaping reality’, but often provides ‘a rare space for self-actualisation in the world *and* preservation from it’;<sup>36</sup> it allows walkers a safe space to perform their identity. At The West Ball II, before the first participant stepped on to the runway, one of the hosts, Xander, asked for the music to be stopped and spoke to ‘male figure’ realness and its significance. He tells us that the celebration of this category is essential in Liverpool where there is always a chance that a homophobic or transphobic attack could happen; this is significant as the first time any negative aspects of the area are brought up. One of the judges then requested the microphone and extended on this, saying that realness is about celebration of the skills required to pass and survive and is specifically not an opportunity ‘to come for anyone who isn’t real’, or who the

spectators might not read as conforming to their gendered expectations of the category.

This moment is significant for several reasons: first, it is an attempt to set up realness as celebratory; this category is about what people do every single day to participate in their community and engage with their culture. Second, realness in this moment is confirmed as being not about ‘fantasy’; this realness category is about bringing performances of everyday life into ballroom. Third, while Bailey argues that explanation and extrapolation of categories at a ball is common,<sup>37</sup> this explanation was provided in much greater depth than the explanation for any other category on the night and is the only time a judge actively partook in explaining the importance and significance of a category; this interjection was uncharacteristic of the movements of *this* ball. Finally, it is a curatorial act that actively worked to establish rules of engagement for the spectators when evaluating the walkers and to justify the inclusion of the category among the significant discussion around realness and gender binaries. It shows how realness will be done at this particular ball and establishes the framework for a utopia that the walkers instantiate. The applause and cheering of the audience at the end of these interjections confirmed their agreement to engage under these terms.

At the ball, almost no walker in the realness category was chopped on their first walk. Of the two who were chopped, one came on stage performing flips and the other removed an exaggeratedly oversized hoodie to reveal an overtly constructed, costume-like

outfit and exaggerated physical performance which is not allowed for realness; it was too over-the-top, not 'real' enough. Both were chopped with the former being told that it was 'realness, baby; this is not the category'. That is to say, every participant who walked the category within the framework and criteria of realness (implicit in all realness categories and explicitly outlined by the commentators and judge) made it to the second round: the battles. In their desire to celebrate realness, the judges chose to celebrate every walker and refused to say that anyone is 'not real', only that some are too performative in their attempt to construct realness. Once in the battles, however, this assessment shifted from a binary of 'real' and 'not real' to become about the shades of realness that each walker presented. The ultimate winner, an area boy, made it to the battles by being unassuming. His white singlet, black shorts, bumbag slung over one shoulder, red TNs and matching baseball cap with rat's tail sticking out would easily have him blend in as an area boy. His staunch walk, boxy steps with arms barely moving, also cut an intimidating figure on the catwalk.

However, while his invisibility got him to the next round, it was not what ultimately led to his win. Bryce Lease argues that realness categories exist in the 'constant tension between authenticity and believability *and* high theatricality and artificiality'.<sup>38</sup> He theorises that the power of realness, clearly identified at this ball as a non-performance category, is about the ability to flawlessly execute and perform the '*doing* for the uninitiated, and the *showing* doing'<sup>39</sup> for

those with the necessary skills to interpret and understand the labour of removing layers of yourself in order to pass. Looking real may get you to the battle, but the performance of real and showing the work required to construct this performance is what earns you a win. For the battles, the ultimate winner of the category changed into a pair of grey track pants side of stage, removed his singlet and swapped his baseball cap for a balaclava. He came on stage with a similar staunch walk, though now, he wasn't unassuming; you would immediately notice him and avoid him if you saw him. Yet, he was recognisable as an area thug in a way others were not, and demonstrated the labour required to show realness in two distinct looks and characters.

## LOCALISATION

The walkers in the realness category at The West Ball II, who are likely to identify as queer, and almost all of whom could be described as people of colour, understood the requirements of the task; they demonstrated a seemingly shared understanding of what 'area realness' is. They are from the area, or a very similar area in a different city; they are from working-class and often diasporic communities, many of which sit on the fringes of Australian capital cities, culture and society. These communities can also be deeply queerphobic, as both survey data and my own experience tell me.<sup>40</sup> Realness at The West Ball II allowed walkers to celebrate their toolkit of blending, after the potential double rejection of their queerness

by their community and wider society and their brownness by white homonormative society.

The chosen theme for *The West Ball II* forces the creation of specific and localised performances. Balls will often have themes related to the house that is hosting, the time of year or historical periods. However, in cases where the theme is a specific location – and further to this, a celebration of specific identities that are tied to this location – the performances can reveal the dominant narratives of these locations and cultures. In making (South) Western Sydney the theme for the ball, the organisers have showcased how ballroom is distinctive in the area. If art and the tools to interpret it ‘are made in the same shop’,<sup>41</sup> how effectively could someone without the necessary tools to interpret this ball come to understand which runway presentation is best, or what the event means to the migrant brown communities in Western Sydney? It is in the analysis of what might not be widely interpretable that the narratives of this queer region begin to be revealed.

Other balls in Australia and abroad, packaged up and posted online, are generally able to be interpreted by an audience who, feminist and performance studies theorist Peggy Phelan would argue, ‘speak in [the community’s] tongue’.<sup>42</sup> As long as you understand the conventions and structure of a vogue ball, and the general criteria for each category, you can read the description of the theme, interpret what is happening and hold an opinion as to who should win. The runway category of Paris’s *Cleopatra Ball 2* is both a stunning



display of style *and* readable by a global audience: a gold recreation of an *haute couture* runway gown with the headdress of a Pharaoh; an outfit inspired by the god Anubis; and many (many) elaborate Pharaoh crowns. Even though they may broadly fit in ‘Banjee boy’ and ‘schoolboy’ realness categories,<sup>43</sup> a category that asks you to dress as a boy from ‘the area’, ‘smoking durries’ outside ‘Livo library’, is more specific and requires local knowledge to comprehend and even deeper local knowledge to successfully participate.

This requirement for local knowledge gives this ball its significance: the criteria immediately draw a connection between an imported and increasingly global cultural event and the people who are celebrating it in Liverpool. It becomes a celebration of a unique identity, and the building of a community (or world) for marginalised queer youth in Western Sydney. In this case, the theme being the location of the ball allows the categories and criteria to be shaped to reflect the specific identities within the community that host it. For this community, value is placed on the cultural and stylistic narratives of the area, and vogue balls provide an opportunity and framework for queer people from this region to celebrate their distinct cultural experiences living in Western Sydney. I earlier described the identity of the area as being disassociated from more mainstream, cosmopolitan Sydney, and geographically overlaid on to a region of Sydney that has been described by the hosts as homo- and transphobic. Reading the narratives of this region, already queered from the dominant cultural narratives of Sydney, queerly reveals the value and signifi-

cance of area youth culture on this community's queer inhabitants, and demonstrates how their experience is distinct from that of inner-city, homonormative experiences of queerness. Furthermore, the selection of the category for realness to be a reflection of the everyday, not fantasy, presents a particular idea of what is being celebrated at this ball. The rules and criteria of the categories are not unique, but choosing quotidian performances as the focus of the category shifts this to celebrating survival not the opportunity for fantasy. The category works within the overall framework to provide an opportunity to celebrate the queer person of Western Sydney's toolkit, the culture and community they identify with, and their experience of being queer.

For these performers, the utopian future glimpsed at The West Ball II is one that simultaneously celebrates the multicultural working-class community and the queer experiences of those who live there. The queer future glimpsed here is not one that connects these participants to white cisgender gays in the inner city; it is one that connects them to their geographic and diasporic cultures and communities and provides space to celebrate their queerness within these that does not otherwise exist. Of course, as The West Ball finds its place in the area's annual cultural calendar its dominant tone may deepen and move beyond the celebratory as its utopian affordances grow in complexity.

### CONCLUSION: THE WEST BALL 3

The West Ball 3 is due to be held in 2022, at the Casula Powerhouse for a second time. The flyer for the ball is a composite image of the many sites in/sights of Liverpool: the city library (that the area thugs were smoking durries outside), the Westfields, Krispy Kreme, Casula train station, and the modernist clock tower at Liverpool station. The title of the ball, 'West Ball 3', is made up in the design and colouring of the sculptural location marker of the Liverpool library: brightly coloured 1990s aesthetic with each letter in a different font. The landmarks on the poster are referenced in a category that asks walkers to bring them to life (though I would like to express my disappointment that the fountain in Macquarie Street Mall was not included on the flyer and therefore does not meet the criteria of the category; perhaps it was demolished too long ago to be remembered for its iconic divisive status and as the location for Vanessa Amorosi's first music video). The realness category, again male figure area realness, asks walkers to dress in their 'best midnight adventure to the servo' and one vogue category asks walkers to wear 'a look inspired by your national flag'.

What these categories and theming suggest is that The West Ball 3 will continue what the organisers worked to establish at the first two West Balls: a celebration of the queer region of Western Sydney. The ball remains an opportunity to celebrate many parts of the cultural experience of the area and continues to set itself apart from mainstream, homonormative Sydney cultures, even when sponsored

by ACON and originally programmed as a part of Sydney Festival.

If analysing the performances of the Realness category at The West Ball II provides a glimpse of what a queer utopian future looks like for the members of this community, analysing other categories at multiple West Balls may provide a sharper image of this utopia. Viewing this against the established and emerging vogue ballroom communities in the United States, Europe and the Asia Pacific can help to reveal echoes within the queer regions where these communities are built. These performances can begin to show what queer communities across ‘supra-regions’<sup>44</sup> have in common, which Gopinath argues often exist as a result of the same colonising, imperialist or globalising forces. Accepting that these performances glimpse a queer utopian futurity, viewing the map of this queer region, alongside or superimposed on to others with similar world-making performance and practices, may reveal some of the conditions under which (the) community is created.

Analysing the individual differences in the execution of ballroom performance by these communities reveals which local conditions create these differences. Perhaps it is a glance to another queer region, rather than (or in addition to) a glance to the horizon of queer utopia, that results in the genesis and sustention of this community and, by examining the differences in these utopias, more can be understood about the communities who are envisioning them.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Jonathan Bollen, Jay Bowman, Chris Hay and Beanie Ridler for reading drafts of this work and providing valuable feedback and discussion to shape this piece.

## NOTES

- 1 Jesse Jones, 'Pioneering Ballroom Event to Dazzle Western Sydney', *Pink Advocate*, 10 March 2021. Online: <https://pinkadvocate.com/2021/03/10/pioneering-ballroom-event-to-dazzle-western-sydney/>.
- 2 Balls are made up of a number of 'categories' where walkers compete against each other with individual criteria for each category.
- 3 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).
- 4 Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2018) 192.
- 5 More recent Vogue Ballroom scholarship has worked to understand the vogue ballroom community beyond the framework of Livingstone's documentary, providing a more complete picture of the varied elements of the community. Marlon Bailey's *Butch Queens up in Pumps* provides a deep ethnographic analysis of Detroit's ballroom community to outline what he calls three key dimensions of vogue ballroom: the gender system, the kinship structure (houses) and the balls where rituals take place. Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps: Gender, Performance and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013). Ricky Tucker's recent work, *And the Category Is*, draws on interviews and personal narratives to interrogate the interaction of ballroom with mainstream cultures and using interviews with members of the community to critique these interactions. Tucker (and others) also document the feelings of exploitation and a lack of compensation felt by Livingstone's documentary subjects. Ricky Tucker, *And the Category Is ...: Inside New York's Vogue, House and Ballroom Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022).
- 6 madison moore, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2018) 202.
- 7 Ibid, 204.
- 8 Ibid, 209.
- 9 Cajsa Carlson, 'How Ballroom Voguing Came to Bangkok', *Culture Trip*, 27 June 2019. Online: <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/thailand/articles/bangkok-is-burn-ing-how-ballroom-voguing-came-to-thailand/>. Chloë Chotrani, 'Podcast 59: The Truth About Voguing in Asia', *Arts Equator*, 29 May 2019. Online: <https://artsequator.com/podcast-voguing-asia/>. Arthur Tam, 'Inside Hong Kong's Voguing Scene', *i-D*, 1 October 2019. Online: [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/kz4gbn/voguing-scene-hong-kon](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/kz4gbn/voguing-scene-hong-kon). Wang Xuandi and Fan Yiyang, 'In China's Voguing Houses, Queer Millennials Strike a New Pose', *Sixth Tone*, 17 December 2020. Online: <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006578/in-chinas-voguing-houses%2C-queer-millennials-strike-a-new-pose>.
- 10 Kareem Khubchandani, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press,

- 2020).
- 11 The Area Movement, 'Lifestyle: Welcome to the Area'. Online: <https://theareamovement.com/pages/lifestyle>, emphasis in original.
  - 12 Brendan Bradford, Jarome Luai and Brian To'o Representing The Area on the Game's Biggest Stage', *The Sporting News*, 8 June 2021. Online: <https://www.sportingnews.com/au/featured-content-sport/news/state-of-origin-jarome-luai-and-brian-too-representing-the-area-mt-druitt/h2ougkq2314o1fdeomjmwewawc>.
  - 13 Tom Stayner and Tys Ochiuzzi, 'Western Sydney Lawyer Tu Le to Fight for Her Community Against Kristina Keneally', *SBS News*, 10 September 2021. Online: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/western-sydney-lawyer-tu-le-to-fight-for-her-community-against-kristina-keneally/cc339a35-752a-4a11-b7f1-d9b99032e636>.
  - 14 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 60.
  - 15 Ibid, 20.
  - 16 Ibid, 5.
  - 17 Gayatri Gopinath, 'Queer Regions: Locating Lesbians in Sancharram', in George E. Haherty and Molly McGarry (eds), *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Studies* (Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 342.
  - 18 Ibid, 343.
  - 19 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 5.
  - 20 Xander Silky West [@xanderkhoury], 'West Ball Promotional Flyer', *Instagram*, 30 December 2019.
  - 21 The Nike Air Max Plus TN (TNs) are a popular sneaker with customisation options and limited edition styles released in small batches, making them a status symbol. They are associated with lad culture, are the subject of hip-hop tracks from Western Sydney artists and are specifically called out in dress code regulations at a Sydney hotel as being not permitted on a weekend. Marco Gallo, 'Kicks of Controversy: The Story of Nike's Air Max Plus TNs', *Grounded*, 26 April 2002. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDy7iaZbrdQ>.
  - 22 Ibid, 5.
  - 23 Ibid, 60.
  - 24 Olly Alexander, personal interview.
  - 25 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 196.
  - 26 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 32.
  - 27 moore, *Fabulous*, 186.
  - 28 Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps*, 58.
  - 29 Xander Silky West [@xanderkhoury], 'West Ball II Promotional Flyer', *Instagram*, 11 February 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLJNBkWn2Le/>.
  - 30 Jonathan David Jackson, 'The Social World of Voguing', *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 12.2 (2002): 34.
  - 31 Bryce Lease, 'Dragging Rights, Queering Publics: Realness, Self-Fashioning and the Miss Gay Western Cape Pageant', *Safundi* 18.2 (2017): 142.
  - 32 madison moore, "'To Be Able to Blend": Does "Realness" Still Belong in Ballroom?', *Out*, 7 April 2017. Online: <https://www.out.com/news-opinion/2017/4/07/be-able-blend-does-realness-still-belong-ballroom>.
  - 33 Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps*, 58.
  - 34 Ibid, 59.
  - 35 Tucker, *And the Category Is ...*, 13.
  - 36 Ibid, 154.
  - 37 Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps*, 58.
  - 38 Lease, 'Dragging Rights, Queering Publics', 142.
  - 39 Ibid.
  - 40 Fowler and Werriwa, the two electorates that make up greater Liverpool, both voted 63.7% 'No' in the 2017 Marriage Equality postal survey. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey, 2017'. Online: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1800.0~2017~Main%20Features~New%20South%20Wales~9>.
  - 41 Clifford Geertz, 'Chapter 5/ Art as a Cultural System',

in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) 118.

42 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 97.

43 Tucker, *And the Category Is...*, 157.

44 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 61.

THEATRE AS A SPACE OF  
RESISTANCE AND PROTEST: QUEER  
POLITICS AND *COLOUR OF TRANS 2.0*

NEETHU DAS. K AND VELLIKKEEL RAGHAVAN

This is the story of my scars, story of your hatred, story of my struggle, survival and strength. (Vidya, *Colour of Trans 2.0*)

*Colour of Trans 2.0* is the debut production of Panmai, a newly emergent activist theatre group formed in India. Produced and directed by the group, it is a work that challenges the continuous ostracisation of transgender lives within the Indian public sphere. *Colour of Trans 2.0* narrates transgender lives and those of their community by way of testimonials and through documentary video techniques using archival materials such as film clippings and newspaper cuttings of personal events. The theatrical testimonies contribute to a queer collective voice in the larger socio-cultural



context of India today. *Colour of Trans 2.0* refuses to be defined strictly within a single theatrical genre. Though largely conceived as a testimonial monologue performance, many times it adopts a carnivalesque spirit through various cabaret and clown episodes; its approach may also be considered postdramatic.

*Colour of Trans 2.0* was first presented in August 2014 in Tamil Nadu, South India, and went on to be performed on tour across the USA in Boston, Philadelphia and New York. The three actors – Smile Vidya, Angel Glady and Gee Imaan Semmalar – are transactivists, who are very committed to raising the many issues faced by the trans community in the South Indian public sphere. All are co-founders of Panmai, the first Indian transgender theatre group, which formed in 2014. Living Smile Vidya, who hails from Tamil Nadu, is the author of *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*, an autobiographical account originally written in Tamil and later translated into English, Malayalam, Marathi and Kannada.<sup>1</sup> Vidya is also recognised as the first individual in India to have ‘transgender’, her preferred gender identity, recorded in her passport. Angel Glady is a performer with Performance Group Tuida, South Korea, and recognised as the first transgender graduate from Madras University. Gee Imaan Semmalar is a writer and scholar who has contributed articles in *Open Magazine*, *Dalit Camera*, *Women's Studies Quarterly* and other publications. All three performers are active in raising queer issues in the Indian public sphere, and have attained postgraduate education from India.

This article examines *Colour of Trans 2.0* as a contemporary example of queer activism on Indian stage which exhibits certain testimonial, documentary and postdramatic features. The play is devised and performed by a group of artists who establish an independent theatre group to create space for queer stories. The performance is a synergy of artists who manifest and stand for their queer identity within a work of art which protests against the discrimination faced by the queer community in Indian society, as well as against the conventional forms of theatre. Their performance transforms theatrical space into a dialogic platform for queer politics, brilliantly executed through improvisations in performance and fluidity of the written text, as well as through narrative and linguistic interventions. This transformation is carried out by presenting monologues which counter the heteronormative construct of 'body'.

## RESISTANCE THROUGH INDEPENDENT THEATRE

*Colour of Trans 2.0* had to fight for a space for queer stories to be heard in India. The resistance to staging such works within the Indian theatre sector is described by Living Smile Vidya. On her personal blog in October 2015, she posted the following under the title 'Could Be a Suicide Note':

What's the point?! 10 years of theatre experience and Study from London I made a theatre production called 'Colour

of Trans'. But, all these 10 shows of it we only happened to perform by queer friends and some friends help. Even National School of Drama denied our play to perform in a theatre festival. All these years I never wanted to be a sex worker or beggar but want to be an actress and worked all I could.<sup>2</sup>

Vidya, a foreign-exposed, well-educated actor and theatre academic, was denied a voice in the patriarchal set-up of Indian theatre. The traditionally structured morale of Indian theatre could not bring itself to programme a work like *Colour of Trans 2.0* because of the collective moral panic about transgender identity. When Vidya returned to India after attending a short course in theatre in the UK, she set up Panmai. Vidya's comments about that time reveal much about the invisibility of queerness in India. Journalist Ranjani Rajendra quotes Vidya:

I'd been involved in theatre for over 10 years, but had always done cisgender roles. It was after I went to the UK that I realised there was so much more I could do. I saw trans people there actively involved in the performing arts, while here we see them take to beggary and sex work. I wanted to change things a little. Once I returned, I got in touch with Angel and Imaan, both of whom I had known for a long time, and we decided to set up Panmai. Panmai

started out as a platform for us to tell our stories. But in the long term, we hope to turn it into space for other marginalised people to tell theirs.<sup>3</sup>

For Vidya, the aims of founding Panmai were to create an Indian queer theatre with her professional experiences gathered from abroad, to make Indian theatre trans-inclusive by attracting performers from the trans community, to prevent the otherwise talented transgender theatre persons from turning to begging and sex work, to create a platform to perform their gender identity, and to provide roles for trans actors who were otherwise engaged in performing cisgender roles. Panmai may now be considered a trans-artist movement and cultural platform employing various art forms such as theatre, dance, painting, photography and films. Their website describes their work as offering a ‘Space for the Excluded’.<sup>4</sup> Panmai is primarily supported to finance their plays through crowd funding. Kavita Kishore explains, ‘Since the production is taking place at Spaces, there is no rental for the auditorium, but we did not realize how expensive a production would be’.<sup>5</sup> The group has received financial support through crowd funding to pay for the show’s design, invitations, music and photography. After a few public performances, the play began to receive public acclaim. Later, Panmai was invited to perform *Colour of Trans 2.0* at theatre festivals outside of India, drawing international attention to trans issues in India, including the honourable Supreme Court of India’s verdict

on 15 April 2014 which recognises transgender individuals as ‘third gender’ in law. The play highlights the fact that despite their legal recognition, transgender individuals are still not accepted culturally or socially in Indian society.

### RESISTING THE CONVENTIONS OF DRAMATIC FORM

As a theatrical form, *Colour of Trans 2.0* transcends the traditional idea of performance by adopting a postdramatic performance structure. The Panmai collective developed the performance text so that it could be altered and improvised with each new production, rather than sticking to a complete and closed written playscript. Plays like *Colour of Trans 2.0* deconstruct the traditional idea of a play text by reconstructing a new language of performance through the monologue form. As a work of documentary theatre, the play deals with a socio-political theme, and one based on the role of protest. It therefore demands an equally suitable framework such as the post-dramatic form, which itself is a protest against the dramatic structure of the theatre experience.

The format of the play integrates the techniques of documentary theatre, testimonial theatre and the postdramatic. The prominent features of *Colour of Trans 2.0* can be described in the following way. Primarily, it is a queer play in that it is an organic representation of the community by members of that community. It is a testimonial play in that it is based the real life experiences of trans

individuals, and it raises the awareness of the trans experience in India to a broader audience. David Watt describes testimonial theatre as one where ‘disparate authentic voices speak apparently directly to an audience able to vicariously experience another world, on the assumption that such vicarious experience offers access to real’.<sup>6</sup> The monologues in the testimonial format of *Colour of Trans 2.0* make the confrontation loud and clear. The narrative style of the play also allows for the actors to engage with the audience.

Even though the play is presented as a theatrical performance, the Panmai collective refused to reduce *Colour of Trans 2.0* to a propaganda performance devoid of aesthetic significance by stressing its political content. Instead, *Colour of Trans 2.0* is a form of protest theatre where the play directly protests against the heteronormative hegemony through the performance and creates a space for an immediate social intervention. Aidan Ricketts observes the major features of this direct action technique adopted by the protest theatre to be the image of dissent blended with the very physical act of the performers.<sup>7</sup> This technique of direct encounter with the audience is also an adaptation of the postdramatic structure. As Lehmann aptly points out, postdramatic theatre favours ‘improvised actions aimed at a specific experience of presence and ideally the equal co-presence of actors and spectators’.<sup>8</sup>

Postdramatic theatre aims to position the audience as a part of the public sphere and challenges them to take responsibility for their complicities. The play does this in both whimsical and hard-hit-

ting ways. For example, there are video sections showing a series of photographs with Vidya and Gee performing various poses and wearing male and female outfits alternatively and interchangeably with the audio track parodying the popular sexist idiom ‘boys will be boys’. By the end of the audio track, gender fluidity takes flight, as indicated by a subversion of the idiom into ‘girls will be boys and boys will be girls’. The purpose of such visual insertions is to reiterate the fluidity of gender and to negate gender essentialism. Ashis Sengupta considers this stylistic intervention of insertion which has evocative associations to be a noteworthy feature of postdramatic theatre.<sup>9</sup> Ashis Sengupta has noted that the reasons and stylistics adopted by Indian theatre-makers for a new aesthetic may not be compatible with the peculiarities of Western postdramatic theatre. He notes that the monologue adopted by the Indian play *Kitchen Katha*<sup>10</sup> is ‘paradoxically polyphonic in texture in that several characters from the past “speak” through the narrator’ and that this qualifies as a post-dramatic performance. This employment of structurally dramatic yet non-dramatic intervention is visible in *Colour of Trans 2.0* as well.

It is an unusual play in that the characters are all played by the actors, who also perform themselves. The play depicts moments of psychological and emotional extremes, similar to the ‘in-yer-face’ theatre of Britain in the 1990s. In-yer-face theatre broke social and cultural taboos using direct, powerful language and fast and furious dialogue.<sup>11</sup> Their sensibility relished the idea of provocation. In-yer-face theatre involved a stage language with an emphasis on rawness and intensity

as a theatrical technique, including stage images showing acute pain or comfortless vulnerability to affect the audience.

The playtext in *Colour of Trans 2.0* also shows influences of Augusto Boal's 'Forum Theatre' as the performances become a platform for discussions to take place between the actors and the audience on current or relevant social issues. Like 'Forum Theatre', *Colour of Trans 2.0* creates active political debate. The spectators enjoy a decisive role in such interactive 'Forum Theatre' performances. Many times in *Colour of Trans 2.0*, the actors' monologues are delivered as questions to the audience who respond spontaneously, thereby establishing a political dialogue between the actors and the spectators. Here, a performance platform has been converted into an active forum for political discussion. It is an example, in Boal's terms, of 'the oppressed people ... making the theatre their own'.<sup>12</sup>

In *Colour of Trans 2.0*, the actors narrate and perform their lives in an autobiographical way. Deidre Heddon notes the connection between the self and theatre in the following way:

[T]he direct address mode frequently adopted by performers of autobiographical material enables an immediate engagement with their audience. As a consequence, audiences become witnesses to the personal narratives of the performers and are also unavoidably confronted by matters of relevance to the broader society, such as human rights, citizenship, justice, and equality.<sup>13</sup>



In addressing the audience, *Colour of Trans 2.0* challenges the broader moral panic in India towards trans people through its emotionally packed scenes and personal stories that present a stark and inescapable picture of the challenges that the Indian transgender community face daily regarding gender identity, gender affirmation surgery, and social abuse.

### RESISTING THE FIXEDNESS OF THE WRITTEN TEXT

Though *Colour of Trans 2.0* is largely autobiographical, the monologues that form the play are not fixed in written form. They are, instead, improvisations, developed through discussions between the actors. The staging of the play is also created in this way. After each performance, updates to the play and reflections on audience responses are discussed among the actors. This process has allowed the content of the performance to shift by incorporating local and topical socio-political issues. This, in turn, assists the actors in establishing a stronger communication with different audiences – as indicated by differences between the two performances of the play in India, one at the International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFOK) in Thrissur and the other at the Max Mueller Bhavan in Chennai.

Thrissur, a district in Kerala, was involved in controversy for a beef festival that was organised by the left-leaning Students Federation of India (SFI) in a local college. Some students from the right-leaning student organisation Akhila Bharathiya Vidyarthi

Parishad (ABVP, All India Students' Organisation) had interrupted the festival, attacking the organisers as well as those who had come to take part in the festivities.<sup>14</sup> In the performance of *Colour of Trans 2.0* at ITFOK, Gladly goes in search of a rented house. Gee, who plays the assistant of the house owner whose premises Gladly wants to live in, is not amenable to her request. In negotiating the rental agreement, Gee, the house owner, asks the audience: is it a problem to ban beef in a house, when it is not even allowed in a college in Thrissur? Gee's direct question to the audience is an attempt to create a metaphor about the politics of exclusion in Indian social spheres and the double standards of the dominant caste elites who demonise the subaltern food culture in India. The question put by Gee to the audience allows them to interrogate the answer. Through a simple satirical gag about beef, the actors challenge how the Hindutva fundamentalist ideology in India leads to violent actions against the SFI left and trans people. This gag was not included in the Chennai production as there was no relevance attached to this political anecdote in that local community.

While the audience at Max Muller Bhavan in Chennai were young, urban and cosmopolitan, and already sensitised to the queer cause, the audience at ITFOK were largely from Kerala, comprising people from different age groups and cultural sections drawn to the festival in Thrissur. This difference was evident in both the reception of the performance and the improvisation devised by the artists. While the Chennai production received ovation from the audience for the monologues where the actors recall their past relationships,

the Thrissur production received thorough acclamation for the rented house scenes. The already sensitised audience, which included queer allies, could relate to the emotional scenes undergone by a queer individual in Indian society, whereas the festival audience watching the Thrissur production was more appreciative of the political tones in the play.

### RESISTING HETERONORMATIVE GENDER NORMS THROUGH NARRATIVE AND LINGUISTIC INTERVENTIONS

*Colour of Trans 2.0* was conceived as a counter-narrative to mainstream cultural discourses that ‘other’ the transgender community in India. Through this theatrical intervention, the general public, who may otherwise remain ignorant about the lives of those in the transgender community, become witnesses to testimonies of transgender experience and are made aware that they themselves need to accept the existence of the transgender community and their basic rights as human beings.

In *Colour of Trans 2.0*, the character Gee asks Gladly: ‘What you have down there? You like man or woman, or both? Why is your ass like that? Why is your hair like that? Why do you have facial hair? Look at your clothes, your neck, your mouth, your shoulder, your leg, your eye, your breast. It’s so tight. It is pink.’ This line of questioning draws attention to the politically incorrect questions that people ask

trans people, about their bodies and their desires. The questions are humiliating and brutal. Generally, in a similar situation a trans woman might just walk away, but in *Colour of Trans 2.0*, the trans performer finally explodes. Gladly faces the audience and declares her identity as a trans woman, sharing with the audience her feelings of humiliation and pain from the questions asked of her by Indian society in general. More importantly, Gladly foregrounds her Indian identity as being central to who she is.

The playwright Vidya belongs to a Dalit community in Tamil Nadu, South India. She was the only son of a former government servant. Her position as the first-born son implied a privilege not bestowed on her other two siblings, who are female. Vidya was supposed to live up to the expectations of her family by becoming a collector, a high-ranked official in Indian bureaucracy. Instead she decides to live as a woman and subsequently moves from her village to the city. One day her father (Appa) comes to visit her in the city, when she finally reveals her gender identity to him. Vidya explains the psychological trauma of coming out to her father in her book: ‘Though I was able to explain my decision to everyone else, I stood before Appa like a criminal. I will always carry the guilt of dismantling his hopes and aspirations. Was I really responsible for his woes?’ The consequences of Vidya’s coming out to her family were far greater than just her father’s disappointment. Vidya experienced not only the loss of her parental and peer support; there was also financial instability, social ghettoisation, traumatising, ostracisation and the withdrawal of her fundamental human rights.

After Vidya's story, Gee, a trans man, comes forward on the stage to narrate his experiences from the perspective of his mother. Gee belongs to a traditional Nair family in Kerala, a state in South India. His mother, also performed by Gee, recalls that he was a hyperactive kid, and a bit of a tomboy. As a victim of patriarchy herself, Gee's mother is able to extend her solidarity to Gee in his becoming a trans man. The gender solidarity formed between an elder female and the new trans man could be perceived as a collective protest against the patriarchal structure of Indian society, and of the gender laws legislated to punish trans people. There are also consequences for those who support trans identities and Gee's mother's bold acceptance of his transgender identity leads to her own victimisation for being a 'bad' mother.

*Colour of Trans 2.0* makes interventions in gendered terminology that seek to define the trans experience in India. In the play, the term 'third gender', which is commonly used in the registers of law and by the media in India, is challenged. When Gladly goes in search of a rented house, the house owner is not pleased knowing that Gladly is a trans woman. The house owner comments, 'It is okay, I mean it is not good. But it is okay the Honourable Supreme Court accepts them as like third or fourth or somewhere there.' This comment reflects the current legislation in India that aims to keep trans people at the lowest level of society's hierarchy. India considers women as a 'second sex' and trans people as a 'third' gender. *Colour of Trans 2.0* challenges the priority of masculinity in India by critiquing this hierarchy.

## EVERYDAY EPISODES OF TRANS ABUSE AND THE POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF PANMAI

In choosing to live their lives in authentic ways, trans men and women in India become vulnerable to abuse, financially, physiologically and physically. The impacts of exposure to abuse become heightened in a society that is heavily class-based. Through the character of Gladly, these moments are portrayed for the audience who can thereby be made aware of these issues. As a child, Gladly was always mocked for being different by her classmates and called an *onpathu*, meaning the number ‘nine’ – a word used to mock transgender identity as being in between ‘man’ and ‘woman’, since the number nine becomes six when flipped. This is connected to the physicality of a trans body where the sex is transformed to that of the opposite sex. These taunts are designed to erode her humanity in the eyes of her friends to the point where they no longer recognise her as part of society. Then one day she is molested by her friends. The incident totally traumatised her. During one of her monologues, Gladly undresses, peeling off her clothing, one item after another, until the layers of white T-shirts become red in evocation of her naked body covered in blood and in pain. Gladly’s monologue concludes with a blackout where the audience can only hear Gladly crying and pleading to a policeman, begging him to help her.

A PowerPoint presentation follows, showcasing photographic documentation of some of the victims of social and state-sanctioned violence against trans people in India. This documentation is used in

the play as evidence of these atrocities by the establishment against marginalised trans people, thereby extending the play's solidarity with the victims of violence. The play even shows incidents where people are killed by the state for questioning the establishment, as happened during the political upheavals in Jammu and Kashmir. The PowerPoint presentation declares that, through performance, Panmai is protesting against state violence and expresses solidarity with the victims. Such topics are often forbidden from public discussion in India where they are understood as raising questions against the nationalist project of India. The presentation includes the photograph of the executed Kashmiri separatist, Afzal Guru, whose capital punishment was the subject of a controversial discussion at Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2016, when many students were arrested for being 'traitors' and the debate of 'nationalism' was thrown open. Similarly, a video of Manipuri women protesting against the Indian army – which had been removed from YouTube – is included in the presentation. With the insertion of such documentary, visual records, the play opens the possibility of a public sphere in India where courageous discussion can take place within theatre. The actors, as activists from the transgender community, hold their hands with the other oppressed and marginalised victims who are denounced as 'antinationalist'. In this way, the play goes beyond the aesthetics of the performance by daring to make a political statement.

## COUNTERING STEREOTYPES AND REWRITING THE HETERONORMATIVE CONSTRUCT OF ‘BODY’

*Colour of Trans 2.0* offers a counter reading of contemporary images and made-up stories about transgender individuals in the media. Within the performance, a video is shown that includes scenes from movies portraying transgender people in a stereotypical and derogatory manner. These scenes are taken from hugely popular Tamil, Malayalam and Hindi films. Such a cross-linguistic selection indicates the misrepresentation of the transgender community across Indian cinema. In the films, transgender individuals are portrayed using foul language, begging for their living and irritating ‘straight’ people, while trans women are portrayed trying to seduce men despite their protests. In contrast, *Colour of Trans 2.0* reconstructs the trans community as one including highly intelligent activists and revolutionaries who intervene in Indian politics, and across artistic and social sectors. The three transgender performers and characters invert social stereotypes of trans people found in the media and in films through sophisticated writing and highly expressive monologies that, in turn, position the audience as villains.

The play also aims to rupture mainstream narratives about transgender people that in India are often limited to conversations about AIDS and safe sex. The play brings into focus many real and complex issues faced by the transgender individuals in Indian society by presenting episodes of coming out to the family, sexual abuse and surgeries. Unlike its mainstream counterparts, *Colour of Trans 2.0*



embraces a well-rounded perspective because of the political content and the ideological stand that the actors choose to take. The group and their activities are not limited to the performance. The actors in the play wear the colour black, perhaps referring to the darkness in their life, but also suggestive of the monochromatic colour of queer protest in India in contrast to the plurality of the rainbow colours of the global queer pride flag.

In the last scene of the play, Vidya performs a harrowing monologue revealing the physical scars on her trans body, marking the year of each surgical procedure from 1991 to 2008, and ending with the final surgical mark of gender affirmation on her pelvis. In the background, a photograph of Gee is projected, disclosing the surgical marks of their removed breast. In this last act, trans bodies are presented as a cultural site embodying their resistances against the ingrained heteronormativity of the gender order that exists within Indian society, culture and politics.

*Colour of Trans 2.0* is a performance that breaks through the audience's understanding of what constitutes the traditional idea of a cisgendered body as female or male form through the performative disclosure of the trans body, while also presenting their naked bodies as the site of both physical and mental trauma. The portrayal of trans bodies on stage, in this way, becomes the vehicle through which local audiences come to recognise the day-to-day life experience of transgender individuals who choose to undergo gender reassignment.

## TRANSFORMING THEATRE INTO A DISCURSIVE SPACE

*Colour of Trans 2.0* aimed to establish a ‘dialogue’ with Indian society. The actors/activists, who are previously seen as outsiders in a transphobic society, use the monologue form in direct address to position themselves ‘inside’ the audience and, subsequently, also within the broader community. The actors’ monologues and gestures are transformed into verbal dialogues and gestural interactions between the actors and the audience. In one scene, for example, Gee recalls his childhood days and how he started identifying as a trans man. Throughout the monologue, Gee talks about his manifesting identity as a resistance to the gender normative views of the broader society. As Gee states:

I feel proud of myself and I stand in [sic] it. Owl lives, still watching me from all sides. But my doors, they don’t turn open in shame. I return to those gazes and say, *Poyi thante valla paniyum nokkedo!* (Get lost and mind your business!)<sup>15</sup>

For Gee, ‘Owl lives’ refers to a heteronormative gaze that does not accept gender diversity in India. In offering an alternative perspective, Gee exercises an agency in deciding his gender identity, one that rejects the normative gender expectations of Indian society. Gee’s monologue is given in direct address to the audience in the playhouse, who have had little exposure to the representation of trans lives in theatre. In a gestural way, Gee points his finger assertively and,

with anger, his pride and vocality are affirmed. It is a very significant moment as Gee declares that he no longer deals with society in shame; instead he can stand proudly in his identity.

In another significant moment in the play, as Glady sets out in search of rental accommodation, ideas of modernity in contemporary Indian culture come into question. Fed up with continual rejections, Glady finally responds:

Yes! my hair is like that,  
 Yes! my voice is like that,  
 Yes! my face is like that,  
 Yes! my body is like that,  
 Yes! My walk is like that,  
 Yes! Yes! Yes!  
 I eat, I shit, I feel, I love, I cry, I fuck, I breathe.  
 Just like you!

In her response, Glady expresses her frustration in having to deal with the everyday systemic violence that confronts trans people living in India. In the final scene of *Colour of Trans 2.0*, it is Living Smile Vidya's body, traced by a complex web of surgical marks, that powerfully evokes how transgender bodies become sites for engraving normative sexual expectations. In narrating the trauma that she has experienced while transforming herself from a male to a female, she exposes her naked body before the audience, declaring, in a moment

of self-assertion, her trauma to the people who have been tolerant of the views of her abusers.

During the performance of *Colour of Trans 2.0*, the trans actors try to remain very close to the audience, most often going to the middle of the audience while delivering each story to the audience directly, erasing the imaginary fourth wall. In a few instances, as the actors stand still among the audience, narrating their story creates space for a very intimate and interactive experience that allows the audience to feel close to the transgender actors, both physically and emotionally. Such corporeal closeness creates a deeper connection between the actors and the audience than is often the case in conventional theatre. When discussing the significance of corporeality in a theatrical context, theatre theorist Patrick Duggan states:

The performance space was shared, unbounded, desegregated and through this there was the possibility of generating a sense of being more fully present at the performance. The performance was received through the body/ies of the audience ... It is the physical connection between bodies in a space that gives any theatrical experience its power; being part of the live event, watching bodies move in front of you, places you in a direct corporeal/phenomenological relationship with the performers and with the representations/images being presented in the piece.<sup>16</sup>

In this performance, theatre becomes a space for immediate social action by shifting societal proximities of insider-outsider roles. Augusto Boal suggests that theatre should be a weapon to wield to liberate both the spectator and the marginalised. *Colour of Trans 2.0* delivers one such transformative experience, both for the trans performers and for the people who came to witness their stories.

### COLOUR OF TRANS 2.0 AS A PROTOTYPE

*Colour of Trans 2.0*, as one of the first queer plays to be performed on the Indian stage and in the public sphere, presents queer stories by queer actors in a genre only spoken about in very recent times. The performance plays with artistic styles and aesthetics to form a sense of Indian queer theatre. Through this playing with form, the company counters dramatic traditions in India that have often excluded trans voices and aesthetics. This play marks the beginning of a revolution in Indian theatre by employing a postdramatic model of documentary theatre to present the testimonies and voices of real people and their experiences. As Nidhin Nath quotes Vidya:

‘There is a protest throughout the performance against the people who are not ready to accept us. So, this performance will be a slap to such people’s faces.’ In most of the scenes, the actors speak directly accusing the audience who are a microscopic representation of the society. The ‘fuck off’ Gladly

used in one scene is to the audience, Gee clearly points to the audience while commenting on the owl lives who destroyed his free spirit, Vidya shows the middle finger towards the audience while leaving the scene. It is the audience to whom Gladly explodes and shouts 'Just like you'.<sup>17</sup>

For the performers, the play is the revolution currently happening in India. The play is setting the foundations of a future queer performance where themes of sexuality, gender and trans bodies in India can be voiced. *Colour of Trans 2.0* has set a milestone in Indian theatre in presenting queer stories about community and in the formation of the queer performance collective Panmai.

The performance of *Colour of Trans 2.0* initiates a discussion on gender identity, sexuality, queer identity, transphobia and civil rights. It elevates the possibility of Indian theatre into a space of activist potential. *Colour of Trans 2.0* writes a new lexicon of narrative on Indian theatre by building up testimonies directly from members of the queer community. The testimonial performance transforms the space of theatre into a protest point where the actors fight against the state for their basic human rights.

## NOTES

- 1 Living Smile Vidya, *I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* (India: Rupa Publications, 2014).
- 2 Living Smile Vidya, 'Could be a Suicide Note', *Smilepage*, 14 October 2015. Online: <http://livingsmile.blogspot.com/2015/10/could-be-suicide-note.html>.
- 3 Ranjani Rajendra, 'Breaking New Ground', *The Hindu*, 3 August 2015: Web.
- 4 'About Panmai', *Panmai – Space for Excluded*, n.d. Online: <https://panmaithetheatre.wordpress.com/>.
- 5 Kavita Kishore, 'Shades of a Life, Brought on Stage', *The Hindu*, 20 September 2014: Web.
- 6 David Watt, 'Local Knowledges, Memories, and Community: From Oral History to Performance', in Susan C. Haedicke et al. (eds), *Political Performances: Theory and Practice* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009): 189–212.
- 7 Aidan Ricketts, 'Theatre of Protest: The Magnifying Effects of Theatre in Direct Action', *Journal of Australian Studies* 30.89 (2009): 75–87.
- 8 Hans Thies Lehmann, *Post-dramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jurs Munby (Oxon: Routledge, 2006).
- 9 Ashis Sengupta, *Postdramatic Theatre and India: Theatre Making since the 1990s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
- 10 Kitchen Katha, *The Company*, n.d. Online: <https://thecompanychandigarh.wordpress.com/kitchen-katha/>.
- 11 Reb. 'In-Yer-Face Theatre: A Contemporary Form of Drama', *The Artifice*, 10 February 2014. Online: <https://the-artifice.com/in-yer-face-theatre-a-contemporary-form-of-drama/>.
- 12 Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 4th edn, trans. A. Charles, Maria Odilia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer (London: Pluto Books, 2008) 95.
- 13 Gillian Arrighi, 'Autobiography and Performance Review', *Autobiography Studies* 24.1 (2009): 151–4.
- 14 'Kerala: Six College Students Suspended for Conducting "Beef Fest" Protesting against Dadri Lynching', *The Indian Express*, 5 October 2015: Web.
- 15 *Colour of Trans 2.0*, produced by Panmai. Max Muller Bhavan, Chennai, 26 July 2015.
- 16 Patrick Duggan, 'Feeling Performance, Remembering Trauma', *Platform* 2.2 (2007): 44–58.
- 17 Nidhin K.A. Nath, 'Idathinu Vendi Panmai Nadaka Sanghathinte Porattam' (The Fight of Panmai Theatre for Space), *Second Bell*, 15 January 2016, 2.

‘WE’LL MEET YOU  
UNDERGROUND’: TRANSCULTURAL  
PERFORMANCE PRACTICES IN  
QUEER SPACE AND TIME

JEREMY NEIDECK, NATHAN STONEHAM, YOUNGHEE  
PARK AND M’CK MCKEAGUE

INTRODUCTION

For almost three decades a creative community has flourished between Australia and South Korea, initiated by the work of the late theatre-maker Roger Rynd and his wife Catherine Pease. Roger’s sudden passing in 2010 heralded a period of intense international activity between artists in his orbit, a loose coalition committed to continuing his work of collaborating across language and culture. The work of these artists in maintaining Roger’s legacy is difficult to define, partially because of its wide-ranging form: from play-based work for children and families to bilingual musicals; from boutique



adaptations of Brecht served with street food to dance theatre combining traditional Korean opera and expressionistic contemporary Japanese dance. In recent years, however, some of these artists – in this case, the four co-authors – have forged an identity built on the long-term development, nourishing and maintenance of interpersonal relationships that have continued in the wake of Roger's passing. We call ourselves Company Bad.

Our landmark work *Jiha Underground*<sup>1</sup> is a piece of music theatre, originally presented in 2011 by Motherboard Productions in the Metro Arts Basement in Brisbane, Australia. *Jiha Underground* occupies a special place in the history of our collaborations and, as explored below, it is a work that is cherished by the audiences who witnessed it. The four co-authors of this article are also *Jiha Underground*'s writers and composers (Jeremy and Nathan), the director (Jeremy), the assistant director and designer (M'ck), and one of the performers who contributed significantly to the Korean language dialogue and the development of the musical score (Younghee). What follows is an account of our interrogation of *Jiha Underground* as we try to understand what it is that we made, and how it relates to the ways that others think about queer performance. Our position, then, is a constructivist one and our work together follows the patterns of collaborative practice-led research where new knowledge is discovered in concert with the creation of artistic works.<sup>2</sup>

*Jiha Underground* strives toward what transcultural performance scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte has described as the

modelling of new and collaborative social realities through the methods of art production,<sup>3</sup> while working in the kinds of brave, queer spaces that Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash have identified as holding the possibility to ‘subvert, challenge and critique’.<sup>4</sup> We have taken to calling the spaces that we work in ‘brave’ rather than ‘safe’, for the same reasons that social justice educators Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens have in their work, because it is ‘more congruent with our understanding of power, privilege, oppression, and the challenges inherent in dialogue about these issues in socioculturally diverse groups’.<sup>5</sup> One of Company Bad’s primary collaborative tools is the focus on negotiating and maintaining friendships,<sup>6</sup> and the company’s wider body of work is undertaken through what Lisa M. Tillman-Healy, author of the narrative study *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation* (2001), has described as ‘friendship as methodology’.<sup>7</sup>

Michel Foucault in ‘Friendship as a Way of Life’, the influential 1981 interview with French magazine *Gai Pied*, teases apart some of the kinds of relationship dynamics that we see as being inherent in the collaborative practices and creative work of Company Bad. Foucault proposes that:

A way of life can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity. It can yield intense relations of not resembling those that are institutionalized. It seems to me that a way of life can yield a culture and an ethics.<sup>8</sup>

The creation of new cultures is one of the products of trans-cultural processes, and for Fischer-Lichte, the interweaving of cultures in performance allows:

their participants experiences – however fleeting – beyond racism and thus new ways of thinking beyond the pervasive binary concepts of Self versus Other, East versus West, North versus South, own versus foreign and the aesthetic (i.e., intercultural performance) versus the political and ethical (i.e., postcolonial theory).<sup>9</sup>

This kind of thinking beyond the binary is also part of Company Bad's way of life, and below, we describe the queerness of our friendships and point toward ways that this has yielded a form of working ethic that has had material impact on the organisations that we have worked with.

In *Jiha Underground*, we have interwoven languages, cultures and lived experiences in ways that offer fleeting glimpses towards the kind of utopias described by José Esteban Muñoz as 'proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic'.<sup>10</sup> In the case of *Jiha Underground*, its utopian vision involves diverse people coming together as friends in queer space and time. The aesthetic realm that the work occupies has its closest analogue in 'queer fabulism', a term used in 2018 by writer Kitt Haggard to describe a boom in narratives penned by queer authors that capture the 'inherent strangeness of

a marginalised experience'.<sup>11</sup> Queer fabulism owes much to, but is distinct from, the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez and other Latin American writers who used myth and fable to critique cultural and political hegemonies in the twentieth century.

*Jiha Underground*'s queerness is encoded in the fabric of the space in which it happens. Scenographer and academic Rachel Hann has described works of performance that tactically produce atmospheres of 'risk, collapse, discovery, and material uncertainty' that define 'what trans feels like in the contemporary moment'.<sup>12</sup> The site where audience and performer meet in *Jiha Underground* is one that transgresses hetero- and cisnormative expectations and owes much of this to the adoption of 'trans experiences as methodologies for making'<sup>13</sup> by designer and assistant director M'ck McKeague.

This article is a critical reading of *Jiha Underground* that draws on reflections the co-authors have had in the decade since its debut. We call on the reception of the work in the form of published reviews to describe the ways that *Jiha Underground* functions as a transcultural and queer kind of heterotopia – a space that Joanne Tomkins<sup>14</sup> explains as slipping between the binaries of private-public, family-social, cultural-useful, leisure-work, an alternative space that is distinguished from the actual world, but that also resonates with it.<sup>15</sup>

### *JIHA UNDERGROUND*

Reviews of *Jiha Underground*'s debut season contain detailed descriptions of M'ck's transformation of a venue considered by many theatre-makers in Brisbane not to be fit for purpose, as seen in this review by Anja Homburg:

A room I used to dread setting foot in has become a warm and welcome haven for misfits, a fully operational bar and dance floor where patrons mingle with the cast. Every inch of wall, floor, and ceiling is covered in magazines, fish silos and cardboard sculpture. Everyone who enters is enthusiastically greeted in Korean before the show begins.<sup>16</sup>

The delight of discovery that resonates in this account is due in part to the journey that audiences were required to take in order to enter the venue. Thinking they'd booked tickets to see a piece of independent music theatre, audiences instead found themselves directed to enter an iron gate and make their way down a heritage-listed carriageway to the grimy and dilapidated rear of the building. Here, they were invited to descend a dimly lit stairwell and pick their way through a narrow hallway crammed full of dusty furniture where they found a speakeasy that might have been more at home in Brisbane in its Moonlight State era:

... we find ourselves in a strange subterranean world, a world full of singular, odd objects: the kind of detritus

even op shops [charity stores] decline ... The overhead set of nets, fish mobiles and a hollow cardboard whale seem to suggest a marine theme. Its secrets will be revealed bit by bit as the show unfolds. Ushered to a comfy couch, we sip red wine and munch on a strange and soggy type of popcorn while listening to a DJ play backing tracks from old TV series.<sup>17</sup>

The initial creative impulse for *Jiha Underground* came from Jeremy and Nathan's recollection of late-night visits to Feel, a cramped junk bar that used to sit under the Samilo Warehouse Theatre in downtown Seoul. In fact, the original pitch for the work contained very little detail except that it would recreate a bar like Feel in Brisbane and, in that bar, there would be music and storytelling in Korean and English. This creative DNA is evident in Simon Tate's review of the original production for *ArtsHub*:

*Underground* was like a wild night out – the sort you recount proudly as a benchmark for variety, spontaneity, poignancy and fun. If you were a traveller who stumbled into this Korean speakeasy and its nightly retelling of the tale of lost love and found community, you wouldn't leave until you became part of the story too.<sup>18</sup>

Here, Tate foreshadows the sentiment of community ownership of *Jiha Underground* that led to remounts for Brisbane Festival 2012 and at the Brisbane Powerhouse as part of the World Theatre Festival (WTF) and Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM) in 2014. This periodic presentation of *Jiha Underground* cemented the work as a part of the fabric of Brisbane's independent theatre boom, described by Hannah Brown as the 'new new wave',<sup>19</sup> which arose as part of a period of sustained resourcing of new and emerging performance-makers in Queensland. Although *Jiha Underground* was last performed in full underneath Seoul City Hall in 2014 as part of HiSeoul Festival, it was revived in concert in 2020 to mark Metro Arts' 40th Anniversary, and at the time of writing, Screen Queensland has supported multiple rounds of development of a feature film adaptation of the work, off the back of La Boite Theatre's 2020 Stage to Screen initiative.

### QUEERING FRIENDSHIPS

The performance of friendship is out on show in *Jiha Underground*. The real-life relationships of the creative team have had a direct effect on the writing and embodiment of the fictional relationships of the characters, which in turn affects the performance energy and responsiveness of the cast to each other and to the audience – points illustrated by reviewers such as Anja Homburg<sup>20</sup> and Zenobia Frost.<sup>21</sup> It would be convenient for us to report that the success of *Jiha*

*Underground*, and the longevity of the collaborative partnerships enjoyed by Company Bad's members, have everything to do with the effortless power of friendship but, in fact, the maintenance of these friendships takes time, energy and an embrace of discomfort. Foucault's exhortation that friendship is a 'way of life' is one of the fundamental conditions for catching glimpses of utopia in Company Bad's work; however, as Tom Roach has observed, Foucault's concept is 'anything but utopian':

Betrayal, distance, brutal honesty, indeed, an impersonal intimacy founded in estrangement are its makings. This is, to be blunt, the shit of friendship. When the most troubling aspects of relationships become the very foundation of a friendship, however, new subjective, communal, and political forms can be imagined.<sup>22</sup>

Roach goes on to characterise Foucault as determining friendship to be 'the becoming of queer relationality'<sup>23</sup> and for Company Bad, this process of becoming has written itself on the methods of our decades-long creative collaboration.

Tillman-Healy writes that research that uses friendship as a methodology needs to be undertaken over many years 'at the natural pace of friendship', and that as a project's 'issues emerge organically ... the unfolding path of the relationships becomes the path of the project'.<sup>24</sup> These are the working processes that Company Bad has



developed, influenced by Roger Rynd and Catherine Pease – processes that avoid what dramaturg and scholar Peter Eckersall has described as the ‘pitfalls of past “trendy” intercultural activities’ by working on longer time scales, thoroughly negotiating the direction of the project, and discussing the limits and capacities of the team and the project overall.<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, Jeremy has identified these negotiations as happening at ‘sites of transcultural potential’<sup>26</sup> where the creation of new cultures materially affects not only performance material, but modes of production, and is able to leave lasting traces in the world.

One way in which this was made manifest in *Jiha Underground* was an assertion made by the creative team through producer Dave Sleswick that the administration, programming and venue staff of the Brisbane Powerhouse – our presenting partner for the 2014 remount of the work at WTF and APAM – attend the first morning of rehearsal. While it is normal practice in Australia for venue staff to conduct a safety induction at the commencement of work, we wanted to transform this one-way flow of information into a conversation by inviting the entire organisation to join us in a session where we could all share the conditions required for us to do our best work. Time was set aside for everyone in the space to affirm their names and pronouns, and we encouraged the practice of active listening and communicating in simple English. Further, we opened up space for the sharing of lived experiences that were able to illustrate to our partners why our advocacy for things such as gender-neutral bathrooms and the publishing of bilingual promotional

material were not merely requests, but were necessary pre-conditions for us to be able to work – on a par with the operational health and safety guidelines that we were being required to follow. For many in the room, it was the first time experiencing a space of friendly and reciprocal sharing of life ways that has since become common to processes of arts and cultural production in Australia. The result was the contribution to an environment and the creation of a work ethic in which the queer, trans and South Korean members of our team felt braver at work – an environment which endured across several years of creative endeavour at the Brisbane Powerhouse.

Fischer-Lichte writes that transcultural performance practices can model alternative, inclusive social structures,<sup>27</sup> and *Jiha Underground* does this by interweaving languages, cultures and lived experiences in ways that offer a fleeting glimpse toward utopias where culturally, linguistically and gender diverse individuals come together in our safer, welcoming and loving bar. We turn now to exploring how these glimpses of utopias manifest in our work by considering some of the ways in which performance ‘leads queer’<sup>28</sup> in *Jiha Underground* – describing the possible directions that the work takes on queer ideas in not only its content, but in its scenographic atmosphere, in its dramaturgy, its use of character and its exploration of alternative temporalities.

## QUEERING THE ATMOSPHERE

One of the most striking ways in which *Jiha Underground* leads queer is in the way that it is situated and embodied in an atmosphere of utopian potential. In *Beyond Scenography* (2019), Rachel Hann builds on existing understandings of atmospheres in the built environment<sup>29</sup> to place the sense of ‘being with’ at the centre of ‘how the place orientations of scenographics can be deployed to affirm the material potential of speculative worlds’.<sup>30</sup> In more recent scholarship drawing on her experiences of what she describes as the ‘political category’ of trans,<sup>31</sup> Hann argues that cisgenderism is performed through the means of atmospherics:

Of felt experiences of place, law, category and belonging that pervade and wash against and with you again and again and yet exceeds binary models of subject-object, thing-emotion, place-feeling.<sup>32</sup>

While at the time of our initial staging of *Jiha Underground* not all of our collaborators were cognisant of the ways in which cisnormativity pervades our experience of the world, each of us came to the process with experiences in forms of structural oppression that we lived in hope of alleviating, including heteronormativity, ableism, white supremacy and the hegemony of the English language. M’ck and Jeremy have written elsewhere about how some of these preoccupations provided scenographic impulses

that, we argue here, contributed to *Jiha Underground*'s atmosphere of utopian potential:

The treasures that clutter the space are old and worn out, mirroring the fact that the audience does not need to look heteronormatively presentable to be valued there. The seating is a mix of odd couches, bean bags, kitchen chairs and stools, letting the audience know that different types of bodies are welcome there. There are lots of aisles so audience members can move around or leave if they needed, which implicitly makes the space more accessible to communities who disproportionately experience the kinds of trauma that make the idea of being trapped in a tightly packed seating bank unbearable.<sup>33</sup>

In its initial incarnation, the work took place in a marginalised physical space in a state of transition – a space that many theatre-makers at this time not only avoided but sometimes refused to work in. Our use of the term ‘transition’ here is in the spirit of Sean Edgecomb’s use of the trans prefix as a way of capturing motion, of describing passing into a ‘space beyond’.<sup>34</sup> As we demonstrate below, it reflects not only the audience’s passage into the space, but also the dramatic context of the scenography: the fiction that the characters staffing this dive bar are constantly curating a collection of what, to the uninitiated, looks like junk:



The basement of Metro Arts is one of the ugliest places I've ever been, but it has been completely transformed into one of the coolest venues you could dream up. Imagine the collection of a hoarder of kitsch had exploded amongst comfy sofas and bean-bags and you come close.<sup>35</sup>

Simon Tate's review above highlights the centrality of the space to the work as both a mirage of a cramped junk bar you might stumble upon in Seoul, and a refuge for those who are either unwelcome in, or actively locked out of, social spaces. The invitation to pass into the space beyond is foreshadowed by the image featured on the hand-lettered posters for the work, which encouraged potential audience members to tear off and take a piece with them as an *aide-mémoire*. This interactivity was reinforced during the party that concluded each performance, through an invitation to leave a message in the space as a physical manifestation of their memories of the work.

The nature of these physical interactions of the audience with a space in a state of transition is revealed when read alongside Edgecomb's analysis of the work of Alexander Guerra, in which he describes a version of queer that:

... implies a going through, weaving in, under, around and over the normative, narrow constructs of gender and sexuality to avoid the pitfalls of hegemonic socially imposed limitations.<sup>36</sup>

In Guerra's ongoing work of performance photography *Rabbits Run Amok*, Edgecomb identifies a 'queer kinesis', a movement of identity that encodes a sense of 'falling through', in the form of photographic evidence of a body that is transforming, a body that has woken in a strange place and is still experiencing the aftershocks of ecstasy. Edgecomb uses the term 'falling through' as an evocation of Lewis Carroll's rabbit hole, arguing that by employing this method of transformation, Guerra:

... attempts to transcend the positionality dictated by normative social orderings of class, ethnicity, national identity, gender and sexuality. Because, as with Carroll's pinafore-clad heroine, falling through is largely underground, so a queer method of reception is necessary to understand the whole of Rabbit's performances. I suggest that this method is queer kinesis.<sup>37</sup>

Jeremy and M'ck have written that 'one of the core mythologies of *Jiha Underground* is that once you have entered, you could be anywhere and everywhere – that all of the undergrounds are connected'.<sup>38</sup> This treatment of the performance space as a conduit for queer kinesis, as a place that physically moves its audience into new realities, troubles a range of binaries: in-out; up-down; here-there – 'Musicians, waiters, and bilingual DJs all join in the storytelling, occasionally interrupted by the bar's owner and MC'.<sup>39</sup> As we have proposed, the queerness of the space provides a stage for disruptions

to identity boundaries, such as those of audience-performer-bartender-producer:

The queerness of *Jiha Underground* is entrenched not only in the content of the work but in the fabric of which it's made – including the design. Through immersive elements, the design disrupts the audience-performer binary and in doing so transforms the work's relationship to non-normative bodies and identities.<sup>40</sup>

These intersecting threads of space, body and identity are taken up later in this article; however, the expansion of Edgecomb's queer kinesis as one way of understanding the scenographic impulses at play in *Jiha Underground* is evidenced in Zenobia Frost's 2011 review, titled 'Curiouser and Curiouser':

The Metro Arts Basement is a sadly underused venue. Many Brisbanites, I imagine, don't even know it exists – but even for those [who] do, entering the 지하 *Underground* junk bar feels like falling down the rabbit hole ... There is a sense that something magical is about to happen.<sup>41</sup>

This feeling of falling down, or passing through, is central to the way that we have come to understand the queerness of *Jiha Underground's* dramaturgy – not only in the ways that characters develop inside



the work’s structure, but in the ways that our audiences physically encounter the work.

## QUEERING DRAMATURGY

The queer kinesis of *Jiha Underground* is reinforced for its audience through its interconnected dramaturgical layers – none of which is separate and all of which are in flux. These are visualised as layered realities, where the people performing present, represent and *re-present* themselves in proximity to a witnessing and participating audience. These frames provide performer and audience alike with the opportunity to layer their identities and fall through them together.



FIGURE 2: GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF *JIHA UNDERGROUND*'S FIRST DRAMATURGICAL LAYER. COLLAGE OF REHEARSAL STILLS AND CREATIVE STIMULUS. TEXT AND IMAGES: JEREMY NEIDECK AND NATHAN STONEHAM, 2011 AND 2012.

The first layer is the ‘real world’. The world where Nathan and Jeremy are each other’s first loves. Where they wrote to each other for a year while on opposite sides of the world, and kept a blog, a collage of memories and new experiences, a queer mood board that became a zine. It is the world where they invited their closest friends and collaborators into the Metro Arts Basement and asked them to help make a new work drawing on these stories. It is also the world that the audience lives in, the world they have come from when they nervously descend the stairs, follow the path through the junk and into the second layer.



**FIGURE 3:** GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF *Jiha Underground*'S SECOND DRAMATURGICAL LAYER. COLLAGE OF PHOTOGRAPHS OF SCENOGRAPHIC TREATMENT OF METRO ARTS BASEMENT FOR 2011 DEBUT SEASON. IMAGES: FEN-LAN CHUANG, 2011.

This is the world that M'ck has constructed in fine detail. This middle layer is a tropical-themed junk-bar inside which the cast are

‘in role’ as staff members. Then, as the audience has a few drinks, and Sajangnim – the Korean owner of *Jiha Underground* – entertains everyone with his awkward showmanship, we slip into the third layer.



**FIGURE 4:** GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF *Jiha Underground*'S THIRD DRAMATURGICAL LAYER. COLLAGE OF PRODUCTION STILLS FROM 2012 BRISBANE FESTIVAL SEASON. IMAGES: FEN-LAN CHUANG, 2012.

This is a narrative – which we call ‘the fantasy’ – that unfolds through bilingual storytelling and music that winds its way through a mix-tape of folk, trashy rock and traditional Korean music. Coconut Princess is the main character of this fantasy, the classic ‘play within the play’. On the night that the audience stumbles into *Jiha Underground*, the shy and awkward bartender Jules is selected at random by Sajangnim to play the role of Coconut Princess. Coconut Princess grows up on an island with First Love, who is played by Cheolsu.

While neither Nathan nor Jeremy grew up on a small island, it is a setting that resonates with aspects of their family histories, and its almost archetypal nature was a useful way to explore the isolation that many queer people feel as they are coming to terms with their sexuality. A desire to journey ‘beyond’ and discover something ‘more’ is encoded in the action of the work, and is outlined for the audience in an early line, delivered as narration:

Coconut Princess wanted to find things he’d never seen,  
and First Love wanted to go places they’d never been.

The audience follows the adventures of Coconut Princess as he searches for his first love, falls in love again, and is taken underground, where he learns about transcending the boundaries of space, time, love and relationships.

Call it a queer fairy story if you like, there is certainly a magic realism feeling to this mime and music tale of two friends who take off on a raft to seek the freedom of the sea, only to have one of them swallowed by a whale. The lone survivor meets up with a sailor who, while happy to be a bed companion at night, seems to be conflicted in the morning.<sup>42</sup>

While, in the review above, Sue Gough describes *Jiha Underground* as a fairy story, and joins Zenobia Frost<sup>43</sup> in likening it to

a work of magical realism, it is Kitt Haggard's description of queer fabulism which comes closest to capturing our creative intention, to create a work that:

... make[s] physical what is otherwise ephemeral or ineffable in an attempt [to understand] those things that we struggle the most to talk about: loss, love, transition.<sup>44</sup>

As is seen below, these are themes that also run through the lyrical content of the work, and they are reflected in the climax of Sue Gough's review:

It blurs the distinction between love, gender and friendship, and does this with a gentle exuberance that builds through moments of heartbreak to a pounding anthem celebrating individual freedom.<sup>45</sup>

Kitt Haggard's characterisation of queer fabulism can be seen at work in the dramaturgy of *Jiha Underground*, because, for Nathan and Jeremy as co-writers of the work, 'sometimes, there is no other way to understand the disorientation of childhood' (and we would extend this to coming-of-age as queer in-between Queensland and South Korea in the early 2000s) except through myth and fairy-tale.<sup>46</sup>

Each layer of the dramaturgy affects the next and requires not only a threshold in order to cross over, but a period of transition

and translation as the audience follows the performers on a journey of queer kinesis as they fall into and through their identities. One of the most concrete ways that the audiences encounter this is through the characters that they meet in the underground.

### QUEERING CHARACTER

Company Bad's approach to the playing of character in *Jiha Underground* is in collaboration with its queer dramaturgy. The relationship between the dramaturgical layers in *Jiha Underground* is not a serial one; the layers are co-present, the connections between them powerful, and the bonds form and reform in ways that are tangled and messy, and at times unconscious. This multivalency is not only core to the mythology of *Jiha Underground* but is built into the pattern of weaving that describes the transculturally collaborative environment in which the work has been developed<sup>47</sup> even if the audience, and at times even the performers, are not conscious of it. The performers' real selves are always present – not in the way that a method actor from the direction of psychological realism may be calling on memory and emotional trauma in order to play something other, but in the very concrete way that queer people periodically hide and unhide aspects of themselves in order to stay safe in the world.

Our approach to playing character privileges the slipperiness of identity and emphasises bodies that are transitory, that perform characters who are constantly searching for some space beyond.

To borrow from Edgecomb's description of motion in the work of Alexander Guerra, it is 'made possible by [a] horizontal construct, allowing a variety of identities to stack up without anyone claiming more relevance than the others'.<sup>48</sup>

This kind of queer kinesis is what we see as being our own transcultural and queer approach to acting, one that does not discard the labour of bodies<sup>49</sup> in a constant state of masking and unmasking, or code-switching as they navigate the transculturally collaborative working environment, where the constant negotiation of relationships is paramount to long-term success. For audiences of *Jiha Underground*, this stacking up and falling through of identity is not only palpable, it provides further resonance for the space's liminal and transitional nature, as evidenced in the conclusion of Zenobia Frost's 2012 review:

The actors are so comfortable in their roles they might well not be acting at all. **Younghee Park** shines as cool Cheolsu; **Nathan Stoneham** is ethereal; **Dave Sleswick** brings the fully functioning bar into the show; and our gracious host (Hoyoung Tak) is utterly lovable.

The result is a show that makes you at home inside its theatrical realm and – even more rare – makes you feel delighted to be human. 지하 *Underground* is a safe haven, and a springboard for adventure: a free place from which to go forth and 'see things you've never seen, and visit places you've never been'.<sup>50</sup>

The safe haven of *Jiha Underground* is not only made manifest through the queerness of the atmosphere in which the audience meets its characters, but in the ways that time itself is queered.

### QUEERING TIME

In studying the rise of queer urban subcultures in the early 2000s, Jack Halberstam describes queer temporalities as ‘allowing participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death’.<sup>51</sup> In *Jiha Underground*, this manifests as a conscious effort through the writing, and in the sequencing of the work, to pull against ‘straight time’, which Muñoz describes as telling us ‘that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life’.<sup>52</sup> The parting lyrics of the work’s finale, ‘Feel’, hammer this home for anyone who hadn’t been able to ‘pick the patterns’<sup>53</sup> of the work’s queer dramaturgy:

How long can someone wait?  
 Do we ever fall out of love?  
 Can we reconnect after so long?  
 Are you looking for me too?  
 You can wait in the vastness in-between  
 You can live in the vastness in-between  
 You can love in the vastness in-between  
 We could meet in the vastness in-between.<sup>54</sup>



These affirmations of temporal queerness, of longing, loss and hope on a timeline that is incomplete, that is still being established, found resonance with reviewer Zenobia Frost, who writes:

The show itself only runs for an hour, but time passes strangely – as if, perhaps, the bar’s staff are caught in a perpetual loop.<sup>55</sup>

By drawing on the stories, the signs and the signifiers of queer and othered subcultures – in an Australian and South Korean context – *Jiha Underground* produces alternative, transcultural queer temporalities. The glimpses at utopias that we create in proximity to a witnessing audience are a far cry from the heteronormative alternative, of which Muñoz writes that ‘all we are allowed to imagine is barely surviving the present’.<sup>56</sup> The temporal loops that Frost mentions above seem to be part of the work’s appeal for audience members who returned time and time again:

It’s very easy indeed to get caught up in, and by the time the Watermelon Party finale (yes, it’s exactly what it sounds like) rolls around, you’ll be sad to leave Neideck’s colourful friends and lovers. But don’t worry – they’ll remember what your poison is if you return.<sup>57</sup>

Frost’s suggestion is that *Jiha Underground* and its cast of friends and lovers will hold the memories of those who enter suggests an image

of a queer utopia coming into view.<sup>58</sup> A utopia whose queer culture provides blessed relief from the heteronormative, which Muñoz suggests ‘makes queers think that both the past and the future do not belong to them’.<sup>59</sup>

### QUEERING TRANSCULTURAL UTOPIAS

The kinds of heterotopias conjured up by works such as *Jiha Underground* were of particular interest to Muñoz because:

For those of us whose relationship to popular culture is always marked by aesthetic and sexual antagonism, these stages are our actual utopian rehearsal rooms, where we work on a self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics such as late capitalism, heteronormativity, and, in some cases, white supremacy.<sup>60</sup>

The language Muñoz uses to decipher these spaces has resonances with Fischer-Lichte’s descriptions of transcultural performance practices that model alternative, inclusive social structures inside a form of performative liminality that turns ‘the very journey into the goal’.<sup>61</sup> Company Bad’s tactic for realising this in *Jiha Underground* is the interweaving and entanglement of languages, cultures and lived experiences in ways that offer fleeting glimpses towards our vision of utopian spaces inhabited by people who openly love and care for one another.

This movement toward the space beyond, an active striving toward mutual intelligibility despite, or perhaps because of difference, is one of the keys that Company Bad understands as being vital if we are going to truly achieve our aim of modelling new and collaborative social realities. One of the core challenges in this is to weave together languages and performance cultures in a way that audience members not only tolerate, but also accept and appreciate, and value as integral to the work. We have already quoted Homburg's review which describes *Jiha Underground's* 'cosmopolitan' cast, individuals who carry some of the signifiers of national or ethnic identities, but that are 'obviously part of something else as well'. They note, further, that this is 'a testament to how little language, culture, and gender can matter in the face of friendship. All the more true in the face of love.'<sup>62</sup>

It is important to note that the glimpse at transcultural and queer utopias afforded by *Jiha Underground* was realised by an ensemble whose lived experiences of and interactions with diverse gender and sexual identities intersected neatly with their cultural backgrounds. Although strong professional relationships and sincere bonds of friendship already existed between most of the team members, for our South Korean collaborators, *Jiha Underground* was their first genuine contact with queer and trans life ways. For these collaborators, *Jiha Underground* provided a rich but at times uneasy period of acculturation which was compounded by operating in an unfamiliar environment where English was the

working language. One of the sites of transcultural potential that arose during this period of collaboration was this confluence of diverse cultural and social constructions of gender and sexuality, and the complexity associated with sharing aspects of our lived experiences at a time when we were still learning how to construct braver creative spaces.<sup>63</sup> We were often unconscious of the ways that our worldviews were in conflict. At a time when our working processes were in their infancy, these moments were overcome through practised and genuine acts of friendship that embraced and interwove our complex worlds. This genuine struggle had the effect of reconstructing our relationships and deepening the queerness of our friendships. In fact, one of the most joyous celebrations to be held in the space during this time was the wedding anniversary of Hoyoung Tak and Chunnam Lee. As an ensemble of gender-sexual-culturally diverse individuals, we were reaching toward a point where *Jiha Underground* became a space of physical, mental and emotional common ground.

The rich liminality felt by audiences – a space straddling thresholds of language, culture and gender – helps to code the work's gay, queer, trans and non-binary characters as belonging to their surroundings. Their diverse gender identities and sexualities are a part of the story, but in the relative social conservatism of the contexts in which we have presented the work (Brisbane and Seoul), the atmosphere in which these characters are represented had to be tactically constructed.

Palatable inclusion, however, cannot be employed without implied, or indeed actual, threats of violence. As Eric A. Stanley has argued in *Atmospheres of Violence* (2021), although the ‘narrative arc of rainbow progress’ would have us believe that we are in a time of radical positive social change, ‘inclusion, rather than being a precondition of safety, most properly names the state’s violent expansion’,<sup>64</sup> and that ‘the time of LGBT inclusion is also a time of trans/queer death’.<sup>65</sup> Stanley is writing in a context of unpacking the archive of material and physical anti-trans/queer violence that is exacerbated, rather than mitigated by the state and its judicial systems. However, the question at the centre of Stanley’s work is one that is never far from our minds as arts and cultural workers:

... if the state, even as an experiment in democracy, is unable to offer us relief, then what forms of being together in difference might grow the world we want and need.<sup>66</sup>

Stanley’s suspicion of authoritarian structures – no matter how affirming and emancipatory they aspire to be – is one shared by Company Bad’s members. One of the starkest examples of this in action during *Jiha Underground’s* development was when, after presenting a work-in-progress showing of the work, we were asked by a member of our production team whether we had thought at all about our straight audiences – that some of the ways in which our characters expressed themselves and their desires might not play well

in Brisbane. Even in the most supportive and inclusive of environments, the trans and queer characters that inhabit *Jiha Underground* are at constant risk of violent erasure.

## CONCLUSION

Writing this article has allowed us to think about how *Jiha Underground* fits into the rich ecologies of transcultural and queer performance and scholarship. Company Bad makes work for those who are ‘used to squinting hard and trying to pick out some small thread of culture, language, or identity to hold onto’<sup>67</sup> in the media we consume. The more we return to the underground world we created, the more we realise that people keep coming back not just for our stories, but for the opportunity to be with us in an atmosphere of discovery and disorientation, of nostalgia and strangeness, of love and loss. In *Jiha Underground*, we showcase a way of life built on friendships that grow in the spaces between and beyond language, culture and gender. Our insistence on opening up these spaces where we can feel free to co-exist with a less present fear of judgement, racism, transphobia or homophobia helps to create an environment that offers our audiences a glimpse of a realm of utopian potential.

## NOTES

- 1 *Jiha Underground* was originally produced by Dave Sleswick for Motherboard Productions under the title 지하 *Underground*.
- 2 Daniel Mafé and Andrew R. Brown, 'Emergent Matters: Reflections on Collaborative Practice-Led Research', in Richard Vella and Brad Haseman (eds), *Speculation and Innovation: Applying Practice-Led Research in the Creative Industries* (Queensland University of Technology, 2006) 1.
- 3 Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Interweaving Cultures in Performance: Different States of Being In-Between', *New Theatre Quarterly* 25.4 (2009): 391–401.
- 4 Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash, 'Introduction', in Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (eds), *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research* (Routledge, 2010) 7.
- 5 Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, 'From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue around Diversity and Social Justice', in Lisa M. Landreman (ed.), *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2013) 149.
- 6 For a more thorough description of these processes, see Jeremy Neideck, 'The Fabric of Transcultural Collaboration', PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2016. Online: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/93720/>.
- 7 Lisa M. Tillman-Healy, 'Friendship as Method', *Qualitative Inquiry* 9.5 (2003): 729–49.
- 8 Michel Foucault, R. de Ceccaty, J. Daner and J. Le Bitoux, 'Friendship as a Way of Life', republished in Paul Raminow (ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press) 138.
- 9 Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures – Rethinking 'Intercultural Theatre': Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance Beyond Post-colonialism', in Erika Fischer-Lichte, Saskya Iris Jain and Torsten Jost (eds), *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2014) 13–14.
- 10 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 1.
- 11 Kitt Haggard, 'How a Queer Fabulism Came to Dominate Contemporary Women's Writing', *The Outline*, 8 August 2018. Online: <https://theoutline.com/post/5751/fabulism-fiction-carmen-maria-machado-daisy-johnson-melissa-broder>.
- 12 Rachel Hann, 'Staging Trans Feelings: Tactical Atmospherics and Cisgenderism in We Dig' (2019), *Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) Conference* (Liverpool Hope University, 9 September 2021). Online: <https://medium.com/@dr.rachelhann/staging-trans-feelings-tactical-atmospherics-and-cisgenderism-in-we-dig-2019-637100f21c7f>.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 After Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 22–7.
- 15 Joanne Tompkins, *Theatre's Heterotopias* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 1.
- 16 Anja Homburg, 'The Underside of Love', *Critical Mass*, 17 November 2011. Online: [www.criticalmassblog.net/2011/?p=3173](http://www.criticalmassblog.net/2011/?p=3173).
- 17 Sue Gough, 'Twists Down Offbeat Track', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 16 November 2011 56.
- 18 Simon Tate, 'Underground', *ArtsHub*, 18 November 2011. Online: <http://au.artshub.com/au/news-article/reviews/performing-arts/underground-186423>.
- 19 Hannah Brown, 'Brisbane's New Theatre Boom and the Turquoise Elephant in the Room', *The Guardian Australia*, 9 July 2015. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jul/09/brisbanes-new-theatre-boom-and-the-turquoise-elephant-in-the-room>.
- 20 Homburg, 'The Underside of Love'.

- 21 Zenobia Frost, 'Curiouser and Curiouser', *Rave Magazine* (Brisbane), 22 November 2011, 37.
- 22 Tom Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012) 7–8.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Tillman-Healy, 'Friendship as Method', 735.
- 25 Peter Eckersall, 'Trendiness and Appropriation? On Australia–Japan Contemporary Theatre Exchange', in Peter Eckersall, Tadashi Uchino and Naoto Moriyama (eds), *Alternative: Debating Theatre Culture in the Age of Con-fusion* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2004) 43.
- 26 Jeremy Neideck, 'The Cost of Cultural Ambition', *Currency House: Investing in Cultural Leadership* (Sydney: Currency House, 2016). Online: [https://currencyhouse.org.au/sites/all/themes/currencyhouse/pdfs/neideck\\_ambition.pdf](https://currencyhouse.org.au/sites/all/themes/currencyhouse/pdfs/neideck_ambition.pdf).
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier, 'Introduction: Queer Dramaturgies', in Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier (eds), *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 4.
- 29 In particular, the work of Gernot Böhme. See Böhme and Jean-Paul Thibault (trans.), *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
- 30 Rachel Hann, *Beyond Scenography* (New York: Routledge, 2019) 79–80.
- 31 Hann, in 'Staging Trans Feelings', writes: 'The politics of "trans" as a label has changed significantly in the last 5 years. For me, "Trans" is now a political category produced by and for others – who for the purposes of this talk I'll refer to as "cis". Trans is only useful for an individual like me in terms of positioning myself within cisgendered discourses.'
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Jeremy Neideck and M'ck McKeague, 'Immersing Australians in the *Underground*', in Tessa Rixon, Jennifer Irwin, David Walters, Jeremy Neideck, M'ck McKeague, Richard Roberts, Anthony Brumpton and Latai Taumoepeau, 'Shaping Our Australian Scenographic Identities: A Visual Essay', *Scene* 9.1+2 (2021): 142–3.
- 34 Sean F. Edgecomb, 'Queer Kinesis: Performance, Invocation, Transformation', in Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier (eds), *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 330–47.
- 35 Tate, 'Underground'.
- 36 Edgecomb, 'Queer Kinesis', 336–7.
- 37 Ibid, 339.
- 38 Neideck and McKeague, 'Immersing Australians in the *Underground*', 143.
- 39 Homburg, 'The Underside of Love'.
- 40 Neideck and McKeague, 'Immersing Australians in the *Underground*', 143.
- 41 Frost, 'Curiouser and Curiouser'.
- 42 Gough, 'Twists Down Offbeat Track'.
- 43 Zenobia Frost, 'THEATRE REVIEW: JiHa Underground', *OffStreet Press*, 13 September 2012. Online: <http://offstreetpress.wordpress.com/2012/09/13/theatre-review-jiha-underground/>.
- 44 Haggard, 'How a Queer Fabulism Came to Dominate Contemporary Women's Writing'.
- 45 Gough, 'Twists Down Offbeat Track'.
- 46 Haggard, 'How a Queer Fabulism Came to Dominate Contemporary Women's Writing'.
- 47 Neideck, 'The Fabric of Transcultural Collaboration', 100.
- 48 Edgecomb, 'Queer Kinesis', 333.
- 49 Campbell and Farrier, 'Introduction: Queer Dramaturgies', 15.
- 50 Frost, 'THEATRE REVIEW: JiHa Underground'.
- 51 J. Halberstam, 'What's That Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives', *International Journal of Cultural*



- Studies* 6.3 (2003): 314. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/229269/>.
- 52 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 22.
- 53 Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan) 12.
- 54 Jeremy Neideck and Nathan Stoneham, 'Feel', from *Jiha Underground* (2011).
- 55 Frost, 'Curiouser and Curiouser', 37.
- 56 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 112.
- 57 Frost, 'Curiouser and Curiouser'.
- 58 It so happens, *Jiha Underground* did remember Frost, who on declaring the work her 'show of the year' as part of *Rave Magazine's* Best of Brisbane Arts 2012 writes: 'I expect the cast think I'm stalking them; I've seen the show, in its various manifestations, about four times'. (Zenobia Frost, *OffStreet Press*, 31 December 2012. Online: <https://offstreetpress.wordpress.com/2012/12/31/zens-2012-in-review/>.)
- 59 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 112.
- 60 Ibid, 111.
- 61 Fischer-Lichte, 'Interweaving Cultures in Performance', 392.
- 62 See Neideck, 'The Fabric of Transcultural Collaboration'.
- 63 For more of this important context, see Younghee Park, 'Theatre-Making in the Age of #MeToo: Working Cross-Culturally Toward a Framework for Making Safer Creative Spaces', Masters thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2022. Online:
- 64 Eric A. Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021) 5.
- 65 Ibid, 6.
- 66 Ibid, 11.
- 67 Neideck, 'The Cost of Cultural Ambition', 10.

# BIRDS OF A FEATHER: ON QUEERNESS, PERFORMANCE, THE COMING BACK OUT BALL AND THE LGBTIQ+ ELDERS DANCE CLUB

PETA MURRAY, ADELAIDE RIEF, MARNIE BADHAM,  
TRISTAN MEECHAM, BEC REID AND LENINE BOURKE

\* Throughout this article you can click on the photos to view videos of All The Queens Men's projects.

All these groups, for one reason or another, are loosened from the power structure of society because they are different, other. Such folks can easily see their fellow human beings as themselves. They have a sense of the naked unaccommodated human being, the *communitas* person. Power structures tend to kill *communitas*. It is the fact of liminality, its aside-ness, its below-ness, that produces and protects *communitas* ... The domination system cannot understand liminality. But the liminal desires the liminal, has to be out of the structure game, where it can have its ordinary people

quality. There *communitas* exists, just as grass wants to come up between the cracks. (Edith Turner, *Communitas*)<sup>1</sup>



**FIGURE 1:** [THE COMING BACK OUT BALL](#), 2018, ALL THE QUEENS MEN, MELBOURNE. PHOTO CREDIT: BRYONY JACKSON. FILM CREDIT: LOGAN MUCHA.

For almost a decade, the independent Australian arts organisation, All The Queens Men, has dedicated a large part of its mission to building creative and community practices that place the rights of LGBTIQ+ elders at the visible forefront, shifting the way we value and create space for the older members within these communities. Founded by artists Tristan Meecham and Bec Reid, All The Queens Men creates contemporary queer performance in collaboration with communities of all shapes, sizes and identities. The LGBTIQ+ Elders

Dance Club and The Coming Back Out Ball are part of its suite of social dance projects that aim to combat ageism, homophobia and transphobia.

### BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

This article explores the trajectory of these socially engaged art projects through a series of overlapping stages: artistic leadership in honouring and celebrating LGBTIQ+ elders at the inaugural Coming Back Out Ball (2017, 2018), ongoing community building, social inclusion, and creative expression of The LGBTIQ+ Elders Dance Club (since 2016), and imagining of expanded intergenerational and intersectional futures through decentred forms of practice. We have also drawn on existing collaborative research extant around All The Queens Men's work on ageing in queerness.<sup>2</sup> To reflect the multivalent nature of All The Queens Men's creative outcomes, and in homage to the organisation's avian-like ethos of sociability, cultural transmission of knowledge across generations, privileging of visual, spectacle, signals and song, and foregrounding cooperative and participatory behaviours, in this article we have gathered together the diverse voices of community members, artists and scholars.

Our queered dialogic approach to the artistic, social and affective readings of these community based and collaborative practices emerges through contextualisation, storying, visual documentation and an autoethnographic voice. Articulating both the pos-

sibilities and politics of queering autoethnography, we follow queer scholars Stacy Holman Jones and Daniel X. Harris who embrace empathy and affect through critical discussion of this type of coming together as a political act.<sup>3</sup> Ours, then, is a co-authored account whereby queer autoethnography meets reportage, previous evaluation and qualitative inquiry, frocked up in bi-coloured plumage.

The opening quote, comprised of Edith Turner's eight sentences on *communitas*, provided us not just with an organising structure for the eight sections in this article, but also a kind of theoretical aviary for the housing and hybridising of a particoloured scholarly aesthetic. It has been assembled queerly and voiced polyphonically in an online third space, via a shared Google Doc, deploying a FIFO (fly-in, fly-out) ethos that allowed for solo visitations, irregular pairings, and other feathered and flighty interminglings. Might these epistemological flockings, we ask, help us to articulate the meaning and significance of this research while also furthering its theoretical reach through a queered and ornithological aesthetic?

**1: ALL THESE GROUPS, FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER, ARE LOOSENED FROM THE POWER STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY BECAUSE THEY ARE DIFFERENT, OTHER (ON THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF *COMMUNITAS* AND THE GIFT)**



**FIGURE 2:** [THE COMING BACK OUT BALL](#), 2017, ALL THE QUEENS MEN, MELBOURNE. PHOTO CREDIT: BRYONY JACKSON. FILM CREDIT: LOGAN MUCHA.

There was a trope in twentieth-century Australian culture – back in my day – about something being referred to in jest as a ‘gala’ (pronounced ‘galah’) occasion. A galah is a member of the family *Cacatuidae*, which places it among cockatoos. A gala, the dictionary tells us, is a social occasion with special entertainments or performances. The word’s origin in the early seventeenth century alludes to an opportunity for showy dress, and has Italian and Spanish roots, and before those, Old French, in the word ‘gale’ which had to do with rejoicing.

To draw out this wordplay, ‘gala/h’ will henceforth be spelled thus, and any and all future solo interlocutions (aka autoethnographic squawkage) from Peta Murray – dance club enthusiast, scholar and dramaturg within this document – will appear in pink-for-girly boys and girls. Pink and grey also make a striking they-them colour combo, as any queer ornithologist knows, and although auto-correct offers

punk-for-grrrrrls as an alternative, we preen in pink to overwrite and underscore this article as a performative space of autoethnographic queerelousness of our own.<sup>4</sup> This composition, then, is offered not just as queer autoethnography, but as more: a *queered* and *queerable* autoethnography, illustrative of an active performative process of and commitment to ‘queering’ as a research endeavour, an act of resistance and invitation to anti-oppressive and emancipatory acts of culture and of scholarship.

A small bird with a garish colour scheme of grey feathers and a pinkish head, the ‘galah’ name is an Anglicisation of the word ‘gilaa’, from the language of the Yuwaalaraay First Peoples. Despite its modest size, the galah is characteristically bold and loud; it is not just widely distributed across the continent, but well adapted to urban areas, where it is given to flocking – mingling readily with a range of species. Ornithologists observe galahs as highly socialised, extremely intelligent and given to playful engagement in entertaining activities. Like most birds, they create strong lifelong bonds.

In many queer contexts, we do the same. We still flock for safety in numbers. We still create and celebrate our own communities-within-communities; our own ways of subverting, surviving and thriving; and to support these, we continue to devise personal and collective rituals. Core to our theorisation are the key concepts of ‘*communitas*’ described by Edith Turner in 2012 and ‘the gift’ as reciprocity posited through the anthropological lens of Marcel Mauss in 2002. The former, usually located in fields of anthropology

and ritual studies, affords us a way to speak about experiences of unfiltered, unfettered joy that are only possible in liminal spaces of betwixt and betweenness. ‘*Communitas* is togetherness itself’, declares Edith Turner.<sup>5</sup> The notion of ‘the gift’ is a metaphor to signify the start of a reciprocal relationship between artist and community in socially engaged art practices, as a form for encounter and exchange. Socially engaged art as ‘the gift’, read through the lens of Mauss, is not simply a one-way transaction; it is about forging relationship through gift-giving and new cycles of reciprocal exchange. Mauss identified the obligations associated with this gift: giving, which is required in building a social relationship; receiving, which signifies acceptance of the relationship; and reciprocating, which demonstrates the recipient’s integrity.<sup>6</sup>

It was a sudden revelation for me that while I was helping to create this space for others, they were also creating a space for me. To feel a sense of belonging that grew from an early awkwardness into an easy familiarity that came from joining each other on the dance floor, from knowing we’d see each other again next month, and from knowing that we were both welcome here. And especially since my grandparents passed, to feel a sense of being connected – to an extended family, to a lineage of struggles and joy in who and how we love. (Adelaide Rief, Dance Club Producer, All The Queens Men)



As we shall illustrate, whether online or face-to-face, All The Queens Men curate spaces of *communitas* and reciprocity in which queer-identifying people may come together in a spirit of *galarrikinism* (larking, but in a uniquely Australasian, larrikinesque way), accommodating of meaningful irreverence, secular ritual and affording a kind of intentional expansiveness that promotes and cultivates queer kinship across every letter of the alphabet and beyond to their allies and broader society.

## 2: SUCH FOLKS CAN EASILY SEE THEIR FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS AS THEMSELVES (ON AGEING, QUEER LONELINESS AND GOING BACK INTO THE CLOSET)



FIGURE 3: [LGBTIQ+ ELDERS RESPOND TO THE COMING BACK OUT BALL](#), 2017, MELBOURNE, ALL THE QUEENS MEN. FILM CREDIT: KEITH DEVERELL AND TRISTAN MEECHAM. PHOTO CREDIT: BRYONY JACKSON.

In their earliest forms, debutante balls and similar quasi-regal events had little to do with queerness and everything to do with ushering nubile young folk across thresholds of ‘eligibility’ into state-sanctioned sanctities of heteronormativity via further ‘formalities’ celebrated as marriage. But there is no suppressing the fairies in fairy tales, and hints of homophilia may surely be discerned in the pomp and circumstance, in the spectacle, and in the all-important tropes and encodings of ‘the dance’ as a site of queer encounter.

The Coming Back Out Ball and The LGBTIQ+ Elders Dance Club are part of a suite of social dance projects. They emerged in 2016 at an intense pressure point – the Australian same-sex marriage debacle – when the rights and roles of our diverse communities were being debated and debased by those often with little relationship to LGBTIQ+ communities. ‘And still we persist. Assemble ourselves. Gather. And we wonder if in that gathering, we *queer the everydayness of queer terror*’, write Holman Jones and Harris (our italics).<sup>7</sup>

But history invariably repeats itself. As we began to collaborate on this article in the lead-up to the 2022 Australian federal election, intersections of the LGBTIQ+ community were again being used within a conservative agenda to divide and deflect the nation in election campaigns. The pressures were real, with many from the community voicing outrage, yet still former Prime Minister Morrison and his team attempted to divert attention from their own government’s political missteps by placing pressure on trans and gender diverse people.<sup>8</sup>

Thankfully this time again, conservative panic did not prevail. Instead, we witnessed a massive swing vote against the former Coalition government and with its heteronormative paradigms so often used to divide and conquer. Meanwhile, as queer performance and social dance works, The LGBTIQ+ Elders Dance Club (Dance Club) and The Coming Back Out Ball (The Ball) strove to hold these many shades of joy and fear through constantly evolving creative forms in response to and in collaboration with diverse and changing community interests.

**3: THEY HAVE A SENSE OF THE NAKED  
UNACCOMMODATED HUMAN BEING, THE  
COMMUNITAS PERSON (ON POLITICAL AND  
CONTEXTUAL FRAMING OF PRACTICE)**



**FIGURE 4:** [THE LGBTIQ+ ELDERS DANCE CLUB](#), MELBOURNE, 2018. PHOTO CREDIT: BRYONY JACKSON. FILM CREDIT: LOGAN MUCHA.

So here I am at sixty-four, a year away from eligibility for the full senior's package and the right to raid my own nest egg. Over these many decades I've been to one high school formal, umpteen weddings (including four that have only become possible since the passage of the *Marriage Equality Act*), and more and more funerals each year. Ceremonial moments of my life, those that admit operatic emotions, ecstasy and euphoria remain rare.

All The Queens Men developed this suite of projects in response to social research revealing that some older people may conceal their sexuality or gender identity when they access aged care services because they believe they are not safe.<sup>9</sup> The research found that this LGBTIQ+ generation risks re-closeting their sexual, gendered or cultural identity, or variation(s), when accessing aged care services. In Australia, these elders lived through a time when being LGBTIQ+ could result in imprisonment, enforced medical 'cures', loss of employment, and rejection by family and friends. For many, the reality of impending ageing has meant that some elders are going 'back into the closet', for fear of being deprived of quality care.

While we know that the experiences of LGBTIQ+ people are diverse, representations in the media remain limited, expressing two dominant narratives. The first portrayal is of 'constraint': stories and images of marginalisation, loneliness, inequality and isolation; the second, more recent, representation is that of 'celebration and empowerment' – agency and autonomy.<sup>10</sup> However, these narratives have typically neither represented the diversity of experiences,

nor have they originated from a self-determined position by older LGBTIQ+ people themselves.

Almost without exception such moments have taken place in ‘churches’ and ‘chapels’ of queer culture: Mardi Gras events, Midsumma festivals, on holy days of observation such as IDAHOBIT or International Lesbian Visibility Day, through live music and performance or in bars, clubs and other sacred dives, generally curated by and for the young and the restless.

Even with the growing awareness of the needs and rights of older LGBTIQ+ people, there remains limited research on their experience of loneliness. Loneliness has been described by Catherine Barrett and colleagues as the perceived discrepancy between actual and desired social relationships. They explain,

The connection between loneliness and social isolation is not a simple one. While previous definitions describe it as a consequence of social isolation, more recent studies have highlighted that loneliness is associated more with the quality of social bonds than the number of connections a person has.<sup>11</sup>

Australian social work scholar Mark Hughes noted in 2017 that, until recently, little attention has been given to the gender and sexually diverse nature of the older population, resulting in LGBTIQ+ people being invisible in a wide range of settings and encounters, including

in the delivery of social services in the home and in residential care.<sup>12</sup> All The Queens Men took this research as an urgent call for a response of creative care and community building.

#### 4: POWER STRUCTURES TEND TO KILL COMMUNITAS (ON THE ORIGIN STORY OF THE LGBTIQ+ ELDERS DANCE CLUB)



FIGURE 5: [THE LGBTIQ+ ELDERS DANCE CLUB](#), MELBOURNE, 2018. PHOTO CREDIT: BRYONY JACKSON. FILM CREDIT: LOGAN MUCHA.

All The Queens Men began presenting an LGBTIQ+ Elders Dance Club around Australia in 2016, with the aim of combating loneliness by offering a regular dance event that celebrated the social and cultural rights of older LGBTIQ+ people. Hosted by local artists in each location and supported by All The Queens Men, Dance Club

seeks to foster a sense of belonging for LGBTIQ+ people, while ensuring access to a wide range of opportunities for all aspects of healthy living. Using performing arts as a social form, this project provides safe spaces that enable increased social engagement for marginalised individuals and communities, as well as improving quality access to artistic activities.

The deep significance of Dance Club has been articulated by participants.

It made many people who, in their day to day lives in our society, feel, or are made to feel marginalised, neglected, invisible, lonely ... it made these people feel valued, important, beautiful, and cared about. I cannot express strongly enough how valuable that is – it brings tears to my eyes just thinking about the value of Dance Club.  
(LGBTIQ+ elder)<sup>13</sup>

This free dance event series continues to be delivered in Melbourne, Canberra, the Gold Coast, Adelaide and Brisbane and has become a regular monthly calendar event for many. Melbourne Dance Club has been running longest, seeing up to 150 people at each monthly session, while other Dance Clubs are only just getting started, with more intimate events welcoming twenty to fifty regular attendees.

Here I may worship at the altar of Queen Beaver, Maude Davey or Yana Alana and find validation and renewal, emboldening



me to move calmly and queerly on(wards), seen, blessed, affirmed. Kithed and re-kithed, in the knowledge that ‘through kithing one may announce, declare, proclaim affinity and hope. In kithing one makes alliances known by action or by words.’<sup>14</sup>

All The Queens Men report anecdotally that approximately 75 per cent of attendees are regular returnees to the Dance Club as an antidote to isolation, ageism and discrimination. In Australia, Dance Club is a leading creative ageing programme, happening in the context of a re-emergence of health-based social dance projects from groups like the Creative Ageing Centre, Tracks Dance Company in the Northern Territory, and Tasmania Performs. However, Dance Club is a unique offering in that it focuses not only on the instrumental social and health impacts of dance as a form, but also balances the intrinsic values of individual and collective creative expression. Its unique point of difference is the aesthetic and queer performance sensibility that underpins the curation of dynamic, creative and inclusive social spaces.

One man interviewed in the 2017 evaluation of the inaugural Coming Back Out Ball explained the importance of this kind of independent space:

THIS is something I have been DYING and waiting to see for ages: an acknowledgement of the elders and their contributions. I must admit, as an ‘almost’ 50-year-old virile (still-feel-young-and-excited) gay male I’d LOVE to see a



ball or event (or even just a bar or night) for the aged 45+ to mingle and talk, dance and meet ... away from devices, apps and technology: much like Saturday night ... just the generation before! There is NOWHERE for us to go and meet anyone anymore! (guest at the 2017 Coming Back Out Ball)<sup>15</sup>

**5: IT IS THE FACT OF LIMINALITY, ITS ASIDE-NESS, ITS BELOW-NESS, THAT PRODUCES AND PROTECTS *COMMUNITAS* ... (ON THE VISION OF THE COMING BACK OUT BALL)**



**FIGURE 6:** DEBORAH CHEETHAM PERFORMS WITH THE COMING BACK OUT BALL ORCHESTRA CONDUCTED BY DR KATHLEEN MCGUIRE, 2017, ALL THE QUEENS MEN, MELBOURNE. PHOTO CREDIT: BRYONY JACKSON.

The Coming Back Out Ball is so named because one of the biggest challenges faced by many older people within the LGBTIQ+ community is whether to be out and proud in late life or keep this aspect of themselves hidden.<sup>16</sup>

The Coming Back Out Ball seeks to celebrate the activist contributions of LGBTIQ+ elders to the ongoing project of LGBTIQ+ equality, combating loneliness with social bonding and (re)connection to community, while also encouraging expressions of identity through dance and fashion. First presented at the Melbourne Town Hall in October 2017, this community celebration hosted hundreds of guests.

I am a heaving mass of disappointment at being declared too fledgling for The Coming Back Out Ball. I am only fifty-nine. Not that it would make the slightest difference if I were older. The event has sold out. In a last-ditch attempt, I seek to offer my services as a volunteer. Again, no dice. The queer art of failure? I will have to wait for the photos. And the movie. And the stories of friends who were there. No preening or plumage for me, and my envy knows no bounds.

The inaugural Ball included performances by leading LGBTIQ+ artists – including Deborah Cheetham, Robyn Archer, Lois Weaver, Gerry Connolly, Carlotta – and featured a high-end dinner service and dance party. It was important in the vision of The Ball to share this lavish dinner to show respect to the elders through quality hospitality and entertainment from queer icons. As a premiere event of the Victorian Seniors Festival in association with the National

LGBTIQ+ Ageing and Aged Care Conference, the cultural safety of this initial Coming Back Out Ball brought many members of the Victorian LGBTIQ+ community together at a time when LGBTIQ+ rights were the centre of public debate, with media headlines and protests on either side of the divisive marriage equality issue.

Born out of a social history of queer performance culture, The Ball nods to historical traditions and chutzpah of the Balls of the 1970s and 1980s in Melbourne – key political and social activity for groups in the LGBTIQ+ community. Women’s Balls were important annual events on the social calendar for lesbians, also raising money for the liberation movement, while public assemblies such as Mardi Gras began as proud public protest to a society that discriminates against the LGBTIQ+ community.<sup>17</sup> All The Queens Men Artistic Director Tristan Meecham recognised this history of performance and protest in his opening remarks at the inaugural Coming Back Out Ball.

Tonight is a spectacular celebration of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex elders. I stand before you, a young gay man, to offer this night as a gift, a gift in appreciation and respect for all that you have done. To the LGBTI elders who have led the way, who have shaped our community, who have fought for my rights to stand here in fabulous six-inch high heels and gold nail polish. To you, I say thank you. I bow down to you ... (Tristan Meecham, 6 October 2017)

The individuals who attended The Ball expressed thoughtful feedback about their experiences of being involved. LGBTIQ+ elders disclosed that they felt honoured and affirmed, while volunteers and allies spoke of a humbling experience. These were expressions of strong feelings of belonging, respect and celebration, but reflections also included other, more mixed emotions moving across a spectrum of nervousness to unbridled joy. ‘We felt bloody fabulous. We dressed right up and felt good about ourselves and created a great sense of community again.’ Many of the older people attending who lived on their own explained how they didn’t get out very often as they didn’t have places to meet other people in their community, so this was a ‘big night!’ Participants suggested that they felt ‘a few years younger perhaps’, ‘fabulous, invigorated, flirty’ and ‘like a queen for the night’. More commentary spoke of love, joy and even of ‘feeling like I was surrounded by a big hug in the room with all the smiling faces’. This emotion was dense and raw, seemingly growing and expanding to fill the space as the night progressed. ‘Sometimes, I thought my heart was going to burst. The performances and speakers were so empowering for our community!!’<sup>18</sup> Dance as a form of connection, not only purposed as spectacle and performance.

‘As well as celebrating diversity, it’s the intimacy promised by dance ... Dancing is the thing that keeps you connected’, Lizzie says. ‘I think with sexuality, as you get older – and Derek and I have chatted about this a lot – it’s not just about having sex, it’s about holding hands. It’s about sharing a movie and a meal. About having a purpose to cook and

what are you going to wear?<sup>19</sup>

Some who came to The Ball reported having mixed emotions – shifting over the night: ‘excited, emotional, even a bit overwhelmed at times’ and ‘happy, honoured, tired, surprised’. There was also a clear shift in the mindsets and expectations of some attendees after their participation. One woman explained that she

... felt better about the world. It also gave me the encouragement to continue to be more actively engaged in social change – been feeling a bit worn down recently. (LGBTIQ+ elder)

Another attendee explained a different shift, describing how she ‘felt a lot of love and delight, but also anger to our government’. She continued:

If they’d done their jobs on SSM [same-sex marriage] in August, it could have been more of a celebration of how far we’ve come rather than another in a long line of embattled and hurt moments in history!

Through its form and aesthetic, The Ball held space for these many intricacies of nostalgia, memory and celebration.

Following these early iterations of Dance Club and The Ball’s premiere in 2017, All The Queens Men, in partnership with RMIT University’s Dr Marnie Badham, undertook significant reflective research and evaluation to explore more deeply the meaning and significance of the work. Underpinned by values of community self-de-

termination and cultural safety, participatory advocacy and dialogic approaches informed the methodological approach of the research partnership. Volunteers listened to the stories and concerns of LGBTIQ+ elders regarding not only the social dance projects, but also for their communities more broadly. One-on-one conversations, online surveys and lively town hall meetings were held with learnings fed back to the community before being shared publicly. Key themes that arose included the need for more intersectional and intergenerational engagement for future creative projects, but also strategic advocacy advice was sought and shared regarding urgent health, housing and social policy affecting seniors and LGBTIQ+ elders specifically.<sup>20</sup>

## 6: THE DOMINATION SYSTEM CANNOT UNDERSTAND LIMINALITY (ON THE STORY OF THE COMING BACK OUT SALONS)



FIGURE 7: [THE COMING BACK OUT SALON](#), ALL THE QUEENS MEN, 2019, MELBOURNE. FILM CREDIT: LOGAN MUCHA. PHOTO CREDIT: BRYONY JACKSON.

Following the spectacular events of *The Ball* in 2017 and 2018 at the Melbourne Town Hall, sister events such as *The Coming Back Out Salon* at the Myer Mural Hall, Melbourne, in 2019 and ongoing local versions of *LGBTIQ+ Elders Dance Club* (2016 to present) across Australia, new partnerships with local organisations and festivals as hosts have also developed. These increasingly dispersed events have featured performances from Yo-Yo Ma, Electric Fields, Gender Euphoria, Sarah Ward, Kutcha Edwards and Miss First Nations winners and others. Each event as part of this suite of dance projects features performers relevant to the place and moment in which the events are presented and represents a diversity of the *LGBTIQ+* community. *The Ball* and *Dance Club* have also been presented internationally in partnership with National Theatre of Scotland, Luminare Festival, and Eden Court.

In the name of research, I attended a *Coming Back Out Tea Dance* at the Collingwood Town Hall. It's an interesting choice of site, a monument to a civic vision of class, grace and elegance that this neighbourhood has long lost, if indeed it ever had it. Collingwood is best known for its Magpies (the local football team), not for its gala/hs. My Fitbit tells me that in stepping out, I clock up a solid nine kilometres on the dance floor. I wear bunny ears, a highly flammable, rainbow-coloured polyester lei and one of my bespoke sashes that proclaims me 'elder-flowering'.

As a testament to the artistic leadership of *All The Queens Men*, this delegated delivery model – which sees events delivered in partnership by delegating to and mentoring local artists and cultural producers on the ground – results in context-specific, locally relevant

social dance projects. This expanded, decentred and sometimes digitised model has grown in response to increasing interest in the queer performance and socially engaged arts model that is unique to All The Queens Men. The organisation is currently exploring creative social enterprise models for future sustainable partnership delivery.

I take a lot of photos, thinking that I will need them to try to offer readers the kind of ‘thick description’ (as Clifford Geertz might suggest)<sup>21</sup> that a paper like this requires. But I don’t need prompts or notes to feel again the pulse and vitality, the uplift these ‘outings’ give me (see what I did there?) thanks to the rite of purgation-meets-benediction that becomes possible within the design and capaciousness of these events, these leaky colanders of joy, effervescence and possibility.

**7: BUT THE LIMINAL DESIRES THE LIMINAL, HAS TO BE  
OUT OF THE STRUCTURE GAME, WHERE IT CAN HAVE  
ITS ORDINARY PEOPLE QUALITY (ON THE ADVENT OF  
THE DIGITAL LGBTIQ+ ELDERS DANCE CLUB)**



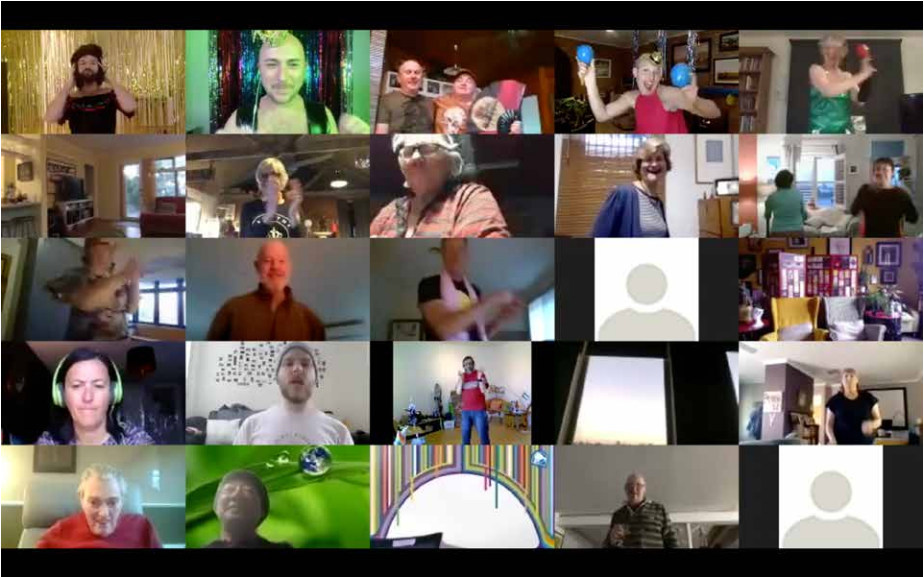


FIGURE 8: [DIGITAL DANCE CLUB](#), 2020, ALL THE QUEENS MEN. ONLINE, VIDEO AND PHOTO BY TRISTAN MEECHAM.

After four years of monthly Dance Club and three iterations of The Ball, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted everyday life and, for many, severed and retraumatised communities for whom social connection is a key indicator of wellness. Social and health services became limited, activity in public space feared, and access to friends and family only possible through digital means. The implications of the pandemic were all the more amplified for older people, in particular in Australia in states and cities where public health measures required ‘people to stay at home’ and put aged care settings under severe pressure.

As COVID hits and the long lockdowns of the pandemiconium in Melbourne begin, I take refuge on Wadawurrung Country. There are moments of novelty as I try to live and work in that

vertiginous otherworld that is ZoomLand. Being rural assuages some of my FOMO; instead, I start to develop fomophobia\*: which I define in a new project, a diary-cum-blogsite, My Corona, as the fear of missing the fear of missing out. (\* Interesting how Google's spell-checker suggests that 'homophobia' may be the word I want.)

All The Queens Men quickly responded by developing digital versions of the LGBTIQ+ Elders Dance Club across the country. Kicking off almost as soon as we entered our first lockdown, Digital Dance Club reached out to elders, friends, family, anyone who needed to process this almost unimaginable pandemic and accompanying crises by shaking a tail feather.

I am looking for a way of marking time and distinguishing Satallday from Saturday, when, to my delight, an email from All The Queens Men proclaims the first of a series of online dance clubs for the LGBTIQ+ community. The first is held on 6 April 2020. I connect my computer to loud-speakers, permit myself a lite beer in the middle of the afternoon, and pop on a dapper hat. I clear floor space and bop myself into a lather. I clock a couple of familiar faces bopping away in their own little ZOOM frames. It's kind of public and kind of secret at the same time. I'm hooked.

Hosted by Tristan Meecham and Bec Reid – with increasingly sparkly costumes, sets and props; hiding the parents, partners and living rooms behind; and often joined by performers from their own bedazzled bedrooms – Digital Dance Club beamed a special sort of communal magic through the airwaves, mirroring the advent

of television in living rooms, a new wide world way of connecting and being together.

Month by month, the wonky fiestas continue. I collect the set. I learn faces, nicknames, pronouns ... I love the one-to-one catch-ups and the artfully sincere performances from some of our most iconic artists. All The Queens Men serve us home-baked burlesque, micro-cabaret and boudoir drag with care, joy, two dollar-shop cossies and far too much bling.

But this kind of seamless magic took a lot of work behind the scenes, with All The Queens Men investing significant time and energy in supporting elders to connect digitally and socially. Equipment and skills needed to be upgraded to honour the gift of the performances and music, leading to the magical *communitas*. As the pandemic continued, Digital Dance Club offered a regular moment to step away from the everyday and enter a joyful world of connection and bad jokes. Now as we in Australia have all begun to cautiously emerge from rolling lockdowns, Digital Dance Club may have served its purpose for many. But an important question now is who this format might continue to serve, as there are those for whom the risks presented by the pandemic are still very real.

**8: THERE *COMMUNITAS* EXISTS, JUST AS GRASS WANTS TO COME UP BETWEEN THE CRACKS (ON THE FUTURING OF LGBTQI+ ELDERS DANCE CLUBS)**



**FIGURE 9:** [THE LGBTQ+ ELDERS DANCE CLUB](#), MELBOURNE, 2018. PHOTO CREDIT: BRYONY JACKSON. FILM CREDIT: LOGAN MUCHA.

After a summer-long hiatus, a Wednesday night Dance Club (abbreviated to 45 minutes) is offered for a run of mid-winter weeks. I'm overweight and unfit, moulting, not yet recovered from a fall that delivered three broken bones and a growing confrontation with advancing age. There is something comforting in Tristan Meecham's signature tropes, self-deprecating jokes, and effusive banter with his 'art husband', Bec Reid. I love their frequent technical difficulties and how they are not in the least fazed to beam themselves in from respective verandas and spare rooms at either end of the rainbow in their tinsel and their tat. Bec's dance instructions, and her regular invitations to pick up the nearest phallic object for a speedy lip-sync, see me all-singing, all-dancing for the duration. With its guaranteed

hits of Dopamine, Oxytocin, Serotonin and Endorphin, Dance Club is more than a DOSE, it's a tonic.

Since The Coming Back Out Ball premiere and the 2017 federal election, state governments around Australia have formally apologised and expunged the criminal records of gay men who had lived with a criminal record for the 'abominable crime of buggery'.<sup>22</sup> Australian queer cultural events and festivals have visibly shifted programming to include older LGBTIQ+ members and community initiatives such as Switchboard's Out and About visitation programme, Val's LGBTI Ageing and Aged Care or ACON's LOVE project. All The Queens Men created a feature film, *The Coming Back Out Ball Movie*, that premiered as the closing event at Melbourne International Film Festival and is now streaming on Netflix. The sum of all these parts continues to contribute in small ways to a broader cultural shift towards equality and understanding.

Previously relegated to neighbourhood centres and church basements, socially engaged art now features in 'high art' venues while also engaging publics in creative forms of participation to effect social change. In Australia, the field has been dominated by the political histories of the community art movement from the 1960s and later, the institutional success of what became known as 'community cultural development' from the mid-1970s.<sup>23</sup> Gay Hawkins tracks a range of projects from the 1980s, including the town of Nimbin's celebration of nature and pre-industrial communality, and the advent of the Sydney Mardi Gras as a celebration of homosexual-

ity and hedonism as key markers for the democratised movement of community arts. Contemporary socially engaged artists continue to be driven by the politics of representation, social change motivations and an interest in new creative forms of community self-determination through sophisticated and culturally specific aesthetic practices.<sup>24</sup>

All *The Queens Men* applies a sophisticated understanding of queer performance aesthetics to engage with broader community sensibilities to offer invitation to both intimate connection and, at the same time, festive spectacle for celebratory purposes. This sensibility was extended to the vision for *The Ball* through Meecham's words quoted above. The extravagance – the grand gesture – of this gift is also relevant, explained in Meecham's words 'the event was spectacle, born out of a performance culture that has the capacity to shift something for a moment' and speaks to an ethics of generosity in his practice. Here, we can read the extravagant spectacle of *The Ball* as the initial 'giving' gesture, whereas the participation of the LGBTIQ+ elders serves as the acceptance and entering into this social relationship. The element of 'reciprocity' now has become an important part of the creative iterative process between artists and community, including new partners and hosts to iterate new context-specific forms of *The Ball* and *Dance Club* across Australia and internationally.

## CONCLUSIONS: DANCING INTO NEW QUEER FUTURES

All The Queens Men projects are curated to the last detail, yet they bring the joy of spontaneity to the audiences who happen upon them, much as Melanie Joosten described in *The Guardian* as ‘the original transient flash mob’.<sup>25</sup>

I will get to go to The Ball. Just once. But it will be online and in another time zone half a world away. The Ball in Scotland will be zoomed at me and my wee Scots hen, Fiona. We will stay up long past our bedtimes to join in, but will have been primed for weeks, hold booked tickets, and be dressed for the occasion. I will wear my best tartan strides, and be ready to drag ‘n’ phlaigh, within what will be an interplay of the sacred and the profane, the rites and the revels. Ritual, I would argue, is only possible within this precise calibration of containment and release.



**FIGURE 10:** THE LGBTIQ+ ELDERS DANCE CLUB, MELBOURNE, 2017. PHOTO CREDIT: BRYONY JACKSON. FILM CREDIT: LOGAN MUCHA.



Now emerging from the pandemic, LGBTIQ+ elders and their communities have hit the dance floor once again! In May 2022, All The Queens Men hosted The Coming Back Out Tea Dance, with hundreds of LGBTIQ+ elders returning to connect and commune in person. The Coming Back Out Salon was presented again in Melbourne in October 2022 and The Coming Back Out Ball in Sydney will be delivered in February 2023 after more than two years of social isolation and regular government imposed public health measures. The exhaustion and uncertainty of the last few years has underscored a need to reconsider how All The Queens Men continues to enact the foundational values of these projects. The pandemic forced a shift in the form, inspiring the adapted Digital Dance Club model, and only recently have in-person events been able to recommence. In their pandemic ‘endurance’ reality, All The Queens Men now is re-establishing and re-connecting, murmuring and flocking, while examining the new social, political and economic context to find new inspiration.

The Coming Back Out suite of projects is now seeding fresh possibility, with its rich past and many possible futures grounded in clear direction from the 2017 evaluation. Community members involved in discussions at the 2017 event and in later public gatherings called for continued culturally safe activities with increased emphasis on intergenerational and intersectoral opportunities, to engage leadership from young people, First Peoples and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse individuals and communities in particular.<sup>26</sup> Over



the past few years, the potential of the project to address a more intergenerational LGBTIQ+ community has continued to emerge and new forms and directions for the project are in development through Rainbow Families Dance Club in response to the expressed needs of emergent LGBTIQ+ generations. New producing models are being tested that situate young queer, trans and gender diverse artists in creative lead roles for The Ball.

Complex questions must now be navigated about leadership, togetherness, inclusion and new forms of advocacy going forward. The projects thus far have been largely held by lead artists Tristan Meecham and Bec Reid, supported by local artists, Dance Club hosts, dance leaders and volunteers who have dipped in and out across the years – a finely woven and growing murmuration who have each left a trace on the projects. This artistic vision has delivered deeply relational experiences for Tristan and Bec, and now, in imagining futures, they ask how they might reshape a relationship with the project that centres engagement with new collaborators at Dance Club in Melbourne, Canberra, Brisbane, the Gold Coast and at pop-up locations across the country.

These squawkings in pink represent but one contributor's attempts at a queerelously autoethnographic account of some brief but meaningful encounters had with the work of All The Queens Men over the past several years as they delivered gala/h interventions into dual dimensions – actual and virtual. In adopting this askance stance, I have responded to Holman Jones and Harris' invocation to

seek out and indeed to interpose queer spaces wherein we may ‘count our lives – in all of their precariousness and reliance upon others – human and non-human – as animate, liveable, grievable’.<sup>27</sup>

All The Queens Men’s engagement with local artists has seen an iterative and emergent practice of sharing culture and reciprocal values which now need clearer articulation to understand how and why this new distributed project flourishes. The initial ‘gift’ offered through Dance Club and The Ball can now be seen to be moving from giving to receiving to new forms of reciprocal exchange in this suite of social dance projects.

Finally, while enfolding their work within a growing body of queer scholarship, All The Queens Men ask: how can we not only reflect the diversity of the LGBTIQ+ community but also understand and integrate this diversity into its vision and delivery? And how might aesthetics and meaning be shaped by diverse thinkers and movers as collaborating artists, hosts and dancers? Should Digital Dance Club continue to support creative connection with folks with limited access to public engagement? And who else can benefit from the aesthetic engagement and social connection of a safe, inclusive dance floor? Queering autoethnography, as Holman Jones and Harris reminded us, may turn ‘me-search to we-search’ in collectivising our bid to ‘find and make community in this time of fractured, individualized and atomising culture’, even as they remind us that autoethnography of any persuasion is ‘a thoroughly relational practice, one concerned with and responsible for creating a dialog with a community of “others”’.<sup>28</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Edith Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (Springer, 2012) 184.
- 2 Marnie Badham and Lenine Bourke, *Reflections of The Coming Back Out Ball: A Dialogic Evaluation* (Melbourne: RMIT University, 2017).
- 3 Stacy Holman Jones and Daniel X. Harris, *Queering Autoethnography* (Routledge, 2018) 7.
- 4 Peta Murray, 'Essayesque Dismemoir: W/rites of Elder-Flowering', PhD thesis, RMIT University, 2017.
- 5 Turner, *Communitas*, 4.
- 6 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Routledge, 2002).
- 7 Stacy Holman Jones and Daniel X. Harris, *Queering Autoethnography* (Routledge, 2018) 38.
- 8 Paul Karp, 'Scott Morrison Defends Delaying Protections for LGBTQ Students as Party Tensions Resurface', *The Guardian*, 8 May 2022. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/may/08/scott-morrison-defends-delaying-protections-for-lgbtq-students-as-party-tensions-resurface>.
- 9 Catherine Barrett et al., 'Social Connection, Relationships and Older Lesbian and Gay People', *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 30.1 (Taylor & Francis, 2015): 131–42.
- 10 Andrew King, 'Troubling Identities? Examining Older Lesbian, Gay and/or Bisexual People's Membership Categorisation Work and Its Significance', in Rosie Harding and Elizabeth Peel (eds), *Ageing and Sexualities: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Routledge, 2017), Chapter 8. Mark Hughes and Andrew King, 'Representations of LGBT Ageing and Older People in Australia and the UK', *Journal of Sociology* 54.1 (SAGE, 2018): 125–40.
- 11 Barrett et al. 'Social Connection, Relationships and Older Lesbian and Gay People'.
- 12 Mark Hughes, 'Towards the Inquiry into Aged Care and Beyond: The Promise and Challenge of a New Era in LGBTI Ageing', in Rosie Harding and Elizabeth Peel (eds), *Ageing and Sexualities: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Taylor & Francis, 2016), Chapter 9.
- 13 LGBTIQ+ elder in Badham and Bourke, *Reflections of The Coming Back Out Ball*, 22.
- 14 Francesca Rendle-Short and Peta Murray, 'Kin-as-ethics: Experiments in Un/authorised Queer Essay Practice', *Sydney Review of Books* (2021).
- 15 Badham and Bourke, *Reflections of the Coming Back Out Ball*, 18.
- 16 Melanie Joosten, 'The Coming Back Out Ball: Being Out and Proud and Older in Australia', *The Guardian*, 25 March 2017. Online: [www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/25/the-coming-back-out-ball-how-the-older-gay-community-is](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/25/the-coming-back-out-ball-how-the-older-gay-community-is).
- 17 More on queer culture in Australia in Graham Willett and John Arnold (eds), 'Queen City of the South: Gay and Lesbian Melbourne', *La Trobe Journal* (State Library of Victoria Foundation, 2011).
- 18 Badham and Bourke, *Reflections of the Coming Back Out Ball*, 22.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 1973) 1–32.
- 22 George Allen, 'Sex Offenders No More: Historical Homosexual Offences Expungement Legislation in Australia', *Alternative Law Journal* 44.4 (2019): 297–301.
- 23 Marnie Badham, 'Spectres of Evaluation: Inter-determinacy and the Negotiation of Value(s) in Socially Engaged Art', in M. Preston and C. Poulin (eds), *Co-creation Practices* (Brétigny, Paris: Empire Edition co-édition CAC, 2019) 205–17.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Joosten, 'The Coming Back Out Ball'.
- 26 Badham and Bourke, *Reflections of the Coming Back Out Ball*, 22–4.

27 Holman Jones and Harris,  
*Queering Autoethnography*, 46.

28 Ibid, 7.

# A RAINBOW IN THE AGE OF COVID: CONTEMPORARY QUEER THEATRE IN AOTEAROA

JAMES WENLEY AND NATHAN JOE

On 23 January 2022, Auckland Pride announced the cancellation of its February festival due to a nationwide outbreak in Aotearoa New Zealand of the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 coronavirus. Founded in 2013, Auckland Pride had established itself as a fixture of the city's arts and culture calendar, expanding in 2021 from a two-week event to fill the entire month of February with queer arts and events programming. Alongside social events for Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland's rainbow community, Auckland Pride is a vital hub for queer theatre- and performance-makers to showcase their work under the Festival's umbrella. The 2022 Festival had been promoted as the 'largest Queer Arts programme in the history of the festival', with arts events (dance, theatre, music, cabaret, comedy, live

art, film, drag performances, ballroom, circus, craft, literary events and public art exhibitions) making up ninety out of the Festival's 180 events.<sup>1</sup> Auckland Pride framed its decision to cancel the majority of its programming as part of an ethics of care for the rainbow community, deeming that it would be 'irresponsible' to proceed during an Omicron outbreak.<sup>2</sup>

While Auckland Pride's 2022 Festival had lost the game of live event production pandemic roulette, the size and strength of its planned queer arts programme reflects the prominence of queer performance in Aotearoa's contemporary cultural landscape. Queer arts and practitioners have been highly visible throughout the period since February 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic reached Aotearoa. During the country's first lockdown in March 2020, many New Zealanders turned to the digital content of queer actor-comedians Chris Parker, Tom Sainsbury and Jenaye Henry. In 2021, Chris Parker won TVNZ's *Celebrity Treasure Island* reality show, raising \$100,000 for the Rainbow Youth charity. Eli Matthewson received the Fred Award for best show at the 2021 New Zealand International Comedy Festival for *Daddy Long Legs*, about his experience as a millennial gay man, and in May 2022 Matthewson became the first celebrity contestant on *Dancing with the Stars NZ* to perform with a same-sex dance partner. Both Parker and Matthewson follow in the footsteps of comedy-music performers the Topp Twins as national role models who celebrate their queer identities. New Zealand drag artist Kita Mean was crowned the inaugural 2021 winner of *RuPaul's*

*Drag Race Downunder. Out Here*, Aotearoa's first anthology of writing from Takātapui and LGBTQIA+ writers featured Queer playwrighting and spoken word. And there was a proliferation of queer theatre and performance on Aotearoa's stages, reflecting a wide spectrum of our rainbow community.

Shane Boshier, queer director and playwright, argues that 'queer playwrighting has a fractured history in Aotearoa. It exists in bursts of energy from generation to generation.'<sup>3</sup> In surveying New Zealand's contemporary generation of queer theatre-makers, we argue that despite the significant constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic environment, queer theatre and performance has asserted itself with an explosion of energy. While a broad definition of queer theatre and performance includes any work created by an LGBTQIA+ artist, we are primarily interested in work by LGBTQIA+ creators that centres queer lives, characters, stories and themes. Proud representation of queerness in theatrical performance expands the perspectives showcased on Aotearoa's stages, providing particular resonance for queer audience members. Just as we use 'queer' and 'rainbow' as umbrella terms for a range of gender and sexual identities, we also use 'theatre' and 'performance' as umbrellas for a range of live performance contexts, involving scripted drama, dance, live art and more, embracing fluidity of form.

This article focuses on three dramas performed in 2021 that exemplify key strands of this contemporary explosion of explicitly queer performance: *Over My Dead Body: UNINVITED* by Jason

Te Mete and *Everything After* by Shane Boshier ask us to attend to Aotearoa's queer history, by bringing visibility to the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on Aotearoa's rainbow community; *Yang/Young/杨* by Sherry Zhang and Nuanzhi Zheng foregrounds the space of high school and the Chinese family, using the domestic landscape to explore intersectional politics through a narrative of triumph and pride that challenges the limitations of Western notions of 'coming-out'. Embracing an out and proud identity, queerness is named and made explicit in these works, in contrast to previous generations of queer New Zealand playwriting where queerness was primarily located subtextually.

Though larger mainstream organisations have begun to support queer theatre, the surge in queer performance ultimately comes from the independent practitioners themselves. In an attempt to repair 'the fractured history' of our queer theatre, we aim to document the developments that have led to this explosion of rainbow performance during the pandemic and examine how we might extend these conditions to create a sustainable ecology for queer performance in Aotearoa.

### AOTEAROA'S QUEER THEATRE CANON

Shane Boshier's comments on New Zealand's fractured history of queer playwriting appear in his article 'Firing the Canon', written for the 2020 *Playmarket Annual* as a 'first stab' at recording



Aotearoa's queer theatre history.<sup>4</sup> Boshier interviews contemporary queer theatre-makers Sam Brooks, Joni Nelson, Nathan Joe and Felix Desmarias, and observes that 'most cited the work of their contemporaries rather than predecessors as inspiration' for their work.<sup>5</sup> This finding prompted Boshier to enquire, '[D]o we actually know our history?'<sup>6</sup> Boshier identifies *If I Brought Her the Wool* (1971) by Gordan Dryland as New Zealand's first 'out and proud play', but as the play has not been published or revived it remains little known.<sup>7</sup>

The invisibility of the queer identity of playwrighting forebears is a key reason behind the fractured history. Bruce Mason and Robert Lord are regarded as significant figures in the development of Pākehā New Zealand playwriting, but their output is overdue a queer re-reading. Mason's homosexuality only became public knowledge upon the publication of John Smythe's *The Plays of Bruce Mason* in 2016, three decades after Mason's death. Boshier argues that Robert Lord's plays *Balance of Payments* and *Meeting Place* (1972) are 'alive with subtext that queer audiences would have happily read'.<sup>8</sup> Most of Lord's plays were written prior to the passing in 1986 of New Zealand's bitterly debated *Homosexual Law Reform Act*, which decriminalised sexual activity between men, leading Boshier to comment that Lord's 'articulation of gay experience shows extraordinary courage and defiance'.<sup>9</sup> The subtextual queerness in Mason's and Lord's work aligns with the plays and careers of American and British playwrights Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee and Noel Coward, whose work in turn has been readily produced on Aotearoa's stages and has

influenced our industry. Boshier names Renée (Ngāti Kahungunu) as ‘our first out lesbian dramatist’, and her trailblazing queer writing (*Setting the Table*, 1982) was inspirational for Lorae Parry, whose play *Eugenia* (1996) was based on the historical story of trans man Eugene Falleni.<sup>10</sup> The absence of any professional revivals of *Setting the Table* and *Eugenia* results in a condition of amnesia for Aotearoa’s theatre-makers and audiences, a barrier against making meaningful contemporary connections with our queer theatre history.

In 2013, playwright Sam Brooks declared that ‘there’s no queer theatre in this country, which is a little surprising given there’s more gay playwrights here than there are All Blacks’.<sup>11</sup> His contention was that while there were many queer theatre-makers, they were not actively making works with queer themes and issues. Brooks represents the vanguard of the millennial generation of queer theatre-makers, self-producing his first season at Basement Theatre in August 2012, a double bill of his plays *Goddess* and *Mab’s Room*. While plays written by queer playwrights involving queer characters could easily meet a general definition of queer theatre, Brooks named himself as ‘part of the problem’, writing plays ‘about people who happened to be gay’, rather than plays ‘about being gay’.<sup>12</sup> Compared to the ‘subtextual’ era prior to the *Homosexual Law Reform Act*, Brooks’ complaint can be measured as progress, with Brooks having the freedom as a queer writer to write queer roles for the stage without making queerness the central theme of his plays. The only play that Brooks had written at that point that he deemed a ‘gay’ play was *Queen*, a stream-of-con-

sciousness monologue ‘about the young gay guy experience’.<sup>13</sup> *Queen*’s April 2013 season at the Basement Theatre coincided with the New Zealand Parliament passing the Marriage Equality Bill. James Wenley quoted the words of queer MP Tamati Coffey in his review of *Queen*: ‘This bill will validate my place in society ... it moves mountains for future New Zealanders, who will live in a time where it’s normal to be able to love whoever they want to’.<sup>14</sup> As recently as 2012, a major plot point of Benjamin Cleaver’s musical *Day After Night*, directed by Wenley and performed at Basement Theatre, was the inability of the central gay couple to become legally married and adopt a baby together. With the progressive milestone of the Marriage Equality Bill reached, the questions around the definition and place of queer theatre in Aotearoa raised by Brooks were acutely relevant.

Two inspirational examples that Brooks felt fitted his definition of ‘queer theatre’ were *K’Rd Strip* (2013), a dance-theatre work by Okareka Dance Company, and *Black Faggot* (2013) by Victor Rodger, a series of monologues and duologues from the perspective of queer Sāmoan men which premiered at Basement Theatre as part of Auckland Pride. Boshier names Rodger as ‘arguably the greatest exponent of queer playwriting in the last twenty years in Aotearoa’.<sup>15</sup> Nathan Joe recalls being ‘absolutely floored’ when he attended *Black Faggot*, ‘one of my earliest experiences watching something unabashedly queer on stage. Something unapologetically in-yer-face gay.’<sup>16</sup> In 2016, Rodger collaborated with Hawai’i-based playwright Kiana Rivera on *PUZZZY*, with its Basement Theatre production

doing the ‘same for Pacific Island lesbians’ as *Black Faggot* had done for Sāmoan men, ‘finally [giving] voice to a sector of the Pacific Island community that has long been invisible’.<sup>17</sup>

Attending Rodger’s *Black Faggot* in 2013 was the catalyst for Bruce Brown’s *The Legacy Project*, which aimed to open a similar space to Rodger’s play to tell stories across the diversity of Aotearoa’s rainbow community.<sup>18</sup> Launched at Q Theatre for the 2014 Auckland Pride with a selection of six short plays, *The Legacy Project* became a vital platform for new queer writing for the stage, running at each Pride Festival until 2019. Nathan Joe credits it as ‘one of my first platforms for developing a voice as a playwright’,<sup>19</sup> with other alumni including Joni Nelson (*8 Reasonable Demands*, 2019), Todd Waters (*Take the Crown*, 2020) and Cole Myers (series writer of *Rūrangi*, 2020). *Teen Faggots Come to Life* (2014) at Basement Theatre was another production that responded to Rodger’s *Black Faggot*, featuring five autobiographical solos from Māori and Pasifika students from the Pacific Institute of Performing Arts (PIPA) that offered ‘a glimpse into real teenage life for gay, transgender, fa`afafine, fakaleiti and bisexual teens’.<sup>20</sup> The writer-performers included Amanaki Prescott-Faletau (who wrote fakaleiti love story *Inky Pinky Ponky*, 2015, with Leki Jackson-Bourke) and Jaycee Tanuvasa (FAFSWAG member and mother of the House of Iman).

Since Sam Brooks’ 2013 article, the ranks of millennial queer playwrights have swelled to include Jess Sayer (*Sham*, 2016), Nathan Joe (*Like Sex*, 2016) and Joshua Iosefo (*Odd Daphne*, 2019).

Agaram Productions has showcased queer South Asian perspectives, notably Ahi Karunaharan and Padma Akula's *Mumbai Monologues* (2014). Interdisciplinary arts collective FAFSWAG, formed in 2013, developed a Pasifika vogue scene and became Basement Theatre's first artists in residence in 2017, where they produced *Femslick* by Akashi Fisiinaua, *Fa'aafa* by Pati Solomona Tyrell and *Neon Bootleg* by Moe Laga.<sup>21</sup> The invitation for FAFSWAG to curate Basement Theatre's opening party in 2018 was a significant moment for the venue, flipping the power dynamics of the Western performance space into one that centred the safety and gaze of queer Pasifika people. The most prominent queer production on Aotearoa's mainstages in this period was *Hudson & Halls Live!* by Kip Chapman with Todd Emerson and Sophie Roberts, which toured nationwide between 2015 and 2017. Silo Theatre staged an interactive Christmas special featuring Emerson and Chris Parker as New Zealand television chefs Peter Hudson and David Halls, a queer couple 'hiding in plain sight' on national television between 1976 and 1986.<sup>22</sup> Parker contributed to the queer canon with his own autobiographical comedy shows *No More Dancing in the Good Room* (2015), about growing up as a young gay boy in Christchurch, and *Camp Binch*, which focused on his teenage years and won the Fred Award at the 2018 NZ International Comedy Festival.

Despite this growing canon of queer work, by 2019 Sam Brooks (who had continued a prolific output as a playwright and established a national profile as a staff writer for *The Spinoff* online

news and culture website) still had cause to lament the lack of prominence for queer theatre in Aotearoa. Brooks stated that ‘as a queer person, and a queer maker of theatre, the dearth of queer work on our mainstages is keenly felt’.<sup>23</sup> Profiling Shane Boshers’ production of *Homos, or Everyone in America* by US writer Jordan Seavey at Q Theatre’s boutique Loft stage, Brooks noted the only two ‘explicitly queer works’ programmed across the nation’s mainstages in 2019 were the international scripts *Cock* by Mike Bartlett (directed by Boshers at Circa Theatre) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* by John Cameron Mitchell at Court Theatre. Boshers expands on the ‘near absence of queer storytelling’ from funded companies in his *Playmarket Annual* article, calculating that queer-centred storytelling made up 2 per cent of mainstage programming from Creative New Zealand-funded producing houses compared with 8 per cent of the programming of ‘indie’ presenting venues Basement Theatre and BATS between 2011 and 2020.<sup>24</sup> As Nathan Joe told Boshers, these statistics reflected the reality that ‘independents [were] doing all of the heavy lifting for queer work’, but ‘those artists are not being funded or being paid a living wage, creating the work at significant personal cost’.<sup>25</sup>

## THE COVID-19 GENERATION

Reviewing the February 2020 Auckland Pride, Nathan Joe was moved to write that the Festival was ‘one of the proudest and most vibrant

I've ever seen it, and perhaps the proudest I've felt around it personally'.<sup>26</sup> While Joe mourned the absence of *The Legacy Project*, which would result in fewer 'gateways for new queer voices', he welcomed the 'new wave of practitioners making work'.<sup>27</sup> These included *Play* by Liam Coleman, *Perfect Shade* by Sarita Das, 'a wig-fuelled exploration of colourism and colonialism through a Bengali lens', and *Transhumance* by Ania Upstill, the 'first overtly queer clown show' that Joe had attended.<sup>28</sup> Established playwright Aroha Awaru offered *Provocation*, contrasting the celebratory tone of the Pride programme with an examination of hate crimes committed against the queer community. Joe's assessment of the 2020 Pride was that 'while New Zealand still has a long way to go in terms of producing queer Kiwi theatre on its mainstages, this Pride shows promise in laying the foundations for our contemporary voices'.<sup>29</sup> However, this momentum was halted by the arrival of Covid-19; the first recorded case was reported in New Zealand on 28 February 2020, and by mid-March the live performance sector experienced widespread cancellations. While the Pōneke Wellington NZ Fringe season of *Princess Boy Wonder* by Hugo Grrrl (George Fowler), an autobiographical transgender coming-of-age story, was cancelled when BATS theatre closed its venue, staff quickly pivoted to enable *Princess Boy Wonder* to become New Zealand's first Covid-era online livestreamed theatre show on 20 March.<sup>30</sup> Three days later, the government announced a nationwide lockdown, and all live in-person performance ceased until 19 June 2020. Following lockdown, Hugo Grrrl's *The Glitter Garden*,

a drag musical for children co-written with Lori Leigh, gained a high national profile due to homophobic and transphobic attacks against the production by the Taxpayers' Union and the Conservative Party, resulting in a sold-out season at Circa Theatre in October 2020.<sup>31</sup>

In 2021, theatre artists had reason to begin the year with confidence: Covid-19 had been eliminated in New Zealand following a second lockdown in Auckland in August 2020, and emergency funding from Creative New Zealand complemented by the government's wage subsidy payments had helped to prop up the performance sector and prevent widespread collapse. The 2021 Auckland Pride listed an expanded thirty-two events under its performance category, including *Gays in Space* by Tom Sainsbury and Jason Smith, *HeTheyShe* by Coven Collective, *Let's Get Loco* by Liam Coleman and *Over My Dead Body: UNINVITED* by Jason Te Mete. While a three-day lockdown and other performance restrictions from 14 February significantly impacted Pride's programme, affected shows were able to reschedule: *UNINVITED*, for example, moved its 24–27 February season at Q Theatre to 14–17 April 2021.

Wellington Pride Festival proceeded with its 13–27 March 2021 dates without pandemic disruption, launching with *He Tangata* at the Wellington Opera House on 13 March. Created and choreographed by Jayden Rurawhe and Paris Elwood, *He Tangata* celebrates takatāpui, a kupu (term) that embraces 'all Māori who identify with diverse genders, sexualities and sex characteristics'<sup>32</sup> as an 'accepted and revered' part of te ao Māori.<sup>33</sup> Rurawhe uses the



concept of rongoā (traditional Māori healing practices) to describe the positive effect of *He Tangata* on performers and audience: ‘[W]hen I am moving ... I am soothed by movement. When I watch storytelling through movement, I receive the same calming and healing that kawakawa tea would give me. By reconnecting with takatāpuitanga, we are healing ourselves by way of movement, a metaphysical medicine.’<sup>34</sup> On opening night at the Wellington Opera House, Rurawhe celebrated disrupting Western power dynamics as ‘a big-bodied fem non-binary takatāpui taking up all this space in this motherfucking colonial building’.<sup>35</sup> Wellington Pride also featured *The Eternal Queers* by Estelle Chout, promoted as Aotearoa’s ‘first all-queer, all-people of colour play’.<sup>36</sup> While this description overlooks queer Māori and Pasifika-led productions, reflecting the fractured history of queer theatre in Aotearoa, *The Eternal Queers*’ intersectional BIPOC solidarity is significant, using identity conscious casting to appropriately represent historical local and international queer icons Carmen Rupe, Stormé DeLarverie, Gary Wu, and So’oalo To’oto’oli’i Roger Stanley. The production was led by producer Chinwe Akomah, who had challenged the Wellington Pride council on its lack of events centring the queer BIPOC community, and was in turn ‘asked to remedy that deficit’.<sup>37</sup> Akomah felt that the ‘impact that queer people of colour have had on queer rights and freedoms is ignored, unknown or whitewashed’ and ‘wanted to do something to change this’.<sup>38</sup> Deeply concerned with how we remember queer histories, *The Eternal Queers* was a milestone production that nev-

ertheless demonstrated the failures of funded theatre infrastructure to support this grassroots production and more queer BIPOC work.

It is vital that queer productions are not siloed in Pride festival contexts, and there were also a number of productions produced outside of Pride umbrellas in 2021. Reviewer Emer Lyons noted that *The Changing Shed* by Michael Metzger, which won Dunedin Fringe's 2021 Best Theatre Award, 'adds to the small canon of New Zealand gay plays' and was 'the first to specifically address gay identity in a rural context'.<sup>39</sup> *Everything After* by Shane Boshier played Q Theatre's Rangitira mainstage, and *Yang/Young/杨* by Sherry Zhang and Nuanzhi Zheng was presented by Auckland Theatre Company at Basement Theatre as part of the Here and Now Festival. A significant work for queer Pasifika artists was the sold-out season of *Fever: Return of the Ula* by Fine Fatale at the Civic Theatre's Wintergarden as part of Auckland Live's Cabaret Festival. *Fala Muncher*, directed by Amanaki Prescott-Faletau and featuring three queer Pasifika solo acts written and performed by Jaycee Tanuvasa, Lyncia Muller and Disciple Pati, was one of the final Auckland productions to complete its 3–14 August 2021 season at Basement Theatre prior to the Delta outbreak and subsequent regional lockdown, temporarily pausing the burst of rainbow energy that had dominated Aotearoa's stages over 2021.

**ACKNOWLEDGING THE GHOSTS OF QUEER  
HISTORY: *OVER MY DEAD BODY: UNINVITED* AND  
*EVERYTHING AFTER***

We have chosen to showcase *Over My Dead Body: UNINVITED* and *Everything After* together as representatives of the burst of rainbow energy on Aotearoa's stages during the Covid-19 pandemic. Both plays are written by established theatre directors motivated to write their own work to fill gaps in queer stories written for the stage. Jason Te Mete (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngai Te Rangi), who was both Musical Director and a performer for *KʻRd Strip*, built his career primarily as a director and coach for musical theatre before writing *Little Black Bitch* (2018) and *UNINVITED*, the first plays in his *Over My Dead Body* series which explores different facets of Te Wheke Māori Health model.<sup>40</sup> Shane Boshier was the founding Artistic Director of contemporary boutique theatre company Silo Theatre from 2007 to 2014, bringing international queer theatre to Aucklanders, including *Boys in the Band* by Mart Crowley (Silo's 2005 season), *Take Me Out* by Richard Greenberg (2006),  *Holding the Man* by Tommy Murphy (2009) and *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner for Boshier's 2014 farewell season. Despite an Auckland Arts Festival reading in 2017 and receipt of the 2018 Adam Playwriting Award by Playmarket, *Everything After* was not subsequently programmed by the Festival, or any of the established producing organisations, and was ultimately mounted through Boshier's own company, Brilliant Adventures. Similarly, the production of *UNINVITED* was initiated by Jason Te Mete's Tuatara Collective.

Although *Everything After* had been in development since 2014, and *UNINVITED* had previously had a development season in 2019 at Basement Theatre and Auckland Pride (featuring graduate actors from MIT School of Performing Arts), the production of both plays in 2021 held a profound resonance, taking place forty years since the initial cases of what would come to be classified as HIV/AIDS were reported in the United States, and in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. *UNINVITED* and *Everything After* help to rectify an absence of local stories of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on our stage and screen. AIDS activist Michael Stevens writes movingly that ‘so many “ordinary” gay men died here [in New Zealand] too, men who just wanted to live and to love and be loved without fear’.<sup>41</sup> *UNINVITED* depicts three people who died in the 1990s whose spirits gate-crash a flat warming held in 2018 on the eve of World AIDS Day. The play is intended to provide a ‘platform to have an open kōrero about the effects of the epidemic in our community’.<sup>42</sup> *Everything After* was motivated by Boshier’s contention that queer histories were being lost, and ‘to find ways to always be reminded of what has come before us’.<sup>43</sup> The play’s protagonist is a survivor of the HIV/AIDS epidemic who experiences PTSD. *Everything After* wrestles with the displacement of the queer (namely cis and white) male in contemporary society, challenging its audience to look at what happens when our queer histories are not acknowledged. With metaphorical and literal ghosts, these two plays refuse to let go of the past, and warn us of the dangers of doing so. These stories of the impact

of AIDS on the rainbow community are finally given life onstage in Kiwi vernacular. This grief is no longer something that happened elsewhere, but something also discernibly part of Aotearoa's queer whakapapa.

The 2021 Auckland Pride season at Q Theatre loft was *UNINVITED*'s first professional season, featuring an entirely LGBTQIA+ cast, crew and creative team. Like *He Tāngata*, *UNINVITED* was created to offer rongoā through a focus on mana ake, which relates to 'maintaining power, having control, experiencing different situations or challenges and having the ability to build the mana of others'.<sup>44</sup> Inspired by quilt panels from New Zealand AIDS Quilt project, *UNINVITED* sought to bring mana ake and dignity to the stories of individuals whose lives were taken by HIV/AIDS. The focus on hauora (holistic view of health and wellbeing) and rongoā extended to getting funding to support access to an 'in-house counsellor for both audience members and the cast and crew of the show'.<sup>45</sup>

The contemporary generation of queer rangatahi (young people) is represented by three flatmates and university students: 'straight-laced' and questioning Pākehā Maria (Amanda Tīto), junior registrar and 'out and proud' Tongan lesbian TJ (Lyncia Muller), and City Mission volunteer and gay Pasifika man Anaru (Vincent Farane), who has thrown a party to celebrate his twenty-second birthday.<sup>46</sup> Maria and her parents had recently inherited the flat, which had been unoccupied for the past seventeen years. The new flatmates find

artefacts from the flat's past: a denim jacket covered in patches, an 'old, very tattered rainbow flag attached to the window', and a candle with a note reading 'They wander silent, without prayer / Light this candle, if you dare / To bring back souls who linger here'. When Anaru lights the candle, three uninvited guests arrive at the party: Sam (Tim Hamilton), an 'out and proud' but 'relatively straight acting' Pākehā gay man, Anna Flactic (Brady Peeti), a Māori trans woman, and Kate (Sapati Apa-Fepulea'i), a Sāmoan 'gothic punk' and 'heavy drug user'. As we will later learn, all were previous tenants who had died in the 1990s after contracting HIV/AIDS. Each of the uninvited holds an affinity with one of the flatmates, and each flatmate can only see one of the uninvited: Maria drinks with Sam (who is Maria's uncle); TJ, who wears the denim jacket that belonged to Anna, is entertained by Anna's lip-sync performance (TJ's police officer father links the pair); and Anaru and Kate bond over being adopted (it is later revealed that Kate is Anaru's mother).

A scene between Anna and TJ directly addresses a clash of perspectives between past and present, centring on the place of police in Pride movements. In November 2018, the Auckland Pride Parade banned police and corrections officers from marching in uniform for the February 2019 parade. TJ, whose father was a police officer, argues that the police should have been allowed to march in uniform. Anna shares her experience: 'Which story do you want first? How about the one where that pig arrested me for nothing, took me down the station and then strip-searched me to see if I was wearing ladies

undies or not?’ TJ denies Anna’s experience: ‘[T]hey don’t do that, they can’t do that! When did this happen?’ Anna’s eloquent response speaks for all who have faced institutional brutality and discrimination: ‘It doesn’t matter when, but it happened. Are you saying I should just forget it?’ The interaction culminates in TJ misgendering Anna, with the entire scene calling attention to the need for a reinforcement of queer politics of solidarity, particularly for all members of the rainbow community to stand up for trans rights. Reviewer Gabriel Faatau’uu-Satiu, who attended the 2019 production, writes that ‘although I have heard of ... particular struggles in the past, hearing it being shared explicitly by [Anna] was quite an experience ... judging by the silence and quiet sniffles around the room, we really felt the pain, heaviness and realness of this story’.<sup>47</sup>

Members of the audience participate in a key turning point in the play when the flatmates ask us to affirm that we can see Sam, Anna and Kate. While improvised interactions with the audience as ‘guests at the party’ add a level of frivolity and unpredictability to the performance, being asked to acknowledge the presence of the spirits adds further complexity to our roles, establishing us as witnesses and conduits between the two generations. Following the audience’s affirmation, Anaru discovers clippings of death notices, and the flatmates and spirits contend with the paucity of information contained in their obituaries. TJ redeems herself by rejecting the dead name used in Anna’s notice and expressing outrage at the denial of Anna’s identity. Anaru is struck that Sam died at age twenty-two, the

birthday that Anaru is celebrating. As Anaru blows out the candle on his cake, a ‘gust of wind’ blows out the spirits’ candle, causing them to disappear. TJ’s boss Dr Andrew, who had just arrived at the party, recognises the jacket worn by TJ as Anna’s, and we discover that Dr Andrew was Sam’s lover. Dr Andrew completes the stories of Sam, Anna and Kate, his testimony further contributing to the new generation’s knowledge, represented by Anaru, who admits ‘sorry, I just don’t really know much about AIDS and stuff’. After Sam became ill, Sam’s family prevented Andrew from seeing him – ‘they wouldn’t even let me speak to him on the fucking phone. He was my soulmate, my everything, and I wasn’t allowed at his funeral.’ Andrew implores the people at the party – including the audience – to never forget the way AIDS victims were treated: ‘It was a virus! An incredibly cruel virus, totally unexpected, and absolutely uninvited.’ Following the curtain call, the actors invite the audience on to the stage and form a circle around the candle, which is relit, and a waiata is sung, ‘a prayer for those who are no longer with us’. Reviewer Jess Karamjeet praised the ‘beautiful sense of safeguarding and support from the production team, including access to counsellors and encouragement towards kōrero’.<sup>48</sup> *UNINVITED* demonstrates mana ake by enveloping the audience with care, affirming the mana of victims of HIV/AIDS and the importance of sharing queer histories.

While *UNINVITED* aims to increase knowledge of the HIV/AIDS epidemic for a new generation, *Everything After* explores the ongoing trauma experienced by survivors who lived



through it. Dr Andrew plays a minor *deus ex machina* type role in *UNINVITED*; *Everything After* centres an equivalent character, Nick, as the protagonist. Reviewer Ethan Sills notes, '[F]ew stories get told about HIV in the 21st century – and it's even rarer to get an older perspective on the battle',<sup>49</sup> and Nathan Joe evaluates the significance of *Everything After*'s place in the queer canon: '[T]here are fewer plays in our queer canon that celebrate the experiences of older gay men living with HIV ... Boshier contributes to the canon by taking the AIDS play and thrusting it into our contemporary age. It's incredible that the play is such an anomaly, but it is.'<sup>50</sup>

The protagonist of *Everything After*, Nick (Simon Prast), an HIV/AIDS activist and survivor appears in the play as a man out of time, 'challenged over and over to survive the treacherous banalities of modern gay life'.<sup>51</sup> Joe observes that 'the play's subject matter, much like its character, is fighting for relevance in a culture that seems to have moved on quickly ... The irony of being an AIDS survivor during an era where bareback sex and preventative medication is in abundance.'<sup>52</sup> If *UNINVITED* calls in a new generation to replace ignorance with knowledge, *Everything After* calls out, pointing 'a finger at a current generation of gay men who have forgotten that pride was paved from pain'.<sup>53</sup> Both plays attempt to free and exorcise the ghosts of queer history by giving them a chance to speak to their traumas. The lesson is clear: history must not repeat itself.

**RESISTING THE COMING-OUT NARRATIVE:  
YANG/YOUNG/杨**

The third play that we have selected to showcase is *Yang/Young/杨* by playwrights Sherry Zhang and Nuanzhi Zheng, which was directed by Nathan Joe and represents an intersectional Generation Z perspective on contemporary queerness in Aotearoa. Zhang recalls that ‘as we turned 20, we couldn’t stop overanalysing our own coming of age, and the fact we never saw ... stories like ours reflected back. So we started dreaming up the characters who later become [protagonists] Qiu Ju Yang and Poppy Young.’<sup>54</sup> Zhang focused on Yang, whose exploration of her sexuality comes into conflict with the cultural performance of being the dutiful daughter, and Zheng focused on Young, who navigates the social hierarchy of secondary school, with the playwrights splitting the writing so ‘our own distinct storytelling style became embedded in each character’s voice’.<sup>55</sup> *Yang/Young/杨* was programmed by Auckland Theatre Company, Tāmaki Makaurau’s largest theatre company, for the 2021 iteration of its youth-focused Here and Now Festival. While not its stated remit, Here and Now (previously known as The Next Big Thing) might be considered as one of the most resourced curators of contemporary queer theatre in Aotearoa. During Associate Director Lynne Cardy’s tenure in the company, ATC’s youth festival commissioned notable works of difference, including queer-centred works *Inky Pinky Ponky* and *8 Reasonable Demands*, and its programming has been more culturally diverse than ATC’s mainstage seasons. As well as the queer

context, *Yang/Young/杨* was also notable for its trilingual storytelling, featuring dialogue in Mandarin, Shanghainese and English.

Zhang describes *Yang/Young/杨* as a ‘classic coming-of-age story, but from a queer, Chinese-New Zealander lens, and intersected with surreal fantasy elements – two separate but intertwining storylines, with family and friendship at their core’.<sup>56</sup> The play’s queer lens is explored through Qiu Ju’s storyline. In an introductory address to the audience, Qiu Ju (Shelby Kua) struggles whether or not to define herself by her queerness:

My name is Qiu Ju, Qiu for Autumn, Ju for chrysanthemum, I am the same Zodiac sign as my Ah Ma, I play the clarinet, I have black hair and brown eyes and a nose and – *(defeated pause)* I can be good at maths. I can be nice, and smart, and good. *(sigh)* I can be exactly what you want me to be. *(thoughtful pause)* But I can also be ... something. Someone.<sup>57</sup>

The promise of a queer romcom narrative for Qiu Ju is offered by the arrival of Abigail, whose confident performance of her bisexual identity is expressed in her Instagram user handle: ‘A underscore Bi, underscore, gal’. After bonding in music practice, Qiu Ju visits Abigail’s house for a ‘jam’, which pays off in a beautiful scene of queer affection as Abigail attempts to confirm if the attraction she feels towards Qiu Ju is mutual. Abigail turns a discussion of

whether Qiu Ju has a ‘girl crush’ or a ‘CRUSH’ on *Euphoria* actor Zendaya into an opportunity to ask, ‘Do you have a “girl crush” or a CRUSH on me?’ (*beat*) Don’t overthink it. What do you feel?’ Qiu Ju’s admission ‘A CRUSH’ cues ‘cute intense staring’ between the pair. Qiu Ju’s tentative new relationship with Abigail increases her social clout through a ‘sudden increase in likes’ and new followers commenting ‘Couple goals’, and ‘Do you think they’ll get voted for cutest couple?’ via staged Instagram reels. Queerness is represented as aspirational, popular, trending.

Qiu Ju’s feelings towards Abigail are entangled with her feelings of duty to her grandmother Ah Ma (Valery Chao), who has an expectation that Qiu Ju will find a boyfriend. Abigail wants to attend the school ball with Qiu Ju as a couple and meet Ah Ma. Abigail’s request summons the ghost of Qiu Ju’s Ah Gong, who appears as a figure from Chinese Opera. Qiu Ju tells Ah Gong that Abigail is her girlfriend – ‘Everytime I’m with her, I feel like my heart is spilling out’ – but this sends Ah Gong into a fury, countering, ‘Why is your own happiness more important than your family’s? ... Wǒmen zhōngguó rén cónglái méi yǒuguò GAY [we Chinese people are never gay].’ Influenced by the disapproval of her ancestor, Qiu Ju refuses Abigail’s ball offer. Abigail bitterly tells Qiu Ju, ‘You can stay in the closet, or be with me. I know what I’d choose.’

Reviewer Alice Canton observes that ‘Yang/Young/杨 connects to a lineage of Queer coming-of-age storytelling (see: *Love, Simon, Moonlight, Call Me by Your Name*) through the exploration of

Queerness and the coming-out narrative colouring the protagonists' story arc (without necessarily consuming it)<sup>58</sup> However, the expected beats of a Western queer coming-out narrative are complicated by Qiu Ju's familiar and cultural ties. Qiu Ju describes seeing the school counsellor, who 'said that I can just move out, make a new support system. When you're Queer, your chosen family is the one that matters', but Qiu Ju explains, 'I don't know if Ah Ma would survive without me. And I don't know if I could.' Abigail also perpetuates a Western empowerment narrative, posting mantra on her social media – 'BE OUT BE PROUD. REAL QUEER ICONS DON'T HIDE THEIR TRUTH FROM ANYONE' – without engaging with the complexities of the family connection that Qiu Ju would risk if she followed this advice.

Qiu Ju finds some balance in her conflict between sexuality and culture when she visits a Chinese Buddhist temple with Ah Ma. Sensing Qiu Ju's anxiety, Ah Ma gently advises, 'Maybe don't worry about putting into words, just feeling is enough'. Qiu Ju does not attempt to describe her sexuality, but says to Ah Ma, 'This is who I am. 我就是这样. 你可以接受我吗? [I am this way. Can you accept me?]' Do you accept me?' Qiu Ju then enacts a ritual, closing her eyes and bowing to the floor three times before throwing two stones. The stage directions read: 'One curve, one concave. It's a YES and QIU JU smiles through tears.'

While Qiu Ju and Abigail are voted 'President and Madame President' at the ball (the most popular couple), Zhang and Zheng

choose not to offer an easy reconciliation between the former lovers. Abigail takes the vote as an opportunity to express, à la Netflix musical *The Prom* (2020), that ‘though the whole concept is so heteronormative, it just really shows how far we’ve come that Queer love can triumph conservative ideologies’. Qiu Ju, however, forcefully counters, ‘I’m not choosing you over my family’. Qiu Ju continues:

Fuck your whole idea of the closet! I’m in control of who knows what and when. In, or out or wherever.

... it doesn’t make me less. And it’s not about ‘bravery’.  
 ’Cause I’m not hiding, or a hypocrite. I’m just trying my best to exist.

I’m Qiu Ju, and I’m enough.

This politically charged moment sidesteps the Western queer narrative that institutes a dividing line of ‘before’ and ‘after’ the coming-out. As Zhang writes, ‘not all of us can *Love, Simon* it: hug our parents and be chill’.<sup>59</sup> Qiu Ju’s refusal to come out explicitly at all might be framed as a cop-out under a Western model of coming-out, but the play celebrates this moment as a triumph of nuance. Canton praises the way the play ‘gently reimagines a world in which the spectrum of sexuality (and gender) is No Big Deal’ and approves of the lack of a ‘neat, tidy resolve’, sharing how the characters’ demonstration of compassion and respect ‘bring a tear to my eye and are enough

to make my Queer wee heart burst'.<sup>60</sup> *Yang/Young/杨* broadens Aotearoa's queer canon in its message that coming-out can be an ongoing practice rather than a definitive end point and involves cultural nuance.

### SUSTAINING THE QUEER THEATRE ECOLOGY

Creating and staging live performance has become an activity of considerable financial, emotional and mental adversity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite these challenges, Queer theatre has been a particular site of energy and dramaturgical innovation on Aotearoa's stages through the first two-and-a-half years of the pandemic period, offering a rainbow of representation, rongoā and hope for audiences. Work like *He Tangata*, *The Eternal Queers*, *Fala Muncher*, *Over My Dead Body: UNINVITED*, *Everything After* and *Yang/Young/杨* are intersectional, invested in queer history, and offer a broader representation of our rainbow community on Aotearoa's stages.

Queer performance's shift to the forefront in the age of Covid can in part be explained by changes to infrastructure and policy within Aotearoa's performing arts ecology that has provided space for new generations of artists to articulate queerness through theatre, including the platforming decisions of Auckland and Wellington Pride Festivals, Basement Theatre, and Auckland Theatre Company's *Here and Now*. However, the remarkable run of queer

theatre in 2021, halted by the Delta outbreak in August 2021, was largely a phenomenon of underfunded independent theatre-makers. *Yang/Young/杨*'s programming by ATC was exceptional, with *UNINVITED* and *Everything After* reliant on the mahi of Jason Te Mete's and Shane Boshier's own companies.

The proliferation of queer works through the pandemic demonstrates an understanding that makers and audiences no longer see queer work as something to be ghettoised or hidden in closets. We cannot truly celebrate queer work if it is only celebrated as queer work. Queer work, both in and out of Pride, is necessary. It is vital as we come out of the pandemic that this momentum is sustained and nourished. As Boshier argues, 'we need dedicated funds for queer-led projects'.<sup>61</sup> To counter the phenomenon of 'one season' wonders, there needs to be a concerted effort by funders, venues and companies to support not only productions, but nationwide tours of queer work. Pride festivals could support revivals of plays from our queer theatre canon, and commission work from new writers to be in conversation with them. A publication of collected queer plays from Playmarket would be an essential aid for teachers, theatre-makers and readers to access Aotearoa's growing queer canon.

Although the Delta and subsequent Omicron outbreaks severely disrupted theatre production in Aotearoa, queer performance has continued to find windows of opportunity. While the 2022 Auckland Pride was cancelled following the Omicron outbreak, Pride's registration with the Ministry of Culture and Heritage's



Events Support Scheme ensured that all programmed practitioners were paid as if the events had gone ahead. Pride has also launched ‘The Queer Agenda’, a platform that promotes queer events outside of Pride Month.<sup>62</sup> One of the cancelled Pride shows, *Too Much Hair*, a gender euphoric cabaret by Ania Upstill and William Duignan, released a digital version of the show with funding from telecommunications company Spark. The show’s May season at BATS became an anchor event for Queer AF, a new queer arts festival in Wellington, founded by Jess Ducey.<sup>63</sup> In December 2021, Susan Williams debuted *Illegally Blind*, an autobiographical show examining the intersections of their identity as a blind, chronically ill, neurodiverse, ace, non-binary performer. Dan Goodwin, Joni Nelson and Nathan Joe formed theatre collective Hot Shame to produce queer works, presenting Goodwin’s *Chrome Dome and Schizo*, Nelson’s *Together Forever*, and Joe’s *Gay Death Stocktake* at Basement Theare over July–September 2022 (*Gay Death Stock Take* debuted at Ōtautahi Tiny Fest in November 2021). Auckland Theatre Company programmed *Scenes from a Yellow Peril*, Joe’s meta-analysis of Asian identity with a queer lens, in its mainstage 2022 season. We have confidence in concluding that Queer performance in Aotearoa is here to stay, and will remain out and proud, no longer hiding in subtext.

As the definition of queerness continues to expand and grow, so too will our expectations of queer theatre. The queer works showcased in this article all point both towards the future of queerness, and to the past. So then, we must remember where we

have come from, and how we got here, while maintaining an open mind and heart for what is to come.

## NOTES

- 1 'The Largest Queer Arts Programme in the History of Auckland Pride Confirmed', *Auckland Pride*, 11 January 2022. Online: <https://aucklandpride.org.nz/articles/the-largest-queer-arts-programme-in-the-history-of-auckland-pride-confirmed/>.
- 2 'Auckland Pride Cancels 2022 Festival in Response to Omicron Outbreak', *Auckland Pride*, 23 Jan 2022. Online: <https://aucklandpride.org.nz/articles/auckland-pride-cancels-2022-festival-in-response-to-omicron-outbreak/>.
- 3 Shane Boshier, 'Firing the Canon', *Playmarket Annual*, 2020, 53.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid, 53–4.
- 8 Ibid, 54.
- 9 Ibid, 55.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Sam Brooks, 'No Country for Queer Theatre', *Sam Brooks Loves You*, 21 June 2013, <https://sambrookslovesyou.wordpress.com/2013/06/21/no-country-for-queer-theatre/>.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Cited in James Wenley, 'Gay-up Storytelling', *Theatre Scenes*, 18 April 2013. Online: <http://www.theatrescenes.co.nz/review-queen-smoke-labours-productions/>.
- 15 Boshier, 'Firing the Canon', 57.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Lydia Zanetti, 'Puzzy', *Zanetti Productions*, 2016, <http://zanetti-productions.com/puzzy>.
- 18 Dionne Christian, 'Queer Stories Bring Spectrum of Experience', *New Zealand Herald*, 8 February 2014. Online: <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/queer-stories-bring-spectrum-of-experience/7NDEHHHQZ2Y-7ZSC5VPR5NTD5F4/>.
- 19 Nathan Joe, 'SCENE BY NATHAN: Auckland Pride and Fringe 2020', *Theatre Scenes*. Online: <http://www.theatrescenes.co.nz/scene-by-nathan-auckland-pride-and-fringe-2020/>.
- 20 Jacqui Stanford, 'Teen Faggots Coming to Life', *Pride New Zealand*, 13 February 2014. Online: <https://www.pridenz.com/gaynz/14602.html>.
- 21 Kate Prior, 'We're Here, We're Queer, We're Going Nowhere: FAFSWAG at The Basement in 2017', *Pantograph Punch*, 21 November 2017. Online: <https://pantograph-punch.com/posts/fafswag-at-the-basement>.
- 22 Clare de Lore, 'Hiding in Plain Sight', *New Zealand Listener*, 15 October 2018. Online: <https://www.pressreader.com/new-zealand/new-zealand-listener/20181015/281526522013895>.
- 23 Sam Brooks, 'No Country for Queer Men: Where Is All the Great New Zealand LGBTIQ+ Theatre?', *The Spinoff*, 13 February 2019. Online: <https://thespinoff.co.nz/media/13-02-2019/no-country-for-queer-men-a-response-to-homos-or-every-one-in-america>.
- 24 Boshier, 'Firing the Canon', 58.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Joe, 'SCENE BY NATHAN'.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 James Wenley and Phoebe Robertson, 'Aotearoa New Zealand Theatre and Covid-19: A Timeline',

- Theatre Scenes*, 2 May 2022. Online: <https://www.theatrescenes.co.nz/timeline/>.
- 31 See <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/28-09-2020/gliiter-garden>.
- 32 Rainbow Youth Inc. & Tiwhanawhana Trust, 'Takatāpui', 2022, <https://takatapui.nz/#home>.
- 33 Ana McAllister, 'He Tangata', *Pantograph Punch*, 13 March 2021. Online: <https://pantograph-punch.com/posts/he-tangata>.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Lia McGuire, 'He Tangata: Wellington Pride's Opening Gala Was a Breath-Taking Unveiling of Takatāpuitanga', *Massive Magazine*, 22 March 2021. Online: <https://www.massivemagazine.org.nz/articles/he-tangata-wellington-prides-opening-gala-was-a-breath-taking-unveiling-of-takatapuitanga>.
- 36 Andre Chumko, 'New Zealand Debuts Its First All-Queer, All-People of Colour Play', *Stuff*, 22 March 2021. Online: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/stage-and-theatre/124557701/new-zealand-debuts-its-first-all-queer-all-people-of-colour-play>.
- 37 Octavius Jones, 'You Will Not Erase Us', *Pantograph Punch*, 29 March 2021. Online: <https://www.pantograph-punch.com/posts/you-will-not-erase-us>.
- 38 Chumko, 'New Zealand Debuts Its First All-Queer, All-People of Colour Play'.
- 39 Emer Lyons, 'Growing up Queer', *Pantograph Punch*, 3 May 2021. Online: <https://pantograph-punch.com/posts/growing-up-queer>.
- 40 See Health Department website: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/populations/maori-health/maori-health-models/maori-health-models-te-wheke>.
- 41 Michael Stevens, 'Surviving the Plague Years: Living with AIDS', *Tē Papa*, 2016. Online: <https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/discover-collections/read-watch-play/history/lgbtqi-histories-new-zealand-aotearoa/surviving-plague>.
- 42 Tuatara Collective, 'What Would You Do If Someone Gatecrashed Your Party?', *13th Floor*, 11 February 2021. Online: <https://www.13thfloor.co.nz/what-would-you-do-if-someone-gatecrashed-your-party/>.
- 43 Oliver Hall, 'Theatre That Asks How We Hold Onto Our Histories', *Gay Express*, 24 June 2021. Online: <https://gayexpress.co.nz/2021/06/theatre-that-asks-how-we-hold-on-to-our-histories/>.
- 44 Tuatara Collective, 'What Would You Do If Someone Gatecrashed Your Party?'
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Quotes from *Over My Dead Body: UNINVITED* are sourced from its unpublished manuscript, provided by Jason Te Mete.
- 47 Gabriel Faatau'u-Saiti, 'Honour the Story', *Theatre Scenes*, 16 February 2019. Online: <http://www.theatrescenes.co.nz/review-over-my-dead-body-uninvited-auckland-pride/>.
- 48 Jess Karamjeet, 'Rainbow Visions', *Theatre Scenes*, 19 April 2021. Online: <http://www.theatrescenes.co.nz/review-over-my-dead-body-uninvited-tuatarata-collective/>.
- 49 Ethan Sills, 'Theatre Review: *Everything After, Q Theatre*', *NZ Herald*, 8 July 2021. Online: <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/theatre-review-everything-after-q-theatre/>.
- 50 Nathan Joe, 'How Not to Survive a Plague', *Theatre Scenes*, 8 July 2022. Online: <http://www.theatrescenes.co.nz/review-everything-after-brilliant-adventures/>.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Sherry Zhang, 'Your Queer Chinese-New Zealand Teenage Fantasy: How We Wrote *Yang/Young/杨*', *The Spinoff*, 24 July 2021. Online: <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/24-07-2021/your-queer-chinese-new-zealand-teenage-fantasy-how-we-wrote-yang-young-%E6%9D%A8>.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Quotes from *Yang/Young/杨* are sourced from its unpublished manuscript, provided by Sherry Zhang and Nuanzhi Zheng.

- 58 Alice Canton, 'Young, Queer, BIPOC: A Response to *Yang/Young/杨*', *Pantograph Punch*, 26 July 2021. Online: <https://www.pantograph-punch.com/posts/yang-young>.
- 59 Zhang, 'Your Queer Chinese-New Zealand Teenage Fantasy'.
- 60 Canton, 'Young, Queer, BIPOC'.
- 61 Boshier, 'Firing the Canon', 59.
- 62 See <https://aucklandpride.org.nz/queer-agenda/>.
- 63 See <https://www.queer.af.nz/>.

## REVIEWS

**EMMA WILLIS, *METATHEATRICAL DRAMATURGIES OF VIOLENCE: STAGING THE ROLE OF THEATRE* (CHAM, SWITZERLAND: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2021)**

Emma Willis is an important contributor to the growing literature on performance and violence, particularly in her 2014 monograph *Theatricality, Dark Tourism and Ethical Spectatorship*. Her latest book, *Metatheatrical Dramaturgies of Violence*, is a sequel of sorts, again including theatrical responses to the Rwandan genocide and the plays of Eric Ehn. Where *Dark Tourism* was structured around voyages between sites of remembrance for violent acts and similarly memorialising playtexts, *Metatheatrical Dramaturgies of Violence* is organised around interlinked theatrical case studies. Willis's evidence largely comes from scripts and theoretical commentaries, though there is some reference to specific productions and implied *mise-en-scène*.

A large number of plays are alluded to, but most chapters focus on one to three works. After introducing her concepts in Chapter

One, Willis moves to Guillermo Calderón's text *Kiss* (2016; Chapter Two); Jackie Sibblies Drury's *We Are Proud to Present* (2012; Chapter Three); Michael Redhill's *Goodness* (2005), a documentary about a tour of *Goodness* to Rwanda (2013), together with Ehn's *Thistle* (2012; Chapter Four); Ella Hickson's *The Writer* (2018), Tim Crouch's much discussed *The Author* (2009) and Heidi Schreck's *What the Constitution Means to Me* (2017; Chapter Five); Ontroerend Goed's *Audience* (2011) and Drury's *Fairview* (2018; Chapter Six); before closing with Te Pou Theatre's production of *Racists Anonymous* created by Tainui Tukiwaho (2020; Conclusion).

As a reader unfamiliar with nearly all these works, I found Willis's deployment of comparative analyses within and across chapters deft and informative. Calderón's overtly anti-theatrical condemnation of that age-old butt of criticism, the naïve thespian, becomes more convincing when Willis subsequently discusses a film presenting a real tour to Rwanda by the Canadian cast of *Goodness*, a play about an unnamed but presumably south-eastern European genocide. Somewhat amazingly, the documentary features even more shockingly naïve artists than Calderón's own metafictional creations, giving credence to his otherwise rather unsophisticated attack on theatre as mostly being nothing but uninformed play acting (see Jonas Barish's 1981 classic on the history of this tedious but still active trend in cultural criticism). Willis shows that Drury's achievement in situating her own fictional historicisation of racist violence in the context of its American performance not only contrasts with Redhill's non-spe-

cific and universalising account, but also, through comparison with Schreck and Te Pou/ Tukiwaho, Willis reinforces the political value of making overt the context of performance in these plays' own stagings. Nevertheless, Willis's assemblage is disparate, the author concluding that 'the book I set out to write and the one that I have written are ... different' in that she goes beyond her stated 'remit of examining metatheatrical dramaturgies of violence' (206). Perhaps the title could have been tweaked to make this more apparent.

Willis moves from looking at theatrical responses to state-endorsed murder and execution in Chile, Rwanda, Syria, former Yugoslavia, Namibia, USA and El Salvador, before shifting to the cultural, institutional and performative violence directed at Blackness and femininity. Willis is correct to assert, à la Austin and Butler, that rhetorical acts, gestures, speeches and descriptions have real material affects. Even so, the inclusion of plays such as Hickson's *The Writer* which decry violence but do not (as far as I could tell) stage or even describe scenarios of actual physical violence functions to disperse Willis's analyses into a wider field. Echoing traumatic affect itself (Caruth, 'Unclaimed Experience', 1991), there is also something of a belatedness in the presentation of some of Willis's material. Willis's analysis of *We Are Proud to Present* in Chapter Three rests on what she calls a 'kind of double-consciousness dramaturgy' (76), but it is not until Chapter Four that she reminds us that this comes from W.E. Du Bois' famous characterisation of the Black experience in America as a form of 'doubleconsciousness ... always looking at one's self

through the eyes of others' and how white surveillance can act to write and constrain the para-theatrically observed Black subject (101). Willis also notes that *The Writer* features a passage where a character named Semele takes the protagonist to a bucolic feminine utopia (153), but Willis is both sparing and delayed in clarifying how closely this idyll is modelled on Euripides' own metatheatrical play of femininity run riot, *The Bacchae* (the character of Dionysius' mother, Semele; an onstage interloper-spectator who evokes Euripides' Pentheus; the dithyrambic dancing in the wilderness; and so on; 181). I for one wondered how this might be contrasted with classic re-imaginings of *The Bacchae's* violently multivalent energies like Caryl Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986). Much of what Willis discusses also echoes Brecht's landmark concept of metatheatrical estrangement, and Willis draws repeatedly on Jacques Rancière – a theorist whom I myself have always found extremely difficult – but it is not until Chapter Six that she offers an extremely welcome clarification of Rancière's rejection of the Brechtian conceit that theatre audiences are typically passive. As Willis helpfully explains, for Rancière, nearly all audiences must at some level 'play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the "story" [or what Brecht called the *fable*] and make it their own' (171). Although Willis concedes that electronic distribution means that it is likely many of her own readers will download single chapters rather than the whole monograph (35), such readers would do Willis a disservice since her most striking observations swim



into focus after her delicate criss-crossing of disparate materials. In the final analysis, *Metatheatrical Dramaturgies* comes across as a meta-critical travelogue, and is more rhetorically similar to Willis's previous book than is at first apparent.

This new book's strength then is in the thought-provoking breadth, innovation and daring of Willis's associative links or flashes of insight (more on this below). Willis reminds us how circuits of violence reinforce not only the status quo, but the conventions of theatre itself, and vice versa. Willis cites Peggy Phelan's useful reflection that 'much Western theatre [is] ... based upon the ... domination of the silent spectator' (169). To perform within a theatre is to attempt to pacify or seduce your audience into statically paying attention to your performance. Willis's concern then is what forms of theatre might either dramatise this act of stilling and silencing, or alternatively, which forms might bring forth speech and embodied acts from its audiences? Willis concludes that metatheatrical devices are one way to do this, though by no means a guaranteed method to produce such outcomes, with metatheatre just as readily falling into solipsism – as with the tour of *Goodness*, where one of the actors congratulates themselves that the trip has led them to appreciate: 'I've never felt so small ... in the best way – I [now] feel I'm just a tiny part of the world', presumably limited in knowledge and experience, but 'that's a wonderful feeling' too (123). Against this, Willis invokes Ehn's allusive, shared model of witnessing to conclude that in approaching genocide and violence, 'the final task is not to examine "how does it

feel” for *you*, the audience member, let alone, how does it feel for *you*, the artist, as Redhill and his actors ask, but rather, in Ehn’s words, “to say this is *what happened here*” (132; my emphasis).

Willis’s close analysis of scripts and intense theoretical engagement leads her to conclude that critically reflective (one is tempted to say dialectical) historicisation and sensitivity to the context of performance is key to whether theatrical metafiction serves to undermine or perpetuate what Nicholas Ridout calls the tendency of theatre to act as an ‘alibi’ for the audience, because, as Ridout puts it, ‘In the act of telling that this suffering should ... really matter to you, the theatre also tells you that there is ... really nothing that you can do about it’ (70). Willis’s study is an analysis of theatrical forms and their potentials, but the reader must go elsewhere for those historical accounts themselves which might tell you, in Ehn’s words as quoted by Willis (132), what actually ‘happened here’. This may be why Willis, incorrectly to my mind, concludes that the actor from Drury’s script who claims to be unable to find out about the African genocide victims they are playing can make this claim, because of an absence of a colonial ‘verifiable archive’ (81). It is an odd statement given the centrality of the photographic archive to both the script – one character is struck by the resemblance of an image of a victim to herself and to her grandmother – and to the play’s composition. It was Drury’s viewing of one of the many archival photographs of Namibian genocide victims which spurred her to write this play. Willis tells us that she herself attended a production where these and other

archival remains were displayed and placed in dialogue with each other in the foyer (84). While it is certainly true that there are more archival documents of the Herero and Nama genocide (1904–07) authored by European commentators than there are from African survivors – which, from a Western judicial point of view, lends them a certain weight as outsider testimony – such insider accounts *do* exist, and both forms have received historical attention, particularly in the context of the Jewish Holocaust, where it is argued that the ideologies and practices that underlay the Shoah and other events were constituted in part through these earlier horrors (see <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/herero-and-nama-genocide>). Survivors of genocide have moreover themselves made productive rhetorical and argumentative links between diverse historical killings as part of what Michael Rothberg calls ‘multidirectional memory’ (2009). Rothberg shows that it was in no small part a consequence of Algerian resisters drawing parallels between their experience and that of the European Jewry that ‘the Holocaust’ came to be recognised as a historical entity. This is particularly significant for readers of this journal, since Patrick Wolfe and others have noted that there are important structural parallels between diverse historical instances of settler colonial genocide in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Israel and elsewhere (‘Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native’, 2006).

One might hope then that, like the metadramatic works which are examined in her book, Willis’s contribution might be read as a call to become better acquainted with historical evidence and

the ongoing, contextually and historically rooted legacies of violence, genocide, racism and gendered oppression. One need not go, as Willis does, to Kelly Oliver's work to realise that those who have been objectified were often constructed by their oppressors as 'objects ... not subjects' and that this helped to legitimise violence against them (120). The archives of the Shoah show how the Nazis made objectification literal. Living humans were turned into nonliving objects and remains, and then these remains, as well as the act of destroying them, were themselves erased, de-imaged and effaced – but not totally. The same can be said of the genocidal assaults on Australia's First Nation peoples (see for example Bird, 'Aboriginal Life and Death', 2001). Citing Brecht's use of visual montage and dialectical estrangement, art historian Georges Didi-Huberman insists that 'In order to know, we must imagine for ourselves' (*Images in Spite of All*, 2008; Marshall in Zolkos (ed.), forthcoming). 'If the horror of the [Nazi death] camps defies imagination, then each *image* [document, testimony, photograph, staging] snatched from such an experience becomes all the more necessary' – even as it must simultaneously be recognised that such an image or staging cannot show the totality of that which resists the viewer's re-imagination. Didi-Huberman describes such critical acts of interpretation as functioning like a scintillating shard of insight, or as Walter Benjamin put it, the arranged 'nexus ... of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears' (Marshall in O'Toole et al. (eds), 2017). Willis's work contains many such flashes engendered by her own

act of critical montage, and as I have attempted to show here, these insights can continue to spark off other sources and interpretations to gather depth and relevance. To quote Willis, such plays and accounts ‘turn the spectator’s gaze towards the historical, political and cultural dimensions of their own act of spectatorship’ (178), whose history continues to be written into the past, present and future.

### JONATHAN W. MARSHALL

*In addition to writing on performance, photomedia, neurology and hysteria, Marshall has published on Brecht’s staging of historicised images of suffering (O’Toole et al. (eds), **Translation, Adaptation, & Dramaturgy: Ethics**, 2017; Zolkos (ed.), **The Didi-Huberman Dictionary**, forthcoming), landscapes of violence (Marshall and Duncan, **ADS**, 2018), as well as public commissions for arts organisations on the staging of gendered violence (<https://www.performinglines.org.au/2016/08/23/jonathan-marshall-on-sally-richardsons-trigger-warning/>). Marshall is working on a monograph on Australian butoh. <https://edithcowan.academia.edu/JonathanWMarshall>*

**JULIAN MEYRICK, *AUSTRALIA IN 50 PLAYS*  
(CURRENCY PRESS, 2022)**

Julian Meyrick's *Australia in 50 Plays* surveys Australian drama from 1901 to 2020. With Federation and the destabilising Covid-19 years as bookends, Meyrick sets out to describe how plays contribute to 'nationhood'. He explains, 'The problem of picking plays from the 40 years after Federation is a problem of discovery. The problem of picking them from the last 40 years is a problem of choice' (16–17). The book successfully skirts its curatorial challenge, taking a position as a 'history of the nation seen through the lens of some of its plays' (17). Inviting readers to engage on these terms, Meyrick calls for a renovation of nationhood as distinct from a deadly nationalism.

Eight chapters make up case studies of roughly fifteen-year periods. A historical anchor, such as Gough Whitlam's dismissal in Chapter 6, or World War One in Chapter 2, grounds and informs the reading of representative dramas in each period. The number of plays addressed in each chapter expands to reflect the increasing number of Australian plays produced over time. The selected works function either as standard-bearers, or, as more plays are woven into the text, treated as representative groups. Meyrick describes a series of unifying themes, including shared narrative trajectories, social types and character archetypes that recur and develop in select dramas. He weaves these observations into both the history of Australia, and 'types' of Australian plays. The structures and characters identified

in earlier works are integrated into the interpretation of more recent plays. He argues that reinterpretation and accumulation of key themes that effect Australian society as a whole are realised differently with a ‘holarchy’ as scaffold. Meyrick’s ‘Holarchic relations ... gives us a way of looking at the national repertoire that respects the creative singularity of individual plays, yet allows them to be situated within larger assemblages of creative effort’ (142).

Meyrick’s analysis is richly informed by a complementary coordination of historical, literary and dramaturgical perspectives. Drawing from a breadth of experiences, having served as literary manager of Melbourne Theatre Company, freelance director and dramaturg, and as a scholar of Australian theatre, with a bent for cultural policy, it is also notable that Meyrick positions himself as the offspring of Australian and English parents – the book moves between a close and distant reading of ‘the nation’ and its drama. Various modes of thought, nevertheless, are driven by advocacy. The concluding chapter, which sets out to position drama as a medium for a society to ‘think itself *as* a society’ (282), argues that drama performs a vital role in the ‘social contract’ of nationhood. The choice to extract core ideas from Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, prior to ‘imperialism, colonialism and racism’ (289) which subsequently infect the concept of the nation, is leveraged to support Meyrick’s claim that ‘the concept of the nation is key to the shared rights and duties of Australians of all backgrounds, faith, classes, genders and ages’, and that ‘this relies on the breadth, depth and

imaginative capacity of our national culture, a vital component of which is our national drama' (293). Rightly, Meyrick points out that Covid-19 has seen the nation return as a significant force. Artists' (non)eligibility for wage subsidies, the closing of borders, the solidarity expressed by wearing a mask and isolating during the height of the pandemic – all these anecdotally imply the pitfalls and benefits of belonging. In response, Meyrick calls for a more inclusive nationhood that accounts meaningfully for the role of the state in the lives of its citizens. In Meyrick's view, the presentation of drama is a civic action.

Advocating for a renovation of nationhood runs through the book like a 'red thread' (293). The central argument falters, however, given the choice to anachronistically return to Enlightenment visions. It is not an inherently flawed approach, but the success in weaving together narratives of Australian drama is not matched by weaving classical and more compelling scholarship. Race and nationalism in Australia could be unpacked more productively. Meyrick alludes to a 'paranoid nationalism' (292), but could include Ghassan Hage's work in *Against Paranoid Nationalism* (2003), or Hilary Glow and Katya Johanson's proposals for a 'critical nationalism' (2009) in his tapestry.

Similarly, Meyrick identifies the way class is addressed (or not) in Australian drama. In Chapter 1, he presents Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection* and Louis Esson's *The Time is Not Yet Ripe* to establish the themes of the study. An interest in the intersection between class, popular performance, the literary aspects of drama, and the role



Australian plays have in the complexities of ‘nationhood’ continues to be highlighted throughout. Through Chapters 3 and 4, Meyrick notes the role of New Theatres, the role of the Communist Party and women dramatists in the 1940s, but points out the erosion of Australian drama’s engagement with class issues. In Chapter 8, he argues that while more intersectional overall, in drama of the new millennium, ‘class is the Other’s, Other’ (275).

While Meyrick refers to the work of the economist Guy Standing, and Thomas Piketty’s tomes on capital, his argument could be renovated by unpacking, for example, Standing’s vocabulary and the ways in which the precariat represents a new, stratified range of workers and unemployed. Standing explains how a vision of the industrial working class no longer holds, and Meyrick misses opportunities to weave these valuable ideas in his analysis. Chapter 6 deploys Stephen Sewell’s 1983 play, *The Blind Giant Is Dancing*, and Katherine Thompson’s 1990 play, *Diving for Pearls*, to mark alternate realities stemming from the accords struck between the Hawke government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions. While themes of class and the toxic relationship between race and nationalism are addressed and framed historically, Meyrick offers provocations for deeper reflection rather than presenting a pragmatic vocabulary that accounts for changes to the nation. The book could be informed more deeply by the literature that Meyrick alludes to, then his conclusions, which are felt, could be more convincing and dynamic.

The strategy of weaving the reading of drama over time is, however, a great strength. Taken as a whole, the book's argument that a national repertoire can be realised and presented on stage is compelling. Meyrick's methodology for reading drama through holararchy is refreshing. His reading sees new nodes and connections in the history of playwrighting in Australia develop and argues for a new 'slot' (294–5), where Australian repertoire features regularly in the seasons of Australia's theatre companies. Re-engaging with a repertoire in this way is as beneficial for researchers as it is for literary managers and artistic directors. When revisiting the so called 'New Wave', Meyrick states, 'When the programming *habitus* of companies changes, it impacts more than the fate of a few plays. The whole direction of Australian theatre changes' (124).

Meyrick's book is a tool for thinking. It is adept at expanding thought about the place and purpose of plays in Australia but select chapters would benefit from being partnered with other sources in an undergraduate teaching setting. Meyrick's quick wit is engaging, but a tendency to use neat polemics that may linger more in the minds of new readers rather than the argument overall, means it must be read with care and against other scholarship. Postgraduate students could coordinate further reading swiftly, as the book gives shortcuts to key elements of Australian history and engaging synopsis of fifty representative works.

Meyrick has drawn on the breadth of his experience, perhaps most significantly as an advocate, and this tone also features in his other scholarly works, *Australian Theatre after the New Wave* (2017)

and *What Matters?* (2018), and in his journalism. For Australian readers, whose nation is defined by a notoriously short and selective memory, Meyrick's book makes a distinct contribution. Connecting with the historians Stuart Macintyre and Donald Horne, along with select Australian theatre and literary historians, Meyrick gives readers a foundation often missing in more narrowly focused scholarship. For readers enmeshed in Australian drama, the book's provocations about the way plays are read together is a worthy inquiry.

Meyrick opens and closes the book with reference to Robert Darnton's critique of a 'pyramid' vision of history. In the Introduction, Meyrick quickly proposes that economic and social forces '*condition* culture', and vice versa, but he claims that we should look for 'unexpected connections' (7) through culture. The key point is that a national community should take 'all the activities of life seriously, where going to the theatre is as ubiquitous as going to the shops' (7). As a cultural history, Meyrick aligns his book with Manning Clark, and the investigation of 'the inner meaning of Australia's national life' (293). In searching for a narrative in and about Australian drama, Meyrick aims to travel 'the same road' (293) as a cultural historian. In this respect, Meyrick's pursuit of a narrative and effort to elevate Australian drama's significance is laudable. Readers may find themselves in furious agreement with the sentiments of *Australia in 50 Plays*, but they will also need to seek out other companions, other surveys and scholarship to address the provocations that Meyrick presents.

**PETER BEAGLEHOLE**

*Peter Beaglehole writes plays and performance work. He won the 2022 Jill Blewett Playwright's Award, and the 2018 Young Playwright's Award. His research in Australia's theatre history deploys Memory Studies and focuses on Dorothy Hewett.*

**GILLIAN ARRIGHI AND JIM DAVIS (EDS), *THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE CIRCUS* (CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021)**

*The Cambridge Companion to the Circus* is a comprehensive collection of scholarship from international scholars and practitioners specialising in the field of Circus Studies. The editors write, 'The circus's specialised history in different parts of the globe reveals that for just over 250 years this hybrid entertainment ... has developed and diversified through multiple cycles of reinvention' (1). The contributors to the volume represent a diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds, from theatre and performance to sociology, and the result is a comprehensive introduction to the practice and traditions of circus and 'the theoretical approaches that thread through Circus Studies scholarship' (6). The book thrums with deep archival research, rich anecdotes, and impassioned connection to all things 'circus'. Divided into four parts, *The Companion* covers circus history; key acts; the evolution of circus and development of contemporary circus; and methodologies in Circus Studies scholarship. The four

parts work in concert to cover a broad range of topics in relation to Circus Studies, helping to build a picture of how Circus connects to other media and theatre and performance, as it ‘has always followed trajectories of innovation producing experimental fusions with other aesthetic forms’ (7).

‘Part I: Transnational Geographies of the Modern Circus’ contains the first six chapters and describes the historic and geographic foundations of the early circus to the present day. Matthew Wittman’s chapter, ‘The Origins and Growth of the Modern Circus’, focuses on the origins of the circus in eighteenth-century London at Astley’s Amphitheatre, and how this new form of entertainment brought together diverse pre-existing acts, and quickly spread to Europe and America. In ‘Reconstruction, Railroads, and Race: The American Circus in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era’, Sakina M. Hughes focuses on the Gilded Age and the Progressive era in America (1865–1900), ‘when business was flourishing, glittering with gold’ (35). Hughes’s chapter does not shy away from describing the social problems and racial injustice of the period and argues that ‘the American railroad circus of the Gilded Age and the Progressive era’ was entwined with these social issues, and ‘reflected, supported and *challenged* the race norms of the age’ (36).

Gillian Arrighi’s chapter, ‘Circus, Colonialism and Empire: The Circus in Australasia and Asia’, outlines ‘the transference of the circus’ to Australasia, Southeast Asia, and the South Asian territories of the Indian subcontinent and China. Arrighi draws on archival

research to explore how ‘circuses were agents of colonialism and empire, as well as transcultural agents in the period that was both the Age of Empire and the Age of Modernity’. Arrighi’s account of George Lewis’s equestrian circus amphitheatre in Melbourne and his extensive touring in the 1850s and 1860s allows her to analyse ‘the transmission and cultural mobility of circus arts across space and time’ (56). From here, Julieta Infantino moves the focus of the volume to Argentina. In ‘The Criollo Circus (Circus Theatre) in Argentina’, she describes the development of Argentina’s unique circus form, which features a two-part performance – ‘the exhibition of various circus skills’ followed by ‘a dramatic narrative based on the *criollista-gauche* genre’ (63). This chapter describes how Argentinian circus was entwined with theatre and national culture.

In ‘The Past and Present of Czech Circus’, Hanus Jordan and Veronika Stefanova trace the origins of Czech circus in traditional folk puppetry. Drawing on detail captured in nineteenth-century licences for public performances, Jordan and Stefanova track the ‘implementation of artistic acts alongside puppet shows’ (78), and the development of circus through to the present day. The final chapter in Part I, Rosemary Farrell’s ‘Catching On: Chinese Acrobatics from China to the West in the Twenty-First Century’, traces the influence of the Nanjing Project on Australian new circus in the early 1980s, as well as on the development of circus in other Western countries. Through an analysis of Chinese acts performed in the West from 2011 to 2018, Farrell describes how ‘acrobats of exceptional skills

from China have been both official and unofficial cultural envoys to the West, and Chinese aesthetics and political boundaries have been dissolved into the performance culture of the West' (92).

'Part II: Circus Acts and Aesthetics' opens with Kim Baston's 'The Equestrian Circus', which explores the enduring role of the horse in circus. Baston describes the development of spectacular group equestrian acts in the late nineteenth century, and how 'contemporary cultural anxiety over the performing animal body ... is reflected in the change in presentation of the relationship between human and horse from one of dominance to one of reciprocity and exchange' (107). Peta Tait's chapter, 'Animals, Circus, and War Re-Enactment', continues the investigation of the non-human performers, and the incorporation of trained animals into elaborate battle re-enactments. She charts the use of animals such as horses, mules and camels in British campaigns, and notes that 'the increased use of animals in war might be grouped with wider practices exploiting animals' (130). The capture of wild animals to meet the demand for circus menageries and animal acts resulted in high mortality rates, and Tait writes that '[t]he circus act with animals was complicit in covering up the wider social violence involving animals' (131).

In Chapters 9 and 10, Louise Peacock and then Kate Holmes turn our attention to human performers in the circus. In 'Circus Clowns', Peacock 'takes a historical and cross-cultural approach to the development of the clown in Europe and the USA' (141). Clown acts developed in Astley's circus in 1780 to supplement equestrian

performances, and verbal repartee was an important aspect of the act, as exchanges between the riding master and clown ‘allowed for the riding master to show his superiority’ (141). Peacock writes that as circus venues became larger, clown acts became more physical, and were a strategy to allow breaks between other circus acts. In Chapter 10, ‘Aerial Performance’, Kate Holmes writes from her experience as a trapeze practitioner, exploring gendered notions of aerial grace and strength. Her chapter finishes with a study of how contemporary trapeze challenges ‘expectations that the conventional aerial bodily aesthetic is young, slim aesthetic, and muscular’ (164).

In ‘Part III: Circus – A Constantly Evolving Form’, Catherine M. Young outlines how ‘body-based circus acts’ winkled their way on to the stage in the variety era. She describes how the Victorian pantomime, with its reliance on ‘machinists and special effects’ had an ‘acquisitive aesthetic in which any performance mode ... could be incorporated into its ceaseless spectacularity’ (172). In Chapter 11, ‘Becoming an Art Form: From “Nouveau Cirque” to Contemporary Circus in Europe’, Agathe Dumont charts the emergence of new circus on the early 1970s. An ‘aesthetic and cultural revolution that was rooted in the dynamics of the social and cultural and social revolutions of the 1970s’ describes the evolution of this form of circus. She notes that new circus artists ‘dig deeper and deeper into the specifics of their creative “language” by finding a choreographic language beyond the “tricks”’ (198). In Chapter 13, ‘Risky Play and the Global Rise in Youth Circus’, Alisan Funk investigates Youth



Circus and the transmission of circus skills to young people for their ‘emotional, social, and physical benefits’ (205). Funk scaffolds her study of Youth Circus with a discussion of ‘risky play’ and Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory (208–11). In ‘Social Circus: The Rise of an “Inclusive” Movement for Collective Creativity’, Jennifer Beth Spiegel presents ‘an overview of how social circus has evolved in dialogue with broader sociocultural trends and issues’ and how social circus plays an important role as a ‘corporeally based collective creativity’ which is a ‘locus of social transformation’ (216).

‘Part IV: Circus Studies Scholarship’ opens with Charles R. Batson and Karen Fricker and their ‘overview and exploration of the methodological approaches employed by circus scholars’ (231). Batson and Fricker summarise the ‘three methodological approaches which currently dominate circus research: history/ historiography, performance analysis, and ethnography’ (231). This useful chapter assists the reader to ‘zoom out’ and reflect on the scholarship represented in the volume. Their discussion of the possibility of ‘making space for the marginal and the outlier’ and Halberstam and Nyong’s call for a ‘rewilding of theory’ offers exciting possibilities for circus scholarship (239). Anna-Sophie Jurgens concludes this wide-ranging collection with ‘Through the Looking Glass: Multi-disciplinary Perspectives in Circus Studies’. Her chapter asserts that ‘studying circus holds a central place in intellectual debate in an “age of technology” and at the same time contributes to bridging the “two cultures” of the humanities and the sciences’ (245). Jurgens’

chapter advocates for circus studies as ‘a LaborARTory’ and asserts that ‘science and humanities scholars alike investigate what kind of knowledge circus may impart’ (251). *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus* eloquently conveys the riches of the interdisciplinary and embodied knowledges of Circus Studies and introduces the reader to a dynamic and evolving field of research.

### JANE WOOLLARD

*Jane Woollard is a writer and director. She is Senior Lecturer, Theatre and Performance, and Associate Head, Learning and Teaching, School of Creative Arts and Media, University of Tasmania.*

### MONICA TEMPIAN, *MARIA DRONKE: GLIMPSES OF AN ACTING LIFE* (NZ: PLAYMARKET, 2021)

A black and white photograph of actor, director and educator Maria Dronke can be found in the foyer of Studio 77, the home of Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington’s Theatre programme. Glancing downwards, Dronke has an expression of intense concentration, and we can appreciate Bruce Mason’s description of her ‘sad, splendid eyes’ (98). Below her image is a list of recipients from 1982 to 2021 of the ‘Dronke Prize for Drama’, awarded annually to an outstanding Drama (later Theatre) student studying at the university.

The list of award winners reads as a ‘who’s who’ of graduates

who have gone on to make waves in Aotearoa New Zealand theatre, among them: academics Stuart Young, David O'Donnell and Emma Willis; playwright Ken Duncum; BATS founder Simon Bennett; former Toi Whakaari New Zealand Drama School director Annie Ruth; Trick of the Light theatre company's co-founder Ralph McCubbin Howell; directors Eleanor Bishop, Stella Reid and Cassandra Tse; designers Lucas Neal and Isadora Lao. Announced at the golden wedding anniversary of Maria Dronke and her husband John in front of two hundred guests, the Dronke Prize represents a tangible example of how Maria Dronke's legacy continues into the present day.

Monica Tempian, author of *Maria Dronke: Glimpses of an Acting Life*, writes that Dronke's life story 'drew me like a magnet' (196). Born Minnie Kronfeld in Berlin 1904, from 1925 to 1932 Dronke pursued an impressive professional acting career in Germany using the stage name Maria Korten, including working with the famed director Max Reinhardt. Targeted for her Jewish heritage, Dronke fled Nazi Germany, and the Dronke family (Maria, John and their two young children) arrived in Wellington in August 1939 as refugees.

Actor Dorothy McKegg attests that Maria Dronke was 'the spark that lit our generation, my generation, Pat Evison's, Bruce Mason's', training Aotearoa's first generation of professional theatre practitioners (147). Edith and Richard Champion, the founders of the New Zealander Players, met at Dronke's acting studio, which had been established to interest young people in her profession and

to share her expertise. Nola Millar, who founded the New Zealand Drama School, was another of Dronke's pupils. Other prominent acting trainees included Rosalie Carey, Bill Sheat, Elizabeth McRae, Barbara Ewing, Peter Vere-Jones and James K. Baxter. Bruce Mason's landmark plays *The End of the Golden Weather* and *The Pohutukawa Tree* were workshopped at Dronke's studio. With Ngaio Marsh, Dronke led a drama summer school in January 1948, the 'first large-scale attempt to establish theatre training on a new footing' (160). Dronke directed productions for the Wellington Catholic Players, Wellington Religious Drama Society, Wellington Repertory Theatre, Tauranga Repertory Theatre and the Victoria University Drama Club. Her 1941 production of *Hippolytus* is credited as the first ancient Greek play staged in New Zealand to feature a full chorus. Dronke also introduced the art of poetry recital to New Zealand and her literary salons were legendary, featuring poets, politicians and her students.

When Dronke announced her retirement from teaching in 1957, a newspaper article predicted that 'when the time comes to write the story of cultural development in New Zealand, it will most certainly be found that this gifted teacher and performer, lecturer and scholar, had a catalytic, enduring and beneficial effect upon things associated with our theatre' (124). Tempian's biography makes an indisputable case for Dronke's catalytic intervention in the development of Pākehā theatre in New Zealand, although Tempian argues that Dronke had subsequently 'fallen through the cracks of historical record keeping' (196).

My own quick review of the literature suggests that there has been patchy acknowledgement of Dronke's legacy. She is conspicuously absent from some key histories published during her lifetime: Peter Harcourt fails to note the contribution of Dronke's acting training to the professionalisation of New Zealand theatre in *A Dramatic Appearance* (1979), nor is she mentioned in Howard McNaughton's 1981 or John Thomson's 1984 books on New Zealand drama. Despite Dronke's influence on Bruce Mason, she only gets a brief mention in *The Plays of Bruce Mason* (2015), author John Smythe suggesting that Dronke-trained actors struggled with a 'kiwi' accent. Dronke's importance in our history is recognised elsewhere – a powerful and dramatic vocal performance from Dronke opens the fourth episode of Lynn Freeman's 2002 radio documentary *Encore: The Story of New Zealand Theatre*. An entry on Dronke by Ann Beaglehole appears in the 1998 edition of the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, republished online on *Te Ara*, and Sue Dunlop's 2002 MA thesis offers a substantial biographical essay on Dronke (Tempian does not reference these sources). Dunlop's suggestion that 'Maria Dronke is not well known to most New Zealand theatregoers today' accords with Tempian's view. With the translation and publication of *Glimpses of an Acting Life* in English (it was originally written for German-speakers and published in 2015), there can no longer be any excuse not to know of Maria Dronke: Tempian rightfully elevates this German refugee as a leading player in our country's theatrical and cultural history.

In the opening chapters, Tempian chronicles Dronke's formative years, transporting readers to cosmopolitan Berlin of the early twentieth century. At age seven, Dronke was staging performances at home, taking on the roles of ticket seller, designer and actor. At age sixteen, she was reciting poetry, accompanied on the piano by none other than Bertolt Brecht. While Dronke's mother was initially resistant, Dronke trained in voice and speech at the Berlin School of Music. After gaining an agent, she joined a provincial repertory company to play the 'sentimental flower' character-types (32). Contemporary actors will marvel at Tempian's descriptions of the 'tough training ground' provided by the repertory company: actors needed to be ready to play any part in the repertoire within twenty-four hours, and over a period of nine months Dronke learnt and performed eighteen protagonist roles plus many more minor roles (33-4).

In 1928, Dronke joined Max Reinhardt's production of *Romeo and Juliet*, understudying Juliet and playing the role for matinee performances. Juliet became 'the role of Minnie's life' and she continued to perform the character for two decades in German and in English (48). Dronke's stage career was cut short by the rise of the Nazi movement; she was expelled from the German Theatre Association in 1933 and her stage name was erased from the German press. In 1939, the Dronke family were part of 1,100 German refugees accepted by the New Zealand Government at the start of World War Two.

Tempian builds a portrait of Dronke's tenacity in creating opportunities in a country hostile to both foreigners and artists, with no professional theatre. In December 1939, Dronke opened her first Studio for Drama, Voice Production and Voice Restoring. In addition to establishing herself as an acting coach, performer and director, Dronke agitated for the rights of refugees, addressing Parliament in 1945: '[W]e are asking – and we know it well – for the greatest privilege you have to bestow: that of equality' (107).

Tempian dedicates two chapters to a close examination of Dronke's practice as an acting teacher and director. Dronke railed against traditional elocution training, which privileged declamation and volume. Dronke's technique involved a psychological focus: 'free the child's personality and you will free his voice and his speech' (139). Tempian does not place Dronke's approach within the wider context of the twentieth century's revolutions in acting training, although it is significant that in a period when the Group Theatre's Method acting was ascendent in the United States, with its emphasis on utilising the actor's own biography and emotional experience, in New Zealand Dronke was promoting an approach of '[losing] yourself completely in the role, forgetting your own self' (145). Richard Champion summarised Dronke's teaching as 'acting is being, believing that you are this other character, you are creating this character' (145).

This biography is bolstered by personal interviews and correspondence with many of Dronke's former pupils, as well as access to the private Dronke family collection, which includes letters, memoir

fragments and photographs. Tempian's extensive appendices offer a wealth of supplementary material, including Dronke's poems (1934–39), a list of key performances and productions in Germany and New Zealand, and photographs and production posters. Dronke's daughter, Marei Bollinger, specifically requested that the biography be written in an easy and enjoyable style, without any footnotes. The drawback is that when Tempian is in narrative mode, it is often unclear what sources she has drawn upon – a limitation for future researchers.

Dronke's own lectures and writing, liberally quoted throughout the book, provide a rich source of inspiration for contemporary theatre educators. I'm particularly taken with Dronke's articulation of the embodied pedagogical value of drama: '[D]rama is the most powerful instrument of teaching; teaching through the eyes and ears, through the mind as well as the emotion' (178).

Dronke stoked a passion for theatre in her students, presenting acting as a vocation worth taking seriously, and one even worth striving to pursue professionally. *Glimpses of an Acting Life* is an essential read for anyone invested in the theatre of Aotearoa New Zealand, a crucial link in understanding the whakapapa of acting training in this country. May Maria Dronke's story continue to inspire new generations of practitioners.

**JAMES WENLEY**

*Dr James Wenley is a Lecturer in Theatre at Te Herenga  
Waka Victoria University of Wellington.*



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Dr Marnie Badham** (she/her) has a twenty-five-year history of art and justice practice in both Canada and Australia. Marnie's research sits at the intersection of socially engaged art practice, participatory methodologies, and the politics of cultural measurement. Through aesthetic forms of encounter and exchange, her practice brings together disparate groups of people in dialogue to examine and affect local issues. Marnie is Senior Lecturer at School of Art, RMIT University.

**Jacob Boehme** (Narangga/Kaurna, South Australia) is an artist and artistic director of dance, theatre and ceremony and the writer/performer of the critically acclaimed dance theatre work *Blood on the Dance Floor* (Winner Best Independent Production, Green Room Awards, 2017). Jacob is the First Nations Lecturer MFA Cultural Leadership at the National Institute of Dramatic Art and Director of First Nations Programs at Carriageworks.

**Jonathan Bollen** is Associate Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies in the School of the Arts and Media at the University of New South Wales. He is the author of *Touring Variety in the Asia*

*Pacific Region, 1946–1975* (2020) and co-author of *Visualising Lost Theatres* (2022), *A Global Doll's House: Ibsen and Distant Visions* (2016) and *Men at Play: Masculinities in Australian Theatre since the 1950s* (2008). His doctorate was awarded for research on queer kinaesthesia in the 1990s.

**Dr Lenine Bourke** (they/them) is an artist, researcher and public pedagogue. Their practice is interdisciplinary and always focused on community engagement and collaboration. Currently they are the Manager at Art From The Margins, an inclusive Arts Centre working in contemporary art-making and justice. They have focused their creative practice on developing participatory nature-based experiences that engage the public more deeply in future thinking through the climate crises.

**Stace Callaghan** (they/them) is an independent trans-masculine, multi-award-winning writer, performer, musician and workshop facilitator. Since 1994, they have devised and performed four critically acclaimed, highly physical, queer, solo theatre productions. Stace is the co-founder of The Joy Dispensary and is passionate about making life-affirming work that unites and inspires, creating positive change in the world.

**Alyson Campbell** is a theatre director whose work sits mainly within the LGBTQI+ community and she has a long-time interest in performance and HIV and AIDS. She is Professor in Theatre at the VCA, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne, specialising in gender and sexuality and is editor of two collections:

*Queer Dramaturgies* (Palgrave, 2015, with Stephen Farrier) and *Viral Dramaturgies: HIV and AIDS in Performance in the Twenty-First Century* (Palgrave, 2018, with Dirk Gindt).

**Dr Neethu Das. K** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, St Joseph's College for Women, Kerala. She completed her PhD from Central University of Kerala. Her major areas of interests include Gender Studies and Theatre and Performance Studies. She can be contacted at neethudas1992@gmail.com.

**Dr Catherine Fargher** is an AWGIE award-winning scriptwriter, dramaturg and teacher, with thirty produced scripts in radio, theatre and games. Her bioethical fable *Dr Egg and The Man with No Ear* was adapted by Jessica Wilson/ Sydney Opera House in 2007 and toured internationally from 2008 to 2011. It is adapted online as *Dr Egg Adventures Laboratory*. In 2018, Catherine wrote *Shawshini (Springtime in Kabul)*, with Heather Grace Jones and Taqi Bakhtyari. She is a Lecturer at Macquarie University, Faculty of Arts.

**Jonathan Graffam** is a Research Assistant and sessional Tutor at the VCA, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne, where he recently completed a Master of Fine Arts (Theatre), examining the dramaturgical strategies used in staging fat-positive queer performance work. He continues this research at Monash University in a PhD project titled 'Fat Dramaturgies: Queer Strategies and Methodologies in Staging Fat Activist Performance'.

**Nathan Joe** (he/him) is a queer, Chinese-Kiwi performance poet, theatre-maker and critic. Recent work includes curating BIPOC spoken-word event *DIRTY PASSPORTS* at Basement Theatre, co-creating *Slay the Dragon or Save the Dragon or Neither* with A Slightly Isolated Dog, directing *Yang/Young/杨* and writing and performing *Scenes from a Yellow Peril* with Auckland Theatre Company. He is the 2020 National Slam Champion and winner of the 2021 Bruce Mason Playwriting Award. In July 2022, he was appointed Creative Director of Auckland Pride.

**Billy Kanafani** (he/him) is a Master of Arts (Research) student in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of New South Wales. He has worked mostly in education, including senior curriculum and assessment design and implementation, secondary school to university transition, and also taught in several schools. His research interests include queer performance and culture, assessment and measurement, and creative arts pedagogy.

**M'ck McKeague** is a set and costume designer, performance-maker and installation artist currently living and working on Turrbal country. M'ck graduated from Queensland University of Technology's BFA (Drama) in 2013 and University of Melbourne's Master of Design for Performance in 2018. Dissatisfied with master narratives and the systems and spaces that uphold them, M'ck seeks out collaborative scenographic practices that embrace difference and disrupt privilege in process, form and content.

**Tristan Meecham** (he/him) is a queer artist whose multi-form creative practice is a tool for social change. His projects championing the rights of LGBTI+ older people are presented by leading cultural institutions around the world. Through relational engagement practices, he co-designs projects that enable communities improved access to arts experiences, broader community health and social services. With Bec Reid, he is the Artistic Director of All The Queens Men.

**Leah Mercer** (she/her) coordinates Theatre Arts at Curtin University. With The Nest Ensemble she directed both *Eve* and *Home*, as well as *Joey: The Mechanical Boy* and *The Knowing of Mary Poppins*. She wrote/ performed *A Mouthful of Pins*, and won Best Director (Performing Arts WA, 2014) and a Silver Matilda (Directing, 2007). She completed her practice-led PhD at Queensland University of Technology, *The Physics Project*, and won ADSA's Philip Parsons' Prize for Performance as Research, 2008.

**Peta Murray** (she/her) is a writer-performer best known for her plays, *Wallflowering* and *Salt*. Queerer works include *Things That Fall Over: an anti-musical of a novel inside a reading of a play with footnotes and oratorio-as-coda* and *Missa Pro Venerabilibus: A Mass for The Ageing*. A Lecturer at RMIT University in the School of Media and Communication, she is one of a team of investigators on an ARC-funded project: 'Staging Australian Women's Lives: Theatre, Feminism and Socially-Engaged Art'.

**Jeremy Neideck** is a performance-maker and academic who has worked between Australia and Korea for almost two decades and is Course Coordinator of the Bachelor of Performing Arts at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) at Edith Cowan University. Jeremy regularly consults on the architecture and facilitation of collaborative projects and programmes of institutional and community transformation.

**Younghee Park** is an independent theatre artist, facilitator and educator with over twenty-six years' experience in adult and children's theatre, community arts, film and television in South Korea, Australia, America, Japan, Germany and China. Younghee is a prominent voice in the Korean #MeToo movement, and works as an activist, helping to dismantle environments in which abuse can flourish in the culture and arts sector.

**Dr Vellikkeel Raghavan** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature, Central University of Kerala. His major areas of interests include Theatre and Performance Studies, Film and Media Studies and Critical and Cultural Theory.

**Ian Rafael Ramirez** is currently a PhD student at The University of Melbourne. He is invested in the (everyday) performances of the *bakla* in the Philippines and is committed to looking at their life-making practices as sites of forging alternative ways of being in the world. His research works focus on queer nightlife, drag scenes, and virtual drag performances in Metro Manila, Philippines.

**Bec Reid** (she/her) is an Australian-based performer, producer, director and choreographer. Bec encourages people to experience their worlds in new ways through highly physical, participatory, practical and celebratory actions. In 2017–18, Bec was a Fellowship recipient from the Australia Council for the Arts. In partnership with Tristan Meecham, Bec leads *All The Queens Men*. With Ian Pidd and Kate McDonald, Bec is the Founder of *Everybody NOW!*

**Adelaide Rief** (she/her) is a creative producer, facilitator and General Manager of *All The Queens Men*. Across the past ten years, Adelaide has built a practice specialising in public and participatory art, community engaged place-making and creating frameworks for artists' development. She is an alumni of Next Wave's Kickstart Helix programme and the Australia Council for the Arts Future Leaders programme.

**Nathan Stoneham** is an artist who has been creating contemporary, socially engaged arts processes and performances with groups across Australia and the Asia Pacific region for fifteen years. Recipient of the Australia Council for the Arts Kirk Robson Award, Nathan's practice explores transcultural and queer approaches to making art and friends, and brings people together to collaborate on different ways of being together.

**Liza-Mare Syron** has family ties to the Biribay people from the Mid-North Coast of New South Wales. A theatre-maker and academic, Liza-Mare is a founding member and Senior Artistic Associate of Moogahlin Performing Arts. She is currently an Indigenous

Scientia Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales and has recently published a book on the *Rehearsal Practices of Indigenous Women Theatre Makers: Australia, Aotearoa, and Turtle Island* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

**James Wenley** (he/him) is an ace Pākehā theatre academic, practitioner and critic. James was awarded a PhD from the University of Auckland and is a Lecturer in the Theatre programme of Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington. James makes theatre under his company Theatre of Love, most recently *Dr Drama Makes a Show* (2020), and *Dr Drama Makes a Show With You* (2021). James is also the editor and founder of TheatreScenes.co.nz, a platform for reviews and commentary on Aotearoa theatre.