

# *fusion journal*

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## **Issue 15** **AusAct: The Australian Actor** **Training Conference 2018**

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# Editorial: Actor training in Australia

Robert Lewis, Zoë Hadler and Jhi Rayner<sup>1</sup>

The first AusAct: The Australian Actor Training Conference<sup>2</sup> (held in September 2018) that formed the basis of this special issue of *fusion journal* emerged as a result of discussions between colleagues in the Acting discipline at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga. We were interested in the state of actor training in Australia and the most effective way to discuss this was to create a platform for practitioners, academics and pedagogues to celebrate, interrogate and showcase actor training methods that have been created and developed in Australia.

Performance practitioners, directors, teachers, academics, postgraduate students and performers were invited to attend to discuss and demonstrate their original pedagogies and methodologies that have been developed in Australia and that have been inspired by the environment, land, the Australian performing arts industry, the Australian values and culture. In general, presenters were encouraged to discuss the need for uniquely Australian performer training pedagogy, the link between Australian values and culture and actor training, the role that place, space, environment and land plays in the development of training methods, and finally, the involvement of technology in actor training.

Although original methods and approaches have been developed in Australia since the latter part of the 20th century, staples such as the Stanislavski Method, amongst many others, maintain a stronghold. American and European methods still take precedence in the industry. Private institutions and tertiary training institutions are capturing aspiring and established actors' interests by importing teachers from overseas, declaring their methods as being superior to ones developed and taught in Australia, allowing them to "tell us how it's done". Having said that, there is no such thing as a completely original method, as every system has influences that echo the ones before them, albeit in a more altered and sometimes advanced way in order to respond to contemporary needs of the performers and the industry. Interestingly enough, I have been told by overseas directors and teachers, particularly in the US as both a student and teacher, that although the systems and methods taught in Australia are borrowed, or directly taken from international methods, the outcome and overall aesthetic is vastly different due to the physicalities and the overall attitude of Australian actors. I have been told that Australian actors are physically free and less reserved.

The conference hosted 18 paper presentations, 12 of which have been published in this edition of *fusion journal*. The conference also included six workshops and two

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performances throughout the two days. Presenters discussed intercultural fusion, actors' health and wellbeing, place-based performance training, gendered casting and technology in actor training.

Elizabeth Blackwood, Lotte Latukefu and Mark Seton's article, *Actor Training in Portfolio Careers: Flourishing in a Creative Career Beyond "Luck"*, discusses existing research relating to the notion of student agency in designing a creative portfolio career versus the narrative of the lucky break so often associated with acting careers. The notion of preparing students for the industry versus artistic integrity is a complex one, and is sometimes challenging when designing and developing curriculum. Blackwood, Latukefu and Seton outline the process of review and design, underpinned by notions of portfolio training in a Bachelor of Dramatic Arts at a private higher education provider in Sydney. This industry-ready approach complements Jack Bradford's approach used in Brisbane Junior Theatre (BJT). Although quite dissimilar to Blackwood, Latukefu and Seton's example, Bradford provides a practitioner-led account on how to create sustainable, enduring and consistent theatre that draws upon BJT's 18-year experience as an Australian youth theatre. His article, *Brisbane Junior Theatre: A New Theatre Paradigm*, takes a detailed look at BJT's methodologies and intensive process and examines how it is able to succeed against the accepted theatrical norms of time and focus. Bradford also provides a possible model for future companies to emulate in order to answer the call for strengthening theatre in Australia.

Zac Bradford's article, *Vocal Resonance: Optimising Source-Filter Interactions in Voice Training*, aims to persuade the reader that understanding concepts related to vocal resonance can be advantageous to voice practitioners. Bradford hopes to convince any sceptics of its importance to reconsider and explore this topic further. James Harrison, who, like Bradford, is a graduate of the One Voice Centre in New York, is also a voice practitioner, however, his approach to voice and movement training blends martial arts training with conventional voice work. Harrison's article, *Within and Between: Integrative Performer Training and the Sword*, examines intercultural performance training concepts in order to develop strength, concentration and stamina by implementing key elements of Kendo. Pivotal to Harrison's work is the notion that increasing the demands placed on the muscles used for breath and subsequent vocalisation in a training environment prepares the performer for easier vocalisation in performance.

Integration has been somewhat of a buzzword in recent years, considering the implementation of various technologies and complementary and contradictory methods and approaches. Robert Lewis and Dominique Sweeney's article, *Perform "The Space", Not "In The Space": Incorporating Place, Environment and Imagination in Integrative Practices*, discusses how actors train to respond through an integrated awareness of personal space, body and voice, with place and architecture; a holistic approach to performance training that can integrate technology – as long as the primary element (that is, land, place and space) is acknowledged. Integrated exercises are designed to extend actors' imaginations through identification beyond the constraints of the human body through the exploration of shape, space, colour,

animals, elements, and natural and manufactured objects. Lewis and Sweeney's actor training research is located in the place and the instilled history or infused atmosphere and gives the method and the participant actors power and ownership of their work located in place. Nicole Stinton's article, *Monologuing the Music: A New Actor Training Practice for New Times*, discusses her holistic approach to enable students to rigorously explore *what* is being said, in terms of the verbal text, as much as *how* it is being said, that is, the musicality of the text, not only from a singing perspective, but an acting one. The aim for the future, according to Stinton, is to develop great actors who happen to sing really well, as opposed to actors who can sing, or singers who can act: in a sense, developing holistic performers.

At the other end of the technological spectrum, Shane Pike's article, "*Make it So...*": *Communal augmented reality and the future of theatre and performance*, discusses the evolution of Motion Capture into Performance Capture and argues the latter has not detracted from the art-form but worked to confirm the intrinsic necessity of the actor to screen-based performance. The future of live performance may lie in the hybridisation of the "real world" and the virtual world, and Pike delves into the idea that augmented reality technology complement live theatre and performance. Pike predicts that this technology will inspire the live performer to intensify their art-form and allow them to use advances in digital technologies to serve theatre as opposed to dominating it.

Andrew Lewis and Lyndall Adams's article, *Empowering the Next Generation of Actors through the Creation of Student-Centred Self-Devised Dramatic Work*, charts the development of original, devised dramatic work and the dynamics involved in theatre co-creation through student-centred collaboration. Lewis and Adams's research examines the existing pedagogical practices in the current Bachelor of Arts (Acting) course at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. Lewis and Adams also explore prospective changes that may be implemented to the current curriculum, as they and their colleagues indicate room to enhance the program and encourage resilience in order to develop skills for creating their own original work. The focus shifts from devising to directing in Gabrielle Metcalf's article, *The Role of the Director in Australian Actor Training: An Exploration of Dialogic Leadership as a Pedagogical Practice for Australian Directors and Acting Teachers*. Metcalf introduces dialogic leadership as a pedagogical tool for directors and acting teachers. *Directing through dialogue* is the term Metcalf uses to describe a methodological approach to training actors that challenges the traditional hierarchical director-centred model and replaces it with an actor-centred, egalitarian model, and utilises coaching and feedback to facilitate growth and development in student actors.

Kim Durban's article, "*Had I Been There, Which I Am A Silly Woman*": *Dealing with Gendered Casting in an Australian Tertiary Setting*, charts some of the issues surrounding play selection and gendered casting throughout Durban's 18 years of working as an artistic director of actor training in the regional city of Ballarat, Victoria. Margaret of Anjou's reference to herself as a "silly woman" in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* is a political ploy to draw attention to her gender with apparent dismissiveness yet indicate her limitless power in the face of male dominance. The key focus within

Durban's investigation is the interrogation of the term "silly woman"; namely, what to do with women in actor training (who outnumber males in the application and audition process for drama school entry); women who, like Margaret, are talented, outspoken, able and self-aware, yet perhaps, like her, engaged in a somewhat treacherous game dominated by male forces. Durban states that it is a struggle to find a range of audition monologues for women in their late teens and early 20s (typically the age when students audition for university courses) where they are not portrayed as victims, love objects or followers rather than leaders.

Actors' health and wellbeing is also a relevant issue which was discussed widely throughout the conference, and continues to be a topic of discussion. Soseh Yekanians's article, *"When You Cry You Really Cry": Playing with Actors Emotions*, examines the changing responsibilities and realities of actor training in Australia in terms of Constantin Stanislavski's emotional recall, or "emotional memory". After spending years of examining the question of training actors to (re)produce authentic emotional performances on stage, while still allowing them to remain safe and psychologically detached from their "real-life" emotions, Yekanians has the confidence that the answer lies within the systematic "Effector Patterns of Emoting", an idea proposed by neuroscientist Dr Susana Bloch of the Institute of Neurosciences at the University of Pierre and Marie Curie in Paris. This approach asks that actors control their breath, posture and facial expressions to safely produce "real" emotions on stage via "the effector patterns of emoting" that already exist within their physiological make-up. This approach is less invasive than "emotional recall" and can be triggered and halted safely without any repercussions.

I would just like to end with an insightful quote from Terence Crawford's opening keynote address: "Acting must be joyful. Amateurs say 'good luck' to each other; professionals say 'have fun'. So have fun". How true is this. Some actors so often try to purge themselves in order to "lose themselves" in the role and the performance, or put themselves through gruelling processes as some sort of catharsis; that way, they feel justified and by inflicting some sort of pain or discomfort (without any proper guidance, training or support), they are "true" to the character, moment or intention of the playwright. Crawford continues by sharing a question he asks to his advanced students: "Was it fun?" ... If the answer is no, then one of two things is true: either you're still doing it wrong, or you shouldn't be doing it".

In closing, director and choreographer Jacqui Carroll, co-founder and director of Ozfrank Theatre, described in an interview conducted on 20 June 2018, the notion of Australian actor training through the lens of the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis:

*we are Australians, essentially. We can't produce something that's 'other', what we're going to come through is something we as actors feel as required in the world we live in culturally, we want to bring together a whole bunch of things we've learnt, put it into a context which suits the people standing in front of us – Australian actors. They want something to stimulate them into what they're going to do. They're not going to turn into Japanese actors; they're going to become stimulated Australian actors. We need to hunt up within that training, we need to hunt up, devise*

*things that would satisfy that kind of hunger. And so, John [Nobbs] started looking at everything and started to work through a whole series of potentials.*

## About the editors

Dr Robert Lewis is a Lecturer in Acting and Course Director (Creative Industries) at Charles Sturt University and previously lectured in the Theatre Program at the University of Tasmania. He has studied theatre at UTAS, Honours at Monash University, Education at RMIT and Voice Studies at NIDA. His PhD focused on integrative practices and intercultural performance training aesthetics. He is a director, writer, theatre maker and voice and movement teacher. Robert has published theatre performances and training films through Contemporary Arts Media (Artfilms) and has published various academic articles on the subject of voice and movement integration. Robert is the founder of AusAct.

Zoë Hadler is an actor/writer who has been working in the arts since early childhood, working both on stage and backstage in multiple capacities. Her performance work includes *Killing Game* (2018), *Sanctuary* (2017), *DNA* (2016), and *Hairspray* (2013). Zoë completed a BA in Stage and Screen (Acting) in 2016 and has since taken on a Masters of Creative Practice, specialising in writing and performance, which has seen her perform her own work in showcases such as *Scratching the Surface* (2018) and as part of La Boite's Festival of Australian Student Theatre in 2018. Zoë was also a key research assistant for the inaugural AusSct Conference held on CSU Wagga's campus.

Jhi Rayner is an actor and director who is currently studying his Masters of Creative Practice at Charles Sturt University. Having come from an improvisational theatre games background, Jhi is always looking to explore how to best implement improvisation into his process as both an actor and a director. He hopes to create his own unique style and approach to the craft that he can use to create brand new Australian Theatre. Directing credits include *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett (2018), *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard (2017), and *Killing Game* by Eugene Ionesco (2018). Acting credits include Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (2015), Azdak in Bertolt Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (2015) and Bob King in David Williamson's *Sanctuary* (2017).

# Finding the light: Acting as an artistic and social project

Terence Crawford<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This keynote address delivered to the inaugural AusAct Australian Actor Training conference in 2018 applies theories of Bourdieuan sociology and post-Malinowskian ethnography to the challenges of acting, actor-training, and Australian theatre.

## Keywords

Acting; Australian Theatre; Well-being; Sociology; Bourdieu; Stanislavski

I want to begin by acknowledging that we meet on land that is and always will be Aboriginal land. I was born and grew up on Awabakal land around Lake Macquarie; I now live on Kuarna land in Adelaide, and today we meet on the land of the Wiradjuri people. I acknowledge the significance of this land to these people and their histories, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

It's not my intention to give a lecture on acting to a group of colleagues from whom I have more to learn than to impart. I accept the honour of opening the conference not as a champagne bottle smashed across the bow – not that kind of confident gesture, but a far less certain one in these times. I offer my thoughts today as a kind of whisper to myself, not, I hope, as a lecture or harangue. I apologise that I'm likely fail in that at certain points.

I want to share some findings from my research of the last six years or so which casts acting and theatre practice as sociological phenomena, and try to thread those observations through some assertions about acting, and through some concerns of currency: a depleted Australian theatre sector, and; concerns for actors' well-being.

Let me begin with a proposition:

If you meet an actor-friend in the street while they are in the middle of rehearsals for—let us say—*The Crucible*, and you ask them how things are going, here's what they are *not* going to say:

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*Oh, it's tough, because it's very cold in Salem, and those witches are hard to pin down.*

They are much more likely to say:

*Yeah, it's going well. The director has a really strong idea of what she wants to do. Good cast, lovely stage management. But no air in the room, and no natural light. The money's crap/good, etc.*

This is for me powerfully indicative of how actors experience acting and being an actor: not as a predominantly fictive exploration, but as an industrial, social and artistic immersion. My doctoral thesis searched for the fiction inside this broader phenomenon, and found it to a dappled presence in the concerns of the professional rehearsal room. The percentage of time actors and directors spend talking purely about the fiction is surprisingly limited. The vast bulk of the discourse is about the artwork.

If we can imagine a series of circles within circles: I have located the fictive concerns of acting wholly within a broader artistic compass, and located that artistic compass within a still-broader social pale. That too lies within a milieu of industrial imposts and liberties, and beyond this, the politics of state. There are no borders defining these symbolic spaces. That is to say, for those moments of inhabitation of fiction, the actor remains within artistic, social and industrial territory, under the influence of artistic, social and industrial liberties and inhibitions.

So it is that when an actor walks onstage he is walking into a fiction, yes, but that is a less resonant observation than the observation that he is walking into a work of art.

If we take an Olga out of a production of *Three Sisters*—let us say it is a superb performance—and plonk her down in another production, she will of course be lost. Her 'Olga-ness' is of limited transferability. What makes her Olga work—what brings the actor her agency—is her refined habitus developed not purely within the fictional compass, but within the artistic, the social and the political compasses. All of these developments of habitus are with her as she navigates the moment.

Ahh... The Moment. The cherished, fetishised nirvana of The Moment. The thing we are supposed to be *in*. I don't deny the importance of being in the moment, but I do ask, "What moment? Of what does the moment consist?" In the Americanised Stanislavskian tradition, it consists of fiction, and an aliveness and responsiveness inside that fiction. What I have is my John-Proctor-ness, witches flying around my head, my emotional reflexivity in relation to that fiction and the facts of my own emotional life and history, and—in the best of circumstances—a responsive connectedness to my fellow actors.

All of those things are within the moment, and are important, but I suggest they describe the moment but thinly. The fiction doesn't allow me to ride a laugh. The fiction doesn't even allow me to play an Action. The Moment is a fragment of the actor's score. Among the constrictions and misconstructions of American Stanislavskianism is the implication that this score is coherent with the fiction. The actor's score is essentially incoherent, and entirely idiosyncratic. It is a thing of light and sound, a director's note,

your mother's voice, a fragment of memory, an oblique image, a learnt rhythm, a discovered rhythm, a mathematical equation or architectural structure, a rhyme, an acronym implanted to remember a tricky bit of text, a spatial sensitivity, an impulse, a pattern of consonants and vowels, a colour, a song, a kid you went to school with: a kaleidoscope of knowledge, vagueness, lost-ness and profundity. A kite in the breeze. This is the moment. The actor's artistic score includes finding a light. Finding the light is not secondary or interruptive. Finding the light is among the little artificialities that make acting art.

If the actor is fixated only on being an inhabitant of the fiction her artistic agency is diminished. We need to train actors to be inhabitants of artworks, not merely fiction-dwellers. I have pursued this with my identification of the Aesthetic as one of the Dimensions of Acting in my book of that name. This emphasis has allowed me to do something that we traditionally find very difficult: describe actors as artists. This is rendered inarguable *only* by our engagement with the aesthetics of the stage, with artifice.

Now, to professional actors of long-standing this is stating the obvious, but two things are of interest:

1. What impact this might have on the well-being of actors;
2. That it is not a sensibility that exists with consistency or surety in our acting studios or in acting theory (although it is embedded in some theoretical rubrics, like those of Jacques Lecoq and Anne Bogart). We tend to see the rarefied acting studio as a place of pure fiction-hunting, and tend inevitably to cast the aesthetics of production, the technologies of the theatre, even collaborations with artistic colleagues, as impurities up ahead to be endured. And this is okay so long as the engagements with real acting, with being an actor, are up ahead. I'm thinking here of those of our colleagues now seeking to "train" actors purely in studio environments without access to six or eight full student productions as part of the training, or those of us working in institutions where the production house model is under threat.

But for now I want to return to the image of circles within circles and focus on the social compass. The actor walking on stage is walking into fiction, into art, and into technology. He is also walking into a society. I don't mean the society of Salem or Chekhov's moribund backwater. I mean the society of the cast. The qualities of the social relationships that have been forged have determined the artistic viscosity at every point, and continue to play out on stage. This sensitivity might be seen as an extension of what Philip Zarrilli has called the knowledges in, for and about the experiential phenomenon of acting (44).

I'm thinking of a high-profile production I saw a few years ago in which it seemed to me that the acting of the cast was patently disconnected, in which there was a near-total lack of empathic listening or spatial sensitivity or impulsive connectivity. I remember thinking at the time, "Something is deeply amiss in the social community of that cast." In the months and years that followed, I learned of a social toxicity that indeed

distinguished the experience for those actors. I think of those moments in the theatre—and I enjoyed one last year—where people say things like, “There’s a lot of love on that stage.” We can’t hide the former and we can’t fake the latter. The performance will not only evince but intensify the darkness and the light of the production’s social tenor. Where there has been social humiliation, that humiliation will be repeated and grow more deeply ingrained with each performance; where there has been joy, that joy will be reinforced and enshrined in the act of performance.

The social meets the fictive in a different way in the canonical Stanislavskian acting exercise of Public Solitude (Stanislavski, *Prepares*, 81-85). The title of the exercise is a description of the meeting of the social and the fictive. The student performs a task in an imagined familiar environment, and seeks a feeling of unselfconsciousness in the pursuit of some mundane or intricate behaviour. The criterion for success in the exercise is how close the student comes to a level of unselfconsciousness correspondent to absolute privacy. Some time ago I had the feedback from a student that he did okay in the exercise but was, from time to time, very conscious of the classmate he could see out of the corner of his eye. Not an uncommon response. Fifteen or twenty years ago, my reply to this report would have been along the lines that these moments of consciousness were distractions – essentially that they were instantaneous failures, and that the challenge ahead was in eliminating such distractions. I suspect that would be the theme of the feedback in many acting studios.

But on this occasion four or five years ago—deeply immersed in a research project that cast theatre practice as sociology – fuelled by the world-view-altering lessons of post-Malinowskian ethnography and Bourdieuan sociology, I just couldn’t bring myself to say to this student, “Your task now is to pretend your classmates don’t exist.” So instead I use this rupture to underline the reality of acting as a social project; that the publicity is as important as the solitude. “You are conscious of your classmate for the very good reason that your classmate is there. Therefore, we can say that the work of this exercise is not acting. It is an exploration of that part of acting that attends the fiction. Your total being, your selfhood, your subjectivity is finally correspondent with that of those around you.”

This intersects with ethnographer Michael Jackson’s notions of well-being as a kind of connectedness in lost-ness, the coming ‘into our own with others’ (93). Jackson invites a rejection of interiority—the reading of an isolated and independent psychological profile—as the spring of well-being, and favours social connectivity, meaningfulness, social purpose, as the true determinants. But it also comes from a reading of the late Stanislavskian shift of focus to the externally imagined Object (Crawford, *Dimensions*, 40-44).

This faith in the Object—the thing that is “out there”, outside of the self, as the thing that motivates and enables the moment—has become a central logic in my teaching. I extend the canonical acting notion beyond fiction—its Stanislavskian aim—and beyond an acknowledgement of a shared stage and auditorium, to the outer compass, the political world, and encourage students to look for social and political purpose in plays, roles, and in moments. The suggestion is—following Jackson’s theories—that these connections may allow acting to be a conduit to well-being, not a hindrance.

Let me describe one very simple exercise: one of a number I am exploring with students.

The first thing I do with students—beyond broad orientation—is to ask them to think about their grandparents, be they alive or dead. I ask them to report in what country their four grandparents were born. I write a list of the countries on a whiteboard. Currently I'm working with a very small group of only six first-year students—thanks, Minister Birmingham. Between the 7 of us, we listed 14 countries of birth of our 28 grandparents: countries of Eastern and Western Europe, South America, Asia, Africa, Australasia. I don't press hard on the multicultural implications of that list. It pretty much speaks for itself. The exercise I've been working towards for a number of years then asks students to tell a story about one of their grandparents, either from their personal experience of them, or from family lore, with details as the grandchild imagines them. This is researched and refined as a first acting exercise. My imprecise rationale for this exercise is that it touches history, it somewhat historicises the pursuit of acting, placing a highly privileged Object in an historical and political context. It sobers and centres. The acting instinctively achieves clarity, purpose and love. Acting is experienced as dedicatory and blooded.

My aim is to somehow attempt to open the work to the world. To “act with the windows open”, as I say: the windows to our imagination, and the windows to our knowledge and feelings about the world, in the moment.

The immediate pedagogical implication, of course, is that I must encourage students to take interest in the world. That's a terrifying challenge. I “get” my students for a certain amount of time, I am there to stuff into them a daunting amount of theatrical knowledge and experience, I am not a teacher of politics, history or philosophy, and they are not with me to study those disciplines. All I can do is make the world a constant reference. All I can do is frame acting as a thing occurring in the world, not discrete from it, and not entirely motivated by ego or by artistic aloofness or by fetishised virtuosity. I am unapologetic in allowing a class to travel—as it did a few weeks ago—to a précis of the history of the Louisiana Purchase. To anyone who might say, “That is not the stuff of an acting class”, I am old enough and bold enough to reply, “But what if it is?”

I am looking for the windows out of the rarefied studio, out of the elite huddle (and don't get me wrong, I'm absolutely for the training of elite talent – it is something we need to defend, but out of the huddle we tend to form around elite talent), out of the intimate one-ness of acting pedagogy and mentoring, and way out of psychological interiority, towards the other, towards art, the social manifestations of the stage and the auditorium, to the world and its histories.

I challenge students to dedicate their work to someone in the real world. Does this woman's problem exist in the town where the play is to be performed? If so, assume she will be in the audience, and do it for her. Speak to her and for her as if she was as dear to you as a grandparent.

I want to now apply this thinking about connectivity within and across my symbolic spatial compasses to a few moments in my recent experience that guided this address. They constitute three itches that I feel the need to scratch.

The first was a comment by a colleague who—in expressing concern about the well-being of a group of actors—conflated two things: the dangers and damage that might be caused by abusive behaviour in theatrical contexts, and; emotional hangovers experienced by actors in the hours, days and weeks following the performance of emotionally demanding roles.

If it is so that the reporting of concerns about well-being regularly repeat this conflation, it is more than likely because the issues are conflated in actor-respondents suffering some hurt. The fact is, however, that the only thing these two phenomena have in common is that people are hurt and deserve compassionate responses. The hurts stem from vastly different sources, and require entirely different strategies toward mending. So I glance back at my sociological compasses to attempt to make the distinctions, in the hope that clarifying sources of discontent might help clarify remedies.

It seems to me that un-wellness for actors might germinate in four broad areas:

1. in the compass of the capital-P Political, where actors' livelihoods and happiness are threatened by ascendant philistinism and market-obsession. Acting students, cursed with being both artistically-orientated and young, feel particular pressure from a federal government that seems to be conducting a war against their generation;
2. in the industrial compass, where actors are consistently subject to disconnection, disenfranchisement, radical whimsy, and infantilism by quasi-feudal overlords. It's important to qualify that point – I'm not talking about people but structures. The recent Artshub article by Queensland Theatre Company artistic director, Sam Strong, demonstrates recognition of the feudal structure in which good and compassionate colleagues—like artistic directors—find themselves inside the castle walls. Strong recommends excellent strategies for diverting the sources of poison and throwing some planks across the moats to the freelancers outside;
3. from the social compass; and
4. from the artistic (including fictive) compass.

In short, un-wellness might stem from:

1. How our society treats us;
2. How our industry treats us;
3. How we treat each other; and
4. How we approach the work.

I want to focus on the third and fourth of these delineations, as they were the two represented by the initial itch: social behaviours, and artistic emotional costs of acting. The key distinction is that one of them is around acting and the other is inside acting.

Let me begin with some thoughts about the social elements—and I have published more extensive thoughts on the social challenges for actors than I will touch on here (see Crawford, *Feudal*).

I continue to make the confession that I believe theatre practice among actors is chiefly characterised by happy, healthy human interaction, by inclusivity, respect, egalitarianism, intelligence, kindness. We now have the privilege and responsibility to acknowledge that this is not universal. There are ruptures and abuses. In making claims of goodness I am not downplaying the significance of the hurts that are felt, or the need for meaningful responses to those who are hurt, and to those who hurt. I'm not saying that anti-social behaviour is outweighed by good social behaviour and is therefore insignificant. I'm saying somewhat the opposite. I'm saying that theatre continues to be experienced by those with the privilege of experiencing it predominantly as Nick Enright described it to us as our acting teacher at NIDA: a phenomenon that occurs when people move toward each other with open hearts and open minds; that theatre's enduring tendency is for social cohesion, inclusivity and respect. It is precisely because of this that transgressions are significant. They are abuses not only against immediate victims, they are abuses against the ethos of theatre and the nobility of acting. They have gone shockingly unattended because of the unrecognised privileged immunity of some, like me, and the silence of others.

What I have learned over the last couple of years—shutting up long enough to hear the voices of wounded colleagues—is that I have experienced theatre through a lens of somewhat immunity. Stories of abuse—coming so belatedly to me, and so surprisingly, and finding me so dumb—suggest that with the continual forming and reforming of theatre's social groups, the inequities attendant upon their construction tend to be replicated within them: imbalances breeding imbalances. My research has shown, for example, that marginal players in a rehearsal room practice social marginality, and that leading players practice social centrality. We need to foster a culture where this peculiar social behaviour is recognised as part of the work, not reflective of the social value and the rights of anyone. The quality of mercy is not strained by the size of one's role. These kinds of sensitivities, this kind of intelligence, and an equal voice for all are among the changes that I hope and I believe are now happening.

Theatre is not a rotten barrel, but the caution has been given to this theatre-tragic that the good stuff won't be maintained without acknowledgement, strategy and vigilance.

Many of our theatre companies have developed codes of behaviour and are asking all actors to sign them before commencing work. This is an appropriate thing for companies to do—I am on the board of one of them, and have endorsed it—but as an actor, the code posted in the greenroom is not why I'm going to behave the way that I'm going to behave. My problem with the codes of behaviour is that they infantilise actors. The codes tend to frame actors as naughty children who must behave in the adults' house as the adults instruct, and they consequently tend to frame the adults, the

authors of the codes—directors and management—as pious signatories to their own absolution. What does that have to do with us as teachers? Well, who would dare to suggest that the dangers of power-imbalances that might beset acting schools should implicitly exclude teachers? As a teacher and course leader, I hope I can deal with these things—I hope I am dealing with these things—not by infantilising my students, but through processes that might follow the modest, folk-beat of intersubjectivity (Jackson, *Ethnographica*). As an actor, I will sign the code, because it is consistent with how I conduct myself. But I will also make this point to my cast-mates: “Let us behave well toward each other not because the boss tells us to, but because we are actors. If one of us is treated disrespectfully, we are all treated disrespectfully, and acting is treated disrespectfully. There may be great and small roles, and great and small cv’s, but we take our bows together, and we look after each other, because that is what actors do! We are not naughty children. We do not need well-meaning colleagues casting themselves as our adults. We are inheritors and protectors of noble and good things: theatre and acting.”

I love acting, and I won’t forego or betray its beauty and goodness. Acting is a social project. The work will evince the society. The work is the society.

The other element in what I’ve described as this conflation is the notion of emotional cost of acting to actors. On this, I’m afraid I have a frank and uncomfortable belief to share. If an electrician goes from job to job continually electrocuting herself, I will ask, “What is she doing wrong?” If an actor is more than a little troubled for more than a little while after performing a role of emotional scale, I ask the same question: “What is she doing wrong?” Because she is doing something wrong.

Acting must be joyful. Amateurs say “good luck” to each other; professionals say “have fun”. So have fun.

My question to advanced students—particularly relevant in the context of emotionally demanding material—is always, “Was it fun?” You’ve ended the scene with a genuine emotional connection to grief; we have identified that emotional connection as being subject to any number of external stimuli; we have identified that emotion as a function of motion; even if you have acknowledged your personal experience of grief, you have assiduously avoided immediate reference to it in the moment; we have named the emotion of the moment an ‘artistic cousin’ of grief, not real grief; we have acknowledged that the actor’s emotion is of no intrinsic value; you have dedicated the moment to someone who might be in our audience, and identified the acting as story-telling; you will find the light, and so render the fiction as art; you have made a connection to the world, and so rendered the art purposeful. Nonetheless, you are in tears. Was it fun? If the answer is no, then one of two things is true: either you’re still doing it wrong, or you shouldn’t be doing it.

I hope this “tough love” can be seen as such: a strategy of avoidance of hurt. I won’t guide actors to pursue acting in a destructive way.

Through Medea, through Hamlet, via connectivity, purpose, privilege, to joy!

The second of the three inciting moments for this address was seeing an ad on my Facebook feed a few months ago. It was a notice for a series of acting classes for Australian actors aimed at readying them for ‘Pilot Season in the US’.

Why did this disturb me, and make me feel that I had landed on another planet?

At the risk of seeming merely nostalgic—let the chips of nostalgia fall where they may, I say—the message we were given at NIDA, implicitly and explicitly, was: You are being prepared for a career in Australian theatre. Go make Australian theatre great. While there was regular crowing about the success of Mel and Judy in the US (well might a school be proud of such distinguished graduates) we understood that phenomenon as a kind of lottery-wheel spinning around on another axis. It would pick up whomever it picked up, while we all kept our focus on Australian drama on stage.

But how has the Australian theatre changed since I graduated from NIDA 34 years ago? At that time there were professional regional theatre companies all over the country. Throughout the 1990s we watched them all squeezed out of existence. In the 1980s, a Sydney actor might prepare for playing Rosencrantz at the Sydney Theatre Company by playing Hamlet in Newcastle, Townsville or Wagga. The central counterclaim of those who opposed the establishment of the Major Performing Arts companies was that the creation of flagships would sink the rest of the fleet. That is precisely what happened.

The Australian theatrical landscape is so reduced by the destructive and cynical instrument of nurture and decay that is the MPA funding structure, that any student told today to dedicate his working life to the Australian theatre industry has the right to laugh in our face: “What fucking industry?”

So I’m not critical of colleagues proposing that students look to American tv to make a living, or of the actors who do so, but when I saw that advertisement for that Pilot Season course it struck me that nothing could symbolise the distance we have travelled these thirty years more thoroughly than that little piece of marketing.

Not critical, but worried. I worry about what it means for Australian theatre and what it means for young actors and graduates. I continue to work with well-trained, excellent young actors who are every bit as committed to theatre as I was and am. The work is scarce. It always has been. I fear it is scarcer than ever for these young colleagues. Perhaps more threatening are governmental pressures on young people between jobs—the tortures of Centrelink and associated privatised harassment agencies. As has always been the case, some will still be actors when they’re fifty, most will not. All actors who come to the decision to seek a divorce from acting face a challenge that requires a little bravery. No one gets out of here without tears.

I believe in the old lefty notion that a society might be judged by the circumstances of its poorest citizens, so I wonder if our industry should be judged by the experiences of those not “making it”. But in a country where one can no longer walk a block of our major cities without encountering people sleeping and living rough—those who have failed to position themselves to reap the benefits of the great trickle down—this notion seems quaint. What is the nature of an actor’s failure? Is it determined by the nature of

the pursuit? How is it different for those actors who chase American pilots? In Bourdieuan terms, what are the stakes and values of that field? What is the *illusio*? And what is being reinforced through us, and in us, by our engagement with it? (Bourdieu, *Rules*, 172, and *Meditations* 11, 102) I have spoken to a number who have tried the US couch-surfing life for between two and ten years, and failed. And I have been struck by how profoundly they feel that failure, how hard their landing seems to have been, and how disabled and disconnected they seem for alternative pathways in life, or for ongoing faith in the art of acting. Is there something more organic about failure in the cottage industry of Australian theatre, an industry fitted for failure? Is it easier to fall from the smelly former set-piece couches of our green rooms than it is to fall from the imported leather settees of Hollywood waiting halls?

And might this relate to intersubjectivity: to a sense of community-in-journeying, connections to audience, connections to other actors, relative agency inside projects, the identification of social purpose? Is there something intrinsically less connected about acting in television and film, even when we get the job? Acting in front of a green screen for the interests of a commercial shooter game may be interesting, skilful, and assumes sound pedagogical legitimacy via canonical acting practices and theories (sensory recall and neutral mask, for example), and may earn some good bucks for a happy few, but is there sufficient social purpose at the heart of that pursuit, for example, to bring it to the centre of a training course? Is it easier to find purpose in the shared space of the stage and the wrap of a live audience? Is the social *raison d'être*—dare I say, the moral—of the work in which we “ground” acting students a thing of lasting significance? Is the work’s social ambition the stuff of longevity? Did not the VCA, for example, begin its pursuit of actor-training with a manifesto for just the kind of connection to social and political purpose that I am advocating? What cultural capital is accrued by actors? How is it accrued, and to what lasting benefit? I was in the first production of John O’Donaghue’s *Essington Lewis, I Am Work*, in Newcastle in 1981: a play written and partially set in Newcastle, a play about work in a working-class town, performed by a mainly untrained cast of locals. Audiences became packed with workers. Spontaneous standing ovations—total standing ovations from audiences who didn’t necessarily know what a standing ovation was—every night. Decades later I said to Jonathan Biggins—who was also in that cast—that it was a blessing and a curse. We understood as 19- and 20-year-olds that this was special, but we didn’t understand that this was as good as it gets. What value that experience in our careers and lives? Well, I carry from that experience the knowledge that theatre can—though it rarely is—it *can be* like that. Cultural capital begins with and is dependent upon cultural ambition. Among the many things to grieve in the loss of our regional professional theatre network is that their regionality tended toward social connectivity. In this way, these smaller professional companies were not merely the secondary outliers of Australian theatre, they were the exemplars – they achieved things that MPAs do not achieve, and are discouraged from achieving. They were not the outer branches but the roots.

These broader reflections lead me back to the questions: Can Australian actors afford to overlook Australian theatre for LA couch-surfing? Is it a healthy pursuit?

I make the assertion that we can't teach the purpose of acting without theatre. Finally, I suspect it is not acting that holds us, but theatre. Isn't that among the lessons we mark for delivery to the 18-year-old who comes to us with nothing but an ambition to be Heath Ledger? Don't we instinctively want to recalibrate that naiveté? To politicise? Not to mention the darkly ironic instinct: to save? We can't do it without theatre for the earlier reasons I suggested, that theatre practice delivers the non-fictive elements that turn acting into art (that is, in the studio I can teach someone how to act; but only in the theatre can they learn how to be an actor), and we can't do it without theatre because theatre has—I will continue to argue—inherent social properties; social properties that can and do manifest in actors as life-affirming and joyful: as well-ness.

With the reduced theatre sector and an increased strategy of looking toward the US to build a career, Americanised Stanislavskianism, which we fought pretty hard and pretty successfully to keep down in the hole for a number of decades, seems to be on the increase in its reach and influence in Australia. This concerns me from a cultural point of view, but also in relation to well-being. Where the pathways of acting practice lead inward to psychologising, emotionalising, autobiography, and where the pathways of career-ambition lead overseas, to isolation from family, friends, cultural reference and cultural coherence, we should continue to expect young Australian actors to be destabilised and isolated by acting. They are isolated because Americanised Stanislavskianism wilfully isolates them, and sees their isolation—even a kind of spiritual self-immolation—as its purpose.

The third itch that I want to briefly scratch stems from a conversation I had at a dinner party recently with one of Australia's leading playwrights. We were discussing the emotional impact of acting on actors. He was very sympathetic and concerned, both for them and for his own work. He said, "My job is to create traumatic circumstances for characters. To ask actors to enact trauma. Am I now being asked to check that, or to stop doing that?"

Finally, what do I tell my playwright friend?

Don't surrender your art for the sake of bad acting and bad teaching. Don't surrender your vision in the face of a neglected and depleted industry. Bring us the trauma of life that surrounds you and surrounds us. Compel us to look toward the world as you look toward it. Compel us to connect, to politicise, to historicise as you do. Compel us to dig our feet into our own earth; to dance as the Wiradjuri people danced on this land. To the same purpose. Connect us, that we might learn social connectivity as a renewed purpose and inspiration for our art. Such that a way of acting that is purposeful, political and joyful, might become a way of being.

Thank you.

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## About the author

Dr Terence Crawford has been a professional actor since 1980, and is a graduate of NIDA. Most recently, he played the role of O'Brien in the national and international tour of George Orwell's *1984* and the lead in Stephen Sewell's *Welcome the Bright World*. Terence has been Head of Acting at Theatre Nepean, the Intercultural Theatre Institute (Singapore), LASALLE College of the Arts (Singapore) and Adelaide College of the Arts. His Masters is a dissertation of Chekhov in an Australian context, and his PhD an ethnography of rehearsal practices. Dr Crawford has published two books on acting: *Trade Secrets* (2005) and *Dimensions of Acting* (2011).

# Actor training in portfolio careers: Flourishing in a creative career beyond “luck”

Elizabeth Blackwood, Lotte Latukefu and Mark Seton<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The Dramatic Arts is often viewed as a high-risk option due to low job security. As Creative Industries evolve contemporary performers are confronted with an even larger gap between supply and demand. This article discusses existing research relating to the notion of student agency in designing a creative portfolio career versus the narrative of the lucky break so often associated with acting careers. It outlines the process of review and design, underpinned by notions of portfolio training, in a Bachelor of Dramatic Arts, at a private Higher Education Provider in Sydney. It concludes that it is possible to design a degree that prepares students to practice decision making, flexibility and weighing risks – key skills required for a portfolio career.

## Keywords

Drama Training; Portfolio Career Training; Active Learning; Curriculum Review

## Introduction

There is a view of the actor’s career characterised by the unending, single-minded struggle to get that “lucky break”. However, the reality of a career in the Creative Industries is that it is complex, multi-faceted and diverse and requires a broad range of skills and knowledge (Bartleet et al. 2012) rather than simply one road to success. The role of tertiary education institutions hoping to produce artists with lifelong sustainable careers in the arts must then include training for this type of complex career. The need for tertiary education providers to do more than simply teach the skills of a profession, but also to develop students into effective industry personnel has been gradually becoming a significantly greater focus in curriculum development (Harvey, 2000). Tertiary institutions must invest more seriously in graduate employability and this requires deeper application, adapting whole teaching methods and curriculums to cater to the ever changing Creative Industries, rather than superficially addressing the issues in specialised units at the end of their training.

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Although course reviews are regularly scheduled events in the life of tertiary education delivery, the 2017-18 review of the Bachelor of Dramatic Arts at a Higher Education Provider in Sydney also involved a significant structural overhaul to better facilitate the concept of portfolio careers into the curriculum. In addition to the new, alternate structural features, professional development units were designed in response to concern amongst both permanent and casual staff that students should be better equipped to deal with life post-graduation. The following article reports an analysis of the review of the Bachelor of Dramatic Arts in which subjects and overall course structures were reassessed and redeveloped with the portfolio career in mind. The goal of the College in this review was to provide a Bachelor's degree that produced dramatic artists with the necessary skills and understandings to engage in a sustainable, resilient, lifelong career in the arts.

## Context and methods

The current Bachelor of Dramatic Arts has three majors: Performance; Theatre Practice and Production. Like many intensive theatre training programs, the degree was designed with theoretical, skill based and professional development units feeding into a core pillar of productions. Students are involved in a diverse experience of acting and dramatic art production. The percentage of the Bachelor's degree devoted to the different skills was determined by the student's choice of major with particular units becoming core or elective. These core components of the degree were retained and expanded upon following the review process.

The review process involved two phases of collaboration. The first were weekly meetings between the Head of Performing Arts and staff to analyse the previous course structure, discuss concerns that could be addressed within a review and to examine the course through the lens of both portfolio training and student wellbeing. The second phase of the process involved collaborating in a work in progress course design with a focus group of seven current sessional lecturers within the Bachelor of Dramatic Art who also teach at other tertiary institutions and work currently in the Creative Arts Industries. It was particularly important that staff were able to communicate their areas of concern and ideas as anecdotal evidence of issues arising from the old course both to ensure that the new degree had as much input as possible for quality purposes but also to facilitate a smooth transition as staff would feel that they were active members of its creation.

In informal staff preliminary discussions there were concerns, anecdotes, suggestions and research findings about the prospective features and direction of the degree. Whilst these concerns were far reaching in subject, what they essentially boiled down to was that the performing artist's career is constantly changing, and we needed to keep changing with it.

The four major concerns that presented themselves as relevant to this article were:

5. Our current students were experiencing a disenfranchisement with the arts sector and their degree due to a feeling that they would be unable to sustain themselves financially with the skills they have learnt upon exiting the degree.
6. Many of our alumni were lacking a certain resilience and creativity in finding employment and constructing their careers.
7. The production stream was not as popular as the other streams, possibly due to a disconnect between its structure and the industry into which students would head upon leaving the degree.
8. There was a need to ensure we were preparing students realistically for the portfolio career they were most likely to create for themselves on graduating.

In our formalised collaborative research, the focus groups conducted with staff and the student feedback from unit evaluations further illuminated the need to address these issues not just as extracurricular and voluntary, but seeded deeply within the central narrative and curriculum of the Bachelor degree. This would ensure that all students, not just the highly motivated ones, would come out of the degree able to conduct a healthy, life-long career in the arts. The new learning environment would connect theoretical and methodological considerations of active learning and portfolio career training in the design.

Our broader research produced a key study in the UK showing that there is a perception by students that their educational credentials have had a progressively declining impact on their prospective employability when graduating even outside the arts sector due to a “congested and competitive graduate labour market” (Tomlinson, 2006). Encouraging students to see a connection between their studies and employment then becomes a key concern of all tertiary institutions, not just arts-focused ones, and early awareness of the career outcomes as aligned to the learning outcomes becomes more relevant. This would address the issue of our alumni’s prospects and provide a solid framework for post study pathway to help the psychological wellbeing of our current students as our degree greater reflected the ever-changing arts sector. And it is here that the concept of the portfolio career training took central focus.

## **Defining a portfolio career**

The concept of portfolio training was first coined in the 1990s but has gained popularity with the examination of successful artistic careers becoming a greater focus of learning institutions, as student graduate employment rates become a focal metric of educational success. It involves the concept that artists working in the industry are more likely to achieve financial stability and creative fulfilment by working several jobs for a number of employers. It is arguably the next step in the divergence away from organisational career development, as a sub category of the Protean Career or “self-managed career” that has become progressively more dominant since the 1970s

(Bennett, 2009). The 2017 Australia Council for the Arts' study by Throsby and Petetskaya confirmed that for most professional artists in Australia, achieving professional stability required exploiting multiple income streams. Whilst it is a concept usually associated with musicians' careers, the similar patterns in initial career trajectory in the findings of Bennett & Bridgstock (2014) by musicians and dancers could reasonably be extended to actors and theatre makers.

In our development of portfolio training, it became apparent that defining portfolio career would be a key concern. Recent research outlines the difficulty in defining exactly what constituted portfolio training within a tertiary education setting (Latukeyu & Ginsborg, 2018). This research showed that there is some debate as to whether a portfolio career would entail working the same skill (such as acting) across multiple employment providers, or working several different skills (such as acting, teaching, stage management) and this difference in opinion could account for a tendency towards emphasising either deeply specialised training which develops one profession's skill to a high level or broad range training that provides training across a number of roles needed to create theatre. In the redesign of the Bachelor of Dramatic Arts, reviews of other similar courses and evidence presented by staff teaching at different institutions and universities found that both models involved significant shortcomings. The shortcoming of conservatoire training was that students lacked an ability to move across multiple employment opportunities and so were fairly brittle in response to arts industry fluctuation. By contrast, the shortcoming of broad range training was that students understood the fundamentals of multiple employable skills but had achieved none of them to an employable level. For the purpose of developing the Bachelor of Drama Arts, then, we worked with a framework somewhere between these two concepts by defining portfolio career training to require the attainment of one major skill, for example, acting or management plus at least one other skill to an employable level. In developing students for a portfolio career, it is necessary to build a narrative of progression for all skill areas, not just the primary one a student focused on.

Similar difficulties came from the complex series of needs for a prospective dramatic arts career as oppose to other disciplines due to the nature of the Creative Industries. Artists manage frequently conflicting paradigms due to the diversity of work undertaken during their career. Specialist and generalist skills are required within the same career, as well as skills in balancing the demands of autonomous working ability and social engagement factors and even the geographical contradictions require that dramatic arts makers are able to exploit domestic and international, urban and regional markets (Lingo & Teper, 2013). Similarly, even the concept of entrepreneurialism, which is so key to arts careers, is slightly different to other disciplines such as Business, so curriculum strategies cannot simply be pulled from the Business sphere into the arts but must be started from scratch with constant referencing to Creative Industry practise (Bridgstock, 2012).

What is central to the narrative of portfolio training, regardless of where on the spectrum the particular training fits in number of skills attained, is that the concept is radically different from the romanticised Hollywood version of artistic success where luck makes overnight success and the industry forgets the rest. In developing students

for this career type, then, it similarly became necessary to build a narrative of progression into employability for all skill areas, not just the primary one a student focused on.

## Discussion

In applying these principles, feedback from staff during the review strongly recommended that the current actor training major remain almost identical. The degree also retained the central productions that the students worked towards throughout the year as the value of real world problem solving was so strong (Bal et al, 2015). The three major areas of change were in the overall progressive structure of the degree, the introduction of specialisations and the development of the portfolio career narrative into the curriculum.

In reviewing the Bachelor of Dramatic Arts, the review committee utilised Lawson's (2015) steps of introducing, developing and assuring learning outcomes for the overall course design. These steps were introduced both into the individual units of study and a whole of course approach. This allows students to see the learning outcomes that they are being trained to achieve and be able to measure this achievement as they progress, making them agents in their own education and taking them from inexperienced novices (and often high school leavers) to entry level professionals by the end of their degree.

In the "Introducing" first year of the degree, students take units that address a broad range of knowledge and skills in Dramatic Arts (these will be discussed later in this article). The number of production units that students were required to study in first year were doubled and made equal in value to the performing units. This ensured that, unlike some music conservatoires where portfolio training is more lip service than reality (Latukefu & Ginsborg, 2018), the drama students will have genuine experience of a range of different roles and responsibilities that are part of making Theatre, not just being an actor.

The second year or "Developing" stage (Lawson, 2015) changed significantly from the old course. In second year, students elect to go into the Performance stream, Production stream or Theatre Practice stream. They then choose a pathway of particular skills of interest and follow that throughout their whole second year. This follows the specialisation strategy which will be discussed later. Performance majors maintain their heavy load of performance subjects such as movement, voice and acting, are introduced to the theatre productions and undertake two electives that are offered in a progressive set so that they are honing one particular skill in their second year alongside their performance skills. Production students undertake a series of technically focused core units and also have a progressive elective component of either more production or performance subjects. Theatre practice majors have the most choice with core management units and two pathways to choose so that they can choose multiple skill areas to hone. The second year involves a considerable learning curve as students progress from introductory subject styles to in depth skill development.

The third year or “Assuring” stage of the course involves students becoming more autonomous in their skill development. Performance third year subjects become more specialised and demanding to align with more difficult productions and the Production and Theatre Practice students complete directed independent projects that involve one-to-one mentoring with a staff member in their chosen field. In these projects students are encouraged by their mentor to make the shift from being students to being professionals with emphasis on being able to adapt to changing environments and multiple roles. This third year also involved the stepping stone “professional development” unit which deals with concepts around managing your portfolio career from financial management, health, goal setting, and developing a healthy sustainability in the career of the student.

Earlier in the article we discussed the notion of skill pathways and specialisations. During the review process staff involved in the design expressed opinions such as the importance for students to have an overview of all of the roles involved in dramatic art production. But, they were concerned that graduates would have a superficial level of knowledge insufficient to properly fulfil roles in the industry. The pathway units were designed to work together to give students a deeper understanding of the particular skill area that they wish to pursue. There are five pathways now in the Bachelor of Dramatic Arts; Acting, Story, Producing, Management and Design.

- In the Acting pathway students continue their studies of acting, voice or movement that introduced in first year. Students who choose this pathway continue classes throughout the second and third year.
- The Story pathway further develops introductory skills in directing and writing that students attained in first year. Second year students who choose a story pathway undertake one Directing and one Scriptwriting unit and can then further hone those skills in one on one mentoring subjects Project I and Project II in third year.
- The Producing pathway is compulsory for Theatre Practice students and involves developing skills in producing dramatic works and running a dramatic art business. Second year students undertake one Production Management and one Business Management unit and then have the potential to produce their own work in their third year Project I and Project II units.
- The Management pathway is a specialised stage management stream designed to get students professionally stage managing and capable of performing this role in college productions in their third year.
- The Design pathway involves specialised units in Mechanical Design, Technical Design and Visual Design, with skills ranging from lighting design to prop making. It is a required pathway for Production majors and the skills learnt in these units can also be consolidated with the third year Project I and Project II units.

Each of these pathways was designed in consultation with a specialist from the particular field and they are designed to give students a deeper understanding of their chosen pathway so that graduates can pursue multiple roles in the Creative Industries. Students should be able to develop a level of resilience to industry change as they will

be able to adapt to flows of employment in particular areas by switching the types of work they are looking for.

The final change that needed to be considered was how to embed the narrative of portfolio training into a digestible way for students. Latukefu and Ginsborg's (2018) research into portfolio training outlined a certain hesitance from the student body in accepting portfolio training.

In order for students to be successful in training for a portfolio career, their career and life after the college had to become a part of the collective approach from early in their educational career. Bennett and Bridgstock (2014) note the importance of introducing the seemingly contradictory concepts of career awareness and intrinsic (often creative) satisfaction early in the student's educational experience in order to manage student expectations of their career. Early introduction also could allow students to develop their own individual balance of needs for financial stability and creative satisfaction to allow for a level of deliberateness in their initial employment choices. Staff expressed that previously some students had seemed to exist inside a bubble throughout their training, unwilling to think of their life after graduation.

An important addition to the co-curricular activities offered to students at the college were negotiations with the broader college for a career resource space and a career counsellor who specialises in Creative Careers to run micro-career workshops on selected topics such as: building my online small business and how to create sustainable mental and physical approaches to my creative practice.

As well as these features, the degree emphasises the importance of choice to encourage students in their autonomous journey. By directing students to a progression of subjects rather than one off electives, it ensures that they seriously consider their pathways, the assumption being that students will be more careful if they are committing to two semesters worth of subjects. This choice element was also supported by an emphasis on "Active Learning". Students who are active, self-determined learners are motivated and self-confident and they construct their own knowledge and understanding through personal experience and a dynamic role in decisions about their education (Deci et al, 2011; Petress, 2008; Simons, 1997; Dewey, 1936). This sort of learning has personal meaning and can be applied to relevant activities beyond the educational setting (Verenikina, 2008). By allowing students choice both in their overall course progression and within their individual units, we were able to empower an active learning environment to support student independence and, therefore, engagement.

## Conclusion

The new Bachelor of Dramatic Art will begin in March 2019; however, it will be some time before we are able to report the outcome for the students in terms of their employment and welfare with three years before they even become alumni. It is yet to be seen if Lawson's introduction, development and assurance model combined with a pathway skill development system will in fact improve alumni employability and

resilience in the face of arts industry change by bringing the portfolio career into the forefront of the student and staff psyche.

In training students for portfolio careers, we examine the portfolio career in a deconstructed way so that students can place themselves anywhere on the spectrum of a portfolio career. This spectrum goes from using the same skill cluster working for multiple companies, to multiple skills in the arts sector, even out to Throsby and Zednik's (2011) proposal of creative skills being transposed to non-arts sector employment alongside arts employment. This could combat the student perception of a growing irrelevance of tertiary education by realigning the training to feed directly into their industry, and explicitly showing them this progression through the professional development units.

Overall, our findings in the review of the Bachelor of Dramatic Art emphasised a need to develop new features within the degree to respond to the concerns of the staff regarding student employability. The design was underpinned by theories of active and self-determination learning in which students are autonomous, self-reliant authors of their own career. Furthermore, the design was heavily influenced by the notion of the portfolio career which countered "swept up with luck" narrative of acting careers. Instead the narrative of this reviewed degree is that students are preparing for a portfolio career in which they are able to practice taking positive steps and weighing risks which is a key skill required for a portfolio career which involves constant decision making, flexibility and foresight in career steps in order to be successful.

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# Brisbane Junior Theatre: A new theatre paradigm

Jack Bradford<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In Australia, there is currently a need to strengthen young people's involvement in theatre. Therefore, there is not only a cultural need for new ways of providing regular performance opportunities, but also a need to inspire young theatrical performers. This paper proposes that a week intensive youth theatre production, such as those performed by Brisbane Junior Theatre (BJT), is a viable way of meeting this demand. The paper is a practitioner led account on how to create sustainable, enduring and consistent theatre that draws upon BJT's 18-year experience as an Australian youth theatre. The author, Jack Bradford is the founder and artistic director of BJT. By using BJT as an example, this paper proposes that these practises can be utilised with great effect by any theatre practitioner. In particular this paper will take a detailed look at BJT's methodologies, and intensive process and examine how it is able to succeed against the accepted theatrical norms of time and focus. It will also examine Newport's "Deep Work" principles to provide evidence for BJT's success. Ultimately this paper will not only demonstrate the reasons for BJT's success and longevity, but also provide a possible model for future companies to emulate in order to answer the call for strengthening theatre in Australia.

## Keywords

Intensive Theatre; Youth Theatre; Endurability; Deep Work; Theatre Methodologies

## Introduction: The need for a new theatrical paradigm

The Australian Theatre Forum 2011 called on individuals, organisations and agencies involved in theatre in Australia to commit to "strengthening young people in theatre, increasing the scope of theatre and young people, particularly on main stages; [and] increasing access to theatre for young people" (Australian Theatre Forum). This theatrical edict demonstrates a cultural need for a new way of providing regular performance opportunities to inspire young theatrical performers in Australia.

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Richard Schechner (Brown) declared: “Theatre as we have known and practiced it – the staging of written dramas – will be the string quartet of the 21st century.” In contrast, Robert Hetherington said, “in many places theatre is heading off to be the buggy whip of the 21st century” (Hetherington). Hetherington is using the term “buggy whip” as a metaphor to describe the conventions of modern theatre as drastically outmoded and in need of new practices and paradigms.

In 2018, there is a growing need to provide a new paradigm for producing theatre that gives young performers opportunities and skills and provides a way of creating enduring theatre practice. The practices, methods and 18-year history of Brisbane Junior Theatre’s (BJT’s) uniquely Australian cultural phenomenon of an intensive one-week production and performance process, may provide some insights and solutions for a new paradigm to equip an ever-broadening base of young performers with skills and opportunities for life in the performing arts. The practices and methodology of BJT can also be applied by other theatre practitioners to help create sustainable theatrical practice for any theatrical organisation.

## What is Brisbane Junior Theatre?

BJT is a not-for-profit youth theatre company in Brisbane Australia that has produced 76 intensive, fully resourced productions over its 18-year history. Each production is entirely rehearsed and performed within a single week, with an average of 40 hours total rehearsal time, four performances and an average cast of 65 performers aged 5-18 with at least 20 production support personnel. Music Theatre International and Hal Leonard Australia recently referred to BJT’s significance as a youth theatre in Australia by saying that “BJT has had the most Youth Theatre performances in all of Australia and is known for its consistent quality performances.” (Stoddard)

BJT’s one-week theatrical process can be described as both intensive and enduring, produced with consistency and quality, and fully resourced, meaning each production includes and integrates sets, props, costumes, sound, lighting, video, special effects, make-up and any theatrical support needed to produce a quality production. BJT produces quality Broadway-based musicals (mostly abridged) for eight hours a day for five days, Monday to Friday. Each show is double cast with casts alternating performances: two on Friday night at 6pm and 8pm and two on Saturday afternoon at 2pm and 4pm. The intensive nature of BJT’s theatrical practice relies on focused and intense work performed in a much shorter time than the accepted theatrical norm has historically required. BJT’s intensive performing processes, identified later in this paper as BJT’s Musical Theatre “Taxonomy,” will describe ever increasing levels and elements of focus required for each day of rehearsal and performance. At least part of BJT’s longevity is due to its repurposing of established theatrical mediums to fit into an Australian cultural context.

Bradford, Artistic Director of BJT, was deeply influenced, not only by the history and knowledge of Old Repertory and Summer Stock Theatre, but by his own personal Summer Stock intensive experience. Bradford performed in the 1980 Cripple Creek Colorado production of *My Partner and Olio Act*, a three-hour performance played two

times per day, six days per week, 150 times to sold out audiences from June to September. Bradford auditioned and rehearsed this professional three-hour production in a ten-day period. He remembers that the process of memorising lines and lyrics, creating a role, negotiating with actors and audience was a gruelling, exhausting process, but very valuable in developing his ability to understand successful intensive theatrical practice. This experience led Bradford to believe that intensive theatre was not only possible, but achievable for young performers, and can act as a vital catalyst for their development.

## **Theatrical norms versus intensive practice**

Francis Hodge, in his seminal book *Play Directing*, declared that quality theatrical productions require a minimum of “8 hours rehearsal for every 10 minutes of performance on stage” (Hodge 178). Most professional and reputable theatre directors and producers accept and practice this convention as the norm. However, proven historical intensive theatre practices, such as Summer Stock and The Old Repertory System, have required much shorter and much more intensively focused rehearsal and performance processes, albeit for varied reasons. Using Summer Stock and The Old Rep as precedents BJT has likewise created a condensed but equally intensively focused process. BJT’s average theatrical performance is 1.5 hours long with 40-hours of rehearsal time. There are 30 hours of scheduled rehearsal time and 10 hours of break time. This process, based on Hodge’s formula (assuming with adults) would require 72 Hours of effective rehearsal time. Consider the significance of this intensive formula being accomplished by an average of 65 young performers aged 5-18 over 76 performances in 18 years of practice. This experience is currently unique to BJT, due to being influenced by its Australian context, allowing it to stand apart from its historical influences.

## **Intensive Influences: Summer Stock and Repertory**

Though BJT demonstrates a unique cultural theatrical practice, it is important to examine its influences to better understand its unique significance. In the United States between 1920 and 1960, theatre saw the advent of “Summer Stock,” which invented another form of intensive theatre, based on the cultural phenomenon of “The American Three-Month Summer,” and created a way for young aspiring professionals to do back-to-back productions in regional areas where the public could experience quality theatre. Summer Stock used the intensive 7 to 10-day rehearsal periods to produce multiple productions back-to-back using stock sets and costumes, as well giving young actors opportunities to hone their craft in front of an audience.

Martha Schmoyer LoMonaco in her study *Summer Stock! an American Theatrical Phenomenon*, defines Summer Stock as:

| *a particular type of entertainment that evolved in the North Eastern United States during the 1920s and 1930s ... between the months of June*

*and September ... it was part of the new American 'Cultural Maturation'  
(preface)*

This study also lists over 580 Summer Stock Theatres throughout the US from 1920 to 1960. Summer Stock Theatre as a unique American phenomenon used intensive theatrical practice for practical as well as financial reasons, as the American three-month summer June, July and August, created the basis of demand for this form of theatre. As LoMonaco further states:

*Most theatres played one-a-week stock offering a different play every  
week throughout the summer season of as many as 8 to 14 or 15 weeks ...  
Most plays were recent Broadway hits. (preface)*

While BJT uses a similar shortened intensive rehearsal process in order to produce commercial musical theatre, it has been scheduled to fit in with the Australian Holiday System rather than the American 3-month Summer Holiday period. This phenomenon has led BJT to produce one production quarterly as opposed to many productions in a short period of time. Which in turn has created financial and theatrical sustainability by reinforcing demand, while allowing for greater control over quality by giving downtime for the company to prepare for the next show.

The Old Repertory System is an intensive form of theatre that emerged in the 1920s and began to decline in the early 1960s. Based on intensive two-week rehearsal schedules, it provided opportunities for young actors to develop their craft, to perform more quality productions and created a financially viable way of bringing theatre as a popular form to the masses. *The Oxford Companion to Theatre* states, "One of the most phenomenal aspects of British drama has been the remarkable growth and success of the Repertory Movement, resulting in the establishment of over 100 Repertory Theatres in Great Britain" (Hartnoll 664). The article also declares that:

*The true Repertory Theatre is one in which a number of plays are always  
ready for production, so that as many as five or six can be performed  
weekly, with new ones in preparation ... much of the work is performed  
under exhausting conditions; a new play every week or two, endless  
rehearsals, constant learning of new parts ... all these demand much  
mental and physical endurance...and the experience gained on the  
Repertory stage was invaluable. (Hartnoll 665)*

It was the practice of a Repertory Theatre to change the bill frequently to attract greater audiences, which meant that the rehearsal process had to be quick. Peggy Ashcroft, who played Juliet at the Old Vic in 1935 opposite Gielgud and Olivier, remembers "with hindsight one can appreciate the difficulty of trying, in three weeks rehearsal, to combine an electric naturalism with a feeling of the pulse of the verse." (Billington 80) Billington further asserts (79) that the reason for Ashcroft's success as a repertory actress is "her ability to absorb deeply packed imagistic speeches into her being and then speak them as if they came newly minted from her brain." These quotes emphasise the process of integrated acting elements in a shortened intensive process that produced quality and consistent theatrical practice. Olivier, concerning the length of

process, also remembers that he rehearsed for only “two weeks” when directed by Noel Coward in *Private Lives* in the same era (Olivier 90). In like manner, Gielgud, when discussing one of his own ‘intensive’ theatre experiences, (Brandreth 42) declared that he

*was forced instinctively to react instinctively to the parts, not studying the details but imagining the whole ... as we rehearsed the play. With only three weeks of course there was not time to do much of anything else.*  
(Brandreth 42-43)

While BJT does not utilize the Old Rep’s system of producing multiple shows being performed on a weekly basis, it does strive to utilize the same intensive techniques, albeit in a more streamlined and focused context.

Both the Old Repertory and Summer Stock processes have easily contradicted Hodge’s rule that “for every 10 minutes of performance, 8 hours of rehearsal is required.” (Hodge 91) Both Old Repertory and Summer Stock production lengths were about three-hours long, which means at a minimum, these productions needed at least 4 - 6 weeks of rehearsal time to be successful. In contrast, Brisbane Junior Theatre’s intensive practice is accomplished in five eight-hour days. Actual rehearsal time is only six hours per day because of much needed breaks. However, the significant cultural element that sets BJT apart and makes it a “unique phenomenon” is that BJT’s intensive work is performed by young actors between the ages of 5 and 18 years.

Yet these intensive processes are not as prominent as they once were, with the Old Rep system being in decline since the early 1960s. This has ultimately lessened theatrical opportunities for performers in England to receive an intensive theatrical experience to help build their craft. Ken Rea, prominent British Theatre director and scholar, recently stated:

*Repertory theatre is when you have a permanent company of actors and while you are performing one play in the evening, you’re rehearsing the next one in the daytime. And so it goes on ... the demise of the repertory system means that you are losing actors who have been through a real apprenticeship.* (Dale)

In like manner, famous repertory actress Judi Dench espoused:

*That’s what the repertory theatres did. Something that changed each week or each fortnight ... They were so crowded ... and we were terribly lucky to have those theatres ... as long as there’s some of those Reps going and keep going you know, there is a light, a little flame that we can nurture and hope that sometime in the future it can come back to be a bonfire.* (Dale)

Rea and Dench are speaking about the deterioration and demise of the Old Repertory Theatre system. The demise of The Old Rep has led to a significant diminishment of performance opportunities for aspiring actors to learn their craft.

Australia has never had a prominent intensive theatrical process, which means that Australian trained actors have also lacked opportunities to hone their craft. BJT has adapted elements of the aforementioned processes to fit its Australian cultural context and has become the leading intensive youth theatre in Australia.

## **BJT's adaptation to Australia's theatre scene: Cultural opportunity**

By incorporating elements of cultural practices into the theatrical processes a company can be more successful. The willingness and ability to adapt to Australian cultural factors has been one of the key areas of success for BJT. The main cultural factor that helped inspire BJT's one-week process was the "Australian School Holiday System." In 2000, when forming BJT's production process, Bradford considered the Australian Cultural educational convention of "four holiday periods per year." Bradford began planning four shows per year, one in each of the quarterly school holidays: a Summer Show – (1<sup>st</sup> week in January after January 1<sup>st</sup>), an Easter Show - (usually Easter Monday to Saturday), a Winter Show – (1<sup>st</sup> week of the two-week break, usually June 30 - July 6), and a Spring Show – (the 1<sup>st</sup> week in September Holidays, around Sept 24<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup>). Bradford thought it was also important to develop and communicate a ritualised tradition so that parents and young performers could plan their year of performances in advance and create a regular pattern of being part of BJT theatre practice. With this formula, parents could also plan for holidays in the off week in each two-week holiday period. In the Australian culture, most workers only have four weeks of paid holidays per year. If parents traditionally take one week per holiday period, then they would need their children to be occupied in the alternate week and so this practice was formed to fit into the Australian cultural convention.

Another Australian cultural phenomenon that has provided a significant opportunity for BJT's work is the notion that there is a division of drama and theatre at the secondary and tertiary levels. Because of the educational emphasis on "drama education" as opposed to theatrical experience in Australia, young performers have developed limited theatrical technique without audience-based performance as being a strong part of the curriculum.

Therefore, to create an enduring theatre culture with home-grown Australian talent, there must be an emphasis on "extracurricular" training. BJT has arisen both because the Australian culture has created this opportunity, but also out of desire to provide performance opportunities for young performers in the Australian culture.

## **BJT's business plan and mission statement**

BJT incorporates intentional business principles integrated with its values and goals to create a unique theatrical practice. From its inception, BJT established values and goals to help govern its work. These values include developing and maintaining family value productions, artistic excellence, a safe environment, fairness, a commitment to developing and nurturing talent, skill and creativity. BJT's initial business plan listed as

its main objective to “develop in children self-worth and self-confidence through self-expression. BJT’s mission statement states: BJT exists to provide cultural and educational development for children...through performing arts training, production and experience. (Bradford). In order for these core values and objectives to be achieved Bradford initiated goals of “Consistency and Quality” and “Production that Drives Training” as major success mechanisms to ensure successful, enduring theatrical practice in BJT’s work.

## **Endurable theatrical practice**

The concept of “endurable theatrical practice” coined by the author of this paper means the significance of consistent and quality productions and processes over BJT’s 18-year period. “Endurability” is a significant factor as each BJT production of four performances has occurred an average of 4.2 times per year for 18 years. This enduring theatrical practice has provided regular and important performance opportunities for young performers to build their skills and crafts and develop valuable techniques over several generations.

“Endurability”, including consistency, quality and fully resourced productions, are major goals of successful youth companies in Australia and globally. While there are other youth companies, as well as one-week theatre workshops, the ‘Intensive’ practice of producing a quality, fully resourced Broadway-based production in one week is unique to BJT. Bob Hetherington, Theatre Historian and Head of Theatre and Dance at University of Memphis, stated, “the one-week production blitz is unknown in [youth theatre] production in the US.” (Hetherington)

## **Consistency and quality**

Consistency and Quality means that in order to achieve success, BJT must have regular performances four to five times per year. BJT needs to also ensure consistent rules, standards and quality of its performances and processes as well as consistent growth of reputation and resources. Quality refers to maintaining a high standard of productions by producing great plays, popular, well written musicals, and by attracting quality people to perform and produce them, as well as ensuring and producing quality skills and experiences in each production and performance. In order to accomplish this BJT committed to ensuring its productions were done in quality theatres spaces, using quality resources.

The second major guiding factor developed by Bradford was the notion that “Production Drives Training.” This means that young performer’s desire for better roles and greater experiences need to be facilitated by ever increasing quality training. BJT both fuels this desire by creating consistent quality productions while also providing training opportunities to help them obtain their theatrical objectives. To accomplish this BJT provides group workshop training as well as the development of technique through private lessons. BJT’ training technique is designed to integrate and synthesise acting, singing and dancing in a simulated performance workshop environment.

## The Collins Approach: Hedgehog and Bus

One of the main goals Bradford adopted from the research of Jim Collins was that it was imperative for success that businesses get the “right people on the bus.” This means that BJT should have quality leaders in decision-making roles. Collins’ “The Bus” principle (Collins 41) has been a guiding force in developing leaders at BJT since 2001. Another Collins principle Bradford adopted from BJT’s first production was “the Hedgehog” principle (Collins 90-110). This notion means that BJT should do what it does best, “produce one-week Broadway-based musicals”, and be very careful about adopting any extraneous work, unless it directly relates to this main objective. Again Bradford has diligently used this principle to guide BJT’s work. Collin’s “Bus Principle” has allowed BJT to build a trusted core of leaders that meets BJT’s desire for consistency and quality. The “Hedgehog Principle” has helped BJT prioritize goals and maintain its primary focus while preventing it from overreaching and depleting its resources and is a useful tool for theatre companies to consider as it maintains focus and control and helps eliminate distractions, allowing better financial sustainability.

## The Becker Approach

*Art Worlds’* author, Howard Becker, has inspired other important successful principles, which have affected BJT’s work. These principles include “reputational value” and “networking.” Becker insists (360-361) that a “corporate” group, like BJT, creates a reputation and tradition by its ongoing and endurable work. Becker also stresses the notion that a major key to the success of an Art World is its ability to successfully network with other artists, support groups and audience members. Becker (29-30) states: “producing art works requires elaborate cooperation among specialised personnel.” BJT has consistently emphasized reputational value by maintaining quality success mechanisms such as costumes, props, sets etc. from show to show. BJT has also maintained its networking focus by maintaining low prices and quality communication with local theatre groups and the extended community. This has allowed the local theatre community as well as BJT to access shared resources and knowledge, strengthening the standard of local theatre. This in turn feeds back to BJT allowing greater “endurability” and success in its theatrical practice.

The combination of “endurability”, “consistency and quality”, The “Hedgehog” and “Bus” principles, “Networking” and “Reputational Value” has provided BJT a structure which enables financial viability and affordability. For example, BJT’s endurable practices requires consistently affordable costs such as registrations and ticket prices in order to attract its clients on a regular basis. Whereas the “Hedgehog” principle ensures that BJT is always objectifying and eliminating distractions to maintain financial viability. It is these principles collectively that have allowed BJT to remain successful over its 18-year history.

## Newport's *Deep Work*: Enhancing BJT's intensive practice

In order to understand the impact of BJT's processes and productions, it is now important that this paper examines and explores ideas and elements from Cal Newport's study, *Deep Work*, comparing and contrasting ideas and elements of intensive learning. Filtering BJT's work through Newport's ideas may give a greater sense of credibility to the processes of BJT and significantly form a basis for establishing the one-week theatre production process for youth as an iconic way of offering new generations theatrical experiences. The application of Newport's principles will increase focus over time, extending the capacity for youth theatre performers.

Newport, in his book defines "Deep Work" as "the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task. It's a skill that allows you to quickly master complicated information and produce better results in less time." (Newport 4) Newport defines the "Deep Work" antithesis as "Shallow Work": "non-cognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tend not to create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate." (Newport 6)

Exploring "Deep Work" principles in the context of the BJT one-week process implies that each BJT production will require high levels of individual and corporate focus without distraction, in the cognitively demanding task of producing a major Broadway Musical with an average of 65 young performers in one week. The overall task of developing significantly high-level (Deep-Work) productions has been the overriding goal of BJT since 2001. Newport further states, "Deep work requires long periods of uninterrupted thinking." (Newport 5) This element of working in an intense time period meets the BJT formula of five intense eight-hour a day rehearsals followed by four performances on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> days.

*Newport more specifically defines 'deep work' as '... consolidating ... work into intense and uninterrupted pulses ... leveraging the following law of productivity: High-Quality Work Produced = (Time Spent) x (Intensity of Focus)'. (Newport 40)*

The purpose of deep work, therefore, is to extract meaning. This formula describes the work of BJT from production to production and can be measured by contrasting the time on a graph from Monday to Friday with the intensity of deep work required by individuals and groups throughout the ever increasing daily tasks. Newport continues to describe the benefit of 'flow' in *Deep Work*:

*The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi ... emphasizes the advantage of cultivating "concentration so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems." (79)*

Csikszentmihalyi's studies demonstrate that "jobs are actually easier to enjoy than free time, because like 'flow' activities, they have built-in goals, feedback rules, and challenges, all of which encourage one to become involved in one's work...The best

moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile." Csikszentmihalyi calls this mental state "flow." (Newport 84) The inclusion and ritualization of flow-like activities in the rehearsal process contributes not only to the ease of the production process but also to the overall morale of the cast and team as there is a sense of accomplishment through the completion of set goals. BJT is implementing "flow" during its process, at a high level for a great number of people, and that the "built-in goals, feedback rules, and challenges" encourage the cast and production team to be involved in the work at a deep level, giving it meaning (Newport 84).

Another area of value in BJT's process is the emphasis on developing technique in acting, singing and dancing and by building techniques of stagecraft in the performers and team. Newport quotes "Dreyfus and Kelly" and identifies this as "Craftsmanship," and stresses its value by stating that Craftsmanship produces a sense of "Sacredness" (Newport 86) in the process.

Newport's first rule is to establish a "Rhythmic Philosophy of Deep Work Scheduling" (109). In other words, people engaging in "Deep Work" should "commit to a particular pattern for scheduling this work and develop rituals using the same time, place and processes to sharpen...concentration before starting each session." BJT's schedule and rituals almost exclusively have remained the same for 18 years and has successfully been passed down through multiple generations of performers.

Another Newport rule is to schedule deeply focused work in time blocks making adjustments if needed. "When you're done scheduling your day, every minute should be part of a block" and "be liberal with your use of task blocks." (Newport 23) Newport also advocates using multiple blocks of "Deep Work" time throughout a day and making them longer than required to handle the planned tasks. BJT's processes are built around blocks of time ritualised with purpose that uses gradually more intense work. BJT starts each day with the same ritual of focused creative games that build energy, unity and team work into the cast.

One of Newport's principles of "Deep Work" involves individuals and groups who engage in blocks of intense focus, taking regular breaks to rest the brain. BJT's rehearsal process from its inception has included three extended breaks per day. These breaks aid young performers in resting their brains to embrace "Deep Work" rehearsals. As Newport further asserts (146), "Downtime helps recharge the energy needed to work deeply."

Another principle Newport identifies is "collaboration" as he declares:

*In many types of work – especially when pursuing innovation, collaborative deep work can yield better results. This strategy therefore, asks that you consider this option in contemplation how best to integrate depth into your professional life. (132)*

Another reason for employing collaboration as a technique to strengthen deep work in BJT's productions is that "by working side by side with someone on a production, performers can push each other toward deeper levels of work." (Newport 134)

Another phenomenon motivating BJT's young performers is to engage the "Deep Work" process with enthusiasm and vigour. This element Newport identifies: "Focus on Wildly Important goals" (136). BJT's job then, has been to use training and performance processes to help young performers become "Wildly" interested in shows. Newport further asserts this process "will help focus an organisation's energy to a sufficient intensity to ignite results" (136).

Newport identifies distraction as a major danger to "Deep Work" processes and suggests several ways to eliminate distraction from a person's work ethic. Newport reveals that

*People who multitask all the time can't filter out irrelevancy. They can't manage a working memory. They're chronically distracted. They initiate much larger parts of their brain that are irrelevant to the task at hand ... they're pretty much mental wrecks ... it's hard to shake the addiction even when you want to concentrate (157-158).*

BJT asks that actors put away their phones and other devices and create an environment of intense focus. Youth theatre demands an extra emphasis on concentration because of the varied levels of cognitive development represented in the different age groups.

The difference in cognition for children of different age groups is of particular note to BJT and other companies that deal with children. Piaget's cognitive development theory reveals that there are three levels of development within the spectrum of BJT's age groups: The "Preoperational Stage" occurs between the ages 5-7, the Concrete Stage 8-12, and the "Formal Operational Stage" 12 and up (Cherry). The theory suggests that the growing plasticity of the brain allows ever-increasing abilities such as problem solving, logic, abstract thought, memorisation, empathy and capacity in young people. Another study shows that music may increase capacity in young people:

*Children who undergo musical training have better verbal memory, second language pronunciation accuracy, reading ability and executive functions ... Providing a child with techniques and foundations, which will probably serve as a benefit for the entire lifetime. (Miendlarzewska & Trost)*

In contrast, Newport also hypothesises that "Deep Work" has certain time and intensity limits for individuals to successfully perform deep work. He states:

*Performance psychologists ... note that for someone new to such practice ... an hour a day is a reasonable limit. For those familiar with the rigours of such activities, the limit expands to something like four hours, but rarely more. (Newport 219-220)*

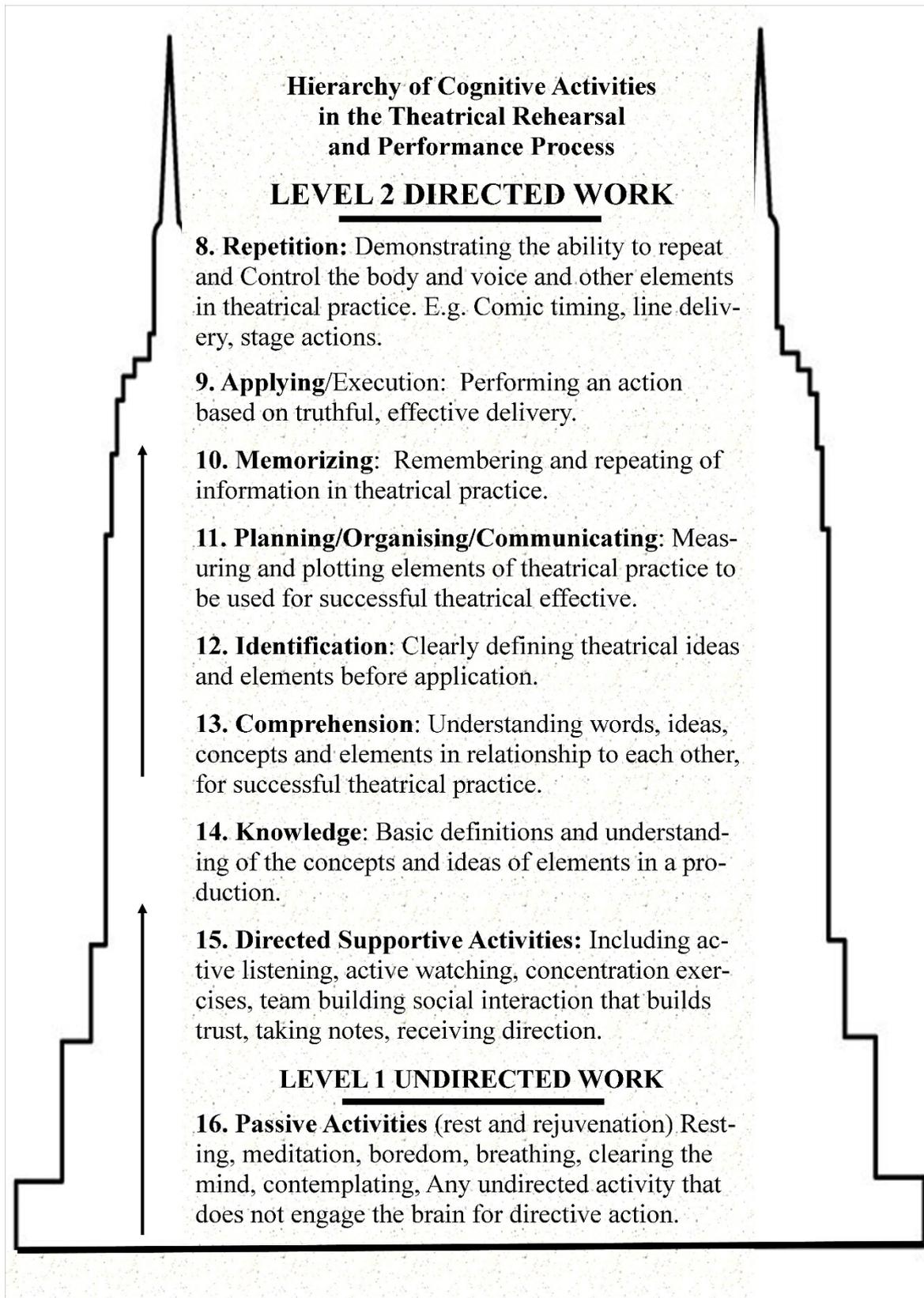
However, Newport also suggests that an 80/20 split is roughly what you would expect when describing a “power law distribution over impact” (197). This principle refers to the ability to give primary focus and purpose to activities that represent what would equate to 80% of the core business that produces success in individual or group activities. Newport’s 80/20 principle is almost exactly like Collin’s (90) “Hedgehog Principle,” and has been practiced in BJT’s work from its inception. BJT regularly eliminates extraneous activities and goals, concentrating on the “top two or three such activities.” that have helped BJT “succeed” (Newport 201).

In order to further examine BJT’s intensive practice, it is necessary to introduce two figures. Figure 1 is the “BJT Musical Process Taxonomy.” The taxonomy is a hierarchy of “Deep Work” intensively focused activities and their processes in an order determined by increasing levels of intense focus and deep work in BJT’s one-week theatrical practice. Figure 2 is a graph that quantitatively measures (focus x time) in the BJT weekly process. This study supposes that a high percentage of a BJT ensemble, are “wildly passionate” about their involvement in the theatrical production. This intense engagement over a short period of time takes place in “chunks” of time, with regular periods of rest.” These and other factors identified by Newport may contribute to extending the capacity of “Deep Work” for individuals and groups.

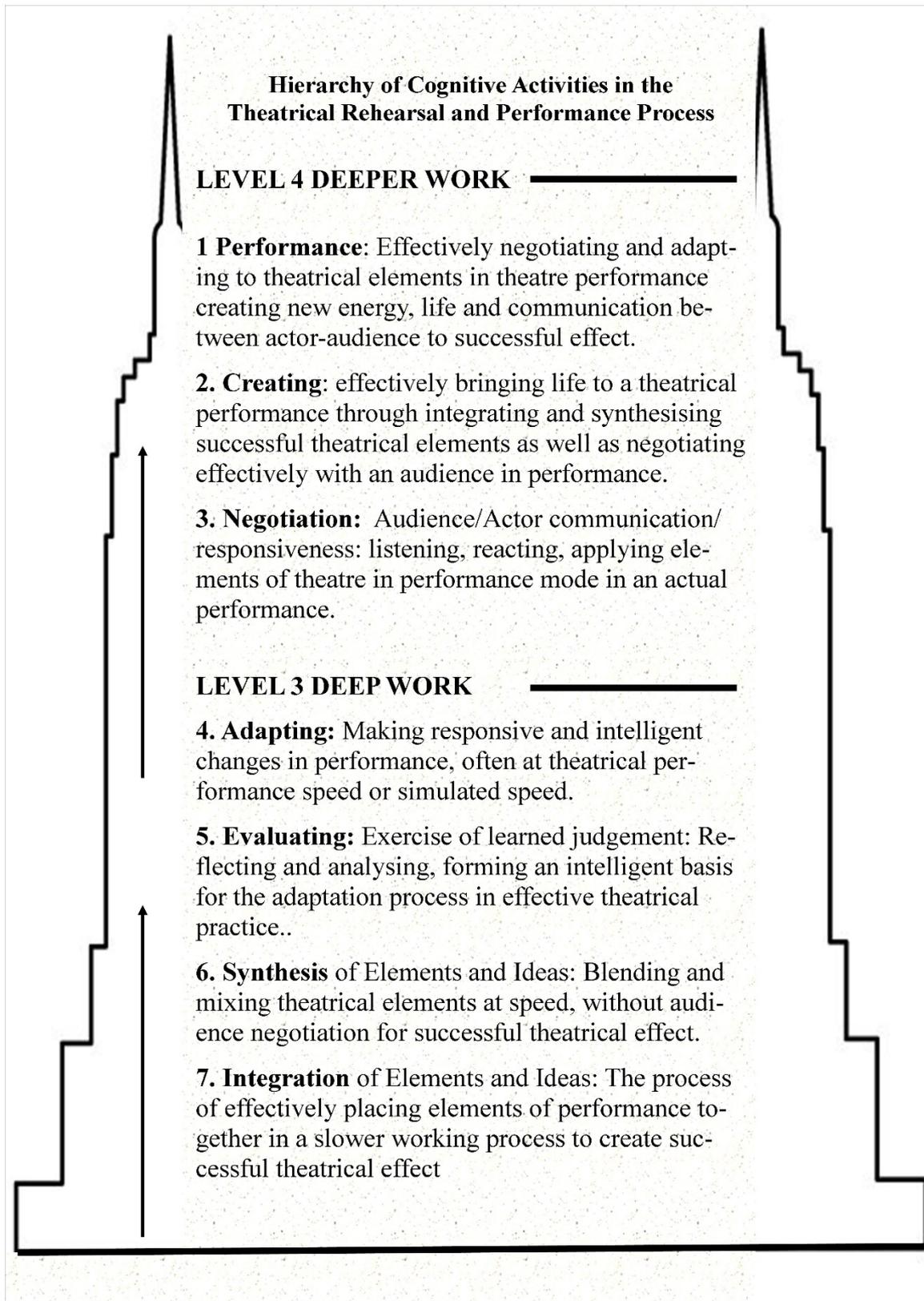
The following two figures “BJT’s Musical Theatre Taxonomy” explain and describe the BJT musical theatre process by listing the ever-increasing tasks that build upon each other to create successful theatrical production in BJT’s intensive process.

In Figure 1, at the bottom tier of the 16-element taxonomy is the “Undirected Activities” list. This level describes the “do-nothing” or “very little” activities that performers may do when they are doing nothing in their breaks. Though BJT’s includes strategic breaks and rest periods as part of its intensive process, BJT’s main work generally begins with “Directed Activity.”

“Directed Activity” as listed in tasks (8–15) can be defined as one-dimensional work activities that performers achieve when gaining and applying knowledge, identifying key elements of characterization, play construction, language and movement, music skills, etc. The “Directed Activity” process continues by applying the skills of comprehending and understanding information, memorising lines, planning, organising and communicating ideas and information, as well as repeating skills and actions in the basic forming stage of putting the elements of the production together. Primarily these activities begin as one-dimensional tasks of building characters as well as the basic level of blending and overlapping ensemble activities. “Directed Work” begins to graduate into deep work process as the intense cognitive activities increase in the rehearsal process.



**Figure 1.** Non-directed Work and Directed Work  
(reprinted with permission from Brisbane Junior Theatre).

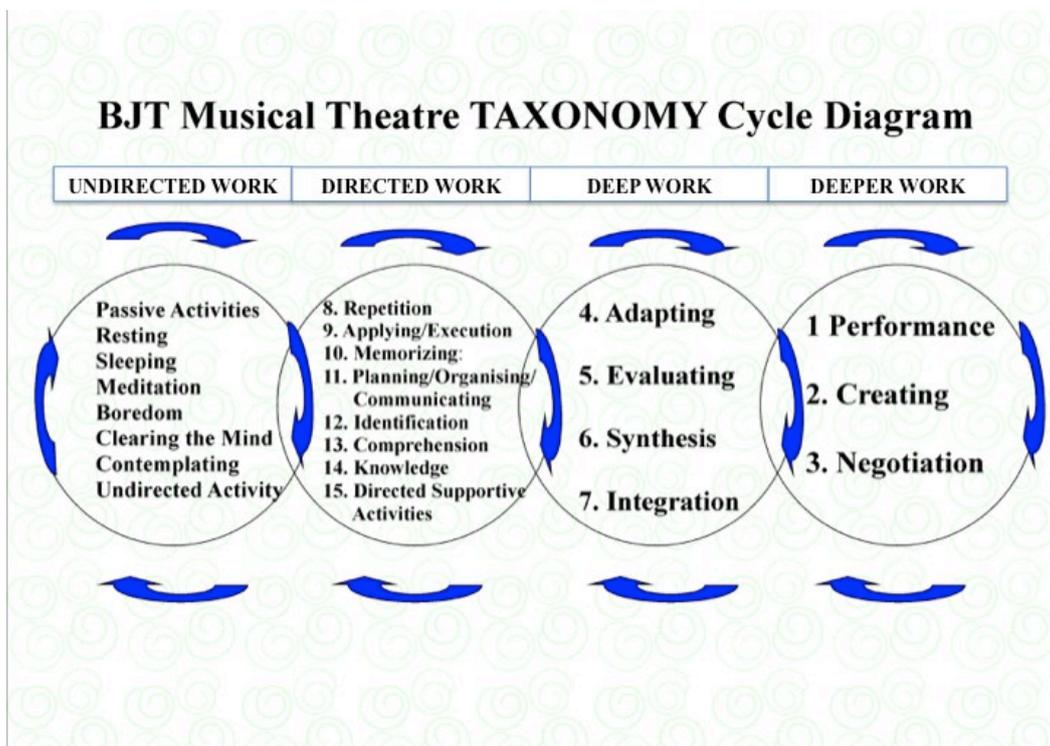


**Figure 2.** Deep Work and Deeper Work  
(reprinted with permission from Brisbane Junior Theatre).

In Figure 2, the “Deep Work” stage 4–7, is demonstrated when the performers use integration and synthesis techniques, evaluating skills and constant adapting techniques, blending acting beats, building characterisation, as well as combining and working acting, singing and dancing together, applying these three dimensional elements with actual production based pace and rhythm. Integrating and synthesising the performing elements of voice, acting and movement are significant theatre tasks that represent a wide scope of theatrical “Deep Work” activities and require intensive focus. Joan Melton, a pioneer in the study of ‘Integration’ in musical theatre states:

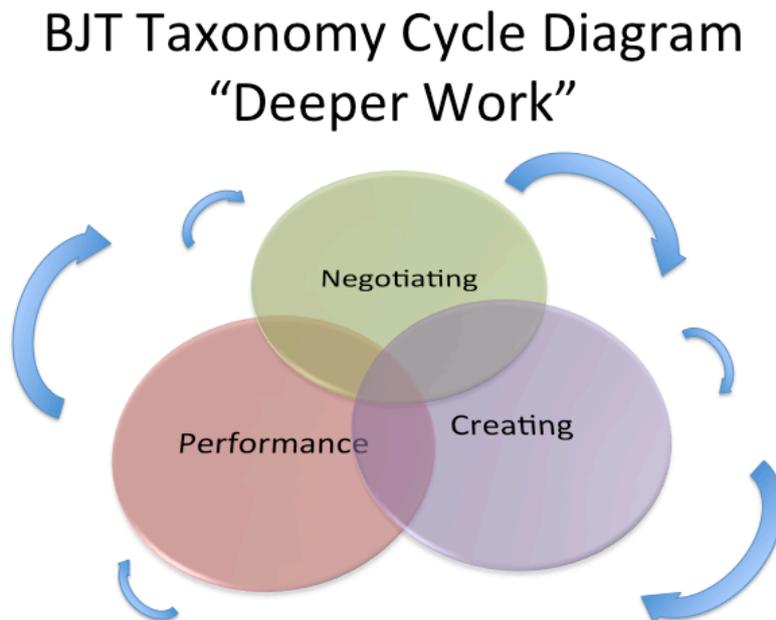
*Music and theatre come together in extraordinary ways both in opera and in musical theatre. Even in non-musical productions, actors sing with or without training. Yet in the training process, singers and actors often live very different lives and take on perspectives that separate rather than integrate their work as performers ... Music and theatre might well come together long before the advent of rehearsals and performances, and if they did, singers and actors would stand to benefit enormously. More overlap in the training process would mean greater ease and skill in performance. (Melton xiii-xiv)*

The 4th level, Deeper Work, combines audience-actor negotiation, adaptation and transformative creativity, fully realised integrated technique at full pace and speed of performance. It is also important to understand that each of the four areas of this taxonomy should also be seen as operating in constantly moving overlapping cycles of elements that are in no way fixed or static.



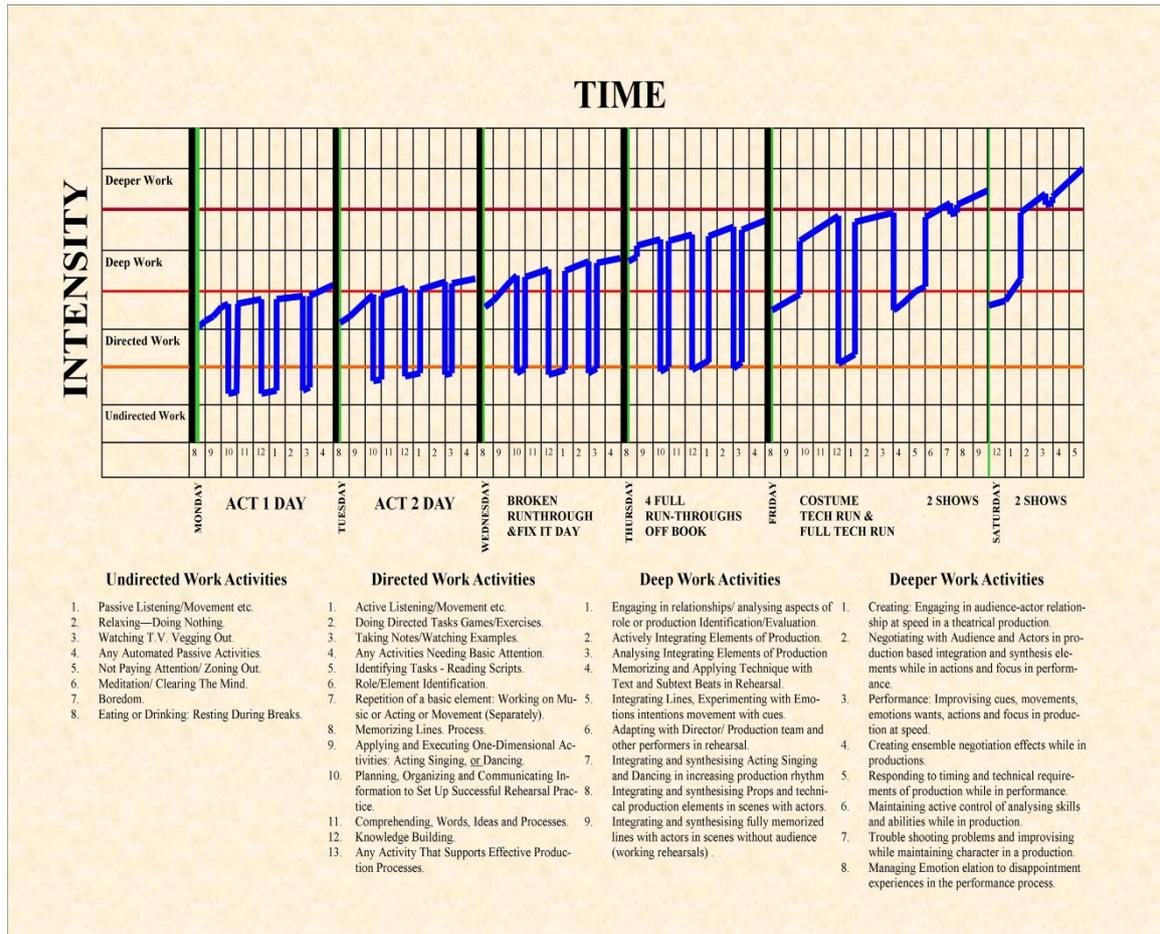
**Figure 3.** Taxonomy Cycle diagram (reprinted with permission from Brisbane Junior Theatre).

In Figure 3, it is important to understand that each task has a cycle of continual intensity of focus. Each cycle overlaps and affects the following upward cycle of the taxonomy creating a depth of skill and understanding in each of the levels of work achieved. Each element is not static, but constantly moving and growing, building with and upon previous cyclical elements to establish the final result of negotiating, creating and performing powerful and truthful theatre. Figure 3 demonstrates how levels of the taxonomy overlap and are connected to produce successful theatrical practice.



**Figure 4.** Deeper Work cycle (reprinted with permission from Brisbane Junior Theatre).

Figure 4 demonstrates the non-static nature of each of the elements, while recognising that the elements of each level have their own unique flow of cyclic creativity, that depends on ever increasing intensely focused tasks and the conventions and rules that shape them and govern how these elements and levels operate. The figure uses the “Deeper Work” level as an example to show how each element connects in a cyclical group and spins with flow through time, overlapping with other necessary elements in the process of creative growth toward the goal of producing a successful production. It is important to note that not only are the circles interconnected, producing nuances and new creativity, they are also moving individually and as a whole in the same direction reflecting that successful production needs to be truthful, life-like and transformative as it interacts in fresh ways in each actor-audience encounter.



**Figure 5.** Time over Intensity: BJT intensive process graph (reprinted with permission from Brisbane Junior Theatre).

Figure 5 is a “Time over Intensity” graph demonstrating BJT’s one-week intensive process. The intensity of the “Taxonomy” graph is the vertical information measuring ever increasing, intensely focused activities throughout the week. The horizontal timeline quantitatively measures the hourly work of BJT’s performers in rehearsal. The figure’s blue line rises according to the intensity of the group task and falls when there are shallow work activities. The graph clearly shows that the levels of intensity based on the tasks of intense focus demonstrates in the BJT Taxonomy shown in Figures 1 and 2, generally rises according to the level of task intensity through time. This further demonstrates that as the performers progress in skill and technique, they become an integrated and synthesised ensemble, ultimately performing with creativity as they rise through each of the 4 levels and 16 elements of the Musical Theatre Taxonomy.

When viewed as a whole, the five figures above demonstrate not only BJT’s ever-increasing “Deep Work” tasks, but also the three-dimensional process of how these tasks function within BJT’s actual intensive rehearsal and performance process, and that BJT has operated within the framework of Newport’s “Deep Work” principles since its inception. Newport’s “Deep Work” principles validate BJT’s ability to develop and perform a production within the limited time of its intensive one-week period. The

proof of the importance of these principles can be found within its consistent success over BJT's 18-year history.

## Conclusion

The need for an increased emphasis on theatre for Australia's youth has ensured that a new paradigm be sought. A strong solution for this comes in the form of "intensive theatre". While intensive theatre has had proven success internationally in both America and Britain, some changes must be made in order for it to succeed in Australia. BJT's intensive one-week rehearsal and performance process has demonstrated the ability to successfully adapt to the Australian culture and its proven durability, 76 successful productions over 18 years, means that its approach is worthy of consideration and possibly emulation. Due to the fact that the intensive nature of the one-week process at the point of BJT's inception was non-existent in Australia and globally, and that BJT's intensive practice success has, subverted the accepted norms of time over focus in traditional theatrical production, only heightens BJT's significance. Cal Newport's principles have both demonstrated an explanation for BJT's ability to function against the norm, and provided a framework for other theatrical practices to emulate and incorporate. Some examples include being wildly passionate, producing flow, cultivating and engaging youth in collaborative work, developing supportive relationships, instituting chunks of well-planned "Deep Work" time, followed by significant chunks of planned rest and rejuvenation, maintaining important goals, eliminating extraneous activities and actively eliminating distractions.

BJT's intensive model and formula have the potential to be the new paradigm called for by the "2011 Australia Theatre Forum" for inspiring theatre performance opportunities for young performers (Australia Theatre Forum). For example, BJT's one-week process could be adopted by schools, theatres, arts and community groups to create programs that engage young people. This paper has also demonstrated that BJT's intensive youth theatre process is unique and is perhaps the new paradigm that would provide young performers with technique, skills and greater stage experience, not only for Australia but globally. For these reasons, BJT's one-week phenomenon may deserve closer attention.

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## About the author

Jack Bradford, MA, Grad Dip Ed Secondary, BA, AA, Dip MUS, Cert IV TAE, is an American/Australian theatre performer, educator and director. Jack is the founder/artistic director of [Brisbane Jr. Theatre](#), Starlight Theatre and Brisbane Musical Theatre in Brisbane. Jack's Musical Theatre roles include Jean Val Jean in three productions of *Les Miserables* with a 2002 4MBS Award for Best Actor in Brisbane. Jack has also played Sweeney in *Sweeney Todd*, Jesus in *Godspell*, and Arthur in *Camelot*. Jack has directed a number of Brisbane premiere productions including *Songs for a New World*, *Witches of Eastwick*, *Rent* and *13 the Musical*. Jack's screen credits' include *Daybreakers* with Ethan Hawke and Mr. Chauvel in the BBC/Disney TV Show *Mortified*. Jack has taught Drama and Theatre at the tertiary and secondary level and currently teaches weekly classes for Brisbane Junior Theatre where he directs and produces five yearly productions. In addition to this Jack is also the Artistic Director for BMT (Brisbane Musical Theatre) where he recently produced and directed *The Roar of the Greasepaint* *The Smell of the Crowd* and *Les Miserables*. Jack also teaches part-time at Mueller College as well a Charlotte Mason College where he is developing and teaching a Diploma of Musical Theatre course. Jack is also currently directing BJT's *Peter Pan* and preparing for BJT's upcoming productions of *Annie* and *Grease*. Jack is also very proud of his very talented and skilled family, Deborah his wife, Zachary, Jacob and Jesse his wonderful sons.

# Vocal resonance: Optimising source-filter interactions in voice training

Zac Bradford<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to assist the voice practitioner in their teaching practice. This article will link information relating to source/filter interactions to practical application. Through the understanding and application of these concepts, one can elicit consistent positive change in students' voices. Furthermore, the practices discussed in this article will provide vocalists with a tangible way of repeating optimal voice production. Readers of this article will likely have different levels of familiarity with this information. I aim to persuade the reader that understanding concepts related to vocal resonance can be advantageous to voice practitioners. I hope to convince any sceptics of its importance to reconsider and explore this topic further. Understanding the scientific terminology and how the elements within resonance connect to each other may be an obstacle for some. The theory regarding vocal resonance is a key element in making voice practitioners more effective in their work. This article will provide a starting point for organising this information in a logical way and provide clear strategies for how this information could be used to enhance the teaching of voice.

## Keywords

Voice; Pedagogy; Resonance; Acoustics; Singing; Teaching

## Introduction

Voice science is being studied and explored by voice teachers (and other voice practitioners). An increasing number of voice pedagogy courses, being offered through universities and independent organisations suggest this trend will continue (Harris 2016, Courses; Michael, Graduate Voice Pedagogy). Of all topics in voice pedagogy, resonance is often the most challenging to understand. Voice Resonance encompasses concepts such as formant tuning/detuning, semi occluded vocal tract postures, impedance matching, linear and non-linear source filter theory and velopharyngeal opening. I have personally witnessed numerous positive transformations in my

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students as a direct result of applying techniques based on resonance concepts. These topics will be discussed later in this article.

Despite the vast amount of information on this topic available to the voice community, I have observed that there is often a disconnect when it comes to creating clear links between the science and practical application. Howell states: “Admittedly, at least based on how the concept is currently explained, there is a high knowledge threshold required before formant theory becomes truly practical for most singers. A recent informal Facebook poll of my singing and voice teaching friends revealed a wide divergence in both the basic understanding and practical application of formant theory” (Howell, A Spectrogram...). It is my hope that this article will help lessen this disconnect and provide the reader with greater understanding and ability to apply the source/filter concepts.

One approach to training that strives to link voice science and practice is Mindful Voice Production (MVP), created by vocologist Dr Brian Gill (Gill 2015, Mindful Voice Production). MVP is not a method, but rather an approach which utilises “tools” informed by a detailed understanding of the human voice, including resonance and its various topics. Gill says “there are many ways you could approach practical application, but you have to have a-way” (Gill, October 2018 Personal Communication).

This article will begin by providing a brief overview of how the human voice works in light of current voice research. The second part of the article will explore three theoretical concepts relating to vocal resonance, and strategies for utilising them in practical application. The application of the concepts discussed in this article are heavily influenced by Gill and his approach to voice training, MVP.

## Why explore vocal resonance?

*Of all instrument makers the voice builder is in greatest need for exhaustive and exact information about the instrument he makes, for the reason that the voice is of all musical instruments the most complicated in its method of tone production. (Redfield 278-279)*

Having a detailed understanding of how the voice works can be of great benefit to the voice practitioner. I have spoken with many voice teachers who are not familiar with detailed scientific information pertaining to vocal resonance, and vocal production and they are able to achieve positive results with students through intuition, heightened listening skills and time-tested exercises. Understanding source/filter relationships can add to your tool kit, enhance your efficacy as a practitioner, and inform your understanding of why an exercise is, or isn't eliciting efficiency in the voice. Optimising source/filter interactions can result easier vocal production and enhanced sound output for less effort for the student.

Resonance adjustments have the potential to impact the vocal output and input of the voice user (Bozeman 10). The output may consist of vocal dynamics and timbre. Vocal input (the way in which the voice operates) includes stability, ease of production,

efficiency, flexibility and register transitions. If optimal resonance adjustments are made, vocal function can be enhanced. This enhancement of vocal function may assist in vocal sustainability by minimising vocal fatigue for a given task. Other potential benefits are that as the body is producing sound more efficiently there can be a physical freedom that allows the vocalist to be more expressive in their communication.

It is well established that some professional actors and singers take advantage of resonance strategies (Raphael 83-87). While the science behind resonance is relatively new, the practical effects have been realised in a practical setting for many years. Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) wrote about the positive effects of resonance on the voice, before the scientific community understood non-linear source-filter interactions in the voice. Stanislavsky made specific mention of benefits including balanced timbre, carrying power of the voice, increased range, ease of production, and the ability to vocalise for long periods of time without the voice tiring (Stanislavski 94-101). Teachers of the bel canto tradition, including Mathilde Marchesi (1821-1913), also had discovered this through practical explorations (Doscher 178).

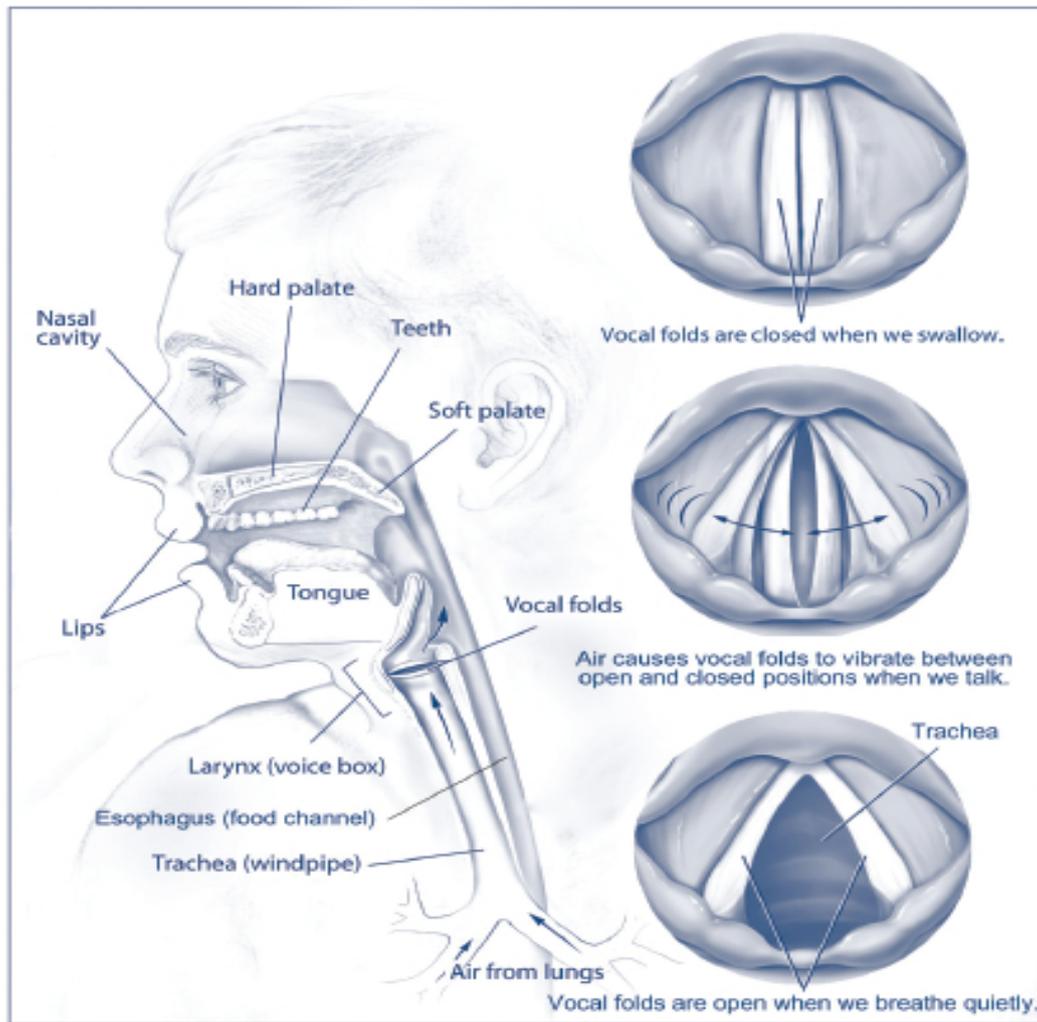
## **A brief summary of vocal resonance research**

### **Source-filter in voice production**

In order to understand source-filter, it is important to first break it down to its components; the source, the origin of voiced sound, and the filter, the cavities which the sound energy passes through as it exits the body (see Figure 1).

#### Source

The voice source is the pulsing trans-glottal airflow (Miller 122; Sundberg 2018) (Miller 122). In order for voiced sound to be produced, certain conditions must be set up in the vocal apparatus. These conditions involve the positioning of the vocal folds (source) and the sufficient lung pressure. When the vocal folds are adequately adducted (i.e. brought together), an increase in breath pressure (relative to atmospheric pressure) sets the vocal folds into vibration. The vibrating vocal folds create alterations in pressure. Phases of increased pressure (compressions) and decreased pressure (rarefactions) result in sound waves. These pulses of transglottal air flow generated by the vibrating vocal folds will from here on be referred to as the “Source”. Sound waves are then propagated through the vocal tract (Gill, Vocal Tract Tuning).

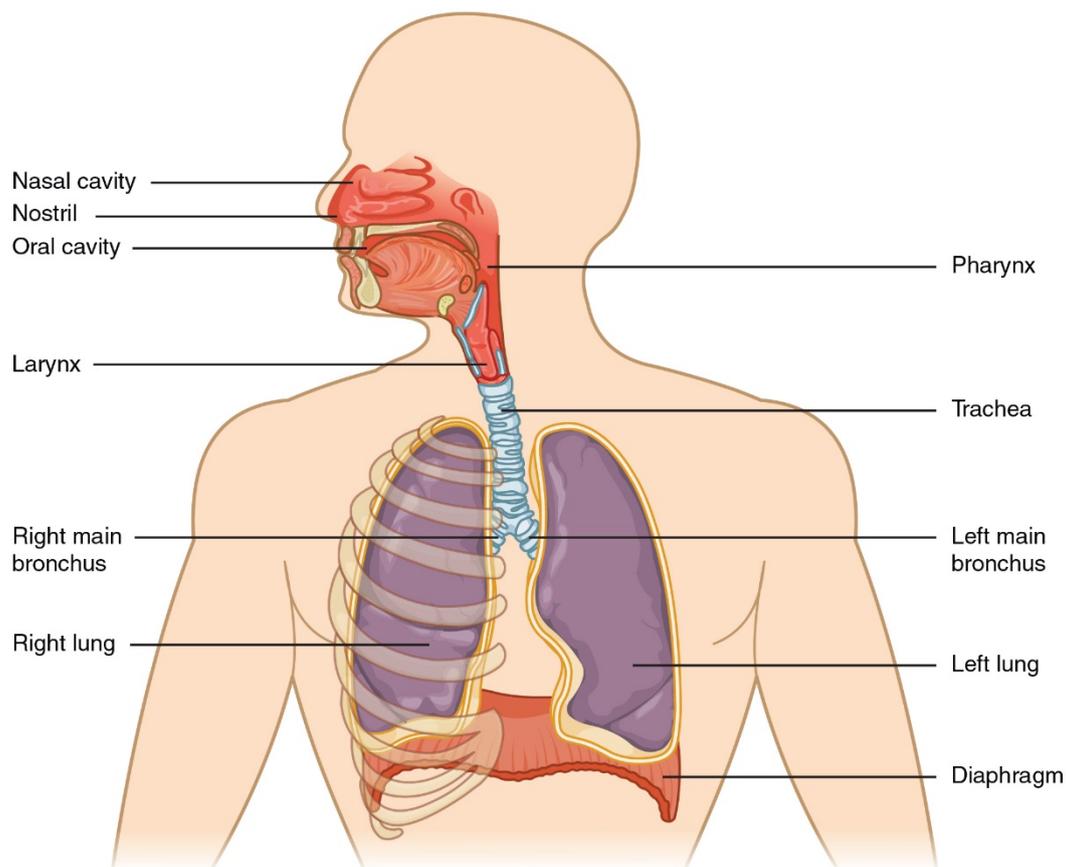


**Figure 1.** Source, filter and vocal fold vibration. (Source: File: Hoarseness image.jpg, used under Creative Commons Attribution–Share Alike 4.0 International License.)<sup>2</sup>

### Filter

The vocal tract is a selective sound filter (Doscher, xviii): selective, in that some information produced at the source is enhanced and other parts of the signal are diminished. The vocal tract is comprised of the pharynx (laryngo, oro and naso), Oral Cavity and Nasal Cavity (McCoy 17) (Gill Vocal Tract Tuning) (see Figure 2). The term “filter” will be used to represent all of the aforementioned components of the vocal tract.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hoarseness\\_image.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hoarseness_image.jpg)  
(Creative Commons: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>)



**Figure 2.** The sound producing system. (Source: File: 2301 Major Respiratory Organs.jpg, used under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License.)<sup>3</sup>

## Resonance

Before exploring the theoretical underpinnings of the voice source and filter further, it will be helpful to have a definition of what resonance is. Resonance has been defined as “A Condition that exists between the source of energy and the configuration of the medium such that the energy of some frequencies of vibration will be kept alive in the medium while others will quickly die off” (Story 1999, 1).

Using Dr Story’s definition as a framework, I will now explore the voice source, the frequencies of vibration produced and the “medium” (aka filter) in which these frequencies travel through. This will provide us with a point of reference in the practical application section of this article.

<sup>3</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2301\\_Major\\_Respiratory\\_Organs.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2301_Major_Respiratory_Organs.jpg)  
(Creative Commons: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en>)

### Prominent theories of source-filter interaction + analogy

There are two prominent theories of source-filter behaviour in the human voice, the Linear and the Non-Linear source-filter theories. The relationship between a performer, and an audience can be looked at through a linear and non-linear lens (Bozeman 10). In this analogy, the linear relationship is like that of a film actor and a camera (see Figure 3). The performer is the source of energy. This energy is received by the camera, which acts as a filter. The performance is transmitted from the camera to the audience as they view it on a screen. It is important to note that the audience's response does not affect the performer during the filming.



**Figure 3.** Actor and camera analogy for linear source/filter theory. (Source: *Filming Actors at Table, Motion Picture Kitchen Set, Texas-Illinois Co*, used under Creative Commons Attribution–Share Alike 4.0 International License.)<sup>4</sup>

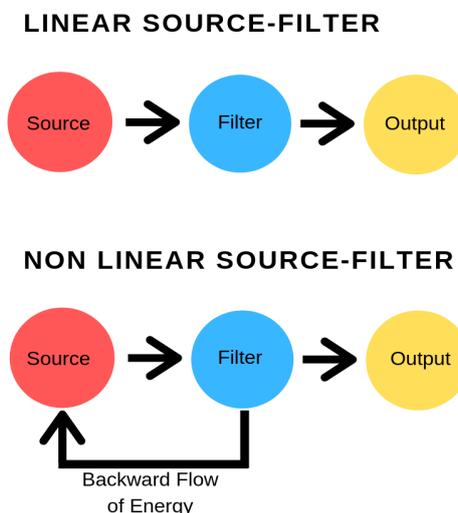
In a non-linear relationship, this relationship is like a live show in a theatre. The actor remains the source of energy, and the energy is received by the live audience. The audience may respond or react in a number of ways. The audience reaction, then, has the potential to impact the performer's ongoing performance. If the performer is inexperienced, booing from the audience may derail the performer completely, causing them to forget a line or lose confidence. In an optimal setting, great applause from the audience may give the performer a boost of energy that assists in their ongoing performance. Contrast that with an experienced performer, who on the other hand, may be able to perform at a high level regardless of the audience response (Story 1999, 1) (see Figure 4).

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.flickr.com/photos/smu\\_cul\\_digitalcollections/14152548523](https://www.flickr.com/photos/smu_cul_digitalcollections/14152548523)  
(Creative Commons: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>)



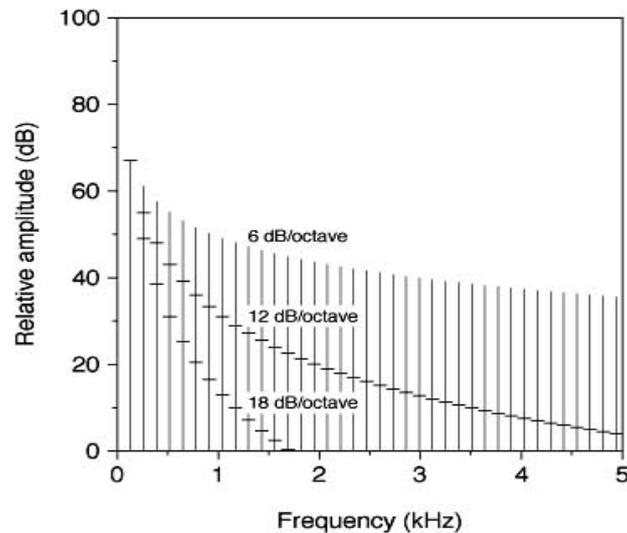
**Figure 4.** Performer and audience interaction, used as an analogy for non-linear relationships in voice production. (Source: No title, used under Creative Commons CCO 1.0 Universal License.)<sup>5</sup>

The voice source and filter can have similar interactions to the performer and audience (see Figure 5). In a linear situation, the information produced at the voice source is filtered by the vocal tract, and received by the listener. In a non-linear relationship, the same occurs, however, the interaction doesn't end there. If the filter is shaped optimally, this has the potential to enhance the vocal fold vibration, via a backward flow of energy from the vocal tract to the vocal folds. If the filter is not shaped well for the given pitch being vocalised, the mismatch of source-filter may interfere with the ease and evenness of vocal fold vibration (Titze Vocology 287).



**Figure 5.** Source/filter theory: Linear and non-linear.

<sup>5</sup> <https://pxhere.com/en/photo/950795>  
 (Creative Commons: <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>)



**Figure 6.** Spectral slope. (Source: Ingo R. Titze, National Center for Voice and Speech, reprinted with permission.)<sup>6</sup>

### Source-filter interactions

Taking advantage of optimal vocal tract configurations to enhance vocal fold behaviour in voice training and performance can be beneficial to the vocalist. When the source and filter interact in a positive way, vocal effort can be minimised for a vocal output (Story 2000; Sundberg 2017). Learning what these optimal filter configurations are, and how they can be accessed, will be explored in the practical application section of this article. These strategies may allow vocalists to experience a more efficient way of vocalising (Titze *Vocology* 286). It can be quite useful for vocalists to learn to bypass these interactions also, when/if needed for a certain timbral aesthetic. However, this is often difficult to achieve initially, and may be wiser to experiment with over a longer period of time during training.

Variations in the sub-systems of the vocal instrument can occur, resulting in endless combinations of interactions, e.g. varying muscular contractions, levels of sub-glottal pressure, lung volume etc. The voice practitioner benefits from considering the interdependency of the systems of the vocal apparatus on the whole instrument. Exploring the endless variables and combinations of the various sub-system interactions are beyond the scope of this article.

### Understanding the voice source

The voice source produces a sound wave. This sound wave consists of the fundamental frequency (FO), which is associated with the pitch that listeners perceive, and is synonymous with the first harmonic (H1). Harmonics are all integer multiples of the fundamental frequency (Gill, *Vocal Tract Tuning...*).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ncvs.org/ncvs/tutorials/voiceprod/tutorial/graphing.html>

Voice scientists use a theoretical construct known as a Source Spectrum to isolate the unfiltered sound created at the voice source from that which is filtered by the vocal tract. This source spectrum is thought to drop off from -6dB in loud vocalising, -12dB per octave in speech, and breathy phonation can be -18dB per octave (McCoy 23; Miller 120-21) (see Figure 6). “Harmonics in the sound produced by the vibrating vocal folds gradually decrease in amplitude relative to the fundamental. This phenomenon is called spectral slope...” (McCoy 23). The amount of contact and closure time of the vocal folds during each vibratory cycle has an influence on the decay rate of harmonics. The longer the closure time the more prominent the higher harmonics (Doscher 126). There is also a link between the source spectrum and the tonal quality the listener perceives in the voice (Sundberg 1987, 76).

This information can be of value to a practitioner. If a student is not needing to produce a brassy sound (rich in higher harmonics), then very little vocal fold closure time will be required. Taking advantage of a well-tuned vocal tract and amplification may be more than sufficient to create the desired aesthetic. Minimising vocal fold closure time, and therefore friction of the vocal fold tissue is also a vocal health and sustainability consideration that can benefit vocalists (Gill, Vocal Tract Tuning...; Titze 2012, 18).

The vocal tract can only filter information produced at the source. For example, if the source does not produce information in the higher frequency range of 2,500 -3,500 Hz, then the filter cannot boost it, because it does not exist. This may happen in breathy vocalisation (refer to Audio Clip 1), which has a strong fundamental frequency and very little information above the first few harmonics (McCoy 23-24).



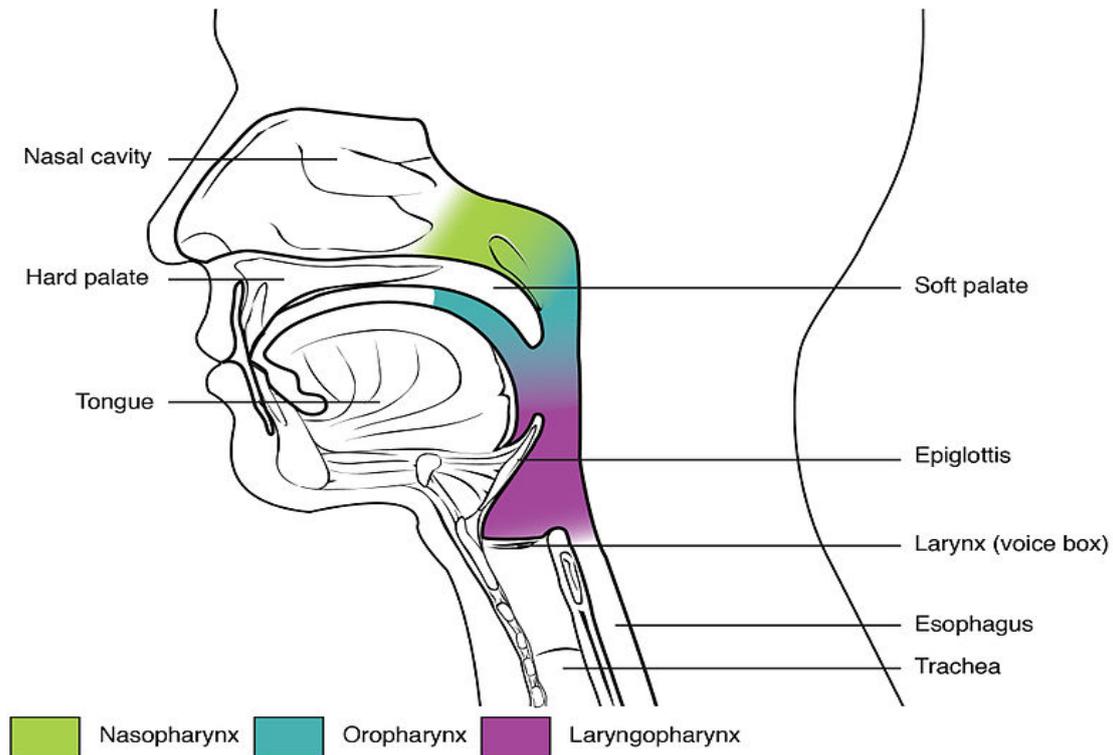
**Audio Clip 1.7** Breathly phonation (little closure time at the vocal folds results in a steep drop-off of amplitude).

## Understanding the filter

As mentioned previously, the filter consists of the pharynx, the oral cavity and nasal cavity. The pharynx can be divided into three sections: the laryngo-pharynx, oropharynx and the naso-pharynx (see Figure 7).

“The unique feature of the vocal apparatus is that the size and shape of the resonant system is under conscious control of the speaker or singer” (Culver 226). The articulators are under the conscious control of the vocalist. These include the pharynx, tongue, palate, jaw and mouth opening and lips. The configuration of these articulators influences the size and shape of the vocal tract. For example, if the hump of the tongue is depressed, a larger space is created in the oral cavity, and constriction increased in the pharynx. This brings us to the formation of vowels.

<sup>7</sup> To listen to this audio clip (and Audio Clips 2 and 3) please download and save this PDF to your device; Adobe Flash Player may also be required.



**Figure 7.** Divisions of the pharynx. (Source: File: 2305 Divisions of the Pharynx.jpg, used under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License.)<sup>8</sup>

## Formants and vowels

The vocal tract has multiple resonance chambers. If you have read vocal resonance literature, then you are likely to have come across the term formant. “A formant is a variable resonance of the vocal tract” (Miller 113). A formant is variable as you can alter it by adjusting the articulators to form various configurations. The lowest two resonances of the vocal tract are known as vowel formants, often referred to as F1 and F2 (or R1 and R2, R standing for Resonance). F1 is sensitive to changes of space in the pharynx. While F2 is sensitive to changes of space in the oral cavity. It must be said, that F1 is not the pharynx, and F2 is not the oral cavity. This is important, as changes to lip rounding can impact F1, and changes to larynx position can impact F2.

Altering F1 and F2 to be more sensitive to the information produced at the source is often referred to as vowel modification (Miller 29-30). Variations in space, size, opening, texture of the wall can impact the resonance frequency of a Formant. Barbara Doscher says:

*The larger the cavity, the lower the frequency to which it resonates, the smaller the cavity the higher the frequency ... The longer and narrower the neck of the opening, the lower the frequency to which the cavity responds. The wider and flatter the neck, the higher the frequency ... The softer the*

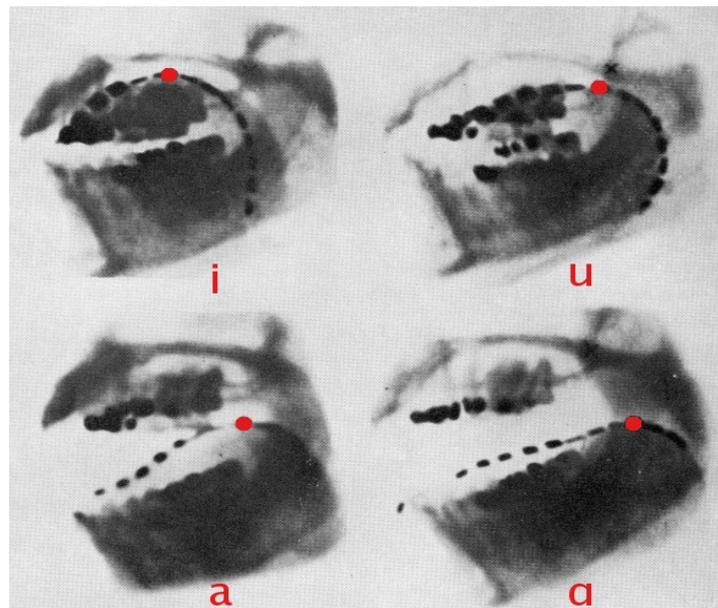
<sup>8</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2305\\_Divisions\\_of\\_the\\_Pharynx.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2305_Divisions_of_the_Pharynx.jpg) (Creative Commons: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en>)

*walls, the more the lower overtones are emphasised. Hard walls encourage higher partials. (Doscher 103-4)*

These acoustical laws will provide insight on how vocalists can produce more output for less effort. I will explore in more detail how these adjustments can be made in the practical application section of this article.

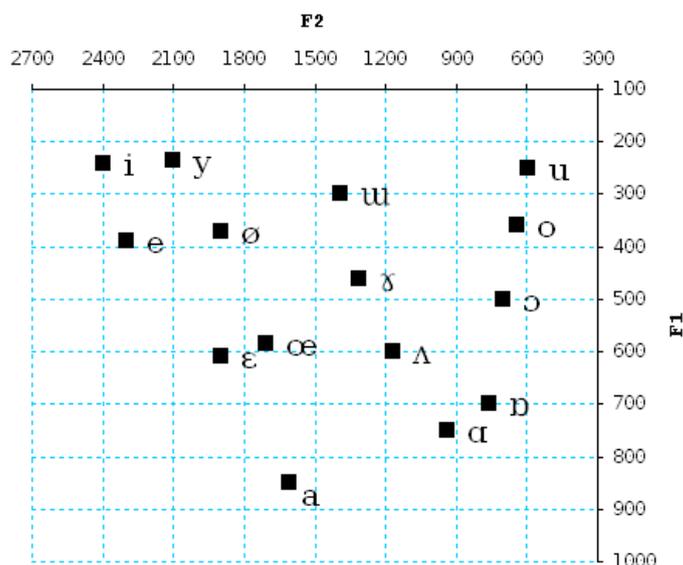
Vowels have certain characteristics that can be visualised using MRI and vowel formant charts. Looking to Figure 8 notice the differing vocal tract shapes for four vowels: /a/, /ɑ/, /i/ and /u/ (refer to Audio clip 2). The /ɑ/ vowel (as in “Father”) has a constriction in the pharynx and a large space in the oral cavity. This pharyngeal constriction is linked with a high F1 frequency (see Figure 9). The larger space in the oral cavity is linked with a low F2 frequency. Recall what Doscher said regarding the size of the cavities. Notice how the coordinates for the /ɑ/ are close together at roughly 750Hz (F1) and 1000Hz (F2) (see Figure 9).

The /i/ vowel (as in “tree”) has a large space in the pharynx and constriction in the oral cavity, leading us to the conclusion that /i/ will have a low F1 (near 300Hz) and high F2 (2,400Hz). The /u/ vowel has an intermediate pharyngeal constriction, giving it an F1 near 250Hz. While /u/ has a large space in the oral cavity, giving it the lowest F2 of the vowels (600Hz).



**Figure 8.** Vocal tract shapes for various vowels. (Source: X-rays of Daniel Jones' [i, u, a, ɑ], used under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License.)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vowel#/media/File:Cardinal\\_vowels-Jones\\_x-ray.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vowel#/media/File:Cardinal_vowels-Jones_x-ray.jpg)  
(Creative Commons: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)



**Figure 9.** Average vowel formants F1 F2. (Source: File: Average vowel formants F1 F2.png, used under Creative Commons Attribution–Share Alike 4.0 International License.)<sup>10</sup>

An important note: vowels are not defined by an absolute point, but rather, cover a large region. There are a range of options when it comes to shaping a vowel. For example, the /u/ vowel has an F2 that could be as low as 500Hz or as high as 1,110Hz depending on how it is articulated, or who it is articulated by (other vowel charts reflect these variations). The size and shape of the individual’s vocal tract are some influencing factors that will impact the formant frequencies of vowels. Shaping vowels so that the resonant frequency of the space (filter) is in close proximity with the frequencies produced by the vocal folds (source) is of benefit to the vocalist. In a practical setting this is valuable information, as it gives you a range of options for shaping a vowel for dramatic, stylistic or functional reasons.



**Audio Clip 2.** Vowel sequence (/a/ /i/ /u/ vowels vocalised).

### Summary of resonance theory

To summarise the theory section, the vibrating fold folds interrupt trans-glottal airflow, which is the source of vocal sound. This source of energy consists of the fundamental frequency (the pitch we perceive) and a series of harmonics, all which are multiples of the Fo. This information is selectively filtered by the vocal tract. The shape, size and

<sup>10</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Average\\_vowel\\_formants\\_F1\\_F2.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Average_vowel_formants_F1_F2.png)  
(Creative Commons: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>)

opening of the vocal tract will determine which harmonics are boosted and which die off. The vowel formants (F1 and F2) determine the vowel.

There are two prominent theories of source-filter interaction, the linear and the non-linear. According to the non-linear source-filter theory, the filter has the potential to influence the way in which the source functions. The remainder of this article will explore practical strategies for taking advantage of these non-linear interactions for optimal ease and efficiency in vocal production.

## **The how: Practical application, putting it together!**

### **Resonant voice**

Before delving into these three concepts, it may be helpful to define resonant voice in clinical terms. “Clinically, resonant voice has been defined as any voice production that is both easy to produce and vibrant in facial tissue” (Titze, 2012, 286). So why is resonant voice so important for vocalists? Firstly, it is a health consideration, the ease of vocal production is linked with minimised friction at the vocal folds. Gill suggests that “The sympathetic vibrations toward the front of the face are indicative of an effective resonator, whereas the ease of production is indicative of an effective use of the vibrator, which is often dependant on the efficiency of the resonators” (Gill, Vocal Tract Tuning...).

These sensations can be useful for the practitioner and student during voice training. Sympathetic vibrations toward the front of the face can aid the vocalist in learning to monitor if the voice production is efficient. When the conversion from Aerodynamic to Acoustic energy is efficient, the sound is carried away from the source, hence, vibrant in facial tissue (Titze 2012, 287).

It is worth mentioning a caveat for all concepts relating to application. If an exercise should work in theory but is causing the student discomfort, e.g. if the student is experience vibrations towards the front of the face during vocalising (which in theory is ideal), but is simultaneously using pressed phonation (straining), then something needs to change. Take into account how much breath the student has inhaled, the age, gender, existing vocal habits and the size/shape of the body of the individual. These variables are just some important things that may influence how you help a vocalist adjust to vocalise more efficiently. For example, working with an unchanged adolescent voice will differ from that of an adult male. Pitch range, formant frequencies and vital lung capacity are just some of the obvious differences that will need to be considered when making adjustments with these two demographics (Titze 2005).

This final section of the article will address three main concepts that take advantage of shaping the vocal tract to enhance the behaviour of the vocal folds. Sound output can also be enhanced (increased volume/clarity), for minimal vocal effort as a result of these source/filter interactions. The three concepts to be explored are Formant Tuning, Semi Occluded Vocal Tract Exercises and Velopharyngeal Opening. All of which will be

defined, their specific benefits mentioned and practical strategies for their application presented.

### **Formant tuning: What is it?**

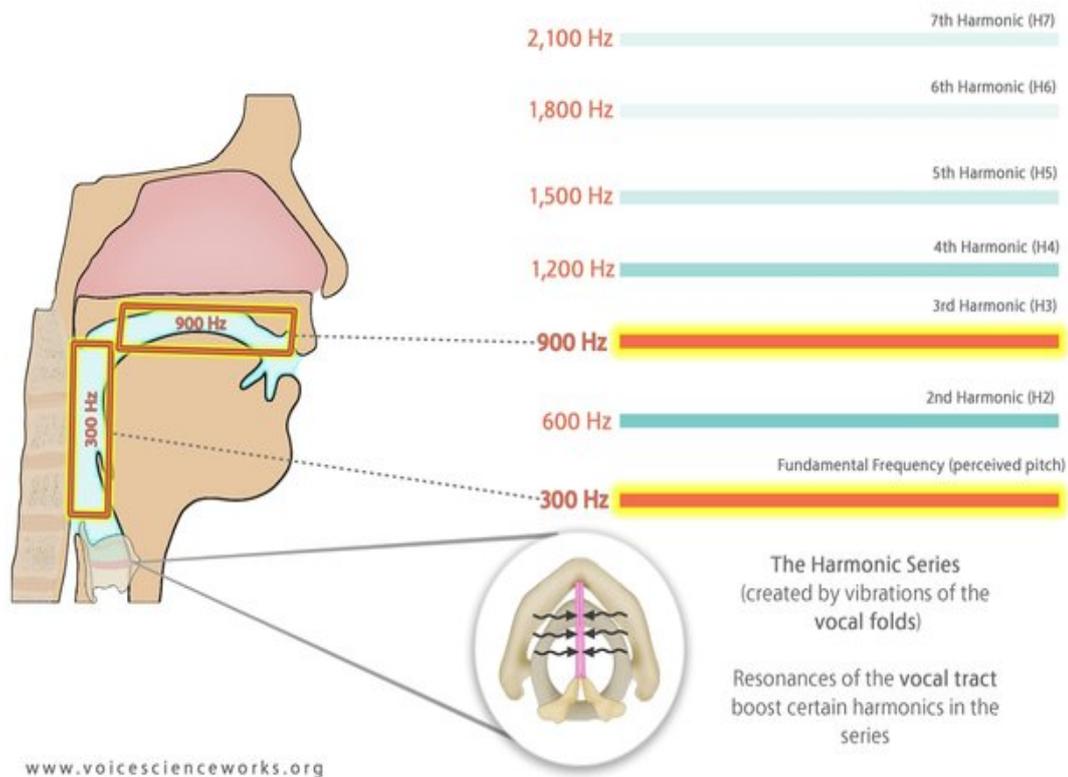
The first concept to be explored is Formant Tuning, defined by Bozeman as “The tuning of one or both of the first two formants in order to find a better formant/harmonic match for greater resonance” (106). This involves the vocal tract being shaped in a way that aligns with the pitch being sung/spoken. Both professional actors and singers have been shown to utilise formant tuning (Raphael 83-87). The pitch could be altered so that it better aligns with one of the formants. However, it is often the case in a musical context that the pitches have been decided by the composer of the song. In this situation, it makes more sense to alter the shape of the vocal tract to meet the needs of the sound wave.

As Gill says: “Vowels create spaces. Those spaces have an inherent pitch. The vowels need to be tuned to the voice pitch in order to be acoustically sensitive. Or modified to be acoustically sensitive” (Vocal Tract Tuning...). This concept is often referred to as vowel modification by voice teachers and vocalists. Vowel modification often gets a bad reputation, possibly because the modification is sometimes done to the point where the lyric being vocalised is not intelligible or is too far removed from the intended vowel. I have observed that when modification is done by elite vocalists, it is usually so nuanced that it is probably not noticed by the average listener.

Figure 10 provides an example of a vocal tract configuration where the F1 has a frequency of 300Hz and an F2 of 900Hz. On the right-hand side of the image are the fundamental frequency (bottom), and all of the harmonics produced (above). Notice that all of the harmonics are multiples of the fundamental frequency (i.e.  $F_0 = 300\text{Hz}$ , and  $300 \times 2 = 600\text{Hz}$  which is H2 etc.).

In this particular example the vocal folds are vibrating at a frequency of 300 Hz (we perceive this as D4). F1 is aligned with H1 (300 Hz), while F2 is aligned with H3 (900Hz). In other words, the frequencies from the vocal folds line up with frequencies of the vocal tract. You could then say that F1 is tuned to H2 ( $F_1/H_2$ ) and F2 is tuned to H4 ( $F_2/H_4$ ). These particular formant/harmonic interactions have unique aesthetic qualities (timbre, dynamics, etc.) associated with them, as well as a possible influence on the vocal fold vibration. These unique qualities may be used for expressive, stylistic or dramatic purposes.

If you wish to explore this further, there is a range of affordable voice software that can aid in understanding and exploring these concepts. Software includes Voce Vista and Madde Voice Synthesiser, which allow the user to measure acoustic output and experiment with hypothetical formant-harmonic interactions. [Voicescienceworks.org](http://Voicescienceworks.org) also has many wonderful resources on this topic.



**Figure 10.** Harmonics from the vocal folds lining up with the formants in the vocal tract. (Source: Laurel Irene & David Harris, Voice Science Works, reprinted with permission.)<sup>11</sup>

### Benefits of formant tuning

Vowel modification done well (i.e. formant tuning) can be used to affect positive change in the way in which the vocal folds vibrate. Barbara Doscher says “Simply stated, vowel modification can produce changes in glottal airflow and pressure, which in turn alter the vibratory pattern of the vocal folds” (151). Story agrees, and adds “Phonating at a frequency at or near the first formant may allow for an efficient voice production that could possibly be associated with lower vocal effort” (1999, 1). I have witnessed many times that when the vocal production is more efficient, vocalists are freer to be expressive and communicate more effectively.

In addition to the ease and evenness of the vocal fold vibration, you can also get more bang for your buck with formant tuning. “The most obvious advantage that comes from even an approximate tuning of the first formant is a very large increase in the loudness a singer can achieve for a vocal effort.” (Benade 80) It is much wiser to use formant tuning to gain an increase in vocal loudness rather than solely increasing sub-glottic pressure to achieve the same result. Vocalists who use improper amounts of subglottic pressure can experience negative consequences while vocalising (e.g. instability, noise

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.voicescienceworks.org/resonance.html>

in the sound, voice cracking, strain etc.). Gill states “Extra subglottic pressure leads to extra friction, which causes a breakdown of the tissue of the vocal folds” (Gill Vocal Tract Tuning; Gill 2014).

How do I tune my formants?

When assisting a vocalist in vowel modification, knowing how filter adjustments will impact formant frequencies (i.e. pitch of the space) is of great use. The following rules have been adapted from Dr Ingo Titze’s four rules for modifying vowels:

1. To lower F1 and F2, increase the length of the vocal tract increases (lip rounding and/or lowering of the larynx).
2. To raise F1 and F2, increase lip spreading.
3. Lower F1 and raise F2 by creating a mouth constriction. (close the mouth, front the tongue)
4. Raise F1 and lower F2 by creating a pharyngeal constriction. (lower the jaw, depress the tongue)

(Titze 2005;<sup>12</sup> Gill Vocal Tract Tuning)

Formant tuning strategies

When creating vocal exercises, utilising vowels with formant frequencies in the range you are going to have the student vocalise in may be a wise choice. Let’s focus on the F1 (first formant) location of vowels (see Figure 11).

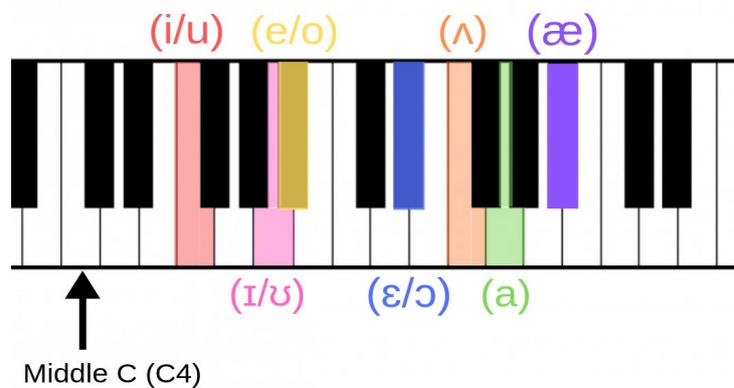
If you were to create an exercise starting at the note F 4 (350Hz), in the passagio for a high voiced male or lower-middle voice for female range, the /u/ vowel (as in “you”) may be an ideal choice. The /u/ vowel has a low F1, approximately 250Hz-400Hz. The /u/ vowel may be helpful to the student within a few tones of F 4. If the exercise is taken too much higher, a change may need to be made to the vowel to keep the source-filter interacting optimally.

Continuing with this example, let’s say you take the same exercise pattern up to Bb4, where the /o/ vowel is optimal (see Figure 11). You may choose to ask the student to open the vowel slightly, still keeping the lips narrow, but creating a little more space between the front teeth. This opening of the teeth would raise the frequency of F1. If done subtly, it may be enough of a vowel modification to keep the vocalist producing sound in an easy and efficient way, as F1 would stay in alignment with a Fundamental Frequency (Fo or H1). For other students, vowel substitution may be the wiser choice. You may ask the student to substitute to the intermediate vowel /ʊ/ (as in “good”), as the exercise ascends from F 4 to Bb 4. This is often enough of a change to help the

<sup>12</sup> [www.ncvs.org/ncvs/tutorials/voiceprod/tutorial/rules.html](http://www.ncvs.org/ncvs/tutorials/voiceprod/tutorial/rules.html)

student. Some students will need a little more alteration and will benefit from singing /o/.

You as the practitioner can then assess the sound being produced. Is the voice production relatively effortless? Is it clear? Smooth? etc. Your listening ability, coupled with asking the student what it feels like, will give some pretty strong indicators of whether it was a more efficient way of vocalising. When the voice is resonant, students will often describe the experience as feeling forward, or higher up in the face/head. Possibly the most common response when it is “right” is – “that felt so much easier” or “it felt more open”.



**Figure 11.** Optimal vowel frequencies.

### Pairing vowels

Another useful strategy is to pair a vowel with a F1 approximate to the pitch range the exercise is in, with a vowel that is further away from the pitch to be sung. Let’s say a female student finds it challenging to produce an /a/ vowel (as in “father”) on an Bb4. A wise choice may be to pair /a/ with /o/ in the exercise. /o/ has an F1 at approximately Bb4. You could then design an exercise starting at Bb4, having the vocalist alternate from /o/ to /a/. The goal would be to have the student try to minimise movement of the articulators as they briskly alternate between the two vowels. What this may do is get the F1 of the /a/ vowel to migrate toward that of the /o/ vowel. In other words, you are helping the student to lower the First Formant (F1) of the /a/ vowel to match the pitch being vocalised. Using a mirror can be helpful for the student to monitor minimising movement of the lips and mouth opening. It is important that the student doesn’t lock the articulators into place in order to achieve this, as rigidity may bring about other unwanted tensions. The key is flexibility of the articulators, while minimising their movement.

While these exercises take advantage of source-filter theory to elicit more efficient vocalising, it is important to note that elite vocalists learn how to take advantage of positive interactions when it suits them and circumvent negative source-filter interactions when they need to (i.e. to produce a certain aesthetic, etc.). I would suggest that this be a long-term goal for all vocalists, and worked on gradually after experiencing optimal source-filter interaction.

### **Semi Occluded Vocal Tract exercises**

The second concept relating to source-filter interaction to be explored is Semi Occluded Vocal Tract exercises (from here on referred to as SOVT). Kenneth Bozeman defines a SOVT as “a vocal tract with an exit sufficiently narrowed to generate flow resistance or acoustic impedance” (Bozeman 112).

#### Benefits of SOVT exercises

When resistance is created away from the vocal folds, this helps to reduce the pressure that falls across the vocal folds as they vibrate (Gill 2014). SOVT exercises help the vocal folds to stretch and un-press (Titze 2017, 139). Stretching is advantageous as it allows blood to flow to the muscles. It is also a key factor in accessing higher pitches and maintaining vocal flexibility. Un-pressing has to do with bringing the vocal folds apart, also known as abducting. This is very important as it can help minimise the collision force, and friction of the vocal fold tissue as they vibrate. Friction is the enemy of the tissue, excessive friction can lead to injury, so we want to minimise it as much as possible (Gill, Vocal Tract Tuning). It has also been shown that un-pressing assists in the stretching of the vocal folds (Titze 2017, 135-141). Which may suggest that it is beneficial to un-press the middle voice using SOVT exercises, before stretching in the higher range where more stretch is required (Titze 2012, 198).

#### SOVT exercise strategies

There are many SOVT to choose from, with many variations. SOVT exercises include the lip trill, straw phonation, the raspberry, tongue trill, /u/ vowel (when rounded), hand over mouth, fricatives and many more. Some vocalists find lip trills (two lips vibrating) easier to vocalise on, while others prefer the raspberry (tongue out, and vibrating with lip/s). Understanding Impedance Matching can provide further insight into which SOVT exercises may be more useful in various circumstances. Impedance matching is beyond the scope of this article, so it will not be discussed further.

#### Optimising a lip trill

We will focus on perhaps the most commonly used SOVT exercise, the lip trill (also referred to as the lip bubble). This SOVT exercise requires air from the lungs to set the lips into vibration. Many students find the lip trill hard to coordinate. Let's explore some approaches to helping your student trill more easily. Learning to do the trill unvoiced is often an easier place to start for most people (where the vocal folds are not

vibrating). If the student is able to maintain a voiceless trill, then graduating to short, simple musical patterns on a voiced trill may be a logical next step.

Breath energy is one of the most useful elements to consider when enhancing the trill. If the lips are not vibrating easily, ask the student to increase the amount of air they blow. They may need a little or a lot more, and in some cases the thought of less breath will help the student find the balance required to set the lips into steady motion. It can also help to ask the vocalist to do a voiceless trill for a couple of seconds and then add voice in the same uninterrupted trill. For some students the vibration at the lips will diminish or even stop when the voice is added. Asking them to “sneak” the sound in, or to be “gentler” with the voice as it enters the trill will often help them to find a better flow/pressure ratio (Gill 2014).

Another element under the conscious control of the vocalist is the tension of the lips. If the student’s lips are tight (i.e. they are unable to move in a trill), asking them to gently stretch the facial tissue on and around the lips (with their hands) prior to trilling, may be sufficient to set the lips up to better receive the air. For others, the position of the lips may be too far apart when the breath flow starts, preventing easy vibration. In this case, asking the student to gently press their lips together and protrude them (prior to trilling), may be enough of an adjustment to encourage easy and even vibration of the lips.

It is likely that some students will have air fill their cheeks as they start to trill, and the lips fail to vibrate easily. Placing their hands on their cheeks can be a starting point for directing the air to the lips and away from the cheeks. You can then encourage them to experiment with various hand positions (relative to the lips), and varying amounts of tension of the facial tissue (influenced by hand position and pressure against the face). Students will likely find a “sweet spot” after exploring various combinations of hand placement and tension of facial tissue. These adjustments may seem like tedious task to undertake, but the positive change they can elicit continues to amaze me. Gill states, “Hypothetically, even and easy vibration at the lips during a lip trill, is indicative of evenness and ease of vibration at the vocal folds” (Gill, October 2018 Personal Communication).

### Contexts for the lip trill

Lip trills (and other SOVT exercises) can be combined with other concepts such as formant tuning for further benefit. If the student is in the lower middle voice (male or female) approximately around D3 or D4 on the piano, then vocalising an /i/ vowel just prior to the lip trill may set up a more optimal vocal tract configuration, potentially enhancing the source-filter interaction while trilling. Recall that the /i/ vowel is ideal in the neighbourhood of 300Hz, near to D4, however vocalising an octave lower on D3 could align H2 with F1 (see Figure 11 for /i/ F1 location) (Gill, May 2018 Personal Communication).

Trilling (and other SOVT exercises) can be done on musical patterns, sustained pitches or melodies of songs. It depends on what the student needs. If the student is struggling to flow through a phrase using lyrics, trilling through an entire phrase or song may be a

wise choice. If they are able to trill in a way that allows them to vocalise with ease through those phrases, then using the lip trill as a lead in to the phrase may be fruitful next step. I will often ask my students to prep the first note of the melody on a lip trill and then continue vocalising with a similar feeling on the lyric. If the trill is free and easy for the singer, but the melody starts to become forced half way through the phrase, I may ask the student to stop and focus on the challenging note/lyric, and apply the trill to the note where there is a tendency to use excessive pressure.

## **Velopharyngeal opening**

The final topic is Velopharyngeal Opening (VPO). When the velum makes complete contact with the pharyngeal wall, the velar port is closed. VPO requires space between the velum and the back wall of the pharynx so that sound energy can pass through the nasopharynx and nasal cavity (Miller 122).

### VPO versus nasality

VPO is often referred to as nasal resonance by vocalists and voice practitioners. The potentially negative impact of using the term “Nasal” is that it can imply tonal quality that many vocalists and teachers push back against. Dr Johan Sundberg conducted a perceptual study in 2002, where an expert panel of listening experts rated samples of professional opera singers. 15 of the 17 singers from the study were shown to have used a VPO on three vowels, at varying pitch levels. There was no correlation in this study between a VPO and rated “nasal” tone quality. This deserves a further look from the voice community (Sundberg 2002).

### Benefits of VPO

“Narrow” VPO has been shown to result in the most balanced spectrum, when contrasted with “much” or “no” VPO. The “Narrow” condition also resulted in the highest overall sound pressure level (SPL), and the high frequency energy was the greatest in this condition (Lee, Jessica, et al. VP27). The high energy information (2-4KHz) is advantageous, as the human ear canal is sensitive to information in this region (Titze 2001, 41-43). This high-end information also exists above the average noise of an orchestra and background noise (e.g. in a restaurant) (Sundberg 2018, Resonance). VPO can also act as a SOVT exercise. The resistance that builds up at the opening of the velum during a VPO could help to reduce pressure that falls across the vocal folds as they vibrate, allowing easier and more even vibration (Birch et al. 70; Sundberg 2006, 137). Recent research also suggests “that a slight VPO can serve the purpose of optimising the ratio between sound level produced and subglottal pressure” (Gill, Dec 2018 Spectrum Effects). VPO has also been shown to increase stability at register transitions (Sundberg 2017, BSc29). VPO can be used as a way of Formant Tuning, as it lengthens the vocal tract and lowers all formant frequencies (McCoy 154).

### Practical Strategies for using a VPO

Perhaps the easiest way to gain access to VPO is to hum. Humming a simple melodic phrase from a song, may be useful for a student learning to access VPO. You can also ask a student to hum just prior to vocalising, this may encourage a VPO to remain throughout the piece being worked on. This needs to be monitored via the student's sensations and your ears (Stoney, Nasal Resonance Explained).

A strategy that I have adopted, is having the student pinch their nose (with thumb and index finger), with the intention of feeling vibration in the nose as they vocalise (Gill, May 2018 Personal Communication). If there is uncertainty about whether vibration on the nose is linked with VPO, you can have the student pinch and release rapidly while vocalising (refer to Audio Clip 3). If there is a VPO you will hear a rapid interruption of the vocalised sound (Gill 2014).



**Audio Clip 3.** Rapid pinch (where both nostrils are completely shut off, resulting in a noticeable interruption of the sound being produced).

One of the benefits of the nose pinch is that the vocalist can monitor sensations via kinaesthetic awareness with the finger and thumb. The other major benefit is that the student can vocalise words with the nose pinch. As a student gets used to accessing VPO with the nose pinched, you can have them start vocalising a phrase, and midway through the phrase take the pinch away. If they are able to maintain a similar sensation and the tone continues to be produced with ease, clarity etc. then they are likely maintaining a similar a VPO.

While a student is learning to access VPO consistently, the amount of VPO may need to be exaggerated initially. Learning to fine-tune the amount of VPO will likely impact the balance of “bright” and “dark” tonal qualities. Birch et al. say “...varying VPO shapes suggest that singers may use a VPO to fine-tune vocal timbre” (70). That being said, I would encourage you to initially focus on the functional advantages related to ease of production, then fine-tune aesthetics throughout the course of the training process. In prioritising vocal sustainability over tonal aesthetic while balance is being discovered, the student will not tire nearly as much in the process. Alternately, if the singer aims to produce a “finished product” immediately (focusing on the goal), regardless of the vocal function used, it is possible that excess muscular force could be used to achieve that tonal goal. Ultimately, easy, efficient voice production used to create a balanced timbre for the given vocal task should be high priority in voice training.

## Conclusion

There is great benefit for voice practitioners in considering linear and non-linear source/filter interactions in voice production. The benefits for the student can include easier, more efficient vocal production and more sound output for a given vocal effort.

The practitioner also has the advantage of a factual point of reference when working to correct a vocal issue with a voice student, which often leads to targeting the cause of the issue more promptly.

Familiarity with the harmonic series, and formant frequencies of the vowel formants (particularly F1 locations) is helpful knowledge for the voice practitioner, as it provides a foundational context for vocal resonance. All information relating to vocal resonance should be looked at in the context of the whole vocal apparatus. If an exercise based on a theoretical concept is not working for a student, it is important to consider other subsystems such as the breathing system or the alignment of the individual.

We live in an exciting time, where information about the voice is more accessible than ever through the internet and modern technology. We are constantly receiving new information from scientific research, and are able to experiment with voice software designed for in-home use. While this constant stream of new research may mean that teaching practices need to be updated in the future, the information in this article provides a strong foundation based on what is presently known. Teaching voice is a life-long endeavour for the practitioner. I believe it is a worthwhile endeavour, as this knowledge can be used to enhance the human voice, and more importantly the quality of life for the vocalist and for all who hear them.

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## About the author

Zac Bradford heads New York Vocal Coaching AUSTRALIA, the first international branch of NYVC. He is an Australian singer and teacher with advanced degrees from New York University and Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, Brisbane. Zac's clients have reached the Top #10 on the US Billboard Charts, have been featured in Hollywood Films, Television Shows, Commercials, Broadway, Off Broadway, 1st USA National Tours and The Metropolitan Opera. Zac works professionally both in music theatre and as a gig singer performing a wide variety of styles. He is passionate about seeking a holistic, approach to voice training, where detailed scientific information is mindfully linked with practical application.

# Within and between: Integrative performer training and the sword

James Harrison<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article explores the notion that some of the many exigencies of performance could be addressed by implementing key elements of Kendo, a Japanese martial art that involves the use of a practice sword, in training. Pivotal to this work is the notion that increasing the demands placed on the muscles used for breath and subsequent vocalisation in a training environment prepares the performer for easier vocalisation in performance. A series of exercises have been devised to explore these concepts, as well as investigating further uses for the sword in performer training.

## Keywords

Actor Training; Kendo; Voice; Movement; Integrative Practices; Sword; Martial Arts



**Plate 1.** University of Tasmania participants engaged in partnered work with a focus on ‘the space within’.

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## Introduction/author's notes

Many of the concepts explored in this article are found in other martial arts and performer training systems from around the world, however as I was introduced to them through Kendo, it is through that lens that I explore some of these notions in this article. It is important to note that, while very much an international sport, Kendo is born from and remains immersed in the Japanese culture and language. I am not Japanese, I do not speak the language, and acknowledge the hazards implicit in any translation.

This work began as an artistic exploration of an encounter that I had with Kendo as a teenager. Kendo, meaning 'the way of the sword', is the sport of Japanese fencing, and 'a form of physical culture' that retains connections with its samurai heritage by way of its 'concern for decorum, ritual, character development, and spirit' (Green 2001, p.249). I was fifteen when my friends and I discovered that our high school science teacher had competed in the sport for years, at a high level. Our teacher agreed to run regular training sessions for us and patiently instructed us in the physical and philosophical ways of Kendo. My friends and I were a motley crew of various heights, shapes, sizes and degrees of fitness, but these discrepancies did not seem to matter under the equalising and ego-bruising nature of Kendo. We would fight with light and flexible bamboo swords called shinai and train with heavy oak swords called bokken (Broderick 2004, p.16). Kendo training and the culture that went along with it provided us with the perfect setting in which to discover ourselves, explore the trichotomy of the body, the voice and the mind, and improve our levels of fitness. The exercises we did began to deconstruct our physical idiosyncrasies and clumsy high-school identities and reconstruct us as people who were resilient, had stamina, were less negatively self-conscious and were more in-tune with our bodies. It taught us, even in moments of crisis, listen quietly to the messages our brain receives from the rest of our bodies and engaged us in exercises that often made the body 'speak up' about what it has to say.

Our teacher was tough but, contrary to some 'tough' instructors, he stirred in us a drive to push *ourselves* to our limits. He made the space we trained in a space in which it was okay to fail. Years later, as a theatre student in university, I found myself longing for the hall in which we practised Kendo, for the exhausting but focused exercises that drilled an economical approach to movement, for the inner 'quiet' that would come from training hard, the awareness that you were engaged in a lifelong endeavour, and for the culture of accepting paradoxes as a part of any training system. For example, that one could be training to attain perfection while understanding that one would never be perfect.

It was this desire to recreate those conditions that led to the creation of this work and its subsequent workshops. I am grateful to the many talented performers who have taken part in these exercises over the last few years, who have been invaluable in developing the work, many of whom feature in some of the images used in this article.

It is with deference to the dedicated practitioners of Kendo that I acknowledge I am not one of them and that my exploration of these concepts, thought the lens of theatre

training, is an artistic interpretation of their world and a clear departure from the strict forms and terminology of the sport. This is a theatre maker's exploration of the concepts that first made him think about the integration of thought, voice, and movement.

## Key philosophies

This ongoing project seeks to investigate whether the implementation of Kendo-based exercises and approaches to training can be of benefit to a training performer. There are many potential benefits to practicing Kendo that have been understood in the Kendo community for a long time but whose application in actor training is yet to be evidenced. This method of introducing elements of Kendo to actor training has been workshopped on several occasions including as part of an assessment at the One Voice Centre for Integrative Studies in New York, a University of Tasmania Honours project, at the inaugural AusAct Australian Actor Training Conference hosted by Charles Sturt University, and explored as part of summer school programs at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. It is pending more vigorous testing over time, so observations are made by the author, incorporating feedback from workshop participants and raise questions to be explored further, rather than presenting evidence of objective outcomes.

The notion of extrapolating performer training exercises from Kendo was first explored as an assessment project as part of a certification in Integrative Studies from the One Voice Centre for Integrative Studies in New York. This involved developing the work solo over a one-year period, and then workshopping the results with a group of performers and performance coaches over a limited 2-hour period. The following year as part of an Honour's degree, volunteer University of Tasmania acting students participated in 10 weeks of workshops exploring the hypothesis. In 2018, ideas and exercises developed in this period were presented at the AusAct Australian Actor Training Conference in Wagga Wagga, hosted by Charles Sturt University. The panel on which this project was presented, and the subsequent workshop that was delivered, added more elements to the work and refined the philosophies that have driven the project. One notable outcome has been the distillation of the framework *Working in Three Spaces* (the title of the presentation and workshop) to *Within and Between: Integrative Performer Training and the Sword*. This reworking eliminates the third 'space' and focuses in on the first and second spaces 'within' and 'between' as potentially powerful lenses with which to view, categorise, and train the elements of performance that these exercises explore. The goal of grouping certain elements together as 'the space within' and 'the space between' is (once these elements have been understood on a basic, physical level) to give a performer two simple checks to perform, that can take place both before a performance and while onstage. They are: 'What is happening within?' And: 'have I considered the spaces between?'

Elements of this training have also been developed as a counter to the tendency of performers to receive their training separately through classes in voice, movement, acting etc. While there is obvious specialisation that comes from training with a distinct focus, separate from the demands of integration (or 'putting it all together'), this project

has sought to provide a complementary structure in which to facilitate the integration of these elements. A typically siloed approach to training often leaves the integration of voice, movement and thought processes up to the performer and frequently this can occur perilously close to the performance dates. On the merit of integrative training, practitioner Experience Byron states: *“Well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are at a juncture where the industry has evolved. However, the demands on the performer have become increasingly inter-disciplinary, the training of the performer still tends to take place within an outdated set of categories”* (Byron 2014, p.2). Navigating the friction between disciplines can be a demanding process for the performer, and training should address these ‘in-between’ spaces. Perhaps the most eloquent argument for training that better prepares the performer for this is the old adage: *“a ship in harbour is safe, but it is not what a ship is built for”*.

Kendo itself requires a demanding and integrative approach to training as a combination of mental, physical, and vocal efforts is required, largely simultaneously. It is this integration of sometimes distinct elements that positions the exercises to ready performers for the exigencies of performance. This particular work has been developed sometimes in line with, and other times in response to, existing integrative approaches. Performance coach and author Joan Melton incorporates voice into physical routines resulting in a combined physio-vocal approach and teaches that the pursuit of technical accuracy should be undertaken with playful exploration (Melton 2003, p.xiii). This notion of playful exploration has been adopted throughout the creation of this work.

Another aim of implementing Kendo-based exercises is that Kendo is seen as being able to ‘build physical endurance, and sharpen reflexes’ as well as develop a participant’s ‘concentration, determination, and strength of character’ (Broderick 2004, p.8). It is through pursuing these outcomes that Kendo reveals itself as concerned with the unification of mind and body, an arguably favourable result for any training performer. Early in the twentieth century actor/director Vsevolod Meyerhold, stated: *“Training, training, training! But if it’s the kind of training which exercises only the body and not the mind, then no, thank you!”* (Leach 2010, p.26).

The fundamental principles that this work seeks to illuminate may not in themselves provide immediate remedy for specific exigencies (for example, singing while tap dancing, or integrating text and movement) but aim to instil in the performer tools useful for analysing and exploring these areas of friction, as well as building the confidence and resilience needed to explore these ‘in-between’ spaces. As 16<sup>th</sup> century artist and master swordsman Miyamoto Musashi said: *“If you know the way broadly you will see it in everything”* (Harris 1974, p.47).

## Methods

The principle behind using one of our species’ oldest tools, a stick, is that it provides an extension of one’s sense of self that allows you to train a spatial awareness that would be otherwise unattainable without one. In addition to this, the excess weight and the changing influence that this weight can have on our balance when we swing the stick makes it an illuminating tool for analysing internal weight shifts and alignment and can

put into crisis our notion of our physical ‘centre’. For these purposes, the ‘centre’ can refer to our centre of mass, our centre of gravity/our sense of balance, or the imaginary line that bi-sects us medially. For some of the exercises, a sense of the combination of all three is required.

As with all aerobic exercise, any physically demanding exercises using these sticks (or, if possible, bokken: heavy wooden practice swords) will also influence our breathing. Highly physical exercises with these principles in mind can reveal the smaller workings at play in movement and vocalisation. It is a tool for the kind of investigation and self-diagnostics that occur in actor training. This article will explore two of the exercises developed with these outcomes in mind.

## **Exercise 1: *Suburi and the space within***

A fundamental element of Kendo is the practice swings called suburi. This is the repetition of a strike/cut made to an imagined opponent with all the form and intention that would be engaged if there were a real opponent standing opposite you. This phrase is often repeated hundreds of times each session, sometimes at different speeds and in slightly varying patterns (see Plate 2). It is used to drill poise, efficiency of movement and economy of breath/energy, as well as instilling an attitude of readiness and a physicality like that of a coiled spring as yet unsprung. The action of suburi, for all the exertion required, has the effect of increasing the potential energy at a performer’s disposal by way of the fitness gained and the mental fortitude developed through drilling these actions many thousands of times. This structure recognises the illuminating effect that exhaustion can have on interpreting the messages of the body. Participants are encouraged to work in this demanding model, but to understand their own limits and safety should always be paramount. It is intended that suburi build stamina, resilience and economy of movement. It is also intended to provide a framework in which to experiment with creating sound in unison with physical acts that place the body into crisis while maintaining a mental state that is primarily calm and focused. In Kendo, as in many martial arts, a Kiai is used. A kiai is a personal and powerful yell, cry or scream and a demonstration of fighting spirit (Broderick 2004, p.44). It is important that this occurs in unison with the climax of other actions. A principle in Kendo, is ki-ken-tai-ichi, loosely translated in English as ‘the spirit, the sword, and the body as one’ (Broderick 2004, p.47). In Kendo competition, the spirit is ‘identified’ by the strength or nature of the vocalisation, and this has been adopted into the framework for theatre training purposes.

The manner in which we hold the sword/stick in this exercise is very important. Musashi instructed (and this is also the technique in modern Kendo) to grip the sword tightly by your little finger, but loosely by the other fingers. Musashi states, ‘Fixedness means a dead hand. Pliability is a living hand’ (Harris & Musashi 1974, p.55). This notion of the ‘living hand’ is directly applicable to the use of props and the interaction with other onstage objects. In his text on actor training, *The Invisible Actor*, Japanese actor and director Yoshi Oida speaks of this, saying that the samurai’s grip keeps his movements both ‘strong and free’ (Marshall & Oida 1997, p.24). Oida expands on this, referring to movement more generally ‘If you focus your strength elsewhere, nobody

can see it in operation, and your movements will seem more effortless ... by thinking about these regions, you have directed your attention away from your head, or neck, or legs (where muscular tension creates visible problems for the actor)' (Marshall & Oida 1997, p.24). This concept is very important when conducting these exercises.



**Plate 2.** A basic swing, beginning from middle stance.

The exercise is as follows:

The right leg is slightly forward of the left leg, with your weight being evenly placed between the two and the feet are roughly shoulder-width apart. The right foot is flat on the floor, while the heel of the left leg is slightly raised. This leaves you ready to move in any direction, pushing off with the left foot and sliding your front foot in the direction of travel. The legs should never cross, as they do in conventional walking. One should remain tall and balanced. The hilt of the sword/bokken or stick is held with both hands (approximately 10cms apart) with your left hand near your naval, the blade extending up and out on a diagonal line towards the head-height of an imagined, mirrored version of yourself, approximately a metre and a half away. The sword should be in line with your medial line/centre, the hilt emanating from your centre of mass, with your centre of gravity/point of balance being directly below your pelvic floor. This is our 'middle stance' and it is based on Kendo's 'Chudan no Kamae' (Broderick 2004, p.40).

The sword is then raised in an arcing motion over your head until the tip of the sword is behind you, and then swung in a strong, straight manner, over your head and towards the head of your imagined opponent, stopping the blade at their head-height (this can be achieved more easily through a gentle inwards twist of the wrists, as if trying to wring water from a cloth). This is the moment of the strike. As the blade is being swung, one slides their right foot forward and just as quickly as that has happened, their left foot slides forward so as to remain in the original stance. Also, in time with the raising of and striking with the sword, one inhales deeply, and exhales or vocalises at the moment of the strike. The sword is lowered back to its position in middle stance as one takes a step backwards with the left leg (the right leg quickly following suit) to find oneself in the stance one began in, and ready to repeat the phrase again. Repeat this process many times.

Director and author Eugenio Barba described the concept of Sats: the moment immediately preceding an action, the impetus that generates and informs the action, the 'pre-action' (Barba & Fowler, 1995, p.39). The moment of sats will physically and mentally determine the qualities of the action. In competitive Kendo, the combative elements dictate that we try to quieten or disguise this moment of Sats. This is a useful concept, though of course, in performance some of our best work comes from illuminating for the audience the moments of pre-action. When practicing suburi, the

performer should experiment with masking the impetus to move, creating each swing as spontaneous and distinct from the last, and repeat this process many times. Conversely, the performer should also use this gesture exercise to explore acknowledging the impetus to move i.e. *‘Where does this action begin?’ ‘What is the sequence of events that is triggered that results in the moment of the ‘strike’?*

Kendo offers a complementary term to succeed sats and the moment of the action. Zanshin, meaning ‘the remaining mind’, describes an awareness that follows every action, a ‘continued spirit’ (Broderick 2004, p.49). In a performative setting, it is a respect for the moment that you have just taken part in and a wariness of the moments yet to come. A moment of calm reflection and analysis, in real time, of your actions on stage, it is the continued assessment of your last move that will inform your next one. While not every performer would like to carry this with them on-stage, it could be argued that it is important to have zanshin in the rehearsal room and in training. For the exercise of suburi (and in the hope that it will have wider applications for the performer) it is important that contained within the phrase is a clear moment of sats (the impetus preceding the action), the strike (the action itself), and zanshin (the ‘remaining mind’).

Variations to the suburi are designed to engage slightly different muscles, or to create alternate points of crisis for the body and breath/voice. The performer will feel exertion in the upper body but most of the sensation will occur in the abdomen, especially while generating sound. One should always be asking *‘are the changes I’m making conducive to vocalising and moving, or do they make the task more difficult?’* On a much larger time scale it is important for the participant to ask, for example, *‘do my observations change with poor health or increased age?’* Some suggested variations on this simple gesture exercise are as follows:

9. Introduce different dynamics for the phrase. For example, take more time identifying the moment of sats before striking very quickly, or vice versa. One could do fifty suburi at a reasonable speed, paying attention to correct form, before doing another fifty at a much faster pace.

It is important to continually make observations about the results in real time: *at what speed does it become difficult to maintain the correct steps of the action? At what point does exhaustion affect one’s form? Does the voice become exhausted at the same point in time as the rest of your body? Is there a point beyond exhaustion that one finds it is possible to ‘rally’ and return to speed and form?*

It is in these moments of crisis that the body/voice connection can be best explored. It is possible to begin to understand the notion of ki-ken-tai-ichi (‘the spirit, the sword, and the body as one’) when, at the first point of exhaustion, if the decision is made to ‘dig deep’ and continue, the kiai/voice will become strong again, heralding a return to form and pace. Training a sense of this feeling is arguably an important feeling for a performer to understand. Using this sense of ‘inhabiting’ completely a moment of action, and understanding the elements it is comprised of, a performer could not only train the voice and body for these powerful moments but could, outside of the training

space, use this sensation as an abstract stimulus to explore those areas of performance that are most heightened and powerful.

10. The voice initially involved should be a free and unrestricted shout on a pure vowel that is only sustained as long as the moment of the strike. After some time, however, play with sustaining the sound beyond the moment of the strike, or make a more staccato sound. Experiment with using different pitches and dynamics. Introduce text: first, in a staccato, one syllable per strike manner, then in a manner that the suburi is occurring separately to the flow of the text. One could even speak through the text, only performing a strike on key grammatical markings or major beat changes. These variations should also be conducted while singing. *What observations can be made about the voice/body, and again, are these changing elements conducive to the task or distracting?*
11. Instead of sliding the lead foot forward as you swing, use the forward momentum to introduce a 'stomp'. This should occur in unison with the strike 'landing', and the exhalation or vocalisation. Experiment with allowing this stomp to affect the voice and conversely play with attempting to isolate the voice from the effects of the stomp. Japanese director/trainer Tadashi Suzuki said of the performer/ground relationship *'The way in which the feet are used is the basis of a stage performance. Even the movements of the arms and hands can only augment the feeling inherent in the body positions established by the feet. There are many cases in which the position of the feet determines even the strength and nuance of the actor's voice'* (Suzuki & Rimmer 1986, p.6). Whether sliding or stomping, the position of the feet (hip-width apart, right foot a little forward, left foot slightly back with the heel raised slightly off the ground) is an arguably valuable stance to have as a part of a performer's 'muscle memory'. Contrary to the typical 'actor's neutral' that can be found in many approaches, this stance is one of readiness. Within this training framework, readiness (the 'upbeat to sats') is our new neutral.
12. Suburi can be incorporated into the 'sitting statues' (see Plate 3) exercises developed by Tadashi Suzuki (Carruthers & Yasunari 2004). This is very physically taxing, but from this point of crisis, economy of movement becomes paramount. Suzuki also uses 'sitting statues' (though the result of incorporating suburi is a dynamic, moving, gesture exercise) to train voice (Allain, P. 2002). It is important to maintain a 'softness' throughout the face, neck, and upper-body, despite swinging the heavy wooden sword and the extra demand placed on the abdominal region when in this position. A lack of tension through the face and neck, coupled with the increased engagement in the abdomen, seems to allow for free, and creative voicing to take place, despite the difficulty of the exercise. Participants from the University of Tasmania series of workshops spoke text from poems and contemporary Australian theatre, as well as singing (with the pieces ranging from nursery rhymes to arias from Puccini) from this difficult but dynamic position.



**Plate 3.** Suburi in a 'sitting statue'.

This exercise of suburi interrogates the elements of voice (breath), movement (balance, weight shifts, alignment) and thought (impetus/sats, the moment/ki-ken-tai-ichi, and zanshin: the remaining mind) that are internal. We can categorise this basket of elements as the space 'within'. This is the performers inner-world and each of its elements, in a trained performer, should be under their control. While the breaking up and analysing of these elements is an intellectual process, the purpose of suburi is to connect these sensations and assign them to muscle memory. The goal is to create a performer who can instinctively check, and create with, the myriad of conditions that affect and comprise voice and movement.

## **Exercise 2: *A fight for centre***

Our second modality is 'the space between'. This is the notion that, building on and beginning with the actions that occur in the space within (the space of *control*), we then have a space of *influence*. The desired outcome of the following exercise is to develop the notion that the spaces *between* performers are the sum of the calculations happening *within* each performer. Through implementing the use of a wooden sword or stick in this exercise, the goal is to allow a physical conversation, spoken only through the haptic feedback delivered by touching sticks, that gives one a sense of one's partner's inner machinations while also granting the same insight to them.

In Kendo, as in most combat, and as it is onstage, inter-personal distance is very important. From the martial arts we are presented with the notion of Maai. Maai is the "dynamic combination of timing and distance" (Broderick 2004, p.49). Contained within the concept of maai is also the notion of 'seizing the chance' (Ozawa 1997, p.38). It is a concept that refers not only to the space between two combatants, but the time it would take to cross that distance, not just to strike the opponent but to strike the opponent in a manner that involves the sword, the body, the spirit as one. Too far apart, one reaches and stumbles and loses, too close and the result is messy and cluttered, and the action isn't dutifully carried out. It could be argued that an understanding of maai would be pivotal for actors.

Not only do common factors in performance like blocking and choreography affect all possible maai, but the time it would take to cross the distance between performers to touch or 'influence' them can be determined by character decisions and intentions. Instinctively, we make these tiny calculations all of the time in every-day life. It's how we maintain and navigate personal space and though this is an in-built mechanism, a simple term to describe such a complex process could be a useful tool in a performers belt. Much creative work could be done between scene partners (be they fighting,

moving in for a kiss, or crossing the stage to make tea) just by giving the direction ‘consider your maai’.

The alignment and balance that comes from being in our middle-stance (as mentioned earlier) presents an interesting and stimulating dilemma for partner work. Instead of (as we do in the suburi exercise) imagining a mirror-image version of oneself standing directly opposite, stand opposite a partner, similarly equipped with a stick or bokken (see Plate 4). If your stick extends perfectly from the naval to your partner’s head height (though standing apart, as before approximately a metre and a half away), to an observer looking straight on, you should be perfectly bisected, the stick drawing a medial line down your body.



**Plate 4.** Partners aligning for ‘the fight for centre’.

In this middle stance the stick should be in line with your medial line/centre, the ‘hilt’ emanating from your centre of mass, with your centre of gravity/point of balance being directly below your pelvic floor. Now the partner, standing opposite takes up the same stance, mirroring you, with their stick displaying an extension of their own centre, perfectly bisected. If both participants are staying true to their centre line, those sticks are now being made to occupy the same space, even if only by a few centimetres. This presents the participants with a fight for that shared centre (see Plates 5 and 6). It is important not to stare at the tip of your ‘opponent’s’ stick, but rather, try to take in the whole picture, and rely more on the haptic feedback you’re are getting through the stick. Musashi spoke also of a ‘two-fold gaze’ – perception and sight, perception being strong, and sight being weak (Harris 1974, p.54). This is very much in line with the notion of ‘soft focus’ from Anne Bogart and Tina Landau’s *Viewpoints* work. They describe soft focus as ‘the physical state in which we allow the eyes to soften and relax so that, rather than looking at any one or two things in sharp focus, they can now take in many’ (Bogart & Landau 2005, p.31). The philosophy behind this endeavour is that by removing the demand for information from the eyes that the actor may start to be sensitive to their surroundings in other ways. Musashi, over 400 years ago, said ‘it is important to see distant things as if they were close and to take a distanced view of

close things' (Harris 1974, p.54). This is an important notion when implementing this exercise.



**Plate 5.** Moving through the rehearsal space while attempting to gain/maintain control of the centre line.



**Plate 6.** Experimenting with different distances during 'the fight for centre'.

In this exercise one cannot maintain one's own centre except at the expense of your partner's and vice versa. The connection of these mirror images, and the haptic

feedback you suddenly get about your partner, offers you a glimpse into their ‘first space’. You get a sense of the many small ways they are altering alignment and shifting weight to try to gain this ‘shared’ centreline. It is in this friction that the entire combative side of Kendo exists, but in actor training this is a valuable exercise as it extends our focus from the space *within* to the space *between*. This is the beginning of a sense of working in both ‘spaces’ simultaneously and provides a near instant group of ‘pre-flight’ checks that can be performed before entering the stage or repeated on stage from moment to moment. It should be stressed that we drill these exercises so that we can consider and make choices based upon ‘the space within’ and ‘the space between’ in a manner that isn’t an overly intellectualised process, rather a more organic one.

As with suburi, singing and speech can be introduced to this exercise. This approach has been devised to complement other training methods. When introducing speech to the exercises participants of the workshops used text that they had already explored through the lens of other practitioners or that they were exploring as part of currently running rehearsals or productions. These new exercises added another dimension to the work of practitioners such as Constantine Stanislavsky, Michael Chekov, and John Barton, as the participants navigated the dynamics prescribed by the style and text while also experiencing the subtle shifts in dynamics elicited by ‘the fight for centre’. What is most important is that the performer is listening to their body and making truthful observations.

## Conclusion

A key area of value in which this approach positions itself is the identification, interrogation and addressing of physical, vocal, and psychological idiosyncrasies, possibly due to prior training methods or old injuries, that the training performer may not be aware that they are carrying. The aim of each of these Kendo-based exercises is to increase body awareness, thereby informing the possible creative choices a performer can make, as well as training the body/breath/voice relationship that tension and bad habits can often influence or hinder. In the vocal training of Catherine Fitzmaurice, what is referred to as ‘destructuring’ work, explores the ‘letting go of habitual breathing patterns and reconnecting consciously with the autonomic nervous system, which breathes for us when we are not thinking about how to breathe’ (Melton 2003, p12). The importance of first ‘unlearning’ the *habitual* to better learn the *performative* is present in the approaches of many other performer training methods. Ellen Lauren says of director/trainer Tadashi Suzuki’s work that it ‘asks you to do movements that are not seen in everyday life, but that take the body out of a habitual way of learning’ (Carruthers & Yasunari 2004, p.97).

The notion of training ‘in two spaces’ or structuring the analysing or creation of performance in this manner, seeks to simplify the job of the performer and to give clear outcomes to our training as well as to clearly distinguish the modes in which we train. This may have applications in real-time for performers or may be able to be used as a more detailed framework for choreographing or directing, as well serving as an analytical structure for reviewing actions after the fact. While the grouping of *seemingly* disparate elements (though it is hoped that the exercises reveal the true

interconnectedness of them) into the two groups of ‘*within*’ and ‘*between*’ may begin as an intellectual process, through the repetition of these simple exercises that explore these elements, the goal is for the training performer to gain a sensory understanding of each of those elements.

When we put the body into crisis we also hope to, with a quiet mind, observe the most, and, having made these observations, better understand the instrument we inhabit. When reflecting on the workshops, participants provided the following insights into their experience of their training:

- “I felt that my focus, breathing and voice improved because of the exercises.”
- “we didn’t have to intentionally think, we can just do and be and focus [...] connecting to a deeper instinct of listening to the body and therefore giving truthful reactions. I got out of my headspace and learned to just physically be in the actions and the movements. The repetitions helped to instil it in the body memory”
- “I had more awareness of how I can move and how I wanted to control my body (and voice), particularly in physical theatre.”
- “The workshops really helped with my physical discipline and I really enjoyed the sword aspect. I thrive off exercises that incorporate the body and spirit and I felt the lessons were just that. It felt great to push through my own personal boundaries and to ‘not give up’ during certain exercises. It also gave me a great understanding of my stage presence and it re-affirmed my belief that immaculate stage presence doesn’t come from height, but self-belief in your craft, your character and most importantly, your physical presence.”
- “The militaristic nature of repeated uniform action in a group setting with an inward focus manifesting in our kiai was an experience I felt altered my state of consciousness. A ritual mindset I think is an essential element, or at least tool, for any performance.”

Future iterations of this work will seek to exemplify the concepts outlined here by documenting and surveying a large group of participants who have undertaken a prolonged engagement with these exercises (as they are in their current form). There are currently twenty exercises that have been developed for this method over the various workshops that have occurred to explore these principles and future work would seek to reassess the value of each of these, with the aim of (once the parameters of ‘effectiveness’ had been established) selecting the most effective. A scientific investigation into the anatomical nature of the ‘crisis’ points established by the work would be welcomed, as would further artistic exploration of the potential of this work. Further consultation with practitioners of various training methods to better establish what other structures for training this approach could complement would also further strengthen the training method.

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## About the author

James Harrison is an Australian theatre-maker, musician and performance coach currently based in Tasmania. His theatrical credits range from stage management positions, vocal coaching, and scriptwriting, to directing and performing in musical, classical, and contemporary theatre. He has a Bachelor of Contemporary Arts (Hons) from the University of Tasmania and is a certified practitioner of Integrative Studies (Hons) from the One Voice Centre for Integrative Studies, NYC.

# Perform “the space”, not “in the space”: Incorporating place, environment and imagination in integrative practices

Robert Lewis and Dominique Sweeney<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Robert Lewis and Dominique Sweeney at Charles Sturt University are developing integrative practices and experimentation in the undergraduate acting program. They draw on a wide range of practical and theoretical experiences including Lecoq, Butoh, Suzuki Actor Training Method and Laban Movement Analysis. In this article they discuss how actors train to respond through an integrated awareness of personal space – body and voice – with place and architecture. The interactive approach to actor training is designed to extend imaginations through identification beyond the constricts of the human body. Actors explore shape, colour, animals, elements, substances, poetry and the great themes of existence. This is related to the local environment. Their actor-training research is located in the place and the instilled history or infused atmosphere. Technology and performance practice change constantly. Places too are temporal with changes in landscape over time. Where we are here and now in this moment is the constant. That is what we are compelled to share. This awareness is developed through careful and detailed observation of place. Original actor training gives the method and the participant actors power and ownership of their work located in place.

## Keywords

Acting; Voice; Movement; Land; Place; Environment; Space

## Introduction

Since the latter part of the 20th Century, original Australian actor training methods have surfaced in institutions and independent theatre companies. However, the traditional forms such as the Stanislavski Method, amongst many others, maintain a stronghold. The shackles of American and European staples still have a grip on the industry. Even private institutions are capturing aspiring young actors' interests by importing teachers from the US or Europe, declaring their methods as being superior and highly regarded, sometimes overlooking the original methods developed in

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Australia. Of course, there is no such thing as a method being completely original, as every method has influences that have been tried and tested for centuries.

The catalytic points of new media and technology in performance and ever-increasing intercultural influences of new theatrical works have caused a shift in actor training methods and aesthetics. Currently, there is an unbalance between Australian actor-training research is located in the place and space which has instilled history and infused atmosphere. Technology and narratives reflecting societal change alter constantly based on the era. Places are also temporal with changes in landscape over time. Our bodies are the only constant.

As a result, we are in the process of developing integrative practices and experimentation in the undergraduate acting program of Charles Sturt University's Bachelor of Creative Industries (Acting and Performance) program. We currently draw on a wide range of practical and theoretical experiences including Lecoq, Butoh, Nobbs Suzuki Praxis (a variant of the Suzuki Method of Actor Training) and Laban Movement Analysis to create a hybrid, integrated approach. In this article we discuss how actors train to respond through an integrated awareness of personal space, body and voice, with place and architecture. Integrated 'acting' exercises designed to extend imaginations through identification beyond the constraints of the human body through the exploration of shape, colour, animals, elements, substances and poetry. This is related to the local environment. Our actor training research is located in the place and the instilled history or infused atmosphere. Technology and performance practice change constantly and places too are temporal with changes in landscape over time. Where we are here and now in this moment is the constant. That is what we are compelled to share. This awareness is developed through careful and detailed observation of place. Original actor training gives the method and the participant actors power and ownership of their work located in place.

## **Robert Lewis: An integrative approach**

As predominantly a voice and movement teacher, having studied and reiterated methods and practices some of which were over a century old, I wondered, over the course of a decade teaching in tertiary institutions, why we were not practicing methods that were developed or created in Australia to facilitate the needs of Australian actors. Although most physical and vocal issues that performers encounter are universal, for example, tensions that inhibit communication, clarity of speech and vocal projection, what differs are the content, the cultural landscape and the attitudes of performers.

The interest in developing new exercises happened in my 3rd year of undergraduate study where we were encouraged to share to the rest of the cohort an original exercise that we have developed based on a problem that we had encountered during our directing projects. That original 10 min exercise revealed to me the creativity behind exercise development and the necessity to adapt, personalise and develop already existing exercises. It highlighted the fact that the development of actor training is a science in itself. The importance of integrative practice was highlighted during my studies at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA).

What we were taught in voice class throughout our Voice Studies postgraduate degree at times contradicted the practice that we were experiencing in movement class, particularly in relation to muscular activity and overall anatomy. The enlightening aspect, however, was that students were encouraged to find their own way and make sense of connections themselves which encouraged self-driven learning. I quickly came to realise that if a practice is safe and not physically and vocally damaging, then it should be safe to practice and creativity in terms of exercise development and integration of diverse methods should be encouraged. Although for the most part, the training was creative in nature, scientific and anatomical lectures were a strong component of the overall program. Physiological insights into how and why muscles in the body work (specifically the abdominal region) alongside safe physical practices allowed me to realise that exercises such as Suzuki's Sitting Statues (Allain 2004, pp.111-112) can be practiced safely if the performer has an awareness of what is happening inside their bodies. Keith Bain, who encouraged students to explore dynamics, energies and physical attributes with the voice, made the realisation that movement and vocal language is intertwined evident.

It was in a recent workshop at the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio conducted by Yoshito Ohno that the significance of place and space in performance training should be a priority. Upon realising that I was from Australia, Ohno commented on the fact that Australia had vast amounts of space and that Australians are physically freer than the Japanese. He also encouraged participants to experience the practical Butoh training conducted at the workshop and to adapt it in order to fit the participants' environment in their own country. If it is one aspect of actor training that is necessary in contemporary performance, it's the ability to be highly flexible, agile and responsive to the performance environment.

With the rise and popularity of site-specific, immersive and non-theatrical space-oriented performances over the past several decades, this awareness of place and space in actor training will attest to the fact that performers need to have a deeper understanding of not only their own instrument, but also the performance space they occupy. Patrice Pavis, professor of Theatre Studies at Kent University, stated that:

*[a] large part of the work has to do with researching a place ... an airplane hanger, unused factory, city neighborhood, house or apartment ... This new context provides a new situation or enunciation...and gives the performance an unusual setting of great charm and power. (Pavis 1998, pp.337-338)*

Pavis's observations, albeit relating to theatre specifically, clearly focuses on the histographic and architectural aspects of the performance spaces. What is lacking to the most part is the connection between the performer and the architecture; the link being specifically tailored performance-training methods designed to assist the performer in connecting site to body and voice.

It is important for the performer to initially observe the space with a specific frame of mind. Butoh dancer and Bodyweather founder Min Tanaka claimed that he does 'not dance in the place; but [he is] the place' (Messon-Sekine & Viala 1988, p.158). This

psychological attitude is imperative to achieve a total embodiment between the performer and the surrounding architecture. Performers may focus their attention to the space itself creating and action/reaction with the body, voice and the materials that constitute the space, however, the 'living architecture' which are essentially the body and its movements, work in a continuum with the physical architecture.

### **The Nobbs Suzuki praxis: An Australian variant of the Suzuki method of actor training**

One of the original aesthetics that have been developed and has continually been evolving since 1992 is the Nobbs Suzuki Praxis (NSP), created by John Nobbs of Ozfrank Theatre, Brisbane. The NSP is an Australian variant of the Suzuki Actor Training Method (SATM), an actor training system developed by Japanese theatre director, Tadashi Suzuki. Nobbs, through first hand experiences with Suzuki as an actor and student, developed the unique, Western variant of the original alongside co-director of Ozfrank Theatre, Jacqui Carroll.

When asked in an interview to clarify how the NSP contributes to the Australian actor training landscape, Nobbs replied:

*There's very little – there's no physical, very little physical legacy [Australians] can look at. No physical geniality ... and it's ironic I suppose that us as Australians, because Australian's about space and Japan's about time. We don't have very much sensitivity to time, and the Japanese don't really understand space. Australians have always understood space, that's why we make such great sportsmen and such great dancers, because they're spatial, they eat space in a way that most other cultures wont. In a sense we can probably offer an anti-aesthetical vision of Suzuki because we're on the other side of the coin in terms of the spatial vision versus a temporal vision. And I guess that's why we can come up with the match so to speak, the revelations, the core values of Suzuki because we're actually about space. (J Nobbs 2018, pers. comm., 20 June)*

Nobbs explained during a masterclass in June 2018 that one of the core principles of the NSP is the duality of knowledge and mystery. Dualities are present in every facet of performance and performance training practice: the more prevalent the duality, the more apparent the space between, the 'Ma', which means the space between things and 'is the moment just at the end of a movement and before the beginning of the next one' (Tadashi Endo 2006). One could also describe the 'Ma' as the subtext, more conventionally speaking. In a 'Stanislvasian' sense, the actor achieves their objectives in very much a linear trajectory. I am referring to the most common interpretation and practice of Stanislavski's work, the earlier psychological training that was practiced early in his career before the implementation of Active Analysis, which has had resurgence in recent times. However, even in Active Analysis, even though it's a very physical interpretation of a psychological action, is bound by the linear and logical progression of an expressed internal, psychological action. Each psychological action is a building block for the character to reach their super objective.

## Knowledge and mystery

By looking at the disparate methods of Stanislavski and Suzuki (who are culturally and artistically poles apart), similarities can be made by observing and comprehending the notions of knowledge and mystery, which are both happening at the same time all at once. In a sense, these elements can be described as: Knowledge is *understanding who you are*; mystery is *not knowing who you are*. This refers to the actor knowing that they are ‘acting’, not yielding completely to the character without ‘becoming’ it, rather, embodying it. On one hand the actor knows who they are and at the same time, understands what character they are playing. The mystery surrounds the unknown world they are entering while playing that character. This concept can also extend to the idea that knowledge is *being yourself*; mystery is *being someone else*. Knowledge is also the *Ego*; mystery is the *Id* which could also translate to ‘knowledge is the *conscious*; mystery is the *subconscious*’. Finally, the concept that is true to every character written, as well as a reflection of our daily lives: ‘knowledge is to *hunt*; mystery is to be the *hunted*’. This is by far the most crucial knowledge/mystery concept for actors. Knowledge is the psychological and verbal actions that the character uses to achieve their objectives. This is no doubt in the forefront of their psychology. It is clear, pragmatic and quantifiable. In a sense, the actor is ‘hunting’ their objective by logical and practical steps. The ‘hunted’, on the other hand is far more complex; it is the subtext, the space between themselves and other actors, and above all (in a rational sense), the other characters that want to take your place (and will do whatever it takes to take it) within the context of the play.

There is no doubt that mystery surrounds aspects of the performance training, but overall, it could be seen as how clever the actor is in developing a certain character, both psychologically and physically. Once actors have an understanding of the dualities in practice, they essentially fill the void with the ‘mystery’ rather than pragmatic psychological actions.

## Duality and pragmatism in the Teddy Bear Exercise

Both the NSP and the SMAT deal with performative/quintessence training. I will discuss the original NSP exercise designed by Nobbs and Carroll, called the Teddy Bear exercise. In order to interrogate Suzuki’s original exercises, the company embarked on their own initiative and interrogation of the original aesthetic, probing deeper into the core of what Suzuki was attempting to achieve in his original exercises. This in turn enabled Nobbs and Carroll to develop and create their own extensions and unique and contemporary take on the exercises. Suzuki’s training is universal in the sense that it interrogates the human spirit. Although Japanese performance training, which is steeped in history, inspired the SMAT, it is a testament that the human spirit transcends culture. The universal value of Suzuki’s training would be forgotten and in a sense be distilled in time of practitioners do not develop the work by incorporating their own cultural stamp on it.

In the *Frank Suzuki Actor Knowhow* [the former title of the NSP] *Training Manual* published in 2010 alongside the *Self Discovery in a Silver Room* DVD, Nobbs describes the exercise:

This version begins with the actors facing the back wall. One hand must be placed on the wall and both feet and the hand must remain still for the introduction to the song during which the face and body turn gradually to face fully front to be still on a certain chord just before the song proper starts.

(Meanwhile the Teddys, facing upstage, have been sitting patiently down the front in the corridor of their respective actor).

As the song proper starts [Slim Whitman's *Rose Marie*], the actors start to focus on and move towards the teddys in a freeform improvisation and, on a certain guitar slide (which occurs at approximately 1 minute and 31 seconds into the song), they must pick the teddys up, in whatever manner they feel. Mostly, performers think that they need to both grab and pick up the teddy on the first sliding note, but in fact they can place hands on the bear at any time throughout the piece; it is on the beginning of the sliding note when they must pick the bear up. They then retreat back upstage to the spot on the wall where they first started, with the teddys facing the audience, to finish in a position similar to the start. After the music's over they say a speech three times in three different ways.

1. Standard way.
2. As if they were a teddy bear.
3. A compound of teddy and their first speech (Nobbs 2010, pp.18-19).

In an impromptu addition in a workshop conducted on Monday June 17, 2018, Nobbs asked participants to speak the training speech into the teddy bears ear as they walked back to the wall facing the audience. Experiencing this felt as though you were actually teaching the object the art of language, the skill of listening and embedding a human quality to the object. This instilling of language and meaning increases the level of complexity and mystery when placing the bear on the wall and letting it speak the speech in its own 'voice'. It is now an autonomous object that has a life of its own. The 'knowledge' was the intention and meaning behind the words themselves, while the 'mystery' was the unknown and unchangeable reaction the inanimate object would, or may have had if it were alive and able to respond. The mystery is far more complex and multi-faceted than the knowledge.

The exercise is essentially all about journeys: where the performer has been, where the performer is at that point in time, and where the performer going. It is about feeling the actors' way through time and space and transforming their whole being as they move through that space in a linear track-like manner. It is very important for an actor to feel this change, and to also express it. If they are truthful to that change, and experience that journey, then the audience will go on a journey with them. If the mystery is at the forefront of the exercise and subsequent performance, then the audience will draw more out of it and implant their image to the work.

There is a certain connection that we all have when looking into the eyes of the teddy bear. In fact, this connection can somewhat be mythical – for a start, there is a certain knowledge that you have as a performer that this is an inanimate anthropomorphised object, but the mystery lies in the subconscious connection you have when advancing towards the bear and the resultant sound that is produced when asked to ‘speak as the teddy, and speak as both the teddy and yourself’. How can the Teddy Bear transgress from being a powerful pre-acting training exercise to include physical and psychological actions, text and others?

One such way is to introduce psychological verbal actions to the exercise; here lies the duality in practice, and in action. At the end of the exercise after you have spoken the text as a mix of the bears and your own, slowly turn to face the audience with the bear in hand and then turn the bear to face you. The instructor would call out a psychological/verbal action, for example: ‘to berate’, ‘to educate’, ‘to explode’ and ‘to seduce’. The verbs are limitless and not restricted to a certain few or necessary aligned with a certain context or character. Proceed by walking downstage on your designated line and repeat the verbal actions (only one at a time – don’t change them) to the teddy until you reach the downstage line. Repeat while walking back. In order to engage the body and to use the entire space, the psychological verbal actions are coupled with Action Drives from the Laban Movement System. For example, the performer would speak ‘I seduce you’ to the bear while physicalising the ‘Press’ Action Drive on the bear throughout the entire space. The physical and psychological/verbal actions are replaced by texts, dialogue or monologues. The knowledge is the expression of the actions, however, the mystery lies in the actions of the unresponsive teddy bear.

The next step would be replacing the bear with another performer: the performer who is the recipient of the action. The partner is to kneel on the ground facing upstage exactly like the bear; they should remain still, focused and relaxed, but not ‘dead’- they are very much an alive being. They should feel ‘empty’ with no preconceived notions or states of being and must not react whatsoever to their partners. Again, at a certain point in the music, the performer moving forward lifts the other actor by their shoulders (they obviously don’t physically lift them up, it is more of a guide to assist them up on the floor) and either from their shoulders or hips, they move backwards while their former sitting partner moves forwards upstage. When they reach the wall, the lifter (the performer who lifted their partner), gently places their partner on the upstage wall facing the audience, who still remain in neutral. The lifter then faces the wall and then a) speaking the text in full neutral voice; b) speaking the text expressing the voice of their partner (who is facing the audience in neutral) by feeling their energy; and c) combining their voice and your voice together.

The physical and psychological actions exercised with the teddy bear is repeated with the partners, however, when you have two performers in the exercise, the other partner (the one who was lifted up), will respond using their own psychological action and Action Drive. For example: Performer A: the actor who walked down the line towards the kneeling partner while Performer B: the kneeling partner – is in a neutral state. The exercise continues, and when the time comes to express the psychological/verbal actions and the Action Drives, it could look like this: Performer A: ‘I seduce you’

(physicalising a ‘Slash’), Performer B: ‘I defy you’ (physicalising a ‘Dab’), and so on. Depending on the workshop leader or objective of the task, the performers may express one set of specific psychological/physical actions, or alternate.

The overall important elements to be conscious about (or in fact not consciously think about) are initial impulses, vulnerability, openness and connectedness, which are all necessary elements of performance. Impulses are necessary to not only demonstrate truth in any action but to trust first instincts. Openness and vulnerability are one and the same, which is essential for creativity – to unlock an ‘inner self’, to be open, sensitive and empathic. Vulnerability is a frightening thing; once performers start to be conscious of this vulnerability, the self-consciousness is evident to the audience. This vulnerability, however, allows performers to experience (and expose) the truthful body and voice, which can be empowering. Connectedness in terms of the performer and teddy bear, the performer and the space, and the performer and others who share that same space are also crucial. These elements compel the performer to strip away all intellectualisations, preconceptions and all the peripheries of acting. They have no ‘bag of tricks’ to fall back on.

On commenting on the concept of knowledge and mystery in a comprehendum on Suzuki, Nobbs, in an email, described it as such:

*One is that it is the play (Dionysius) that most defines the deep function of theatre, and by extension, Art itself: The conflict between spiritual and temporal (worldly) power, or put another way the dichotomy between mystery and knowledge. By that I mean that in our apprehension of the cosmos, there are things we understand (factual knowledge), and things we don't understand but only feel (mystery), and our ability to function within a cosmos is a disruptive ‘conversation’ between these two sides of our ‘stance’. Art is the portrait of this ‘conversation’, and theatre specifically is the display of actors undergoing the ferment of this knowledge and mystery interaction as witnessed by the public as a form of psychic completion. (J Nobbs 2018, pers. comm., 10 July)*

## **Dominique Sweeney: Place-based practice**

In the development of an integrative practice (which has many definitions) one aspect is definable: that is place-based practice. When Lewis described Yoshito Ohno’s encouragement to experience the training and to adapt it for the Australian environment, I hear the same words echoed by Jacques Lecoq. Lecoq said a number of times while I attended his school that the vastness of Australia is in me and must emanate through me as the actor. Together, Lewis and I are developing an integrative Australian Actor Training pedagogy that takes up this call to recognise and foster actors’ artistic sensibility to place, our place.

My proposition is that contemporary traditional Aboriginal theatre performance practices offer a different way forward to the postdramatic contemporary actor representation issues that Hans-Thies Lehmann poses (Lehmann). The starting point

for me is a call to study what Aboriginal actors do. For example, on stage and screen, David Gulpilil is an artist who draws on his profound knowledge of place for inspiration. The emu performed by Gulpilil in the film *3 Dances* is not just expert imitation, it is the relationship of the chosen dramatic form in that place that shapes our perception of what he is performing (Gulpilil, Roberts and Film Australia). What is this mask, puppetry, object manipulation that Gulpilil executes with precision in relation to the ecology? The use of a hand to animate an emu's head beside his face effortlessly tells the story through this very simple double image manipulation in a clear style we can easily appreciate. There are a multitude of styles and forms in Australian Aboriginal performance traditions that require an awareness of the aesthetics and relationship to country. Aboriginal actors across Australia provide portals of awareness to audiences using signposts which arts curator Hetti Perkins explains show that:

*the past, present and future are seamless and often chronologically non-linear – which is, of course, at odds with conventional storytelling! They show an idiosyncratic worldview where a contemporary event like a catastrophic weather event and tragic death is understood within the context of the spirit world. (Perkins and Kataoka)*

Perkins describes traditions that antedate Edward Gordon Craig's über-marionette, the ultimate actor, by millennia (Craig). The fluidity of acting styles in Aboriginal cultures embraced these greater connections between death, spirit and country. Gordon Craig surmised that "the beginning of all drama is movement". Jacques Lecoq's theatrical pedagogy is that 'tout bouge', developed from Jacques Copeau and Suzanne Bing, where everything moves and if not, is dead. But death and stillness have their place too. The world of the not-moving, the other world or domain of the dead, to which we are connected yet physically separate is the theatrical sphere where country, environment and history stir our perceptions. To begin developing an Australian pedagogy is to find these voices here and now that are emplaced in this country.

### **Under the skin and out of the skin**

If we look back to early 20th century actor training alongside Stanislavsky, Gordon Craig said that instead of an actor getting under the skin of the part they should be getting out of the skin of the part altogether. "[T]he preposterous absurdity of this delusion ... the belief that [the actor] should aim to make an actual copy, a reproduction" is contrary to the art and so we must "do away with the real tree, do away with the reality of delivery, do away with the reality of action" (Craig). Gulpilil's emu example demonstrates an accuracy of representation that shows little resemblance to 'realistic' acting. In his screen roles in films from *Walkabout* to *Charlie's Country* his characters live a 'truthfulness' that comes from the way he provides a certain distance similar to portraying the emu somewhere between his hand and face.

Between 1917-1919 the French Vieux-Colombier theatre company went to New York where Suzanne Bing encountered and worked with Margaret Naumberg developing children's nature play as the heart of creative acting. In the world of child's play Bing found process over product with joyful learning as mainstays in a world of unimpeded

creativity. This play is never confined to reproducing the 'real'. From observations of child play Bing developed vocal exercises consisting of recreating the sounds of wind, rain and animal noises and movement exercises based on the portrayal of animals. These are theatrical observations not attempts to recreate reality. The corner stones to the approach are "simplicity, spontaneity, trust, experiential learning and discovery, and being less dominated by purely intellectually and analytically refined approaches" (Fleming, p.109).

### **Neutral mask**

From these basic principles passed on through Jean Daste to Lecoq, the development of the 'neutral mask' as primary to actor training emerged. In 1991 at the International Workshop Festival in Adelaide I was first introduced to Jacques Lecoq and the following week to the voice teaching of Frankie Armstrong. These two seminal workshops have left me with lifelong impressions. Armstrong's inspiring gift to students is to open up voices "the most intimate expression of ourselves... to discover the wondrous variety of expression, colour and range that we are capable of"(Armstrong). So too with 'neutral mask' the idea is one of opening up each actor's creative being. But while profound, something is missing in Lecoq's 'neutral mask' pedagogy. The first six months of the Lecoq training is a silent world of movement and gesture. In an integrative approach to actor training 'neutral mask' exercises that include voice simultaneously open up the vocal possibilities Armstrong explores.

My central proposition in developing this integrative approach is not to prescribe one kind of actor training but to take useful acting exercises created in specific places and test and adapt them for where they are now located. This foundation work prepares actors with an in-depth awareness of who and where they are in this place and - provides the basis to then explore beyond. For research into characters from other places and times that include accents and different physicalities, the 'neutral' starting point provides a ready position to enable the possibility of learning and developing the portrayal of 'others'.

Anne Marshall describes the rigidity in non-Aboriginal acting students attempting to learn stylised movements from Mimili people. The issues are because, as Marshall describes:

*Aboriginal performances carry with them a vast range of kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory experiences. Apart from human interaction, this variety is connected with seasonal changes; location changes; particular vegetation; topography of the surrounding countryside; altitude; fire and wood smoke; food; animals, birds and insects; the scent of rain on dry dust; pollen carried by the wind and the tang of seasonal flowers and fruits. (Marshall, pp.311-312)*

What we have to discover and learn through appreciating these connections to country is the way to an emplaced actor training.

## Conclusion

Place-based practice is necessary, and in Wagga Wagga we are in Wiradjuri country. Our task is to discuss how these ideas can be applied with the support of Wiradjuri elders. Traditional Aboriginal theatre practices in the broader continent are core to what we can learn to be closer to country and attuned to 'kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory experiences'. Emplaced approaches to acting in undergraduate courses are the start to developing an Australian Actor training pedagogy. Opening pathways to post graduate research through the appreciation of Aboriginal languages, translation and studying the richness and variety of styles, forms and stories is for our future development.

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Dr Dominique Sweeney is a lecturer in acting at CSU. He trained and works as a performer. Dominique's education included two years in Paris at L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq. His performance work has seen him on stages, screen and other locations throughout Australia. He taught and directed at Sydney Theatre School and worked as an Environmental Education Ranger in Centennial Park, Sydney. In 2012 Dominique devised and applied a drama program for autistic and multiple disability students at Wairoa school in Bondi. He is a core member and chair of the board of Theatre Kantanka, a company that specialises in site specific performance. He also works with Fine Line, a Lecoq based ensemble.

# Monologuing the music: A new actor training practice for new times

Nicole Stinton<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The myth that musical theatre actors cannot act is alive and well. Director, musician and lecturer Dr Zachary Dunbar asserts that the industry frequently chooses between actors who cannot sing or singers who cannot act (2016, 71). Popular blogger WestEndProducer purports that the musical theatre ‘twirley’ is often considered as a jack of all trades but a master of none (2017). In conservatoire style training, could traditional triple-threat skill-focused courses include more holistic educative approaches that integrate the three disciplines of acting, singing and dancing and, longer-term, contribute to dispelling the aforementioned myth? Whilst this question cannot be answered without the passing of time, contemporary conservatoire-based training seems to be moving in the right direction with classes in scene-to-song and acting-through-song. In a new Musical Theatre course at The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), we have also adopted several other integratory methods to promote more authenticity from our students during performance. These include firstly embedding discipline-specific content within classes that are not normally associated with that discipline, secondly students writing original music theatre works and finally enabling them to monologue the music, not just the lyrics. This last technique is an acting, not a singing, tool that enables students to rigorously explore *what* is being said (the verbal text), as much as *how* it is being said (the musical text).

## Keywords

Musical Theatre; Music Theatre; Triple-threat; Acting; Monologue the Music; Monologue the Lyrics; Conservatoire Training

When I started my actor training over twenty-five years ago, I quickly discovered there was a stigma attached to me simply by merit of my course of study. That is because I was training in musical theatre I was not considered a ‘real’ actor, whilst the real actors were those doing the straight acting course. Upon graduating I quickly learnt that this perception also permeated the entertainment industries. In fact, I remember a conversation that I had with an agent back in the 1990s who recommended I not list my

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music theatre credits, nor skills, on my CV if I was going for a film and television role, because it was most likely I would then not be given an audition. Ever since I have worked hard, both in my professional and education practices, to debunk this myth. I have pursued any means I could find to generate work built on believable and authentic acting, whether the actor was speaking, singing or dancing. Two and a half years ago, when I first started my PhD research, I was disheartened to read in an article by music theatre educator Dr Zachary Dunbar that directors and educators are still often having to choose between ‘actors who can’t sing’ and ‘singers who can’t act’ (2016, 71). A fortnight later I came across a Blog article by WestEndProducer who purported that the perception of the musical theatre artist as a ‘twirley’, one who is often considered as a jack of all trades but a master of none, still virulently permeates the UK theatre industry (2017). Then, rather than dismiss this perception as a myth as I had done since my twenties, I began to actively investigate what else might I do to be a better director and teacher of music theatre, one that helps actors to be as believable and authentic on stage as they possibly can be.

By the end of 2017, I had become confident that today’s music theatre training programs needed to expand upon the traditional triple-threat conservatoire-style training that myself, and many of my teaching colleagues and industry peers experienced as young adults: I believe that training today would benefit from a far more holistic and integrated approach to skill development and experiential learning. Moving forward I advocate that program design shifts away from curricula that rely heavily on teaching acting, singing and dancing in separate classes as independent skills that are almost mutually exclusive to one another. In saying that, I certainly do not mean that the disciplines of acting, singing and dancing should not be taught to students, nor that they should not be taught at least some of the time in autonomous sessions to students, but that much is to be gained if educators can rethink, rework and/or expand the methods of each skill acquisition. For the purposes of this article to support this notion I will draw largely on anecdotal observations from my teaching practice and rehearsals made over the last two years, as well as some data gathered from formal workshops that were conducted specifically for the purposes of research in this area. I argue that the dominant practice of using theatrical productions as the main vehicle for integration is no longer enough to meet the demands of theatre-with-music industries. That by taking a more holistic approach to musical theatre actor training, and building in multiple methods of integration across the curriculum, future industries will not have to choose ‘actors who can’t sing’ over ‘singers who can’t act’, but simply great ‘actors’ who happen to sing really well.

The idea of integration in actor training is, of course, far from new. There are many innovative music theatre educators who are not only implementing, but also actually creating effective contemporary acting practices that embrace a unified skill approach, especially in melding acting with musicianship: Dr Paul Barker in the Masters program at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London is teaching students to proactively consider the music when making character and song interpretation choices; author Jeremy Harrison in the Actor-Musicianship program at Rose Bruford in London is enabling actors to characterise and express meaningfully through instrumental as well as vocal sound; Professor Joe Deer, Chair at the Creative Arts Center at Wright

State University in the USA, is assisting students to listen for clues in the music when acting a song through a range of diverse activities, as seen in his co-authored book *Acting in Musical Theatre* (Deer & Dal Vera, 2016). At the Victorian College of the Arts in Australia, the new Head of Music Theatre Tyran Parke is working with students on being more responsive to the multiple texts of a song (the verbal, musical and physical texts) in their interpretations.

In my own teaching practice, I have asked, *What can I borrow from such specialists and then build on to design an effective, integrated music theatre actor-training program, whilst still providing students with the specific discipline skill development they need?* It should be said that the course I manage at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) is not a Bachelor but a Diploma, and it is not three but one year in length. Most Diploma students are hoping to continue further music theatre studies through one of the many Bachelor courses that are now available across the country. As this Diploma was only launched last year, it is unencumbered by historical institutional and course practices, and similarly it is not bound by conventions of traditional conservatoire-style training. Because of this, it has been relatively easy to incorporate several holistic-training approaches and cross-content focuses into the course design. These include:

1. Embedding discipline-specific content within classes that are not normally associated with that discipline
2. Students writing original music theatre works
3. Monologuing the music, not just the lyrics, as an acting tool

The third of these is the cornerstone of the Diploma's acting through song class. It is an integrated music-acting technique that I have been developing over the past two years which incorporates a series of activities that enable actors to identify and then explore how they can utilise specific musical elements within a song to characterise, build relationships with other characters, to realise dramatic action and to make other acting choices. Before I discuss this in detail, as I will later in the article, I would like to explore the first integration focus; the embedding discipline-specific content across classes. This involves the transference and/or repetition of components that are usually found in one class, within another class. For example, acting content would not only be found in an acting class but also in non-acting classes, singing would be taught in voice class as well as non-voice focused classes, aural would be included in non-music skills classes, et cetera. This is with the aim for students to not only transfer knowledge from one subject to another, but more importantly to meld components of the disciplines together, to value this amalgamation and use this synthesis to inform their rehearsal and performance processes. Like traditional conservatoire-style training, our Diploma students undertake specialised discipline-based classes, including in acting, jazz dance, music skills, song and dance, and voice, with each class focusing on a particular discipline. However, components of the prescribed Vocational Education and Training (VET)<sup>2</sup> units which sit underneath the Diploma curriculum design are not restricted to

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<sup>2</sup> Vocational Education and Training Package units from the CUA50213 Diploma of Musical Theatre

roll-out within only the most logically-matched classes. Rather VET content is clustered<sup>3</sup> across classes which then requires students to think cross-disciplinary and continually transfer the knowledge and skills from one discipline to another. For example, the VET CUAMLT501 unit “Refine Aural Perception Skills” (Commonwealth of Australia 2017) is not merely restricted to being taught within the Music skills class. Parts of the unit’s outcome criteria are embedded into an additional two classes:

- a. Song Repertoire
- b. Acting through Song

For example, “Refine Aural Perception Skills” outcome 2.5 is split across two classes, as seen in Figure 1. As could easily be expected one of these classes is music skills, whilst the second is an acting through song class. Another outcome however, number 3.4, is not covered at all in the logical music skills class, but rather is covered in acting through song, as well as in song repertoire, as outlined in Figure 2.

VET element 2.5	<i>“Develop aural identification of instrumental timbres, textures, formal structural elements and other aspects of musical expression”</i>	Music skills class
		Acting through song class

**Figure 1.** MS(Dip) Elements Evidence (Stinton, 2017).

VET element 3.4	<i>‘Discuss and apply aural perception skills relevant to own music practice’</i>	Song repertoire class
		Acting through song class

**Figure 2.** MS(Dip) Elements Evidence (Stinton, 2017).

By requiring students to analyse, apply, question and discuss music aural components in other classes, they engage more holistically as artists with song material. This is then assisting in an integrated, connected approach on the rehearsal room and performance floors. For example, in an analytical acting through song class late last year, without informing the students what the song was, I played on the piano the opening underscore of “Nothing” from *A Chorus Line* (Hamlisch, 1982). Without recognising the song, just from listening to the underscore the cohort of twenty-six students were able to identify appropriate clues about character, relationship, tension, situation, setting, theme, etc. From that group, Student 9 said:

*I loved the exercise in tonight’s class and found it so ‘mind blowing’ because we found so much information in just the music about character, setting, situation, etc which I usually have to spend so much time researching the show to find out. Especially when it comes to context, it’s hard to find much without reading the actual script (which is always hard*

<sup>3</sup> Clustering is the term utilised in VET to describe the process of grouping together a number of competencies (focus areas) within a class, which were not originally grouped together in the Training Package curriculum documents provided by the Department of Education and Training.

*to find!) so this is a helpful new approach I can take. (“Workshop Data” 2018)*

Student 19 said:

*By listening to only the accompaniment of a completely unfamiliar song, I was able to discern feelings or emotions that I felt the music implied. After then hearing it with the lyrics, which showed the more explanatory intention of the song, I realised how it’s not the only the music that seems to heighten the meaning of what the character is feeling or saying, but also how what the character is feeling or saying can influence the music. This interaction of the music and lyrics made me explore the idea of, ‘When is the music eliciting a change in the characters feelings, and when is the characters feelings or thoughts driving a change in the music?’ (“Workshop Data” 2018)*

The week before writing this article the same group of students were asked music aural questions in a practical acting through song class which required them to consider how compositional musical elements informed their acting choices. Student 6 who, prior to entering the Diploma, had studied music as an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) subject in Year 12 was asked, “What is a change in the music that helped you create your character?”. They replied with

*There is one bar before the final section where it returns to the theme at the beginning [student sings the musical motif] which is reminiscent of a dance theme which comes back later in the show ... where the mother talks about how she was seduced as a child herself. So that change in music [in ‘Open Your Heart’ from Carrie] really helped to show a more humane side to herself where she changes from being a very aggressive force in the song to really being able to show her vulnerability and regret. (“Workshop Data” 2018)*

Conversely Student 3, new to music theory training, was asked, “When it went into the main melody section, how did that change help you to build your character as the Babe in *I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change?*” This student answered with

*It [the melody section] was a lot more connected ... than the staccato section. That contrast flicked a switch to get myself into the smoothness of the Babe. (“Workshop Data” 2018)*

Whilst there is a difference in the sophistication of their responses that is at least partially informed by the extent of their music theory and aural knowledge, both students were still able to identify specific music elements in their songs and to discuss how the use of these elements helped them create character.

The second integrated approach that is part of the course is the writing of original music theatre works by students, largely explored in a class called creating work. Across the year, students undertake four writing projects, indicated in blue in Figure 3.

### ASSESSMENT DETAILS:

Assessment	Description	Due Dates
Practical Assignment x 3 (PRO)	The student will establish themselves as a sole trader and provide evidence in project form that they can manage their financial affairs in order to be financially viable as an artist	Sem 1 Week 9
	Working in a small group the student will create and perform from memory an original 8 - 12 minute a cappella musical.	Sem 1 Week 15
	The student will create a website and a networking plan to promote themselves as an artist who is about to graduate from WAAPA	Sem 2 Week 15
Portfolio x 2 (PF)	Across five weeks, the student will create a portfolio that documents their process as they complete your OBS1 Fringe World Duet task and collates marketing material to promote themselves.	Sem 1 Week 6
	Across thirteen weeks (including two non-teaching weeks), the student will create a portfolio that documents their process as they work in a group of 3 – 4 artists on a Creative Development project to create, perform and project manage the opening 10 - 15 minute excerpt of a drama-with-music piece	Sem 2 Week 11
Observation of Presentation x 2 (OBS)	The student will present from memory, on one occasion, with a partner a performance of a found-song with original lyrics.	Sem 1 Week 5
	Working in a small group the student will devise, write and perform from memory a 10 – 12 minute Theatre-in-education play.	Sem 2 Project week 1

**Figure 3.** CW(Dip) Clustered Class Plan v6 (Stinton, 2017).

Whilst having to write music theatre works was literally terrifying to almost all the students at the beginning of the year, especially as half of them entered the course musically illiterate, they agree the process has since proved invaluable to them. This is not merely as potential future writers and composers of new works, but as holistic, purposeful actors able to create believable, authentic characters when working with both original and given (non-original) plays. This advantage should, longer-term once students enter the industry, result in them having an increased likelihood of getting acting work.

When writing the final song of a mini-musical for the creating work class one student, Student 2, was struggling with writing something that worked well dramatically. It was only once they focused on character and their purpose that “writing the song became easy” and the selection and treatment of the chords they chose “came to say so much about the character of [and] focus during the piece” (“Workshop Data” 2018). When composing for their original mini-musical Student 7 made some highly specific and extremely insightful observations about their musical theatre creative writing process:

*Our group really focused on building characterisation through melody and rhythm throughout the first section of the piece. The scene starts with a percussion section followed by a vocalised chord progression. In this part of the musical the girls [characters] are creating the percussion with various props such as buckets and brooms, to demonstrate the manual labour taking place. The use of 4/4 in this section, along with a straight descending chord progression creates a methodical and droning like sound. The use of accidentals in the harmony line also created a dissonance to represent the girl’s misery. Solo lines were then layered over the top, which started off low and syncopated. The line ‘inside the*

*institution no one can hear the girls scream' was written with quaver and dotted quaver beats. This syncopation layered over the top of the straight chord progression was written with the intention to demonstrate the girl's internal suffering, the contrast and clash conveying their inward struggle and outrage toward the surroundings, wanting to fight the system however giving in and returning back to the chord progression.*  
 ("Workshop Data" 2018)

When then reflecting on how they would use their writing experience to create characters in given, non-original scripts, this same student described the process as eye opening because they

*became aware of the immense detail put into every section of a piece music that is sometimes overlooked by the actor. ...Being able to breakdown the music from the opposite perspective was a really valuable lesson, and I was able to understand some of the smaller details the composer chooses for the song that which could tremendously help the actor (such as the use of tempo and dynamics etc.). It demonstrated how much each character is really represented through the music and how an actor can use all of the individual elements to find out more about their character.* ("Workshop Data" 2018)

The third inclusion in the Diploma program that is integration focused is Monologuing the music. This is comprised of a series of acting activities that encourage the actor to characterise drawing on more than merely those clues found in the verbal (lyrical) text of a song. Typically, an activity that many actors currently undertake when preparing a role for performance is to monologue the lyrics. This is where they separate the verbal text from the musical one, removing the music entirely and then workshopping the words as if they were a spoken monologue. This practice is commonly accepted by many experts to assist the actor in uncovering characterisation, relationship and other dramatic action insights, in order to create a multi-layered, purposeful character (see Clark 84; Craig 1; Dunbar 66-67; Henson and Pickering 55-56; Kayes 175; Lucca 42; McWaters 49-50; Moore 160-164; Richardson 12-13). Only after the actor has undertaken lyric-monologuing explorations, is the music then added back in for the actor to sing the song. Whilst lyric-monologuing is a relatively popular component of many musical theatre actors' preparation and rehearsal processes, and certainly is useful in building character, very few actors undertake reverse activities to explore only the musical text of a song in order to uncover acting clues. Focusing so heavily on the lyrics when characterising creates an explorative dependence on "What am I saying?" to inform acting decisions, but also a devaluing of "How am I saying it?" as being a useful part of this process. I propose that when actors, as part of their regular acting processes, undertake investigative activities to purposefully uncover characterisation clues in the music, not just the lyrics, of a song, they expose insights that are almost certainly overlooked without such enquiry. Both my professional practice of two decades as a musical theatre director, actor and teacher, and my current research as a PhD candidate, support this hypothesis.

Monologuing the music, as previously stated, employs activities that enable actors to identify specific clues in the music that they then utilise to characterise, build relationships with other characters, realise dramatic action and make a range of acting choices. Just as one removes the music of a song and speaks the verbal lines aloud to focus on the lingual text and *monologue the lyrics*, when music-monologuing the actor removes the words of a song and expresses the vocal lines aloud to focus on the musical text. When undertaking the latter, instead of verbalising words, the actor uses non-lexical sounds, such as "mah" or "toh", or an open vowel such as "ah" or "oh", to sing the musical lines. Similar to the way in which emphatic words, key phrases and lyric repetition become more evident in the absence of music when lyric-monologuing, key musical elements, such as rhythm, pitch and pause, become more apparent in music-monologuing. Although I have observed that some actors may already remove the lyrics and vocalise to non-lexical sounds, their primary purpose in doing so is to learn which notes to sing, for how long and in what way to sing them, rather than to uncover characterisation or other acting insights. Data contributing to the development of this music-monologuing technique has been gathered in both in formal workshops that were conducted specifically for research purposes, as well as in teaching and rehearsal situations when observations have been anecdotal. Regardless of the formality of the data gathering, when working with professional and student actors I have found that by monologuing the music, it is not simply *probable* that insights helpful to the acting process are identified, but that often such insights are not perceived *until* the verbal text has been stripped away and the music is left exposed.

For example, in 2017 I was directing a newly graduated professional actor in a cabaret for the Perth Fringe World festival and she was singing the song "I want to go to Hollywood" from *Grand Hotel* (Yeston 1990), where the German character Flaemmchen is expressing her desire to become a film star in Hollywood. Only after the actor removed the lyrics and monologued the first verse, did it become apparent that the writer was shifting between having the first word of a phrase sometimes fall on and at other times after the first and strongest beat of a bar. Beat one, the strongest beat of the bar, is indicated in bold here:

[PAUSE] *I want to be that girl in the mirror, there.*  
 [PAUSE] *I want to be that girl with golden hair*  
**UP** *on the silver screen most ev'rywhere*  
**IN** *the world*  
 [PAUSE] *I want to go to Holly-*  
**-wood**, *Talkies ... I mean the pictures. (Yeston 1990, 117-118)*

Whilst of course it is not possible to know what composer/lyricist Maury Yeston's intention was through this musical device, the actor decided she would use the small musical pause (quaver rest) at the beginning of phrases one, two and five to suggest that she was chasing a dream that is beyond her reach. She then chose to juxtapose this elusiveness with a moment of definitiveness: She emphasised the strong starting beats of phrases three and four to purposefully and enthusiastically describe her Hollywood goal. Similarly, after removing the words and vocalising the middle section later in the song where the character describes the bleak destitution of her reality, each phrase

starts with a silence or pause in the music that was followed by a very short phrase, the actor then built further on her earlier aching for an unattainable dream by first leaning into each silence and then immediately attacking its subsequent phrase:

*[PAUSE] My cold water flat,  
 [PAUSE] The sofa that I sleep on  
 [PAUSE] Behind the screen,  
 [PAUSE] The noisy lodger in the  
 NEXT room,  
 [PAUSE] My broken hand mirror,  
 [PAUSE] My broken coffee pot  
 [PAUSE] If things get broken, they  
 STAY broken (Yeston 1990, 122-123)*

Whilst the actor had only a simple music literacy, it was only once the lyrics were taken away she was able to clearly hear musical clues and then utilise them as part of her song interpretation. Should the actor have not taken an integrated music-acting approach, it is possible that she would not have made the characterisation choices that she did.

Last year when working with Natasha's material in *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812* (Molloy, 2016) as part of a performance practice workshop series, Diploma Student 21, with limited prior music theory knowledge, made a series of musically-driven character notes. These are notated in Figure 4 in blue alongside the song's lyrics in black.

In working on "Pierre" from the same play, Student 20, who was a self-taught pianist and guitarist, shared the following insights:

*The song is written in 12/8, along with some of Pierre's other songs and sections of songs. In this number, I found that it is essentially Pierre is explaining his insecurities and situation and what he is like as a person. The music often pulls Pierre back in an awkward off beat fashion. There are duplets following a lyric that Pierre sings and this is jarring because it doesn't sound musically right. This is relatable to his questionable morals. Those being a pushover and giving people money to make them happy or to make up for something he did. ("Workshop Data" 2018)*

Once able to apply techniques that encourage an integrated acting approach, such as music-monologuing, students are able to uncover acting clues that are only available in non-verbal musical texts and, as such, could be overlooked if they were not implemented.

This shows that by providing student actors with training that focuses on both specific specialised skill development, whilst also embedding some elements from other skill disciplines into these same classes, and by equipping them with techniques to effectively listen to, analyse and experiment with the musical elements of their songs as an important part of the acting process, they are able to more easily take a holistic acting approach than those actors of previous generations. I am also confident that

when these students eventually become professionals, they will then be better equipped to build connected, believable and authentic characters and meet the acting demands of the music theatre industries. Longer-term this may shift perceptions about industry having to choose between ‘actors who can’t sing’ and ‘singers who can’t act’ (Dunbar 2016, 71), and rather great actors who happen to sing well.

I hate you Sonya!  
I hate you Roza!  
I hate you, I hate you!  
You're my enemies forever!

[NATASHA]  
And without a moment's  
reflection  
I wrote the answer to Princess Mary  
I'd been unable to write all morning

All our misunderstandings are at an end  
Forget everything and forgive me  
But I can't be  
Andrey's wife

**Letters**

Dear Andrey—  
What more can I write  
After all that has happened?  
What am I to do if I love him and the other one  
too?  
Must I break it off?  
These terrible questions

Dear Princess Mary—

Oh, what am I to write!  
How do I choose?  
What do I do?  
I shall never be happy again

**The Ball**

I am seized by feelings of vanity and fear  
There is no barrier between us  
Whispers and moans, and ringing in my ear  
There is no barrier between us

This whole section is off the beat and the melody and rhythm is all over the place, which displays her temper tantrum. When she says 'I hate you' it is off the beat – showing that she doesn't actually mean it.

This is very fast and almost monotone which displays that she is acting quickly with anger but not necessarily doing the right thing

Instead of continuing to write, she's silent, because she has no clue what to say.

This rhythm is in very quick triplets, which reveals her scattered thoughts

This whole section has quite a sexy feel to it – it is written with a waltz rhythm. The melody is slurred on the words such as "moans" and "divine" which give off sexual connotations.

Figure 4. Title (“Workshop Data” 2018).

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## About the author

Nicole Stinton has worked as a director, vocal coach and actor for over two decades across Australasia, specialising in music theatre. She has taught acting and singing at a tertiary level for over 10 years, including at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) (Australia) and Lasalle (Singapore). Other industry experience includes being Artistic Director for four seasons of Short+Sweet in Singapore, as well as the inaugural Malaysian festival. She has published several drama textbooks that are widely used in the West Australian education system. Nicole holds an MBA in Entertainment and Arts Management (Deakin) and a Bachelor in Musical Theatre (WAAPA). She is studying her PhD in music theatre acting at WAAPA. Nicole is currently Course Coordinator of the new Diploma of Musical Theatre at WAAPA.

# “Make it so...”: Communal augmented reality and the future of theatre and performance

Shane Pike<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Digital technology continues to change and transform the way audiences interact with art and entertainment. The impact that streaming devices and high-definition recording equipment has had on the actor's craft, in particular, is irreversible and the increasing prevalence of digitally rendered characters and animated stories has changed the performative storytelling landscape forever. This article reflects on the increasing evolution of reality-augmenting technologies and proposes how these might influence and benefit the development of theatre arts and live, dramatic performance. It is argued that while the technology is not yet at a point where it can most-usefully supplement the established ability for traditional theatre to generate fantastic worlds in the minds of its audience, projection-based augmentation is rapidly moving towards a point where it can take the dramatic arts to their next evolutionary level. Rather than supplanting the actor and nullifying their specialist skills and artistry, it is predicted that this technology will encourage the live performer to heighten their artform and allow them to use advances in digital entertainment to serve theatre and performance, and its audiences, well into the future.

## Keywords

Performing Arts; Theatre; Art and Technology; Practice-led Research; Augmented Reality and Theatre; Projection Mapping and Performance

In the creation and presentation of live, embodied, performative and imaginative worlds through storytelling it is argued that the comparably traditional methods of theatre and dramatic performance making maintain an edge over current digital technologies in their reliability, usability, adaptability and flexibility. Able to be presented with as little as human bodies in space, and for a community of individuals to experience the performance collectively and simultaneously simply by being present, there is a sense of inclusivity and a desirable element of shared-experience at the centre of the theatrical performance that does not currently exist in some of the most popular

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forms of digitally supported imaginative world-making, which can literally immerse users in the un-real and detach them from those around them. What is more, to oversimplify the point, the theatrical experience as we most commonly know it generally places little onus on audiences beyond getting to the performance space and finding somewhere to sit<sup>2</sup>, while immersive technologies often demand audiences to bring their own devices, or to don equipment seemingly designed with function prioritised over comfort and ergonomics.

Theatre scholar, Michael Mangan (21-27), provides a detailed discussion on the imaginative interactions that occur between audience and live performer in order to generate a believable experience when viewing theatre, ideas which I have also analysed in previous writings (Pike "Articulating the Inarticulate: Performance and Intervention in Masculine Gender (Re)Presentation"; Pike "A Role to Play: Investigating Concepts of Masculinity in Australia through Theatre"). In short, however, through the persuasive technique and skill of the artists – generally a collaborative effort between a writer, director and actor – each audience member of a dramatic artwork becomes the creator of their own imaginative world of the story, seeded by the artist's creative offerings.

Augmented Reality (AR), on the other hand and for example, creates the world of the story outside the mind of the audience so that the fantasy is not generally conjured in the audience's imagination, rather, they are brought into the imagination of the person(s) who have digitally designed the world. Each audience member/participant shares in the uniformed world of the creator, which becomes an enhanced version of their everyday, real-world experience. Theatre, by contrast, asks the audience to draw on their real-world, lived experiences and complete their own fantasy by virtue of what is presented to them onstage. The moment in time this article looks towards is when digital technology will find seamless integration into the more traditional, theatrical conventions to enhance and support the dramatic worlds created and ideally conjoin the fantasies of the creators and the audience rather than, it is argued, the current state of affairs where the digital and the dramatically, tangibly embodied still find an uncomfortable friction.

As others have pointed out, the ability for live, embodied, theatrical storytelling to create fantastic and other-worldly experiences, in the minds of an audience, is well-established and perhaps best summed up by Shakespeare's Chorus in *Henry V*:

*Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;  
 Into a thousand parts divide one man,  
 And make imaginary puissance;  
 Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them  
 Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;  
 For 't is your thoughts that now must deck our kings, (Rogers 13).*

<sup>2</sup> Leaving aside the accessibility issues that some performance venues present to certain members of the community, which are very important issues but not the focus of this article. An extension of this point, and this article for that matter, along these lines is how technology can be used to improve accessibility issues for live theatre and performance. The focus here, however, is where digital and traditional might merge in the act of bringing the creative, storytelling concept to "reality".

Alongside this poetic explanation of how imaginative (re)constructions of fantastic worlds are conjured in a live theatre audience's mind, augmented reality scholars Julie Carmigniani and Borko Furht draw on the following explanation of how technology attempts to achieve a similar end: "Augmented Reality (AR) [is] a real-time direct or indirect view of a physical real-world environment that has been enhanced/*augmented* by adding virtual computer-generated information to it" [original emphasis] (3). Based on these explanations, it is further reinforced that the detailed world of a traditional play is conjured *inside* the mind of each individual audience member, while AR generates a world *outside* the minds of the audience. What these two contrasting methods of fantastic world-making have in common, is that they are both based *in* the mind of an overall creator: the artist/designer/storyteller whose imagination ultimately conjures the world the audience will enter, whether that be physically or metaphysically.

As the uptake of AR enabled mobile devices increases, this technology is becoming more and more usable. However, there is no escaping the fact that the hardware required to interact with this technology currently and generally limits the experience to those with access to an enabled device. Furthermore, wearable devices (such as the Oculus Rift or Samsung Gear, for example) actively shut-out the "real" world by requiring an individual to wear closed-in head gear, arguably defeating the purpose of an enhanced or augmented reality where the reality and the augmentation are effectively separated for the user and not so much enhanced, as simply re-created on a digital scale. In this respect, requiring individuals to wear a device that separates them from their outside world is not ideal for a creative project with the aim of bringing the fantastic into the everyday. There is the risk that the experience simply becomes watching an interactive 3D movie rather than being part of a live, shared experience, the novelty and appeal being that the movie is watched in a location that is not a cinema or the user's living room. There is also the potential for some users to suffer unpleasant physical reactions to wearable devices, such as headaches, nausea and vertigo, significantly limiting the appeal of the experience.

Other technologies, such as three-dimensional projection mapping, do allow for a shared experience – a critical element for the transformative nature of live performance that cements it as a vital social and cultural necessity and, importantly, "the occasion on which we confirm our shared humanity" (Alfreds qtd. in Purcell 75). The complexity in coding and design for this kind of projection for creators of imagined worlds can, however, limit the technology's usefulness in a live, storytelling context without access to affordable and willing technicians, engineers and scientists skilled in the area. The requirement for screens on fixed tracks or immovable, carefully aligned set pieces to receive the projection may also interfere with the practicality of the performance space. As outlined below it is in the development of these technologies, though, towards less rigid forms of communal augmented reality that traditional theatre and technologies of entertainment may very well find their integration.

Focusing on creators of live art and entertainment there is also an argument that the current theatre making practices remain more realistic, affordable and efficient, in terms of transforming the creative vision from idea to an embodied/embodiable reality,

and leave limited persuasive reason as to why makers should more stridently embrace emerging technology, particularly for the small to medium theatre sector and especially for independent theatre artists. Performances that utilise Virtual Reality (VR) and/or AR technology, represented by screen-based digital projections or portable platform-based computer gameplay incorporating character and narrative, whether or not they appear in three dimensions and/or use interactive Artificial Intelligence (AI), continue to require programming beyond the layman and often demand cost-prohibitive soft- and hard-ware for their presentation. This means that, for the live performance maker, the technology is currently at risk of being a hinderance rather than a help. And this is an important consideration, given the trajectory of creative academies and arts faculties in universities towards incorporating AR, VR and AI technologies into their theatre studies curriculums and research agendas, as well as the increasing interest from funding bodies to see digital elements pitched by performing artists as part of applications for financial support. While it is useful to encourage artists to adopt new technologies and build on traditional techniques and knowledge, it would be unfortunate to foster a situation where the plaustrum is placed squarely before the equus.

In many ways, theatre is a medium experienced in adopting technology into its created worlds and naturally subsumes new techniques and modes of information transformation and transmission as a natural evolution. A fact that bodes well for the eventual, complete subsumption of something like projection mapping into its creative process. Indeed, it is fine to argue that theatre is already a low-tech instance of augmented reality, with the theatrical elements of design – costume, lighting, sound, AV, set, props – the original augmenters. I would say that this argument is not entirely indefensible, and eventually AR and/or VR will become yet another tool of the theatre-maker's kit, but the technology is not quite there yet.

However, the multiple elements of and possibilities for theatre and technology should not be over-simplified, such that if “augmented reality means to integrate synthetic information into the real environment ... would a TV screen playing a cartoon movie, or a radio playing music, then be an AR display? ... Obviously, there is more to it. The augmented information has to have a much stronger link to the real environment” (Bimber and Raskar 2). Movement towards this more robust augmented information in theatre is, arguably, simply the digitisation and advancement of the process of intermediality that has already changed the way live performance is done (Chapple and Kattenbelt). Just as neither film nor TV replaced live theatre but influenced its style and form, particularly through acting styles and trends, so too will be the case for these other technologies, especially in light of their need for animation (Hayes and Webster) and how actors can find a place within this.

There is another consideration of how these and related technologies, both as they currently stand and in a future where they have found an indivisible place within live performance, might alter the theatrical landscape. Here, motion capture (MoCap) technology and animation are relevant. The underlying argument being that MoCap is a finite technology, in terms of its usefulness to actors of the future. The reality is, as motion is captured – to be used in the animation of these augmented and virtual

realities – universities, production studios and research and technology institutes record and store the data that documents that motion, and animators already have the skills and knowledge to write the code for realistically animated characters without a live body (Wise). Online resources that provide free, downloadable data of an extraordinary amount of everyday human actions have existed for some time now (CMU). The data available can be easily accessed and subsequently animated in any way you please. It follows, then, that once motion has been captured and stored the need for a human body to provide the motion for capture, particularly an actor trained in working with a MoCap suit, is removed. Why would a budget be used to pay an actor a substantial sum of money to generate a performance that can be digitally rendered from already available information? It is a controversial fact that animators are generally much cheaper than a star actor who, in any case, “can be seen as an above-the-line drain on production finance, an overvalued promotional figure taking credit for character expressivity that might be, in actuality, largely animated” (Bode 5).

While generally considered a concern of the film and television aspects of the industry, the immediate response to such a criticism is, of course, evidenced in the advent of the term Performance Capture (PerCap) as distinct from MoCap. While some do not distinguish between MoCap and PerCap there is “a movement in the works to replace the term ‘motion capture’ with ‘performance capture’ to shed a better light on what the actors do and how these films are created ... the technology captures every aspect of the actor's performance” (Schultz 12). There is no reason why the same argument should not be used to support the place of actors in live performance in both providing the physical body on stage as well as the template for any digitally rendered characters that may appear. Well-known thespians have consistently promoted PerCap as a specific technique and elevated skill, distinct from existing notions of MoCap and what it means (Wired). By consistently using the term “performance capture” to emphasise the work and skill of an actor to create a character for digital rendering, the argument is presented that motion captured for one character is not appropriate to be used for another character. The skill and uniqueness applied by an actor to each and every performance cannot be replicated but only supported and enhanced by an animator; and must be done so on a case-by-case basis for every character specifically created by an actor for each individual role.

Furthermore, “actors (including John Malkovich, Andy Serkis and James Franco) have asserted that techniques like performance capture and compositing actually “liberate” their acting process in different ways” (Bode 5). On the face of it, then, PerCap is likely a critical skill for the actor of the future, as well as the director if they are to work successfully with the performer. To understand and use this technology will enable actors to take their craft to the next level of its evolution. In many ways the format shift from film to digital – and from programmed consumption at cinemas or through traditional broadcasters to on-demand streaming services directly to multiple devices – has simplified, or made less complicated, the skills of an actor when performing for a camera: “there used to be a big difference between acting for film and acting for television ... These days, the actor often has no idea of what size screen his work will be shown on” (Tucker 23).

The distinctions here, then, are between traditional to-camera acting and PerCap acting, where the performance is delivered to a program and not directly to camera. In terms of to-camera acting, there is no longer a general difference between film and television but only difference found in the length of time it takes to film any one project, and an actor's ability to immediately switch between close up and long shot acting, both of which directly correlate to whether a shoot is single or multi-cam (Tucker 24-25). So, while the difference between acting for film and television is less and less a valid consideration, the distinction between acting for stage and acting for the screen, which includes PerCap, will remain for some time yet. Though, it is likely that while technology is levelling the styles and techniques employed by the screen and television actor, it will conversely require the stage actor to alter and redefine their methods of performance if digitally rendered characters are going to find a common place in onstage projections. The stage actor and live performance creator/performer can take note of this and would do well to also familiarise themselves with the techniques required to harness the technology.

Considering MoCap and PerCap and developments in animation that have led to an entirely digitally rendered actor – a performative being known as a “synthespian” – in cinema, it can also be noted that this has not (yet) entirely replaced the physically present actor on the screen. It has, however, “served as a catalyst for actors, theorists, and critics to clarify the specificity and value of acting” (Bode 10). For live performance, there will inevitably come a time when the physical and (a)live actor will have to interact with characters, sets and fantasies generated and projected onstage entirely through digital means, forcing them to reconsider and re-contextualise their place in the theatre. Given the significance of the live-ness of theatre as part of its shared experience between performer and audience and amongst performers and amongst audience, I do not see a future where live performance is replaced with entirely projected, pre-animated holograms. There will always be the want and the need for live bodies in the space – even if those bodies occupy a different space and are transmitted in real time – as this is fundamental to the rite and ritual that is the theatre. However, the live bodies of the performers will have to adjust in order to accommodate the inevitable real/rendered hybrid performance that the technology predicts and has already been established in film and television.

This hybridity of performance is different to an actor learning the skills to work while wearing a performance capture suit, but is similar to those performers that act in front of a green screen while staring at a small white ball, which takes the place of what will become a digitally rendered character on screen. What will happen, is that these digitally rendered characters will eventually be able to be projected live onstage in real time, not added independently of the performance and/or pre-programmed into an app that superficially overlays them through another medium, such as an AR enabled mobile phone. This will require performances and performance techniques unlike acting alongside another real-life actor as, at least for the foreseeable future, AI powering these characters will not be able to replicate the actor's “impulse”, a fundamental skill of a contemporary performer.

The idea of the “impulse” and performing “in the moment” is now a core tenet of contemporary Australian and Anglo-American acting traditions, which can trace its lineage through the teachings of Meisner, stemming from the conflict over interpretations of Stanislavskian realism that arose between Strasberg and Adler. It may be some time yet until AI can understand this evolution of the craft and be seen to be “carrying out an action in the moment with justification and particularization” (Tait 352) as the skilled and well-trained real-life actor does. As such, these digitally projected characters will have their movements, dialogue, actions and reactions pre-programmed for some time yet. It will be the skill of the (a)live actor to make these appear impulsive and true to the moment. Even though the fantasy world will be visible, the skills required will be more akin to green-screen acting, but in real time in front of a live audience.

Extending on this notion of AI and characters that are not only seen as interactive, but are also able to independently interact, explanation is offered for the title of this article, “Make it So”, a quote from Patrick Stewart’s character, Captain Jean-Luc Picard, made famous in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* TV series. It was in this series that the hypothetical “Holodeck” first appeared and is the kind of augmented and virtual environment that would lend itself most usefully to the performance of live art. The direct reference to the phrase “make it so”, then, is a call-to-arms to those behind these technologies to present us with the non-fiction equivalent of the Holodeck so that we may use it to enhance our live theatrical performances. I do make one distinction, however, and that is in the importance of AI. For Picard’s Holodeck, AI is crucial as the fantasy worlds entered into are more akin to gameplay with the narrative situations to be acted-out by the individual in a pre-determined scenario. The individual is able to move through an augmented reality so the world itself and other “characters” must be able to interact with the (a)live participant in order for them to benefit from the experience and achieve a set of active and reactive aims or plot-points: it is a pick-a-path novel turned into a digital reality.

This kind of AI interaction, however, even when possible is not a necessity for live performance as being an audience member and watching protagonists and antagonists travel through a fixed-narrative story/journey is an insuppressible human want and a seemingly endless source of entertainment and joy. An audience does not need to manipulate and alter the narrative trajectory (though, for some shows this might be desirable and already happens in certain instances of interactive theatre) and the (a)live performers generally have no fundamental, dramaturgical reason to do this either. Regardless of intelligent interaction from digitally rendered characters, AR will undoubtedly enable the enhanced presentation of the fantastic for live theatre. Rather than simply replacing the characters of realism – i.e. humans playing a part become AI programs taking humanoid form and playing a part – animals, monsters and other-worldly creatures will be brought to stage, something that is currently often achieved through the use of puppets.

The idea of the Holodeck also suggests that artists and academics will have to more clearly delineate between the notion of interactive games/gaming as compared to a live performance that uses immersive AR. Currently, a distinction is clear where

participants are required to wear a device in order to view the AR of a digital world. Once the need for a device is removed, what becomes immersive – maybe even interactive – performance and what is gaming? Will the distinction be in the element of competition? Where playing a game gives some kind of inherent agency over how you interact and progress through the augmented world in order to achieve a pre-determined goal – whether that be to catch a digital animal in a ball, or to simply stay alive with other players “after you”. While, in the world of the story and storyteller (which theatre performers and makers exist in) the narrative intention for the audience could be said to be more passive.

While interactive theatre does give agency to audience members, the underlying purpose of the exercise more generally is to take the audience on a pre-determined journey through story and character in order to achieve a considered impact or provocation for the audience members. That impact/provocation is often political in nature and the purpose of the work therefore has a greater social, cultural, philosophical and artistic purpose. Perhaps, then, the more useful distinction to be drawn will not be between what is a game and what is performative art, but what is a game and what is purely entertainment. Perhaps here, at this future juncture of attempting to define activities based in augmenting technology, the greater friction will not be between art and technology, but between playing games and entertainment. Perhaps it is entertainment that will be subsumed into gameplay, not art. The two defining areas of cultural endeavour and enjoyment will not be a duality between entertainment and art, but between art and gameplay. Entertainment will simply be the happy result of both.

Whether or not it is required for the purposes of live theatre, there are those who suggest that the kind of AI demonstrated by the Holodeck is not so far away. Indeed, one educated estimation has this eventuating in as little as five to ten years (Zambetta). Even so, how long this takes to filter down into larger performance venues, such as well-funded State theatre companies, let alone into the hands of independent artists – who will arguably be the most likely to push the technology to its limits – is a different matter entirely. The closest thing we currently have to the Holodeck is projection mapping on moving surfaces, which requires mobile screens such as those used in the *Box* by production house Bot & Dolly (TCP Staff). Projection mapping gives the illusion of images with depth and can follow the action of a live actor/performer onstage who appears to interact with the displayed images. However, the interactions are naught but a series of tightly controlled choreographed movements on the part of the actor, matched with the finitely programmed movements of screens attached to robotic arms making them semi-mobile yet giving the impression of uninhibited movement in space. Of course, movement is inhibited by the tracks that the robotic arms move along, and the general restrictions that hydraulic joints are subject to (admittedly, just as human joints are limited by degrees of movement). Presumably, the cost of transporting these robots and the time and specialist knowledge required to program the projection mapping places them largely out of reach of most artists and storytellers. This current solution to generating multi-dimensional digital experiences is also not the fully-immersive world that Holodeck-inspired AR promises, but it is a step along the way.

Projection mapping and projection-based augmentation is the most promising area for live performance in terms of the stage moving more completely into the digital age. Some experts acknowledge the technique, or the ideas behind the technique, beginning as early as 1969 (Jones) and it has been employed with great interest in the areas of game development and design, entertainment and has also found profitable commercial applications (Benko et al.; Haller et al.; Marner et al.) but has yet to be fully extended into performing arts and the live disciplines within creative industries. There are also currently several “smart projectors” available that make complex calculations and subsequent adjustments in angle, colour correction, and other detailed responses to surface types so that projected images appear unadulterated regardless of the object receiving the picture (Bimber et al.). This means it is possible to project on to window curtains or wallpaper, brick walls or even overlaying images on hanging paintings and other artworks without interfering with the projection, which clearly bodes well for employing such technology into already available theatres and other live performance spaces. Couple this with devices such as Immersis, a projector that allows the image from a VR device – such as Leap Motion or Microsoft’s HoloLens – to be projected into a room for everyone to share the experience and the potential to bring the virtual into the actual is beginning to be illuminated (Probasco).

In light of all of this, the answer for dramatists and theatre makers and the next step towards our onstage Holodeck, as I have already alluded, will be found in the increasing improvements in projectors and projector technology. Even so, the advent of an image-generating device that can display a 3D picture to the naked eye in the middle of a sunny amphitheatre without a solid object behind the projection to catch the image, similar to R2-D2’s Princess Leia hologram (Lucas), is some time away. Where Virtual and Augmented Reality require devices and other objects of digital information management a theatre performance strictly requires as little as an imagination, but when the technology can adequately project the images from the creator’s imagination as part of the theatre performance is when these forms shall truly find synthesis. It may already be clear, but it seems relevant to highlight that as the writer of this article I am not a technician, developer, engineer or programmer of technology. I am a performing artist: a writer and director. Those with specialist knowledge may criticise and point out deficiencies in comprehension and understanding of the technicalities and complexities underlying how AR and/or VR actually work in discussing its applicability to the theatre. However, the point of view of active theatre makers is critical in the development of the technology in a way that is both useful and necessary for and to the artform.

To contextualise: I understand the effects and impact intermedial and lighting design elements can have on a performance and help to realise my vision without any specialist knowledge in how electricity, Light Emitting Diodes or Ultra High-Performance Lamps actually work. I am unaware of how my show’s audio track is converted from sound waves in the studio to a series of ones and twos as it is read and understood by the operating system controlling my QLab files; however, I can tell you exactly when it should do that and at what volume it should be heard to generate the most powerful emotional response from an audience. I am not aware how light is captured as pictures by a 4K UHD camera on my Pixel phone but I can certainly direct

the scene that it films, ensuring the pictures it does capture are exactly what the viewer wants and/or needs to see. This may sound a little flippant, or even arrogant and dismissive, that is not its intention but hopefully illustrates the point. Perhaps it is time for theatre makers and live performance generators to actively converse with the inventors and engineers about what we want from this technology in order to enhance our craft, in favour of potentially seeing it as entirely independent from our work resulting in a divergence of forms and knowledge instead of an evolutionary convergence of ideas and available tools.

I should also acknowledge that parts of this article may seem like I elevate theatre and performance to something that emerging and immersive technologies are subservient to. This is not my intention either. What I am drawing on is the fact that theatre, as an important cultural and social endeavour with entertainment value, has had thousands of years to explore its form and understand how its audiences interact with it and new technologies can benefit from this as much as the theatre can from them. Once technology can generate something close to the Holodeck on our stages, these forms can truly evolve as one. This will take theatre to a fantastically new level of possibility, and the technology will benefit from thousands of years of storytelling and artistic refinement to generate imaginative and dramatic worlds like we cannot yet even envisage.

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# Empowering the next generation of actors through the creation of student-centred self-devised dramatic work

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## Abstract

There has been a demise of many Australian theatre companies over the past 20 years, along with a decrease in long-form television series. As a result, there is less work available for graduating actors from conservatoires. In this precarious landscape, acting conservatoires need to appraise how actors are trained and assess how to better empower them as independent artists. One such approach is the development of devised theatre work within a conservatoire actor training structure. This article charts the development of a new devised work and the dynamics involved in theatre co-creation via student-centred collaboration. Our research examines the existing pedagogical practices in the current curriculum of the Bachelor of Arts (Acting) course at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts and explores potential changes that may be implemented to the current curriculum. We suggest there is room to enhance the program, encourage resilience in the next generation of actors and contribute new approaches through the creation of devised work. The results of our study aim to encourage and foster agency for student actors, developing necessary skills for creating their own work and empowering their choices as artists.

## Keywords

Devised Theatre; Conservatoire Actor Training; Co-creation; Student-centred Learning; Pedagogy

## Introduction

The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) is a school in Edith Cowan University that was established in 1980. WAAPA offered an Advanced Diploma in Actor Training until 2015. For acting graduates to be competitive in Australia and overseas, WAAPA introduced a Bachelor of Arts (Acting), based on their existing

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conservatoire model and in line with other Australian universities. This new degree ensured that students could go onto other higher education courses if they desired. In this article, we examine the implementation of devised theatre work within existing conservatoire actor training at WAAPA to determine how to better empower student actors as independent artists.

Research conducted through interviews with academics from The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS), the Julliard School, New York University (NYU) Tisch School of Arts, Ryerson University, and the University of Missouri–Kansas City (UMKC) suggests that there are international exemplars in which devised theatre has enhanced conservatoire programs. Our research examines existing pedagogical practices in the acting course at WAAPA and explores possible curriculum changes through the creation of devised work to encourage resilience in the next generation of actors. To implement these changes at WAAPA, a pilot program was conducted in 2016 with the third-year acting cohort. Follow-up interviews conducted 12 months after graduation provide a rich archive from which to draw some initial conclusions.

We conducted our research in the context of a rapidly and dramatically changing performing arts industry in Australia that requires actors to create work in a challenging economic environment. Due to these changes, many theatre companies that provided employment for graduates have closed, including the Perth Theatre Company (WA), Deckchair Theatre (WA), the Hole-in-the-Wall Theatre (WA), the Performance Space (NSW) and Marian Street Theatre (NSW).

In response to the contraction in funded Australian theatre companies, an independent theatre arts sector has emerged with the rise of unfunded actors' collectives who seek project-by-project funding to survive, such as Red Line Productions (NSW), Hayloft Theatre Company (VIC), Red Stitch (VIC), Last Great Hunt (WA) and production houses like La Mama, (VIC), TheatreWorks, (VIC) and the Blue Room (WA). New performance opportunities have also presented themselves with successful fringe, cabaret and comedy festival circuits. One example, the Fringe World Festival in Perth was first held in 2012 and is now the third biggest fringe festival in the world, after the Adelaide and Edinburgh Fringe Festivals. Additionally, a surge in digital technology has heralded rapid growth in various screen delivery platforms, providing employment opportunities for motivated performers. It is easier for performers to begin their careers by creating their own screen work, such as web series, or entering short film festivals like Tropfest with the simplest of hand-held technologies and software programs. The advent of cable television networks such as HBO, Netflix, Stan and Foxtel, and the ease of sending self-tests to international entertainment organisations, has opened a lucrative employment market for actors. Work opportunities in the United States and Europe are significant options, should graduates have the skills to offer their work for consideration. High-profile trailblazers, including Hugh Jackman, Frances O'Connor, Tim Minchin, Eddie Perfect, Dacre Montgomery and Shalom Brune-Franklin—all WAAPA alumni—are examples for graduates who wish to try their luck overseas.

The changing face of the arts industry demands that WAAPA produces graduates with more than just acting skills. They must be exceptional, self-determined and

autonomous strategists with business and technology skills, as well as elite performers, if they are to stand any chance of attracting an A-list agent, gaining employment in the current climate or becoming artists capable of contributing to vibrant artistic communities. In this precarious landscape, acting conservatoires must appraise how actors are trained and assess how to better empower them as artists. We suggest that one such approach is the development of devised theatre work within a conservatoire actor training structure.

## What is devised theatre?

A useful starting point for determining whether devised theatre should be an integral part of conservatoire actor training at WAAPA, is Oddey's claim that "a devised theatre product is a work that has emerged from and been generated by a group of people working in collaboration" (1). According to Oddey, devised theatre provides an alternative to the more traditional form of playwright-director-theatre. Devised performance is a response and a reaction to the traditional mode of playwright-director relationship with text-based theatre, and challenges the prevailing ideology of one person's text under another person's direction. It involves a process of making theatre that enables a group of performers to be physically and practically creative in the sharing and shaping of an original product that directly emanates from assembling, editing and reshaping individual contradictory experiences of the world (Oddey). Harvie and Lavender understand devising to be "a method of performance development that starts from an idea or concept rather than a play text; is from the start significantly open-minded about what its end-product will be; and uses improvisation—by performers, but also other creators, including writers, designers, directors and choreographers—as a key part of its process" (2). Collaborative performance is a recent shift in theatre-making orthodoxy and new methodologies have significantly affected theatre practice.

Companies such as The Wooster Group in the United States, Frantic Assembly in the United Kingdom and Legs on the Wall in Australia play with new and unique ways to create theatre that challenge the primacy of the written text so often used in mainstream theatre. These companies have evolved their devising processes that challenge the traditional model of theatre practice and the director's role. With devising methodologies such as Viewpoints, evolved by Anne Bogart of the SITI Company, the traditional role of the director is contested. Herrington claims that Bogart's devising process is entirely collaborative, suggesting that Bogart provides the concept of "birthing place" as a starting point for the devising process and then expects the actors to "open it up, restructure it and re-form it" ("Breathing" 139). Herrington argues that "when directors work with Viewpoints they relinquish some of the control it has taken directors a century to acquire. When actors become active participants in the overall creation of the show, power is redefined: the traditional director/actor hierarchy disappears" ("Directing" 156).

The effect that a devised theatre piece can have on an actor includes enabling a powerful commitment through performers working as co-creators rather than as actor or vessel for the director: "A performer/deviser has a personal input and commitment

to the making of the product from the start, which consequently means that the needs of the performer/deviser are recognized and therefore different from the actor in text-based theatre” (Oddey 11). Devising allows the collective creation of art—not the single vision of the playwright—thus, all makers in a creative project experience agency in their theatre practice (Haagensen p.68). To determine the validity of introducing a devised stream into the acting course at WAAPA, we felt it was important to benchmark with other leading international drama schools.

Andrew Lewis interviewed several highly regarded academics in the field of actor education—Peter Zazzali, Ali de Souza, Rebecca Guy, Scott Illingworth, Peggy Shannon and Stephanie Roberts—and asked them about the necessity for devised work within a conservatoire training structure. A common theme emerging from the interviews involved empowerment and self-motivation in finding work after acting.

## Interviews with academics

According to Dr Peter Zazzali (Interview 1 March 2018), an Associate Professor at the University of Kansas Theatre Department, the key to creating devised work relies on students’ creative imaginations, which forces them to be entrepreneurial because they are not relying on an existing text. As a result, students must take initiative and develop and execute their own projects, not by simply learning a part, but by taking on the various roles of writer, director and producer. By doing this, they learn varied approaches to making theatre, which provides a greater sense of ownership over their theatrical experience and career. It empowers them to be an artist with agency, “rather than a commercial entity for material consumption; an actor who sits around waiting for the phone to ring” (Zazzali, Interview 1 March 2018).

Ali de Souza, Senior Acting Lecturer at RCS, acknowledged that devising is a vital part of the actors’ training at RCS. According to de Souza:

*Devising is a unit threaded through an otherwise conservatoire BA, which begins in first year with a student-led project called Auto-cours, which is French, meaning ‘self-study’, where the students use learned physical techniques to explore observed environments purely through the body, and with the use of music, sound, light and objects. They work in small groups of about 5/6 actors and are mentored, but not directed. The actors choose the topic themselves ... The second half of second year is devoted entirely to creating new work. The actors again work on short (10-minute) self-led projects called Enquete (French, meaning ‘investigation’), again in small groups, and these can have a vocal element ... They are then given a series of week-long workshops on devising, verbatim theatre, mask, scriptwriting, research and development and physical theatre—all with the aim of enabling the actors to see their art through various styles and techniques. The actors then form small groups depending on their areas of interest and pitch an idea for pieces of performance which form our On The Verge Festival of new work in June. The actors can choose to write, direct or devise, or simply act if that is what they want to do ... It is not*

*enough anymore to simply train the actor who will just act in shows and on screen. Many of our actors do indeed go on to being successful jobbing actors working regularly in film, TV and stage. But many go on to create companies, devise shows and look at theatre in new ways. (Interview 6 April 2018)*

It is apparent that Zazzali (Interview 1 March 2018) and de Souza (Interview 6 April 2018) are experienced actor–educators who view devised work as important for the development of student actors and believe that it should be integrated into their training. Alternatively, Rebecca Guy, a Senior Lecturer in Acting from Juilliard, did not deny the importance of devising, but stated that their actor training does not encompass devised work. As Guy saw it:

*There’s an opportunity to do self-motivated work at Juilliard. [It] can be devised work, but most of the independent projects that are approved for students to do are usually works where students are acting and producing and/or directing established plays. There’s not an organised and official self-devised work track in the training program at all ... There’s no thinking that is opposed to the idea of self-devised work. It just hasn’t worked its way into the training track here ... I think the overall overarching goal in 25 words or less is to, by the time a student graduates from here, they’re going to be able to do whatever kind of work, performance work, whatever kind of theatre, film work, camera work, self-devised work, any kind of style, any story they want to tell, to tell it really well. (Interview 12 January 2018)*

NYU has a different approach to devising work than Juilliard. While devising is not woven into the curriculum at NYU, the university dedicates one slot to student-driven work in the middle of the third year of their four-year training. Scott Illingworth (Interview 14 January 2018), a Lecturer in Acting at NYU, explains that they have a slot called “Free Play”, in which the students share leadership, create teams and take over two performance spaces, producing a week-long festival of original works. NYU do not formally teach devising in their curriculum; however, the students apply a set of tools, exercises or games that they think are generative, or they work with a staff member who serves as a mentor on the project. The students are often surprised by what they create and the local artistic community regularly come to see Free Play because of the personal expression in the work. Several of these projects have taken students down interesting paths and launched graduates’ acting careers.

While there is only the one opportunity of self-devised student-driven work at NYU, it is apparent from talking to Illingworth (Interview 14 January 2018) that the Free Play experience allows the student actors to express their individual creativity, rather than making them interpreters of pre-existing works in a traditional theatre structure with a director and text.

In contrast to the training at NYU, Dr Peggy Shannon from Ryerson University believes that it is important for student actors to learn devising throughout their training. She suggests that the intersection between theatrical forms and finding new ways of telling

stories goes back to the Ancient Greeks. The students have devising units during each year of their training, called Creative Performance. Shannon feels that it is important that student actors contribute intellectually and artistically, so they develop a devising performance vocabulary. Student actors at Ryerson University undertake three to four hours of devising practice each week and they are taught how to improvise, devise and cluster their learning around themes. The devising culminates in public performances in their fourth year, when they run a curated festival over two weeks of their own work, called *New Voices*. The students write, perform, direct and produce these pieces that become calling cards to the industry, with agents and artistic directors attending this event (Interview 30 November 2017).

Professor Stephanie Roberts from UMKC explains that they also have a self-devised component in their actor training. They use Auto-cours, which is a foundational program in generative ensemble performance. Weekly investigations into the elements of theatricality may include group presentations, feedback, discussion, weekly assignments and in-class explorations. The course investigates the topic of collaborating within an ensemble. Technique and skills develop through the experience and the students reflect on the process. Students are provided with a theme for weekly devising assignments and work together in groups. They meet on their own, develop a short theatrical presentation and then perform it for classmates and faculty. The students explore several structures for devising and are given short group assignments. These can include documentary theatre, hero's journey, autobiographical writings or myths. The final project is a site-specific outdoor piece. They also conduct epic storytelling, in which they create a devised piece based on current issues. Many of the students expand these works when they graduate (Interview 13 April 2018).

It is apparent from the interviews of academics from the actor training institutions that each value devising in different ways. The units of study are unique; however, there is an awareness that devising should play an important role in actor training. To assess the potential benefits of implementing devising processes for actors within the Bachelor of Arts (Acting) course at WAAPA, a project was created, titled *The Beat Generation*. *The Beat Generation* sought to use devising techniques and processes to create a public performance.

## WAAPA pedagogy

The current Bachelor of Arts (Acting) degree course at WAAPA is a complex program that integrates three foundational strands of actor training—voice, movement and acting, and these skills are scaffolded over the duration of the students' training. The conservatoire program is guided by a philosophy of discovery, application and embodiment. In the second semester of the third year, a pilot project was introduced, titled *The Beat Generation* (Lewis). It was a devised promenade performance conducted at the Fremantle Arts Centre. According to Zampatti, “in a week that *The Beat Generation's* greatest and most famous heir won the Nobel Prize for literature, it's good to be reminded of their legacy. And how lucky are we to have WAAPA to do the reminding” (p.89). Cox described the show as:

*Designed and styled to give the audience the vibe of the era (late 1940s/early 1950s America), rather than to tell a specific story, the audience was guided between 10 intimate scenes. From Kate Betcher's spoken stream of consciousness to Kieran Clancy-Lowe's mesmerizing portrayal of a failed poet addicted to the hunt, again and again the piece returns to the work of Ginsberg, Burroughs and Kerouac. Indeed, the highlight was—Al and Jack—where Rory O'Keeffe and Giuseppe Rotondella compete and obsess over their writing ... A concept piece made possible by using a host of performers, the show makes a point of highlighting the gross mistreatment of women in the 'Era of the Housewife,' and Miranda Aitken's turn as an unstable, asylum-bound Sylvia Plath stands out (1).*

The aim of the pilot curriculum incursion was to investigate how possible pedagogical shifts in student actor training can enable student actors to experience working as participants in a co-creation process. The project was devised by the performers and facilitated and directed by this article's first author, Andrew Lewis. *The Beat Generation* examined the co-authoring aspects of a final third year production, just prior to their graduating showcase (Lewis). Interviews were conducted with the actors in the middle and at the end of the production, with follow-up interviews conducted one year later. In this article, we explore the graduates' reflections one year after the performance when we asked the question, "Did you find *The Beat Generation* a useful experience?"

## Interviews one year later

Several graduates commented about the skills they developed devising their own work—Emma O'Sullivan, Kieran Clancey-Lowe, Anna Apps, Brittany Santariga, Miranda Aitken and Giuseppe Rotondella. Some graduates went on to create their own work based on their experience with the devised project—O'Sullivan, Santariga and Rory O'Keeffe. Others commented that the project should have been introduced to the curriculum earlier, or integrated throughout the degree—Apps, Kate Betcher and Sophia Forrest. A few found the collaborative aspect of the project frustrating or counterproductive—George Pullar, Alex Daley and Megan Smart.

O'Sullivan said:

*I had an opportunity to create whatever it was I had always wanted to do in theatre. There was no space for excuses, money was not scarce, the show was publicised for me, there was plenty of time, and plenty of resources and I was definitely not short of belief in my own skill ... An extremely valuable skill I learned from *The Beat Generation* experience was having to be creative on demand, which I used to write another one woman show for Jack Rabbit Theatre Company last September, while also re-rehearsing and performing my first one woman show for its third run at a fringe festival in Sydney. That was a skill that I didn't even know I had learned from *The Beat Generation* until I had to use it. It proved*

*extremely valuable for me because I found myself back in the situation where I had the licence to create something I had always wanted to perform, but also had to constantly meet the creative requirement of the three artistic directors of the company, and the tastes of the director. These turned out to be extremely useful parameters in which I could work and made the job easier. (Interview 15 February 2018)*

Clancey-Lowe found the experience invaluable because:

*It gave me the confidence in my own work that I needed to continue creating material for the public. I also found that without the confines of a script, I could finally fully explore my craft. I took advantage of the opportunity to build something and succeeded ... It increased my confidence and understanding of use of story arc and space. The process freed me up from a script and gave me near absolute creative control. I developed production skills, spatial awareness and how to develop the show each night around the audience. (Interview 7 February 2018)*

Like Clancey-Lowe, Will McNeill gained the confidence:

*To try new ideas and develop my own work ... Although there is work, there are periods that can be very slow ... Improvising and playing with a self-devised text was extremely useful and I use it a lot with creating performance pieces currently. As well as just putting my head down and doing it, rather than relying on others, I find it easier now to just try different ideas and see how they go ... Being able to create one's own work is more and more important in today's industry. (Interview 12 March 2018)*

Apps reflected:

*Being in the "industry" now, I can see that having skills to develop your own work, and believing in your ability to produce your own work is very important ... I learned that it is important to create **lots** of material and then peel it back to the 'best'/most effective material ... I found the experience to be **very beneficial** because most performers will need to have the confidence and ability to create their own material out in the 'real' world. (Interview 7 February 2018)*

Pullar thought that:

*The only way to create a solid show from scratch is by creating as much material as you can in the early stages of rehearsal and being fearlessly open to as much as possible. In devised theatre, you're not given a framework or map to build on; you have to create it yourself and then go back and carve out the specifics. (Interview 6 February 2018)*

Daley believed that the project:

*Forced me to actually put work I had written in front of people and open it up to critique and compromise. This is something I had avoided in the past and hindered my overall writing ability. The collaborative nature of the project also meant learning to work with others and compromising personal ideas and visions for the piece. (Interview 4 February 2018)*

While not challenged by the subject matter, Daley did learn patience and “how to compromise and not let it affect your ego”. He would not “approach working with 18 other directors again”; however, he “truly did enjoy getting to perform a scene that I created the concept for. There is a certain ownership of the performance I’d never experienced before. It definitely inspired me to continue with my writing”.

Santariga recently collaborated with a group of ex-WAAPA students on developing a play. She states:

*We used a space at the Merrigong theatre for a week to workshop ideas one of us had for a play. It was really great just to get up and have a play together, much like we did with The Beat Generation. It’s so important that we learn how to do this for when we enter the industry. Unfortunately, as we leave these institutions, it’s really hard to get work. The theatre companies in cities like Sydney reuse the same actors and put on shows that we have all seen time and time again. Some of the best shows I’ve seen this year have been my friends shows that they have written and directed together. This is where we find new, exciting, relevant content. So, it’s important that we have skills that help us make this. (Interview 25 March 2018)*

Smart’s experience was less positive:

*I think the exercise was too grand a scale with 20 students (with varying degrees of enthusiasm) and no clear leadership positions. There was no cohesion to the vision and few were willing to compromise their own to suit the groups better. There were too many chefs in the kitchen. It felt like a mess throughout the whole process ... My takeaway from the experience was be careful who you work with. (Interview 1 March 2018)*

Joel Davies had a mixed response to the project:

*Although I did not like doing The Beat Generation, there were still a few positives to take away from the exercise. I liked performing something that wasn’t directed; I liked working in a small group; and I liked the freedom of doing what I wanted. (Interview 17 March 2018)*

Betcher’s opinion was that:

*It didn’t help me in the industry, not really. Unless you are in the industry creating your own fringe shows etc, most conventional jobs don’t really*

*require the skills acquired during this project. (Interview 15 February 2018)*

Lachlan Ruffly (Interview 15 February 2018) has “told the story of devising our piece as part of a stand-up routine. I didn’t have to add any jokes”. Aitken stated that she:

*Learned the importance of having a collective purpose or mission statement. It’s vital to have a common goal, an intrinsic one even. And to respect the process. There’s a lot that goes into self-devised work ... The project was, in a lot of ways, a lesson in what not to do as a team. But as the performance week came around, there was a greater camaraderie brought about by our shared joy of performance and ensemble. (Interview 15 February 2018)*

Forrest did not feel that devised theatre was for her, as “I enjoy having the base of a script and knowing where my character will arc before starting”. Her reflections on the process were insightful, commenting that a self-devised piece:

*Would be better in first or second year, in particular, when there won’t be agents and people coming to it, so you’d feel more free to creatively express, without fear of judgement. Because WAAPA has been so safe and really branching yourself out there and not being seen by the public eye until later on. I think a lot of people, and I think I definitely did, pulled back on risky choices with the thought of it being seen by the industry. (Interview 24 October 2017)*

Elle Mickel’s opinion differs:

*I think it was an interesting exercise to do just before graduating because it was all about being self-reliant ... For me, it was a mini showcase, in a way. It’s about looking at yourself objectively and going, okay, these are the parameters, what am I good at? What have I got to sell? An audience is coming and, in this particular case, a lot of agents, and it’s a time in our WAAPA careers where we really need to sell ourselves. How creative am I? What can I make of this opportunity? ... I auditioned for this really cool feminist play ... and they encouraged you to write your own thing. So, I just did my beat poetry thing. So, I’ve actually used it in an audition. (Interview 23 October 2018)*

Rotondella and O’Keeffe were interviewed together. Rotondella:

*Think[s] that pressure, it makes you ... aware that you can make your own work. And so many people in our year have gone off to make their own work ... And if you don’t have anything to do, which isn’t uncommon, as we’ve found out, it’s good to be able to rely on your own. (Interview 14 October 2017)*

O’Keeffe notes that he has already written a:

*Western that I’m filming ... with a couple of mates. I guess it gives you the confidence that you can create work. And there’s nothing holding you back. And you can do it with anything ... it’s just about taking action.*

Rotondella conceded that when work dries up:

*The teaching that we learned in that last part of third year come into play, because you begin to think about how I can curate a piece that I can put on myself.*

Angus MacLaren was filming in India at the time. However, his:

*Experience of watching the show from an outside perspective and talking to those who were involved ... it was a very positive and skill enhancing project that has proved extremely useful in terms of self-devised work. (Interview 22 February 2018)*

## Conclusion

Interviews with international colleagues at five elite acting conservatoires—RCS, Juilliard School, NYU Tisch School of Arts, Ryerson University and UMKC—revealed that each has a different perspective on self-generated student-driven work and where it is placed in their respective programs. Other than Juilliard, the actor conservatoires have woven devising units and student-driven productions into their programs. Juilliard are not opposed to devised work, but they have nowhere to include it in their current curriculum. The other leading conservatoires recognise the need to empower student actors in the decision-making process, thus providing agency in what they do. Using collective creation rather than the often-used playwright–director model provides an interdisciplinary experience that enhances student actors’ skills and challenges their imagination. This approach provides an entrepreneurial sensibility that can benefit students upon graduation. Roberts echoes these sentiments:

*In a competitive industry such as ours, I maintain that the only way to guarantee that you will consistently work is if you create the work yourself. Regardless of whether an individual ends up producing her own work, the learning experience, in all aspects—from writing, interpersonal and technical skills, to self-discovery—is vast. (Interview 13 April 2018)*

The comments from Roberts and the other interviewed academics reveal the benefit for student actors being provided with opportunities to create their own work. This allows student and graduate actors to view themselves as self-generators of material instead of just actors waiting to be employed in a vicarious arts environment. The collated data allowed Lewis to reflect on the current curriculum in the Bachelor of Arts (Acting) at WAAPA and better determine, in discussion with staff, if and where changes could occur.

The WAAPA training culminates in an industry showcase in which students perform for agents, casting consultants and industry. *The Beat Generation* was performed as the last production prior to the showcase. This was problematic for some students such as Smart (Interview 1 March 2018), who “thought it was a mess”, and Betcher (Interview 15 February 2018), who felt that “it did not help” her in the industry.

Our research indicates that some students were preoccupied with exiting the course and did not want the responsibility of creating their own work at that time. However, many other students felt empowered by the process. Clancey-Lowe (Interview 7 February 2018) enjoyed “gaining confidence from having creative control”, while O’Sullivan (Interview 15 February 2018) liked having the “licence to create something she had always wanted to perform” and Mickel (Interview 23 October 2018) said it was a “mini showcase” for her.

The benefits were substantial and, in addition to favourable reviews, many students had a positive experience. As a result of the accumulated data, the WAAPA Acting Department is examining how and where to embed devised work—and associated training skills—into conservatoire actor training, while maintaining high-quality actor education. In 2019, a new unit of self-devised work will be introduced for students in the second semester of their first year, titled *Life Stories*. This will be student-driven work, in which students will draw from material from their own lives and create short theatrical pieces or etudes, while being mentored by a staff member. Given the feedback from the students regarding the timing of *The Beat Generation*, another slot in the second year is being considered for a devised production.

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# The role of the director in Australian actor training: An exploration of dialogic leadership as a pedagogical practice for Australian directors and acting teachers

Gabrielle Metcalf<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Australian actor training owes much of its history to the Russians; Stanislavski, Chekhov and to those that adopted and adapted their methodologies over the past century; Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler, Uta Hagen and Lee Strasberg. During the 1970's the advent of devised theatre and more physically based theatre practices saw the work of Europeans; LeCoq, Copeau and Laban recognised as valuable actor training tools. While Australian actor training has been informed by a plethora of practitioners and theorists, the same cannot be said for those providing the training. The teachers of acting who populate Australian Academies and Universities do not enjoy the same variety of methodologies on which to draw. The paucity of research investigating the pedagogical practices of directors and acting teachers in educational settings signals an opportunity for further investigation. This article introduces dialogic leadership as a pedagogical tool for directors and acting teachers. *Directing through Dialogue* is the term I use to describe a methodological approach to training actors that challenges the traditional hierarchical, director-centred model and replaces it with an actor-centred, egalitarian model. *Directing through Dialogue* utilises coaching and feedback to facilitate growth and development in student actors.

## Keywords

Director; Acting; Dialogic Leadership; Directing through Dialogue; Coaching; Feedback

## Introduction

Drawing on an autoethnographic study of a rehearsal process with students completing their first year of actor training at The West Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), this article examines how dialogic leadership practices and coaching can impact student learning and efficacy. It offers an approach to directing and teaching

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acting that serves to go some way towards addressing the gap in research around pedagogical practices in the teaching of performing arts.

A crucial component of actor training is learning to work with directors, who also may be acting teachers and industry professionals. This is an important part of introducing acting students to what they are likely to encounter in the industry. However, very little has been written about the methods associated with directing. Richard Trousdell (1992) notes

*For most of us, directing is an unmapped art or an academic discipline with almost no fixed landmarks. Unlike acting, where we have many theories and methods to guide us, directing offers few schools of thought about its nature, preparation, or technique. (p. 25)*

As a director and acting teacher my interest in how to develop my artistic and pedagogical practice led me to investigate the patterns of communication that occur between a director and an actor. The complexities of this relationship warrant unpacking to understand the effect it has on the training actor.

What I had experienced and observed over many years of teaching and directing student actors was the high degree of dependency that they demonstrated in the workshop space and the rehearsal room. I identified the potential of the research arena to source additional ways of addressing dependency and to uncover what I, in my role as teacher and director, could do to lead students from dependency into a place where they had more agency.

Principally, as a director and a teacher of actors I am in a position of leadership. Rebecca Daniels (1996) asserts that the director is essentially a leader, “While the degree of emphasis differs, most theorists, educators, and practitioners consider leadership to be an integral part of the directing process, and the most often acknowledged quality of a good director is leadership ability” (p. 11). If this is the case, what leadership style could best serve the training of actors?

## **Dialogic leadership**

Over a four-year period whilst directing and teaching student actors I trialled various leadership styles. I arrived at what Isaacs (1999a) explains as Dialogic leadership. This is a term he gives to a way of leading that “consistently uncovers, through conversation, the hidden creative potential in any situation” (p. 2). Dialogic leadership draws on several philosophical underpinnings that explore the nature of dialogue. Philosophers, Mikhail Bakhtin and Martin Buber have been influential in their conceptualisation of dialogue. For Bakhtin, dialogue is ontological, that is “a way of living life in openness to others who are different from oneself, of relating to people and ideas that remain separate and distinct from our own” (as cited in Shields, p. 65). In Bakhtin’s view language is “inherently dialogic and it is through multiple voices that we can learn to see ourselves through the utterances of others” (as cited in Raelin, 2013, p. 820).

The idea of multiple voices is one that resonates with teaching actors, whereby a group of students come together to bring their collective imaginations, intellects and experiences to the task of learning how to tell stories and create meaning for an audience. How the members of this class form views of each other and their role in it is determined largely by the utterances they make, not only verbal utterances but also the physical, non-verbal language that people use to communicate. How the teacher sets up the container for the learning to occur is paramount to how the utterances will be made. If the container is one where students feel they have value then the offers they make are embedded in a belief that they have agency, resulting in positive and creative decision making. Fundamentally, dialogue is about an orientation towards another, a desire to understand and be understood, whereby meaning is created from the tension that exists between different voices (Bakhtin, 1981).

Martin Buber (2002) saw life as an encounter and inherently relational, he suggests that “For the most part we do not listen to the address, or we break into it with chatter. But if the word comes to us and the answer proceeds from us then human life exists, though brokenly, in the world” (p. 110). He distinguishes an *I and thou* way of relating, where we “treat others as fellow subjects and dialogue partners” (Phillips, 2011, p. 29), from an *I and it* relationship where we “treat others as objects to be analysed or manipulated” (p. 29). Appreciating the wholeness of the *thou* and their inherent value was an axiom of Buber’s philosophy, “The I-Thou relation stresses the mutual and holistic existence of two entities. It is an encounter of equals, who recognise each other as such. It is a *dialogue*” (Morgan & Guilherme, 2012, p. 982). If the teacher-student relationship is viewed as I-Thou then there is the potential for a more egalitarian frame to identify each other as equals.

Taylor and Kent (2014) hold that participants in dialogue “feel obligated to design their communication interactions with other people to facilitate interaction, self-discovery, and co-creation of reality” (p. 389). The co-creation of reality is an exciting way of viewing actor training where the student learns how to develop the ability to collaborate with others in creating a reality that contains making work in relationship with others. Dialogue’s emphasis on “multivocality, open-endedness, human connection, and the co-creation of meaning” according to Laura Black (2008, p. 94), allows the participants to explore more fully the complexities of other peoples’ imaginations and perspectives as well as their own. This notion of exploration resonates with rehearsal practices. Discovering a character’s wants and needs and their relationships with other characters, whilst endeavouring to communicate as an ensemble, is part of the work for an actor and a cast.

## Directing through dialogue

Dialogic leadership offered the possibility of what Poulos (2008) calls the “active praxis of imagination and courage” (p.119). The teacher establishes an environment through their leadership that invites students to have the courage to fully engage and bring their imaginative selves to the acting process. *Directing through dialogue* is the term I use to explain how Dialogic leadership can work for the acting teacher and director. It refers to a way of being in the rehearsal process that more broadly positions the

teacher/director as one who engages in a process of influence where power is shared and not invested predominantly with an individual, to one where multi voices are heard and given permission to influence and affect learning and teaching.

## Coaching

Coaching is one approach I utilised to assist in creating the dialogic teaching space in an autoethnographic study that was conducted with a group of students completing their first year of actor training at WAAPA. My aim was to determine the impact of adopting a coaching approach to the direction of a play and to explore the degree to which the student actors felt they had agency in the rehearsal process.

Robert Benedetti (1985) suggests that all actors need to have a clear sense of the direction in which they are heading and that this can be achieved through regular feedback and coaching on their progress from the director. However, the word *coaching* can be defined in a myriad of ways. I will be drawing on understandings of coaching as developed by John Whitmore which were introduced in his seminal text, *Coaching for Performance* (2002). Whitmore (2002) advocates that coaching is a leadership behaviour at the other end of the continuum from command and control. Coaches aim to encourage the best performance out of the coachee. For this to happen the person being coached needs to be treated as an equal even if their role has a lesser label, for example, teacher and student, director and actor, stage manager and assistant stage manager.

The focus of coaching is to enhance performance and this is achieved, according to Wilson (2007), “through a dialogue which assists coachee’s to see new perspectives and achieve greater clarity about their own thoughts, emotions and actions, and about the people and situations around them” (p. 7). Enabling actors to open up the space within themselves in which “there is room to look around, see what is no longer required, what might be rearranged, and where there are gaps that could be filled” (Wilson 2007, p. 16) could afford them more agency in the creative process. If students are able to confidently draw upon their intuition, thoughts and creativity then the outcome for the development of their acting craft could be enhanced.

## Researching a rehearsal process with first year acting students

I take you to the first day of rehearsals with nine first year student actors. They are embarking on their final project for the year where they will rehearse a play for four weeks which they will then perform for a public audience. They sit in a circle gazing at me with expectation and hope in their eyes. After a process of introduction, I ask if there are questions. One student, Margie looks at me and says, “I’d really like to know what your vision for the play is”. My inclination was to try and explain a vision, to make them feel inspired and excited, that they could sit back comfortably and relax because I had it all in hand. They could trust that I would wave my director’s wand and we would have an amazing production on our hands. However, ignoring my inclinations, I decide

to opt for a coaching approach instead, I say, “I have some ideas about the play, however I’m really keen to hear what your vision for the play is”. A look of terror flashes momentarily across her face. This wasn’t going to plan. I expected a look of joy that she would have agency and be able to have input into the play. I glance around the cast, who begin to shift slightly uncomfortably, how was this ever going to work?

Trusting the coaching process, we proceeded with rehearsals, me with more awareness and caution after the initial session and over the rehearsal period I witnessed the actors gradually beginning to trust themselves enough to bring their voices to the process. What I mean by bringing their voices to the process, is the student actors were making offers based on their own ideas and imagination rather than on the need to impress or garner my approval. It was often challenging for me to hold back and not immediately offer my view. In an interview with Margie two years later, I asked her about that question she had posed to me on the first day of rehearsals. She explained in her response, “I guess that was because it was the first time we had been given free reign after a year where we had been told exactly how it was to be done ... I think I grew a lot as an actor, doing it.” The payoff for Margie and the cast was that they were required to think about what the play meant for each of them and use their imagination to create a vision. Further, they knew that I was interested in their opinions, their thinking and their ideas. I trusted that their creative capacities were part of what they needed to bring to the rehearsal floor.

Whitmore (2002) suggests that we only express about 40% of our full potential (and this figure is probably a lot less) and the obstacle or reason that we aren’t able to reach our full human potential is fear. Fear of failure, fear of what other people think, fear of looking stupid. He says the “single, universal, internal block” to reaching our potential is a lack of self-belief (2002, p. 18). This was good to know. I was then in a position to think about how I could dissolve this block so that I could build self-belief in my students. Since judging yourself to be capable of success increases your chances of actual success, while judging yourself as not capable of success reduces your chances of actual success.

As part of my bid to build self-efficacy in the students I would often ask the actors for their thoughts on the work they had done, before sharing mine. This was to acknowledge that the power differential between director and actor, teacher and student, could influence what the acting student might offer. Rather than agreeing with me to get it ‘right’ I was much more curious to understand how they were seeing the character and situation and then look at it how it intersected with my own thinking.

An example of Directing through Dialogue is illustrated in this clip which shows an interaction between myself and one of the actors. We are working on a scene and I have asked him a question about the way his character is viewing the situation. I then leave space for him to process and articulate his thoughts.



**Video:** [Coaching in the Dialogic Space](#)

You will notice the silences and the pauses, the actor appears to be ill at ease and awkward some of the time. This is important, to allow the space for the actor to process all that is going on in the scene and in his thoughts and response. He initially says “Yes” and then changes his mind to “No”. This process enabled him to own the character more fully. It is vital with a coaching approach that the questions asked of the actor are not leading questions or questions that I already know the answer to, only asking to make the actor think they are coming up with the ideas themselves. One of the actors said, “I felt like whenever you posed a question it would be an actual open discussion about it and which way it could go, you wouldn’t like lead us onto a specific path that you’ve created yourself and you’re not telling us”.

Building self-belief or what Albert Bandura (1997) has termed self-efficacy, is key to understanding how coaching has the capacity to enhance pedagogical practices and student performance. For the director, building self-belief in actors requires letting go of the “need to control others or to maintain their belief in our superior abilities” (Whitmore, 2002, p. 18). Most importantly, self-belief is built when people are able to make decisions, feel their choices are valued and take responsibility for their success and failures. An advantage for the director using a coaching approach is that actors begin to draw on their own intuition and creativity to drive their work rather than waiting to be told what to do by a director, or worse still, making offers in order to elicit the director’s approval. One of the actors in a later interview recalled a director he had worked with who had a very fixed idea of how he wanted a character played. The actor described the impact it had on him during rehearsal, “And the question that kept going through my head was am I doing this right? Or the way he [the director] wants it done? Or the way he’s envisioned it.”

For an actor to be thinking “am I doing this right?” indicates that they are distracted from being in the world of the character, that they are not present for those performing with them and their attention is not ideally in a place that is going to serve the story

they are telling. In the dialogic space, there is a sense of the whole, a wholeness that develops through a shared sense of investment in the creation of the work.

## Feedback and notes

The other area that formed an important part of the research was the use of feedback and notes with the aim of building self-efficacy and agency in the acting students. My goal in the feedback I gave the students during the rehearsal period was to facilitate their development as actors. To do this I identified when the story-telling was clear, acknowledged choices that were risky, and asked questions when the story telling lacked clarity for me as the outside eye. I deliberately scanned for positive aspects of the performance, rather than succumbing to a prevailing misconception that feedback is about the things that need fixing, wrapped up in the concept of “constructive criticism”. Constructive criticism in my view is death to creativity and damaging to actor development.

Director, Christine Young (2012, p. 137) notes that students “demonstrate a bias toward equating harsh criticism with a rigorous approach to training”. For some students, if they are not being criticised, they feel like they are not improving and developing. And for some teachers, they feel that to improve performance one must identify deficiencies. I challenged this idea of students and their acting being deficient by framing feedback in terms of what was working for a potential audience. For example, “your vocal attack on the lines in the scene with your Mother revealed the complexity of the relationship between the two of you. This was really effective”. This allows the student to understand specifically the impact of their choices on a viewer. In another example, “I’m not understanding how he feels about his illness – how can we make that clearer?”, it is not about the actor being good or bad, it’s information that the acting student can use. This information led to a discussion about the nature of the illness with the actor discovering how the character’s illness was affecting his cognitive and emotional functioning. One student said that the notes they received, “Encouraged deep creative thought” while another indicated that they “found notes very helpful, always finding the best from me”.

This approach enabled me to elicit more challenging choices without the notion of failure or success; right and wrong from the students. Framing feedback in terms of negative and positive, good and bad can create an environment where the actor feels like there is a right and wrong way of acting. This can inhibit creativity and narrow the depth of their contribution in rehearsal and making what acting teachers often refer to as “bold choices”, very difficult. As one cast member noted, “I found it fun to make mistakes” and another, “The collaborative nature of the process was fun as we got to make attempts or offers and it was not an issue if we failed”. By identifying strengths in their performance and asking questions of the actor, individuals can explore freely without fear of failure and experience a sense of ownership of their development which in turn, can help build self-belief. By reframing feedback to identify what was working, what was serving the story, and what areas needed different choices to tell the story more clearly, students felt that “It was a fun, safe and creative work environment” to work in.

## Outcomes

The outcome of the rehearsal process with the first year acting students was determined from data gathered through questionnaires, completed by participants immediately after the completion of the performance and my own observations that I had made as the researcher/director, captured in journal entries. I also interviewed the students two years after the research period when the students were in 3rd year. The results demonstrated some reservations about the Directing through dialogue process. Some of the reservations were around students not feeling like they had the skills to contribute to the degree I was asking of them. As one actor said, “Sometimes I just wanted to be told how to say the line” and “I feel the director could have taken more control, directed the scene in the direction she wanted more and taken more of a stand over the actors.” This revealed the actor’s unfamiliarity with being given power and influence in the creative process, exacerbated to a degree by their inexperience. This also indicated that for some students the need to have someone telling them what to do was important and that they viewed part of the director’s role as needing to control.

Overwhelmingly, the students found the process challenging but all reported that the collaborative environment allowed them “permission to grow and develop”. This was an important discovery, with students believing that growth and development was part of the rehearsal process. The students felt empowered by the process, “We had a shared investment in the production” and “It was a fun process and extremely challenging”. The power of the dialogic space was highlighted by one of the students who noted, “And because when you have more than one person thinking on it obviously you are going to have more ideas come from that.” The value of the process was encapsulated by the comment, “It was always interesting and I was always learning”, indicating the pedagogical value of a coaching approach when directing actors. This clarified that a director’s role as a leader can encompass a structure that depends more on the contribution from multiple people and less on the chain of command prevalent in a hierarchical paradigm.

By embedding dialogic leadership practices in the education of Australian students, the pedagogical landscape of actor training has the means to shift. The educator moves from the position of judge and controller to one who establishes an environment that allows for openness and vulnerability. According to Brene Brown (2016), vulnerability is about showing up and being visible, something we are asking our students actors to do on a daily basis. She explains that it is taxing to do that when we’re terrified about what people might see or think. According to Brown (2013), “when we’re fuelled by the fear of what other people think or that gremlin that’s constantly whispering “You’re not good enough” in our ear, it’s tough to show up. We end up hustling for our worthiness rather than standing in it” (as cited in Schawbel, para 8). If students are able to dismiss that gremlin then the choices they see themselves as having, are expanded.

Brown (2016) describes a culture of scarcity that she believes is permeating our society. She purports that this culture of scarcity begins with Never \_\_\_\_\_ enough. Fill in the blank with good, pretty, funny, clever, smart. The impact of this, according to Brown is that people armour up, to keep themselves safe from ridicule and judgement.

However, this armour also prevents us from accessing vulnerability and vulnerability is the path to trust and creativity and innovation which are vital to actors. If as teachers and directors we can build self-belief in our students, firstly we are helping dissolve the block to reaching our potential, so that they can begin to believe that they are enough. That they can bring their selves to the rehearsal room or the studio and participate as dialogic partners in learning their craft. One student said, “If I believe I am enough I also have to believe that my scene partner is enough and that is empowering for both of us”.

## Epilogue

Last year I was working with Jarryd, a student who was auditioning for a place in the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). He received a ‘call back’ and had decided to perform a movement piece as part of his audition. I had seen the movement piece earlier and had sincerely hoped he would not use it if he was called back. In my view, the piece didn’t serve to show his skills and abilities. The night before the audition he asked me if I would watch it again and give him some feedback. My worst nightmare. I watched in dismay – it hadn’t changed. I knew it was going to take hours to work on it. I took a deep breath, looked at the student and said, “I think you’ve done your very best with this – there’s nothing I can add”. He smiled, thanked me and walked confidently out of the room. In that pause, that moment of in breath, I had decided that he didn’t require copious notes on what he could do to improve the piece, what he needed was for someone to believe that he was enough. What this exchange illuminated for me was that as directors and teachers we can get stuck giving instruction, direction, notes and lots of suggestions to make things better but at the heart of performing at our best is self-belief. Needless to say, Jarryd is now studying at NIDA.

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## About the author

Dr Gabrielle Metcalf holds a PhD in Theatre Directing from The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts where she currently lectures in Acting and Directing. She has a special interest in leadership methodologies and processes for directors which she has applied to her own directing and teaching practice. She has used an autoethnographic approach in her practice-led research to interrogate the position that a director holds in the rehearsal process and has just co-authored a book, *Teaching Drama*, commissioned by Beijing Normal University, outlining how drama can be taught in schools. Gabrielle also works with a variety of corporations across Australia and Asia training leaders in effective communication styles.

# “Had I been there, which am a silly woman”: Dealing with gendered casting in an Australian tertiary setting

Kim Durban<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Margaret of Anjou’s reference to herself as a ‘silly woman’ in *Henry VI* is a political ploy to draw attention to her gender, yet indicate her limitless power in the face of male dominance. This paper will map the trajectory of repertoire selection in my 18 years of working as a director and artistic director of actor training in the regional city of Ballarat. I have witnessed a profound shift in the demographic, political and financial realities that shape my practice. Intake numbers have doubled; the age of candidates has dropped; mental health problems for young actors have increased and budgets have plummeted. After the main struggle to maintain adequate studio time in order to create effective models of actor pedagogy, gender considerations follow. When choosing repertoire for training purposes, issues of equity and the cultural appropriateness of repertoire and teaching tools arise. Linda Walsh Jenkins and Susan Ogden - Malouf suggest ‘a feminist critique of theatre shifts the gaze from product to process’. In Ballarat I have programmed female playwrights and directors, double-cast women and men, and staged obscure classical works. I will explore the queries to actor-training orthodoxy inherent in such choices and the challenges faced by actor-trainers working in a #MeToo environment.

## Keywords

Actor Training; Gender; Regional; Pedagogy; Director; Repertoire

I will start with a quote from *Henry VI Part 3* where Margaret of Anjou talks to her husband. This speech puts into context the use of the quote in the title of this article:

*Margaret: The duke is made protector of the realm;  
And yet shalt thou be safe? such safety finds  
The trembling lamb environed with wolves.  
Had I been there, which am a silly woman,*

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*The soldiers should have tossed me on their pikes  
 Before I would have granted to that act.  
 But thou preferr'st thy life before thine honour:  
 And seeing thou dost, I here divorce myself  
 Both from thy table, Henry, and thy bed,  
 Until that act of parliament be repealed  
 Whereby my son is disinherited.  
 The northern lords that have forsworn thy colours  
 Will follow mine, if once they see them spread;  
 And spread they shall be, to thy foul disgrace  
 And utter ruin of the house of York.  
 Thus do I leave thee. Come, son, let's away;  
 (3 Henry VI, Act 1, Scene 1: 247-263)*

This article will map some of the issues surrounding repertoire selection and gendered casting during my 18 years of working as an artistic director of actor training in the regional city of Ballarat, an Australian city of just over 100,000 people which is situated about one hour and 15 minutes from Victoria's capital of Melbourne. I intend to outline the pressures and particularities of working in regional actor training. Margaret of Anjou's reference to herself as a 'silly woman' is a political ploy to draw attention to her gender with apparent dismissiveness yet indicate her limitless power in the face of male dominance. The key focus within this investigation is the question of the 'silly woman'; that is, what to do with women in training; women who come in vaster numbers, women who, like Margaret, are talented, outspoken, able and self-aware, yet perhaps, like her, engaged in a somewhat treacherous game dominated by male forces. Some of what I outline is in the form of a report of activity, but also contains the query I place on myself and colleagues about training young women as actors, and the ethics needed in dealing with them. For example, it is hard to find a range of audition monologues for women in their late teens and early twenties where they are not portrayed as victims, love objects or followers rather than leaders. My experience is particular but the issues are not constrained to the regions. If I do a quick internet search of monologues for entry into Australian drama and screen schools in 2019, I can find pieces for young women about murder, teenage motherhood, rape and dating (As examples, see WAAPA; VCA; Flinders). What do these pieces "show" and how do they prove acting potential? What are training environments perpetuating in choosing these pieces for them to do? In 1992, Richard Hornby suggested that this kind of narrowness means "students are prepared in a degraded way for a theatre that is degraded." (Hornby, 24). I share this concern.

It is hard to be unaware of the tension surrounding repertoire when reading students' written responses. Here are three verbatim extracts from different student responses to an online survey in Ballarat 2016: 1. "The text is pretty sexist, but I guess that is to be expected". 2. "The gender politics were challenging." 3. "It is difficult to be in a play where the female characters are generally ornamental, or only there to serve the men." My position as a female director has naturally guided me towards questions about what texts I should direct, and reinterpretation of my role and responsibility in the representation of women onstage. In separate articles, Hannu Tuisku and Ben Spatz

have each suggested a need to further develop ethically sustainable pedagogies of acting, and it is in this spirit that I ask questions. The proposal to teach ethically should not need to be requested if we give all actors their due. I believe that training for the acting industry may be on the brink of a revolution, thanks to the uncomfortable confrontation provided by the #MeToo movement. These adjustments in attitude are contextualised by Australian and international reports about unacceptable behaviour by certain members of the acting industry. In many of these examples, women acting have suggested that they have been disempowered to speak about their working conditions and frightened to lose further work. The debate can also be framed in terms of creative permission. Some directors have claimed a space for a sense of freedom that needs to be present when working creatively, such as Venables: “The relationship between the stage and the audience is an erotic and animal relationship as well as an intellectual and emotional one.” (1996,170) and Armfield: “There is sexual energy which in a sense is part of an actor’s way of connecting to the audience as much as connecting within the cast, and I think that means we have to be particularly mindful and particularly respectful.” (QandA, ABC TV 2018). According to Pigot and Meyrick:

*Staging a theatre production is a fragile and hazardous business, where actors draw on their own experiences and emotional resources to give depth and meaning to a fictional world. In the process, a creative vortex opens up between reality and the emotional life of the play. The better the acting, the bigger the vortex. Because of this, the theatre is a place of profound vulnerability, a place where overstepping the lines of normal behaviour is unavoidable, and sometimes encouraged.<sup>2</sup>*

This is a fraught topic in the face of some high-profile legal cases to which a number of actors, directors and journalists have contributed conflicting views in the press and social media sources. And in dealing with the grounds of training for actors, there is more going on, particularly focused on the perception of identity onstage. One of my trans-gender students asked the other day the reason why the arm positions for men and women were held differently in a dance routine. Leaving aside visual aesthetics and patterning, no-one could tell them, and a historiographic analysis of the roots of ballet does not address the question. So, in attempting to explore some aspects of actor-training orthodoxy inherent in Australian training, I wish to acknowledge that it may be prudent to replace the nominated subject ‘woman’ with other stereotyped categories, such as LGBTIQ, indigenous or inter-racial, differently abled, learning difficulties or Asperger’s. Please feel free to do so as you read.

As the leader of a regional acting program, I must consider whether acting, and acting style, is local or global. Terence Crawford has claimed in *Dimensions of Acting* that Australian actors use all methods, and that “no single method works” because we are “sceptical Australians” (Crawford, 9). The implication is that scepticism is a useful quality to actors. Rosemary Malague suggests that actors need a range of training styles and frames this by asking “What does she bring to the room? What are her needs? What are her goals?” (Malague, 26). Although models of variety can threaten a cohesive

<sup>2</sup> <https://dailyreview.com.au/inappropriate-behaviour-rush-judge>

image of the training (especially for the marketing department), I propose that a complex suite of approaches is best, based on my experience as a teacher and as a working director. When asked, I have often characterised the philosophy of my drama school as the ‘magpie’ school, preferring to borrow and play homage to a variety of methods, from Alexander and clowning to Bogart and Stanislavski. Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Schafer suggests, “the most obvious tension between any early modern Anglo text and its local enunciation in Australia will always be location” (Schafer, 4). My location in Central Western Victoria is particular as a shaping force. I have witnessed a profound shift in the demographic, political and financial realities that affect my practice. Intake numbers for Acting and Music Theatre degrees at Federation University Australia have doubled from 18 to 36; the median age of candidates has dropped from 21 to 18; reported mental health problems for young actors have risen, as evidenced by figures from the university Disability unit; and budgets have plummeted due to internal and external pressures on tertiary funding. Maintaining quality under these pressures is a challenge, especially in dealing with the increased intake numbers for a form of atelier training that relies on personal interaction and fine pedagogic attention to progress. Despite the fact that Ballarat is the site of Australia’s oldest University and that it regularly garners five stars for teaching quality from the student experience category of the Good Universities Guide, Ballarat’s university is not one of the sector’s powerful Group of Eight. (These universities are Australian National University, The University of Western Australia, Monash University, The University of Adelaide, The University of Melbourne, UNSW, The University of Queensland, and The University of Sydney.)

I have characterised this location problem as one of living *upstairs* and *downstairs*, and this binary thus operates in my mind as an analogy for economic power. The Ballarat School of Mines and Industries, which opened in 1870, is now a campus for technical and further education. Naturally, both this focus on training for the workplace, and our regional location, have power implications, and can bring a particular and cliched perception about a university’s pedagogic environment and its cohort; namely that perhaps they are less intelligent, or part of an underclass, or else ‘downstairs from the highly placed, and thus upstairs, ‘sandstone’ universities. This may represent limited thinking in an era of educational internationalisation, yet the populist view prevails in many analyses of successful financial outcomes for graduates from leading universities, in particular. There are often class and gender positions to consider, not just in a cohort, but also in staffing. As Michell, Wilson and Archer have described:

*While we welcome past and current efforts to broaden participation of under-represented students at university, we note that similar efforts are not being made to ensure that all equity groups are represented on staff, women being a notable, albeit unachieved, exception. In recent years we have seen warranted and considerable progress with regard to the representation of Indigenous Australians on staff, or at least the topic is now on the agenda; but to our knowledge no Australian university actively seeks to have 25 per cent of its staff come from low SES backgrounds, even as Bradley Review-prompted Federal Government*

*financial incentives from 2009 have seen most institutions actively recruiting more students from that demographic and working towards the representative target of 25 per cent. (Wilson, Michell and Archer, 2)*

In contemporary times, as the gold has largely gone, Ballarat has struggled to maintain prosperity, and has been reported in the past by media sources such as *The Age*, Melbourne's leading news source, as a place with high youth unemployment, serious drug and alcohol issues, and violence. The City of Ballarat has made recent investments in a local strategy to address some local problems, including levels of psychological distress and alcohol use in young people reported to be higher than the Victorian average. (City of Ballarat Youth Profile, 22) Such is the interesting background to the arts training offered at the Arts Academy. Actors now arrive for training having never seen a play, although they may claim to have viewed a favourite screen performance online multiple times. I am dealing with the career aspirations of many young actors who have grown up in this region. They face the reality that to have a viable performance career they must move to the City. This is where the industry power is seen to exist, and to a large extent, it does. Our graduates are not able to access the industrial power of those trained at more prestigious institutions such as WAAPA, VCA or NIDA. These names open casting agents' doors. My actors cannot enjoy the rich array of live performance available in the big cities just by walking down the street and are subject instead to the repertoire of productions funded by the State Government's Creative Victoria touring programme.

Yet the downstairs location of my graduates can be seen to have its own virtues. Industry commentators have remarked on the freshness and lack of sophistication, indeed, the willingness of Ballarat graduates, and their sense of discipline, that are nominated to be 'regional' acting virtues that set them apart from their peers in a positive sense. I quote from a playwright attendee of our Industry Showcase: "There are several of your boys that I thought were very strong (for my work) but overall what set them apart from VCA and NIDA was they inhabited a masculine energy. I find this very interesting." (Private correspondence, 2014). This rejection of metrosexuality as a positive quality has had an airing in the national press. Actor Michael Douglas has suggested that the trend for 'asexual' or 'unisex' performances in America has left room for male Australian actors to succeed. (The Age, 2015). Could one thus characterise Australian actors as living 'downstairs' from Americans in the international acting market, and taking advantage of it? If so, perhaps the added layer of downstairs regionality can suggest an alternate view of Australian actor training and its impact.

Unfortunately, I note that in the above examples, women are not mentioned. This is a sizeable but unsurprising omission in media commentary for me. Yet in history, female actors have been adored onstage and in the press. Witness the history of reporting and performance from such international figures as Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse:

*Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) and Eleonora Duse (1858-1924) in particular achieved fame of mythic proportions. The triumphant era of Bernhardt and Duse coincided with the years in which suffragism and organised feminism developed in Europe, while the role of women and the*

*relationship between the sexes became hotly debated topics on and off stage. (Re in Moroni, Somigli 2004: 86)*

Rather than focusing on the capacity of women, some attention could be paid to the roles and stories that women are asked to embody. It is disturbing to consider, as Malague suggests, that it is “possible women become more skilled than men in performing truthful moments of shame, humiliation, and degradation” (2012, 173). Could this characterisation of female acting be at the roots of some mental health issues? It is rare to find references to gender distinctions in acting books, apart from male and female collections of monologues. But occasionally, disturbing references can be noted. For example, this set of observations by American television director Burt Brinckerhoff is printed without comment in a book about the nature of the actor-director relationship:

*Think about it, women like to be seen differently than men ... women have a different dynamic as human beings. They like to receive something before they give something back. Very often, they know that they are expected to give before they receive, and this makes them suspicious. So I always like to give something to a woman on the set before I expect her to give back. ... just awareness that I understand who she is as a person, and as a character, and that I have very trustworthy eyes and ears. Usually they appreciate that. Now men never want to appear weak. As a result I always give them the sense that they are action. They are in action, doing something, and that's the reason that they enter this way or do something that way ... I also think there is a big lack of trust in our industry between females and males. (Salvi, 165)*

The natural inequality of such a director's power base is only now beginning to be questioned across the industry. Gendered difference is claimed here as a set of so-called truths enabling unequal treatment at work, based on some apparent psychological analysis. No thought is given to the purpose of “action” as a quality of acting that could be classed as gender-neutral. As Jules Holledge remarks of George Bernard Shaw in an earlier era: “he could not accept that the actress, who displayed her emotions onstage with what he perceived to be a childlike lack of inhibition, was capable of analytic thought. (Holledge, 31). The competitive nature of acting work also needs to be factored in to the consideration of the training actor's purpose. In their salutary overview of Canadian actor training Christine Brubaker and Jennifer Wigmore state in print something that is often discussed in Ballarat:

*Most of our students will never become professional actors. As a baseline value, getting students “industry-ready” can at its best be inspiring, but at its worst be out of touch, reductive, and destructive. As acting teachers, we need to be on the forefront of this learning. Mental health accommodations are an increasing reality in our programs. As teachers, we know we all have a lot of work to do confronting our biases and privilege when dealing with race, gender, power, and inclusion. In 2018, knowledge, skill, and technique are required to work with these young artists, but so too is understanding that success and experience as a*

| *professional performer can no longer be the only measure for teaching a vulnerable practice. (Brubaker & Wigmore)<sup>3</sup>*

Brubaker and Wigmore also list a confronting set of no-nos for the acting teacher: demeaning comments; yelling; fraternisation; sex; touching; inconsistent grading and intimacy protocol. I would like to believe that such cautions are unnecessary in contemporary Australian drama schools due to the framing of codes of conduct that I have read, but possibly this is a hope rather than a fact, as there may always be hidden examples in the studio that are ambiguous within university policy, and not reported due to the unequal power plays at work. (See Codes of conduct NIDA; Federation University Australia). Indeed, perhaps the important point is that we are all *at work* and should be able to work freely of harassment and judgement. As leaders in training, it is our responsibility to be vigilant on behalf of both male and female students. Given recent industry-wide principles adopted for the arts by the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), Screen Producers Australia (SPA) and Live Performance Australia (LPA) in 2018, it is to be hoped that progress will follow on the rehearsal room floor of our training institutions to prevent discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment and bullying in response to the #MeToo era.

These codes should be examined and reflected in our practices as a potential partnership with industry: in the words of the introduction to the draft LPA Code: “LPA’s approach underscores the importance of an industry-wide commitment to long term cultural change”.<sup>4</sup>

Turning to the internal landscape of that training, after the main struggle to maintain adequate studio time in order to create effective models of actor pedagogy, gender considerations follow, as our large cohorts of 38 are rarely gender-balanced. I have often chosen to stage early modern texts, valuable for their large casts, good technical challenges in the text and open requirements of setting and design. As a female director I bring a particular perspective to these plays, yet the influence of gender on my theatre work is not seen as inevitable. Instead, gender is a contested subject that has caused debate since productions appeared directed by early female directors such as Edy Craig in the UK, and, in Australia, pioneer practitioners such as Doris Fitton and Irene Mitchell. When choosing repertoire for training purposes in this environment, issues of equity and the cultural appropriateness of repertoire and teaching tools arise. Malague describes that Linda Walsh Jenkins and Susan Ogden Malouf suggested “a feminist critique of theatre shifts the gaze from product to process” in their seminal article of 1985, *The (Female) Actor Prepares*, yet it has taken a long time for this thought to be converted to action in training. (2012, 1). Malague’s excellent book *An Actress Prepares* dispenses with the brackets around the word ‘female’, as she investigates and questions the patriarchal legacy of American actor trainers including Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner. According to director Clare Venables, “You have to be androgynous in dealing with a script” (1996, 169). Venables is discussing the notion of a gender-neutral

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.intermissionmagazine.ca/artist-perspective/actor-training-canada-appeal-change/>

<sup>4</sup>

[http://liveperformance.com.au/news/lpa\\_takes\\_action\\_drive\\_cultural\\_change\\_preventing\\_workplace\\_discrimination\\_harassment\\_sexual](http://liveperformance.com.au/news/lpa_takes_action_drive_cultural_change_preventing_workplace_discrimination_harassment_sexual)

*directing* perspective, but can this equally be applied to the point of view of the actor? If so, how is this idealism and apparent neutrality of perspective to be achieved? Dame Harriet Walter has a perspective on this after playing a series of male Shakespearean roles, believing that:

*modern theatre is ‘challenging all preconceptions about gender’. Though she believes women playing lead male roles is progressive, she also says there is a long way to go. ‘There are still very traditional things going on, so you never quite know how much of a breakthrough it is,’ she said. ‘But we are reflecting something of a cultural change.’ (Walter quoted in Alberge)<sup>5</sup>*

It is a truth well theorised that the careers of female directors in the past have centred around directing for youth, community and training. Gay Gibson Cima has suggested a positive approach to the stage’s potential for experiment that I believe directors within the training environment are uniquely poised to take advantage of. She suggests that

*As feminist directors, many of us consider the theatre a laboratory in which we prove the validity of experiences previously excluded from or subordinated on the stage ... Directors can contribute to this critique by provoking audiences to rethink traditional values and begin to formulate new ones. (Cima, 69)*

Cima’s model opens the question of interpretation as a playing field for gender-neutral actor and director. Cima’s perspective argues that feminist directors’ interpretive choices are personal, optional and carefully considered, a perspective that can be flagged in any study of the work of companies such as Monstrous Regiment and important female directors such as Jules Wright and Jude Kelly. Schafer has proposed ‘a tension between personal interpretation and the historical moment’ (1998, 4). She wittily inverts the notion of critical disapproval for female directors by embracing and claiming the concept of ‘MsDirecting’. Like the magician who misdirects the audience’s attention in order to create an illusion with subtle actions, the MsDirecting practitioner can be seen to be operating within a frame that inverts the expectation of the norm, that is, the received male director’s approach to the uses of the stage, and, by implication, the role and the perception of the actor. This article is not the place to re-rehearse the questions surrounding the notion of an active male gaze first proposed by Laura Mulvey, as the “straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images ... and spectacle”, nor whether or not there can be a female directing style (Mulvey, 6-18). But what is attractive is Schafer’s notion of *inversion*.

With large class groups, the fight is on to create equality of opportunity. I am going to pick up Schafer’s notion of inversion and speculate about the positive impact of applying it to the actor-training curriculum. What are the potential inverting actions for actor trainers in Australia who wish to expand the canon in a post-#MeToo world? The canon brings a world view yet being pro-woman does not mean being anti-man: and, to

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/16/harriet-walter-stage-more-plays-with-lead-female-characters>

quote Judith Butler; “The option I am defending is not to re-describe the world from the point of view of women. I don’t know what that point of view is, but whatever it is, it is not singular, and not mine to espouse.” (Butler, 1-13). According to Butler, gender is rehearsed, and I acknowledge with her that distinctions are not easily drawn. I would like to suggest, however, that the way female performances are selected, staged and designed can positively problematise and amplify the power of female stage action. Before and after appointment to Ballarat, I have mounted productions that are designed to interrogate the position of the female character during the live performance. There was the 1987 production of Brecht’s *Roundheads and Pointyheads* at the University of Melbourne. I quote here at length a response to this interpretation that encourages me to believe in a potentially woman-focused staging and physicality, from which a revised meaning can be created onstage for the audience:

*She produced Round Heads and Pointy Heads which is based on Measure for Measure. The director chose to have Isabella, who in “one version of the play is raped” (Judith Shakespeare Company) be on-stage during the “big scene at the end, where all the men are very happy, and drinking, and having a banquet” (JSC). Her Isabella doesn’t have any lines during this scene, but her presence on stage speaks volumes about the injustices she has suffered. The director’s choice stands out as the most striking in that the victim/heroine is presented in such a light. Isabella, though without lines, is given the most powerful moment on the stage as she stands among the men who are ‘living it up’. Although I have not had the pleasure to see, first hand, a live production of Measure for Measure, it is in this staging that I can only imagine a woman could direct. The softness, as well as the hurt and anger expressed by Isabella is not, per say, something only a woman can feel, but I would say it is something that a woman could envision playing at the same time in such a situation. (Stokes)<sup>6</sup>*

In 2000, the Masters of Dramatic Art production *Alice Arden* at the VCA School of Drama contained five actors sharing the role of Alice Arden, who each handled different scenes in a variety of performance genres; a 2002 ‘double-cast’ version of *All’s Well That Ends Well* in Ballarat, cast Helena played simultaneously by two women in tandem, one the ‘positive’ side and one the ‘negative’. Then in 2006 at Ballarat, there was a production of *Twelfth Night* that contained five Violas and five Olivias who remained onstage in every scene. By comparison, Phillippa Kelly and Elizabeth Schafer created the play *Margaret of Anjou* from *Henry VI* and *Richard the Third*, carving out a space for the female perspective so that Shakespeare is performed ‘without the boring bits’, as it was described to me by an audience member.

In summary, initially driven by my resource problems as a female director faced with limited means, I have found potential solutions for the problem of casting women in three ways: expanding the canon; exploding the canon, and nudging. In expanding the canon, I have consciously employed female and/or diverse lecturers and directors; the Ballarat repertoire of shows includes female playwrights such as Caryl Churchill, Debra

<sup>6</sup> <http://www2.cedarcrest.edu/academic/eng/flfletcher/measure/WomenDirectingWomenEstokes.htm>

Oswald and Gertrude Stein, and such plays as the feminist masterpiece *Machinal* by Sophie Treadwell. My colleague Ross Hall premiered a new work for our second-year students where there were an expanded number of female roles. In the theoretical area, the canon has been expanded by teaching Oriel Gray beside Ray Lawler, and Susan Glaspell in companionship with Eugene O'Neill. Next, blowing up the canon means I have double-cast or inverted the casting of women and men in *The Tempest* and *As You Like It* and staged unknown plays by Caroline writer Richard Brome. There can be subversion and substitution in staging such texts, casting mothers instead of fathers and boys playing the bit-part of the maid. The tension that this may set up for male actors can provide a perspective on the normalised power and privilege that comes with large cast male plays. Finally, nudging really means pushing myself and guest directors to frame the work differently, such as seven women onstage sharing the role of Mother Courage or programming the Anne Carson translation of *Agamemnon* instead of Seamus Heaney. In Margaret of Anjou's terms, my actors, directors and lecturers are 'following my colours' and, mostly, this conscious attention to the experience of the female student actors is bearing fruit, allowing us all to create a uniquely Ballarat version of what must be taught.

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## About the author

Associate Professor Kim Durban trained as a teacher in South Australia, then as a director at the Victorian College of the Arts. Over the last 33 years she has built a strong reputation as a director of both new plays and classic texts for theatres across Australia including MTC, QTC, Playbox, La Mama and Red Stitch Theatre. In 2001, Kim was appointed Senior Lecturer in Performing Arts, where her productions have included *Margaret of Anjou*, *Machinal*, *Ant + Cleo*, *The Tempest*, *A Little Touch of Chaos*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Murder on the Ballarat Train*, *The Hatpin* and *Kiss Me, Kate*. She is currently the Program Coordinator of the Bachelor of Acting for Stage and Screen and Bachelor of Contemporary Performance Practice undergraduate degrees. Kim is the winner of a 2015 *Vice Chancellor's Citation for Teaching Excellence*, the 2012 *EJ Barker Fellowship*, a 2010 *ALTC Citation* and joint winner of the 1990 *Ewa Czajor Memorial Award*. She has a current entry in the *Who's Who of Australian Women*, and her PhD on Caroline playwright Richard Brome, completed at La Trobe University, included Australian premieres of *The City Wit*, *The Antipodes*, *A Jovial Crew* and *Garden City Weeded*.

# “When you cry you really cry”: Playing with actors’ emotions

Soseh Yekanians<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Historically, acting was in essence a practice derived from imitation and mimicry however, nowadays it seems that this understanding has shifted to more realistic interpretations in performance. As such, the connection and consequences of an actor’s psychological and emotional wellbeing within actor training is being called into question. In Australia particularly, research suggests that when it comes to teaching Emotional Acting, despite varying safer techniques available, psychological exercises such as Constantin Stanislavsky’s Emotional Memory (1936) are still favoured amongst most drama schools and teachers. Although these methods can be effective and aid to more “authentic” performances, they need to be practiced in a controlled and safe environment and even then, actors may lose themselves so far into their past emotional state(s), that then they are left vulnerable and distressed once the acting is over. Furthermore, there is an argument that this method of acting can be indulgent and forces the actor feel self-conscious to the point where they are taken right out of the play – defeating the goal of an authentic performance in the first place. Through observation of the current global liabilities and realities in actor training practices, this paper will discuss why it is vital that actors in Australia are offered alternative non-psychological methods to access emotions onstage so that they can remain safe and psychologically detached from their real-life emotions offstage.

## Keywords

Theatre; Acting; Emotional Acting; Actor Training; Constantin Stanislavsky; David Mamet; Australian Actor Training; The Alba Technique; The Perdekamp Emotional Method; PEM; Emotional Memory; Actors Wellbeing

In an era post Harvey Weinstein, post #MeToo, post #TimesUp, post #NotInMyTheater, the state of our global performing arts industry has undoubtedly been brought into question. Actor training alike has responded to some sort of cultural shift. Institutions and trainers have been interrogated and held accountable for their once orthodox teaching methods that are no longer deemed as acceptable. Examples of this were seen in 2016, when American actor-teacher Cameron Thor was sentenced to

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six years in a state prison for “lewd conduct” with a thirteen-year-old female student. Thor was found guilty of taking advantage of his status and the girl’s vulnerability during their private coaching sessions (Robb, 2016). In 2018, we witnessed New Zealand born actor-teacher Lee Rene Naufahu being sentenced to one year of home detention for indecently assaulting female students through a “gross abuse of power” (Hurley & Leask, 2018). Whereas closer to home, acclaimed Australian actor Geoffrey Rush is being accused of using his dominant pundit status to engage in sexually predatory behaviours towards a much younger female co-star (McGowan, 2018). Whilst, these indecencies have commonly been associated with sexual misconduct, it does bring into question the whole integrity that such power imbalances can have within this profession. More recently, these disparities have made their way into another area of concern that specifically relates to Emotional Acting and the training an actor receives in order to portray an emotionally “truthful” performance.

There is no doubt that at the heart of great acting surrounds this notion that onstage whatever you do has some sense of reality or truthfulness to it. After all, acting notability Stanford Meisner (1987) famously professed that acting was “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances” (p. 15). Unfortunately, this belief has at times been misinterpreted to mean that an actor must “suffer for their art” – leading to irreversible psychological and emotional consequences. This can be attested towards a great divide that commonly lies within actor training, which derives from our foremost notaries who each believed in their own contradictory methods. Lee Strasberg (1988) for example was interested in actors working from their real life events and painful experiences whereas Meisner (1987) and Stella Adler (2000), considered that an actor’s most valuable tool was their imagination – rather than revisiting traumatic memories from their own lives. The most famous misconception however, involves Russian theatre practitioner Constantin Stanislavsky and his conviction that each and every time an actor repeats the process of creation s/he must ‘live the part’ by actually experiencing feelings that are analogous to the character (1936).

In the first part his trilogy of acting, Stanislavsky (1936) discusses a new method or system of acting that actors can use to portray “real” emotions by putting themselves in the place of the character. He notes, “Plan your role consciously at first then play it truthfully. We must assimilate a psychological technique of living a part, and that this will help us to accomplish our main object, which is to create the life of a human spirit” (Stanislavsky, 1936, p. 15). Within this system lies numerous exercises that actors can rehearse with one of which, is called Emotional Memory or Emotional Recall (1936). Predominantly, this exercise came from his earlier work surrounding “The Method” and his recommendation that in addition to external research, vocal and physical preparation, actor training should have within it ‘psychological realism’. For that reason, the Emotional Memory exercise tasks actors to use an emotional memory from their past that is comparable to how the character is feeling at the time. The idea being that, once the actor thinks back to where they were in their own lives when that emotion took place, then they are able to connect that to the character and portray the emotional stakes of that character/scene truthfully.

In theory, while the Emotional Memory exercise may seem harmless and simply a means of accessing some truth towards an actors' performance, in practice the side effects of this psychological process can be detrimental. Even when practiced in a controlled and safe environment, actors may lose themselves so far into their past emotional state(s), that then they are left vulnerable and distressed once the acting is over. Furthermore, there is an argument that this method of acting can be indulgent and forces the actor feel self-conscious to the point where they are taken right out of the play – defeating the goal of an authentic performance in the first place (Mamet, 1997). Regrettably, in Australia, research suggests that despite a multitude of safer techniques available to help students access emotions, variations of psychological exercises such as Emotional Memory, are still favoured amongst most drama schools and acting teachers, which is leading to dire consequences towards the actors overall wellbeing (Taylor, 2016).

In her doctorate study, *Actor Training and Emotions: Finding a Balance* (2016) Dr Leith Taylor, specifically investigated the role that emotions played in actor training as she examined the particular stresses incurred by acting students during their schooling and how, the emotional and psychological aspects of this were managed by the selected group of Australian drama schools. What was disturbing about Taylor's research however, was that it established that even with all the caveats, students were persistently being asked to participate in dated practices that posed a risk to their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Her findings strongly weighed up the need for better emotional and psychological safeguarding of students within the classroom and presented recommendations for the employment of more emotional management strategies (2016). And I understand first-hand the concerns that Taylor's study uncovered.

As a young student, I was in my first year of an acting class when the tutor walked into the room, turned off the lights and said something along these lines:

*Get ready, because today we are going to go into a deep dark place. A place that will make you cry, breakdown and get as a raw as you can get. Emotional Memory. If your emotions aren't real, if your tears aren't real or if you don't 'really' want to punch that person in front of you, then you're never going to be an authentic actor and that means you will never work.*

I was three weeks into my acting degree and could barely tell you the names of five people around me let alone willingly sit there and publically produce "real" tears. Even at nineteen years of age, I was suspicious of what was about to unfold. Not to look defeated or 'less than' I gave it a go as the tutor asked me close my eyes and recall my saddest memory. Under watchful pressure of my peers I knew that I had to recall a memory and that it needed to be something good. And so, I remembered being five years old and seeing my grandmother's lifeless body sitting in our bathtub, which until that moment I had never revealed before. Thus, began my eighty-minute relentless passage through Stanislavsky's Emotional Memory (1936). As traumatic as that experience was I was lucky to have walked away from the exercise embarrassed but unharmed. I cannot say the same for many of my peers, some of whom have now taken

their own lives. Of course, while I cannot with certainty say that there was an inherent link between any of those incidents', *The Australian Actor's Wellbeing Study* (2018) does support my suspicions that, the exercises I witnessed my peers going through in-class perhaps, led them into drugs, alcohol, depression and eventually suicide.

In 2011, the National Performers Committee was alerted to anecdotal reports of high levels of stress, depression, bullying and sexual harassment, as well as alcohol and drug abuse amongst its members (Equity Foundation Website, 2018). As result, the Australian Equity Foundation, together with the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Sydney, initiated a ground-breaking Actors' Wellbeing Study. The nationwide report set out to gain better insights into the physical, psychological and emotional health of Australian actors compared with the rest of the population, in direct correlation to their work practices and how it impacted on their overall health and wellbeing (Equity Foundation Website, 2018). A few years later, Maxwell et al.'s study (2015) was completed and its results brought truth to those once anecdotal stories. In the section "Coping with Work", respondents were directly asked, "Did you ever take one of these substances [alcohol, painkillers, legal substances, anti-depressants, marijuana, anti-anxiety medications, illegal medications, and beta blockers] as a result of problems related to your work as a performer?" (2015, p. 94). Out of 782 actors surveyed, 287 reported using alcohol in response to problems related to their work as a performer. 98 reported using prescribed anti-depressants (such as Prozac or Paxil), and 65 using prescribed anti-anxiety drugs such as Xanax. 140 reported using other legal substances (such as herbal or naturopathic remedies), while 87 had used marijuana, and a further 53 illegal drugs, such as cocaine, ecstasy or LSD (2015, p. 94). Within the findings, the researchers purposely stressed that this question did not refer to the actors' recreational use of these medications or substances, but in fact, to their use in direct response to performance-related problems. Therefore, it is evident that in order for actors to 'let go', debrief or cope from the strains of an emotional performance, they mostly turned to some form of anaesthetising substance.

The psychological and emotional safety of an actor's well-being during a performance is a topic that has been much debated and researched since the time of Aristotle and the Greeks (Konstan, 2006). Even then, questions were asked about the associations between psychotherapy and acting and what the side effects of some of these practices would be. In contemporary times, writer/editor Emily Kirkpatrick (2018) revived this topic by asking, "What happens when getting into character doesn't just involve an actor putting themselves in temporarily uncomfortable situations, but actually damaging their own mental health indefinitely?" (para 3). In her article, Kirkpatrick probed into "how far is too far?" explicitly, alluding towards the psychological ramifications that emotional acting can have on actors (2018). Deborah Margolin, an Obie-award winning performance artist and Associate Professor in Yale's undergraduate theatre studies program, personally understands the psychological complications that Kirkpatrick (2018) refers to. As a performer, she notes that "the line separating her real self from her stage self became less defined the deeper into character she went" (cited in Ohikuare, 2014, para. 2). Margolin recalls, "It was depressing. My character would cry, and I would cry. She was miserable, and I was miserable. She was a frustrated, ignorant person trapped in a narrow life, and I felt like

that” (cited in Ohikuare, 2014, para 4). Worse yet, she discusses the emotional toll that her behaviour had on everyone around her long after her performance was over. Margolin’s understandings echo the claim that some health experts make when they avow that any mistreatment of an individual’s psyche, specifically, emotional or psychological abuse while harder to recognise, can be just as damaging as physical abuse (Healthdirect Australia Website, 2018).

And it seems that neither Margolin nor Kirkpatrick are alone in their assessments. In fact, in an article titled *When You Cry You Really Cry: the emotional toll of stage acting* (2016), theatre critic Matt Trueman looked into the emotional and psychological toll “real acting” had amongst professional actors. Trueman revealed that even in a highly trained working environment, actors were continually being asked to push themselves to exceedingly emotional states in order to produce “real” performances. Actress Michelle Terry spoke of her performance in Sarah Kanes’ *Cleansed*. “Two hours of extreme emotions ... Living with that was quite hard. You’re not meant to feel those feelings all of the time. It’s an emotional shock, having to remind your body of feelings you’ve felt in the past. It came with consequences, carried offstage into everyday life. I was living with a low-level grief” (cited in Trueman, 2016, p. 2). Similarly, actress Kate Fleetwood who played both Lady Macbeth and Medea recounted that she spent most of her evenings going to “these horrible places” (cited in Trueman, 2016, p. 1). Whilst Fleetwood believed that for the most part this was an actor’s duty, she stated that it took a huge toll on her life and at some level, became real. “A real act” she says. “In real time with real consequences...You’re not just technically producing it. When you cry, you really cry – physically, emotionally, everything. It’s in you. It’s part of your life” (cited in Trueman, 2016, p. 1). It was clear that in some way both Terry and Fleetwood had adopted mindsets that somehow assumed unless they subjected themselves to some form of psychological torture, audiences or potentially directors, would devalue or discredit the worth of their performance.

While the area of emotions and behaviour has been widely researched, there is yet to be sound evidence promoting actual distinctions between great acting that is derived from psychological means verses non-psychological means. In 1884, Victorian philosopher William James had a theory surrounding this argument in which he declared that, it is was not our feelings that guided our actions but rather, it was our actions that guided our emotions (Barbalet, 1999). Therefore, one does not need to feel happy in order to laugh but instead, one needs to simply laugh and they will feel happy. James’ theory certainly draws parallels to acting and supports suspicions that there is in fact no difference between revered emotional acting derived from truthful psychological impulses and one that is simply forged via a physical manipulation. Remarkably, the suggestion of the former has been endorsed amongst actors so often that, it is easy to accept as fact. And fact, that Kirkpatrick (2018) believes is more of a myth perpetuated by Hollywood tradition that is ill advisedly filled with glorified stories about famed methods that actors delved into so deeply, that they almost permanently lost themselves in character (2018). This valued folklore seems to trickle down into young susceptible actors who believe that unless they too submit themselves to similar physiological struggles, their performance will never hold up to their celebrities. What

is most concerning however, is that these behaviours are fortified through the initial training an actor receives before launching into these professional careers.

American writer-director David Mamet insists that the underlying issue is the fixation that actor trainers have with preparing actors for “emotional” performances. He deems that, in life there are no emotional preparations for loss, grief, surprise, betrayal, discovery; and therefore, there are none onstage either (cited in Viagas, 1997). Even so, contrary to Mamet’s views, preparing actors for emotionally demanding scenes is an existent reality of actor training. Having had personal experience in some of these psychological practices as a student, as a teacher, I have become fascinated with the paradox of emotional acting. Specifically, what methods we insist actors’ practice in order to (re)produce authentic emotional performances onstage, while still asking them to somehow remain safe and psychologically detached from their real-life emotions offstage. The inconsistency of these demands propels me to further question the industry’s obsession with asking actors to (re)produce “real emotions” in the first place. Why not simply ask the actor to stimulate a replica of these emotions? Is acting not by definition simply “to feign, to stimulate, to represent, to impersonate” (Kirby, 1972, p. 1), or have we somehow forgotten this initial understanding?

In one earliest acting essays written, *The Paradox of Acting* (1883), Denis Diderot notes that “the actor must have in himself an unmoved and disinterested onlooker. He must have consequently, penetration and no sensibility [emotions] ...The art of mimicking... It is the audience who feel and the actor just performs in a self- controlled and detached way” (p 14). Diderot (1883) believed that if the actor gave into his ‘real’ passions and emotions onstage or when portraying the character, then this actor was inconsistent and not to be relied upon from one performance to the next. Correspondingly, Mamet (1997) too maintains that if an actor gave into his real emotions, then that form of acting was indulgent and forced the actor to feel self-conscious to the point where they were taken right out of the play – defeating the goal of an authentic performance in the first place. In direct reply to Stanislavsky’s Method (1936), Mamet (1997) maintains that this form of self-centered actor training does not work and cannot be practiced. It might look good in theory and design but it is an impractical teaching tool. It is just as useless “as teaching pilots to flap their arms while in the cockpit in order to increase the lift of the plane” (Viagas, 1997, para 4).

Instead, Mamet (1997) suggests that it is not necessary to believe anything in order to act. “Here, again, is your job: learn the lines, find a simple objective like that indicated by the author, speak the lines clearly in an attempt to achieve that objective” (p 57). And it seems there is some probability to his beliefs for Stanislavsky himself –after much trial and error –made advancements from his initial precarious “Method” to later appreciate that acting should arise out of rigorous preparation that was obtained through extensive character study and given circumstance, rather than emotion or inspiration (1989). With James’ (1884) philosophy in mind it is feasible to consider that while Diderot (1883) argued acting came from imitation and mimicry, Mamet (1997) considered acting came from the passionate pursuit of actions (the doing) and Stanislavsky (1989) subsequently considered it came from an intimate process of

creation, eventually, all three practitioners harmonised against an actor trying to act through forced emotion.

Elsewhere in the world, actor-training institutions have already begun to make substantial advancements in their training; moving towards safer practices that echo James' Theory of Emotions (1884) and Diderot's (1883) views that acting cannot be self-indulgent but instead, must display the 'illusion' of feeling. Reputable acting methods such as Practical Aesthetics (1986), The Meisner Technique (1987) and the Stella Adler Acting Method (2000) successfully demonstrate that actors can still be truthful in their performances without resorting to emotional or psychological manipulations from their instructors. In direct response to emotional acting, the *Alba Technique* (also known as *Alba Emoting*) is a successful actor training process that teaches actors how to stimulate emotions safely while remaining psychologically detached from their everyday lives. Initially, designed by French Neuroscientist Dr Susana Bloch (1987), the *Alba Technique* is a way to physiologically identify emotion based on the scientific 'effector patterns of emoting'. Systematic progressions that actors can mimic to help stimulate "real" emotion through the manipulation of breath, posture, and facial expressions. Actor Elizabeth Townsend (2009) notes that Stanislavsky's approach to emotional acting via memory exercises was problematic for her. Therefore, by adopting the *Alba Technique*, she finally had an approach to accessing emotions that was safe and could be trusted upon instead of merely reliant on "rummaging through one's personal images from the past" (p. 31).

Similarly, *The Perdekamp Emotional Method* (PEM) has likewise become an innovative emotional acting method, proving to be a positive alternative to the more dated psychological approaches. Originally developed and designed by German director and playwright Stephan Perdekamp (2018), PEM teaches actors how to replicate emotion that is solely based on biological processes as oppose to, personal experiences or emotional memory. Comparable to the *Alba Technique*, PEM does not intend make an actors performance any less truthful nor does it replace the actors own creativity and imagination but rather, offers technical support by which that emotion is accessed making it safer and reliable. Actor Mitchell de Best observes that with PEM, actors can successfully connect to emotions and then let go, rather than "being stuck with them" (Testimonials section, 2018, para. 9). This statement from de Best is significant when deliberating the psychological complications that some emotional acting exercises can have on an actors psyche well after the "acting" is over.

As the strains of competitive industry demands and pressures towards generating more realistic interpretations onstage escalate, so do the stresses surrounding an actor's psychological and emotional safety. More and more, actors are feeling the burdens placed upon them to produce "real" emotions rather than simply pretend. As a result, actors are often unable to let go of these emotions once offstage and instead, find themselves carrying the weight of their characters into their everyday lives – causing psychologically and emotionally damaging effects (Taylor, 2016). Regrettably, when attitudes still largely revere emotional performances generated via "real" emotions rather than mimicry, the process between how actors access, (re)produce and then 'let go' of emotionally demanding/challenging roles will remain an ongoing health concern;

particularly in the context of actor training. For that reason, as the state of our global performing arts industry progresses and actor training navigates through its challenges and evolves, so should our mindset, language and responsibilities around the assumption that “when you cry you really cry” (Trueman, 2016, p. 1), as it not only counters the very underpinnings of great acting but, leads so many actors into treacherous territory.

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## About the author

Dr Soseh Yekanians is a graduate from the Australian Academy of Dramatic Art in Sydney and the Atlantic Theater Company Acting School in New York. In 2012 she was awarded an Australian Postgraduate Award Scholarship to embark on a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) in Perth. Her practice-led research titled, *Creatively Pursuing Persona: Finding Identity through Directing*, investigated how theatre directing and the performing arts could provide a culturally displaced individual with a sense of identity and belonging. Her practice-led study, which resulted in an exegesis and two components of an original creative work, specifically provided new insights into how theatre directing allows an individual to (re)discover their identity through leadership in a non-judgmental forum and how the theatre as a space for communal exchanges and conversations

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