

Practice as research in musical theatre – reviewing the situation

Zachary Dunbar, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of
London

Abstract

The convergence of conservatoire-style training with academia has witnessed an explosion of practice as research (PaR) projects – or what in some academic quarters constitutes research, which is practice led or practice based. During the last five years, we have seen a high water mark in PaR pursuits within musical theatre training and performance. Yet, despite the benefit of research paradigms and publications from adjacent fields, practice-based musical theatre researchers often find themselves somewhat adrift when it comes to understanding the ways in which PaR is formulated, understood, and indeed practiced. This article offers both a general overview of the situation that PaR musical theatre currently finds itself in, and also provides scenarios of what that research might look like. As a springboard for the article I use Robin Nelson’s recent examination of the field, and particularly the fundamental trope of ‘doing-thinking’ which is formulated in and through the notion of praxis (2013: 40). From here my discussion will develop in two ways. First, I look at various settings in academia in which I have encountered PaR, occasions that have given rise to issues about the ineffability of the art form and the intentionality of practice during research. Second, I focus on the nascence, resistance and potential of practice-based research in musical theatre. Crucially the inherent complexity of musical theatre offers us a chance to reflect on the dyadic concept of ‘doing-thinking’. To that end I propose taxonomic distinctions

that may help convert an essentially dialectical concept into an analytical tool for the appraisal and evaluation of musical theatre PaR.

Keywords

practice as research

practice-led

practice-based

doing-thinking

Praxis

multimodal knowledge

performance as research

interdisciplinary

With a mob on his tail Fagin the master pick pocket in the musical *Oliver!* theorizes about a crime-free life: a wife?, a classy job?, a regular nine-to-five? Alas, these alternatives to a criminal practice propose such modest gains: ‘...I think I’d better think it out again!’, as his song refrain goes.

Throughout history academics and theatre practitioners have ‘picked a pocket or two’ in the name of creative scholarship. In recent times, however, none will have failed to observe the mob-like effect of practice-based research projects. They have spread to every quarter of academia, especially where conservatoires have converged with research universities. There are further incitements that occasion my ‘thinking out loud’ here the prospects of Practice as Research (PaR): a year-on-year growth in PaR interest in musical theatre; a correlation in the number of supervisees who conduct such research at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama; my encounter with PaR during my own Ph.D. studies and a re-encounter in a collaborative composition project. In addition, a critical mass in the practice-based research outputs within related fields such as experimental music theatre, new opera, music composition and performance training, and voice and movement studies have caused me to ponder why an essentially skills-dense vocation such as musical theatre has yet to produce a similar density of practice-based outputs. Most recently, following through on this query I curated an international musical theatre conference in 2013,¹ on the theme of practices, with the possibility of generating papers for a future special issue on PaR in this journal.

In this ‘review’ I will provide a brief overview of PaR as it relates to musical theatre.² I will use Robin Nelson’s recent examination of the field, and particularly the

fundamental trope of ‘doing-thinking’, which he argues is manifested in *praxis* (2013: 40). Like Fagin, my reflective turn is all part of ‘thinking out again’ PaR, particularly the various debates and challenges that I will develop in two discussions. The first include various settings in academia in which I have encountered PaR, occasions that have given rise to issues about the ‘ineffability’ of the art form and the ‘intentionality’ of practice during research. The second discussion focusses on the nascence, resistance and potential of practice-based research in musical theatre. Crucially the inherent complexity of musical theatre offers us a chance to reflect on the dyadic concept of ‘doing-thinking’. To that end I propose taxonomic distinctions for ‘doing-thinking’ that help us convert an essentially dialectical concept into a discussable analytical tool for the appraisal and evaluation PaR.

Throughout this article I will refer to PaR interchangeably as practice-based or practice-led research. Opinions vary minimally in its current traffic within academia, more a matter of frequency of use and research settings than unique inflections of meaning.³ I also make note, at the outset, of a parallel mob of readers who at the moment that I speak of the relationship of practice to research demand recognition of the dialectic that construes research both in its orthodox and non-orthodox modes as a practice, or *research-as-practice*. The practice of least resistance is to skulk Fagin-like behind a discussion in this article where I introduce the notion of the research self (in the section, ‘PaR Model’) and taxonomic divisions (in the section ‘Towards a Taxonomy of Doing-Thinking’).

PaR: Multimodal definition and its challenges

According to Nelson PaR ‘involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry’ (2013: 9). Three aspects to take note of in this definition include, first, the primary and unimpeachable position of practice that takes place in and through research. Second, research is likely to be multimodal; that is, it may incorporate several distinct or coterminous disciplines. Third, practice represents the chief evidence brought forward in the evaluation of research outcomes and of the quality of new knowledge.

When artistic practice is incorporated within the fact-finding or analytical procedures of scholarship, practitioners find themselves having to negotiate several challenges, the shored up title of Nelson’s book, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (2013) implies the deeply entrenched perceptions, risks and attitudes that accompany the research journey. During the initial stages, an artist pursuing PaR will normally experience forms of disorientation: concepts and practices that feel at home, cosily embodied, or easily explicable suddenly feel misplaced and in need of rethinking, especially when subject to the scrutiny of others outside their home field. These adjustments are further complicated by overlapping sensations of doing and of thinking, and by routine boundary crossings of disciplines. While enduring periods of reorientation, a researcher is required to become conversant with a number of critical frameworks and to assay those systems of thinking. The multimodal nature of the work may also require different modes of communication (writing, performing, digitalizing, etc).

On a basic level, the normative tasks require on some level the ‘designing, conducting or reporting [of] research’ (Haseman 2006: 1). Daunting as it may seem, artists who engage with research engage with the *art* of research. They encounter ways of doing and thinking that at once feel familiar and also unfamiliar. They also produce outcomes which, like in art, challenge and in some cases subvert deeply ingrained knowledge and the communication of knowledge. So what might this beehive of thinking and doing look like in musical theatre? I propose likely multimodal scenarios, and focus on issues that arise in terms of versatility, accreditation and the confusing typology of what may constitute practice and performance.

A multimodal scenario

A performer interested in British Pantomime wants to explore the complicated interface of singing and of acting in this form of musical theatre. He or she conducts multimodal research that includes aspects concerned with embodying a cross-gendered role, the use of breath as an actor versus the use of breath as a singer, the emotional resonances in the tonal aspects of the song versus the often ironic objectives signified in the lyrics. A couple of critical positions scroll down from these practice-based concerns:

performativity and gender issues, Estill voice training, Stanislavski-based principles underpinning ‘truthfulness’, and standard musicological analysis. Moreover, the researcher may engage with the possibility of mixed qualities of presentation (in order to demonstrate outcomes) and dissemination (in order to articulate the research enquiry).

For the project described above, mixed modes of critical reflection, of articulation and presentation are conceivable. The critical framework may overlap and draw

simultaneously on what Stanislavski practised and what Estill teaches. The way to present data may range from interviews with musical theatre directors on what happens when they try to engage dramatic obstacles that pertain to text and song, to ethno-autobiographical voice-overs that disclose the researcher's real-time observations of an actor who transitions from acting to singing. The presentation of the research findings may imbue the research knowledge with a live-ness: the researcher may present performances that demonstrate the bridge between dialogue and song in front of a live audience, or offer segmented archives of the same event in a rehearsal space compared with a performance space.

Versatility and adaptability

A challenge for the musical theatre practice-as-researcher working in a multimodal framework is the necessity to maintain versatile and adaptable intellectual and practical excellence; that is, the qualities of rigour and critical reflection that pertain to traditional theory-based theses combined with a sense of open-endedness, or strategically thinking (and playing) outside of the box.

Consider, for instance, a person researching the socio-political aspects of slavery and the historical reception of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935). A theory-based thesis may focus on writing a diachronic history and will use primary and secondary sources within a critical framework. A practice-based researcher who explores the same subject may grapple critically with historiography. At the same time, knowledge derived from historiography may inform the design and execution of practice. As an example, an Afro-American reconstructs a performance scenario of racial stereotyping. The purpose is

primarily experiential: to get ‘under the skin’ of colour blindness and racism. Informed by the various socio-political settings that impinged on the historical restaging of *Porgy*, the practitioner inventively reconfigures historically informed performance settings by using scenes from the operatic musical. During the process unpredictable feelings arise wherein issues of racial parody complicate her reading of the experiment. Consequently she decides to reread the historiographical information and redesign her practice. Multimodal PaR simultaneously generates intellectual, experiential, practical modes of engagement; a simple research-based action may cause a seemingly infinite regress in the dialogue between practice and theory.

Accreditation and validation

Boundaries are crossed in multimodal research including conceptual, practical, spatial and institutional ones. The criteria for what passes as appropriate research-practice often reflect on levels of tolerance for methodological pluralism, and how explicitly this tolerance is expressed locally, such as in supervision and in the broader culture of research. During a recent seminar I was asked by an anxious student completing his practice-based Ph.D. thesis whether he might be able to consult standardized criteria for appropriate practice. His supervisor, also in the room, was quick to dispel the anxiety: ‘you’re doing fine’. That tacit agreement, in the room at least, implied that bespoke in-house rules were in operation.

In the same seminar, a composer highlighted the issue of offering ‘original’ composition as evidence of new knowledge, the argument here, by way of a challenge, is that compositions, as evidence of practice, embody knowledge in an especially valid way.

The larger issues looming in this case are culturally and pragmatically interrelated: the quality and type of accreditation that the research outcomes are responding to; whom the practice is meant to enlighten (i.e. its readership); and in what form the outcome is expressed so that the new knowledge generated by the research is communicated properly, compellingly and meaningfully to a research community.

In musical theatre, assuming a project is interdisciplinary, tensions regarding validation normally arise in a situation where a researcher self-identifies as a specialist (actor, singer, dancer, director, composer, instrumentalist), and is *also* required to provide equivalent excellence of, or at least masterful conversance with, any of the adjoining specialties in his or her interdisciplinary research.

Practice and performance

A researcher new to PaR may well ask what might conventionally stand for ‘practice’. Or, more technically, ‘to practice’ – that is, the formulation, iteration, consolidation and reflection that occurs more or less simultaneously in, say, a rehearsal process: such as when a dancer *practices* a set number of moves, a pianist *practices* a song with a singer, an actor *practices* a scene with a director. And in view of the practical act, how might this activity be different from ‘performance’? – an event whereby modes of spectatorship and experiencing are present during a mimetic or didactic act, in a virtual or real space that provides (what psychologists may describe as) an environment that is contextually richer than a rehearsal space?

The twists and turns in the discussions of practice and performance are part of several overlapping and historical discourses, such as the ‘practical turn’ in scholarly

research during the 1980s and 1990s, which gave rise to the emergence of PaR.⁴ The concept of practice and of performance are further complicated by the generalized applications of the ‘performative’, which belongs to a formal theoretical framework (*pace* J. L. Austin or Judith Butler), and also acts as a descriptor for anything to do with performance or performing. There are various localized and discipline-specific discourses on the topic of practice and on performance, but it is widely accepted that performance is a subject that can be subsumed in PaR methodology.

PaR model

Anything with a label of ‘research’ attached to it implies that there is a great deal of thinking and reading involved – real brainy, superhuman intellectual feats. PaR adds another dimension to this common (mis)conception. In fact, the *practice* of doing and of thinking implies a collapse in the Cartesian distinctions about mind- and body-generated knowledge: ‘I think therefore I practice *and* I practice therefore I think’. For the musical theatre practitioner, doing-thinking is a process that seems to be already embedded in the concept of the triple threat – the integrated embodiment of singing, acting and dancing. PaR in a sense is about simultaneously doing the walk, the talk and the thought. How might we perceive and describe the kinds of knowledge that result from this configuration?

According to Robin Nelson, three interlinked categories of knowledge underscore these actions: ‘know how’, ‘know what’ and ‘know that’ (2013: 36–47). As Nelson’s model (see Figure 1) illustrates, these categories are dynamically configured or triangulated, and are thus constantly in dialogue or indeed overlapping. At the centre of

the epistemological dialogue is *praxis* – the knowledge-generating activity that happens when theory converges with practice (2013: 37).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

Know-how

This state of knowing is defined by Nelson as ‘experiential’ or ‘haptic’. It is knowledge that has built up inside us, so to speak, through formal practice and performing. As such, it is also considered to be embodied, tacit or unconscious, and yet somehow potentially communicable. Nelson offers an example of riding a bike (2013: 9), which relies on a host of procedures such as balance, vision, the mechanics of pedalling, sense of torque and even a suspension of faith in the laws of physics while carrying out the act of balancing on two wheels. Knowing how is embedded in the iterative level of motor skills and encoded in bio-physical and cognitive levels. For an organist who plays a five-part fugue, a racing car driver in a sophisticatedly computerized Formula One car, or a performer who mimes a horse in the show *War Horse* (2007) night after night, the know-how is evidenced on some level through organized, purposeful and expressive actions (or indeed purposeful chaos, disorder and non-linear actions).

Similarly, a musical theatre performer, in the middle of performing, for instance, Diana’s monologue-song ‘Nothing’ from *A Chorus Line* (1975), would fail to accomplish the fictionalizations and mimetic acts that the song demands without having embodied or practiced, in a structured way, the exterior and interior sensations and images prompted by the text. Yet, if you ask the actor playing Diana to tell us how she disassociated her

real self from the character singing the song, she would have difficulty in articulating the whole rehearsed or performed event, let alone a step-by-step account of all the performance aspects. In a nutshell, ‘knowing how’ constitutes an understanding that represents more than the (discursive) sum of (experiential) parts.

Know-what

The musical theatre performer, however, may be more articulate about ‘knowing what’. When she thinks about her performance (as ‘informed reflexivity’ (2013: 44)), her artistic practice comes to the fore as craft, or a set of actions for getting the desired effect. From a performing standpoint, her description may include the technical aspects of how an actor can distinguish between diegetic to mimetic actions; in terms of singing, know-what involves the technical labels for negotiating the position of the larynx, and also lyrical and speech-type intonation; for movement, the mechanics of archetypal movements that physicalize the active verbs in the song; for learning the notes, the performer might utilize the pedagogy of sight-reading skills and music theory principles. In the way that Milton expresses the intelligence of Adam in *Paradise Lost* (1667/1674) by the act of naming things, ‘knowing what’ involves the manifestation of intelligent knowledge by comprehending and naming the systematic principles that underscore a set of practices. If you can talk the ‘nuts and bolts’ of what you do, the chances are you are communicating the know-what aspects of your practice.

Know-that

Were we to ask the musical theatre performer about the formal methods or concepts that underscore her craft and interpretation, we are likely to encounter the ‘knowing that’ aspect of her knowledge. This is defined in Nelson’s model as ‘conceptual frameworks’ or ‘cognitive propositions’. The musical theatre performer’s explanation or description of her practice may use language and concepts that are formally connected with actor training (Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov, etc.), singing methods (Bel Canto training, Estill voice techniques, etc.), movement-based processes (Lecoq, Laban, etc), or even contextual (history of Broadway and song writing in the 1970s). The formal nature of such philosophical or practical systems of thought affords the practical researcher critical engagement with, and further cognizing of, ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing what’. This form of knowledge also lays the foundation of a shared discourse for other practitioner-academics who may not necessarily understand the metaphorical or analogical language of the musical theatre practitioner.

Nelson’s model offers an efficient way to classify domains of knowledge that are perceived to be dynamically interlinked. One might argue about a fourth category in the proposed fields of knowledge, which has to do with the nature and place of the ‘knowing self’.

During self-reflexivity the experiential aspects of research influence the degree and intensity to which the researcher perceives categories of knowledge. The ever-changing ‘researching self’ amounts to a special dynamic or intervention in the tri-partite schema of knowledge. That exceptionality implies that a researcher, when doing and thinking, is also enacting or activating embedded legacies, by which I mean embodied knowledge that is instantiated or coming-to-be during research. Heraclitus’ aphorism that

one cannot step into the same river twice is an apt illustration.⁵ Not only is the river (i.e. research) ever-changing. So too is the agent that steps into the river (i.e. the researcher). A musical singer, actor, director or writer, while performing or practising through research, experiences the self as a concretion of stock and trade methods, a mixture of home-grown aphorisms, long-term practical skills, formed and ever-forming schools of thought, unconscious gestural or phonetic ticks, and politically tinged ideologies. How, why and when these concretizations are manifested in, or intervene during, research signify an evolving research self, an investigatory phenomenon that observes the research and is also being constructed by the research.⁶

Encountering doing-thinking: Issues of intentionality and ineffability

Doing and thinking in PaR inevitably leads to a discussion of the intentionality of research and (some may argue) the apparent ineffability of artistic practice.⁷ In this section I contextualize the discussion in my attempt at a practice-based Ph.D., my experience of teaching postgraduate practice-based research, and a recent practice-based project exploring collaborative composing.

The life as a Ph.D. student holds up attractive opportunities for artists who are drawn to intensive reflection alongside practicing the activity they are most passionate about; in this scenario research offers a protracted time to grow your craft, to get better at what you do, to innovate, to survey books, musical scores, archives and digital recordings, and to be among specialists, academics and like-minded artists. When I applied to do a practice-based Ph.D. I was interested in adaptations of ancient Greek tragedy and modern musical theatre. But more importantly, I also wanted time to create and produce a new musical!

Thus I speculated that my time would be spent in much practice while the ‘thinking’ side would eventually sort out a theoretical position and language with which to describe my creative process.

Anyone who has naively ventures to write a musical based on a few tunes and a great idea for a story will know how quickly the concept of a new musical starts to slip from one’s grasp. Similarly my experience of the slippery slope off of ‘Mount Ph.D.’ began with such a blinkered intention. I overlooked the necessary imbrication of theory and practice. I perceived creativity as my bricks and mortar, and theory as a bi-product. Anna Pakes, in her critique of knowledge generated by practice-led research, encapsulates the necessary ingredients of practical research as having ‘clearly articulated intentions’ alongside ‘documentation of process, presentation of the artefact and reflection back on the object’s relation to the initial questions and the broader artworld context’ (Pakes 2004: 4; Freeman 2010: 5). My eye-on-the-prize type of end game did not fit the remit of a PaR project. I was further flummoxed by the apparent ineffability of the process of adaptation, which I was meant to explore: what formal language could articulate the ‘subjective’ experience of composing and writing? I had not given time to survey or evaluate a theoretical language (phenomenology?, narrativity?, postdramatic theory?) that might serve as a conceptual framework through which I would be able to analyse and articulate my practice. I had not conducted the appropriate amount and quality of critical thinking to match the complexity of writing a new musical, and had imagined instead that the practice would magically show the way.

Eventually, having ‘reviewed the situation’ a la Fagin, I realized I was actually more interested in researching the historical reception of ancient Greek tragedy as a

musical art form. Understanding the practice of staging tragedy historically, and not experientially, led me to write a historiographical thesis instead of a PaR one.

Postgraduate practice-based research

In postgraduate research, students are often enriched by the experience of PaR because the research is perceived as a means to become a better performer or practitioner. The search for a research enquiry or question is often prompted by what the individual ‘observes’ to be missing in a discourse, in scholarship, in the industry or in their own process or skills set. Such topics may run the gamut of ‘what makes a successful musical?’, ‘what is truthfulness in performance?’, ‘how do I grasp the notion of flow?’, ‘how do concepts of play relate to preparing for a role in a musical?’, ‘how does breath unite singing and acting techniques?’, ‘what forms of non-western voice training help non-English speaking performers?’, ‘how does one experience riff in a song?’, etc.

Students accept in principle the notion of doing-thinking in PaR work but instantly perceive the theoretical reading as a daunting and alienating task – something that takes them away from instead of closer to their practice. It appears to them almost superhuman to translate and correlate theories such as phenomenology, aesthetics, performativity, etc., into the language and experience of what they do when they do what they do. What normally ensues are periods of intensive doing, accompanied by a blind hope that a build-up of data and the sheer blood and sweat of practice will accrue enough meaning to generate a way of thinking and articulating new knowledge.

When the research appears to fail or lose its bearings, the discussion inevitably focusses on the intentional aspect of the research: how much was the final outcome of

practice – the *new* method, the *new* composition, the *new* production, the *new* form of drama therapy – privileged over the process of testing, analysing, or formally probing the research enquiry? Students will have been challenged about language: how to describe or explain that unsayable ‘thing’ that I do or experience, such as the seemingly ineffable aspect of being ‘in the moment’ when acting, that ephemeral moment called ‘inspiration’ that comes to the practitioner when they compose a melody or conceptualize a dance, or that liminal emotional state between speaking converts into singing and vice versa? No ready-made formulas exist in academic research to resolve these issues. It is my experience however that a researcher achieves some sort of resolution, not only to do with issues of purpose and of language but with a working dialogue between theory and practice simply through the sheer regular practice of doing and thinking it through. Practice in itself may not make perfect research, but the practice of research will tend in that direction (see the section, Praxis: The past and the present).

Practice-based project

A few years ago, following a production of an original musical, I initiated a project to investigate integrative and collaborative processes in song writing. In my musical I explored anthropomorphism, that is, actors embodying animal-like qualities. My role in writing the musical followed a conventional approach that was to work conceptually on ideas and characters that were already formulated in a libretto. Following the production, a colleague asked me whether, as a composer-writer, I had considered working directly with the actor. By taking part in a more devised/collaborative process, especially with the intention of integrating movement, voice and action, would a different type of song

emerge? As the basis for a research exploration I put forward the case for investigating song-writing in a collaborative-devised setting, in an exchange between actor and composer. The main research concerned the nature and method of authorship, composing, as well as what constituted moments of inspiration. I was eager to get into a studio and start playing around, to just think and do, and see what would happen. However, without the interplay of ‘knowing what’ (identifying key methods and operations) alongside ‘knowing that’ (conceptual framework), my practice soon lost its epistemological bearings. I also lost sight of my original intentions. Let me review the situation.

The research evolved in three phases. Phase one gathered together three actors, a director who more or less ran the workshops, and me, who was mainly behind a camera recording events. If it was my intention to test collaborative/devised processes, that goal was overwhelmed, first, by the exponential amount of interdisciplinary issues generated through the various activities that included movement, acting and singing. This situation was further exacerbated by my somewhat confused role as both archivist-observer and composer-writer. In phase two of the project I streamlined the process and worked solely with one actor, with a focus on breathing, sound and systemic movements. I generated the results I wanted and proceeded to produce songs – a song cycle in fact – ‘inspired’ by the material generated between me and the actor in the practical studio. As I narrated the methods and processes I used in a video, it dawned on me that I had again lost sight of the intention of my research. I had not demonstrated or articulated, through a critical framework, the process by which the practical studio work transitioned into composition. It was my view that the compositions proved that I ‘experienced’ collaboration. In fact I

had yet to explicitly interrogate modes of authorship, composing or indeed the ontological basis of inspiration.

PaR in musical theatre – nascence, resistance and potentiality

As with Fagin, we might ask up front: what's in it for musical theatre artists to conduct PaR? Don't we have enough to do just learning the complicated dramaturgy of writing songs and music without submitting ourselves to neo-cortical gazing? Isn't the life of acting *and* singing *and* dancing already a performance process mathematically squared without having to further ramp up matters with theories? And isn't the oft-mentioned instruction to just 'do' and stop thinking one of the failsafe mantras for unblocking a performer? Isn't all that research going to clog things up?

Diarized, anecdotal, aphoristic and autobiographical experiences of practice used to pass as critical reflection in musical theatre studies. Current scholarly research and publications in musical theatre studies however have framed this knowledge within established critical reflection and current shared modes of articulacy: historiography, pragmatic-anecdotal, musicology and critical theory (see Symonds and Rebellato 2009). Yet the trend in musical theatre scholarship would suggest that PaR represents a new phase. As musical theatre training and research within the Higher Education sector increasingly converge, and as experimental music theatre, opera and related theatre studies such as sound studies reach a substantial mass in their practice-based research outputs, is it not timely and significant that an essentially skills-dense vocation such as musical theatre takes formal scholarly account of its practices?⁸

What's in it for the musical 'pick-pocket'? Depending on what pockets are being picked, PaR in musical theatre can perhaps open fresh discourses in re-identifying, defining and problematizing the field of musical theatre, much like the way the performance- and practice-based turn in research unblocked the incessant inwardness of scholarship in the field of ancient Classics and in literature studies. Moreover, PaR projects may deepen and enrich three domains of knowledge in musical theatre: *pedagogy* (methods used in teaching or coaching acting, singing, voice and movement), *process* (creativity and learning strategies in rehearsal and performance mode) and *performance* (the live, simulated or virtual co-presence of experiencers and performers). In the field of practice-based music itself, leading research questions such as 'how is musical performance "creatively embodied", or how musical performance practices "vary across different global contexts, idioms and performance conditions"', present viable leads for musical theatre performance practices.⁹ More interesting, perhaps, and potentially ground-breaking are the PaR paradigms in the psychology of music performance, sports science and artificial intelligence.¹⁰ Research breakthroughs in these correlative arts and practices have not only enhanced and deepened experiential/performative knowing in music performance.¹¹ These sorts of research activities have also brought new areas of discourse in to the conceptual and methodological language of performance training.

Praxis: The past and the present

People enter into research for a whole host of reasons. However meaningful, curious, niggling, intuitional or passionate those reasons, the research road taken – if sustained with academic rigour – leads inevitably to the development of a kind of *praxis* that constitutes the integrative momentum, or ‘ebb and flow’ between theory and practice. This dialogic relationship is of not a recent historical phenomenon.

The purposeful dialogue between theory and practice was amply evidenced in landmark productions throughout theatre history, particularly in re-imaginings of ancient Greek drama among the patrician academics of Renaissance Vicenza, the mid-nineteenth century Prussian royal court of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, and the inter-war ‘neo-classical’ experimentations in Paris. Wagner’s absorption of political ideology influenced his early operas as well as immersing him in some hot political water. Later the philosophical writings of Schopenhauer directly shaped Wagner’s compositional views that led to experiments with musical drama. A common feature of these prototypical PaR projects was the close alliance of theoretical speculation regarding music, theatre, space and even science. It also involved purposeful testing by artists of these theories through their creative work. The synesthetic, eclectic and anarchistic impulses in twentieth-century modernist movements also represented deliberate attempts by practitioners to break down or ignore boundaries between music and in theatre. From Meyerhold to Cage, from Cocteau to Goebbels, thinking outside the box meant privileging theory as a formal part of creating new work (Dunbar 2012). Three responses below by current Ph.D. researchers at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama were prompted by my request for a reflection upon their *praxis* in action. Insofar as they are staged interlocutors with future

musical theatre research in mind, I suggest how their unique mode of doing-thinking may transition into a musical theatre environment.

Researcher 1: Hannah Ballou

The way I ‘do praxis’ is to connect my critical framework to my devising process via daydream and reverie. That is to say, I read around my enquiry... then I come across a theoretical concept like feminist fluidity in Jackie Willson or animalséance in Derrida and my performance-maker brain will inevitably drift toward the possibilities of testing, proving, disproving, parodying, developing, challenging, or otherwise problematizing that concept on stage. I jot down that performance proposal (it may just be a drawing, or a fleshed out idea for a game, song, joke, etc) alongside my notes on the theory. I mark it with a little drawing of a lightbulb. Then, when the time comes to leave the library and go into the studio to make work, I have a large collection of performance proposals (lightbulbs) to test in the devising rehearsal room that are born directly from my engagement with the theory. These form the framework of each new performance I make. (2013)

The lynchpin in Ballou’s praxis is manifested through a sense of play (or ‘lightbulb-ing’), which freely operates through her engagement with theory. For newcomers to PaR the encounter with theoretical writing is characteristically a daunting one; much like the ancient traveller to Delphi, the experiencer is overwhelmed by enigmatic sayings and

obfuscating vapours given off by the alien-sounding language. As Ballou illustrates, concepts, even in their discursive mode, can be useful as mnemonics or prompts during the process of generating a methodology.

A composer investigating song-writing and dramaturgy in new musical theatre may be similarly enjoined to play. Having surveyed the ‘know-what’ aspects of song-writing (represented by books and articles on ‘how to write musicals’, and reflections on craft by masters such as Oscar Hammerstein II or Stephen Sondheim), the musical theatre researcher identifies a key principle such as ‘particularization’ (i.e. a process of detailing dramatic qualities or journeys of character in a song). He or she may test this principle of character-specific writing; ‘testing’ can also mean ‘enacting particularity’ on an experiential level. ‘Testing’ and ‘enacting’ shade into a methodology, and the theoretical language uses notion of Roland Barthes’ *jouissance*, ‘an orgasmic pleasure that comes from writing [...] free of the constraints and rules of appropriate and inappropriate, right or wrong’ (Fortier 2002: 228). Consequently, the PaR researcher through praxis gains insight into ‘playing’ so much so that the experience of spontaneity and chance-taking become intrinsically bound to the act of particularization. The composer may argue: ‘here are the rules of particularization as I define it, and here is how I systematically “play” with the rules in order to generate a new set of principles for character-specific composing’.

Researcher 2: Jo Scott

In my work, the notion of praxis encompasses what Robin Nelson refers to as ‘doing-thinking’ (2013: 11); that is that there is always a dynamic relationship between ideas and action, that the ‘doing’ of the practice is in dialogue with my own ideas and the ideas of others and that praxis emerges from that process. There was always a clarity to me in the central idea of PaR that the enquiry is carried out and enacted through practice, but the role of ‘theory’ can be challenging in that process. Existing theory is for me both the prompt for action (a gap or problem which I identify and want to explore) and the sounding board for what emerges from the practice, i.e. do these emergent properties align with, challenge or interrogate current thinking? However, I also feel like a central and vital precept of PaR is that practice can generate theory and, in that sense, the doing is also always thinking. (2013)

Scott reinforces the idea that feedback loops operate during the process of doing-thinking. The ‘existing theory’ (in this case intermediality) prompts practice-based methodology and at the same time comes under scrutiny. Consider a musical theatre director who wants to observe the external actions of an actor (gesture, sound, breath, etc.) alongside the phenomenon of truthfulness in his performance. This is based on the presupposition that the ontology of ‘truthfulness’, its verifiable reality, corresponds with the Stanislavskian tradition of reiterative physical actions. Ultimately the musical director wants to develop ways to intervene in that truthful moment, like keyhole surgery, and redirect things without disturbing the flow. He or she designs a methodology that incorporates technology (AV digital recording) to track and archive those psycho-

physical variables. Whether the research is successful in tracking, or even explicating the embodied qualities of truthful acting, the knowledge gained through this praxis may impact on the larger discourse of intermediality. Scott asks, ‘do these emergent properties align with, challenge or interrogate current thinking?’ The emergent knowledge for the musical theatre director may prompt a similar question: ‘does current thinking on intermediality have anything to contribute to the intervention of digital recording in performance training?’

Researcher 3: Rebecca Reeves

The relationship between theory and practice in my research has been typified by a sense of fluidity. Theory and practice are in constant play with one another; one takes the lead and the other a more secondary role, only for this to be reversed in the next instance. These shifts are constant and continual. Allowing theory to take second place to practice, or practice to theory, with the confidence that all that I have learnt through one, will inevitably manifest itself through the other, has been a particular challenge. The relationship between theory and practice in research is instinctive, instinctual and new knowledge appears gradually, sometimes surreptitiously through this constant and continual interplay between the two. (2013)

Reeves’ account of the ‘instinctual’ relationship between theory and practice may appeal to an Actor-Musician (or, Actor/Muso).¹² Performance training that involves the

interplay of musicianship (such as expressing a phrase through an instrument) and of acting (such as expressing a text in a semantic manner) predisposes the actor-musician towards both instinctual and reflective activity. Thus a PaR actor-musician may appropriately research the ontological (historical concept) and phenomenological (experiential domain) status of the actor and of the musician. The research intends to create new performance training methods that will help dissolve from the outset any conceptual and physical boundaries associated with what it means to musicalize or to act. Bearing in mind Reeves' understanding of how theory and practice are perpetually in flow, two aspects of doing-thinking are likely to emerge: 'knowing what', for instance, formal methods that look at iterative aspects of playing an instrument and also of embodying a character role enters into a dialogue with 'knowing that', for instance the notion of 'flow' based on the concept expounded by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996). In due course the researcher begins to observe and consciously identify structural and functional aspects of hitherto instinctual knowledge, such as the automated know-how related to playing a cello, or to vocalizing a character's spoken lines. Through praxis the theory of 'flow' transitions from a thought-about concept to an experienced concept. At the same time, the experience of 'flow' under prolonged practice-based research gives rise to new ways to articulate its seeming ineffableness.

Towards a taxonomy of doing-thinking

Doing-thinking is a fundamental axiom of PaR. The hyphenated construct denotes a collapse in the binary distinctions of intellectual and experiential activities, and implies more or less sequential and *also* simultaneous procedures: I analyse this action/I embody

this action; I expound critically on this topic/I am actualizing this topic through performance; I talk about what I'm doing/I intone the essence of what I am thinking, etc.

If we take away the label of research, doing-thinking is inherently what we *do* as artists working in the industry. In a research environment, the interplay of apparently analytical and embodied actions generates a richness of specialist languages and types of knowledge that give an epistemological distinctiveness to a researcher's investigations. An artist-researcher in an academic environment is enjoined to 'audit' research efforts (Haseman 2006: 8), and offer an account of the doing-thinking that happened throughout the research. I suggest three categories by which the dialectical process of doing-thinking may acquire a meta-analytical function; that is, 'doing-thinking' evaluated or audited by degree, frequency/duration and intensity.

The degree to which doing-thinking occurs is denoted by recognizable periods when a researcher defines his or her working knowledge of theory and of practice. As researchers we can define moments when to a greater or lesser extent our activities focus around critical frameworks or concepts – the 'knowing that' aspects formulated by a survey of propositional knowledge such as aesthetics, feminist theory, phenomenology, anthropology, dramaturgy, etc. We also recognize when we are planning, shaping, executing, editing and reconsolidating the practical elements. At the same time, the *degree* to which doing-thinking happens also denotes occasions, and in PaR there are countless moments like this, where theory and practice overlap, or to use Borgdorff's terms again (see endnote 6), they are 'immanent' and 'performative'. There is an inherent complexity to the embedded-ness of thinking and doing that amounts to more than the

sum of its two parts. So in summary, *degree* denotes both definitiveness and transition in the formulation of theory and of practice.

In musical theatre research, a choreographer defines his dance style as somewhere in the spectrum between George Balanchine's classical-balletic style and Jerome Robbins' contemporary idioms. During practice – testing this spectrum – he discovers that shaping character-driven dance inspires hitherto unrecognized embodied knowledge that come from a different spectrum, the American modern dance of Martha Graham, Mary Wigman and Agnes de Mille. An interrogation of stylistic legacy ensues and so does a shift in elements of practice; initially fixed definitions of theory and practice lose their moorings for the time being as the researcher redefines what he is now going to practice based on a priori knowledge of how he or she thought about the influences on his or her choreography. The reflection of fixed positions (my legacy) and transitory process (renewed practising and theorizing) represent the *degree* to which doing-thinking is happening.

Similarly, a conventional composer defines her style as modernist and eclectic, in the style of Leonard Bernstein, for instance. At the same time, the eclecticism in her composer's tool kit appropriates elements of the *boulevard* style of music theatre of Jean Cocteau and Erik Satie. Lately she also finds herself in the role of a lyricist, actively formulating text as a prompt to compose music. American and French forms of eclecticism, based on embodied knowledge (what I do instinctively when I compose) encounters new definitions through readings of discourses on the practical relationship of composing poetry and composing music. Effectively the composer enters a transitory state in which she conceptually defines herself as an eclectic composer, and at the same

time increasingly interrogates this definition as she appropriates, through practice, modes of creativity associated with composing through structural textual narratives. When PaR researchers mobilize thinking about epistemological domains (the basis of embodied knowledge for instance) and audit how doing and thinking overlap, they are in a sense engaging with the *degree* to which the intellectual and the practitioner are undifferentiated.

Frequency/Duration is a process of mapping *degrees* over the time of research. Often when supervising postgraduate students, the sense of not being able to ‘see the wood for the trees’ represents one of the general anxieties associated with practice-based research. The ‘woods’ and ‘trees’ constitute the actions of thinking and doing that deepen into a proverbial forest of entangling terms and a feeling of being bogged down by practice; the path through research, once defined, never turns out the way it looked on the page. It is, therefore, useful to map out the *degrees* of doing-thinking over time.

Essentially the researcher, by means of constructing or creating a grid, matrix, graph or timetable, indicates the *frequency* (number of occasions) and *duration* (length of time) of stocktaking or auditing of critical reflection. For a musical theatre researcher the occasion to step outside the research in this manner represents a means to apprehend and to evaluate an overall picture of the doing-thinking process at various stages of research. The content and style of mapping will, of course, follow a bespoke path to that undertaken by the researcher. In fact, a ‘scheme of works’ and/or ‘timescale’ represents this process of mapping. Defining the frequency and duration of praxis over time also constitute a form of doing and thinking in itself, which helps to distance the researcher from the intensive periods of immersion in research.

Intensity of doing-thinking is defined by the emergence of new forms of knowledge. A researcher might interpret this event as a kind of landmark or punctuated moment that offers new ways forward in either the practical methodology, the problem of theory, or a modulation in the research enquiry that (happily) matches or converts the findings of a practice into useful knowledge. I recall a session on methodology during my Ph.D. research at Royal Holloway (University of London) in which a tutor described such an intensive breakthrough as an Archimedean ‘Eureka’ moment.

For the musical theatre composer who researches collaborative methods, the *intensity* of doing-thinking emerges not so much in the outcome of a well-turned new song (as valuable as that is), but in the increased correlation of her evolving methods (‘acts of composing’) with emerging insights into, say, the notion of ‘collaborativity’. Similarly, a choreographer-director has an out-of-the-blue moment and visualizes a totalizing concept for a musical. This has happened by immersing himself or herself purely in the musical language of the score rather than in the dramatic arch of the story, whereas previously text-based analysis was the primary activity in his or her practice. The totalizing breakthrough is an intensive moment in doing-thinking if what follows is a radical reconsideration of the practical activity (in this case, from reading and analysing to aural awareness), and the development of new methodology that radiates from this breakthrough. Admittedly, we might also consider the sensation of a ‘breakthrough’ as a graduated event, an aggregation of subtle shifts in patterns of thinking and doing.

By observing such moments of *intensity* in doing-thinking, a researcher is made aware of gradual or sudden leaps in knowledge, and also where those cognitive and practical turns accelerate, open up or reorganize the infrastructures of the research. A

significant criterion for a successful PaR thesis is the advancement or offer of new knowledge to the field. Observing the *intensive* moments in doing-thinking is one way to acknowledge the gains and developments during a PaR project, perhaps the reassurance (or extra insurance) as one nears the finishing line of a thesis.

Final thinking out

In this article, I discussed how PaR in the context of musical theatre might play out within an academic environment. The tri-partite and dynamic configuration of knowledge, as articulated in Nelson's multimodal epistemology, is premised on an imbrication of theory and practice, or its *praxis*. Through praxis tacit and codified experiences manifested as performance, artefacts, verbalization or written discourse may generate new knowledge that is made explicit, demonstrable, explicatory and meaningful. Musical theatre practitioners are in a good position to take on PaR because the interdisciplinary and the holistic experience of the field already prepare the way for multimodal forms of research. The co-presence of research and of practice is self-evident in, for example, the instant a musical theatre performer in the middle of a performance counts complex routines in their head, observes the woman in the second row mouthing the lyrics, experiences the cathartic oneness when singing 'One' from *A Chorus Line*, and asks how the heck all this is happening at one go!

Praxis as I understand it in context of PaR may not fit snugly in with all narratives of practice-based research. For example, some practices in voice studies may engage explicitly with the communicative effects of ephemerality (i.e. disappeared knowledge) and inarticulacy (i.e. non-literal phonetic utterances). The sense that the

universe is knowable and observable through the antithetical reality of its dark matter and energy serves as a metaphor for the kind of research that deconstructs, and renders invisible, its own process of dissemination to illustrate its findings. Another problem posed by PaR is the notion of embodied knowledge, or at least the assumption that all knowledge exists in an embodied form. A tone-deaf singer who understands the concept of singing will nonetheless lack the embodied knowledge of singing in tune; the owner of an English Literature degree may be able to brilliantly articulate the dramatic objectives of a play by Sarah Kane to an actor, but may not necessarily be embodied with the knowledge of acting them out.

An increase in practice-based research in the field of musical theatre is likely to generate exciting new encounters and versions of praxis and with it new paradigms in PaR methodology. The singing-acting-dancing-directing-writing-composing field uniquely foregrounds the complementary or nullifying actions of adjoining disciplines, and therefore may shed new light on the synchronous or asynchronous relationship between theory and practice. Nelson illustrates the dialogic relationship of doing-thinking in his model; a taxonomic understanding helps us to recognize and explain the coterminous aspects of both activities. Theory and practice, however unfixed or seemingly intangible, must effectively converge through PaR. Whether this axiom holds true in all areas of academic research wherein practice is involved will always require a bit more practice. Or as Fagin might say in a Ph.D. viva – ‘nuffink a ‘alf inch of practice couldn’t fix, my dears’.

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Contributor details

Zachary Dunbar trained as a concert pianist in both the United States and the United Kingdom (Fulbright, RCM) before embarking on a combined career in music and theatre. He currently works as a director, writer, composer and performer in different genres that have included radio drama (BBC 4), stage plays, musical theatre, Beijing Opera, soundscape drama and dance theatre. His original works have been staged at Camden People's Theatre, Pleasance Theatre, Bloomsbury Theatre, Brighton Underbelly, the Embassy Theatre, several Edinburgh-fringe productions (Fringe-First nominated), and the Jungehunde Festival (Denmark). At RCSSD, MD for *The Year of the Pig*, *Into The Woods*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *The Baker's Wife*. Directing credits include Euripides' *Bacchae* (Central) and forthcoming Martin Crimp's *The Country* (Camden Fringe Festival) with Twice Born Theatre. He has academic publications in the field of Greek tragedy and in Music theatre with Duckworth, *Studies in Musical Theatre* journal,

Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press. He also teaches on the M.A.
Acting course at RCSSD.

Contact:

The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, Eton
Avenue, London NW3 3HY, UK.

E-mail: zachary.dunbar@cssd.ac.uk

Notes

¹ <http://www.cssd.ac.uk/events/research-events/research-conferences/song-stage-and-screen-viii-conference>. Accessed 1 December 2013.

² By which I mean the mainstream genre of music theatre entertainment that is identified historically and culturally with the West End and Broadway industry rather than with the experimental forms of music theatre, which were primarily influenced by the early twentieth-century avant-garde movements in the arts (Dunbar 2002).

³ Gray (1998), Haseman (2006): ‘practice-led’, commonly used in Australia; Freeman posits that ‘practice-as-research’ and ‘practice-based’ are used interchangeably without prejudice (2010: 1).

⁴For PAR, Riley and Hunter (2009), Ludivine et al. (2009); for seminal manifestos fronting up the contention of performance art and research, Pakes (2004), Haseman (2006); for consolidating the debates, Freeman (2010), Borgdorff (2012), Nelson (2013). Contra Borgdorff (2012), Solleveld (2012); on ‘Performance’, Schechner’s useful overview (2002), challenged by McKenzie et al. (2009); ‘Performativity’, Shepherd and Wallis (2004: 220–24).

⁵ Plato, *Cratylus*, 401e, 402a, in Wheelwright (1980: 80).

⁶ On the notion of ‘legacy’ as embodied knowledge, a researcher may engage with fundamentally politicized or historicized embedded-ness. For philosophical discourse on embodied knowledge, see theorists such as Irigaray, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard. The experience of the ‘sedimented’ self, and its impact on the cognition of different forms of knowledge, is indirectly argued by Henrik Borgdorff in his assessment

of arts research. Similar to Nelson, Borgdorff distinguishes four categories of knowledge as *instrumental*, *interpretive*, *performative* and *immanent* (2012: 17–21), and suggests that both *performative* and *immanent* forms of knowledge distinguish complex levels of imbrication between theory and practice. By asserting Adorno’s notion of practice as a ‘sedimented spirit’, wherein ‘all practices embody concepts, theories, and understandings’, Borgdorff perceives the doing of research as a special, or ‘exceptional’, form of thinking (2012: 20–21). That exceptionality, I would argue, implicates the phenomenology of the self.

⁷ See Freeman (2010: 1–8) for a fuller explication of ‘ineffability’ and ‘intentionality’.

⁸ For experimental music theatre, see Rebstock and Roesner (2012); opera, Centre for Research in Opera and Music Theatre (CROMT), accessed 1 December 2013, <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cromt>; sound studies, Kendrick and Roesner (2011).

⁹ For example, the AHRC-funded Research Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice (2009) spearheaded by John Rink.

¹⁰ Research carried out at the Centre for Performance Science (Royal College of Music, London), <http://www.rcm.ac.uk/cps/>, accessed 1 December 2013.

¹¹ The work of John Sloboda and Jane Davidson represent current research in the psychology of music performance practices.

¹² A performer in musical theatre who embodies the skills of playing a musical instrument, although the label generically applies to musicians whose formal musical training converges with theatre practices. Actors actively playing an instrument as they embody a character role have been especially prevalent in recent productions of

Sondheim musicals by John Doyle. In experimental music theatre, the synesthetic performer is commonly featured.