

EDITORIAL: QUEER PERFORMANCE

JONATHAN BOLLEN, ALYSON CAMPBELL AND
LIZA-MARE SYRON

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

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

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

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

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

QUEER REGIONS/GEOGRAPHY

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

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

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

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

PAST/HISTORIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

EMERGING THEMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PERFORMANCE PRACTICE, CREATIVE PROCESS AND DRAMATURGICAL AND CURATORIAL INNOVATION

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

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

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

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

NOTES

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

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr Marnie Badham (she/her) has a twenty-five-year history of art and justice practice in both Canada and Australia. Marnie's research sits at the intersection of socially engaged art practice, participatory methodologies, and the politics of cultural measurement. Through aesthetic forms of encounter and exchange, her practice brings together disparate groups of people in dialogue to examine and affect local issues. Marnie is Senior Lecturer at School of Art, RMIT University.

Jacob Boehme (Narangga/Kaurna, South Australia) is an artist and artistic director of dance, theatre and ceremony and the writer/performer of the critically acclaimed dance theatre work *Blood on the Dance Floor* (Winner Best Independent Production, Green Room Awards, 2017). Jacob is the First Nations Lecturer MFA Cultural Leadership at the National Institute of Dramatic Art and Director of First Nations Programs at Carriageworks.

Jonathan Bollen is Associate Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies in the School of the Arts and Media at the University of New South Wales. He is the author of *Touring Variety in the Asia*

Pacific Region, 1946–1975 (2020) and co-author of *Visualising Lost Theatres* (2022), *A Global Doll's House: Ibsen and Distant Visions* (2016) and *Men at Play: Masculinities in Australian Theatre since the 1950s* (2008). His doctorate was awarded for research on queer kinaesthesia in the 1990s.

Dr Lenine Bourke (they/them) is an artist, researcher and public pedagogue. Their practice is interdisciplinary and always focused on community engagement and collaboration. Currently they are the Manager at Art From The Margins, an inclusive Arts Centre working in contemporary art-making and justice. They have focused their creative practice on developing participatory nature-based experiences that engage the public more deeply in future thinking through the climate crises.

Stace Callaghan (they/them) is an independent trans-masculine, multi-award-winning writer, performer, musician and workshop facilitator. Since 1994, they have devised and performed four critically acclaimed, highly physical, queer, solo theatre productions. Stace is the co-founder of The Joy Dispensary and is passionate about making life-affirming work that unites and inspires, creating positive change in the world.

Alyson Campbell is a theatre director whose work sits mainly within the LGBTQI+ community and she has a long-time interest in performance and HIV and AIDS. She is Professor in Theatre at the VCA, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne, specialising in gender and sexuality and is editor of two collections:

Queer Dramaturgies (Palgrave, 2015, with Stephen Farrier) and *Viral Dramaturgies: HIV and AIDS in Performance in the Twenty-First Century* (Palgrave, 2018, with Dirk Gindt).

Dr Neethu Das. K is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, St Joseph's College for Women, Kerala. She completed her PhD from Central University of Kerala. Her major areas of interests include Gender Studies and Theatre and Performance Studies. She can be contacted at neethudas1992@gmail.com.

Dr Catherine Fargher is an AWGIE award-winning scriptwriter, dramaturg and teacher, with thirty produced scripts in radio, theatre and games. Her bioethical fable *Dr Egg and The Man with No Ear* was adapted by Jessica Wilson/ Sydney Opera House in 2007 and toured internationally from 2008 to 2011. It is adapted online as *Dr Egg Adventures Laboratory*. In 2018, Catherine wrote *Shawshini (Springtime in Kabul)*, with Heather Grace Jones and Taqi Bakhtyari. She is a Lecturer at Macquarie University, Faculty of Arts.

Jonathan Graffam is a Research Assistant and sessional Tutor at the VCA, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne, where he recently completed a Master of Fine Arts (Theatre), examining the dramaturgical strategies used in staging fat-positive queer performance work. He continues this research at Monash University in a PhD project titled 'Fat Dramaturgies: Queer Strategies and Methodologies in Staging Fat Activist Performance'.

Bec Reid (she/her) is an Australian-based performer, producer, director and choreographer. Bec encourages people to experience their worlds in new ways through highly physical, participatory, practical and celebratory actions. In 2017–18, Bec was a Fellowship recipient from the Australia Council for the Arts. In partnership with Tristan Meecham, Bec leads *All The Queens Men*. With Ian Pidd and Kate McDonald, Bec is the Founder of *Everybody NOW!*

Adelaide Rief (she/her) is a creative producer, facilitator and General Manager of *All The Queens Men*. Across the past ten years, Adelaide has built a practice specialising in public and participatory art, community engaged place-making and creating frameworks for artists' development. She is an alumni of Next Wave's Kickstart Helix programme and the Australia Council for the Arts Future Leaders programme.

Nathan Stoneham is an artist who has been creating contemporary, socially engaged arts processes and performances with groups across Australia and the Asia Pacific region for fifteen years. Recipient of the Australia Council for the Arts Kirk Robson Award, Nathan's practice explores transcultural and queer approaches to making art and friends, and brings people together to collaborate on different ways of being together.

Liza-Mare Syron has family ties to the Biribay people from the Mid-North Coast of New South Wales. A theatre-maker and academic, Liza-Mare is a founding member and Senior Artistic Associate of Moogahlin Performing Arts. She is currently an Indigenous

Scientia Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales and has recently published a book on the *Rehearsal Practices of Indigenous Women Theatre Makers: Australia, Aotearoa, and Turtle Island* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

James Wenley (he/him) is an ace Pākehā theatre academic, practitioner and critic. James was awarded a PhD from the University of Auckland and is a Lecturer in the Theatre programme of Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington. James makes theatre under his company Theatre of Love, most recently *Dr Drama Makes a Show* (2020), and *Dr Drama Makes a Show With You* (2021). James is also the editor and founder of TheatreScenes.co.nz, a platform for reviews and commentary on Aotearoa theatre.

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