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‘It’s All in The Timing’ – A Research Project that explores the complexities in the relationship of Actor to Audience, in Musical Theatre

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Copyright Warning

Mary Bryant

A performance of the musical:
Music by David King
Book & Lyrics by Nick Enright

- and-

"It's All in The Timing" – A research project that explores the complexities in the relationship of actor to audience, in Musical Theatre

An exegesis

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Contents

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Abstract

This research project is interested in the communicative transaction that occurs between actor and audience, in theatrical performance, and how this relationship can differ within non-musical, and musical theatre. In non-musical theatre, for example, there can be a very intimate and immediate "dialogue" between actor and audience, that can alter each moment of a performance, making possible a unique co-creation between the two entities. In this way, no two performances are ever alike, the actor "reads" the audience and adjusts their performance according to specific responses from them. This communion allows a flexible elasticity in the outcome, and the actor, in this case, can have absolute control of the timing.

In musical theatre, however, control of timing can be taken out of the hands of the actor, the integrity of the transaction between them and the audience can be compromised, and therefore the performance can lose its potential for uniqueness and originality. Music itself, with its inherent structure, rhythm and tempi can dictate the flow of many elements during a musical theatre performance often compromising, or even disallowing flexibility or any sense of improvisation for the performer/s. This makes the musical theatre performer's task - that of, creating a seemingly spontaneous and organic performance, guided by each audience's unique contribution, marrying at least three disciplines of acting, singing, and dance - a much more challenging task.

The project has investigated the ways in which the musical theatre performer, the actor/singer/dancer negotiates these hurdles, as compared to the actor in non-musical theatre. How does this performer navigate the requirements of each discipline to create a performance with the same sense of integrity as the non-musical performer? How too, can one create a production of a musical that enables the same sense of audience investment as in a non-musical production? Finally, how can we train our musical theatre students to have a greater understanding of the actor-audience relationship, particularly given the limitation of the number of actual performances for each production?

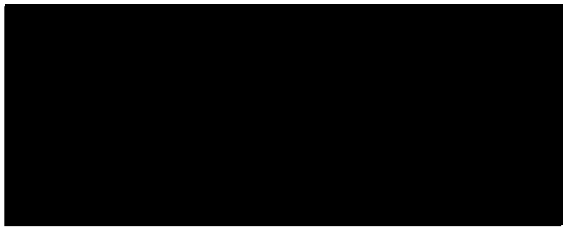
The cornerstone of my "Practise as Research" was a production used as a vehicle to explore and exercise my findings. At the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), with the assistance of nine 2nd Year Music Theatre students, I reimagined a production of David King and Nick Enright's musical *Mary Bryant*. An audio/visual recording of one of the performances is included as part of this thesis.

I directed the original professional production of *Mary Bryant* at Sydney's Ensemble Theatre in 1998. Although favorably reviewed and a financial success, I was at the time, unsatisfied with the results, particularly with concern to the performer to audience interaction. This new production therefore tested and demonstrated ways of improving and responding to these shortcomings through original and unique processes, bringing about some expected but also unexpected results. The findings will be of interest to directors of musical and non-musical theatre, and to teachers of musical theatre, particularly those teaching the acting component.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

1. incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
2. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or
3. contain any defamatory material.

Signed: 

CRISPIN TAYLOR

February 18, 2021

Biography

Crispin is a graduate of Ensemble Acting Studios, has a Graduate Diploma in Directing from NIDA, and a Graduate Certificate of Education from Edith Cowan University. He began as a performer in theatre, musicals, and cabaret.

From Sydney, his directing career has included productions at the Griffin Theatre, the Q Theatre, Belvoir St Theatre, Marian St Theatre, the STC's Wharf Theatre, the Hordern Pavilion (Fox Studios), the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House, and the Perth Theatre Company. He was a 1994 Affiliate Director for the Sydney Theatre Company and was Associate Director for Ensemble Theatre for five years directing over twenty productions for them.

Crispin has taught for Ensemble Acting Studios, NIDA, the Actors College of Theatre and Television, Brent St Studios, the Australian College of Entertainment, and was a Visiting Fellow at the University of Wollongong.

He moved to Perth in 2001 to take up his position as Coordinator of the Acting Program and Resident Director for WAAPA's acclaimed Music Theatre Department. In 2005, the department received a Vice Chancellor's Award for Excellence, and in 2020, Crispin received a Vice Chancellor's Award for Innovative Teaching.

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www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/contributor/1335#

Introduction

It is commonly argued that every live performance is unique, freshly created for that specific time and space. In theatre, the exact same story may be told, on the same stage, with the same script, production, and design elements but generally our attempt, for every performance, is to give a sense of spontaneity, newness, creation. It is our work as theatre practitioners to communicate this same story but tell it in the most appropriate way for that specific audience at that specific time. It is why audiences appreciate live theatre in a different way to non-live performances because of the interaction, the "to and fro", the sense of dialogue. Audiences have an understanding that something is being created, specifically for them, and they have an investment, they have a hand in its creation.

> The core of all theatre is the encounter: the encounter of the actors with the audience, the actors with each other, the audience members with each other. This reciprocal arrangement is the heart of the live event that can actually be felt in the electric air between actor and audience member. (Heim, 2015, p. 3)

In theatre, actors can have the same sense of transaction with the audience as those with their colleagues on stage. They may be able to literally see responses in their faces or body language. If they cannot see, they can certainly hear, laughter being the most audible response but also sighs, gasps, coughs, and the most desirable tension referred to as "you could hear a pin drop". A skilful actor senses this communion and tailors the performance accordingly, perhaps holding a moment a little longer, or delivering a line more forcefully. All of this enables each performance to have a life of its own, the potential to shift, breathe, an elasticity according to the actor and audience relationship.

> Timing is one of the most important yet subtle features of performance. To the degree that a director can maintain management of the timing of a performance, to that degree he or she truly controls it. Yet timing is almost wholly in the hands of the performer. With the exception of musical performance in which the conductor plays a role, the solo

> performer or the performers in their various duets and trios set the rhythm of a show. Since timing and rhythm reflect the natural breathing of the action, the director uses a wide variety of methods to influence them and to assure that the rhythm evolved in rehearsal is retained in performance. (Beckerman et al., 1990, p. 195)

In musical theatre however, the performer often referred to as the "triple threat", faces challenges that are not typical to non-musical theatre. They must straddle the divide in this hybrid form of acting, singing, and dancing. The actor may have constraints that bind them such as the text itself, the space of performance, the work of the designers – set, costume, lighting and sound but the triple threat has far greater restraints generated chiefly by the inclusion of music. This actually has the potential to interfere with the performer/audience relationship. The actor is able to take their cue directly from the audience response but the triple threat has to juggle this response when music is not in play, with the conductor's instruction for timing when it is, with the choreographer's set patterning of moves. Although the same sense of spontaneity is desired, the challenges of achieving this for the triple threat are more complex.

My own work in non-musical *and* musical theatre allows me to reflect on the similarities and differences in this "dialogue". For example, in non-musical theatre the running time and/or length of a performance can vary considerably, up to several minutes, when this is rarely the case in musical theatre. The presence of the conductor, whose job in part it is to keep strict time, to keep the show on track, may actually work against the principles of this organic concept. The conductor may be attempting to create a sameness that could have existed in the past or the future regardless of the audience's contribution at that exact performance. The orchestra pit literally and symbolically creates a divide between performer and audience. There is less room for flexibility, for elasticity; the audience has less effect on the outcome, less investment.

> Closely related to this is the conflict between theatre directors and musicians in opera productions where two totally different forms, drama and music, are treated as though they were one. A musician is dealing with a fabric that is as near as man can get to an

> expression of the invisible. His score notes this invisibility and his sound is made by instruments which hardly ever change… But the vehicle of drama is flesh and blood and here completely different laws are at work. (Brook, 1990a, p. 19)

My literature review uncovered that although there is much written on performance theory itself, there does not appear to be a great deal on how the music theatre performer must navigate through, as Brook suggests, "completely different laws". My research investigated just what these different laws are, how the interaction differs between performer and audience for each of the three disciplines, and most importantly how the triple threat makes all this seamlessly work together.

THE PRODUCTION

In 1998, I had the honour of directing the professional world-premiere of David King and Nick Enright's musical *Mary Bryant* at Sydney's Ensemble Theatre. It is based on the true story of convict Mary Bryant, her relationship with husband Will, and their attempt to escape an early Sydney convict settlement. David and Nick had workshopped the piece with students at WAAPA the year before and the Ensemble Theatre felt it deserved a more fully realised production. Musically, the workshop had been accompanied by a small combination of instruments and David, as composer, was keen to have his music orchestrated.

The Ensemble Theatre is a very intimate space, seating just 220 patrons, and is renowned for the immediate relationship between performer and audience. I suspect that many patrons subscribe because of the sense of inclusion that I have been discussing, a confronting circumstance for the uninitiated but for regular "punters", it often holds the potential for a magical communion. I trained as an actor at this theatre, performed on this stage considerably as a professional, and I was the Ensemble's Associate Director for five years, directing more than twenty productions.

David and Nick were relying on my experience at the Ensemble to appropriately interpret their work. Interestingly, at that exact time, Nick had a huge hit on his hands with *The Boy from Oz*

and David was conducting *Showboat* – both musicals playing to capacity crowds in 1000 plus seating theatres. I remember my instinct was that the show's musical accompaniment should be by a "live combo"- a small combination of live musicians (as I had successfully used in previous musicals at the Ensemble). For reasons that will be explained later, I allowed the orchestration to be fully "sequenced". Essentially the show is pre-recorded through a computerised keyboard and the musical director, as such, simply presses a button to begin a number. There is no "movement" within the numbers themselves, no flexibility, no opportunity for the actor to "breathe" and adjust to the different needs of the audience.

Reviews for the production were not uncomplimentary but in general, were critical of the music, or more correctly, the presentation of the music.

> It is given a chamber production here, directed by Crispin Taylor, in a small venue, and it feels cramped, ready to move on. David King's good score is obviously written for large voices in a large space with a full orchestra. (McCallum, 1998) *The Australian*

> The fatal flaw is the music. It lacks variety, colour, spice, and melody. (Anderson, 1998) *The Sydney Morning Herald*

> If there are no "palpable hits" in King's score, it is never less than melodic, apt, and splendidly played and recorded (the Ensemble's unsubsidised budget doesn't run to live orchestras – even if there were room for them). (Morrison, 1998b) *The Jewish News*

My experience tells me that audiences (reviewers included), can be insightful about the symptoms of what they may like or dislike in a performance but they can often be inaccurate about the cause. My interpretation of the above comments is that the production of the music was not in keeping with the venue, and the sensibilities of that venue's audience. McCallum above mentions "a chamber production" but I do not believe this was a chamber production. The set design, and most significantly, the treatment of the music, was anything but "chamber". Our new production rehearsed and performed at WAAPA in 2019, twenty-one years after the original, used this key idea of a "chamber production" as its starting point.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In beginning the research, it seemed wise to identify three areas of questioning.

1. In what ways can a production of a musical be rehearsed and performed to maximise the potential for actor – audience co-creation?

2. How does the musical theatre performer negotiate the factors that can limit the actor – audience relationship?

3. How can one best train the musical theatre student to have a better understanding of the actor – audience relationship and the challenges inherent in this form?

As I have not altered these questions, it is reassuring now at the conclusion of the project, that not only are they still valid as research areas but also, that they have provoked answers. They continue to serve as the primary research questions, particularly with regards to timing.

Unsurprisingly though, the scope of this work uncovered valuable findings that were not originally intended to be in focus and are included here as fortunate outcomes. Although they may not relate directly to the key investigation of timing, they were unearthed because of this examination, and contribute towards a wider understanding of audience to performer relationships. They may be summarised as the following, *secondary* research areas.

4. The documentation of a period of productions at the Ensemble Theatre, particularly during the years of 1994 - 1998 when I was Associate Director. This reflects on larger theatrical issues and trends, including those of timing in the theatre, and the manipulation of timing by actors in negotiating their relationship with the audience.

5. A detailed analysis and documentation of the original staging of *Mary Bryant*, with a view to considering how to restage it and build on those lessons. The central ones here relate to producing a more temporally flexible, breathing, chamber-style work.

6. The investigation of how the inclusion of factual/documentary content within a poetic/romantic musical work, can be a powerful tool for actor preparation. The juxtaposition of factual and fictional content aids the development of actor investment (personalisation), and through this, audience engagement.

METHODOLOGY

As my area of research is within theatrical performance and the response to it, it is appropriate that my main mode of investigation will be through Practise as Research. Still a relatively new research domain, across the world there are variations on its naming and description, sometimes known as Performance as Research, Practice-led Research, Practice-based Research, Performative Research, Artistic Research and the like. Whatever the terminology, it is the nature of this type of research that differs from traditional quantitative or qualitative research that is important.

Brad Haseman in his chapter, *Rupture and Recognition: Identifying the Performative Research Paradigm*, offers a definition that resonates with me –

> In this third category of research— alongside quantitative (symbolic numbers) and qualitative (symbolic words)—the symbolic data, the expressive forms of research work performatively. It not only expresses the research, but in that expression becomes the research itself. When research findings are presented as such utterances, they too, perform an action and are appropriately named "performative research".
>
> Expressed in non-numeric data, but in forms of symbolic data other than words in discursive text. These include material forms of practice, of still and moving images, of music and sound, of live action and digital code (The multi-method led by practice). (Haseman, 2010, p. 150)

One of the many complexities of this type of research within the performing arts is the ephemerality of the outcome. As I have discussed earlier, one of the major concerns of my investigation is the immediate transaction between actor and audience at any particular moment in any particular performance. Robin Nelson offers a guideline for the documenting and assessment of such research -

> In my approach, a PaR submission is comprised of multiple modes of evidence reflecting a multi- mode research inquiry. It is likely to include:

- a product (exhibition, film, blog, score, performance) with a durable record (DVD, CD, video)
- documentation of process (sketchbook, photographs, DVD, objects of material culture)
- and 'complementary writing' which includes locating practice in a lineage of influences and a conceptual framework for the research.

> The practice, whatever it may be, is at the heart of the methodology of the project and is presented as substantial evidence of new insights. Where work is ephemeral (e.g. theatre, performance, dance, live art) it is ideal if the practice can be experienced directly in any assessment process. (Nelson, 2013, p. 26)

I have, broadly, followed Nelson's model, attempting as he says to make the "tacit, explicit".

A Performance –

The cornerstone of this research was the reimagined production of *Mary Bryant* at WAAPA in 2019. Each of the performances was recorded using three high-definition cameras. The recording of the final performance is submitted with this exegesis as evidence. Although there was a selection of shots available to create an edited final product, I have decided to submit the single, static shot filmed from the central camera. I feel that this constant view of the entire stage, cast, and some of the audience is the most accurate and pertinent record of the event. It is approximately seventy-five minutes in length. (see Appendix 1)
https://ecu.box.com/s/jkqdayrqjjezm8cl19ls9co815qdpgxp

Documentation –

During the production I used various methods of recording significant moments in the rehearsal period. These included annotations in my script, and accompanying documentation, some of which is included here in the appendices. (see Appendix 2 - 11)
https://ecu.box.com/s/jkqdayrqjjezm8cl19ls9co815qdpgxp

Also, there were regular audio recordings of the company of actors at briefings or debriefs. The testimonials that appear in Chapter 3, are drawn from these recordings. Lastly, there were

regular audio/visual recordings of many rehearsals that were not only valuable for me to refer to but as will be examined later, they became an invaluable resource for the cast members. (see Appendix 12)

https://ecu.box.com/s/jkqdayrqjjezm8cl19ls9co815qdpgxp

The evidence for this thesis though, in addition to the formal research in the studio for *Mary Bryant,* draws on my practice as a professional theatre director over the last twenty-eight years. It is an intended autobiographic or autoethnographic journey, and I will touch on this methodologically shortly.

It is worth clarifying further by identifying three significant time periods within these years. The five years as Associate Director at the Ensemble Theatre (1994 – 1998), the twenty years as Coordinator of the Acting Program, and Resident Director for the Music Theatre Department at WAAPA (2001 – 2020), and most significantly the last four years whilst undergoing this research (2017 – 2020).

As this thesis not only contains evidence from the experiment of *Mary Bryant* itself, but relevant anecdotes from throughout my career, the names of students and key personnel are often omitted in the interests of confidentiality and anonymity. It is my own experiential professional knowledge, produced and refined through practice in the rehearsal room and on stage, which is systematized and reported on here.

I have documentation from every play, musical, or event I have ever directed, including script annotations and rehearsal notes, planners, schedules, and most importantly, newspaper editorials, reviews, and in many cases, production photographs. Although they may not be included within this thesis, interested readers can access many of these documents at www.crispintaylor.com.

Productions I have directed that are referred to in this writing include –

NAME	PLAYWRIGHT or COMPOSER/LYRICIST	THEATRE	YEAR
Educating Rita	Willy Russell	Ensemble Theatre	1994
Dags	Debra Oswald	Ensemble Theatre	1994
Educating Rita	Willy Russell	Q Theatre, Penrith	1995
All in the Timing	David Ives	Belvoir St Theatre	1995
The Shoehorn Sonata	John Misto	Ensemble Theatre	1995
An Unfinished Song	James Mellon	Ensemble Theatre	1996
Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill	Lanie Robertson	Ensemble Theatre	1996
Two	Jim Cartwright	Ensemble Theatre	1998
Duet for One	Tom Kempinski	Ensemble Theatre	1998
Mary Bryant	David King and Nick Enright	Ensemble Theatre	1998
The Good Fight	David King and Nick Enright	WAAPA	2002
Talking to Terrorists	Robin Soans	WAAPA	2010
West Side Story	Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim	WAAPA	2014
The Laramie Project	Moises Kauffman	WAAPA	2014
Lord of the Flies	Nigel Williams	WAAPA	2017
Strictly Ballroom	Baz Luhrmann, Craig Pierce et al	WAAPA	2019
Mary Bryant	David King and Nick Enright	WAAPA	2019
A Chorus Line	Marvin Hamlisch, Edward Kleban et al	WAAPA	2020

Complementary Writing –

In addition to the Literature Review detailed in Chapter 1, other writing is included in Chapter 2, based on interviews conducted with three key artists associated with the original, Ensemble Theatre, production of *Mary Bryant* (see p. 54). These artists are –

- Sandra Bates AM - Artistic Director of the Ensemble Theatre (now retired)
- David King – Composer of *Mary Bryant* (now Head of Music Theatre at WAAPA)
- Jason Langley – Cast member of original production (now also a professional director)

These interviews were audio recorded, quotes from them transcribed and included in the following pages. These vital testimonies helped provide a clear context for the original production, as well as an understanding of the unique performance conditions at the Ensemble Theatre. They steered my decisions about what the newly imagined production should, and should not, be.

OTHER METHODS

Apart from Practise as Research, I draw on two other significant research methods that help to manage and appropriately record the scale and breadth of this project and writing. Autoethnography is another qualitative method that conventionally examines and illuminates identity and cultural phenomena, often germinated by trauma and resulting in catharsis and/or epiphany. This may seem grandiose in the context of my writing, as I write of a very particular area of work and that speaks to a very specific audience. However, it is true that the desire to reimagine *Mary Bryant* came from a deep-seated sense of failure within me; I was still haunted by the shortcomings of my poor production so many years ago. Certainly, this is a very personal mission, and the content of this research extends beyond the results of this new production alone. Some of the tenets of this type of research are outlined in the book *Autoethnography*:

- Uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique practices, and experiences.
- Acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others.

- Uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as “reflexivity”.
- Shows “people in the process of figuring out what to do”.
- Balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity.
  (Adams et al., 2014, p. 1)

In many ways, the line of enquiry within this research has been a career-long pursuit, so as previously mentioned I have often included personal anecdotes, to help contextualize parts of the journey. Stylistically, this exegesis has a chronology to it, in order for the reader to appreciate what happened, when, and why. Chapter 3 for example charts the entire rehearsal process and then the performances in chronological order. I have detailed events and discoveries in the order that they were unfolded to me or my students. As I have suggested, I began by investigating the three main research questions but discovered results in lateral but not unrelated areas. The writing moves beyond the conventional hypothesis, process, and conclusion approach. Rather than limiting this record, simplistically, I have chosen to include many of the “twists and turns” along my investigative journey.

> Autoethnographers, in particular, turned to narrative and storytelling to give meaning to identities, relationships, and experiences, and to create relationships between past and present, researchers and participants, writers and readers, tellers and audiences. (Adams et al., 2014, p. 23)

With regard to references, I have tended to include more complete excerpts because I see part of my work as a curator of ideas that have come before, that have led my students and I, down newer and original paths. Speaking of my students, much of the writing is based on interviews with them, and I have attempted to keep a sense of their unique identities by maintaining their own vernacular, when being quoted.

To further clarify the structure and tone of this writing, I refer to the research method of Narrative Research. *The Encyclopedia of Research Design* offers an articulate description:

> Narrative research paradigms, in contrast to hypothesis-testing ones, have as their aims describing and understanding rather than measuring and predicting, focusing on

> meaning rather than causation and frequency, interpretation rather than statistical analysis, and recognizing the importance of language and discourse rather than reduction to numerical representation. These approaches are holistic rather than atomistic, concern themselves with particularity rather than universals, are interested in the cultural context rather than trying to be context-free, and give overarching significance to subjectivity rather than questing for some kind of objectivity. ("Encyclopedia of Research Design," 2010)

In narrative research it is commonly accepted that a researcher begins with a conceptual question that is derived from existing knowledge, and then they may interview individuals or small groups to illuminate new understandings. Again, I believe it has been useful in this case, to give the reader a sense of the order of the journey. In this thesis, the Conclusion draws together all of the threads, across all three of the time periods. Lynn McAlpine in her article titled "Why Might You Use Narrative Methodology?" enlightens:

> My story has a narrative arc; it demonstrates my goals and intentions, the ways in which I carried the action forward by making connections between events, shows the influence of the passage of time, and recounts the personal meaning of the experience. (McAlpine, 2016, p. 33)

With further regard to the tone of the writing included in this thesis, although the Literature Review (Chapter 1) has an appropriate formality, the background interviews, and the detail of the process (Chapter 2 & 3) are less formal and from a more personal and immediate perspective. Robin Nelson on comments on the atmosphere in the creative space and how most effectively that can be recorded in academic writing:

> There is a sense of improvisation, indeed playfulness, in much studio practice even where the research is most rigorous. It thus seems even more ridiculous to be formal about an informal process and, in my experience, first-person accounts of process read well. (Nelson, 2013, p. 35)

In a final note on style and tone, I had a very specific audience in mind, along the research journey and especially in the writing of this thesis – my students. I have attempted to keep the

tone descriptive, and to maintain the personalized voice with which they are familiar. I see this thesis as a gift to them as I hope it will be received by any students of acting or musical theatre.

THE EXEGESIS

Chapter 1 - Offers a review of the relevant literature to date, briefly touching on "liveness" as a concept, as well as some background on audience response and "reception theory". Within this first chapter, more attention is given to acting principles, and theories of acting training, studies of audience response, as well as some necessary definitions of non-musical and musical theatre concepts.

Chapter 2 - Based on interviews conducted in 2018 of three key people associated with the original production of *Mary Bryant* (as listed above). To begin planning for a new production, it seemed wise to return to the "scene of the crime", as it were. My interviewing of these three focused on their perspectives of the Ensemble Theatre, on timing in theatrical performance, and on the original production of *Mary Bryant*.

Chapter 3 - Includes a week-by-week summary of the new production, which was rehearsed and performed in 2019, as well as techniques that were either proposed before the event or discovered during it. I use the testimonies of the nine cast members, from regular recordings during the process, as a narrative to debrief the outcomes of the production.

Conclusion – Aligns and compares three relevant time periods. The past - the results, findings, and outcomes of this project; the present - as I concluded my writing during the pandemic of Covid 19, which drastically altered the audience to performer relationship; the future – where these findings and my work may lead me or others next.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

The 'Live' Debate

The ongoing discussion prompted by authors such as Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander about what constitutes 'liveness' in performance is well documented, and as the focus of it is mostly in the comparison of performance art to its documentation, theatre, recorded theatre, and film (stage and screen), it is not entirely relevant to my exploration. It is worth considering, however, some useful definitions that have become common in the discussion of any performance. Firstly, to Phelan, who in her 1993 book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* claimed –

> Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representation of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance.
>
> Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as "different". The document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present.
> (Phelan, 1993, p. 146)

Remarks such as these lie at the heart of the debate over the validity of the contemporary recordings of performance that are traditionally viewed in person, such as the Met: Live in HD which began in 2006, and the National Theatre Live, beginning in 2009. Although Phelan's comments predate these, music recordings, radio, television, and film have, of course, been in existence long before 1993. I believe that there is performance in film and television, and sound recordings but Phelan makes the distinction that once a performance has been recorded

it loses its sense of being alive, and this directly relates to my area of study – that which is the most “alive”.

Phillip Auslander in his book of essays, challenges Phelan’s theories and helps us come to terms with all the different modes of performance when discussing ‘liveness’ in a contemporary and increasingly ‘mediatised’ world.

> The default definition of live performance is that it is the kind of performance in which the performers and the audience are both physically and temporally co-present to one another. But over time, we have come to use "live" to describe performance situations that do not meet those basic conditions. With the advent of broadcast technologies—first radio, then television—we began to speak of "live broadcasts." This phrase is not considered an oxymoron, even though live broadcasts meet only one of the basic conditions: performers and audience are temporally co-present in that the audience witnesses the performance as it happens, but they are not spatially co-present. Another use of the term worth considering is in the phrase "recorded live." This expression is an oxymoron (how can something be both recorded and live?) but is another concept we now accept without question. In the case of live recordings, the audience shares neither a temporal frame nor a physical location with the performers but experiences the performance later and usually in a different place than it first occurred. The liveness of the experience of listening to or watching the recording is primarily affective: live recordings allow the listener a sense of participating in a specific performance and a vicarious relationship to the audience for that performance not accessible through studio productions. (Auslander, 1999, p. 110)

As my research investigates the transaction between audience and performer, I rely on the default definition, as suggested above. It is essential in my understanding of ‘live’ that they are both present in the same space, and at the same time. Later, in the same publication, Auslander suggests this -

> Obviously, some mediatized performances, such as live broadcasts, can be just as spontaneous as live performances in which performers and audience share the same

> space. It is also obviously true that whereas recorded performances are fixed, live performances can be spontaneously different each time. Although much is made of the way each instantiation of a live performance is potentially different from every other one, how different do we, as the audience, want them to be? In the case of traditional theatre, any given performance of a particular production of a play has to be virtually identical to any other performance of that same production. If a particular performance deviates radically, it is arguably no longer a performance of that production. (Auslander, 1999, p. 110)

Certainly, it may not be desirable for a particular performance to "deviate radically" but I argue that as audience, we want any given performance to not only, differ from any other, but to be unique. I maintain that when we attend a live performance, it is our expectation that it have a sense of unique "specialness" for each of us. We are in "communion" with that particular group of people at that particular performance.

Martin Barker, who Auslander refers to in the second edition of *Liveness*, voices a similar cynicism of the subtle differences that can occur from performance to performance.

> What interests me is the presumption of the importance of difference between performances. In comedy, it is certainly arguable that an audience's laughter responses can become incorporated into a performance, making for uniqueness. In other dramatic modes, where a play's dynamic is more textually driven, for instance, then a committed company of players will surely be working towards minimizing random changes between performances. They will seek a plateau where everything in a production is controlled, where characterization is organic and consistent, movements are choreographed, timed and effective, where dialogue is delivered with the patina of appropriate emotion, and so on.
>
> In other words, this 'fact' that performances may vary, is actually irrelevant - or is it? Perhaps not. Suppose we were to posit that for certain kinds of audiences plays are attended and experienced as if they had elements of uniqueness, that there may exist an unspoken 'contract' between theatres and their audiences: a contract which is

> almost ineffable except by distinguishing it from the inferior experience of cinema - the 'mediated' versus the 'immediate'. (Barker, 2003, p. 28)

In his suggestion of a "a plateau", Barker is referring to a performer's comfortable working routine but within each performance, the actor is also trying for the absolute reverse of "a plateau". They are attempting to breathe peaks and troughs into every moment, as if it is "freshly born", and unique. In the following section, acting teachers will help to clarify this point. Therefore, it is what Barker calls "ineffable" that I will name, investigate and discuss within my research.

A description that resonates most strongly with me predates any of these offerings. Famed *New York Times* theatre critic, Walter Kerr, wrote in a 1972 article, this piece on the difference between theatre and film. I am attracted to it because it speaks, as I do, of the essential "transaction" between performer and audience. I believe that there is always the potential for a unique creation in every performance.

> It doesn't just mean that we are in the personal presence of performers. It means that they are in our presence, conscious of us, speaking to us, working for and with us until a circuit that is not mechanical becomes established between us, a circuit that is fluid, unpredictable, ever-changing in its impulses, crackling, intimate. Our presence, the way we respond, flows back to the performer and alters what he does, to some degree and sometimes astonishingly, so, every single night. We are contenders, making the play and the evening and the emotion together. We are playmates, building a structure.
>
> This never happens at a film because the film is already built, finished, sealed, incapable of responding to us in any way. The actors can't hear us or feel our presence; nothing we do, in our liveness, counts. We could be dead and the film would purr out its appointed course, flawlessly, indifferently. (Kerr, 1972, p. 1)

Kerr's insightful reckoning highlights that the difference between film and theatre is the potential for change. It is impossible in a film for a performance to ever change, in any way, whatsoever, regardless of the audience's response. In theatre, it is almost impossible for a performance to not change, according to the audience's response. Interestingly, Kerr's 1972

article is essentially about the then relatively recent reliance on audio amplification within musicals and plays on Broadway – how times have changed. Finally, David Saltz in the book Staging Philosophies reminds us:

> Theater survives in an age of film and video precisely because the reality of the theater event matters. An audience comes to the theater to experience a real event, to see real, flesh-and-blood actors perform real actions. (Krasner & Saltz, 2010, p. 203)

So, although in all of the above, the focus is a comparison between the stage and screen mediums, with regard to "liveness", and my research is concerned only with that of the stage, this review does help me to clarify my own definitions. The "live" that I am concerned with is the "alive". As I am concerned with the shared breath between performer and audience, it is essential to me that they share the same time and space. As I am concerned with the potential for unique creation between them, it is important to me that their transaction is as unimpeded as possible. As I am concerned with the changeable, malleable, flexible, elasticity within the performance, I have investigated in the following chapters, the factors that limit or restrain this "aliveness".

ALIVE ADJECTIVE

Definition of alive

1: having life: not dead or inanimate

2a: still in existence, force, or operation: active

b: still active in competition with a chance of victory

3: knowing or realizing the existence of something: sensitive

4: marked by alertness, energy, or briskness

5: marked by much life, animation, or activity: swarming

(Merriam-Webster, 2020a)

Figure 1.

From the Acting Teachers

It may be useful here to include some investigation of how acting teachers describe the relationship between actor and audience, how important that relationship is, what terminology is commonly used, and how technically the actor manages and responds to the audience.

The great Russian actor, director, and teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky is to this day still thought to be the greatest influence on actor training in the western world. In the first of what would become a trilogy of seminal books, *An Actor Prepares*, he writes about a teacher talking to a group of students. In this episode, the discussion moves from transaction between actors to that of actor and audience:

> Paul protested, and said:
>
> 'I see how the relation between actors can be mutual, but not the bond between the actors and the public. They would have to contribute something to us. Actually, what do we get from them? Applause and flowers! And even these we do not receive until after the play is over.'
>
> 'What about laughter, tears, applause during the performance, hisses, excitement! Don't you count them?' said Tortsov.
>
> 'If you want to learn to appreciate what you get from the public let me suggest that you give a performance to a completely empty hall. Would you care to do that? No! Because to act without a public is like singing in a place without resonance. To play to a large and sympathetic audience is like singing in a room with perfect acoustics. The audience constitute the spiritual acoustics for us. They give back what they receive from us as living, human emotions.' (Stanislavsky, 1936, pp. 175-176)

Simply put but with powerful insight, Stanislavsky, through the character of Tortsov, articulates what he believes to be an essential "interdependence" between the performer and the spectator. Theatre without an audience response is a vacuum. Interesting also is his suggestion

that an inexperienced actor, may not have an understanding of this vital relationship, they may have a naïve misconception that performing is a one directional process, merely "broadcasting", instead of what I have referred to as a sense of there being a "dialogue".

Sonia Moore, in her book on the Stanislavsky System further clarifies Stanislavsky's beliefs:

> When actors try to repeat what they did the night before, the theater stops being art because it stops being alive. Every performance in a living theater is as different as each day is different, and in order that the theater should be alive, there must be living people on the stage. (Moore, 1974, p. 14)

The suggestion here is that repetition is the death of the theatrical premise, the actor must strive to freshly create for each and every performance. This of course contradicts Barker's proposal that actors "seek a plateau" in the previous section (see p. 23). Moore goes on to advise how newness is brought to the work, through the greatest variable from performance to performance, that of the audience:

> For the actor to try to force himself into believing that he is alone, that he does not see anybody or hear anything in the audience, would also be contradictory to the art of theatre. The audience is an important co-creator of the performance.
> (Moore, 1974, p. 33)

Two important concepts are illuminated here, firstly that of repetition or the lack thereof. Again to the lay person it may seem that an actor is attempting to recreate exactly that which has been before but the actor actually tries for each performance to have a life of its own. The greatest contributor to that original creation is the audience, for unlike the actors, they are seeing and hearing the play for the very first time. The actors adjust the communication of their performance according to specific responses from each performance's audience.

In the book *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, Sharon Marie Carnicke gives this description of an essential part of Stanislavky's teaching:

> A second major assumption behind the system involves Stanislavsky's belief that successful acting places the creative act itself in the laps of the audience. By insisting on

> the immediacy of performance and the presence of the actor, Stanislavsky argues against nineteenth-century traditions, which taught actors to represent characters from the stage through carefully crafted intonations and gestures. However well-rehearsed, Stanislavskian actors remain essentially dynamic and improvisatory during performance. (Hodge, 2010, p. 17)

Although there is a structure governed by the text, the blocking, and the design, the actor creates a sense of spontaneity and "newness" through their response to the audience's cues. Again, I affirm that this is one of the main attractions of live performance – that there is an audience involvement, the audience contributes, they are necessary for the performance to exist, they play a vital role in making each performance unique.

British acting teacher Paul Harvard clarifies this in his book *Acting Through Song*:

> A night at the theatre is special because it is a one-off. When the participants gather for a story to be enacted, they know this particular telling can never be repeated. The chemistry will be unique.
>
> Live performance is special because the audience is participatory. The way that they listen, and respond, directly affects what they witness. In theatre, the relationship between you – the actor – and the spectator is crucial. (Harvard, 2013, p. 230)

Harvard also associates acting in a musical with one of the other required disciplines and further illuminates the special relationship between performer and spectator:

> Acting in performance is like dancing a waltz with the spectator. You are the one leading, the dancer who knows the steps. But only by paying close attention to your partner can you negotiate the rhythm together. Understand this intimate relationship and you will learn to modulate your choices, just like a great dancer who adjusts themselves to their partner. What is exciting about theatre is that every night you are dancing with a different audience, so the chemistry will subtly change each time. The steps may be the same, but you must learn to dance the performance anew. (Harvard, 2013, p. 231)

My acting teacher was the late Hayes Gordon AM OBE. In his book, *Acting and Performing*, he details exactly what sort of communication an actor may receive from the audience.

> The following responses can be quite obvious even to the inexperienced: applause, laughter, a gasp, weeping, fanning themselves with programmes, whispering or talking together, calling out, walking out of the theatre or deadly slow clapping.
> (Gordon, 1992, p. 247)

These responses are primarily detected aurally but visual responses are also perceivable -

> If we can see and hear any portion of the audience clearly, we might detect the same sort of body language we can recognise in a face-to-face encounter. Subtle nods, smiles, frowns, moving of the head, thinning of the lips, looking away, sitting forward, slumping back, stillness, general agitation, and the like. Many of these can be detected in intimate theatre out the corner of one's eyes and ears.
>
> But blinded with lights and with an audience further removed, one fumbles more. We may find ourselves having to guess by the varying qualities of silence. Yes, it does range from dead silence to faint restless murmurs and squeaking of seats.
> (Gordon, 1992, p. 248)

The naming of these sometimes obvious and often subtle forms of communication is useful when appreciating the challenges for a musical theatre actor. It is not true of all musicals, of course, but most commercial large-scale musicals make communication from audience to actor more challenging to perceive. How often does a musical theatre performer have the opportunity to hear the silence? This harks back to my suggestion that musical theatre in general, may allow less potential for performance-by-performance change. The music itself, the conductor, the proximity of the audience, the set and costume design elements can all create a barrier to the transactional process. This lies at the heart of my investigation.

Figure 2.

The Audience

As previously discussed, a production of a play or a musical may have many elements, however it is commonly accepted that for theatre to exist only two elements are essential – a performer and an audience.

> Performers, especially dancers, sometimes talk about "being in the moment" or having an "on performance," in the sense of being really on top of it, or in good form. Sometimes this sense involves both for the performer and for the audience an awareness of things uniquely coming together. One sees brilliance, a special communication between the artist(s) and the audience, a sensuously and perhaps emotionally heightened, lively awareness that unfolds within and is unique to a specific performance. The "on moment" occurs when the performer not only correctly repeats everything she rehearsed, but also has a keen awareness of herself, the other performers and the audience in the immediacy of a live performance.
> (Krasner & Saltz, 2010, p. 123)

The relationship between performer and audience, physically and psychologically is ever shifting and dependent on factors such as, size and space of venues, style of the play and/or production, taste and trends of the theatre-makers and the theatre-going public. There is no set dynamic in this relationship and therefore the communicative processes between the player and the observer can vary greatly. As it is this communication process that is at the heart of this research project, I will use this section to reflect on the audience as the receiver, the interpreter, and the responder.

RECEPTION THEORY

Reception Theory and the closely related Reader-response Theory are concerned with how the reader interprets a text, and how they contribute to the meaning and understanding of a work of art. Theorists such as Hans Robert Jauss, and Wolfgang Iser have examined the circumstance that the *reader's* interpretation will have a unique perspective, regardless of the *writer's* intention. This perspective will always be from a place informed by the reader's own cultural, political, and socio-economic backgrounds and beliefs. The writer, the artist, will have no control over this perspective.

Although these principles are not exclusive to the written text and its reader, they tend to apply most to those from the strictly literary world. As Susan Bennett describes in her book *Theatre Audiences*:

> Not withstanding the often performative metaphors used by these theorists, very little attention is given to the phenomenon of theatre. I found their work at once liberating and frustrating. The usefulness of a discourse which took account of receptive processes was undercut by its neglect of the dramatic text and performance. (Bennett, 1997, p. 20)

The relationship between text and reader in the literary setting does not generally consider the uniqueness of the event that is performance. In the written and read text, there is no transaction as such. Certainly, the reader will have a unique response to the text but the text itself will remain unchanged, regardless of the reader's response. From the perspective of my research, it is a "one-way street". Reception Theory may examine the hermeneutic values of writing but in theatre, interpretation can shift depending on time, space, and audience. Also, the delivery of that interpretation in theatre will undoubtedly be through the contribution of a number of artists – designers, directors, actors. Willmar Sauter has a clarification with which I agree, defining "reception" and "perception":

> The difference between perception and reception can be described in various ways. To a certain degree, they belong to different traditions: ''perception'' carries connotations that tie it to phenomenology, while ''reception'' refers to cultural studies and the

> analysis of social values and mental worlds. Another distinction would be to understand perception as an aspect of the communicative interaction— therefore I pair perception with presentation— while reception describes the process taking place after a performance (i.e., it is a consequence rather than an integral part of the theatrical event). While perception focuses on the communicative process, reception describes the result of communication. (Sauter, 2000, pp. 5-6)

In Sauter's words, it is this perception, "the communicative process" which is of most relevance to my research. *Perception* Theory rather than *Reception* Theory, a point I return to below in reference to Vsevolod Meyerhold.

THE CONTAGION EFFECT

Another major difference in examining literary reception theory with that of performance reception theory, is the collective communion of the audience or lack thereof. Reading is usually a solo event carried out privately. It is not usually a shared experience or if so, happens as an interpretive process after the reading. Theatre although not constrained to this, is usually in the presence of others. Audience response may be individualized but being in the presence of others can have a contagious effect. The response of those around you, the collective response, is infectious. One is often drawn into the "emotional contagion", a shared empathetic response – shared laughter conjures joy, tears conjure compassion etc.

In *Engaging Audiences*, Bruce McConachie observes –

> Emotional contagion in a theatre is automatic and usually very quick. Audiences will tend to laugh, cry, and even gasp simultaneously. The more spectators join together in one emotion, the more empathy shapes the emotional response of the rest. (McConachie, 2011a, p. 95)

This "spectator" response is not unique to theatre, of course. I recently attended a football game with sixty-thousand other "audience" members. In the sporting arena such as this the contagion effect is irresistible. The competition on the ground is mirrored and echoed by the

competition in the stands. As in performance there are three types of transaction happening simultaneously: 1) Player to player, 2) Player to spectator, and spectator to player, 3) Spectator to spectator. There is a palpable chain of contagion.

It is of interest that for the majority of these sporting events, whether they are played during day or night, the audience is in as much light as the game. Spectators are able to see each other, hear each other, and are encouraged to communicate with each other. I wonder if future research should further investigate the factors which inhibit or promote audience to audience communication across the performing arts. McConachie again:

> Uniting a theatre audience through empathy is not as easy as it used to be, however. When Western audiences could see each other in lighted auditoriums, the facial expressions and bodily movements of others in their seats—in addition to their audible vocalizations— helped to evoke a more uniform response among spectators than today, when darkened houselights inhibit emotional contagion. (McConachie, 2011b, p. 97)

Is there a relationship with this communicative process, that applies within the audience-to-audience transaction, compared to the transaction between performer to audience? It seems fair to say that one of the reasons that there is such a visceral dialogue in this transaction in stand-up comedy for example, is because the comedian can see the audience as much as hear them. Also, usually the audience can see each other more easily in stand-up than in theatrical performance.

READING THE AUDIENCE

McConachie's observation of how the changing theatre environment in an historical context, has influenced the audience to audience dynamic, leads us to consider how historically the performer to audience relationship has changed. We know that from the birth of theatre itself, in Greek times that there was barely a division between stage and audience, performer and spectator. All were equal in a spirit of devotion and celebration. Indeed, through the ages, our understanding of Medieval, Commedia, and Elizabethan performance, all encouraged a healthy

and vocal response from the audience. Susan Bennett in her book *Theatre Audiences* comments:

> With the establishment of private theatres in the seventeenth century, however, there is a move towards separation of fictional stage world and audience. Higher admission prices probably limited the social composition of the audience, and with the beginnings of passivity and more elitist audiences came codes and conventions of behavior. (Bennett, 1997, p. 3)

The introduction of theatrical devices such as the proscenium arch, footlights, and the orchestra pit, created a literal and symbolic divide between audience and performer. The audience was effectively, thrust into the darkness to be "heard and not seen", and even then, the "hearing" was of polite approval. I am reminded of the lyrics for Sondheim's *Invocation and Instructions to the Audience* from his musical *The Frogs of Aristophanes* (see figure 3, p. 42), where he seems to have disdain for audience response, albeit it tongue-in-cheek. With this "devoicing" of a theatre audience's response, perhaps the actors of today are required to have a greater sensitivity to enable them to "read" a modern audience.

Of course, within the twentieth century and beyond many have investigated a more immediate relationship between audience and performer, most notably the work of both Bertolt Brecht and Vsevolod Meyerhold, who both sought to breakdown the illusory nature of theatre. Although they wanted to elicit different types of audience responses, they did so through the exposing of theatrical devices and concepts, allowing and encouraging a greater audience consciousness. In many ways, they reimagined the possibilities for performer to audience dialogue. Their contribution to our understanding of contemporary theatre is too vast to be diagnosed here but of specific relevance to my research, was Meyerhold's offering of a code for the notation of audience response:

> a silence; b noise; c loud noise; d collective reading; e singing; f coughing; g knocks or bangs; h scuffling; i exclamation; j weeping; k laughter; l sighs; m action and animation; n applause; o whistling; p catcalls, hisses; q people leaving; r people getting out of their

> seats; s throwing of objects; t people getting onto stage
> (Stourac & McCreery, 1986, p. 20)

Meyerhold here is clearly pursuing *perception* rather than *reception* theory. Although not an exhaustive list, it begins to articulate some of the specifics of what an actor is receiving for an audience. For my project, it is interesting to note that about half are audible responses and half visible. My research examines how the musical theatre performer is able to receive these aural and visual signals given the inevitable restrictions to these senses. When music is in play, how does the performer hear any of the signals? If the audience is in the dark, how do they see any of these signals? In fact, is the audience response actually of much interest to the modern commercial musical performer?

Meyerhold wrote in 1930:

> Nowadays, every production is designed to induce audience participation: modern dramatists and directors rely not only on the efforts of the actors and the facilities afforded by the stage machinery but on the efforts of the audience as well. We produce every play on the assumption that it will be still unfinished when it appears on the stage. We do this consciously because we realize that the crucial revision of a production is that which is made by the spectator. (Meyerhold & Braun, 1969, p. 256)

I question whether this still holds true of the commercial musical in today's market. I am further prompted by this to explore how important the audience response is in each performance of a major production. Do the producers of *Aladdin,* the Disney Corporation*,* feel that their product is "unfinished" when it hits the stage every night? Do they really want more from the audience than their quiet approval (and their dollar)? If we are to trust Meyerhold who was himself calling for a Communist "revolution in the theatre", we must conclude, no.

MUSICALS

Compared with most established artforms, there is relatively little academically rigorous examination of the musical and musical theatre. It seems the commerciality of its nature

prompts suspicion by learned theoreticians, or perhaps because of its multidisciplinary nature, the subject area is too broad to be mined with focus and clarity. There are, of course, many publications on musical theatre - anthologies encyclopaedically listing Broadway and West End shows across the last seven decades or so, and many fine diaristic biographies and autobiographies by performers, composers, directors, and producers. The focus very often though is on the mythology of productions; whether they were hits or misses, triumphs or flops. On Broadway, there is almost an obsession with the "box office returns", and the "number of performances" that a show has run. *Not Since Carrie – Forty Years of Musical Flops* by Ken Mandelbaum is an example of the type of tongue-in-cheek tone that is familiar to many of these writings. Another revered reviewer Walter Kerr offers this in his book, *How Not to Write a Play*:

> We might pause for a moment over musical comedy, though. It is interesting to note that, of all the forms of our time, musical comedy is the only one to make use of: free unrealistic backgrounds; rapid leaps through time and space; bold colour; heightened language (in its lyrics); rhythm (in its music); dynamic movement (not only in its dance, but everywhere); direct address to the audience. Musical comedy is the form that makes the most extensive use of theatrical conventions and its theatrical vitality must stem from that fact. The form is eager to please its audiences, and to explore the theatre as theatre – two things that the serious drama has not thought of doing in quite a long while. We generally regard the popularity of musicals as a sign of public illiteracy; it may actually be a response to creative joy. (Kerr, 1955, p. 237)

The very popularity of musicals, their appeal "to the masses" seems to breed a sense of envy in the onlooker. Certainly, in my experience the triple-threat performer is looked upon as a poor imitation by those who specialise in the more "refined" derivatives such as opera, dance, or acting. Undeniably though, musical theatre has an almost unique relationship with its audience; with its capacity to draw them in, and within the act of the performance itself. "Intersections of Theatre Theories of Spectatorship with Musical Theatre Practices in Performance and Production" is one of only a handful of academic reflections, which not only focus on contemporary popular music, but also explicitly examine issue of audience reception.

Here Jean Louise Balch writes of an interdependency between audience and musical theatre productions:

> Musical theatre attempts to please its audience and through this also achieves commercial success. In the development of a new musical, directors and the creative team test their work in front of a live audience. In many cases the creators try to do a phenomenological "reading" of the audience during performance to get a sense of what "works". The audience act as both a collective – a community created by the event and as individual spectators who participate in active viewing.
> (Balch & Coleman, 2012, p. 85)

Of course, non-musical theatre works, "plays", are often honed during previews also, their playwrights making observations from audience responses. In the world of musicals though, the audience response is all important and there are countless legendary tales of how complete musical numbers or entire scenes have either been cut, added, or rewritten during previews or out of town tryouts. I will return to the function and importance of "previews" in the next chapter.

My research though, is less concerned with the creation of musical works or how, the "creative team" work with the audience, and more focussed on what transpires between performer and audience during a performance. Balch again offers some useful technical elements of the communicative process, and also a poetic sense of the event:

> These active cognitive elements of viewing include attention, memory, visual perception, empathy, conceptual blending and the imaginative concept of play. Through the action of empathy, emotional contagion spreads among spectators and in some instances I suggested that audiences may "vibrate" in tune with the production.
> (Balch & Coleman, 2012, p. 85)

Interestingly "contagion" is referred to again here, as discussed in the previous section (see p. 37). As I mentioned, "the contagion effect" is a feature of many spectatorial events, including non-musical theatre, and sports. It seems though that the musical theatre experience, or

"event" capitalises on this "shared experience". Millie Taylor in her book *Musical Theatre, Realism and Entertainment* adds:

> There are two other features of musical theatre performance that result from live attendance. They are the emotional contagion of sharing the time and place of performance with the performers and with other audience members, and the physiological response to the vibrations and dynamic range of musical and vocal performance. Live performance stimulates the experience of presence […] intimacy with the performers and witnessing the event are important to audiences in the perception of a shared unique experience. […] Their responses activate emotional and social responses that can lead to emotional contagion within the audience and in a process of circularity can feed back into the performance. (Taylor & Marvin, 2012, p. 81)

Again, "emotional contagion" is highlighted as a key feature in the audience of a musical theatre performance. This inclusion also validates the sense of "live performance" (see p. 25) that is important to my work and this thesis and upholds my assertion that an audience desires to have a "unique" experience (see p. 8). The idea of "circularity" has potency for me, what I would call an interdependency or "communion". It is fair to say, though that this phenomenon occurs as easily in non-musical theatre; Taylor here enlightens on how music specifically, arouse an audience:

> Then the musical accompaniment adds another layer of text, emotion and dynamic shaping. The musical language is particularly adept at creating physiological responses such as excitement – for example at key changes or as tempo increases, or trance-like states as a result of extended repetition. Because of the combination of musical and vocal manipulations and mirroring alongside the empathetic stimulation of the plot, musical theatre has the potential to create the experience of voluptuous and excessive sensations for the audience. (Taylor & Marvin, 2012, p. 81)

Although she does not state this, I suspect Taylor is commenting on the effects of "live" music not pre-recorded. This is significant to my study as the musical component of the original production of *Mary Bryant* was not live. I focus on this in more detail within the next chapter.

To conclude this section on audiences of musical theatre, I return again to the findings of Jean Louise Balch. It is particularly insightful to me, as the crux of my study is audience engagement. Echoing Meyerhold, Balch proposes five "modes" of communication in what she calls the "actor-spectator" relationship:

> This study found that the most important element in performance for generating audience interest is the dynamic of the actor in relationship to the spectator. This was used as a point of departure to discuss the various modes of the actor-spectator relationship within cognitive approaches to spectating, phenomenology theories of theatre, the theatrical event approach, and the semiotic approach.
>
> Rather than finding these modes of communication operating serially in performance, it was noted how a dynamic oscillation between modes during performance increases the spectator's interest. In musical theatre many of these modes overlap in the moment of performance which creates a rich, memorable and multi-layered relationship between actor and spectator. (Balch & Coleman, 2012, p. 86)

I will not precisely diagnose these "modes" here but they relate to what I call "modes of transaction" which I do detail in the next chapter. What is of most interest is her assertion that a "dynamic oscillation" between modes increases the "spectator's interest". As you will read in Chapter 3, this was a key ingredient that helped to shape the newly realized production of *Mary Bryant*.

Figure 3.

Non-Musical and Musical Theatre Compared

It may be useful for me to define the types of non-musical and musical works I have compared in this study. There is of course no exact formula for either and each may easily contain elements that does the other. A play may contain music or exacting choreography or automated scenery design. A musical may be performed in an intimate space with close proximity to the audience and a minimalist design. However, the models I am interested in examining are those that typically, within non-musical theatre, offer the actor the greatest possibility of interaction with an audience thereby allowing the greatest potential for co-creation, and those in musical theatre that offer the actor the least possibility of interaction with an audience thereby allowing the least potential for co-creation. Jessica Sternfield in her book *The Megamusical* offers a definition of the type and scale of musicals to which I refer:

> "Megamusical" describes a kind of musical theater that rose to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s and that remains a dominant force on Broadway today. I am not the first to use the term; it began to appear in the *New York Times* during the 1980s. The label was picked up, sometimes derisively, by various critics and reporters and has found its way into theater histories and surveys. It has synonyms—"spectacle show," "blockbuster musical," even "extravaganza"— but "megamusical" is the most pervasive and describes the repertoire effectively. (Sternfeld, 2006, p. 1)

Her book concentrates primarily on the British exports to Broadway of a certain period, including *Cats, Les Misérables, Starlight Express, The Phantom of the Opera, Miss Saigon*, and *Chess*. She seems to focus on the birth of the "megamusical". However, I would suggest that Broadway's response in more contemporary times, through the Disney Corporation, with shows including *The Lion King, Beauty and the Beast, Mary Poppins,* and *Aladdin*, could easily be added to this list. Certainly, it is these large-scale behemoths that I will often refer to.

Elizabeth L. Wollman in her paper *The Economic Development of the "New" Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway,* quotes Broadway creative director Jack Viertel:

> The Lion King was the first shot out of the barrel. Once that worked, you knew it was a matter of time before [Cablevision] and Universal and Hallmark and all these people said, "Wait a minute, this is a good thing, I want to be part of it." And once those companies that are used to spending 40 and 50 million dollars to create a product come to Broadway and see Broadway... as a sort of a beginning of a profit center for a huge product, rather than the play being the play, then that's it, it's gonna change the whole landscape. (Wollman, 2002, p. 456)

For the purposes of comparison, I propose the following six elements typical in the productions of both non-musical and musical events that share commonalities or differences –

THE VENUE

Non-Musical Theatre - Can vary immensely but a sense of intimacy, a sense of immediacy between actor and audience is often desirable and powerful. Some of Australia's most popular theatres are such – Sydney's Griffin, Ensemble, Belvoir St, and although our state theatre companies may have large venues, most have or use more intimate studios.

Musical Theatre – For my purposes I am considering large-scale, commercial musicals which are expensive to mount and considerable focus is spent on gaining returns through "bums on seats". By commercial, I am referring to those producers who are unfunded by any government sources, and usually without a subscriber base. Wollman comments:

> At least from a financial perspective, then, it is corporations that are perhaps most suited to thrive in such a costly setting. For amounts of money that are typically too steep for independent producers, corporations can not only afford to renovate theaters, but can also fill those theaters with their own properties. The musical versions of *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*, for example, each reportedly cost Disney approximately $15 million; while such a sum is reason able for a corporation accustomed to gambling four or five times as much on a television the two most

> expensive musicals in Broadway history upon opening in 1994 and 1997, respectively. (Wollman, 2002, pp. 448-449)

Interestingly, Australian venues are generally even bigger than those used for the same productions on Broadway or the West End. The most extreme example of venue and for my taste, the least desirable, is that which houses the "Arena Spectacular", *(Grease, The Boy From OZ* et al*)*. Here is some editorial from a Brisbane newspaper in 2006 -

> Patrons wanting the best seat in the house at *The Boy From Oz: The Arena Spectacular* will have to dig deep -- the producers are asking $249 for A Reserve tickets, $149 for B Reserve and $99 for C Reserve. For some, that could be a small price to pay to see Jackman wielding maracas as he goes to Rio. (McLean, 2006, p. 15) *The Courier Mail*

THE DESIGN

Non-Musical Theatre - Again, some of our most heralded venues require minimalist set designs, due to the size of the playing space but also for budgetary limitations. Many of these intimate theatre companies prefer to allow the actor to take stage without the trappings of spectacle. Again, there are exceptions – although less common now than twenty years ago, some of the larger state theatre companies enjoy impressive set and costume designs, which I believe can patronise their subscriber audiences, and can devalue the importance and power of the actor.

Musical Theatre – Although they can range in scale, it is almost a prerequisite that a commercial musical has impressive sets and costumes. Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*, like many of the large-scale musicals, uses a numbered grid system that each performer must rigidly adhere to. This system is often used for the accurate spacing of dancers in relation to one another but in the case of *Phantom*, it is as much for safety thanks to the elaborate design of stage machinery elements. The book *Broadway Swings: covering the ensemble in musical theatre* explains:

> Stage Numbers are commonly used in theatrical productions and are just that – numbers placed on the front edge of the stage. Usually "0" marks the center of the stage and the numbers go up from there, both right and left of center. Actors use these numbers to help them go to the same place each time they do a scene or dance number. And the Stage Numbers can be highly effective in high traffic shows or shows with lots of automated set changes as the use of them keeps the performers consistent and safe from danger of moving people or set pieces. (Eyer & Smith, 2015, p. 24)

Shows like *Phantom* that require a huge amount of automation, offer the actor very little room for any sense of improvisation (as Stanislavsky has suggested), in fact, such would be dangerous. Automation by its very name, disallows much "breath" in terms of timing or deviation from any performance. In *Phantom* it is imperative that performers keep to their "grid" number positions, or risk falling through a trapdoor, or being impaled by a candelabra.

THE BLOCKING/CHOREOGRAPHY

Non-Musical Theatre - Although plays can be highly choreographic, the norm generally requires an approximate patterning of moves that may allow for improvisation, commonly known as "blocking". Indeed, some works require absolute improvisation in movement, due to the uncertainty of audience response. Immersive Theatre such as Punch Drunk's *Sleep No More* spring to mind. A review from D. J. Hopkins:

> The audience is taken in small groups into the multistory performance space and released to wander what initially seems like a warren of spooky installation art… While many audience members spent time exploring such details, I knew that there were performers to be found elsewhere in the sprawling complex.
> (Hopkins, 2012, pp. 269-271)

Although this work is not completely improvised, (in fact, performers repeat a set of routines) but as each new audience can differ in quantity and their positioning, an improvisatory

flexibility in the blocking is required. Other works may require absolute precision, but it is the comparatively liberated performance that I am interested in here.

Musical Theatre – Although most musicals contain some blocking that works in a similar nature to plays, almost all musicals have choreographic elements, which are often a strictly regimented series of dance steps and moves. The exactness of positioning and timing of such is vital, especially in large ensemble numbers. Broadway performer Gregory Garrison adds:

> I have performed in shows where there are stage numbers and depths and those without. I find the numbers to be very helpful but rely on other cast members' spacing to guide me as well. You can be on your "mark" and dancing on top of someone else, which is not good for the performers as well as the audience members.
> (Eyer & Smith, 2015, p. 25)

Again, there are exceptions even within the most rigid of musicals, when duets and solos are performed, where the threat of "traffic accidents" is less of a concern.

THE TEXT

Non-Musical Theatre – In plays written within the last ninety years, although the text is generally unchangeable according to the playwright's wishes - the delivery, the communication of the text, is in the hands of the actor. Keenly rehearsed of course, to set parameters of intention but in most cases, offering the actor some flexibility. They have control over how it is released or withheld, over its clarity or confusion. They have almost total control over either sound or silence, guided, in each moment, only by the audience's response of the same. There are playwrights and directors who have been known to be pedantic over timing. Pinter and Mamet come to mind; Beckett is said to have used a stopwatch when he directed. Again, I suggest these demands are *inherent* in musical theatre.

Mark Taylor-Batty in his book, *The Theatre of Harold Pinter* makes this delightful comment about working on a Pinter text -

> A director's job is often therefore to encourage actors in Pinter to think a little quicker than might feel safe, so that the lines follow swiftly one upon the other, just as our own thoughts do when we're under pressure. Then the sudden stillness of a pause or a silence can truly do its work, as the tension between people re-aligns itself in the light of what has just been said or done. Technically for this swiftness of thought to be sustainable and become not simply speed for its own sake (which never helps), an actor requires a nimble mind and lungs like bellows to provide bellyfuls of air in support of every new thought and utterance. (Taylor-Batty, 2014, p. 202)

Musical Theatre – Musicals may have "book" scenes that share the same dynamics as those within a play but in all musicals, there are times when there is not plain text, when it is impossible to detect an audience's sounded response. Also, spoken text is often underscored by music, that may allow some "air of freedom" but often has to serve a dictated time to suit the cueing of other elements. Then, of course, there is the "through-sung" musical where silence may not occur for almost an hour as in *Les Misérables*. Jessica Sternfield again:

> Just as the plot of a megamusical is big, so too the music: a megamusical has little or no spoken dialogue, but is typically sung throughout, in a combination of set songs, linking and transitional material, and recitative-like material. Characters do stop and sing numbers as in the musical comedy tradition, but they also sing virtually everything else, including their dialogue with each other, and the orchestra plays constantly. (Sternfeld, 2006, p. 2)

How can the actor in these musicals maintain a sensitive connection with their audience if they can neither see nor hear them?

<u>THE MUSIC</u>

Non-Musical Theatre - Of course, many plays make use of music, and sound effects but these aural components generally affect the actor differently to those in a sung context.

Musical Theatre – This is at the crux of my research as music within a musical, its own structure of time and rhythm, tends to dictate the same to all the associated elements. Of course, music can have freedom or be improvised but I am looking at that which "beats the drum" for all the before mentioned elements. As discussed in other sections, the presence of the conductor can be a considerable interference between the actor and the audience, in terms of the actor's "organic" work. Worse yet in this vital breathing relationship between performer and audience, is the use of audio technology, not that which amplifies necessarily, but that which helps to replicate from performance to performance; the use of "click tracks", "sequences", and/or recorded backings, for example. Accomplished theatrical sound designer Mic Pool in Collins & Nisbet's *Theatre and Performance Design*, speaks of the responsibility of the role:

> Musical theatre sound design is probably ten per cent engineering and 90 per cent diplomacy and relationship management. There are so many more people involved directly with the creation of the sound of a musical: huge numbers of producers, musical directors, musical supervisors, arrangers, composers, singers, dancers and musicians who will all have their own exacting requirements. A really good sound designer for musical theatre will have extraordinary skills. On a well-designed show the audience will go home happy because they have heard every word of the show and had excellent musical balance, the actors will be happy because they have had all the aural support they need to hear themselves and others, the producer will be happy because the system is economical and has been installed rapidly, and the sound staff will be happy because they are part of that success and have had a reasonable workload in achieving the result. (Collins & Nisbet, 2010, p. 249)

<u>MERCHANDISING</u>

Non-Musical Theatre – One more important area that points out the commerciality of musical theatre. It would be untrue to suggest that plays do not ever exploit potential associated opportunities for capital reward. Certainly, the phenomenon of the two plays packaged

together, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, attack the “punters purse-strings’” from every angle.

Musical Theatre – Large-scale commercial musicals more often than not, are adaptations from books or films. Disney are experts at transforming their immensely popular cartoon films into musicals for Broadway or the West End. These shows are inevitably linked with other product purchase placements. Elizabeth Wollman to conclude -

> The tactic that many corporations are currently using to advertise and market new theatrical productions is commonly referred to as "business synergy," through which media companies work to generate stockholder value. With synergy, a company makes money both by selling a particular product and by integrating it into a cyclical web of related products. Thus, a company like Disney can use one of its properties, for example the animated film *Beauty and the Beast*, to sell any number of others: *Beauty and the Beast* on video, *Beauty and the Beast*-related rides at Disneyland, *Beauty and the Beast* merchandise at Disney stores, and, now, the musical version of *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway and on international tour. (Wollman, 2002, p. 449)

My concern, if stating the obvious, is that artistic intention is compromised due to a financial focus from producers and investors. More evidence for this “pollution of ideals” will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Summary

The following research questions were introduced -

1. In what ways can a production of a musical be rehearsed and performed to maximise the potential for actor – audience co-creation?

2. How does the musical theatre performer negotiate the factors that can limit the actor – audience relationship?

3. How can one best train the musical theatre student to have a better understanding of the actor – audience relationship and the challenges inherent in this form?

This chapter, in reviewing a broad range of literary perspectives, offers useful definitions of principles and concepts that will be examined ahead, as well as helping to define the scope of the research project overall. Understandably, the study so far of the theoretical, poses more questions than answers but the exploration has already illuminated a clear pathway to the next step of this research journey.

The 'Live' Debate

- In terms of definitions, this research concerns itself with outcomes that are as "live" as possible, or as I have suggested – "alive".
- The new production of *Mary Bryant* will embrace the ephemerality of live performance in theatre.
- Ironically, an audio/visual recording of a performance is included as part of this work.

From the Acting Teachers

- Stanislavkian actors, although rehearsed, remain improvisatory during performance.
- A unique communion between the performers and each new audience is desirable.
- Performers need to be aware of audience's responses and respond accordingly.

The Audience

- Perception Theory examines how an audience receives during a performance; Reception Theory examines how that performance has been interpreted after the event.
- Contagion effect is one of many attractive qualities of live performance.
- Production and Design elements can hinder the performer's ability to read the audience.
- Musical Theatre audiences are co-creators in a double sense – with the creative team during previews and "out of town tryouts", with the performers during performances.
- Emotional contagion is a key feature of musical theatre performances.
- Music itself creates physiological responses in audiences.

Non-Musical and Musical Theatre Compared

Although there are exceptions to the rule when comparing non-musical works (plays), and musical works (musicals), there are typicalities with relation to both.

- Plays can more easily embrace minimalism in design; musicals often celebrate spectacle.
- In plays, movement and blocking can remain improvisatory; in musicals choreography tend to require exactitude.
- In plays, the actors usually have complete control of timing; in musicals, performers must negotiate with conductors, design elements, and the music itself.

These assumptions underpin the research discussed in what follows.

Chapter 2 - The Interviews

The cornerstone of this research is a reimagined production of David King and Nick Enright's musical, *Mary Bryant*. I directed the professional world premiere, at Sydney's Ensemble Theatre in 1998, over twenty years ago. Although the production had many fine qualities, was well received by audiences, and reviewers were not uncomplimentary, there was criticism of the music. Doug Anderson, for the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote, "The fatal flaw is the music." He suggests that the composition itself was flawed but my belief is that it was actually the inappropriate delivery of the musical accompaniment that was to blame. It was "sequenced" - effectively a recording using artificial instrument sounds on a keyboard. It was a lush, epic, grand orchestration delivered in an intimate theatre, known for producing work of modesty and minimalism. A completely synthesized treatment played in a theatre acclaimed for subtle and highly naturalistic performance.

This research holds a very personal mission for me and has provided me with an auto-ethnographic opportunity (see p. 17). As its director I feel a sense of guilt; I was ultimately responsible for the inadequacies of the production. I remember thinking that the recorded music was a wrong choice, I wanted to suggest a live solution but the truth is that I was intimidated by Nick and David, both tremendously successful in their fields. I was still a relatively young, and evidently naïve director. With the benefit of hindsight, and another twenty years' worth of directing under my belt, I realize that I did them a disservice by not being more forthright. I was the expert, representing the venue, I knew the tastes and sensibilities of the audience and the reviewers. When entering this research project, it would be fair to say with *Mary Bryant*, I had "unfinished business".

This chapter will give a context to the original production, examining facets of it that were successes or failures. This work is based on interviews with three key figures from the 1998 production. Sandra Bates AM was the Artistic Director of the Ensemble Theatre for over thirty years, and invited David and Nick to have a fully realized professional production of *Mary*

Bryant. Jason Langley, who is now a highly acclaimed theatre director, played the role of Jamie in the original production. Lastly, David King, the composer, who had a very successful career as a musical director and has been Head of the Music Theatre Department at WAAPA, for the last twenty years.

Figure 4.

The Ensemble Theatre

Hayes Gordon AM OBE was born in Boston Massachusetts in 1920. Although he studied pharmacy, he found his way as an actor, moved to New York, and studied there at a time when Stanislavsky's teachings were being introduced to the Americans. He worked on Broadway in musicals, most notably in the original production of *Oklahoma!* but also in productions of *Showboat*, and *Brigadoon*. Escaping McCarthyism, he came to Australia in 1952 to play the lead in the J. C. Williamson production of *Kiss Me Kate*, and soon called Australia home. He began teaching in this country during that production; he would hold classes between matinee and evening performances, onstage, for any of the company who were interested to learn. Hayes was a key figure in bringing Stanislavsky's "Method" to Australia, and interestingly, to musical theatre performers. In the mid-fifties he formed the Ensemble Acting Studios, which ran until 2009, and toward the end of his life he published *Acting and Performing* which outlined his Stanislavsky-influenced acting methods.

> The most influential and far-reaching private studio training, however, was offered by The Ensemble Theatre Studios founded by the American-born Hayes Gordon. He was a professional actor who had been taught by a student of Richard Boleslavsky, who had worked with Stanislavski, and Gordon subsequently attended regular workshops with Sanford Meisner in New York and briefly with Lee Strasberg.
> (Tait & Beddie, 2019, pp. 159-175)

Hayes had a stellar career as a musical theatre performer, including playing Tevye in the Australian premiere of *Fiddler on the Roof,* a role he played for many seasons and remounts. Amongst others, he also played Daddy Warbucks in the original Australian production of *Annie*. However, it could be argued that it was his roles of teacher and director, that would be his greatest contributions to Australian theatre. In 1958, he formed the Ensemble Theatre, which has lived in its current location, a transformed boatshed in Careening Cove, Sydney Harbour, since 1960. It is Australia's longest running professional theatre.

> The Ensemble Theatre became well known for its alternating repertoire of drama which championed social justice, and commercially successful productions that ensured the theatre's financial survival. The Ensemble Studios taught generations of performers who were often attracted to Gordon's left-leaning political perspectives, many of whom became teachers of actors. Gordon was widely known as an important teacher who emphasized Stanislavskian techniques and psychological interpretations of the character in combination with the actor's experience. (Tait & Beddie, 2019, pp. 159-175)

On a personal note, as a graduate of the Ensemble Acting Studios, I had the privilege of being taught by Hayes, and his close colleague Zika Nester OAM, for the three years of the course. For the Ensemble Theatre, I have seen countless productions, I have acted in several plays, and I was the Associate Director for five years, directing over twenty productions. Although I also studied at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), I feel the bulk of my understanding in theatre, serving me as an actor, director, and teacher, has been from Hayes Gordon, and from my experience studying, acting, and directing on the Ensemble Theatre stage. In fact, my relationship with the Ensemble Theatre began in early high school. My father, who although now nearly 92 years old is still an actor, performed in many productions there. I would attend regularly, and one production, I remember, directed by Hayes had a profound effect on me. It was *The Elephant Man* by Bernard Pomerance (1980), and I saw it probably ten times.

It is only whilst undertaking research for this project, that I have come to realise the common path that both Hayes and I have trodden – exploring the relationship between intimate, naturalistic theatre and almost the inverse, musical theatre. Were he alive today, I feel sure he would have approved of this research, and offered much illumination.

The Ensemble Theatre is an intimate space, of just six tiered seating rows, a capacity of 216 (see figure 4, p. 56). It has a 'pocket handkerchief' stage. It was originally built "in the round" (I witnessed *The Elephant Man* from all four sides), before being converted in the early 1980s into its current "thrust configuration". Although the thrust can allow for surprisingly breathtaking sets and lighting, the original in-the-round layout, demanded a minimalist design. It is not entirely true to say that this was "poor man's theatre" but the focus from both philosophical

and practical views, was always on the actor's performance, rather than design spectacle. The intimacy of the space, the very immediate relationship to the audience is of course not unique; in fact, there are smaller professional theatres across Australia. One could mention The Stables Theatre, or Downstairs Belvoir, also in Sydney, La Mama in Melbourne, the original La Boite in Brisbane, The Blue Room in Perth. I believe, however, that much of the success of the enduring Ensemble and a major contributing factor to attracting the theatre's large subscriber base, is the relationship between audience and performers. Both share the same space; there is almost no division between the auditorium and the stage.

Sandra Bates, who was at the helm of the theatre for over thirty years, offers her thoughts on the theatre's success: "I think it's helped enormously by the shape and the size, the intimacy of the space. It's because people can't escape. They are right there, with the actors, going on a journey."

Jason Langley, who has considerable experience performing in many sized venues, and scales of production: "I love it. I love intimate spaces. At the Ensemble, there is such an immediacy of response, reaction, and play between the actor and the audience."

David King, a lifetime of experience working as a conductor on large-scale commercial musicals, is more qualifying about the Ensemble: "I really like it very much for straight theatre." David here refers to theatre that is non-musical, aka "straight theatre".

From this point onward I will include sections of transcript from the separate interviews of these three in January of 2018. These will appear in text boxes.

FOURTH WALL

Most of the plays presented at the Ensemble use a convention which we call, the "fourth wall". This is a theatrical convention that separates the actors and the audience. The audience can see and hear the characters, but it is assumed that the characters cannot see or hear the audience. The audience are onlookers, witnesses to the unfolding events. Here is a somewhat amusing reflection from an essay on theatre conventions:

> Denis Diderot, the eighteenth-century French philosopher who also took a special interest in theatre, gave the following instruction to stage actors: 'Don't think about the spectator anymore, act as if he doesn't even exist. Imagine there is a big wall at the edge of the stage separating you from the parterre. Act as if the curtain was never raised'. In all the theatre theory that was to follow, this imaginary wall was known as the 'fourth wall'. (Tindemans, 2012, p. 1)

This does not mean, however, that the actors cannot see or hear the audience. The actors are still listening, observing the audience but focus on the environmental context of the play. In this fourth wall mode, the actor's senses are working "peripherally" or indirectly to detect audience responses.

When we did *Double Act*, Barry Crayton's play with he and Noelene Brown. Noelene's lit in this circle of light, and she's doing this crossword. She gets to this clue, and she says it again… and the guy, he's sitting right next to her, he could have touched her, and he gave her the answer. It was hard not to - and he wasn't being smart-arse, this is what I love, they are not being smart-arse, they are so involved but they can't help but join in. – Sandra

Sandra's anecdote illustrates a breaking of the fourth wall but we usually refer this term to the actor's or character's breaking of the fourth wall, when they may turn to directly address the audience. At the Ensemble though, it is quite common for the audience to audibly comment on the action, thereby breaking the fourth wall. This is often a useful response but not in all cases.

We certainly found this on *Mothers and Sons*, I would never have thought it was a terribly controversial play but it clearly was for some of the audience. I remember one audience was incredibly hostile, you were so aware of it. The moment the audience realised that my character was gay and that I had a six-Year old son. All of a sudden you could hear "DISGUSTING!" from the audience.

At one point I just gave Tim [Draxl] a peck on the cheek, it was the only kiss in the show, and you could hear "NOT IN FRONT OF THE CHILD!". – Jason

I have performed on the Ensemble stage many times, so I am aware of how easy it is to read an audience there. They are so close, one can literally hear, see, almost feel them breathe. Even without the audience breaking the fourth wall, one is still aware of the dynamic within the room, though primarily in an aural way. One is aware of laughter, of course, but also stillness or restlessness, coughing (particularly during Winter), groaning, gasping, and sighing. All these oral signals feed the actor with information, on how effectively they are communicating to that audience in that particular performance. I noted Hayes Gordon's reference to this phenomenon in the previous section From The Acting Teachers (see p. 27). Meyerhold also had a notation of audience responses, clarifying how one reads an audience (see p. 36)

At the Ensemble, the actor and the audience alike are very aware of other distractions, such as mobile phones, hearing aids (especially at matinees), if there are latecomers to a performance, as there always are, only matched by the poor person who has a weak bladder and cannot wait until Interval to relieve themselves. A good actor, again, will adjust his performance in varying ways to cope with these distractions.

> One particular audience was so hostile, and in the end as actors, we took on the challenge. I guess that's what happens in a space when you can feel the audience that keenly, they affect you, they affect the character, they affect the trajectory of the piece that day. They affect the transactions between the actors, as well as the transaction between actors and audience. – Jason

Jason's example clearly illustrates the symbiotic creation that can occur in any performance of a play. By "took on the challenge", Jason refers to a conscious effort made by the actors to swing the audience to having a more openminded, less biased opinion. The transaction existed from actor to audience, from audience to actor, and from actor to actor. In good theatre, good acting, there is always this shifting dynamic.

In musical theatre, however, there is rarely a true separation as envisaged with the fourth wall. Certainly, there may be "book" scenes of a musical that an audience appear to witness only, what we would call a "fly on the wall" experience, but conventionally songs are addressed to audiences in a different transactional mode (see p. 62). It is this convention in part that elicits

applause at the end of a musical number. Famed Broadway director/choreographer, Michael Bennett, who created icons of musical theatre such as *A Chorus Line* and *Dreamgirls* is quoted in a *New York Times* interview. He voices concern about attempts to incorporate the traits of the fourth wall into musicals:

> In the old-fashioned musical, they finish a number with their arms raised in the air, they stare at the audience, the audience applauds. The audience is acknowledged as being at a musical, whereas one of the dangers of the modern musical is that the audience is somewhat distanced, not acknowledged, more like a voyeur.
> (Shewey, 1983, p. 1) *The New York Times*

DIRECT ADDRESS

By far, the most memorable onstage experience for me at the Ensemble, was a play in which I was performing called *Waiting Rooms* by Michael Costello (see figure 5, p. 67). The play consisted of three forty-minute monologues by three different actors. Pamela Payne clarifies in her review from Sydney's *Sun-Herald* newspaper:

> These three tell their stories within a dramatic monologue convention: realistic establishment of character, acknowledgement of the audience. And, as directed by Sandra Bates, these are three utterly convincing performances.
> (Payne, 1994) *The Sun-Herald*

Although direct audience address holds its challenges for the actor, I consider it the easiest mode for the reading of an audience, simply because you are directly addressing them. One can see as well as hear responses from almost every one of the 220 audience members at the Ensemble Theatre. I remember adjusting my performance according to the particular audience responses; there was a palpable sense of dialogue between us. Even though I was playing a mentally challenged character who had an endearing lack of awareness and a lack of personal self-consciousness, the actor inside of him was very aware and very self-conscious, in an appropriate way.

> And the last character to occupy the stage is Billy, eager, innocent, trusting – the gem of this production, Taylor plays Billy with precision, respect and great warmth. (Payne, 1994) *The Sun Herald*

Within the convention of direct address, the audience plays a role. It is not audience participation as such, but they are asked to respond, to play a function, to have a hand in potential outcomes. Although Janet Hill prefers the term "open address" in her book *Stages and Playgoers*, she notes the reciprocity within this mode of transaction:

> For the moment, let me just say that "direct address" is too rigid a term for the kind of inclusive address I have in mind. It suggests a one-way dynamic, stage to audience only; I consider it vital that the audience return the stage's gaze, that they be partners in the address. (Hill, 2001, p. 5)

It is widely accepted that direct address was common in Medieval, and Elizabethan theatre. We understand that audience engagement was vital, especially with so much potential distraction, and I believe that direct address can maximize this engagement. Hill's book examines many of Shakespeare's great soliloquies where, as the name suggests, the character is alone onstage. In these circumstances, the audience's role can be that of a confidante, often a reflection of the individual, who is asking to tease out a dilemma. Hamlet seeks our counsel in one of Shakespeare's most famous speeches. *Waiting Rooms*, as mentioned above, was a trilogy of soliloquies requiring direct address.

In musicals, as Michael Bennett attests, direct address is more commonly used as a mode of performer to audience transaction than not. As in Shakespeare's plays, the soliloquy is often employed to engage audiences, enlisting them to help solve a riddle. When Judas sings "Heaven on Their Minds" at the beginning of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, he directly addresses the audience, as if they were supporters of Jesus, attempting to warn them about the dangers ahead. Again, it is as if the audience had a function in the performance. So too, when Tevye muses on being wealthy, singing "If I Were a Rich Man" in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Here, audiences are invited to side with the protagonist, supporting his quest for riches, identifying with him, propelling us, with him, into the journey of the story. At the end of the journey, as he learns, so

do we - that the wealth he really values is the love of his family, and in preserving their unity. In musical theatre, it is an accepted convention to call a number such as "If I Were a Rich Man", the "I Want Song". The protagonist proposes a desire that is explored during the piece, and as in Tevye's case, they ultimately come to reevaluate.

David King, though, has a concern with musical theatre at the Ensemble.

> I think there's something disorientating for an audience having people singing at them, or in front of them, when they're that close. I think it's a bit uncomfortable. Once you get into musical territory where it's not quite naturalistic and there is a certain amount of direct address to the audience with soliloquies and so on, I think in a smaller venue it can be a bit uncomfortable. Unless it's set up in a kind of cabaret situation, where you know exactly what you're in for. - David

He suggests that in the case of *Mary Bryant*, the size of the venue was in part responsible for the production's failing. However, I had directed two other musicals, very successfully, at the Ensemble – *An Unfinished Song* by James Mellon, and *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill* by Lanie Robertson (see figure 5, p. 67). It is worth noting that both shows employed live musicians; a "backing track" was not employed as in the case of *Mary Bryant*. Also, every year we successfully stage musicals within WAAPA's Enright Studio, which is no bigger than the Ensemble, and the actor to audience dynamic is just as intimate. Of course, the Enright Studio is where *Mary Bryant* was originally created and performed.

At the time I conducted these interviews, I had no idea that the use of direct address through "narration", would become a key concept in the new production of *Mary Bryant.* This will be detailed in Chapter 3, a debrief on the creation of the show.

THE AUDIENCE

Although the discussion so far has been examining communication between actor and audience, there is another important transaction that occurs at the Ensemble. That of audience to audience. In this small venue, audience members are very aware of each other, due partly to the close proximity of one audience member to another but due also to the thrust stage, which

enables two sides of the audience to sit directly facing each other. The effect of this mini amphitheatre, as occurred in ancient Greece, encourages a forum of discussion, or debate amongst the witnesses. At the Ensemble, it can be in fact, more like a sporting event than conventional theatre, as one might experience in a theater with a proscenium arch.

> Another time was during *The Petition* [by Brian Clark and starring] Frank Wilson and Betty Lucas. They'd been married for 50 yrs. or something, he was Sir Edmund Milne, a very Right-wing general in the British Army. With this particular play, there was a guy in the front row, and Frank had to give this long speech, at the beginning of the 2nd Act, about why we hadn't had a 3rd World War because both sides had nuclear weapons. In fact, the playwright wrote a very good, balanced speech and Frank got to the end of it. By this time, the audience all know that Betty has signed this petition in the *[London Times]* to ban nuclear weapons. He can't believe that his wife has done this to him. Well, the audience find out, with him, that she's got cancer, she's only got a few months to live, and she wants to do something that is actually her beliefs, when she's done everything he's wanted, for the last 50 yrs. So, the whole audience, well 95 % of the audience, no matter what their political leaning, their hearts are with Betty.
>
> Anyway, it got to the end of this long speech, and there's this guy in the front row, who's obviously far right, and it wouldn't matter what the audience thought. And this is the thing about an audience that are all together, if they're all working together, as they do, these positive vibes come beaming towards Betty, and poor old Frank is left as a shocking outsider. It was actually quite cruel because the audience do this, they absolutely do this, they can't help themselves, and it builds. But this guy was so angry it got to the end of this speech, and again, he wasn't being smart-arsed, he was just so incensed with the audience, and he leapt to his feet, he went out on the stage, which wasn't very far, he was in the front row, and he leant over Betty and he shook his finger and said "He's right, you know!" He hadn't even realised he'd done it, he'd just done it. He went back and the audience are tittering rather nervously and he sat down, and they're still kind of laughing… and it was wonderful, he jumped to his feet and he said "You know something? You people are so onside with her, you're not listening to him, you're not giving him a chance. He could be reading the telephone book "– I don't know that he said that! "Just because she's got cancer and she's dying!" You know the audience, it changed a little, I think they gave Frank a better chance. - Sandra

This is an extreme example of audience-to-audience response and not typical at the Ensemble. However, as you can see, and hear, the audience around you, there is palpable effect on one as an audience member, either siding with or against the popular majority. As mentioned in the previous section on audience response, this is known as the "contagion effect" (see p. 34).

Again, laughter is the most infectious of the responses but tears, and weeping can also be contagious.

At the Ensemble, I directed a play by John Misto called *The Shoehorn Sonata*, about a reunion of two women who had been prisoners of the Japanese during the Second World War (see figure 5, p. 67). The production featured slide images of the real nurses, and the conditions within the prison camp. In every performance people were moved to tears by the content of the production, and it would be fair to say, that others were moved to tears by those who were moved to tears. There was no more moving event, of course, than the opening night when actual surviving nurses were present in the audience. The play went on to win many awards.

> The response on opening night was literally stunning, with many war-age women – but others, too – affected by the high emotional impact of the experience.
> (Waites, 1995) *The Sydney Morning Herald*

> The result is an intensely moving evening of theatre, heightened on first night by the presence of two real life survivors. (Kablean, 1995) *The Sunday Telegraph*

So, in examination of *Mary Bryant's* original commercial venue, the Ensemble Theatre, it is clear that its regular audience had certain expectations when attending a performance. They were used to relatively naturalistic acting, modest production values but most importantly, whether they know it or not, they are used to participating in an intimate communion that is unique to that particular audience, and that particular performance. *Mary Bryant* is an epic tale, and it seems this 1998 production was misguided, stylistically, attempting to impress with scale instead of telling the story with clarity, and subtlety. Elements such as an overblown set design, highly stylized choreography, and of course, a grandly instrumentalized and prerecorded soundtrack, appear to have "robbed" the patrons of the modest and organic event, to which they were accustomed. It was perhaps, not a bad production but the "wrong production in the wrong place".

Figure 5.

Timing

Many years ago, I directed *Two* by Jim Cartwright, at the Ensemble Theatre (see figure 5, p. 67). It is a terrific play, in one continuous act, set in a British pub, though all props are mimed. Just two actors play a variety of characters who attend the pub, and also the Landlord and Landlady who appear throughout the play. Audiences are aware of a tension that exists between them, and in the final dramatic scene, prompted by the appearance of a young boy, the Landlady confronts the Landlord. We learn that they had a son who died in a car-crash - the Landlady was driving. This was seven years ago, and the couple have lived in a stony and guilt-ridden silence ever since. The scene is a catharsis and in the very last moment of the play, as they are closing down the pub for the night, the Landlord switches off the lights. It is literally blackness. There is a pause, a long pause. Then in the darkness we hear from the Landlord, "I love you". On some nights there is another pause, then we hear from the Landlady, "I love you, too". However, on some nights there is not a pause, the Landlady responds immediately.

> *They look at each other. It seems they're going to embrace. But he turns and takes a glass, and begins washing it.*
>
> Landlord In the morning, you bring his picture down and put it up there, will you?
>
> *She nods.*
> *They both start to clean up and put away a while, in silence.*
>
> Landlady I'll cash up tomorrow.
>
> Landlord Aye. I'll just switch off.
>
> *He turns lights out.*
> *In the dark.*
>
> Landlord I love you.
>
> Landlady I love you too.
>
> (Cartwright, 1991, p. 49)

These two pauses, or at least, intervals of time, are wholly decided upon by the actors. How do they know how short or long to take? Why does it differ each night? It is their judgement, based on their reading of the "temperature" of the room at that moment, and throughout the journey of the play for that particular performance. As a director, I can be fastidious about timing, particularly in a comedy but here, this had to be an absolutely organic response, called by the actors. Of course, we learnt about timing from the previews, and discussed possible outcomes but eventually, I had to allow the actors to have control. It was absolutely a show-by-show decision. Fortunately, I was working with two very fine, sensitive actors – Julie Hudspeth, and Danny Mitchell.

> The revelation in the final scenes is shocking and intense. Fine entertainment. (Kablean, 1998) *The Sunday Telegraph*
>
> Taylor refines his production so that nothing intervenes between actors and audience. Two is a generous, forthright theatre. (Payne, 1998) *The Sun-Herald*
>
> The final scenes involve a palpable few minutes as these two inarticulate people attempt to come to terms with their own tragedy and its effect on their lives. (Moffatt, 1998) *The Manly Daily*

Needless to say, audiences found this ending profoundly moving, and another timing related event would typically take place. The last line "I love you too" was uttered in the dark, then absolute silence. Even though the audience knew this was the end of the show, and in most plays applause would be drawn from them at that time, they sat "speechless", as it were, seemingly paralyzed by their emotions. Only the distinct sounds of sniffles and tears were audible. After a moment, the lights would come up, the actors would step forward, and the audience would burst into applause, with a kind of relief.

This anecdote is an example of the absolute control these actors had of timing, within this intimate theatre, the close proximity of the audience, and significantly, in this non-musical play. For me, the success of judging timing is through an actor's "sensitivity". Just now, I described these two professional actors whom I admire as being, "sensitive actors". Before returning to

discussion of *Mary Bryant*, some investigation of how such a keen sense of timing is achieved by actors may be worthwhile.

TRANSACTION

I asked Sandra and Jason, both of whom have been actors and directors, how they described an actor's sense of timing.

> Absolutely, I think you're right that it's organic, it's different every night. Therefore, I don't think it's something you should plot. If you've got good actors, if they're listening properly, if they're listening freshly, that's the big thing. - Sandra

> You know what the big thing for me is, when timing's off, it's generally because the actor is not actively listening and they weren't really looking. So, I'm constantly reminding actors to go out onstage and make sure you are really seeing what's around you, and make sure you are really listening. If you're not seeing and listening, you can't react, and you can't react in a timely manner. Generally timing is off when an actor has not been listening and looking. - Jason

In the craft of acting, we call this interaction between players "transaction" and it is at the heart of all our work. Simplistically, it is *talking* and *listening*, not far removed from what we do in everyday life but it is of course, with somebody else's words, and words that have been heard before, words that are repeated. Here the good actor will marry rehearsals with improvisational skills. It is "rehearsed spontaneity". At best the actor appears natural, truthful, real. Their responses to the other person are proportionate, and timely. They are in sync with their scene partner, they are playing "within the moment".

A poor actor or a non-actor will respond too soon, too late, or disproportionately. Their responses appear unrelated to, and unmotivated by, the other person. Much of this is brought about by self-consciousness. Instead of their awareness being fully on the other actor, they are more self-aware. They are monitoring their own responses, listening and watching themselves. They appear "wooden", unlife-like, stilted. My experience as a teacher tells me that transaction

can be very hard to teach. In auditioning for potential WAAPA students, the priority for me above all else is testing the auditionee's transactional abilities. I believe it is possible to teach almost anything within the field of acting within three years but if the student cannot instinctively transact, that can be a real challenge.

The good actor, however, is required to transact not only with their fellow players but also with the audience. Whereas the transaction with another actor is *rehearsed spontaneity*, the interaction with the audience is almost completely improvised. It is *real spontaneity*. The responses from the audience are unscripted, the actor must negotiate these responses on a show-by-show basis.

> It's absolutely being involved with the person you're working opposite, staying fresh to that, you have never heard these words before… but being aware that there is an audience there as well. It has to include the audience in your peripheral vision. Your concentration is on the other person, but your awareness is on the audience. - Sandra

> That's difficult again with musical theatre, particularly in this country, because there are some theatres where you feel no connection with the audience whatsoever. You can't even hear them, let alone see them. The audience might be applauding and cheering but as actors you feel like you're working in a vacuum. … you're not taking your cues from the audience, which is a shame. - Jason

In a recent production of *Strictly Ballroom – The Musical* that I directed at WAAPA, the cast and I were aware of a very vocal range of responses from each audience. Obviously, laughter was often present but more subtle responses such as the sympathetic sigh elicited in response to the character of Scott's Father, and the gasp of shock and disapproval when Scott's Mother slapped her son, and the "pin drop" moment in the finale when Scott and Fran are asked to "please leave the floor". I call these "identification responses" because they are moments when audience members are compelled to respond due to identifying with the situation (see figure 9, p. 110).

One cast member had a particularly challenging role, that of the Master of Ceremonies for the ballroom competitions who often has dual responsibilities as the MC of the show. His transaction was with an onstage audience as well as the actual audience. His task was to make regular scene setting announcements, part ringmaster, part wrestling commentator in nature. In rehearsals this performer, would seem to struggle with injecting the appropriate dynamic into each of his moments. I remember one particular note session, in the middle of the week of performances. I was noting one of his entries, concerned that it was not in tempo with the rest of the show. I discovered that he had not been listening to the rest of the show, he was not aware of how the particular performance was "travelling". I instructed him to be listening, either in the wings or via the Tannoy - backstage speakers used for monitoring. As the MC, it was vital that he have a thorough understanding and appreciation of audience's responses for each particular performance. From then on, the entire company became even more finely attuned to listening and diagnosing audiences' feedback.

> Having been a part of the seventies ballroom dancing world, the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) production of *Strictly Ballroom* is sheer entertainment delight that had me grinning from ear to ear.
> (Dalglish, 2019) *The Arts Review*

> Always popular, *Strictly Ballroom* appears to be the most quickly booked yet, and given the polish and pizazz of this production, the capacity crowds will not be disappointed.
> (Shaw, 2019) *Stage Whispers*

Another cast member underwent an interesting journey. He was playing the comic role of the faded and jaded has-been, Ken Railings. As far as I was concerned, the actor had been on a fine trajectory during rehearsals but when we began performing for audiences, I was aware of unexpected and what I would term "unbridled" laughs, every time he entered the stage. I use the term unbridled because they were not "solid" laughs from the majority of the audience, more like a wave of sniggers. The laughs also polluted the scripted storytelling, and dialogue was being missed, unheard. It took me a couple of performances to realise where, why, and how these laughs were happening. The actor had naively made a character-choice to stuff his

underwear with socks. When he turned profile, the bulge was disturbingly obvious. I suspect the more laughs he got, the more socks he employed. I requested that we no longer pursue this "cheap gag", and for the rest of the season the script and story were adhered to and, in my opinion, appropriately conveyed.

It is worth my adding here that both these actors learned a tremendous amount from their experiences and have my absolute admiration and respect.

> Laughter is particularly seductive to a young actor… who realises the power that they wield. - Jason

> I had an actor who had a gag in a play, and he did it and it was great. The next night it didn't get a laugh, and he said, "I don't understand. I tried to say it exactly the same way as I said it last night". I said, "There's the problem – what were you doing?" "I was trying to say it exactly the same as last night!" - Sandra

Sandra here speaks of the seductive nature of laughter but also reminds us of the danger of repetition in performing onstage (see p. 28). This actor was trying to replicate what had occurred in the previous performance - manufacturing a reaction, and disallowing a genuine and truthful, "in the moment" response (see p. 32).

PREVIEWS

Professionally, actors and directors do not go blindly into performances without any idea of what an audience's reaction might be. It is during previews that they will garner a "median" response. Sandra Bates used, wisely, to ensure a full week of previews at the Ensemble Theatre; for a commercial musical it can be up to a month. My experience as a director tells me not to overreact to any unexpected responses from the first preview.

I was once directing a play at the Belvoir St Theatre (Downstairs) in Eastern Sydney. It was, or so we thought, a hilarious comedy – it had been a huge success Off-Broadway. Ironically, it was the play *All in the Timing* by David Ives. The first audience were an invited group of subscribers from the Ensemble Theatre, which is located on the lower North Shore. We had an amazingly

"luke-warm" response from that audience, barely a titter. We were befuddled but I reassured the company that we were on the right track. The next night, the "punters" were made up of local, regular Belvoir Theatre goers. We "brought the house down", the season ended up breaking box office records for the venue, and we did a return season at the Sydney Theatre Company's Wharf Theatre. They say an audience is never wrong but in this case it was the *wrong audience* for the *right show*.

> During those first few previews, I don't look at the actors at all, I'm only watching the audience. Observing when, if they're looking at their watch, why they are? It is all about the audience, to have those previews is vital because if there's some discomfort overall in the audience, if there's a loss of interest – is it the play, is it the production, is it the actors, is it the lighting? - Sandra

> You're listening for moments that you thought were going to get a reaction, and hearing moments that you didn't expect to get a reaction. You're also looking for people looking at their watches, shuffling in their seats. - Jason

So, during this vital time, the preview audiences "speak"" to the director and actors, helping to bring clarity to the storytelling, to shape the phrasing, to define and solidify poignant or comic moments. When directing, I use the analogy of a performance being like a "ride", like a rollercoaster at a carnival or fun show. I am watching to see how we can keep the audience "leaning forward" for as much of the ride as possible, trying for them to *not ever* be leaning back or slumped in their seats. I am wanting to keep them as fully engaged as possible, ideally, to never lose interest. I will return to discussion of this analogy in the next chapter, related to the new production of *Mary Bryant*.

In his seminal text *The Empty Space*, master director, creator, and theoretician Peter Brook speaks about the experience of the first audience:

> Seeing a first public performance of a play one has directed is a strange experience. Only a day before, one sat at a run-through and was completely convinced that a certain actor was playing well, that a certain scene was interesting, a movement graceful, a passage full of clear and necessary meaning. Now surrounded by audience part of

> oneself is responding like this audience, so it is oneself who is saying 'I'm bored', 'he's said that already', 'if she moves once more in that affected way I'll go mad' and even 'I don't understand what they're trying to say'. (Brook, 1990b, p. 142)

Within a drama school setting though, this essential preview experience is minimized, and this is an area my research addresses. Typically, in a drama school there is one scheduled preview, made up of a primarily student audience. The response is very untypical of what might occur during the season; the students although supportive tend to identify with their fellow performers rather than the characters they are playing. The show then apparently, "opens" the following night without a credible preview audience.

As far as I am concerned, (and I discuss this openly with my students), our week of performances is in fact a week of *previews*. If we are lucky, we *open* on the apparent *closing* night. We therefore diligently spend the week learning from audience responses and adjusting accordingly. Unfortunately, often visiting directors and choreographers are not engaged for this important week. They are not there to help finish crafting the show, they do not ever really see the finished product. Also, professional reviewers are often invited to critique the show before it is, by these standards, "ready". In professional theatre, reviewers are rarely permitted to attend a production until opening night or later, after the show has been honed during the preview performances.

THE CONDUCTOR

So far in this section on timing, based on the interviews of these three key artists, I have examined the relationship between performer to performer, and performer to audience. However, there is another transaction that the musical theatre actor must negotiate – performer to musician, or at least, performer to conductor. Of course, not all musicals require a conductor. In fact, none of the musicals I directed for the Ensemble had a conductor as such but as the next section speaks of the commercial musical which is typically large scale and has the necessity of a conductor, I will reflect on this important relationship.

To remind you from the introduction of this thesis, Beckerman was referenced as saying "… timing is almost wholly in the hands of the performer. With the exception of musical performance in which the conductor plays a role…" (see p. 8). I questioned David about just how much of a role the conductor has:

> The quote from my conducting teacher who was a very experienced theatre conductor, I asked if he were accompanying the singers or are they following you? He said, "effectively I accompany the singers but I don't tell them that". That's the nicest encapsulation of what happens because sometimes you do just let them have their head, and you are accompanying, just as if you were at the piano (assuming you've got a very responsive orchestra). Sometimes you absolutely have to take the lead, going into a big dance number, it's absolutely up to me. – David

David King's comment indicates a negotiation between conductor and performer. This is an additional area of concentration that the performer in a non-musical play rarely has to accommodate. The musical theatre performer is therefore juggling three different sources of "transactional stimuli". There is as much of a negotiation with the conductor as there is with other performers and the audience. This relationship, like that of performer to performer, has been rehearsed but there are many variables that may be encountered during a particular performance, including the audience response.

> I think the negotiation and discovery, with the musical director, in the rehearsal room is so important. A good director and a good musical director will negotiate those things and set them up in rehearsal, so that they come from an organic place, they come from a place of active storytelling. You don't feel that you're absolutely bound by the music in rehearsal. Yes, by the time you get in front of an audience, and you've got all the bells and whistles around you, timing might have to be set in stone, when there's music playing. - Jason

It may be worth stating the obvious - in musical theatre, the conductor only conducts the musical moments, not the <u>unmusicalised</u> moments. So, the performer has to take absolute control of timing in what we call the "book" scenes, and then works with the conductor in the songs. It is typical for the conductor to sit "at ease" during extended periods of dialogue and

return “to attention” when songs are approaching. Of course, there are many variations of this depending on the style of musical, like in the “through-sung” show (see p. 49) or even when there is underscoring in a book musical.

In terms of one of the major themes of this writing though, unique co-creation with the audience, I wonder if the conductor makes this easier or harder for the performer. It interests me that although the conductor might seem to be a bridge between audience and performer, they do have their back to the audience.

> I am sensitive to the audience but as a conductor your attention is equally onstage, as well as with the musicians. You’re very aware of scene changes and things like that, so there are small adjustments that you are making all the time. Also, working with the singers, although it sounds like it's more or less the same every night, of course, it isn’t. If you had two recordings, you put them on at the same time, within seconds they’d be different. - David

This seems to suggest that timing is often not “set in stone” as Jason comments above, that there is some continued flexibility in song as there is in dialogue. It seems the performer reads the audience and perhaps the conductor reads the performer, an equitable collaboration. It is true to say that this combined effort tends to keep the overall “running time” of a performance in musical theatre, more consistent than that of a non-musical play. My experience in non-musical theatre is that the performance of a play can vary by up to ten minutes, whilst in musicals, there is rarely a variation of one or two minutes, in the total running time. I will speak further on this in the next section on the commercial musical.

I once directed the wonderful play – *Duet For One* by Tom Kempinski (see figure 5, p. 67). It is a drama based on the life of cellist Jacqueline du Pre, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. It is a “two-hander”, set in one location, the office of her psychiatrist. There are some incredibly lengthy monologues, some *pages* long. The recorded running time for any of the performances varied enormously. I would like to say it was always the actors’ fine reading of each audience, but I suspect some of it was to do with how the actors were feeling at that moment, how their days had gone, how fresh or tired they were. Of course, I tried to help “conduct” as it were, to assist the direction and tempo of certain moments by the use of

"underscoring". The actors would become accustomed to timing parts or their whole monologues to fit the underscoring music. I eventually found an acceptable median running time for each act. When I was not there, I would have an idea if the play was played too fast (the cast were on "automatic pilot"), or two slow (the performers were lacking energy). Again, within this form, non-musical theatre, the control of timing is almost totally in the hands of the actors.

> There are many pauses and awkward silences between the two characters and Taylor has made them moments of tension and great suspense.
> (Gridley, 1998) *The Mosman Daily*

> Together, the actors bridge the many gaps of silence. This is tight-rope walking without a net. Artistically dangerous stuff, but they, with director Taylor, bring it off to perfection. (Morrison, 1998a) *The Jewish News*

Whereas in non-musical theatre, running times can vary considerably, in musical theatre the times tend to be more regular. This is in part due to necessity of synchronicity amongst the various contributing elements. In musical theatre, the collaboration of the actors, the conductor, the inclusion of dance itself but also the delicately timed set changes, and lighting demand a more rigorous attention to timing.

THE COMMERCIAL MUSICAL

I have touched on the "megamusical" in Chapter 1, and I feel sure readers will have noted my distaste for the commerciality of them, particularly if the artistic pursuit is compromised (see p. 44). Interestingly the term "megamusical" was coined by the Americans about the invasion on Broadway of West End shows such as *Les Miserables, Phantom*, and *Miss Saigon*. I find it ironic that they, the Americans, should criticize the British for commercial pursuits. British scholar Miranda Lundsaer-Nielsen defends shows such as these and is critical of the term used to collect them:

> First, “megamusical” is an inherently reductive term for an artistic work, implying that what is noteworthy about these shows is not their artistry but their size, be it big tunes, big scenery, big marketing campaigns, or big box office success. Second, the broad range of signifiers commonly used to identify megamusicals means that we end up grouping together shows that really have very little in common artistically. In particular, it obviates the need to look closer at individual shows in terms of the libretto and score, cultural origins, the relationship to the audience, or staging vocabularies—in short, the kind of artistic analysis that would reveal considerable differences between the shows that commonly fall under the “megamusical” banner. (Lundskaer-Nielsen, 2008, p. 5)

It is easy to blame Sir Cameron Mackintosh, responsible for many of the successes of the 1980s and 90s, or the Disney Corporation for a monopoly on Broadway in the twenty-first century. However, this capitalistic focus is not a contemporary issue, and it is naïve to think that Broadway has ever *not* been a money-making enterprise. Elizabeth L. Wollman in her paper *The Economic Development of the "New" Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway,* quotes fellow writer Steve Nelson –

> Disney's move to Broadway must be put in perspective, not only with contemporary trends in popular entertainment, but with the often unexamined tradition of spectacle on the American commercial stage. Many who fear the seemingly indiscriminate sledgehammer of Disney's money forget the opulent production values of the classic 1920s revues and the lavish spectacles favored by later impresarios such as Billy Rose, Mike Todd, and David Merrick. Despite prevailing attitudes to the contrary, Disney did not bring technical or P.R. overkill to town any more than Andrew Lloyd Webber or Hal Prince did in decades past. (Wollman, 2002, p. 446)

Although the new production of *Mary Bryant* was neither intended nor realized for commercial purposes, and its scale was in direct contrast to these shows, the reality is that many of our graduates will get work in these commercially geared ventures. Therefore, some acknowledgement of them is required. When I began this research, I had lofty aspirations to

awaken producers to their "dishonorable pursuits", and to inspire them to "change their ways", to pursue higher more noble endeavors. Alas, this crusade is beyond the scope of my research.

> Broadway is a big, money making, commercial machine. That's why I won't go and see shows (sic) that's been running… generally, my rule is that if it's been running for longer than a year, don't bother. If it's been running for a long time, like *Lion King or Chicago, or Phantom of the Opera*, it's purely now a money-making machine, it's lost everything to do with, art, creativity, audience-actor relationship. It's no longer about that. - Jason

Jason's point reminds me that there is value in the study of this section. It interests me in the way it suggests that a big Broadway show may have begun as an artistic endeavor, but as it has become more and more standardized and commercialized, the less is there focus on the artistic integrity of it. The more successful the product becomes, the more incarnations, and potentially, the more diluted is the original inspiration. One tends to consider some of these huge hits as always having been "gravy trains" but that potentially undervalues the contributions and aims of these productions' original show-makers.

To be fair also, I do not dislike commercial musicals in general, and I have no qualms with their producers wanting to make money from them. There are many very good and evidently successful musicals of this kind but I believe that many of the values revered in my philosophy of the art of theatre, are at odds with the values of some producers. Elizabeth Wollman again -

> While opponents are often quick to acknowledge, and even to appreciate, the economic boost that conglomerates have given the industry, most note that this very boost is wreaking havoc on the already delicate balance struck in theater between art and commerce, which seems to be tilting dangerously away from art.
> (Wollman, 2002, p. 455)

In terms of timing for example, I suspect producers of big commercial musicals would find, my desire for a unique co-creation between performer and audience, an unnecessary indulgence. My philosophy desires flexibility, spontaneity, and change; theirs desires a repeated, almost robotic, replication. Producers do not seem generally to be interested in the idea of a musical

being “fresh”, unique for each performance. An Australian colleague who is a very experienced resident director on productions such as these, speaks of how international producers are concerned, pedantically, with their show’s running times. Apparently, if an act is under or over by more than a minute, as logged by stage management in Australia, the overseas producers are on the phone to demand to know what is wrong. The idea of a performance “breathing” is of little interest to them. Coldly, they have a product, and from across the other side of the world, they want to be sure that their product remains the same, identical to any other performance, anywhere in the world. One could easily equate this demand to that of the mass manufacturing of the McDonalds restaurant chain.

> When you’re talking about Show Reports and complaints being made when a musical, is two minutes longer on this particular night – I don’t think that’s coming from the director. I think it’s more the administrative side, the resident director, who’s been charged with keeping the show together. - Jason

Unfortunately, many of our graduates who have left us so “bright-eyed and bushy tailed”, soon become disillusioned with the industry. Many have expressed how unrewarding it can be working on a commercial musical, particularly those musicals in Australia which have originated from overseas. I believe that is due to this lack of breath within a show, a disinterest in creating a unique performance. These actors feel disenfranchised, they are robbed of the responsibility, for communicating with an audience, for having a grasp of timing, for any sense of artistry. I have seen companies of performers who have thrived because of the appreciation of their input, and many others who have not.

> You’re a cog in a machine on *Phantom*, there are so many ways to die on that show. So many ways to injure yourself. I think it’s a shame that you have to rehearse the show with numbers. The associate director just gave the actors numbers. To me that was the most demeaning, uncreative, unimaginative way through something, whereas on *Les Mis*, each time a new cast came into *Les Mis*, they never felt like they were doing someone else’s performance, being shoehorned into someone else’s performance. They felt like they were creating something new. That’s why *Phantom of the Opera* is my most hated show. I’ve seen five opening nights now and I’ve loathed every one of them. I imagine it would be a soul-destroying production to be involved in. I personally think that’s the death of a musical onstage. - Jason

I have to question if our training is in fact misguided. We vehemently attempt to nurture original, unique, independently thinking artists when, evidently, some commercial musicals desire or require the flawless repetition of robots. This is, of course, a generalization, not true of all musicals, all productions, all companies but there does seem to be a trend, particularly amongst the huge American imports. A factor also, is that here in Australia, an American production is not usually brought here until years after it was originally created. From Jason's previous suggestion, I wonder how much of the original artistic integrity remains by the time the production gets to Australian shores. It is a process not unlike "Chinese Whispers", where the aims and inspirations of the original may become diluted, fragmented, or lost altogether.

> Although Broadway is currently enjoying unprecedented financial growth, theatrical productions in New York City and across the country are evolving from creative forms of artistic expression into products developed by committee and suitable for synergistic appropriation by the entertainment conglomerates that produce and market them. In short, both stylistically and economically, theater is becoming more like film and television than ever before. (Wollman, 2002, p. 462)

Particularly in musical theatre, commercial musical theatre, choreography and music gets the most attention, acting becomes the poor cousin that often doesn't get any attention, or gets scant attention. In Australia, when we get the 3rd Associate Director or Resident Director from nowhere, coming out to rehearse us and it becomes about recreating staging. More often than not, actors have to be able to take care of themselves. - Jason

Concluding this section, it is evident that the professional musical theatre performer has considerable challenges in attempting to create the same, seemingly organic and appropriate timing that is expected from the actor in non-musical theatre. Also, the musical theatre student, like all drama-school students has little time to negotiate audience responses and incorporate them into performance because of the lack of preview audiences. Lastly, it is evident that the commercial industry itself can disable performers from the pursuit of true artistic creation. The bigger the machine, the longer it has been running, the further away it grows from the original source, the less the artistic inspiration seems to be of value.

Figure 6.

Mary Bryant

It is fair to say that *Mary Bryant* for me personally, represented "unfinished business", and this lies at the heart of this auto-ethnographic journey (see p. 17). I have been fortunate in my directing career both in working professionally, and for the almost two decades I have been directing students at WAAPA. Without seeming to be immodest, there are very few musicals to which I feel I did not do justice, that I am dissatisfied with, and very few that I feel I need to revisit. In fact, I believe it can be a very real challenge to revisit a show, when you feel you have "got it right" the first time. I have experienced this professionally, plays such as Willy Russell's *Educating Rita*, and Debra Oswald's *Dags* coming to mind, both of which I have directed multiple times, either remounts for the same theatre or transfers to other theatres. Thankfully, at WAAPA, I have only had to repeat two musicals – *West Side Story*, although it was some years later and in a much larger venue, and interestingly – *The Good Fight*, another piece by David King and Nick Enright. Again, this was some years later, the production was edited from two acts to one in the process and was prepared and taken to the New York Musical Theater Festival.

However, *Mary Bryant* as indicated in the introduction, warranted a revisit. This one, I did not get right the first time. To this end, the reimagined production required a very clear agenda. The original production, at the time of writing, twenty-one years ago, was not unsuccessful. Audiences were extremely positive, most reviews were favorable also but, from my perspective, there was a common theme of criticism that ran through them.

> It is given a chamber production here, directed by Crispin Taylor, in a small venue, and it feels cramped, ready to move on. David King's good score is obviously written for large voices in a large space with a full orchestra. (McCallum, 1998) *The Australian*
>
> The fatal flaw is the music. It lacks variety, colour, spice, and melody.
> (Anderson, 1998) *The Sydney Morning Herald*

> If there are no "palpable hits" in King's score, it is never less than melodic, apt, and splendidly played and recorded (the Ensemble's unsubsidised budget doesn't run to live orchestras – even if there were room for them). (Morrison, 1998b) *The Jewish News*

THE REVIEWS

I believe further examination of these reviews, helps to paint a clearer picture (see figure 6, p. 83). With regard to John McCallum's critique for *The Australian*, our national broadsheet, it was overall a very complimentary article. In fact, he calls *Mary Bryant*, "… this first (at last!) successful musical about early Australian history…". This is how I interpret his criticism though, however minor, of the production.

McCallum describes the event as a "chamber production". I do not believe this was a chamber production, but it should have been. The expansiveness of the orchestration, the overwhelming design, and the overly stylized choreography pointed the show towards anything but "chamber". I feel if this was a chamber production it would have been more palatable to the Ensemble audiences overall. McCallum goes on to praise the score but "written for large voices in a large space with full orchestra". *Mary Bryant* only has a cast of eight. Again, I am certain that it was my inappropriate directorial choices that led to McCallum's conclusions. His wisdom indicates to me that if this book and score were presented in a chamber production, with a modest design, and a simple, live, acoustic accompaniment, it would have been very differently received.

The most critical review came from Doug Anderson of the *Sydney Morning Herald,* titled "Slaving to the Wrong Rhythms". To give a balanced account he comments:

> And it's a handsome production, directed with a sense of vision and acute attention to detail by Crispin Taylor. The design, wardrobe and lighting are all of a high standard – the performers responding with vigour to the challenge of mounting a large-scale work on a match-box stage. (Anderson, 1998) *The Sydney Morning Herald*

He is complimentary, yes, but to me as a director this is less than desirable - to highlight production elements as impressive, or that of my direction. To me, my job is done when all elements are virtually invisible or at least, indivisible from the storytelling. I feel a sense of failure when at the conclusion of a performance, I hear audience members praising the set or costumes, for example. I want them to be moved, inspired, overwhelmed by the story, undistracted by any individual element. However, Anderson was trying to find the positives here – now to the not so positives. He writes, "*Mary Bryant* fails to deliver musically, emotionally or dramatically. In short, it is relentlessly earnest." Naturally, this hits sharply into the heart of my artistic sensibilities as a director. I see it as my responsibility to deliver or realise these qualities in any show I direct. However, my attempt to further diagnose the review with the greatest possible objectivity is necessary. He continues:

> Could this be the result of squeezing a big musical into a space too small to contain it? Starving and reducing rather than distilling? The care and commitment so evident in the production insist starvation isn't a factor. The fatal flaw is the music. It lacks variety, colour, spice, and melody. (Anderson, 1998) *The Sydney Morning Herald*

It is worth noting that again, "scale" is mentioned. Again, my responsibility. Again, I believe a chamber production would have brought a different response. With regard to the music, I have to challenge Anderson's assessment. I believe that the adjectives that Anderson claims the music "lacks", actually exist in abundance. I believe the musical composition was not the "fatal flaw". The fault was in the delivery of the music rather than the quality of the composition itself. I should make it clear that I do not discount Anderson's misgivings about the production, in fact I am in agreement about what I perceive to be the "symptoms". However, I question his articulation of *where* and *why* the faults lie.

Perhaps less significant is the review from *The Australian Jewish News* by Peter Morrison. It is again though, a perception of the music and/or how that music is conveyed. Unlike Anderson, Morrison refers to the music as "melodic, apt, and splendidly played and recorded", adding, "the Ensemble's unsubsidized budget doesn't run to live orchestras – even if there were room

for them". I highlight again, that the reviewer felt somewhat uncomfortable about the delivery of the music but attributes this to lack of budget and space.

> I agree, it was very clear, from the reviews, you knew immediately what it was that irked them, that they couldn't quite articulate, either because they didn't have the language, or the knowledge about musical theatre. - Jason

THE MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT

> I can't remember how the notion of doing it with pre-recorded tracks came about. Perhaps I wanted to give it a bigger sound, I'm not sure. - David

The composer David King is not clear how this came about but I have a distinct memory. He had experienced a version accompanied live on piano for the workshop production at WAAPA in 1997. He felt the scale of the story; the epic nature of the music would lend itself to a fully realized orchestration. On this point, I absolutely agree but with the benefit of hindsight, not electronically sequenced but live, visible musicians. It is useful to keep in mind also that he was at that time conducting the very lush production of *Showboat* at Sydney's Lyric Theatre, and Nick Enright was receiving acclaim as the book writer for *The Boy From Oz* at the now defunct, Her Majesty's Theatre in Sydney; two very large-scale shows, over 1000 seats in either venue, compared to the 220 or so at the Ensemble. As I have mentioned previously, my instinct was that this should, musically, have been a modest and seemingly acoustic affair, possibly a repeat of the combination used at WAAPA or just a single piano.

> Certainly after the first audience, you've realised that the music, the arrangement was so full, so expansive – which I know is what David wanted to achieve with that project but I don't think that was the theatre to achieve that in. - Jason

> I just wonder with live musicians onstage, doing the numbers and finishing them more cleanly, whether it might have been a more immediate experience for the audience, in that venue, and might ultimately have been better. - David

Over the rehearsal period of *Mary Bryant,* the accompaniment evolved. David was available for most of the daytime rehearsals, as he was conducting *Showboat* in the evenings. Initially he would play from the acoustic, upright piano within the rehearsal space and here there was the usual, traditional negotiation of tempos and timing. *Mary Bryant* employs a considerable amount of underscoring, occasionally utilizing "til-ready bars", where motifs may be repeated until the performer is ready to continue. This *does* allow flexibility for the performer. However, much of the underscore in *Mary Bryant* is timed, the dialogue is required to be measured out to match the accompanying music. As previously discussed, especially with the help of the conductor, this can shift in performance as the conductor and the performer negotiate the timing live. This was the case in rehearsals of *Mary Bryant* but as we headed towards performance the ability to negotiate, adjust, play became more and more limited.

> It's endemic to musical theatre – in rehearsal you have to discover the way an underscore works, hopefully in rehearsal you discover the best way of text and music to work. I don't like to absolutely set it in stone but you develop parameters that you know are not going to shift too much. You've got to have a sensitive musical director but it's a symbiotic relationship, the actor also has to be aware of the parameters. A new thought hitting you in performance, can crack open doors and windows, little bits of magic! - Jason

As rehearsals progressed, David introduced the electric keyboard, and the synthesized instrumentation that he had been programming. I distinctly remember at one of these rehearsals, I was aware that the actress playing Mary, was struggling to manage the singing of "Sail Away", the potent and powerful closing number of Act I (see Appendix 15). Jason came over to me to offer some advice, suggesting that the tempo was just too slow, she simply was not able to sustain vocally what the music asked of her. In this case, I was able to negotiate a slightly "brighter" tempo with David, and the actress began to manage the song with more ease. However, as we were nearing the end of the rehearsal period, we became aware that we were having to make finite decisions, to concretize, these various tempi and timing concerns. We were not going to be able to adjust these to suit the needs of the performer; that is, what they could manage for any particular performance.

What happened with "Sail Away", David hears the expansive sound of it, and drew it out. In that sense it was about the music and not about the active, acting component. It became more about the sound, which I think is the death of the musical. - Jason

When Jason refers to "sound" here, he means that the singing and music are only in use aesthetically, instead of being vehicles to convey storytelling and drama.

As we moved from the rehearsal room into the theatre, we engaged a very accomplished musical director. However, rather than "helming" the performances "from the pit", he was banished to a sound proofed office, adjacent to the auditorium. His responsibility as a musician in the show, was diminished to little more than the pushing of a button, a role that probably could have been dealt with by the stage manager.

I do not remember if any adjustments were made to the sequenced tracks as we moved into the theatre, negotiating the set, lighting, and other technical demands. However, I do know that little or very few adjustments were made during the previews, as the original cast album was recorded prior to this time, and the backing heard on it is as it were in performance. As previously discussed, the vital week of previews, holding such importance at the Ensemble, is when traditionally the show will be honed according to the audience's responses. In this case, the musical component was already laid in stone, unchangeable regardless of the audience involvement.

When we recorded the album, which we did before we went into the theatre, you could start telling then how different and difficult an experience this was going to be – live. Because we struggled recording it, in the studio… because there was no one breathing with us. And I think that's an essential part of a musical's success, is a musical director that breathes with the actors. It was tough and I think a precis for how it might appear "lifeless" in the theatre. - Jason

<u>IN PERFORMANCE</u>

Of course, the use of sequenced tracks was not unique at that time, and their use is becoming more and more frequent today. *Cats* by Andrew Lloyd Webber is a prime example – even when

it employed a full orchestra, they were unseen, in a room separate from the audience, the music piped into the auditorium. Over its lifetime the *Cats* band has become fewer and fewer, relying more and more on pre-recorded electronic instrumentation. In fact, for most commercial musicals today, it is rare to have a complete orchestra, as originally composed. It is rare to *not* have a reduced version, as producers attempt to minimize costs. I have already spoken on my concerns about commercial musicals in the previous section (see p. 78).

However, in the case of *Mary Bryant*, Jason raises an important issue about the Ensemble audience's reception. It is to do with "suspension of disbelief", the faculty employed by an audience to suspend its critical judgement of elements within an imaginary performance. An audience will generally go on a "ride of pretense", provided there remains a consistency and continuity in the way a concept is being articulated. To give a crude example – an audience will allow that a simple chair is the driver's seat of a car, the actor miming the steering wheel, and shifting gears on the actor's left-hand side. If the actor suddenly shifts gears on their right, however, the illusion, the continuity is broken. Unless the audience are now being asked to believe that the driver has suddenly changed cars, from an Australian into an American car, of course.

> The Ensemble Theatre is an intimate space, and to have this full expansive, orchestral sound, immediately the audience were taken out of any kind of truthful relationship with what was happening on stage because you didn't believe for a second that music was happening live, or could ever happen live in that space. - Jason

Here Jason points to the incongruity of the visual and aural stimulus. The audience at the Ensemble could never entirely "suspend their disbelief", their sensibilities could not allow for the possibility that the orchestra were somehow downstairs in the restaurant, or next door in the Flying Yacht Squadron Club. It was always in the audience's understanding that they were listening to a pre-recorded electronic fabrication, less than satisfactory for their sensibilities in this venue acclaimed for live performance. I am sure they perceived a falseness, a lack of sincerity, authenticity. As Millie Taylor notes in her book *Musical Theatre, Realism and Entertainment*:

> The presence of musicians onstage or in the pit, or reference to them, creates a reflexive circularity and simultaneously authenticates the live musical performance. (Taylor & Marvin, 2012, p. 133)

It is worth keeping in mind also, that although the backing was amplified and presented through the sound system, the performers were not. There were no microphones. I remember at an early dress rehearsal, David arriving part way through, and advising that the "backing" be turned up much louder to "support the singers". It is not my intention to blame David; again, it was my job to advise him with regards to appropriateness for the venue. In my mind, I was attempting to give the accompaniment a more organic, a less artificial presence, so that it would not be so jarringly present in the ears and minds of the audience.

> The actual reaction of the audience to the pre-recorded tracks, is hard to assess. Certainly, audiences love having live musicians, and it frees up a relationship with the stage, that a pre-recorded track will never substitute for. I wonder, If you were able to do it with live musicians, does that somehow make it more acceptable for the audience? I wonder, rather than playing against this nebulous background? - David

The other major mismatch in performance though, and the major examination of this dissertation was in the timing. The difference between the sense of timing in spoken, unaccompanied text, and then the sense of timing within the accompanied, musicalized songs. When in dialogue the timing, as in a play, was in the total control of the actors (see p. 8). It was allowed to shift and breathe, according to each audience's responses. In those spoken moments, the audience were feeling this breath, this organic elasticity, particular to them in that moment. When, suddenly the backing track came on, the potential for "unique co-

> Particularly with any dialogue that was within a song or underscored. The dialogue had to fit the track. It's a musical director's job, in my opinion, to work with the actor, in the moment. If the actor is working a little faster tonight, to work with the actor, with the underscore to catch the moments together. The tracks were set, so what we might have been doing some weeks ago in rehearsal was all of a sudden, kind of hammered into another shape. - Jason

creation" ceased, the music played, according to a pre-determined tempo. There could be no shift, no change, no organic flexibility unique to each audience.

David's opinion differs here though, or at least, raises an interesting phenomenon of using the sequenced tracks. Jason's fears of what may have appeared "lifeless", David refers to as allowing flexibility and freedom:

> I remember going to see a performance of the show, one Sunday night. I just dropped in and they'd been on for a couple of weeks, and I was amazed at how flexible the onstage performance of the music was. It wasn't as if we are locked in to this pre-recorded track that we have to stick religiously to. The very fact that the track was there, and ongoing, and unchanging, seemed to me to give the actors an extraordinary amount of freedom. To delay lines, and to back-phrase at times, because they knew that the track would be there. They were so used to it that they could just be very free with it. I'm not sure how that affected the actor's performance. - David

David highlights that the constancy of the backing track allowed the performers a type of freedom but within boundaries, of course. They became so familiar with the musical blueprint that they were able to adjust their performances to suit. To be clear, when David refers to "delay" or "back-phrase" he means that the performers had some license to shift timing, somewhat, within the boundaries of the backing track. Technically, the performers are slightly changing the values of each note or notes of a composition, to interpret it with some freedom. In musical theatre, this liberty with the composer's work is generally acceptable but only to a certain extent. This would generally be permitted as "interpretation". There was the possibility of some minor improvisation by the performers but still within a reasonably tight structure, dictated by the predetermined track.

> Where I disagree is that the pre-recorded backings had a limiting effect on the actors. I think it had a liberating, a freeing effect on the actors, much to my surprise. I think it was probably helpful for the actors, in freeing them up in that way. But from the audiences' perspective, the joy of having live musicians there and seeing it all created there in front of you, is inestimable, and the show would have benefitted from that. - David

I wonder if David is suggesting that as there was no musical director or conductor, it empowered the actors, giving them a greater control of timing, or just that they became so comfortable, reassured by the track, that their attention could be elsewhere. In a way, these musical theatre performers had fewer "balls to juggle" than would usually be required. Remembering the complexity of transactions for them – actor to actor, actor to audience, actor to musical director – one of these balls was taken out of play (see p. 76).

> Breath is such an important thing in a musical. When you don't have a musical director, who is willing to breathe with you it can really make or break a moment. A musical director that breathes with you, allows you to be, in the moment, organically from performance to performance. - Jason

Breath and breathing, both figuratively and literally, have become key themes of this research, and they are qualities or concepts that I examine in the new production of *Mary Bryant*. These interviews crystallized for me what the original production of *Mary Bryant* was, and what were some of its failures or shortcomings. Most importantly, they guided me as to what this new production could and should be.

Chapter Summary

Further examinations of the key research questions -

1. In what ways can a production of a musical be rehearsed and performed to maximise the potential for actor – audience co-creation?

2. How does the musical theatre performer negotiate the factors that can limit the actor – audience relationship?

3. How can one best train the musical theatre student to have a better understanding of the actor – audience relationship and the challenges inherent in this form?

These important interviews helped clarify performance values at the Ensemble Theatre, discussed how actors achieve timing, and diagnosed features of the original production of *Mary Bryant*. Although the production's reviews are a valuable published source of reference, now these interviews offer perspectives from practitioners. They are research in preparation for the new production which will examine the three key research questions above. As indicated in the introduction though, the findings have broadened the scope of the project to include these additional research areas.

4. The documentation of a period of productions at the Ensemble Theatre, particularly during the years of 1994 - 1998 when I was Associate Director. This reflects on larger theatrical issues and trends, including those of timing in the theatre, and the manipulation of timing by actors in negotiating their relationship with the audience.

5. A detailed analysis and documentation of the original staging of *Mary Bryant*, with a view to considering how to restage it and build on those lessons. The central ones here relate to producing a more temporally flexible, breathing, chamber-style work.

Findings regarding -

The Ensemble Theatre

- An intimate space, known for presenting mostly naturalistic works.
- The physical dynamic between performer and audience is key.

- Audiences can be so involved that they break the fourth wall.
- Direct address maximizes the audience's involvement.
- The audience-to-audience relationship enables contagion effect.

Timing

- At the Ensemble, it is easy to read the room.
- Timing is achieved between actors by truly "listening".
- Transaction between actors is rehearsed spontaneity, transaction between actor and audience is real spontaneity or improvisation.
- Previews are an important process to learn about timing.
- In musicals, the performer is required to transact with the conductor, in addition to audience and other performers.
- Commercial musicals, with a focus on monetary profit may be in less consideration of art. Producers may not desire the type of elasticity that artists seek.

Mary Bryant

- The reviews of the original production were not uncomplimentary, but criticism of the music seemed to be a recurring theme.
- A "chamber" production has become a key inspiration, and goal, for the new *Mary Bryant*.
- In the original, the pre-prepared electronic sequencing had a limiting effect on timing, but Jason and David offered differing perspectives on the outcome.
- Ensemble audiences may have had trouble suspending their disbelief because of the incongruity of elements within the production.
- Breath and breathing have been identified as recurring themes.

Chapter 3 - The Production

This chapter will detail the reimagined production of *Mary Bryant*. It is assumed in the writing from now on, that the reader will have viewed the audio/visual recording of the production. It is included as documentation in this thesis (see Appendix 1)

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This chapter includes three main sections that follow a chronological narrative (see p). The first is an introduction to the techniques that were proposed before beginning work on the production. The second is findings from the rehearsal period that either confirm the usefulness and success of these techniques or detail the discovery and incorporation of new techniques. The third is findings from the performances themselves.

As a preface to this chapter though, a brief recapitulation of lessons learned from or shortcomings of the original production, as indicated by the reviews and by the interviews from the previous section. A clear understanding of these helped to guide the company in the preparation of this revised interpretation. For me, there were three key areas to address – design, physicalisation, and most importantly music. Although one reviewer called the original production a "chamber" production, as I have previously mentioned, I do not believe it was (see p. 11 and p. 84). This was the key to this new version, I believe. A truly chamber production, illustrated through the three key elements above. *The Oxford Companion to Music* gives this helpful definition:

> Chamber music is music written for a small ensemble, either for private (domestic) performance or, if in the presence of an audience, for a relatively small hall. This definition excludes solo music, for an essential ingredient of chamber music is the pleasure of playing together. It also excludes music for virtuoso display in the large concert hall, even though only a few instruments may be involved. (Oxford, 2011)

Design – as the original production had a grand set design that admittedly overwhelmed the intimate Ensemble Theatre auditorium, this production was as minimalist as possible. We used just four benches and very few props, allowing the performers, the storytellers, to be the prime focus. So too with the lighting design. Like the original however, the performance space was small, and the piece was performed to a relatively small audience.

Physicalisation – in the original production, there was a highly stylized, slightly choreographic language used. In this production we achieved a much simpler and more modest physical articulation.

Music – the music was played live by the composer, David King, on an upright acoustic piano.

CAST

Mary Bryant has just two female roles and seven male roles. The musical director (David King) and I cast nine 2nd Year students, according to the singing and the acting demands for each role. The two lead roles (Mary and Will) were "double cast", partially to employ more students within this project but also to explore the potentialities of "double casting". This will be discussed in detail shortly. It was intended that the key figure of Barrister – Boswell be played by David King, but this idea was abandoned shortly into rehearsals. The two actors playing Will were required to play Boswell in the alternating performances.

The students included – Campbell Braithwaite, Tiana Catalano, David Duketis, Jack Keen, Charlotte MacInnes, Jack Martin, Douglas Rintoul, Liam Wigney, and Emily Wood
(see Appendices 2 and 3 – Scene / Character Breakdown).

As participating subjects, their testimonies, recorded in a series of regular debriefs, will be quoted from here on. They will be referred to by their Christian names, apart from the two "Jacks". Also, as there are two Davids involved in the production, they will be referred to in full.

VENUE

WAAPA's Rehearsal Studio 1 – A general purpose studio, used for acting, dance, movement classes. Occasionally used for performance. It is 135.32 square metres.

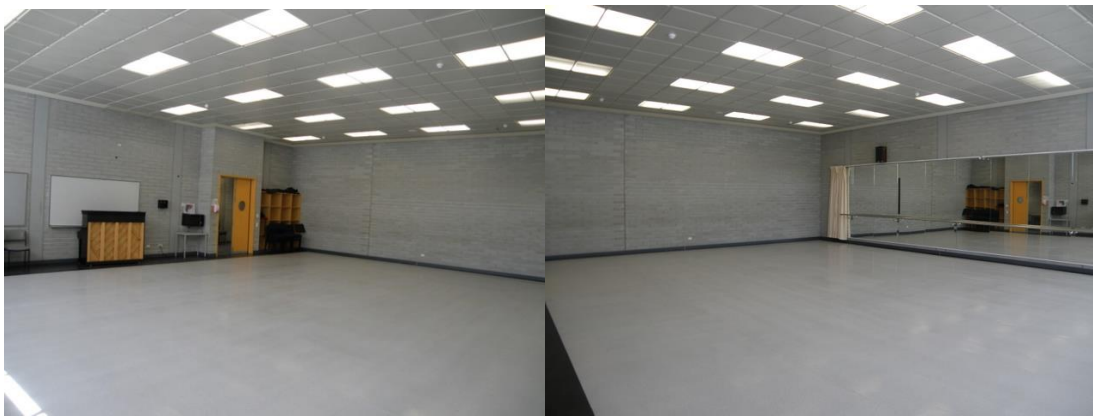

Figure 7.

REHEARSALS

The entire rehearsal period was five weeks from 22 July – 23 August, 2019. Of these, two were full-time weeks (35 hrs./week approx.), and three were part-time (16 hrs./week approx.).
(see Appendix 4 - 9 - Rehearsal Planner and Weekly Schedules)

PERFORMANCES

At the conclusion of this rehearsal period, there were a total of four performances, two for each of the casts on Thursday 15th and Friday 16th August 2019.

Figure 8.

Proposed Techniques

DOUBLE CASTING

The sense of "double cast" in use here, is that often done within a drama-school context. It may be that the selected play does not have sufficient roles to support the players, so a number of the key roles will be double cast. There is intended to be an absolute equity; each cast being offered the same amount of rehearsal time, and the same number of performances. This may seem a fruitful and harmonious adventure in theory, but it can be fraught with difficulties in practice. My experience with double casting in drama schools is that there is invariably a not-so-healthy competition between the young performers, not *sharing* but *competing* in the same role. There is often a conscious or sub-conscious desire to make their version of the character "better" and/or uniquely different. Also, regardless of the director's sincere intention to remain unbiased, there can develop a favoritism towards one of the casts or players, suggesting a lack of objectivity about the actors' work.

However, in 2017, a production that I directed with our then 2nd Year students, seemed to work against these traditional concerns and met with great success (see figure 8, previous page). William Golding's classic novel, *Lord of the Flies,* has entertained and provoked readers of all ages for over sixty years. Generations have appreciated this allegorical tale, which at face value is about a group of pre-teen British schoolboys marooned on an island. Like many, I studied the book in high school, and for many years it has been a personal dream to direct a production of Nigel Williams' play version. He comments here about his first interview with William Golding:

> He was about nothing less than the important task of showing how a slowly nurtured democracy can collapse in the face of the lust for power, how religious instincts can be perverted into becoming a cloak for brutality and how the competition for scarce resources can betray humans into revealing their fundamentally animal nature in the space of a few short months. (Williams, 2012) *The Telegraph*

Up until then, I had struggled with how to make this cast of ten, adolescent, boy characters service a class of twenty – ten men and ten women. This dramatization of the book has been performed in acclaimed productions across the world, featuring both child actors, and adult actors, both all-male, and all-female casts. I am even aware of a production that offered alternating casts – one night all-male, one night all-female. To my knowledge however, this was the first time that the roles were shared – in any one performance, the audience saw the male actors in the first half and the female actors in the second half, or vice versa. This experiment proved to enlighten and inspire us all. With regards to the double casting, what we anticipated to be challenges, we discovered to be beneficial gifts. Different gender perspectives complemented rather than contradicted; actors' attitudes were generously collaborative rather than competitive, and tasks we thought might take twice as long proved to be economical. It was a truly unique and eye-opening experience. This is a comment from a cast member of that production:

> What was good about the double casting was there was this polite, unspoken commenting. If something went well your partner would compliment you but if it was wrong you could sense that too. I felt I could key into whether the audience were watching with interest or disinterest.

By "audience" here they mean the alternate cast who were not in rehearsals on the floor. They would watch keenly from the auditorium, there was a surprising sense of concentration as they studied the work of their partner. Also, they tended to respond as one would expect from an audience. I coined the concepts of the "observer" and the "experiencer", and these students found a highly economical way of working by appreciating the rewards of both perspectives. We adopted this concept in *Mary Bryant*, as I will mention within the next section.

In the professional theatre world, double casting rarely occurs with adult performers but children are almost always double if not triple cast. Theatrical unions demand double casting of juveniles to protect them from being over-worked, and in consideration of their schooling. Shows such as *Annie, Oliver, Mary Poppins*, and *Billy Elliot* can be performed due to the careful

handling of their young performers. However, in these cases it would be hard to argue that there has ever been "co-creation" by the children, as we experienced in *Lord of the Flies* and *Mary Bryant*.

It is worth examining though, some modes of operation in the adult professional arena, such as those of "standbys", "understudies", and "swings". Standbys are engaged to cover select principals and they are usually not in the ensemble. For each performance, they sit waiting backstage for an elusive opportunity. Understudies may "cover" one or more principal and/or minor principal roles, and when not required to do so, will have duties to perform within the onstage ensemble. Then there are swings most prevalent in the domain of musical theatre, who again, have no specific role onstage but may be required to cover some or all of the ensemble "plots". The professional production of *Book of Mormon* is a prime example of all three circumstances. The inciteful book *Broadway Swings: Covering the Ensemble in Musical Theatre* helps to clarify:

> In the rehearsal process, the job of the Swings is walking a fine line between staying out of the way of the Regular Playing Company, while at the same time observing their every move by learning alongside them. Directors and Choreographers will create the show with the Actors who will be performing every night. So, the swings must remain on the sidelines. (Eyer & Smith, 2015, p. 15)

The "cover's" job is to recreate as closely as possible what their originator has defined. This can be even more crucial in a musical, where many elements can be reliant on the disciplined traffic of the understudy. A good understudy or swing is very sensitive to the needs of the performer they are covering, usually keeping a discreet distance in rehearsals, allowing the originator their own creative space. It is understood that the originator is solely creating/interpreting the role, so far as the actor's contribution is concerned. Of course, there is collaboration with the director, choreographer, and other members of the creative team but the understudy is rarely consulted in that process. There is an etiquette, and a sense of hierarchy that must generally be adhered to, in sensitivity to the originating artist. In essence, an understudy is to be "not seen" and "not heard". Although these professional models are not entirely relevant to this

production of *Mary Bryant*, the way that collaboration is either at play or not, may provide a useful comparison. Certainly, part of the training is to prepare them for this variety of roles.

DEMONSTRATION

When I studied acting, now many years ago, the idea of "demonstration" in the training was considered poor teaching. I assume it stems from the premise that a teacher or director hopes to elicit a performance from an actor by helping them to find their own unique and organic response to a moment. The actor is often thought of as being sensitive, and concern has been on interfering with their artistic process, not wanting to "tread on their toes", and allowing them the sense of complete ownership in the artistic creation. It is related to the concept of not ever giving a "line reading" also, to prevent a performance being merely mimicry.

However, the reality in rehearsal is that occasionally an actor will appreciate a line reading. Almost every actor I have worked with has suggested it is a fallacy that it should not ever be done; sometimes in frustration one will say "can you just tell me how it goes!" *Sometimes* and *occasionally* are the operative words though. I know of a director or two who give the impression for many weeks of rehearsals that they want for the actors to "find it for themselves", then in the "thick of it", resort to a line reading for almost every line. A lead actress I know was demolished to tears by one director, her confidence shattered; she felt she could not do or say anything right. The director was giving so many line readings, demanding lines be said as he said them. This was tremendously stifling for her.

I have found though, in my two decades working with music theatre students, that they respond with eagerness and appreciation when demonstration is used in class or rehearsals, *occasionally*. I suspect it is because as they are music theatre students – they are used to looking in mirrors, they are used to watching themselves, and most importantly they are used to having choreography "demonstrated" to them.

In working with a choreographer, the understanding is that they will demonstrate a "move" or step but it is expected that the dancer will "make it their own". In fact, good choreographers

create routines for the bodies and capabilities of the dancer or dancers they are working with, not create for their own bodies. Broadway great, Graciela Daniele still choreographs, for example, at almost eighty years old. Dancers do not have the same sensitivity about being shown what to do, so as actors, they approach instruction with the same open-mindedness. Having worked considerably with non-musical theatre actors, I am aware that they can respond to such instruction with suspicion. Of course, some actors like to work from physical signals as well but as a rule, they are not used to working in this way. For dancers it is the norm.

They are also very used to watching themselves, working in front of mirrors. When I was in drama school the idea of working in front of a mirror was severely frowned upon. The concern I believe, was that the actor would develop an unhelpful self-consciousness, so that when they performed, they were "watching" themselves. "Watching" in this case had a negative connotation. I remember in the very first week of my working at WAAPA, the then coordinator of the dance program within our department, instructed the incoming 1st Year students to go home and "rehearse their songs in front of the mirror", for an upcoming presentation. At that time, as an acting teacher who considered himself a purist, I thought this idea was abhorrent; I would never have recommended it. To be fair, there are pitfalls to this approach.

Young students are often confused about approaching "physicality" in song material. I believe in this case, that many of the beginner students would have gone home and randomly attached unjustified gestures to the lyrics of their songs. Then they would learn their "routines" by rote, their performances being "robot-like", unspontaneous, "wooden". This is because they do not yet have an understanding of what acting is, how transaction occurs between performer and audience in performance, and therefore they do not appreciate how a performance is unique and not a repetition of a rehearsal (see p. 28 and p. 73).

Within our course we have a weekly "performance practice", a class to do exactly as the name suggests; students have an opportunity to *practise* performance. I have a student who, in first year, at his very first performance practice, presented a "number" in the way described above. Physically, he presented a series of clichés, and he presented these to the wall above the heads of the audience rather than to the audience themselves. The point of transacting directly with

an audience is so that one can see how effectively one is communicating and adjust accordingly. Any gesticulation becomes natural, organically created – "living". This student's naive transaction was not with the audience but with the wall. I remember saying to him that he may change the audience, but he would "never change the wall". The student became affectionately known as "Robot …" but I am pleased to say that the lesson was well learnt as he has become a very fine actor.

Demonstration in a class or rehearsal situation, works a little differently than one might expect. I usually approach the actor in question and ask "Can I be *you* for a moment? And you be *me*?" I demonstrate or make an offer in place of the actor, and they have the opportunity to view it from my perspective, and most importantly, from the perspective of the audience. Interestingly, I do not see it as me, "doing it better" than them. The idea or ideas that I offer, have more often than not, come from watching *them*. I am *them*, reflected to themselves, and they are able to see *themselves* for a moment, *within* the composition. This is a continuation of my "observer" and "experiencer" technique as mentioned in the previous section. Another cast member from *Lord of the Flies*, who happens to be a very strong dancer, had this to say:

> You can learn a lot through watching and imitation, for want of a better word. Sometimes you can understand things in your head but seeing it makes it click.

Perhaps it should be clarified that this use of demonstration is not intended to produce mimicry. When dancers are offered choreography, there is an understanding that they must interpret it, not just copy it. In that way, these music theatre actors "adopt" and "adapt" these offers.

It is worth clarifying, the demonstration is not only physical, it may be verbal, or it may be to demonstrate an emotional dynamic but most importantly for this thesis, it may be to demonstrate *timing*.

RECAPS

Partially due to the success of the *Lord of the Flies* experiment, in recent times, our department at WAAPA has instigated the use of understudies within productions. The allocation of understudy roles is somewhat for theoretical purposes only. What I mean is, that it is primarily an exercise, for the understudy to experience the preparation and observation of a role. It is not intended that they will have to cover a role because of illness, although that has happened, but there is often an understudy run of some sort. To use a university term, this is "authentic learning", putting students in a situation which, as closely as possible, approximates a professional situation. As mentioned previously, many of our graduates will be required to be understudies and swings as soon as they enter the industry. This system also brings about a great sense of respect and focus in the rehearsal room because the ensemble cast are all committed and engaged in watching the "creational" work of their principal cast, in the roles that they are understudying.

> Authentic learning is appealing as a pedagogical approach because it situates knowledge in realistic contexts, and it challenges students with realistic tasks, requiring them to think and problem-solve as they might in the real situation. (Bozalek et al., 2014, p. 92)

I did not intend casting understudies when preparing *Mary Bryant*, although I suggested to those who were double cast, that they should use this as a similar exercise, that is, watch your partner's work with fascination and admiration. However, an unforeseen circumstance, which will be detailed in the next section, required the four who shared the two lead roles to have to understudy each other.

Working on *Strictly Ballroom – The Musical* (see figure 9, p. 110 and p. 71), I employed a useful technique that I have not used before with such regularity. It is a convention when rehearsing most plays and musicals, to end the week with a recap of the week's work, sometimes called a "stumble". This then leads, after some weeks to, stumbles of each act, the entire show, and as the name suggest, the proceedings build up speed into fully fledged "runs". It is not usually the convention to do "recaps" on a daily basis. The thinking, particularly professionally, is that it is

unfair, untimely for the principals to have to show their work at such an early stage. They are usually permitted more time to "work things in", mostly by the end of the rehearsal week.

In the case of *Strictly Ballroom* however, I discovered that by having these very regular, very early showings, a few valuable phenomena occurred. Firstly, the principals themselves were forced to solidify the work, almost immediately rather than being able to put it aside until later. Instead of feeling *confronted* by having to present the work too soon, an air of discovery and intrigue came about. Secondly, the entire company could witness what was being explored; everyone felt a contribution to the journey. Also, as a physical language was being developed, principals and ensemble alike were able to pick up on that and adjust their own contributions to match. Thirdly, and most importantly for my research, the company was able to experience an audience of sorts, earlier, and more frequently. It would be fair to say, that the audience were "stacked", that is, very biased in support of encouragement but, even so, they were an *audience*. These recaps were regular feedback points for both the performers and I to learn from.

PLAYBACK

Just as working to a mirror was for me, a drama school taboo, it was also not an accepted practise to visually record yourself and watch it back. To begin with, equipment was not that advanced; the average person could not have afforded a video camera or the like. Again, the theory was that one would become *more* self-conscious from watching themselves "played back", detrimental rather than an advantage. Or that in performance, one would try to emulate the performance that they saw recorded. That could create a "feedback loop". As already highlighted though, the music theatre students are used to looking at themselves in the mirror. They are used to being given a construct, a form, the choreography, and it is for them to make it their own, to fill in the outline that they have been given. They must justify the movement and give it a feeling of spontaneity. Also, they are of course, the "selfie" generation. Young people are constantly "watching themselves"; it is their norm. So, in recent years, I have used playback more and more often, with surprisingly successful results. A student reports:

> I don't enjoy doing it but when I got up and watched my scene back, I learnt so much. If I did the scene again, straight after watching it, it would have been ten times better.

It is worth mentioning that I am judicious with its use, that is, in class situations I do not use it in first year at all. Even in second year, I carefully time when the use of "playback" occurs. In first year, it is important that students do not focus overly on themselves. The transactional work they undergo focusses them more fully on looking for change in their scene partners. In second year, it is useful for the students to not only reflect on what they are doing but also, how they are being perceived. They are seeing in effect, what the audience are seeing. Also, the playback usually comes after the event, that is, as an addendum to the process rather than it be the primary focus. The playback tutorials can be very useful for most students, particularly those who may have been in a state of denial about their shortcomings. Another student:

> I think it's hugely valuable to see yourself. It's confronting but you can gain so much from seeing yourself and seeing what you're doing, and where you need to grow.

Two of my students were working a scene from Jim Cartwright's play *Two*, I have mentioned it before in this writing (see p. 68). The scene presents a disturbing relationship between a young couple, the man emotionally abusing the woman. It is extremely intense and a great vehicle for exploring what I would call "super-naturalism''. The male actor initially had difficulty appreciating the passive aggressive, psychological torture that was occurring within the scene. Technically, he was playing a "generalization". He was playing too loudly, "presentationally", and most significantly in terms of timing, he was rushing. Within class, the student discovered how he could play with intensity, and play with tension, that is, examine the tension *between lines*, not just *on* them. However, in the final assessment, at which there was a small audience of visiting professionals, he held pauses so long that tension was lost. As I would say, the audience came off the "ride" (see p. 74). In the profession, we would say he was "milking" moments. By watching the recording however, in "playback", he was able to be an audience

member and could sense that he “fell off the crest” of the “tension wave”. To his credit, this was just a step on his journey of being able to “read the room” well, and he has now developed into a sensitive and acutely aware actor.

Figure 9.

Rehearsals

I begin this section as it transpired in the chronology of the rehearsal period. The decision described ahead was a totally unexpected outcome but proved to be immensely valuable to the reshaping of the musical itself, and as a tool to enhance the performers relationship with the audience. In a way, this section starts with one of the most important findings.

FACTUALISATION

Liam – It feels like an adventure story.

Jack K – It seems to skip over the actual hardship of what they went through on the journey.

Charlotte – There are plenty of journals, actual journals about the voyage.

Even from the very first reading, the company had strong thoughts about the content of the piece, or at least, how it was illustrated. My memory of the original production was that viewers would compliment the production, but rarely would they say, "What an amazing story". It was almost as if they thought it was fantasy. However, it *is* a dramatization but based on Nick Enright's considerable research. I have directed many powerful plays based on true stories but as already discussed, there were so many elements in the original production that seemed false, manufactured (see p. 97). Audiences were impressed by the spectacle but not moved by the narrative itself. The tone did not seem to be one of "authenticity". Some of the cast speculated that it could have been stylistically appropriate for the time.

Tiana – I've just had a thought about how theatre, film and television has changed, for audiences, over the years, and maybe when *Mary Bryant* was written, it was the style that talked to audiences better. Because we're exposed to so much these days through social media we're not as shocked and put off by being presented with the facts.

Jack M – today, there are so many conflicting reports now, and fake news etc. Authenticity has always been desired but I think now there's even more of a demand from mainstream media, especially from the younger generation. There is a pursuit for authenticity, absolute truth, and objective fact in the mainstream so that people can make up their own minds.

Jack K – There's been a huge rise in independent media, especially in the Trump era.

Jack M - Dismissing the fantasy with truth.

I am not sure that the style speaks of its time; I am not sure it was right for *that* time either. However, I agree that our world has changed extraordinarily in the way we receive and process information. It is not to say that the current world has no interest in fantasy, one just has to mention the all-reaching Marvel empire, to appreciate we have a need for escapism. We are able to access information, documentation, virtually where and whenever we want. As the students suggest, this generation "demands the truth".

Readers may remember my discussion of "direct address", when used at the Ensemble Theatre, and how I suggested its potency in connecting with the audience (see pp. 55-57). A well-established type of theatre that utilizes direct address is "verbatim" or "documentary" theatre. The term verbatim, meaning literally "from the words of", is usually a work based on the interviews of real people, often associated with one traumatic event. I have had the honour of directing several verbatim plays, including *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kauffman, and *Talking to Terrorists* by Robin Soans. The former is based on interviews surrounding the murder of Laramie gay teenager Matthew Shepherd, the latter on interviews of terrorists, politicians, and survivors of terrorism.

> This form of theatre does not necessarily dispense with dramatic action. Rather, direct address with all its variants is a more prominent dramaturgical mode used to explore the act of narration and the nature of memory. (Maloney, 2013, p. 165)

Although not verbatim theatre as such, our research and inclusion of factual details in *Mary Bryant* added a documentary effect. We coined it "factualization" but perhaps "documentarisation" would be more correct. We spent much of the first week of rehearsals in detailed research, scouring through historical accounts of place and period but also specifics on the actual people involved in the amazing story. Portions of text from some of these historical accounts were added to the script for use in the 2019 production (see Appendix 10 – Script Inserts). Some of our inclusions are from the actual logbooks of various ships captains so in that case, they are verbatim. This particular entry is the earliest Australian convict narrative, from *Memorandoms* by James Martin:

> Mary Broad was described as being 'marked with the small pox'. She was 'of a middle stature', walked 'with one knee bent inwards, but is not lame', and spoke 'with the strong west country accent'. Her height was not recorded in this document, but the Newgate criminal register for 1792 noted that she was five feet and four inches (162 cm) tall. In a further coincidence, also transported aboard the Charlotte was Mary Broad's future husband, the Cornishman William Bryant, described in the 1791 return of absconders as being five feet seven inches (170 cm) in height and of a dark complexion. (Martin, 2017, p. 4)

The choice to alter the piece in this way enabled various attractive outcomes. Firstly, we were able to edit the musical into just one act of approximately seventy-five minutes, from its original two act structure. The factualisations linked and bridged where we had removed or reduced dialogue scenes. Secondly, the juxtaposition between the inserted facts and the epic, romantic music and story seemed to keep the audience alerted that this was not complete fantasy, that this was based on real events, a semi-Brechtian approach perhaps. This certainly achieved one of my key desires within this project, for the audience to be more impressed with the story than the production (see p. 66). Also, we as a company became inspired, charged

with a mission to tell the story with accuracy, a condition that in my experience often accompanies verbatim theatre.

> Doug – Having the narration there helped to ground me, to be constantly reminding me that this is a story that's bigger than me, it's not about me. It's something we brushed on in *Come From Away* as well, when we were watching the 9-11 footage. How can I be worried about whether my vowel is rounded…
>
> Emily - … Or my nerves…
>
> Doug - … in terms of servicing a story, and living that story, and trying to create change? We've talked about it a lot before, but I really experienced it in this show.

Lastly, and most relevant to this research, as the actors were required to transact with the audience in multiple modes, "direct address" through the narration, and semi "fourth wall" within the story, it enabled them to experience an intimate communion with the audience. They were literally and immediately able to "read" the audience directly, using many of the visual and aural signals, discussed by Meyerhold and Hayes Gordon (see p. 30 and p. 36). This awareness of the potency of this performer to audience relationship, helped them to appreciate their control over timing (see p. 62). I will return to discussion of this in the section ahead on the performances.

DOUBLE CASTING

The other major decision made very early in the rehearsal period, was to alter the sense of the double cast that was originally intended and was detailed in the previous section on proposed techniques (see p. 100). Instead of the two lots of actors who would have shared the two lead roles, alternating in performances, we decided that we would always include all of the company of nine actors in every performance. That is, the couple who were not playing Mary and Will in any performance would play as ensemble, and vice versa. The entire company performed each time but the two couples swapped responsibilities.

This offered a great opportunity for "authentic learning", as this is the way swings operate in the ensembles of professional musicals. They are required to learn a number of "tracks", that is, "traffic plots", the complete journey of one or more performers throughout a show. These four of our actors will have the experience of learning two complete tracks (see p. 102).

> Liam – It's like National Theatre's *Frankenstein*, where each night they would swap from playing Frankenstein and Frankenstein's monster.
>
> Jack K – In *True West* on Broadway, they would flip a coin, and swap roles every night. Phillip Seymour Hoffman and William H Macy.

These, of course, are rare examples of role exchanges in non-musical theatre. In "straight" plays, although there may be understudies and they may cover a couple of roles, it is dissimilar to musicals where swings will cover many "tracks". I suspect the concepts of chorus, ensemble, and swing, all of which are typical in musical theatre and not typically in non-musical theatre, help to promote a culture of empathy and generosity.

Another eventuality that took us by surprise and relates to the technique of double casting, was the necessity to cast the two boys playing Will, as the lawyer Boswell, for their alternate "track". As discussed previously, it was originally intended for the composer and musical director David King to play this role. From the beginning of rehearsals though, we became aware of how dense the musical accompaniment was, and that David King would have enough to do in dealing just with that. This added load was challenging for the two boys as this decision was not taken until about halfway through the rehearsal period. One could argue this was another instance of "authentic learning", as understudies in the profession can be asked to replace principals with very little notice. The two girls had more time to prepare their *double* "tracks" but still found it extremely challenging. Their ensemble track was without dialogue perhaps but still required the adaption for a completely different set of staging.

> Charlotte – It's just about how quickly we can pick up information. I like a while to adapt and inherit a track, we just don't have time with this particular project. With *Strictly Ballroom*, we had enough time for our tracks to be muscle memory but we just don't have time for that.

Drawn from my experiment working on *Lord of the Flies*, here we utilised the concept of the "experiencer" and the "observer" (see p. 101). As a reminder, each cast would swap positions during rehearsals. Sometimes the girls would be up on the floor (experiencing), and the boys would be watching for the audience (observing). The positive aspect of being the observer is that one is able to see composition, why the physical dynamics are important, or why certain timings are important, from the outside.

David Duketis, for example had an illuminating moment when he was the observer in a rehearsal. He was watching the creation of a choreographic moment by his counterpart Jack Martin, who was the experiencer. What we came to call the "king of the world" moment, and David's reaction to it, was very much in approval and admiration. His response, of course, was from the perspective of the audience. Two things were encouraging for me here. Firstly, that I was receiving genuine and unsolicited feedback from a potential audience, a preview of sorts. More importantly, I knew that David would embrace that staging when he had the chance to do it. It is an understandable feature of double casting, that whoever is the experiencer first, will often have a greater sense of ownership, as the "creator". It is inherent that the observer will feel a sense of having to play the "copier" for that moment. In this example though, and although there was a healthy competition between the two boys playing Will, David appreciated the offer with respect and open-mindedness.

The negative aspects of double casting are considerable though. Although the observer's brain has seen the moment from the exterior, their bodies have not experienced it. This takes time and Charlotte's concerns about time were very valid. On *Lord of the Flies*, of course, the double cast were only learning the one track each.

> Jack M - It took me a lot of focus, yes watching the composition but I had to almost just watch David to comprehend and watch exactly what David was doing. And then to get up and have any idea.

To compensate for this, as well as ending each rehearsal with two "recaps", as proposed, one for each of the casts, I would regularly record them both and make them available nightly to

our shared online account. The cast were then able to review the recorded sections, to use a film terminology – "the dailys". They were able to either consolidate their own work, by monitoring and reviewing themselves, or to do the same by watching their alternates.
(see Appendix 12 – "Playback" example)

https://ecu.box.com/s/jkqdayrqjjezm8cl19ls9co815qdpgxp

Throughout the rehearsal period it was accidental more than intentional that we did not decide which Mary and Will would be playing opposite each other in performance. This seemed to bring rewards, promoting an atmosphere of genuine collaboration, and seemed to dispel petty jealousies and biases that can occur when double casting in a drama school setting (see p. 100). By leaving this allocation until the final week, all four of the players had the opportunity to play the entire show opposite each other. All combinations were explored, and in my mind, I sincerely did not feel that one combination was superior to the other, which can often be the case. I feel that this decision to leave the matching of the two leads until this point enabled a greater sense of collaboration rather than competition between the couples. When we did eventually select which pairs of actors would play opposite each other as Mary and Will in the two casts, we selected them randomly. We called them the "London Cast" and the "Sydney Cast", a further gesture for the sake of equity and equality, rather than naming them A or B, 1 or 2. Of course, whilst not rehearsing and performing their lead roles, the alternates had an ensemble "track" to be concerned about. There was hardly a chance to entertain feelings of jealousy or resentment. The girls though noticed how they both prepared the same role together, differently to how the boys prepared their same role.

Charlotte – Emily and I were discussing the way we work compared to the boys. We actively used each other.

Emily – Nothing against you guys but we used each other, and you guys did it by yourself. We would discuss what we'd changed or go through the track together.

Charlotte – We both went through the entire track with each other, before both shows.

Emily – It was almost like we were the scene partners.

Charlotte – I didn't interact with her at all but I felt like we'd just done a show together.

Jack M – Much as I hate to say it, might be a guy, girl thing. David and I had a friendly rivalry.

Emily – I think that just depends on the person.

Charlotte – It doesn't mean that I wasn't jealous or envious of her sometimes.
I just went "… yeh, Emily" and used that to my advantage.

So, the proposed technique of double casting seemed to pay dividends aided by the proposed devices of recaps and playback. The *unplanned* circumstance of the four leads having to create, rehearse and perform two tracks each brought a great opportunity for authentic learning, and have given them valuable experience to manage professional situations in the area of understudies and swings (see p. 102). Also, by exploring the concept of experiencer and observer, they found a greater awareness of not only what they are doing on stage but of how they are being perceived by the audience (see p. 101). In terms of timing, the experiencer was able to embody a sense of organic and natural "transaction", and the observer was able feel how an audience might respond to that "tension".

TEXT

One of the cast members, Charlotte, comes from a musical background, in fact, she has a degree in Contemporary Music. She would be the first to admit that acting is relatively new to her. At the beginning of her second year, I watched her perform in a musical at a local fringe festival. I became aware that she played "actions", she "transacted" capably when she sang but when she was speaking dialogue, her transaction was poor. Technically, she was not playing

clear actions on a “target”, and worse than that, was not *listening* and *responding* reflexively and proportionately. Readers may remember the importance of this as suggested in Chapter 2 by both Sandra Bates and Jason Langley (see p. 70). When she was singing, she was relaxed, confident but when she was not, she was self-conscious, “wooden”, awkward even.

SELF-CONSCIOUS ADJECTIVE

Definition of self-conscious

1a : conscious of one's own acts or states as belonging to or originating in oneself : aware of oneself as an individual

b : intensely aware of oneself : conscious a rising and self-conscious social class also : produced or done with such awareness self-conscious art

2 : uncomfortably conscious of oneself as an object of the observation of others : ill at ease

(Merriam-Webster, 2020b)

This is not unusual, in my experience training musical theatre students, that come from such a wide variety of backgrounds and have such a range of skillsets. Most people have a fear of what they perceive as “the unknown”. In Charlotte’s case, she felt acting was unknown to her. By seeing her act well in song but not in dialogue, it was my natural conclusion that she was a *good* actress and that she has in fact, been acting all of her performing life. It would seem her rationale was that “one acts only when one speaks”, which of course, is not true. I have many examples of success in working with dancers in the same way, helping them to understand that dance is simply acting to music, using their bodies instead of their voices. They have been acting their whole lives, through dance.

During rehearsals for this project working with Charlotte, I felt a breakthrough for her and a moment of clarity for me. I think it is immensely significant to this research because it lies at the heart of an actor’s sense of timing (see p. 8).

Charlotte and David were working opposite each other in rehearsal, on the floor. They had volunteered to be the Mary and Will, while we began blocking. I was aware though, that as they were working neither of them were playing actions on each other. They were merely "reading" the words, even though we had plotted actions for every scene of the show in the previous week. In debriefing the work, I pulled them up on this point. "What happens when you do that is that there is no sense of real, truthful, organic transaction, and timing. Timing doesn't shift, every value is equal, there is no fluidity, breath. I encourage you to always *play* the script, don't ever *read* it, or if you must, only ever *read* it to yourself. I think it's because you don't feel you know what the right action is when actually it's better to play any action, rather than none. Make it your instinct to not be worried about what the right one is, play anything."

I then demonstrated… yes, "demonstrated", reading an example with Emily as a partner. Not mimicking what Charlotte and David had done but grossly exaggerating the point, reading words from the script without any meaning, a monotonous tone and sense of timing. "As soon as you stop dramatic action, there isn't anything living, in terms of timing. The timing maintains this monotony, it has no sense of life to it." Then we played it on each other well, as a second part to the exercise. Of course, there was now breath, a shifting and dynamic sense of time. "If we investigate time and give ourselves courage to indulge in silence and action and communication, we are able to learn from the experience and make choices from it moving forward".

> Jack K – This plays into what you talk about as the musicality of all scripts, how there's a rhythm and a melody (he indicates with an undulating hand). I could hear the difference compared to when you first read it. It was very monotonous, like playing one note, (Martin demonstrates on the table - a series of even, unchanging notes.)
>
> Emily – So if you're just 'reading' it, you could liken it to reading to a metronome. Actions become like the values in sheet music.

Emily's reflection was a crystallizing moment for me, and for Charlotte. As a singer, she was used to having the values of notes given to her, the rhythms, the tempo are in the music. This is true also for those from a dance background – singers and dancers are not experienced at

having “responsibility for timing”. That is not to say that there is no improvisation in singing and dancing. Jazz, of course, comes to mind as an exception, where improvisation is the norm. Improvisation in the main forms of singing and dancing though, common in musicals, is not typical. In general, young singers and dancers are not practised at “negotiating timing”, having responsibility for it. This is confronting for them and it increases their self-consciousness. This self-consciousness stops them listening to their partner, and as discussed in the previous chapter, truly listening is the key to a truthful performance (see p. 70). Their fear leads them to feel that they alone have to be “responsible for timing” when actually it can be easily found in the engagement with their partner. This may be easier said than done but the very discussion of the phenomenon seems to help young singers and dancers to have a better understanding. In the case of Charlotte and David, as the week continued, they were able to be more courageous, and truly play *on* their partner.

This is a significant discovery or at least, “moment of clarity” for me. Typically, in the judgement of poor acting, critics assess various conditions other than timing as the cause. For example, it is common for one to say that the poor actor is just “concerned about being watched” but in Charlotte’s case, she is just as “watched” when she sings and has experienced being “watched” her entire performing career. Another cause is cited that the poor actor has “difficulty with the words” but Charlotte, for example, uses words, lyrics within songs, and always has. I suggest that neither of these ideas really pinpoints the cause. It is the lack of music to guide and support them, the lack of instruction from that music, that makes the young singers and dancers feel “naked” because it is not in their norm to independently consider timing.

> Charlotte – I would totally agree with you, as someone who has studied music for most of their life, I have never thought about comfortability, that I have no control over the rhythm, minor adjustments perhaps, in length of notes. I don’t think I knew that I was scared but when you compare it with something that is so familiar to me, of course I was out of my comfort zone.

A recent graduate, who came from a strong dance background provides another example. He was so unconfident about acting that, in first year, he could barely “string two words together”.

He claimed he was dyslexic but I am suspicious of that diagnosis because he has become a very fine actor, and has proved he can read very sophisticated scripts "cold", that is, without prior preparation. I now suspect he intimidated at the prospect of having to control timing and this disabled him. I am pleased to report that he left the course as an absolute "triple-threat", equally strong in acting, singing, or dancing.

The Punctuation Exercise

This is a slight aside from the rehearsals of *Mary Bryant* but occurred in the same time period, in a class with the same cohort. It proved to be a timely (pardon the pun), example of one of the ways that the singer or dancer is able to "find the music" within spoken text. We were treating a scene from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, preparing the scene for an important assessment at the end of the semester. Each couple, playing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, had an opportunity to read and physicalise the scene on the floor. When it came time for one girl, she baulked at the opportunity, claiming that she "couldn't do Shakespeare", that Elizabethan text was simply, "too hard for her". Indeed, when she was encouraged to participate, there were symptoms similar to those we had experienced with Charlotte and David, in rehearsals the week before. She was not playing "actions" certainly, but I was also very aware that she was not observing punctuation. An example of the piece of writing was as follows –

> LADY MACBETH
>
> That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold:
> What hath quench'd them hath given me fire.—Hark! —Peace!
> It was the owl that shriek'd, the fatal bellman,
> Which gives the stern'st good-night. He is about it.
> The doors are open; and the surfeited grooms
> Do mock their charge with snores: I have drugg'd their possets ,
> That Death and Nature do contend about them,
> Whether they live, or die.
> (Shakespeare & Muir, 1951, p. 52)

However, she was delivering it, as follows –

> LADY MACBETH
>
> That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold

What hath quench'd them hath given me fire hark peace
It was the owl that shriek'd the fatal bellman
Which gives the stern'st good-night he is about it
The doors are open and the surfeited grooms
Do mock their charge with snores I have drugg'd their possets
That Death and Nature do contend about them
Whether they live or die.

Working with her, I advised that she "breathe and take it slowly", and "observe the punctuation more carefully". Even still, I was aware that any punctuation, whether comma, full stop, ellipsis, semi-colon, or colon, appeared to have the same value. As with Charlotte, because of her self-doubt, her self-consciousness, she was missing "musical instructions", that is, guides or prompts, that already existed within the text. I devised an exercise where she would have to speak and *name* the punctuation as it occurred, giving the proportionate emphasis. It was delivered as such, and seemed to have some clarity for her –

LADY MACBETH

That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold: colon
What hath quench'd them hath given me fire. full stop — dash Hark! exclamation mark — dash Peace! exclamation mark
It was the owl that shriek'd, comma the fatal bellman, comma
Which gives the stern'st good-night. full stop He is about it. full stop
The doors are open; semi-colon and the surfeited grooms
Do mock their charge with snores: colon I have drugg'd their possets, comma
That Death and Nature do contend about them, comma
Whether they live, comma or die. full stop

By observing the punctuation more closely, clarity in meaning was found, through elements of timing – *breath, pauses, emphasis*. Unconsciously, the student also played actions which is of course, another of an actor's tools to investigate timing. This student with a stronger background in singing and dancing, was more used to working in song and music, where *breath, rhythm, timing* are laid out for her. There appeared to be more "instruction", guidance for her in music. She seemed initially panicked by having to be responsible for timing, but by observing the "instructions", in this case, the *punctuation*, timing, breath, and *sense* worked. I concluded – "You rely on the music to give you instruction, and for some of you, spoken text is more confronting because you feel you have to have responsibility for the timing. You feel naked

without the music because you can't yet see the instruction. That's what punctuation is." Of course, one needs to keep in mind that the exact punctuation we see in contemporary Shakespearean publications may not have been as the playwright intended. Mary Coy, from her essay "*Pointing" to Performance: Elizabethan Punctuation and the Actor's Breath:*

> Punctuation was not yet standardized when Shakespeare's works were being published. The increased production of texts solely for reading was beginning to influence the punctuation of what had been predominantly spoken text and punctuation varies from Quarto to Quarto and from Quarto to Folio. (Coy, 2009, p. 304)

Also, although Shakespeare's text provides a good example to demonstrate this exercise, it is equally valuable in a contemporary text. This is the beginning of a particularly intense scene from Patrick Marber's play, *Closer* –

Anna	Why are you dressed? question mark
Larry	Because I think you might be about to leave me and I didn't want to be wearing a dressing-gown. full stop
	new paragraph I slept with someone in New York. full stop new line A whore. full stop new line I'm sorry. full stop
	new paragraph Please don't leave me. full stop
	(Beat) beat
Anna	italics *Why?* question mark
Larry	For sex. full stop I wanted italics *sex*. full stop bracket (I wore a condom). bracket full stop
	(Beat) beat
Anna	Was it ellipsis … good? question mark
Larry	ellipsis …Yes… ellipsis

(Marber & Rosenthal, 2007, pp. 54-55)

An economical yet complex and detailed piece of writing. By the way, we found it useful with this piece to assign the "beats", "pauses" and "silences" to either of the characters. In this

case, we estimated the "beats" belonged to Anna, as she requires a moment to regroup before responding, after tough "discoveries".

Back in rehearsals for *Mary Bryant*, I applauded the cast. In my mind, they were beginning to grasp the "power" in the control of timing. "Before you would handle spoken text like *hot potato*, get it away from me, whereas now, you can use it, to be – profound!" The cast became excited by the idea of defining spoken text the way that music is defined. It was suggested that punctuation could be given specific time values but, of course, in my mind, this would work against the desire for an outcome of "liveness" (see p. 25). Interestingly, esteemed Irish playwright Samuel Beckett toyed with the notion of setting tempos, using musical values when treating his own plays:

> He quizzed Stravinsky on the possibility of notating the tempo of the performance of his plays, and was especially interested in timing the pauses in *Godot*. Stravinsky liked the idea but thought the circumstances of dramatic production were too variable to make such directions enforceable. (Mansell, 2005, p. 230)

I am not suggesting here that music does not shift according to some variants but a crotchet, a minim, a quaver, and semi-quaver are open to far less interpretation than those of non-musical punctuation. Although their exact time values will change according to the tempo, they remain relatively accurate in proportion to each other. A pause, a beat, a silence in non-musical theatre should only be decided upon "within the moment".

It seems useful to these students of music to regard punctuation in spoken text as a guide to timing, but timing in acting, cannot be achieved from the script in totality. It is achieved through analysis of the script, but also the vitally important transaction with one's partner, and at the crux of this research, the influence of the audience.

Charlotte – Obviously, Emily and I are doing the same job but we have such different upbringings in terms of timing, in terms of training, in terms of backgrounds. I find myself so attracted to the musicality, and I find myself attracted to her ability memorise placement and steps, infinitely faster than I can. I admire that about her, admittedly, she's so used to picking up choreography and replicating it.

Charlotte's generous insight again reminds me that our students come from such a diverse range of experiences before they attend WAAPA. We have students from all over Australia, from both cities and country towns, from New Zealand, and occasionally we have international students. Most typically, 1st Year students will enter the course with one dominant skill, out of acting, singing, or dancing, and some experience in one or two of the others. During the course, some will succeed at becoming the true triple-threat, achieving an excellent set of skills in all three areas. Others will focus on consolidating their strongest area and building other areas to be in support of this. As Charlotte points out, Emily comes from a very strong dance background, although she is also a very accomplished singer and becoming a fine actor.

This research project has galvanized for me, what has been my practise for the last twenty years – into helping singers and dancers to realise their abilities as actors, through their own understandings of what *they* consider to be their "dominant" craft. In working with the cast of *Mary Bryant*, who all come from different backgrounds and skillsets, I believe I have found a significant illumination here to assist them with their acting work, particularly in the handling of spoken text and the timing of its delivery.

MUSIC

As one of the key concerns from the original production, the musical accompaniment of this production deserved considerable attention (see p. 87). Of course, David King played it live on a single upright piano, which for my taste, was much more aesthetically pleasing to the ear than the synthesized predecessor. In short, the live playing offered far more flexibility in terms of timing, as I suspected from the outset but as the project unfolded, I discovered the cost of this flexibility. I will return to discussion of this but first, as the major aspect of this thesis is about timing, it is worth reflecting on some lessons and challenges that arose along the way.

First to clarify how "underscoring" works. During early rehearsals, just as he had done in the original production, David King was trying to approximate how long various sections of the underscore needed to be (see p. 87). That is, musical accompaniment that literally underscores dialog sections often leading into, or in the middle of, songs. The aim generally,

when underscoring is being used, is for the transition from speech to song, from the spoken to the sung, to be seamless. Ideally there is no, or at least, very little, "air", no hiatus from one form to the next. In fact, it is desirable, particularly in contemporary musicals, that the audience are unaware of the transition at all. A continuity or integrity between the two is desirable. To achieve this in rehearsals, the cast usually gather around the piano, with the musical director as the point of focus. It can be laborious, requires much repetition, concentration, and patience.

The reason that this required exacting attention in this case was that we were making daily edits to the script. David King had to reexamine from the previous version of the score which was not easily readable. At that point, the score was still in his handwriting on manuscript size sheet paper. No-one had ever played the show from it, in performance. In the particular duet that we were working on, there is a caesura of singing in the middle, where dialogue occurs. The accompaniment keeps playing as underscore, until the dialogue finishes and the song "picks up" again. In our rehearsals, David King was trying to limit the necessity of "til ready bars", that is, bars that are repeated as a safety mechanism, by having an understanding of how much music was needed for the dialogue to occur.

> Liam - I think my brain was playing from what I heard on the recording, and also, I wasn't aware of how much time I have. I think this is the amount of time I have so I'll just rush through it before Will starts the song again.

Liam, however, naively rushed through his dialogue, in an attempt to help, when actually one should play it with the sense of timing that would be needed in the show. I advised him that, when the musical director and the cast are trying to negotiate the timing of underscores, you need to imagine yourself "in situ", to have an understanding of how this is going to be performed, rather than just saying words or rushing through it. David King was estimating how long it was going to take, how much music would be required. Liam needed to advise David of how much time he, the performer might need. This is the sort of negotiation that Jason Langley was discussing in Chapter 2 (see p. 76). Interestingly, when one has a live musician in the performance, this offers some flexibility in the timing. A skilled accompanist, like David King,

can subtly slow down or speed up the underscore to suit. This, of course, was not possible in the original production but certainly occurred in this one. Joseph Church in his book *Music Direction for the Stage* writes:

> In rehearsal you plan and practice the timings of cues, but when conducting you follow and adjust to the performers even if they miss or ignore what was rehearsed. Some stage performers listen actively to the music under them, and some modify their performances to correlate with the music and your cueing. Others remain deliberately unaware of any accompaniment or underscoring. (Church, 2015, p. 234)

In week 4 of rehearsals, we were faced with an unexpected occurrence that brought interesting results in terms of music or in this case, the lack thereof, and timing. Our musical director and accompanist – David King, was required to be absent for the entire week due to illness. It was necessary for us to detail and solidify every scene and song in the show but without musical accompaniment.

Liam - Working without an accompanist, when you have complete control of the timing because you're singing acapella…

Charlotte – … Slow down, speed up…

Liam - … it's been really freeing, really productive.

David Duketis – Even though we had no music and we were doing set moves; we had the lyrics. So even though it might have been slower or faster, it was based on the lyrics. I agree, it was very freeing.

Although we all felt concern for the absence of music for such a long time, at this stage of rehearsals, as David Duketis suggests, it was a very productive week. To explain the task of an accompanist in the rehearsals of a musical, they generally have to be present at the piano for the entire rehearsal, regardless of whether or not we are dealing with a musical moment. They are often *not* the focus of the work, nor is the music, particularly at this stage of rehearsals. I imagine it requires tremendous patience. Although David King's illness was neither planned nor desirable, the timing of it was fortuitous. It *could* have come at a worse time. Fortunately, by

this stage, and with the advantage of having an original cast album to refer to, our performers knew the musical material very well.

It is interesting that the cast as quoted above, without realizing, I believe, were *appreciative* of the opportunity to mine the work from a non-musical perspective. Liam's comment "control of the timing" seems like a revelation to him, again because of his relatively limited experience in working on non-musical texts. It was almost as if these young performers were beginning to understand the power of acting, in terms of, the control of timing. That is not to say that the musical accompaniment was not missed but interesting that the *challenge* became a *reward*. In David King's absence, by necessity, another interesting concept emerged.

A Sound Effects Score

It was always intended to introduce sound effects and/or instruments, played by members of the cast to accompany the musical score, and to give ambience and atmosphere to non-musical "book" scenes. In preparation I collected a range of instruments to explore, including the conventional – a bass drum, a mark tree (a percussion instrument like a wind chime), a ratchet but also sounds were made using "found" objects. The ship itself was indicated by the ring of a bell, the convicts being lashed on the ship was made by one cast member's belt, the evening campfire made using bubble wrap. The creaking of the wind machine became the creaking of the convict hulk as the prisoners huddled below deck. None of these inclusions themselves was revolutionary, in fact, I remember seeing the premiere production of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* directed by Neil Armfield, where similar effects were employed throughout. Interestingly, the text of *Cloudstreet* was adapted by Justin Monjo and Nick Enright. Perhaps our use of sound effects on *Mary Bryant* was an accidental homage to the late Nick Enright.

In the interviews that I conducted in preparation for the production, Jason Langley had mentioned the attractiveness of creating a sound scape:

> I don't think you should limit yourself to instruments. I think there are really great ways that the actors can create the whole soundscape of the piece. You can create the sound of the sea, all live on stage. You can use found objects to create the percussion, the rhythmic undertone of the piece. - Jason

However, what transpired during this week of rehearsals, in the absence of a musical director, is that we created a score of our own, a language that indicated the cueing of transitions, and even helped to set dialogue tempos. By necessity, knowing that we would have limited time to incorporate the musical director back into the production, we took responsibility for much of the timing. In a sense, when David King did return, he became part of a larger orchestration. Not only was he able to be cued by the "SFX score", it also indicated the emotional temperature of certain moments. For example, the scene leading to the hanging of two characters, we had underscored by the steady, ominous beat of a drum. This was included when David King was absent but when he returned, he immediately understood the gravitas that we were interpreting.

Liam – As we incorporated the creak yesterday and we all found the sway, I really felt part of an ensemble. Everyone is always doing something.

There is another important phenomenon with regard to the live musical accompaniment, that occurred during the performances. I will refer to this in the final section of this chapter on the performances.

DESIGN

Jack K – How physical was the original production? How did you physicalize what they went through, on the voyage?

Firstly, I feel in the original production we tried to illustrate it "filmically"; what I mean is in an illustrative and literal way, rather than a theatrical and imaginative way. Interestingly, the musical did originate from a film script, an incarnation of the narrative that Nick had been previously working on. As previously mentioned, the set design in the Ensemble production overwhelmed the space and was unnecessarily "busy" (see p. 85). The production was also unnecessarily choreographic. I do not mean it was "dancey" (not steps in time to music), but

we employed a movement director. We had this quite clumsy physical device to get from the scenes in Newgate prison to the story scenes at sea or in Australia. Cast were made to "crumple" down and "crumple" back up. Everyone complained about their knees. The next show I did with Nick and David was a musical called *The Good Fight*, where I attempted to make up for the mistakes of the past. A story about famed Australian boxer, Les Darcy, that crossed several continents, and depicted the violence of the boxing arena, and the horrors of the First World War. It was presented with just four benches.

Given the aim of achieving a chamber work on this new production of *Mary Bryant,* it seemed wise to return to this minimalist approach when considering the design and physicalisation. Also, the added benefit of a "minimalist" approach is that the style can afford the audience a greater opportunity for "suspension of disbelief" (see p. 90). The simplicity of the four benches which were used in different configurations, were able to easily transform the space, and allowed the audience to go on a highly imaginative journey. The minimalist setting, the discreet use of sound effects, and the objective voice of the narrator, all collaborated to "transport" the audience.

In the middle of the rehearsal period, after we had finished a complete blocking of the show, I decided to completely alter the stage dynamic. We had blocked every scene flat against one wall with the audience parallel to it (see figure 10, p. 138). This was not working for me, partially because it was boring, lacked depth of vision, but also due to practical reasons. The positioning of the piano would have meant that David King could not see the cast. In the positioning of him, I was keen to have him in central focus but he needed to be able to see at least *some* of the action, to receive vital cues and for the cast to do the same from him. In addition, I was concerned about the balance of vocals. Ideally in this acoustic setting, it is desirable for each audience member to receive the same, even, balance, particularly desirable for the hearing of harmonies.

Most importantly though, I was concerned about not only the actor to audience dynamic but also the audience to audience dynamic. The revision to stage the action on an angle, with the

piano upstage in the corner and the seating at right-angles to each other, totally changed the dynamic. (See Appendix 11 - *Stagewrite* plan)

The audience were now included in the stage space rather than being merely observers. Also, there was the potential for them to have a better sense of each other's responses, maximizing the potential for the "contagion effect", as discussed earlier (see p. 34). Interestingly, this configuration better approximates the stage dynamic of the Ensemble Theatre. The three sets of relationships – musician to cast, performer to audience, and audience to audience were eventually well considered (see p. 75)

> Tiana – I reflected on the staging of a production I saw last year, in a thrust staging. Being involved with the other audience members in that way was really cool.
>
> Jack K – I think having that enclosed space is actually quite symbolic of the boat as well. That trapped, contained sensation.
>
> Jack M – After seeing things in the Roundhouse, and even the Enright Studio, I'm not excited about performing in a pros [proscenium arch] anymore, and it's just clicked to me why. It is the more intimate space, where you can get the connection with the audience.

PHYSICALISATION

When we were working "on the floor", staging the piece physically, I reintroduced a concept or direction that we had used together in rehearsals for *Strictly Ballroom* and it has a vital significance in relation to timing. As a director of musicals, I attempt for every element of a production to have a relationship to the music. For me, it should appear to the audience that every element is created, stimulated, motivated, "born" by the music. Lighting cues, set moves, and choreography need to have an integrated relationship, "timed" according to the music. My experience is that young actors, again through self-consciousness, tend not to "listen" to the cues and clues within the music, that describe how and when they should move. In this case, we were in the discussion of the transitions, keeping in mind that we were staging this production with just four benches. Technically, it is desirable for me that the music informs the transitions, that everyone works together to achieve a synchronicity, a shared fluidity. Moves

need to happen simultaneously, and it is not desirable to finish the move before or after the music ends. Anne Bogart's book *Viewpoints* is useful to refer to here. One of the viewpoints, of course, is time:

> **Time**
>
> Tempo - How fast or slow something happens on stage.
>
> Duration - How long an event occurs over time; how long a person or a group maintains a particular movement, tempo, gesture, etc. before it changes.
>
> Kinesthetic Response - A spontaneous reaction to a motion that occurs outside of oneself. An instinctive response to an external stimulus. (realistic/non-realistic)
>
> Repetition - a) Internal: repeating a movement done with one's own body, and b) External: repeating a movement occurring outside one's body.
>
> (Bogart & Landau, 2004, p. xxii)

The benefit of this chamber production is that the cast were able to have control over the timing of many elements that they may not have in a larger scale production. When they had worked previously on *Strictly Ballroom*, some of them had been assigned to move pieces of set, what we call "trucks", and we affectionately called their operators "truck drivers". This experience had helped them to understand the integrity of the timing of elements when transitioning from one scene to another. As this small cast of *Mary Bryant* were responsible for all the set moves, they shared an awareness of how the set, their bodies, the proxemics with each other, needed to match, to be synchronized with the music. To assist them with understanding the different feel for each move, I direct them sometimes using musical terms themselves, such as, "legato" or "staccato". I asked them if the use of legato as a useful term, suggesting 'lyrical' or 'fluid' may be more helpful.

Tiana – Legato speaks of energy as well, continuous, so I think it is a good direction.
Liam – Lyrical sounds like "to the lyrics" but when you say "legato", we all get what you mean.

One student shared with me that this experience had led him to consider the use of terminology such as “crescendo” and “diminuendo” when preparing texts of passion. If it is not clear, this is another example of my attempting to help student actors to learn through the language of their “dominant” skill, speaking to them through music in this case. Samuel Beckett is said to have used similar terms in directing his own plays but as instructions through the text when mine seem to be, through movement:

> Midway during the rehearsal period, after the actors knew the book, Beckett held a rehearsal for tone, pitch, rhythm. Especially in the last two weeks, he tended to comment in musical terms - legato, andante, piano, scherzo, and a rare fortissimo. Often he spoke of "reine Spiel," pure play. (Mansell, 2005, p. 229)

As well as using a verbal language to instruct on timings and tempos, I tend to give visual cues, sometime consciously, sometimes unconsciously. One of the proposed techniques was, as a reminder, “demonstration”, which I continue to utilize in both production and for classwork (see p. 103).

Conducting

On *Mary Bryant* though, I was aware of another visual instruction that I use, which equates to “conducting” the action. I do not generally use this as a technique within scenes but for transitions or in choreographic musical numbers. I questioned the actors about this, furthering our joint examination in the use of demonstration – “Were you aware that I was conducting you? Giving you entry cues, pushing or reducing tempos, adjusting phrasing and dynamics?”

Jack M – We’re used to working in an orchestra or with a band. It’s the same dynamic. Someone giving that breath or dynamics is exactly what a conductor does in an orchestra (he demonstrates). It’s the same principle.
Tiana – When we’re locking as well. “And you turn and you turn.” When you do it (she gets up to demonstrate), I don’t know whether you’re aware but you’re constantly moving with the music, and that makes sense to me, we move on that bit.

This visual “prompting” seems to provide an economical way of working rather than stopping for discussion. When I work with students, I try to lead by example, encouraging them to do the same. One of the exciting parts of the work that I am able to do with students, in productions, is to work alongside them as an artist. When working on a production, my attention is as equally on what I am trying to produce as an artist, as what I am trying to teach. I have the same sensitivities and insecurities about outcomes, as any of the others in the company. Therefore, I try to lead by example, whether it is sharing personal anecdotes to encourage their own personalization (their own personal understanding of a situation), or in this case, to lead them to respond impulsively to the music.

Emily – I come from more of a dance brained background, I love being instructed on how to do things. In a dance, you’re told exactly what to do. They’re up there demonstrating it for you and you just have to copy it and put your own little spin onto it. That’s how our brains work.

Campbell – It goes with our dance training in that you’ve instructed us, in that time, to do that. Once you’ve demonstrated it, I can hear it in the music, and it guides me for the next time.

As indicated, Emily and Campbell come from a primarily dance background. They speak here of instruction from me through “demonstration”. This further supports my adoption of this as a useful technique. It is a concept with which they are familiar. I, of course, am not a choreographer, I do not know how to tell them what I want them to do with their bodies, but I know where, when, and what I want the result to be. I try to provoke them, liberate them to go with their own instincts, prompted by me. Again, an interesting connection to the work of Samuel Beckett but with vastly different outcomes in mind, I suggest. Actress Billie Whitelaw is quoted here:

> That's the way Sam and I worked for the next fifteen years. We would sit opposite each other and speak the words in unison, he in a whisper and me out loud, while we "conducted" each other, eyeball to eyeball, his face changing expression with each phrase, just like a conductor. (Mansell, 2005, p. 233)

Through sheer coincidence, I seem to have travelled a common path as Beckett, particularly regarding music and spoken text, time and timings. However, my attempt is to liberate not bind the performer, empower not intimidate, enable them to take control of timing for themselves. Beckett has been quoted as:

> A tyrannical figure, an arch-controller of his work, ready to unleash fiery thunderbolts onto the head of any bold, innovative director, [sic] unwilling to follow his text and stage directions to the last counted dot and precisely timed pause. (Mansell, 2005, p. 231)

Also-

> [Beckett] asked that a certain phrase which occurs throughout the text be spoken in exactly the same way each time with the same tone, like a note of music played in an invariable way by the same instrument. (Mansell, 2005, p. 232)

Who am I to question a master in our theatrical landscape but of course, what he suggests here is vehemently at odds with the principles of performance that I am investigating? It is accepted though that Beckett as a playwright, was fiercely prescriptive and in defense of how his plays should be performed. His work as a director seems to have been focused on the protection of his writing. In my opinion, his perspective negated a real collaboration between all the artists involved, and certainly disallowed the opportunity for specific audiences to co-create. "Rigidity" rather than "elasticity" seems to have been desired. This is fascinating, though, as he was diametrically opposed to any form of *recording* of his works, that would have offered the ultimate rigidity.

Returning to *Mary Bryant*, I did *not* and would *not* ever physically "conduct" during performances, though many times I would like to have. Liam however, made an illuminating point, perhaps without realising its significance. He thought he was merely commenting on being aware of me in rehearsal, picking up cues from me, "reading the room" as it were but I believe he was modelling the actor-to-audience transaction. Perhaps when I am conducting whilst directing, I am playing the role of the audience, responding physically as they might

respond. Therefore, if Liam continues this keen awareness, might he discover that the audience play a role in conducting a performance?

> Liam – With conducting, in the room, just because of how you work – subconsciously I'm always trying to, with this blocking part, and I know it will become less and less as we detail. In the initial blocking, I feel like I'm always trying to keep a third eye on you – does he like that, does he not, is it working? Reading your non-verbal cues. Especially with the songs.

In these two sections titled design and physicalisation, which were two key concerns from the original production of *Mary Bryant*, a concentration on a "chamber dynamic" helped to make various rewarding choices. Within the set design, we were wisely able to accommodate for a good relationship between musician, performer, and audience, maximizing the potential for interaction between them. In rehearsal, through the use of demonstration, including conducting, we achieved a physical language that was integrated and appropriate to the story telling.

Figure 10.

Performances

This final section of the production again follows a chronology, of sorts. I feel it is valuable to examine how the cast were able to employ skills and techniques learned during the rehearsal period and apply them with confidence in performance. There are also examples of new understandings given the conditions that a performance will demand.

THE AUDIENCE

Stating the obvious, the most significant influence when we moved from rehearsal to performances was that of the audience. Having stated that, however, this experiment would have failed dismally if the audience did *not* have a great influence on the outcome of each performance. In fact, every element was purposely geared to enable the most immediate relationship between the audience and the players (see p. 97). As designed for this "chamber" production, the positioning of the audience in relation to the action, the minimalism of production values, such as set, costume, and lighting, and most importantly, the use of direct address, contributed to a blurring of the line between performance and its reception. This relationship was nurtured even before the performance began. The actors, the Musical Director, and I greeted and welcomed arriving audiences into the space, enlightening them as to the story they were about to see and hear.

Campbell – I found I didn't have time to get in my head like often before a show. The nerves didn't settle in – I found that [communicating with the audience prior to the performance] helped a lot.

Liam – Yeh it was like, let's do this together, a kind of contract.

Emily - At the top of the show, when we were talking to the audience, I was really nervous but I reminded myself that we were just telling this story to these people, this true story, in this intimate way but at the end of the day, it was just us telling this story.

In this studio space, we managed to achieve a sense of intimate communion because we all shared the one space, there was little differentiation between the stage and the seating, and the fluorescent ceiling lighting demanded that the audience was lit as equally as performers. Actually, just before our first audience we tried some "wash" lighting from a couple of jerry-rigged Fresnel lamps. Almost immediately we abandoned the idea, simply because it reduced the cast's ability to see the audience, and therefore was going to reduce their ability to communicate with them. The clarity of transaction with the audience was vital, especially in the "direct address" of the narration (see p. 62 and p. 111). This unanimity of the cast to this design was refreshing and encouraging. From the mouths of the inexperienced musical theatre performer, I have often heard – "I prefer it when I can't see the audience". To me, this was a significant breakthrough for this group, when they realized that this would be limiting, and that they could perform it better if they could clearly see the audience.

> Charlotte – I found that my nerves were at an all-time low in *Mary Bryant* because I was continuously trying to change someone, or the audience.

I believe Charlotte came to find this conclusion but not before learning a valuable lesson. Here is further illumination on connecting with the audience offered by Charlotte, and then Jack M. As I have mentioned before, Charlotte comes from a background of studying contemporary music (see p. 118). In debriefing the performances, I discuss with the students some of their, what I call, "tells". That is, their personal idiosyncrasies that take them out of character, that belie the truth of what they are trying to convey, that negate the audience's "suspension of disbelief" (see p. 90). As a side note, my partner, who is Malaysian and for whom English is a second language, summarizes the quality of an actor's performance as whether or not he "trusts" them. This seems to me to be a clear and sensible addressing of what poor acting does or does not to an audience. My suggestion to Charlotte and Jack M, is that in these moments, they are breaking the audience's trust.

For Charlotte, it was a complete closing of the eyes when singing, which is of course, commonly acceptable in the singing of contemporary music or jazz for that matter. This occurred, I should

add, when she was required to sing in soliloquy, as in the character of Mary's powerful ballad of "Sail Away" (see Appendix 14). This is a time when she is in most need of the audience's support, and a strong connection with them is vital. The show is called *Mary Bryant* after all. However, due to the embracing of concepts that we had been examining with regard to performer to audience interaction, Charlotte was easily able to recognize and adjust this habit of closing her eyes. She maintained an appropriate level of "trust" with the audience.

> Charlotte – It is such a contemporary thing. We would get up on stage and sing entire songs, I mean, entire songs, with our eyes shut. It was a wonder we didn't fall over. It's terrible.
>
> Tiana – The moment you close your eyes, you're not with the audience at all. They just don't care when you're self-indulging.
>
> Charlotte – It is self-indulgent, but I don't know that at the moment. (sic) I feel myself giving in to it.

Jack's case was slightly different, but it also involved the interruption of an engagement with the audience. Jack Martin is a young actor but can play with great authority and bravado. However, if he is unsure in his work, if it lacks preparation or the appropriate amount of detail, he can be very transparent. His eyeline is inconstant, his gaze goes to the floor more than anywhere else, almost as if he were searching for clarity - sure signs of self-consciousness, a state that every actor endures but Jack is unable to mask (see p. 119). Interestingly, of his three modes or three characters even, Will, Boswell, and Narrator – this only occurred in the presentation of the latter two. I think Jack would be the first to admit that he simply put more work into the preparation of what he considered to be his lead role of Will. In the work that was less well prepared, he was actually trying to hide from the audience which is, of course, impossible. In these moments, due to his self-consciousness, his ability to "read the room" acutely is lessened, and therefore his sense of timing is handicapped.

Like Charlotte, he approached the minor criticism with open-mindedness. This process seems to have illuminated important concepts for him which I feel sure he will incorporate into his further work in performing.

Jack M. – Isn't it interesting that like Charlotte, my 'tell' is looking down or looking around, when I don't know what I'm doing. Isn't it interesting that Its about distancing yourself from the audience, when you don't know it?

THE COMPANY

As there seemed to be success in the relationship between performer and audience, so too was there between performer and performer. Some factors that seemed to promote a sense of close teamwork, and collaboration were – that the entire company remained onstage for the entire performance, they were all involved in the realization of every moment. In this minimalist production, the members of the company provided any scene changes, set moves, and even sound effects (see p 121). This brought an interesting awareness of each other, and a shared level of focus and concentration. This seemed to enable an immediate and palpable synchronicity amongst the cast.

Jack M. - The fact that we were all onstage for the whole thing, we couldn't go out the back and relax. We were all staying focused on what was happening and what the relationship was between the actors and the audience. We were all in tune with that.

Liam - Because we were all onstage the whole time, we had to be so hyper-aware of where we were all at as a cast.

Jack K. – I felt so connected to the music, and I felt I was forced to listen, because of all the set changes. The way we always had to move together, and always keep an eye out for each other, I was automatically connected to the pace of the show. At the start I struggled with the idea of legato etc. but I got used to it because you go with the flow of everyone.

Here Jack Keen refers to the concept of giving movement instructions using musical terms, as previously mentioned (see p. 133). Initially the actor in him, as he sees *his* dominant skill, hesitated at the idea of having to move musically. It is rewarding to hear him here embracing the possibility with such openness.

I have a series of exercises in class which are about increasing awareness, particularly of each other in a particular space. One for example, the class of twenty in this case, all move about the room, are instructed to stop, close their eyes, and point to one particular student. Of course, the initial attempts are often ludicrous, sometimes people guess correctly, and others concede to having no idea. As the game is repeated though, the students' awareness begins to develop, and they are able to concentrate on the relative positions of more and more of their colleagues. This awareness seems to have been well employed in this production. All nine members of our cast had an investment in knowing where and when each of them was.

Before each performance Tiana would lead a simple but effective breathing exercise.

> Tiana – With the breathing exercise, it tunes in your listening because you're tuned in to each other's breathing.

Again "breath" and "breathing" make a thematic appearance as key elements, in the pursuit of awareness, acute listening, and therefore responsive and proportionate timing. It is interesting to note also, how often the actors have mentioned being "in tune" with each other. Certainly, their singing was in tune with each other but here of course, they use the expression to mean that their minds were in tune, their bodies were in tune, their awareness was in tune.

> Liam – We've shared so much knowledge and research about the production. We've had a chance to have banter but it's like the Knights of the Round Table, everyone had an even and equal seat. We've worked here as a team…
>
> Jack K – Builds trust.
>
> Liam – The way you work is inclusive, everything and everyone is contributing to a moment of storytelling. Every element is important and leads towards that.

THE MUSIC

Tiana – I think the whole concept of having the pianist onstage or even the band, if it's only a few pieces, it makes us not only be performers but musicians because we all work together because were in the one space. It makes timing easier.

Liam – We're an ensemble…

Tiana – Everyone is hooked into each other.

Jack K – Having the composer there, I don't know if this was the case already or not, I found in the sense of actors controlling the time, so many of our scenes came from 'til ready bars and vamps. Obviously, that allowed us to control the timing more, having the composer here, he was just able to make it work.

In fact, David King was improvising at moments, sensitively feeling the tempi of dialogue sections and minutely adjusting the accompaniment. I am reminded of a comment by David King in the previous chapter, when he spoke of who is leading whom in a musical (see p. 76). Our experience in these performances, at least for some of the time, was that this became a truly shared experience. There is a fairly traditional exercise often used in acting classes, known as Mirror Work. Two actors face each other, one leads in simple movements, the other follows, attempting to create a mirror image. Ideally, the work should be so detailed that the casual observer should not know who is leading and who is following. At some point the teacher or coach will suggest they swap who is leading and following, and the final part is that they free form, without discussion, silently collaborating together, taking turns to lead or follow. I equate the experience of the company in the first performance of *Mary Bryant* with the concept of this exercise. The ten members of the company in this case, nine actors and one musician, all actively listening to each other.

Tiana – One of the things I've realized, and I think it's because of what you talked about before in *Strictly Ballroom*, is listening. It's such a key thing. That actor [who played the MC] needed to listen to the show, and how it's going so that they could step in at the right point and keep on going. It's the same as, if DK [David King] can't see the audience, which he can't. He needs to listen to us because we're the ones that are with the audience. It's just like a circle that we all need to be listening to each other.

Tiana refers to an example I have mentioned in a previous chapter and offers some clarity here (see p. 72). The actor in question was *not* listening to each particular performance, *not* listening to each audience's responses, how the dynamic of each performance was occurring. Tiana's suggestion, to my way of thinking, relates to the job of one of a team of runners in a relay race. In order for the baton to be passed, the receiving runner must approximate the speed of the runner passing the baton to them. In *Strictly Ballroom*, the performer was not aware of the speed that each performance was running at, he entered the race flat footed. Effectively, he dropped the baton. In *Mary Bryant*, as the "runners" were all in the "same race", the baton was, for the most part, passed with skill and efficiency.

It would be remiss however, in this dissertation on timing, not to discuss the differences in the two performances – the Sydney performance in the morning, and the London performance in the afternoon. Without wishing to apportion blame, from the moment the maestro David King began playing for the afternoon and final performance, I was aware that it was going to be a slow show by comparison with that of the morning. The musical director here launches the show, determines the tempo, the energy, the dynamic that begins the show, and it can be extremely difficult to change that.

Jack M. – It felt really slow. At one point in a scene I went, oh the energy is so low. I was really trying to pick it up a lot of the time. I was really aware of how slow the show was going.

Charlotte – In "Your name is on my heart" I feel my objective (she indicates a downward movement). It's losing intensity on the held note because I feel like I've achieved my goal.

Jack M. – A couple of long notes I had in "China", I had to hold forever. They're already long notes, I thought, this is going on… forever.

Doug – I tried to push the tempo.

To be fair, I think that David King, who was still recovering from illness, was simply experiencing exhaustion. The sensitive awareness of each other, cast to musician, and the reverse seemed to be lost or at least, diminished. David seemed not to be listening to the singers as well as he had for the morning performance. I am able to tell when the tempos are slow because I am aware of the singers struggling, technically unable to deliver sound for the length of the note.

However, in this performance, David King seemed to be unaware of their plight. I am reminded of how the original Mary struggled with the song "Sail Away", as mentioned earlier (see p. 89).

> Charlotte – If I'm holding a note for too long, I have prepared myself for a certain amount of breath, therefore thought, therefore note. This note goes so long that I'm aware that I'm losing breath and losing focus. I'm not changing my objective because we both realise that we're about to drown.
>
> Jack M. – Everything you've rehearsed goes out the window because you have to focus on not losing your breath.

Although it could be argued that this is a comparison between two performances, and that only those who were at both performances could notice any difference, I believe the outcome is significant. I have spoken before about how I believe a performance is a "ride" and that the ideal is to keep the audience "leaning forward" as much as possible (see p. 74). It could be said, to keep them in a state of "tension through attention". In my opinion, the first show achieved this much more successfully than the second. In the morning show, the audience were fully engaged, whereas in the afternoon, audiences were able to relax back in their seats. This is not to say it was not still a good show but that it lacked the high level of engagement that was evidenced in the morning's audience.

In order to achieve this "optimal engagement" however, does not mean that everything should be played fast, nor should everything be played slow. At essence it is about *change*, and *range*. When there is a greater differentiation between tempi, fastest to slowest, there is the greatest dynamic shift, and there is the greatest potential for change. With David King's playing, on Friday morning there was "thrill and respite", whereas in the afternoon, "thrill" was not so much achieved, so "respite" was not earned. The ride itself was not as dynamically shifting. Audiences do not feel the need to give the performance their full attention because they do not feel the threat, or the promise, of change. Without this full attention the potential for co-creation, the study at the heart of this research is lessened.

As referenced in the previous chapter on literature review, this quote from Jean Louise Balch in "Intersections of Theatre Theories of Spectatorship with Musical Theatre Practices in Performance and Production":

> … the most important element for generating audience interest is the dynamic of the actor in relationship to the spectator. (Balch & Coleman, 2012, p. 86)

I suggest therefore that in this vital relationship "interest" is maximized not only by shifting the "modes of transaction" in performance (see p. 41), but also by the "tautness" of this relationship. In *Mary Bryant*, certainly the audience's interest was successfully enhanced by the switching of modes, from "fourth wall" to "direct address", as discussed previously (see p. 139). However, it is evident that their interest was also affected by the success of the "ride"; one could say the "dynamic variation". During the first performance, it would be fair to say that the audience were more "interested" due to the variation of tempi within the "ride"; it was more *dynamic*. As there was less variation in the second performance the audience were less interested; it was less *dynamic* and "tension through attention" was decreased. It follows also that the greater the tension, the more effective the transaction between performer and audience, therefore the more potential for co-creation (see p 12). This discovery led me to the proposal of a concept that is detailed in the conclusion of this thesis.

Doug – As an audience member, and I think I have a pretty good focus as a person generally, and there are times when I'm watching a performance and then suddenly I'm thinking "Oh, I'm going to have curry for lunch"…

Liam – Or my bum is really sore in this seat.

Doug – There are moments when you just lose it for a bit and I feel like that's where it just relaxes too much. I feel like nothing is about to change so my mind feels like it can relax – I don't really need to be paying attention to this.

It is worth being reminded though, that were this a professional production, this would still only have been one of a number of previews. I have spoken of the importance of the previews before (see pp. 66-68). If we had had more performances, I would have given "notes" to the

musical director and the cast, that this was not the ideal set of tempi, nor amount of energy, and what was the resulting dynamic for the show. We would have used the experience of a number of performances to negotiate where the show "sat" in terms of timing.

Although I have been critical of this method before, commercial producers use the overall running time of performances to assess whether they are "on track" or not (see pp. 73-75). In this case, I think it is of interest to know that the second show was 1 minute and 55 seconds longer than the first. Measured from first note to last in each performance. That may not seem much but in a seventy-five-minute running time, it is more than a 2.5 percent differentiation.

One hardly needs to point out the irony, that with the recorded musical backing used in the original production of *Mary Bryant,* this variation would not have been a possibility.

Chapter Summary

1. In what ways can a production of a musical be rehearsed and performed to maximise the potential for actor – audience co-creation?

2. How does the musical theatre performer negotiate the factors that can limit the actor – audience relationship?

3. How can one best train the musical theatre student to have a better understanding of the actor – audience relationship and the challenges inherent in this form?

This reimagined production of *Mary Bryant* throughout the rehearsal period and performances, provided an excellent vehicle to examine these three key research questions. As preparation for this production, the previous chapters on the Literature Review, and the interviews about the original Ensemble Theatre production, helped to focus attention in various areas. However, other outcomes presented themselves, as articulated in the introduction as secondary research areas.

4. The documentation of a period of productions at the Ensemble Theatre, particularly during the years of 1994 - 1998 when I was Associate Director. This reflects on larger theatrical issues and trends, including those of timing in the theatre, and the manipulation of timing by actors in negotiating their relationship with the audience.

5. A detailed analysis and documentation of the original staging of *Mary Bryant*, with a view to considering how to restage it and build on those lessons. The central ones here relate to producing a more temporally flexible, breathing, chamber-style work.

6. The investigation of how the inclusion of factual/documentary content within a poetic/romantic musical work, can be a powerful tool for actor preparation. The juxtaposition of factual and fictional content aids the development of actor investment (personalisation), and through this, audience engagement.

Proposed Techniques

- Double Casting
- Demonstration
- Recaps

- Playback

Rehearsals

- Narrative device, "factualization" brought rewards to both the audience and the cast. The cast gained a sense of ownership and an intensified personalization to their characters and the story.
- Most significantly in relation to timing though, the use of direct address maximized the performer to audience relationship.
- Double Casting provided an enhanced authentic learning environment for the student training.
- Important illuminations about how singers and dancers are confronted by timing because they are unused to taking responsibility for it.
- The punctuation exercise proves to be a useful aid in helping them to see musical values with non-musical text.
- Clarification of the actor's responsibility in the rehearsal of timing underscore.
- The positive outcomes of working without the musical director (for a period), including the development of a sound effects score.
- Reconfiguring of the performance space to enhance the musician to performer, performer to audience, and audience to audience relationship.
- Articulation of both verbal and non-verbal directing through demonstration and conducting.

Performances

- The establishment of performer to audience contract, including pre-show mingling, use of direct address, and the opportunity for contagion effect.
- Student "tells" identified to assist in the performer-to-audience communication.
- Acknowledgement of synchronicities in ensemble work.
- Discussion of the pros and cons of live accompaniment.
- Suggestion that "dynamic variation" of tempi contributes to audience "interest".

CONCLUSION

In considering the conclusion of this thesis, it seems appropriate to focus on three periods – the past, the present, and the future. The past will examine the findings and conclusions of the research, specifically, the reimagined production of *Mary Bryant*, and how it became a vehicle within the project, to explore strategies and economies in the training of musical theatre students. For the present, as the time of writing this is the year 2020, it would seem fruitful to make mention of the pandemic Covid-19, particularly its effect on theatre and audiences. It is ironic that this research project is about the relationship between the two, now at a time when neither theatre nor audiences exist. Lastly, this conclusion will look to the future, with further discussion of a concept that the research has unearthed and given a name (G.O.A.L.S.) but is yet perhaps too broad and undefined to be fully developed in this dissertation.

MARY BRYANT

The success of this production of *Mary Bryant* can be discerned in several ways. Firstly, from the all-important response of the audience. They seemed attentive, engaged, and rarely restless. There was laughter, and tears, and at the appropriate places, applause in the expected places, and at the conclusion of each performance, there was the unexpected – a standing ovation. Following each showing, the audience tended to flood the stage space, not only to congratulate the performers, but to talk animatedly about this incredible story of survival. This was especially rewarding to me, a "sweet victory" because the previous version had elicited marvel at the production, especially the design but there was much less focus on the content of the piece.

Next, to address the elements that were intended to bring about a truly "chamber" production (see p. 11 and p. 97). The minimalist set enabled the storytelling to be at the forefront. Unlike the original, audiences were not overwhelmed by the impressive majesty of the design. The four simple benches allowed audiences to suspend their disbelief, as they fluidly became a

prison hulk, a jail cell, gallows, and the tiny boat that made the treacherous escape voyage. The proximity of stage and audience allowed for an intimacy between them, and a lack of theatrical lighting bypassed the usual separation also. This maximized the opportunity for clear transaction between three sets of relationships – musician to performer, performer to audience and audience to performer, and audience to audience. Again, in opposition to the original, the physical language employed was modest and discreet. There were choreographic moments, but they were born from an organic rather than a contrived or decorative sense.

Musically, the single live piano also contributed to the organic feel of each performance. As David King was central to the action, he had the ability to watch, listen, "breathe" with the actors. The development of the sound-effect score allowed the performers a greater sense of ownership and created an evocative atmosphere for the audience. Also, interestingly, a period of rehearsals without musical accompaniment seemed to give the actors a greater sense of ownership for timing. In performance, although there were pros and cons (see p. 145), the use of live instrumentation allowed a far more flexible and elastic performance than the prerecorded music of the original. It was unearthed also, that the greater the dynamic range of tempi in a performance, the more likely to hold an audience's interest, therefore maximizing the potential for co-creation (see p. 147)

By far the greatest improvement to the production overall though was the inclusion of factual information, that we began to call "Factualisation" (see p. 111). The juxtaposition between actual facts, and the romantic music and script seemed to remind the audience that this was not a complete fantasy but a fictional work based on a true story. My judgement is that this semi-Brechtian technique held their attention more as the performers switched between modes of transaction from narrator mode to characters within the story. Although this was not an intended outcome for this research it did contribute considerably to the relationship between performer and audience. The audience were kept alert by the direct address, and in this mode, the performers were able to monitor the audience more closely. They were in tune with the audience therefore tailoring their performances accordingly, landing key ideas and information. This technique clearly maximized or amplified the potential for actor to audience co-creation. Timing as the major concern of this thesis was investigated acutely.

TRAINING

The success of the production, however, was almost a by-product of the investigation of the training of musical theatre performers. Certainly, I feel the students learned more by achieving a successful result in performance but the "journey" was as valuable as the "destination". The production gave me the opportunity to apply and hone directing techniques that specifically apply to working with musical theatre performers, such as demonstration (see p. 103), and conducting (see p. 134). In the relatively short rehearsal period, these proved an economical way of working but I suggest that the performers' acceptance of the techniques was due to their familiarity with them, from my classwork. We were able to work, as in a company of performers who had already developed a level of trust, and a language that enabled efficiency.

The students learned about technical aspects of timing in performance, such as the timing of underscoring (see p. 126), and the timing of transitions (see p. 133) and their responsibilities of timing when creating the sound-effects score (see p. 129). This resulted in an increased awareness of the music and musician, their fellow performers in the space, and how the audience received and perceived moment by moment. "Listening" has been a key theme within feedback from the students, as well as "breathing", the overall effect creating a tight ensemble focused on working together to tell the story most effectively. In addition to this, the use of double casting (see p. 100), recaps (see p. 106), and playback (see p. 107), broadened the students' understanding of their contributions to the overall composition. Their sensibilities appeared to consider more intensely, not only their own performances from a subjective view but also with some objectivity, that of the audience's view.

The greatest relevance to this research though was when examining the backgrounds, experiences, and training of the students. The singer, the dancer, and the actor all have different perspectives on timing. In fact, the dancer and the singer, in this case are not used to having responsibility for timing in performance (see p. 120). They are almost always given musical elements, such as, rhythm and tempo. Their concern with timing is simply to follow it, according to the music. In acting however, timing is not predetermined. In the words of one of

my students, “Timing is not *set*, it is *achieved*.” My suggestion is that it is this sense of responsibility for timing that feels confronting, can be intimidating, to the dancer and the singer. A recognition of this and how therefore to negotiate timing, without music, has become a valuable training concept.

At the beginning of this year, a second-year student, from a strong dance background, was still struggling with convincing transactional work. I had not been able to help him succeed in this work during the course of first year. However, armed with my new understanding, and/or a better articulation of what I had previously suspected, I unveiled this theory to him. The preciseness of his calamity, that it was the actual absence of music that confronted him seemed to reassure him. Then with a further understanding that he could “find the *music* in the text” and could “find the *dance* in his scene partner”, he seemed not to have to wear the “weight of personal responsibility”. He was suddenly able to play with abandon, seemingly liberated, and it is rewarding to see him grow into a fine actor. I suspect this is the most important illumination within my research.

On a personal note, reaching the conclusion of this research has made me aware that these four years have actually been part of a much longer journey of discovery. Perhaps a career-long pursuit but certainly over the last twenty years here at WAAPA, I have come to specialize in enlightening and empowering musical theatre students, young singers and dancers, to act. They become awakened to an understanding that they have, in fact, been *acting* their entire performing lives but commonly, “on the wings of music”. By using terminology that is familiar to their dominant skill/s, I have been able to unlock and liberate them, helping them to find the same confidence in working without music. Or more correctly, to find the *music* in what once appeared unmusical.

THE YEAR 2020

Coronavirus: Australia's performing arts industry 'could be brought to the brink'

(Watson, 2020) *The Guardian*, London

Sam Mendes: How we can save our theatres

(Mendes, 2020) *The Financial Times*, London

Being one of the hardest hit industries, when will theatres reopen?

(McLoughlin, 2020) *Aussietheatre.com*

Will theatre come back? What will it look like when it does?

(Lopez, 2020) *Vogue USA*

Earlier this year, the cast of *Mary Bryant*, together with their classmates, rehearsed for a production of *Mamma Mia!* I went to watch the first complete run in the rehearsal room, usually a precursor to a move into the theatre, to "tech", "dress" and perform a production. Unfortunately, my presence flagged to the cast that this was to be their first run, and their last. The pandemic Covid-19 "stopped the world in its tracks". We were all glued to the news as regulations became increasingly more stringent. Permitted gatherings were reduced, firstly to 100, then 50, then only 2. We were forced to embrace "social distancing", "isolation", and "quarantine" as parts of our norm. Pubs, clubs, restaurants, churches, sports, cinemas, and theatres were forced to close. Live theatre with a live audience became an impossibility.

Interestingly, as our populations were forced indoors, confined to communicate with the world via our electronic devices, "liveness" was required to be re-examined (see pp. 18-22). Many binge-watched films and television series but others like me, frustrated by the arrest of live performance were investigating attempts for a new liveness. National Theatre Live, The Metropolitan Opera, and Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, for example, released broadcastings of their recorded works on a weekly basis. After the event they have become readily available but there was a time when we were comforted by the knowledge that we were watching this prerecorded event, at the same time as others across the world. This enabled us discussion within my classes, simulating a real, shared theatrical event.

Some of my students though had difficulty accepting the value of pre-recorded plays, such as those of NT Live. I had recommended that we all watch *One Man, Two Guv'nors*, as I had seen it live at the Haymarket Theatre in the West End, some years ago. When I re-watched it, I was reminded of the previous occasion; I was easily able to imagine myself as part of that audience, and to transplant myself into that very theatre. Many of my students however, felt disassociated from that crowd, they could not fathom why the audience were so uproarious with laughter, and why the actors seemed to be yelling at each other. They could not seem to appreciate what this event was, *filmed* but not *film*, *theatre* but not *live*. I suspect it tells of a lack of experience in the watching of live theatre, and a far greater experience in watching film. One has to agree though, that the premise of a dynamic co-collaboration between audience and performer is certainly impossible within this medium. It is a poor substitute.

Next came the wealth, or dearth, of live-streamed events. Across the world, whatever our time-zones, those of us in the musical theatre community, eagerly awaited the Sondheim 90th Birthday Concert, for example. Via social media platforms we all simultaneously sighed as the stream seemed to be not working but was in fact just delayed. Like many of these events, it was of course, just a series of prerecorded numbers strung together by an occasional live host, but we studied them with fascination. We were being let in to the loungerooms, studies, and bathrooms of the rich and famous. To be fair, there have been many completely live events also. Alec Baldwin's reading of Lyle Kessler's play *Orphans*, for example, produced by Sydney's fringe theatre company – Red Line.

> "It will be a world-first, completely live reading from four different living rooms around the world," says Andrew Henry. "I thought it was a way we could connect at a time when we're not connected, through our mutual love of the play."
>
> "We are all being forced to examine our own levels of compassion during this difficult time," says Alec Baldwin, who will lend his considerable talents to a "world-first" event organised by a small independent Australian theatre company this weekend. "In that regard, this play reminds us how much we rely on each other."
>
> (Quinn, 2020) *The Sydney Morning Herald*

Naturally, they had difficulties with streaming technologies also, but it was these very flaws which became our verification of authenticity. The more that went wrong, the more we felt their true "liveness", the more reward we had in participation, in witnessing in that exact moment, and sharing our responses with others in the remote audience. Our laughter and tears and applause were replaced by our virtual responses.

The sobering lesson in those challenging times, seemed to be "adapt or drown", and Ellen De Generes is an example of the latter. Her daytime talk show, which has won countless television awards, did not adapt well, and she appeared to be well and truly "drowning". Her success in stand-up comedy and television in front of a live studio audience, has been reliant on the audience response, on the engagement between she and they. During the pandemic, the show played live from her loungeroom, tried to emulate a previous in-studio format. Instead of Ellen "riding a wave" of laughter and support, her "gags" fell flat, the show appeared slow, a series of failed attempts. She appeared to be losing all confidence. It seems naïve to have expected segments that have worked in front of a live audience to work as well without them. One wonders whether Ellen would have fared better with the reintroduction of canned laughter, such as that of sitcoms from the 1970s and 1980s. Australia's Nine Network stopped airing Ellen's at home version in the middle of its season.

Other talk show hosts, with similar challenges, have adapted well though. Britain's Graham Norton reduced his show from one hour to just half of that. The interviews via a type of video conferencing (Zoom, Skype, or Facetime), are kept to a minimum, not much more than five minutes each. The show is fast paced, and Norton keeps it moving without waiting for where laughs once would have been.

Theatre, and television with live audiences were not the only victims of this crisis, when it came to the importance of audience response. Sports, especially football in its various forms, struggled without the physical and oral/aural support of its fans. Once contact sport was again permitted the National Rugby League (NRL) and Australian Football League (AFL), like other codes across the world, introduced their own form of "canned" audience response. An operator sat at an audio control desk and created simulated crowd responses for the remote

viewing public. It is worth noting though, that this was not piped for the players. They could not hear what the viewing public heard. One wonders how this affected the results of the games, with no support crowd to motivate the sportspeople. The Olympics have been of course, postponed in 2020, for logistical reasons but one wonders how an event such as this would be affected *without* crowd response.

> They've written a program where all the sounds go into a synthesiser and they have created a non-repetitive loop or a buzz track at a base level, which is what you hear during general play.
>
> As required there is an operator there who uses a foot pedal or a fader from an audio desk, that you would use to increase not only the volume of the crowd noise in the mix but also expand its intensity.
>
> As it goes up, more layers and files get added. It's not just the same noise getting louder. It actually - the software that has been written - enables it to increase in intensity or density. (Phillips, 2020) *The Sydney Morning Herald*

At WAAPA today, at the time of writing this, we began rehearsals for *A Chorus Line*. The cast and crew in the room were appropriately physically distanced, and those not in the flesh, joined via Zoom. Regardless of the challenges involved, the excitement was palpable. There was a considerable sense of occasion, partially due to the breaking our Covid-forced confinement but also in the timeliness of beginning work on this great icon of the American musical. It was immensely refreshing to be bonded together once more, all sharing an enthusiasm to get back to what we do the best – create art. No one quite knows what the fate of this production will be though. Although, we are beginning with text analysis which allows us to adhere to the regulatory distancing, one wonders what challenges face us when we begin the staging and choreography. Most importantly to my research, I wonder whether this production will ever have an audience. It is a sobering but more than possible circumstance, that for these graduands from the class of 2020, the only true audiences they will ever have experienced, were those of *Mary Bryant.*

THE FUTURE

The future for the musical *Mary Bryant* certainly looks promising. Although not yet approved by the Enright estate, as a result of this re-imagined production, we have compiled a new version of the script. It is edited down to a tight 75 minutes and of course, includes the narration. I intend revising this even further, so that it could be performed with a few as six cast members – two women and four men. This will make it more attractive to professional theatre companies to perform, who are always keen to economize the cast size where possible. The Ensemble Theatre seems a good place to start (see p. 57). The piano score is also currently being digitally transcribed, which again makes the show more accessible as a commercial or even amateur product. I feel sure that there is another life for the show, a happy outcome for this research project, and further recognition of the writing of David King and Nick Enright.

For the research itself, although this current project has been wide reaching, the applications of it and further development are still to come. In particular, my study here of time and timing with regard to the actor audience relationship, has drawn me to suggest a concept – G.O.A.L.S. That is, the "Generated Optimal Audience Load of Stimulation". This refers to my desire, as a director and theatre practitioner, to achieve and maintain within the audience, a state of "attention" through "tension". What I call staying on "the ride" (see p. 74). I compare a performance to the ride of a rollercoaster, unpredictable, ever shifting, the passengers being held in taut focus and concentration. A rollercoaster, like a performance, shifts tempos as it climbs to peaks, teeters on the edge and then plummets down. Although there may be moments of seductive stasis, by its design it is full of surprises and keeps its passengers on the edge of their seats. There are limitations to this analogy, of course. My thesis has always maintained that no two performances are alike, they are shaped by the particular time, space, and each audience. One hopes and prays that the rollercoaster has a repeated verisimilitude and does not ever come from its tracks.

Although I am not yet sure of the complete application of this concept, I suspect that there are several values or properties to explore within G.O.A.L.S. These may include "speed" and/or "tempo". In the playing of comedy, speed is often an important consideration, particularly in

farce, where the thrill for the audience can be just how fast text and ideas can be delivered by the performer. The comic works of Neil Simon or Christopher Durang come to mind, which require a nimbleness from the actor, so that the audience are in a state of surprise at the comedy, never being allowed to see the joke coming, or to get ahead of the joke. In musical theatre, the patter song, is an example of a type of high-speed, bravura performance.

It would be a mistake though to consider that G.O.A.L.S. refers only to how fast an audience can receive information. It surely must consider the slower paced delivery required for a piece of dramatic writing; one might use Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Beckett, Henrik Ibsen, or Anton Chekov as examples. Here the investigation is about maintaining tension through gravitas, weight, sometimes stillness and silence. In all cases though, just like the rollercoaster, tension and attention are achieved by the juxtaposition of shifting speeds or tempi. Little comedy is all fast, little drama is all slow. It requires the ability to explore shifting tempi to create either change in the audience, or more importantly, the *anticipation* of change. This may be an altogether separate but related property called, the “dynamics”.

Another area worth investigating, may be “quantity” or “layering”, referring to, how many simultaneous stimuli can be applied, to keep the audience engaged. If I were to use my recent production of *Strictly Ballroom* for example, I may refer to a particular scene change, a transition from one heightened, dramatic moment to the next. In my work I attempt for an integrity in the relationship of the elements – music, choreography, lighting, sound effects, and set changes (often with multiple factors such as “flys”, “trucks”, and “revolves”). I ascertain how many elements an audience can comprehend within this moment, to keep them in a state of amazed engagement.

Another property of G.O.A.L.S may refer to the “duration” or “phrasing” of elements. In the previous example, I believe each element of a production should appear born from, cued by, the music. Just as a piece of choreography is timed for the music, so too do all other stimuli. The final moment of *Mary Bryant* is a clear example.

The cast return to the “album cover” arrangement of position, that which they began the performance. It is a way of conveying to the audience that this is the conclusion, it is a book

end, the story has been told, the storytellers have come full circle. Keen viewers will note though that the timing of it is not by accident. The performers leave their narration position in "canon", then one by one take their position, whether sitting, standing, or leaning. Charlotte is the last to complete the picture. She is aware that she must not complete that picture before the end of the last note, or after it. It is as if the music is commanding her what to do. It is difficult to ascertain though, whether Charlotte is simply timing her final position with a predetermined musical phrase, or whether David King has a sense that she is sitting in time with the final cut-off of the music. We cannot discern if it is David who makes subtle adjustments to be in synchronization with her, or it is she who is anticipating him, or both. She arrives at her destination as the music concludes.

Figure 11.

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Appendices

1. Audio/Visual Recording – *Mary Bryant* (WAAPA 2019)

   Recorded: 23rd August 2019 – The London Company
2. Scene / Character Breakdown – Act I
3. Scene / Character Breakdown – Act II
4. Rehearsal Planner
5. Rehearsal Schedule – Week 1
6. Rehearsal Schedule – Week 2
7. Rehearsal Schedule – Week 3
8. Rehearsal Schedule – Week 4
9. Rehearsal Schedule – Week 5
10. Script Inserts ("Factualisation")
11. *Stagewrite* Plan
12. "Playback" example – Section 1 – The Sydney Company
13. Original Cast Album cover 1
14. Original Cast Album cover 2
15. "Sail Away" from Original Cast Album, *Mary Bryant* (Ensemble Theatre 1998)

All appendices listed above are available online at –

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