

Feminist Orientations: Towards Approaches for an Intersectional Feminist Music Theatre Dramaturgy

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This thesis is comprised of a dissertation (80%) and a creative work (20%), which is an original script.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis:

- i) comprises only of my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy Fine Arts and Music
- ii) contains due acknowledgement in the text to all other material used
- iii) is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

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Abstract

This research explores an intersectional feminism within music theatre, looking specifically at framings of and orientations towards the female body. Practice is at the centre of its concerns, which focuses, first, on a practice-led analysis of an existing work performed in 2018. The findings from this analysis then inform a practice-based approach to creating a new musical. This project critically responds to the commercial, populist form of musical theatre where the female body has been frequently and problematically objectified and employed dramaturgically, resulting in limiting and reductive stereotypes. In this dissertation I argue that because feminist readings of musicals, led by scholar Stacy Wolf, offer mainly queer-feminist readings and interpretations of existing musicals, approaches that question and detail how feminist music theatre can be made in practice have a vital contribution to make to the future of the discipline.

As a white, cis-gender, heterosexual female music theatre maker and writer I introduce and explore dramaturgical concepts from feminist (non-musical) theatre criticism that offer an intersectional feminist approach to music theatre making and writing practice. I bring Brechtian-materialist feminism (Diamond 1988) into conversation with Sara Ahmed's (2006) work on queer phenomenology to interrogate the normative dramaturgical orientation towards female bodies and body parts in musicals, and unpack the processes through which reductive, objectifying gendering can occur. Through a practice-led analysis of a previous work I created (*Ascent* 2018), I identify and critically analyse dramaturgical processes that elucidate aspects that make *Ascent* a feminist music theatre work. The outcomes from this analysis are summarised as a set of principles, which I applied in a practice-based study to create the book and lyrics for a new musical work, *Dangerous* (which is the examinable creative component of the study). An evaluation and discussion of the application of these principles for making new work summarises their relevance for other feminist music theatre makers and argues for all creators of new music theatre to attend consciously to the orientation of processes, practices and dramaturgy in their writing to avoid replicating problematic depictions of women on musical stages.

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From Stage to Page: How Did I Get Here?

Before embarking on a scholarly research project, I trained professionally to become a performer of music theatre. However, after only a couple of years working in the profession, I pivoted to directing, writing and teaching. This was due to a dawning realisation that the musicals auditioning in Melbourne, Australia circa 2011-2014 – *Grease* (1972), *Legally Blonde* (2007), *South Pacific* (1949), *Dirty Dancing* (2004), *Les Misérables* (1980), *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (2002), *King Kong* (2013) – contained, at best, uninspiring female characters who did little more than support the male story. At worst, they featured deeply problematic and offensive gender stereotypes. This drove me to start a theatre company so I could create the music theatre I wanted to experience; shows where the female characters could be more than romantic support or an object of the male gaze.

When I stepped into a teaching role at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), University of Melbourne in 2017, I came to work with emerging professionals who, like I once did, were aiming for a career as a performer in the professional music theatre industry. My teaching career began not long before a watershed social event, the #MeToo movement, and has been punctuated with other major socio-political events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and #BlackLivesMatter movement. These events have had a profound impact on both my teaching practice and my creative practice.¹ In recent years, I have observed students becoming increasingly engaged in issues of political and personal significance. Therefore, in my teaching practice, I have been required to facilitate complex conversations concerning race, gender, sexuality and more. In doing so, I have been reminded on a regular basis of the impacts that problematic and offensive representations can have on young people, in terms of their mental health, their sense of belonging, and what they imagine is possible for their careers and lives. I have explored strategies with my students for interpreting works in the canon that aim to reduce or mitigate stereotype,

¹ And led me to establishing an online pilot event called Music Theatre Futures (2020), followed by the first in-person conference for music theatre in Australia, Music Theatre Futures (2024), where issues such as those described above could be explored and discussed among industry, educators and researchers. See more here: "Music Theatre Futures". 2024. *Music Theatre Futures*. Accessed 15 November 2024. <https://musictheatrefutures.com.au/>

racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia and more, to inspire in them a sense of agency and creative problem solving.

However, as an artist, I have been left thinking about what the future of this form could hold. As I have discussed with my students and colleagues, and observed in attending musical productions, there have been attempts from various creators to offer gestures toward female empowerment, however these are in the minority, and some have significant shortcomings.

In a *New York Times* interview (2023), theatre critic Laura Collins-Hughes, scholar and writer Salamishah Tillet, and pop music critic Lindsay Zoladz, discuss *Six* (2017), *&Juliet* (2019) and *Once Upon A One More Time* (2019) for their engagement with feminism and notions of empowerment. Interviewer Alexis Soloskis asks the group, who have mixed responses to these musicals, “Is it asking too much of a musical to also have great messages?” when discussing their limitations and lack of depth. After I saw *Six* and *&Juliet* in Melbourne,² I reflected on my practice and similarly wondered: are audiences willing to take feminist concerns seriously, or do musicals centring on female characters and feminist issues need to remain light and entertaining to be commercially successful?

Before embarking on formal research, I carried a general notion of feminism as an artist, that could be summarised as: that which makes it possible for women to do what they are currently unable to do (or that is difficult for them to do). I did not yet know how this related to feminist scholarship, but I knew I was not interested in musical works that reinforced the status quo. I have been drawn to female creators whose work speaks to my aims: to create music theatre that does not limit female characters to reductive, objectified stereotypes, existing purely to support the male driven narrative.³ A work I have long admired is Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron’s *Fun Home* (2015), which demonstrates a commitment to present female characters who do not conform to the gender norms of the

² The performances I attended were: *Six*. 2022. By Lucy Moss and Toby Marlow. Comedy Theatre, Melbourne, Victoria, August 7; *&Juliet*. 2023. By David West Read and Max Martin. The Regent Theatre, Melbourne, Victoria, July 16.

³ It should be noted that not all musicals created by women have feminist concerns driving them, for example, *Hadestown* (2019) by Anaïs Mitchell.

musical. As Kron (then in her early 50s) expressed in a (2015) interview, “I wanted to see a woman who was close to my age on stage. And I wanted to see a gay character at 8 years old – I wanted to reveal the things in musical theater that I haven’t seen yet” (Kron in Thomas 2015).

When I saw *Jagged Little Pill* in Melbourne,⁴ I was pleasantly surprised to see a complex narrative that explored a range of issues pertaining to race, gender, sexuality and mental health. Although a Jukebox musical,⁵ it had female characters driving the narrative and attempted to explore the intersection of many identity markers and feminist issues (such as date rape). With mixed reviews, however, some criticised *Jagged Little Pill* for trying to attend to *too many* issues. As one reviewer noted, “It begins to feel as though it’s just going through a checklist of issues for the wokeness street cred, rather than caring about those issues for their own sake” (VanArendonk et al. 2020). I noticed similar criticisms of *Lempicka* (2024), an original Broadway musical portraying the life of Polish artist Tamara de Lempicka.⁶ The musical had a short run, opening March 2024 and closing early in May 2024 (Paulson 2024). As an artist engaging with these perspectives, some important questions started to emerge that would come to inform the direction of my practice-based research, such as: in what ways does the book musical form resist complex feminist issues? Could there be specific approaches that feminist writers could adopt or explore when writing feminist musicals to help their messages connect with a broad audience, to enjoy the same success as musicals like *Hamilton* (2015) or *Six*⁷ (2017)?

As I came to end of my PhD research, a new musical *Suffs* (2024), telling the stories of the American suffragists, won two Tony Awards (Best Book and Best Original Score) and

⁴ The performance I attended was: *Jagged Little Pill*. 2022. By Diablo Cody, Alanis Morissette and Glen Ballard. Comedy Theatre, Melbourne, Victoria, February 20.

⁵ Kevin Byrne and Emily Fuchs’s (2022) book, *The Jukebox Musical: an interpretive history*, defines the Jukebox as having three categories: the artist catalogue musical, the biographical musical and the era-specific musical. They identify the following as its key features: “The use of already recorded, preexisting, songs; the songs are sung by fictional characters, and even biographical musicals have fictional characters; the songs are within, and connected to, an overarching narrative; the production is designed for live performance; the songs were originally composed for a genre other than a musical” (2022, 8).

⁶ See for example reviews in *The Columbia Spectator* (Markhovsky 2024) and *The Washington Post* (Kennicott 2024).

⁷ Although written by a female creator, Lucy Moss, *Six* is difficult to reconcile as feminist, as will be argued in Chapter 5, drawing from Grace Barnes (2020).

was nominated for a further four. Although the musical was not without its complications, with protestors disrupting a performance in July claiming the show reinforces 'white' feminism,⁸ I was nonetheless encouraged by the industry acknowledgement of this piece, as it suggested there may be a place for musicals seeking to tell stories about women, by women. In Melbourne, new musical *My Brilliant Career* (2024) premiered at the Melbourne Theatre Company, with a feminist, female co-book writer. The musical played to critical acclaim, and, according to journalist Hannah Story (2024), is part of a "wave of Australian musicals centred on the experiences of young women,"⁹ furthering my belief in the importance and timeliness of research into feminist music theatre practice.

Stepping into the research space as an artist-scholar, I arrived with a desire to understand how an intersectional feminist lens could be part of my practice, both in guiding and generating new material and in analysing material I had already created. In creating *Dangerous*, I wanted to write a story with characters that would have excited me as a young performer and offer more than "the most obvious and time-worn stereotypes" (Wolf 2018, 168).

⁸ See more: "Tony-Winning Musical 'Suffs' Disrupted by Chanting Protesters with a Banner," NBC New York, July 4, 2024, <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/tony-winning-musical-suffs-disrupted-by-chanting-protesters-with-a-banner/5564709/>.

⁹ Story includes "Zombie!" by Laura Murphy, Muriel's Wedding by Kate Miller-Heidke and Keir Nuttal, Fangirls by Yve Blake, The Deb by Hannah Reilly, and Converted! by Vic Zerbst" in her list of musicals featuring a female voice. Though not all of these are necessarily feminist, Story's article highlights a recent public interest in new Australian musicals engaging with female writer voices.

Introduction

Subject of thesis

The subject of this thesis concerns the processes of gendering that occur within music theatre contexts. It explores this through practice, which is inextricably connected to my identity as a white, cis-gender, heterosexual woman. Music theatre is a broad umbrella term; the focus of this research is on musical theatre (focusing on ‘book’ musicals and concept musicals which are explained in depth in Chapter 1), as well as the less well-known branch of Composed Theatre.¹⁰ In the commercial, populist form of musical theatre (in which I trained and worked professionally), I argue that the female body is gendered through dramaturgical processes which suggest restrictive, fixed and often problematic gender roles. This research, therefore, explores whether my political aspirations as a creator of feminist music theatre may be realised in a form that typically aims for broad, commercial appeal.

I use these terms, ‘broad’ and ‘commercial’, to connote that which is presented in a commercial context in major theatres and therefore needs to appeal to a wide range of people to be financially viable (as opposed to fringe theatre that may attract small, niche audiences). I draw on William Everett and Paul Laird’s (2015) definition of the commercial theatre of America, epitomised by ‘Broadway’, as a production that occurs in a theatre with “at least 500 seats” around the Times Square theatre district (2015, xi). In Melbourne, this seating capacity may be applied in defining the commercial theatre, with the theatre district encompassing theatres seating between approximately 1000 and 2000, within the Central Business District (CBD). Additionally, professional musicals in Melbourne – particularly new works – are frequently presented by mainstage repertory theatre companies, such as Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC). In MTC’s Southbank location, the Sumner Theatre – which recently premiered new musical *My Brilliant Career* (2024) – has a capacity of 559 seats (*Melbourne Theatre Company* 2025). In summary, broad and commercial theatre will refer to shows which have been professionally produced by

¹⁰ Composed Theatre works are those where creative and structural choices are largely determined by “compositional strategies” and “compositional thinking” (Rebstock 2012, 22). See Rebstock (2012) and Chapter 1 for more.

a mainstage company or commercial producer in a theatre of at least 500 seats, located in the CBD or surrounding inner-city suburbs.

I also use the term 'mainstream', which follows theatre scholar Caroline Heim's (2015) usage. Whilst Heim (2015) acknowledges that "defining the borders of mainstream theatre in terms of inclusions and exclusions is difficult" (2015, 11), mainstream theatre can be thought of as is that "which attracts a more heterogeneous audience" (2015, 11). In this dissertation, therefore, mainstream is often used to describe audiences, audience groups or media activity which typically reaches a broader, "more heterogenous audience" (Heim 2015, 11).

Theatre scholar Susan Bennett (1997) explains there is "limited crossover between audiences of the mainstream and audiences of other theatre products" (1997, 98), and, consequently, those making feminist theatre (among others) "have had to face difficult decisions about broadening their appeal to more traditional audiences in order to maintain or increase funding" (1997, 98). Additionally, as feminist theatre critic and scholar Jill Dolan (2012) asserts, women's "visibility in commercial, mainstream forums ensures the economic viability and survival of women playwrights and performers" (2012, xxx). As a feminist music theatre creator, not only am I wanting to explore how I can create work that could appeal to a mainstream audience to make it more financially appealing for a commercial producer or mainstage company to eventually support, but also, through reaching a mainstream audience in my practice I may contribute to expanding the "horizon of cultural and ideological expectations" (Bennett 1997, 98) that Bennett notes audiences bring with them to a performance; in the musical, this typically aligns with heteronormativity (and often whiteness). Indeed, "the musical reputedly is deemed to be the most conservative and, perhaps, therefore, one of the most surprising popular-cultural forms through which to make feminist attachments" (2013, 117), as noted by feminist theatre scholar Elaine Aston (2013) in her feminist analysis of the Jukebox musical *Mamma Mia!* (2001).

I have undertaken this study not only to create a feminist work that aims for a commercial context, but also to develop a deeper, more nuanced consciousness of my artistic process. I describe my work as feminist, not only because I started creating it in response to the problematic representations of women in music theatre I was noticing, but also because as my work has developed it has centred on issues concerning the position and representation of women in music theatre, as well as incorporating many dramaturgical and theoretical concepts that have come from reading and engaging with feminist theorising of theatre practice. The feminist lens that has emerged through scholarly research and practice is best described as intersectional, as I frequently turn to theoretical frameworks beyond feminism such as queer theory and critical race theory when these offer the most precise way of describing the dynamics in my work, whether that be in terms of process, content, or both (as explained in depth in Chapter 1).

To understand how gendering processes occur within music theatre, I turn to intersectional feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's (2006) work on orientation. Though Ahmed does not discuss performance in her book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), I apply her concepts in conversation with Brechtian-materialist feminism, drawing primarily from feminist theatre scholar Elin Diamond (1988), to understand the dramaturgy of existing musicals in a new way – that focuses on gender. I also apply these theoretical ideas to unpack and develop my dramaturgical choices that emerged out of years of practice, teaching, experimentation, thinking about my political aspirations for the form, and informal study of other music theatre works. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, the concept of orientation can explain how audiences may be directed towards or away from bodies and objects; such processes of directionality are processes of becoming orientated. In the musical, I argue, processes of orientation can reveal how gender is signalled and performed, in the sense that it is performative. In framing gender as performative, I draw on Judith Butler's (1990) ground-breaking concept of gender performativity, a theoretical notion that challenges a stable, fixed conception of gender, whereby gender is created through repeated behaviours and actions, or in Butler's words, "through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 1990, 191, emphasis in original).

This thesis offers analyses of two case studies: experimental feminist music theatre work, *Ascent* (2018), and new feminist musical, *Dangerous*. When I made *Ascent*, I had a clear political aim – to create an experimental work where female bodies were employed consciously, in ways that did not require them to be objectified or sexualised for the male gaze. This was prompted by my lived experience as a woman living in a patriarchal culture and some initial, but limited encounters with feminist scholarship. My analysis of the creation of *Ascent* employs a practice-led approach, recognising and reflecting on dramaturgical choices and how they enacted a feminist agenda (which continues to evolve). This feminism is intersectional (drawing on such scholars as Crenshaw 1989; hooks 2006; Marinucci 2010; Abrams 2011; Dolan 2013) and applies a post-structuralist understanding of gender that challenges fixed, deterministic notions of gender (after Butler 1990). By drawing on the literature to help analyse various aspects of making and thinking about *Ascent*, I identify Brechtian-materialist feminist approaches (Diamond 1988; Gow 2018) and Dolan's (2005) utopian performatives as being present in my work (though in the case of Brechtian-materialist feminist approaches, I did not know this at the time of creation). This, I argue, contributed to shaping the work's feminist orientation and offered an alternative to the numerous problematic representations of gender roles in music theatre. The language of Brechtian-materialist feminism and orientation also provided me with tools to undertake an analysis of historical and cultural contexts surrounding theatrical conventions and performance traditions, to unpack the feminist meanings of certain gestures, choreography and text.

The second case study, *Dangerous*, is an example of practice-based research, which resulted in the creation of book and lyrics. *Dangerous* is a feminist hybrid concept musical that follows five women who played a notable role in women's suffrage. It applies the learnings from the analysis of *Ascent*, distilled into key dramaturgical principles for creating a feminist music theatre work, towards the creation of an original book and lyrics. It is consciously orientated towards an intersectional feminism. Though, at times, it incorporates some experimental aesthetics and approaches (which echo previous

experimental works I have made), it also presents Vaudevillian acts¹¹ accompanied by a pop score and is intentionally created for a broad audience and commercial context. My analysis of this work assesses the usefulness of the dramaturgical principles (derived from my analysis of *Ascent*) and points to areas for further research and development.

This dissertation constitutes part of the examinable material, along with the book and lyrics for *Dangerous*.

Aims

The evaluation of my practice through the analysis of previous work, and the creation of new work, addresses three key aims in this thesis:

1. To address a gap in scholarly, practice-based, intersectional feminist perspectives in the musical theatre literature.
2. To propose dramaturgical principles that I and others can use when approaching the creation of feminist music theatre (and evaluate these principles following their implementation in the writing of a new musical).
3. To create a new feminist musical that aims for a commercial context.

Key Questions

- What makes my work feminist?
- How can I, as a music theatre creator, approach making a feminist music theatre work and can this be of use to other music theatre creators?
- How can my political aspirations be realised in a form that aims for a commercial context and therefore broad appeal?

¹¹ Referring to the American variety form of theatre from the turn of and early twentieth century (more detailed explanations in Chapter 1).

Scope of thesis

My practice encompasses directing, writing, devising, dramaturgy, choreography and producing. For this thesis, I will focus on my work as a director/writer (also referred to as 'maker') when discussing *Ascent* and as writer of book and lyrics when discussing *Dangerous*.

Practice has been the key organiser and filter of the literature review and the broader structuring of this dissertation. Furthermore, this dissertation does not intend to provide complete historical, sociological, or theoretical analyses, but is rather exploring the generative potential of theoretical concepts and socio-historical perspectives when applied to the creative process. As such, a survey of literature has been undertaken in defining music theatre and related terms, situating my practice in relation to socio-cultural analyses of musicals, feminist theoretical concepts and aspects of dramaturgical structuring and staging which speak more directly to my practice. This also extends to my theoretical engagement with intersectional feminism, which is not only informed by my identity (white, cis-gender, heterosexual woman), but also the aspects of identity which directly relate to my practice: gender, sexuality and race. In other words, my intersectional feminism has developed from my identity and my practice and therefore does not always account for all the aspects of identity that intersectional feminist theory has come to encompass (such as class, ability, neurotype).

As I am not a composer and my discussion of music does not concern compositional aspects, I do not draw on musicological or compositionally focused analyses. Rather, my discussion of music is limited to analysing how my use of music and musical thinking (drawing primarily on Rebstock 2012) helps me to realise my dramaturgical and political aims.

Music theatre is a general term, which here encompasses a broad discussion between the well-known form of commercial musical theatre epitomised by (but by no means exclusive to) 'Broadway', and experimental forms of music theatre. This flexibility is

necessary in discussing the examples from my own practice, as both of my works critically engage with and reference tropes and conventions from commercial musicals, whilst also dramaturgically drawing from experimental music theatre forms. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of music theatre – encompassing any combination of music, theatre performance, movement, song, dance, text – means it has been necessary for me to adopt a cross-disciplinary perspective to enable consideration of elements individually and in combination, as needed, for a nuanced analysis.

Within feminist musical theatre – a relatively new area of scholarly research – the contemporary literature is authored by scholars such as Stacy Wolf (2002, 2004, 2011, 2014, 2018), Raymond Knapp (2006), Elizabeth Wollman (2013, 2014) and artist-scholars such as Grace Barnes (2015, 2020, 2022) who focus on interpreting and reading existing musicals, rather than new works or processes around creating new feminist music theatre. Descriptive summaries of process by creators are also emerging (see, for example, Stitt 2022). More recent publications such as *Gender, Sex, and Sexuality in Musical Theatre* (2023) indicate more scholars are starting to engage with feminist and queer perspectives and politics in the musical, however, there remains little engagement with the dramaturgical processes around the creation of new feminist work. In this collection, Sherrill Gow's chapter, also appearing as an article (2018) in *Studies in Musical Theatre* – the sole peer-reviewed journal dedicated to musical theatre scholarship – is distinct from the other contributions, as it concerns an explicitly queer-feminist rehearsal process for an existing work, signalling a nascent sub-field. Her work, therefore, provides a touchpoint throughout the dissertation.

Studies in Musical Theatre features only a handful of articles from over a decade of publishing that are explicitly concerned with scholarly practice-based studies detailing processes around the creation of new work (such as Dahlqvist and Olofsson 2017; Wilkins 2012). Jessica Walker's (2012) article, which details the process of creating a one-person show with a focus on the gendered aspects of the voice, is one of few scholarly practice-based articles with a focus on gender. Interviews conducted by scholars with creators of musicals (see for example Wolf 2023, Knapp 2023,

Rodosthenous 2018) also feature in *Studies in Musical Theatre*, however these do not feature a rigorous, scholarly focus on gender or feminism.

The work of documenting female contributions towards the musical as creative leaders is undertaken by music theatre scholars Bud Coleman and Judith Sebestier (2008), and music theatre scholars Arianne Johnson Quinn and Clare Chandler (2022). When it comes to the dramaturgical analysis of musicals with a feminist lens, the majority of feminist readings of musicals, led by Stacy Wolf, offer mainly queer-feminist readings and interpretations from a spectator's perspective, whereby the reader is required to interpret signs and codings in a musical's dramaturgy as queer or feminist, even when this is not intentionally created by the authors.¹² Experimental music theatre literature is authored largely by artist-scholars such as David Roesner and Matthias Rebstock (2012) and offers discussion on dramaturgical process, however it lacks intersectional feminist perspectives or theory. Therefore, it is necessary to import theoretical perspectives and tools from other closely related scholarly fields to establish a scholarly context for an intersectional feminist music theatre making practice.

In discussing gendered bodies, intersections with other identity-markers inevitably arise. Though the focus in this thesis is on gender and sexuality, race will also be touched on as it relates to identity politics for both works. However, further work is needed to understand how race specifically intersects with gender in feminist music theatre.¹³ Similar research is needed to understand the specific intersections of ability and gender (and other identity markers) in music theatre. It should be noted that the attention to identity markers in this thesis is influenced by my lived experience, which highlights the privileges I am afforded by my body and how I identify with it. Inevitably, I am unable to account for all identities and voices and instead have chosen to focus on aspects of identity which have arisen in practice and relate to my lived experience.

¹² See, for example, Wolf's (2011) analysis of *Wicked*, explained in Chapter 2.

¹³ This is emerging with scholars such as Stephanie Lim (2023) offering insightful intersectional feminist analysis of contemporary casting practices.

When analysing and reflecting upon my practice, the opinions or individual experiences of performers and creatives that I have collaborated with in realising my works have not been included in this dissertation. Though I acknowledge the invaluable, important contributions of the performers who helped me hear and see aspects of my work for the first time, their part in the research process was contained to interpreting the material I wrote, in the studio. While, in a non-research setting, I would encourage sharing of how the performers were experiencing the work and would seek their feedback, this aspect of collaboration falls beyond the scope of this project. There are two exceptions to this: firstly, I chose to include a general consensus that emerged in the studio that supported my personal reflections during workshops for *Dangerous* (as explained in Chapter 5, p.304); secondly, I chose to include an important observation about *Dangerous* made by a colleague, who is also a fellow teacher and researcher at the VCA (as explained in Chapter 5, p.303). Otherwise, my analysis is based on my experience as the artist-scholar. Furthermore, this choice has allowed me to adhere to the University of Melbourne's Ethics committee recommendations.¹⁴

When it comes to the contributions of creative collaborators, I have focused on my role while noting key times their contribution was part of my process. For example, I have offered reflections on how the addition of the composer's music in creating *Dangerous* led me to making revisions of my lyrics. I have attempted to make it clear when discussing collaborative aspects (such as working with a composer), which parts are my work and which parts are their work. In summary, I have chosen to deliberately focus on my own practical experience as a music theatre maker and writer and have limited this study to examining the processes I have undertaken using an auto-ethnographic approach. Further research would be needed to understand how my work is experienced by my collaborators. Additionally, further scholarly research would be needed to understand how my creative work is received by an audience.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that there are unavoidable challenges around the ethics of seeking feedback from performers concerning their experience of performing my writing or embodying my direction, due to the power imbalance that exists between director and performer. Though my practice aims to engender a collaborative, consent-based approach, and involvement in my research would be voluntary, there exists a possible perception that as someone who can provide opportunities for actors, it may be difficult to achieve completely voluntary participation from an actor, who may be concerned about the impact their participation, or lack thereof, may have on future opportunities for work with me, or colleagues in my networks.

It was beyond the scope of this research project to mount a fully realised production of *Dangerous and* therefore include audience reception in this study. I chose, instead, to focus on the process of writing a musical's book and lyrics before it is handed over to the composer for the creation of the full score (though some music samples exist, most of it is yet to be written). There were several reasons for arriving at this scope. Firstly, it allowed me to focus primarily on my contributions to the work. As the collaborative process develops, it can become difficult to delineate where ideas emerge, and it is possible for intellectual property ownership to become blurred. Secondly, there are material and resource limitations available at the university, which prevent the realisation of a fully rehearsed, designed, public facing musical production of scale with professional performers and creatives. Thirdly, the composer and I felt both our creative processes would be best served by me focusing the research process to explore and experiment with the book, without being concerned about what possible impacts there might be to an evolving score.¹⁵ Fourthly, seeing the musical through to a full production would have been a challenge for timely completion of the dissertation, as it can be a lengthy process to develop a new musical through to production. To demonstrate the productive, practical potential of my dramaturgical approaches, I have chosen to video record professional performers reading the book¹⁶ aloud and workshop sessions of select scenes and two songs, which will appear as case study examples in Chapters 4 and 5. Sharing practice-based research on an early stage of an incomplete new musical work offers valuable insights to the scholarly community and industry, where such stages of development typically occur privately and are unpublished in their documentation.¹⁷

Methodology & Data

This project employs the following methodologies: practice-led research and practice-

¹⁵ Every collaboration is unique and not all musical theatre teams create their work in this way; however, my composer and I decided this would be the best approach considering our processes and the complexity of writing an original musical.

¹⁶ The version the actors read is very similar to the final submitted draft, however there are some minor variations.

¹⁷ Notable exceptions include Stephen Sondheim's (2010 and 2011) books that give insight into various stages of development of his musicals, and Lin-Manuel Miranda's (2016) book that similarly documents the creation of *Hamilton* (both are consulted throughout this dissertation). However, neither of these constitute scholarly writings.

based research, along with autoethnographic elements, such as self-positioning and reflexivity. It includes the practices of writing for performance, dramaturgical analysis, rehearsal analysis and consideration of performance reviews, and these are framed critically by an intersectional feminist scholarly lens.

Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds (2018), along with Lyle Skains (2018), have informed my practice-led and practice-based methodology.¹⁸ They propose that in both practice-led and practice-based approaches, *practice* is integral to conducting the research and creating new knowledge. However, there is a distinct difference between these two approaches: a practice-led approach can see new knowledge emerging from creative practice, however it does not necessarily require a creative artifact to be seen or experienced for the research to be understood; with a practice-based approach, the artifact *is required* to be seen or experienced as part of understanding the research, because it constitutes the basis of the new knowledge created (Candy and Edmonds 2018, 65). *Ascent* (2018) is analysed in a practice-led fashion, and then the insights from this analysis are applied to the creation of a new work, *Dangerous*, which presents a practice-based approach, producing a creative artifact.

Key data I have collected takes the form of autoethnographic reflections concerning the creation of my two music theatre works. These reflections have been derived from consulting my journal entries, developmental documents (such as brainstorming documents, storyboards and notes) and script drafts. In my autoethnographic approach I have aimed to write and produce research that connects the personal with the social and cultural context – an approach supported by scholars such as John Freeman (2010, 310) and Tony Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis (2022). Freeman (2010, 309-310) posits that autoethnographic texts are emic: the reflections they contain are made in terms relevant and specific to the context the researcher is working within. Autoethnographic texts are typically “written in the first person and contain self-consciously relational, reflexive and highly personalised material” (Freeman 2010, 310),

¹⁸ Research that occurs in the creative arts involving practice has many different names and variations of methodology, and the associated terminology has evolved over time. See Barrett (2014, 1-13) and Skains (2018, 85) for more.

which has immediate, culturally specific relevance that the researcher makes explicit. It is also a methodology that embraces the person and the personal behind the work, since they are “always present in social life as well as in the processes of research and representation” (Adams, Holman and Ellis 2022, 1). Importantly, autoethnographic knowledge “implies experiential knowledge, containing not only the period of study in question but also the interweaving of past and present knowledge” (Freeman 2009, 310).

These points have been a useful guide in writing this dissertation and weaving my artist’s voice in with scholarly theory and research, because, as Freeman (2009, 311) also points out, such an approach also enables intersectional analysis that is conducive to a multi-perspectival, post-structuralist way of thinking. My autoethnographic approach aims to contribute to discourse and development of ideas in feminist music theatre practice, in a way that I hope will also be of use to other creators of music theatre. As explained by Adams, Jones and Ellis in their authoritative text *Handbook of Autoethnography*:

While writing and performing can be personally cathartic processes, autoethnographers do not write or perform only for themselves; they write and act for others. They offer reflection, insight, and hope to readers and audiences who might have had the experiences chronicled, as well as to others interested in learning more about a topic. (2022, 8)

To help frame my artist’s voice autoethnographically, I employ Robin Nelson’s (2013) Practice as Research model where he proposes three interconnected forms of knowledge: ‘know-how’, ‘know-what’ and ‘know-that’. Here, ‘know-how’ refers to tacit, experiential knowledge. ‘Know-what’ emerges through critical reflection and often helps clarify the tacit knowledge; as Zachary Dunbar (2014, 63) explains, it is the ‘nuts and bolts’. ‘Know-that’ is gained from an outsider’s perspective through more formal ‘conceptual frameworks’. Throughout the thesis I refer frequently to ‘know-how’ and ‘know-that’ as theory often came to clarify my tacit, experiential knowledge.

As part of the methodology, I also consult reviews by theatre critics who evaluated public performances of *Ascent*, since they offer an informed audience perspective on the impact of the work and external insights. I provide images and videos of *Ascent* that are publicly accessible¹⁹ to offer visual context to autoethnographic reflections when necessary. At times, autoethnographic reflections include thick description of examples where other artists were involved in realising my text and direction. All media provided is publicly available, except the video and images of the reading of the new work *Dangerous*, for which ethics approval has been given.²⁰

Bringing academic theory into conversation with practice elucidates both spontaneous and planned choices I made as a music theatre maker and provides a language and theoretical framework within which I approach making and evaluating my creative work. The implementation of the dramaturgical principles in creating a new work (in Chapters 4 and 5) is an important aspect of the study, as it centres practice as the form of research through which an understanding of feminist music theatre dramaturgical approaches can be explored and assessed, opening up a consideration of their potential relevance for other feminist music theatre makers.

Significance of the study

This study will contribute to research focused on scholarly practice in musical theatre, a small but growing area of scholarship, where explicitly feminist practice-led/practice-based approaches remain in the minority. This contribution will have the potential to further the discipline of music theatre, offering a critical framework to develop feminist discourses within music theatre studies.

¹⁹ Via the Citizen Theatre website: *Citizen Theatre*, "Ascent," accessed September 9, 2024, <https://www.citizentheatre.com.au/ascent>.

²⁰ Human Ethics approval was given to have professional actors take part in a reading and workshop sessions of *Dangerous* that were video recorded and photographed. As part of their agreement to participate in the research, the paid actors consented to the videos and photos being used in the dissertation. Ethics reference project number 2023-22923-44669-2. See [Appendix 3](#).

This study may have significance for other music theatre makers, particularly those whose work has intersectional feminist concerns or approaches. As there is a lack of scholarly work that highlights processes for the creation of feminist music theatre, this study has the potential to develop scholarly discussions concerning feminist music theatre making and writing strategies. Additionally, this study offers a significant contribution to the discipline where musical theatre writers rarely discuss or document their process of making new works within a scholarly frame.

The study may have significance for interpretive artists working within musical theatre such as directors, choreographers, music directors, designers and technical specialists, particularly if they have an interest in feminist issues as they relate to the musical.

As a Lecturer in Music Theatre, my research has significance for my teaching practice and may be of use to colleagues, artist-scholars with a teaching practice, and researchers for whom intersectional feminist approaches to music theatre practice is an emerging area of attention within pedagogy.

Since music theatre is an interdisciplinary form and I am drawing from a range of disciplines in building my theoretical framework, the dissertation may have relevance for those creating non-musical theatre, feminist performance and feminist performance art.

Structure

Chapter 1, “Theoretical Context for Practice-Led Analysis of Feminist Music Theatre Work, *Ascent*”, introduces one of the works, *Ascent*, and introduces literature from music theatre, feminism, queer studies, and related intersectional feminist studies. Chapter 1, therefore, is split into three sections: “Section 1: Dramaturgical Context for Practice – *Ascent*” positions *Ascent* within music theatre. It gives an overview of four main types of musicals, with a focus on the concept musical. It also discusses features of Composed Theatre. It concludes that *Ascent* is a concept musical with elements of Composed Theatre. “Section 2: Theoretical Context – Intersectional Feminism and Gender” asserts

the need for establishing an intersectional feminist lens for my music theatre making practice. It also offers key concepts that help define the feminism in my practice – such as gender performativity – and explains how these concepts can be seen to occur in *Ascent*. Section 3 offers a summative conclusion.

Chapter 2 “Orientation and Orientation Strategies in *Ascent*” is also organised into three sections. “Section 1: Orientation” introduces the concept of heteronormativity and its relationship to the heteromatrix and compulsory heterosexuality, to foreground an understanding of Sara Ahmed’s (2006) ideas concerning orientation. I use these concepts to evaluate common dramaturgical features of musical theatre and its orientation, which I argue is largely patriarchal, heteronormative and white-centric. Because of this, many female characters offer little more than support for the central male character’s story and female bodies are frequently employed to appeal to the male heterosexual gaze. This offers a point of comparison with *Ascent*, which is established as a work that demonstrates feminist theory in action, points to the limitations of heteronormativity, and as such, dramaturgically presents an intersectional feminist orientation.

In “Section 2: Feminist Theatre Approaches for Feminist Music Theatre”, I draw from feminist theatre criticism to identify dramaturgical tools that can be used to unpack and discuss the orientation of *Ascent* in more specific detail. The specific branch I turn to is materialist feminism, due to its compatibility with post-structuralist thinking and ability to consider the material realities of performance. Within materialist feminism, I focus on Brechtian-Materialist feminism for the productive dramaturgical tools it offers, which elucidates my practice (in terms of evaluating *Ascent*) and (as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) provides important tools for crafting my original musical (*Dangerous*). I also explore Jill Dolan’s (2005) concept of utopian performatives. This is followed by four examples from *Ascent* that demonstrate Brechtian-materialist feminist approaches and utopian performatives to offer representations of female bodies and characters that critique normative orientations of female bodies and characters in musicals.

The final section offers a summative conclusion and synthesises the analysis of *Ascent* to determine key principles of my intersectional feminist dramaturgy, to be applied to the creation of new work *Dangerous*.

Chapter 3 begins with a precis for the creative work, *Dangerous*. This is followed by the full book and lyrics for *Dangerous*, which is the creative component of this thesis.

Chapter 4 “Writing a Musical with an Intersectional Feminist Orientation” applies the findings from analysing *Ascent* to writing a new musical, *Dangerous*, where I take on the more conventional role of book writer and lyricist. The chapter autoethnographically documents key decision-making points in the writing process, demonstrating the interweaving of theory and practice, reflexive analysis, years of artistic experience, and experimentation. It is organised into three sections: “Section 1: Ideation and Structuring” provides a broad introduction to the early stages of writing *Dangerous*. It offers a precis that introduces Susan Glenn’s (2000) book *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, noting the profound impact it had on the creation of *Dangerous* in terms of inspiration for characters, conceptual themes and general subject matter. This section also documents a failed experiment, where a revue structure was employed in an early iteration of the musical, which yielded disappointing results. I chose to include this as it provided an important moment of experimentation out of which I made key decisions that ultimately shaped the musical for the better. I then explain how another concept musical, *Assassins* (1990), and Scott Miller’s (1997) analysis of *Assassins* helped to guide the structuring and form of *Dangerous*. “Section 2: The Writing Phase” goes into greater detail in explaining how dramaturgical features of *Assassins* – along with *Cabaret* (1966), *Chicago* (1975) and *Pippin* (1972) – were used as a guide and inspiration for writing *Dangerous*. In this section, I explain how *Dangerous* offers intersectional feminist developments of the concept musical features identified in *Assassins*: the use of a narrator figure, the Balladeer character who provides audience connection, and the historical central characters and limbo device. Section 3 offers a summative conclusion.

In Chapter 5, “Writing Feeling-Technologies”, the writing of *Dangerous* is unpacked further, focusing on the stylistic features of lyric writing and specific considerations in writing stage directions. There are three sections: “Section 1: Lyric Writing as Feeling-Technology” explores how an intersectional feminist orientation can be maintained when taking stylistic inspiration from popular songs and musicals, even when these do not display a feminist orientation. Here, the historicity of contemporary music styles of pop, rap and hip hop, which influenced the lyric writing of *Dangerous*, are considered in terms of how they may impact its orientation. Examples from *Six* (2017) and *Hamilton* (2015) are compared with examples from *Dangerous* to examine the specific ways *Dangerous* employs stylistic inspiration for a feminist agenda. “Section 2: Stage Directions as Feeling-Technologies” discusses the role of stage directions in supporting an intersectional feminist orientation. It looks closely at two songs from *Dangerous*, “Pony Patter” and “Dangerous (Finale)”, and explores how employing a Brechtian-materialist feminist approach enables a reclaiming of performance conventions that have historically been used to oppress or objectify women on musical stages. It also explores Dolan’s (2005) utopian performatives when writing stage directions, to contribute to the overall orientation of the musical.

In the concluding chapter, I evaluate the original aims of the research project against the findings explained in the dissertation, to suggest that the concept of orientation can help a music theatre creator become more conscious of the ways gendering processes can occur in music theatre, which can assist in creating explicitly feminist works and avoid the pitfalls of many common music theatre dramaturgical devices. I also point to the limitations of this study and propose areas for further research. I conclude the dissertation by looking to the future and suggesting a more conscious way forward for *all* creators of music theatre, regardless of their politics.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Context for Practice-Led Analysis of Feminist Music Theatre Work, *Ascent*

This chapter will begin with a precis of *Ascent*. I analyse this work as it provides an early prototype for my music theatre making process, where key features that have since come to recur in my praxis first emerged. It is followed by a review of the literature relevant to understanding my practice both in terms of the work I have already made (*Ascent*), and, in Chapters 4 and 5, will have relevance to the new work (*Dangerous*).

In Section 1, I provide historical context for the development of music theatre, considering musical theatre, concept musicals and Composed Theatre and explain where *Ascent* sits in relation to these. In Section 2, I introduce the concept of an intersectional feminist lens and its importance for my practice as a feminist music theatre maker. I will also offer key concepts that help define feminism in my practice, such as gender performativity, to support my use of Brechtian-materialist feminism in later chapters.

Precis



Video 1: Sizzle reel for Ascent (filmed by: Stu Brown)

Ascent (2018) had a short season as part of the Melbourne Fringe Festival at one of Melbourne's leading homes of independent theatre, Theatre Works, on September 28, 29 and 30, 2018. The initial concept for the work emerged whilst undertaking a writing exercise and was subsequently fleshed out over a series of writing sessions, group workshops and rehearsals throughout 2018. The most intensive period occurred throughout late July to September, on a part time basis. The workshops took place with a group of actors with whom I had been doing some experimental physical and vocal training from January 2018 through my theatre company, Citizen Theatre. The final cast consisted of Marty Alix, Jordan Barr, Kala Gare, Willow Sizer and Jessica Vellucci. Lighting Design was by Ashleigh Barnett and stage management was by Sophie Andrew, with design support from Stu Brown. This casting reflected an intuitive attention towards intersectional feminism, as some of these performers identified as queer and all but Marty

identified as female/woman (he identified as a queer man of colour).²¹ The music and sound was composed by my frequent collaborator, Imogen Cygler (female identifying).

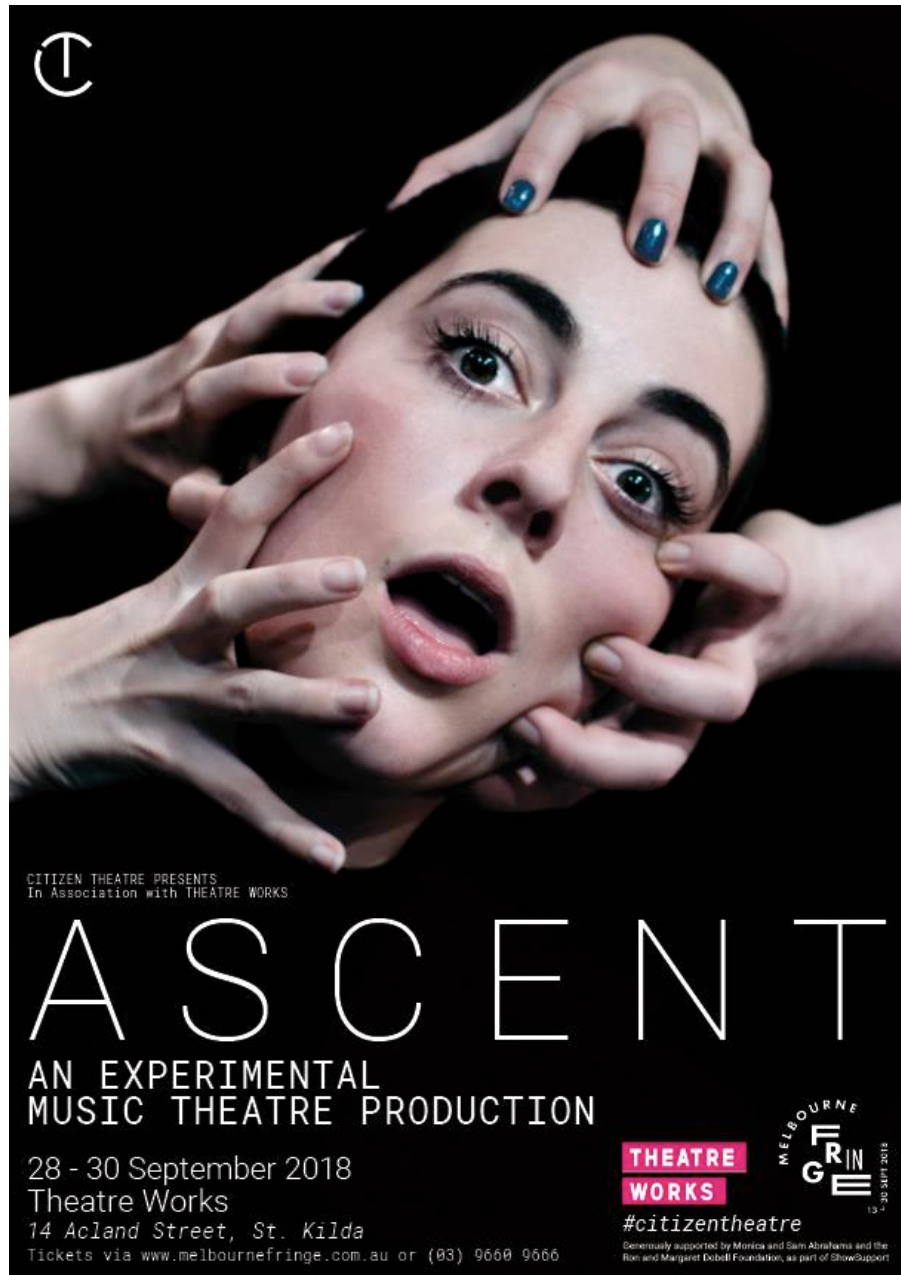


Figure 1: Poster for Ascent (by Stu Brown)

²¹ This description reflects the performers' identities at the time of making the work, Jan – Sep 2018.

I wanted to challenge the gender norms for female characters I had seen in musicals, but I also looked to sources outside the form to help develop ideas for how I could create the music theatre I wanted to see. For instance, I encountered the work of activist and writer Jean Kilbourne through her TED Talk “The dangerous ways ads see women” (2014).²² Her work is broadly concerned with the ways we are accustomed, in Americanised, consumerist cultures, to frequently see disembodied, female body parts in an objectified, problematic way. In *Ascent*, I wanted to explore a way of thinking about individual female body parts that reclaimed their intelligence, agency and creativity. I wanted them to discover they could fly, dance and find their own individual ways of relating to space.

I had also started reading Jill Dolan’s (2013) *The Feminist Spectator In Action*. My conception of feminism up to this point was simple and primarily based on lived-experience of gender-based injustice and marginalisation. However, with Dolan’s accessible text, I began to engage with academic feminist literature and came to think about feminism as that which supports “women’s right to equality in all realms of social life and culture” (Dolan 2013, 1). Dolan’s suggestion that feminists and feminist cultural forms can be part of “a transformative politics of hope so that we can imagine, together, a better, more equitable future for us all” (2013, 1) was highly useful to my artistic practice; Dolan’s words became a compass, guiding many of my choices. Dolan prompted me to ask questions of my work such as, “is this moment contributing to a transformative politics? How is this challenging norms?” and “is this challenging notions that prevent women’s right to equality?” Arriving at a more nuanced intersectional feminist theoretical foundation came later, as will be discussed in the sections to follow.

Ascent took place in a black box theatre with black curtains. The performers wore bespoke, black, full-length costumes, which allowed an isolated revealing of body parts to create specific visual images. For example, body parts from five actors came together to create the image of one body; multiple individual hands came together to create the image of a stomach, then flew away to create another body part in a matter of seconds.

²² See the video at: Jean Kilbourne, “The Dangerous Ways Ads See Women,” TEDx Talk, TEDxLafayetteCollege, 15:50, posted May 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy8yLaoWYbk>.



*Figure 2: Five actors each offer a single body part to create the illusion of a unified body
(image credit: Stu Brown)*



Figure 3: Hands created a torso and are on their way to creating the next image (image credit: Stu Brown)

In creating these images, I drew inspiration from Dimitris Papaioannou's dance-theatre work *The Great Tamer* (2017),²³ where he similarly has performers strategically reveal body parts to create fragmented images that give the illusion of one unified yet fractured and sometimes disproportionate body.



Figure 4: Image from Papaioannou's work The Great Tamer (2017)
(image credit: Julian Mommert)

Though *Ascent* has a simple storyline, I consider the work a concept piece (as will be explained in this chapter). It explores the concept of gendered 'self-improvement' as it relates to social ideals for women. We follow a woman listed in the script as 'B'²⁴ going to various appointments, in pursuit of feeling "forever fresh." As each body part is 'improved' in these appointments, it disappears. For instance, during the pedicure, her toes fly away from her into the black void as the nail polish has its final coat. As her hair is snipped away in the haircut, it flies off into the darkness. In this story every inch of her body is changed until there is nothing left – literally, the body parts all fly away, scene by scene,

²³ See trailer here: Dimitris Papaioannou, "The Great Tamer (2017) / a Work by Dimitris Papaioannou / Trailer," Vimeo video, 3:02, posted 2017, <https://vimeo.com/221573027>.

²⁴ The characters have only letters as names: A, B, C, D and then the Nail Technician, Doctor, Assistant.

leaving only a voice in the darkness by the end. This theatrical metaphor suggests that the ambition to attain the social ideal necessitates giving up some, if not all of yourself.²⁵



Figure 5: The opening 'Haircut scene' (image credit: Stu Brown)

When these 'discarded' body parts fly away, they find a new life with the other discarded body parts. Throughout a series of interludes, the parts find each other and by the end of the show, they have created a celebratory, utopian community where they are able to express their individuality, their agency, their freedom.

Throughout the creation of the work, I was acutely aware of the ways bodies and body parts were being framed and consciously tried to create moments for body parts to move and be part of visual, musicalised choreography, presenting them in surprising, unexpected, or unusual ways. The final scene – the epilogue – along with the interludes,

²⁵ This idea speaks to my experience as a cis-gender, white, heterosexual woman. It therefore cannot account for the diversity of experiences people can have in relation to their bodies, body modification and surgery, for instance trans experiences of top surgery, which may be positive.

were written quite late in the process, and emerged from a need to have the show end with something hopeful, something utopian, after reading Jill Dolan's (2005) work on utopian performatives.

In analysing the process of making *Ascent*, a few things have resonated as significant and relevant to my broader practice. There were music and songs, but it didn't feel like a conventional musical. In many ways it referenced conventional musical theatre tropes, but it also felt distinctly different from a traditional book musical. It also looked different – aesthetically and stylistically, it felt more experimental than commercial. At the time of the performances, I had conversations with colleagues, asking them about what form I should attribute to it – was it a musical, a play with songs, an experimental music theatre work, or something else? And, beyond Dolan's ideas around 'feminism', what other scholars and theories would help me develop my feminist practice?

Section 1: Dramaturgical Context for Practice – Ascent

The history of the Broadway musical is what it is, racism, stereotypes, warts, and all. (Hoffman 2014, 142)

1.1 Music Theatre and Musicals

To determine how I could categorise *Ascent*, I needed to find a term that could specifically and accurately reflect what I had created. Though I knew I had not written a typical musical, there were enough references to the musical that warranted me delving deeper into its development and history, to understand exactly what I was trying to create in my practice. In this section I will present a review of literature that outlines the four major musical theatre categories: revue, musical comedy, integrated or book musical and concept musical. I discovered the concept musical was the most relevant to making sense of the structure I had written for *Ascent*. However, gaining a foundational understanding of the history of the other three categories' evolution became important when Brechtian-materialist feminist concepts such as historicity came into play in my practice (as will be explained in Chapters 2 and 4).

Music theatre is a broad umbrella term including various forms of theatre with prominent music or music-led thinking and material (see Dunbar 2013; Salzman and Desi 2008; Bradby, Delgado and Little 2004; Rebstock 2012), whilst the popular Broadway-style musical, often referred to as musical theatre or the musical, is arguably the most well-recognised form of music theatre. The early beginnings of the musical have been extensively documented, with scholars tracing formative influences from classical Greek and Roman theatre, along with European forms of opera, the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, Minstrel shows and elements of British music hall and the American counterpart, Vaudeville (see for example Kenrick 2008; Patinkin 2008; Hurwitz 2014; Block 1997; Kantor & Maslon 2010; Dunbar 2013; Knapp 2005). The most common form of the contemporary musical is the book musical; it was known first as the integrated musical play, and later as the book musical because of its emphasis on the 'book'. Book

writer, John Weidman, explains the book is more than just the dialogue and songs, particularly as some musicals do not have dialogue. Rather, the book can be thought of as the overall structure of the piece (see *Sigtheatre* 2023). The book musical is a descendent of American²⁶ entertainment forms popular in the early twentieth century, such as variety and early musical comedy, as discussed by scholars such as Sheldon Patinkin (2008), John Kenrick (2008), Nathan Hurwitz (2014), Geoffrey Block (1997), Michael Kantor & Laurence Maslon (2010), John Bush Jones (2003) and Raymond Knapp (2005).²⁷

Vaudeville – a name popularised by variety producer Tony Pastor, drawing from the French term²⁸ – was a mainstay of mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century variety style entertainment, and popular among the poorer classes (Patinkin 2008, 39) and families (see Kenrick 2008, 96). These shows typically featured eight acts across two and a half hours, ranging from dance numbers, songs, acrobats, novelty acts, or “anything that might beguile an audience for fifteen minutes or so” (Kenrick 2008, 98). Another prominent form of variety²⁹ was the revue, which came into prominence in the early twentieth century (Patinkin 2008, 77). This is defined by music theatre scholar Jonas Westover (2013) as a collection of individual pieces that are not necessarily connected to each other – yet with wide appeal – and, therefore, a “highly lucrative type of entertainment” (2013, 4).³⁰ Because of their contemporary, very American stylings with regards to comedy, setting and sound, revues were of interest to younger audiences and the middle class (Patinkin 2008, 80), but were most notably attended by the wealthier classes (Patinkin 2008, 77). The most famous revues were created by producer Florenz Ziegfeld and known as the *Ziegfeld Follies* (Westover 2013; see also Davis 2000). In

²⁶ Though musicals and musical theatre forms are not unique to America, as evidenced by recent publications such as *The Oxford Handbook of the Global Stage Musical* (2023), the book musical comes to maturation in America. Similarly, in *The Routledge Companion to Musical Theatre*, Laura MacDonald and Ryan Donovan (2022) note, “The musical has all too often been defined as a nearly exclusive product of the commercial US American theatre and, therefore, of Broadway” (2022, 1).

²⁷ Music theatre scholars Sean Mayes and Sarah K. Whitfield (2021) offer an in-depth evaluation of the history of British musicals in their book *An Inconvenient Black History of British Musical Theatre: 1900–1950*. They point to the substantial contributions from Black British artists throughout the first half of the twentieth century, offering a counterpoint to the dominant narrative in British musical theatre history, which focuses on the achievements of white creators.

²⁸ Which Kenrick notes is “French slang meaning ‘songs of the town’” (2008, 97).

²⁹ For more on mid-nineteenth century variety that was the precursor to Vaudeville, see Kenrick (2008, 58-61).

³⁰ The revue continues to exist in different formats today, such as television.

variety forms, performers and writers came to hone the art of capturing an audience's attention quickly, through whatever means necessary (see Kenrick 2008, 99), often resorting to stereotypes (see Mintz 1996).

That these forms were financially lucrative because they appealed to wide ranging audiences, was significant to understanding my practice. Although I was exploring how to both entertain and hold my audience's attention in *Ascent*, I was doing so in more subtle and experimental ways, rather than using aesthetics and references that would appeal to a broad range of people. I was not anticipating that *Ascent* would be a lucrative endeavour (and indeed, with such a short season, it was not). I was deliberately working in a fringe environment, not only because of the limited funds and resources available, but also because aesthetically, I did not want to feel I had to appeal to a broad, mainstream audience, as I knew what I had to say did not align with the status quo. Nonetheless, there were some aspects of *Ascent* that I intuitively felt had a relationship to commercial music theatre forms.

Developing alongside the variety shows, early musical comedies first emerged in the late nineteenth century and gained popularity and notable commercial success throughout the 1920s (Patinkin 2008, 6). Like many categorical terms in musical theatre studies, musical comedy has numerous associations and a complex history (see more in Borroff 1984; Kenrick 2008, 95; Deer and Dal Vera 2008, 329; Kowalke 2013, 152-161). Musical comedies have been frequently seen as lowbrow and lacking sufficient artistic legitimacy to warrant rigorous academic engagement (Borroff 1984, 102; see also Taylor 2012). It was not until musical theatre developed more sophisticated themes and deliberate dramaturgy that it began to be taken more seriously; that is, musical theatre was not recognised as a 'legitimate', established art form until its artistic elements started becoming 'integrated' (Kowalke 2013). According to music theatre artist-scholars Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera (2008), musical comedies, whilst having established stylistic conventions in the early 1900s, continue to this day through reinvention and adaption to a changing society and musical tastes. As such, they define musical comedy as a style – that is, a set of consistent conventions or rules that are associated with a theatre genre

or period (2008, 283). Musical comedies have been strongly influenced by Vaudeville and various popular entertainment forms over the years, including the deeply racist Minstrel shows, and have remained “intensely populist” (Deer and Dal Vera 2008, 330). Deer and Dal Vera (2008, 330) explain that musical comedies typically feature comic stereotypes to appeal to the humour of the working and middle classes of their time.

The use of stereotype throughout the history of the musical has been pervasive across its various forms, including the book musical.³¹ Since many book musical creators wrote material for early musical comedy, and the cultural context out of which they emerged was dominated by musical comedy and variety style shows, book musicals also came to feature caricatures and stereotypes (see Decker 2011). Musical theatre scholar Todd Decker (2011) explains that despite attempts from book musical writers such as Oscar Hammerstein, who claimed to deplore the depiction of “evil stereotypes” (Hammerstein in Decker 2011, 1), many of Hammerstein’s books and lyrics failed to provide three dimensional characters, as noted by his most celebrated protégé, Stephen Sondheim:

For all their revolutionary impact, the characters are not much more than collections of characteristics – verbal tics, and quirks, like Southern accents or bad grammar, which individualise a character only the way a black hat signifies a villain – and his lyrics reflect that naïveté. Refining his innovations was left to my generation...³² (2010, xix)

As argued by Decker, stereotypes have, throughout the history of the musical, provided a “dramaturgical shorthand” (2011, 2) upon which the musical has come to rely. These recognisable stereotypes emerged in part to cope with the economy required for writing musicals; a musical’s book is typically one third to one half of a non-musical play and as such, “the concision, economy, and pace of the musical book preclude its approaching

³¹ See Glover (2021) for an overview of prominent black musical theatre creators who, in the early twentieth century and throughout the Harlem Renaissance, actively subverted the stereotypes and norms for black performers on musical stages through their shows. See also Schultz (2010) for more detail on the Harlem Renaissance and the ‘Golden Age’ of black musicals.

³² Stacy Wolf (2014), however, criticises Sondheim’s writing of women characters in *Company* (1970) which she finds to be “stereotypically, even misogynistically portrayed” (2014, 1).

the spoken play in dramatic weight, psychological depth, and complexity of plot” (Kowalke 2013, 168). In his guide to directing musicals, Joe Deer (2014) alerts the musical theatre director to the condensed dialogue, comparing the musical *My Fair Lady* (1956) to George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* (1913). Here (and as a general rule in musicals) the most ‘potent’ emotional moments are expressed through song and dance, rather than dialogue (Deer 2014, 5). With little room for nuanced dialogical character development to occur, stereotypes can become an efficient way to establish characters in musicals on the page. This notion of caricature and stereotype as being a part of the musical’s early foundations felt relevant to understanding my artistic interest in challenging the conventional, commercial forms of the musical.

Decker explains that racial stereotypes have endured in musicals due to their popularity and profitability, and that they have provided “a means to enhance the entertainment value of a product being sold to particular audiences” (2011, 2). Furthermore, because musical theatre has evolved as a populist form and business venture,³³ dominant social ideals or notions about who counts as ‘American’ (Knapp 2005)³⁴, have informed its condensed dramaturgical structure. Along similar lines, theatre scholar David Savran argues that “the musical is first and foremost a product of the marketplace in which the aesthetic is always – and unpredictably – overdetermined by economic interests” (2004, 213).

More specifically, turning to gender, stereotype and the musical, the consistent objectification of female bodies, and particularly their legs, has proven beneficial for the business side of show business since musicals first began. As theatre historian John Kenrick notes: “Variety passed on two legacies to the earliest Broadway musicals:

³³ It was Rodgers and Hammerstein, who, in addition to consolidating the artistic form of the book musical, also established business models in the mid-twentieth century, creating “a business empire that continues to exercise draconian control over their works” (Savran 2004, 214). Since the arrival of the Megamusical (see Sternfeld 2006), however, this control has become very nuanced and particular. As explained by music theatre scholar Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen (2017) in her article “Cameron Mackintosh: Control, Collaboration, and the Creative Producer”, Cameron Mackintosh justifies having a high level of control over musicals he produces due to the need to maintain artistic ‘quality’.

³⁴ Scholar Raymond Knapp (2005) argues, “American musicals teach people in powerful ways what and whom to care about, and how to go about caring about them” (2005, 283).

underdressed showgirls in tights and the concept of adjusting content to meet audience demand” (2008, 61). In her design-focused historiographical overview of spectacle, artist-scholar Virginia Anderson (2012) looks at one of the earliest musicals, an opéra bouffe/early musical comedy style show, *The Black Crook* (1866). Despite having elaborate scenic transformations, the most impactful aspect of the production and determinant of its success was the scantily-clad chorus girls:

It was the daring provocation of nearly-nude dancing girls that brought audiences to this wildly successful show, whose extravagant and often revealing costuming for its leggy chorus members soon become characteristic of the American musical. (Anderson 2012, 297)

Music theatre scholar Elizabeth Wollman also notes that *The Black Crook* contained “melodrama, romance, comedy, dance, songs, speciality acts, spectacular scenic effects, elaborate costumes and legs, legs, legs” (2006, 4). This suggests that the earliest attempt of the musical form relied on objectified and idealised female bodies when creating the most memorable and spectacular moments of the show – something which continued as popular entertainment developed throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For instance, when the first fully integrated book musical that included dance, *Oklahoma!* (1943) was in out-of-town tryouts, producer Mike Todd famously said, “No gags, no gals, no chance” (Todd in Green 1984), reflecting the dominant expectations for what a musicalised story ought to contain. Agnes de Mille, choreographer for *Oklahoma!*, was similarly concerned with there not being “any sex in the first act” (de Mille in Kantor 2013b) and so the dream ballet sequence³⁵ would contain sexualised female bodies.³⁶ Whilst the sexualisation of female bodies is not necessarily problematic, it becomes an issue when it is the dominant – and sometimes only – possibility for female gender expression on the

³⁵ Occurring at the end of Act 1, where Laurey is faced with her confusing desires.

³⁶ The scene sets up a problematic dichotomy, that sexed bodies are bad, scary and must be controlled, whilst innocent bodies are good, establishing the virgin/whore trope in one of the earliest integrated book musicals and reflecting American values of the time.

musical stage. Such restrictive and sexualised stereotypes and misogynistic ideas present in a range of musicals from mid-century to recent musicals is explored in depth primarily by Stacy Wolf (see 2002, 2011, 2014, 2018) and Grace Barnes (see 2015, 2020, 2022).

In their (2008) book *Acting in Musical Theatre*, Deer and Dal Vera describe stereotypes as lacking nuance, and often portraying a negative, judgemental tone. The danger of enacting stereotypes for actors of musical theatre are, from their perspective, that such portrayals of character constitute “bad” acting, or a “two dimensional caricature” that lacks humanity (Deer and Dal Vera 2008, 149). They implore the actor to enact an archetype when bringing a recognisable character type to life, rather than resorting to stereotype, defining an archetype as a recognizable character type which lives “in the collective unconscious” and “exhibit[s] physical and vocal behaviors related to a strong psychological and emotional predisposition” (Deer and Dal Vera 2008, 149). Though as a teacher of musical theatre actors I support this approach, as a creator, the replication of problematic and limiting gender stereotypes in a musical’s writing was something I found troubling and was trying to avoid in my practice.

However, what I had not yet unpacked at the time of creating *Ascent* was the relationship between a musical’s form and a musical’s conventions. I was challenged by how to use a musical’s conventions without replicating the problematic aspects of commercial musical forms – which had historically featured stereotypical female characters – even though I knew there were exceptions, such as the original book musical *Fun Home* (2015) with music by Jeanine Tesori and book by Lisa Kron. Based on Alison Bechdel’s (2006) graphic novel, this musical, with its all-female Broadway collaboration, was the first female writing team to win the Tony Award for both Best Book and Best Original Score (Thomas 2015). It features lesbian and gay characters not as reductive stereotypes or harmful jokes, but as rich human characters, as discussed by Jill Dolan in her blog, *The Feminist*

Spectator (2013b).³⁷ Another exception is *Jagged Little Pill* (2019), the Jukebox musical using songs from Alanis Morissette's album of the same name. In a *New York Times* review, Joshua Barone (2018) proposes this could be "the most woke musical since *Hair*", tackling a range of contemporary issues such as sexual assault, opiate addiction, interracial adoption, mental health challenges and more. These musicals, which offer female characters that are not overwhelmingly focused on marriage and heterosexual romance, penned and led by women creatives, are rare exceptions in the canon. Of those that are associated with so-called 'female empowerment' such as *Wicked* (2003), *Six* (2017), *&Juliet* (2019), their dramaturgical conventions³⁸ and plots do not necessarily provide feminist outcomes, (according to the intersectional feminist framework I have employed in this research) as will be discussed in Chapter 2.

So, while I could point to a musical like *Fun Home* as an example of how an original book musical can present positive portrayals of women, I was not sure how *my* feminist voice³⁹ and aesthetic interests (which at the time of writing *Ascent* were more aligned with the experimental, rather than the conventional) fit with the book musical. My experiments with *Ascent* were a way of exploring conventions I was drawn to, in the aesthetic I was drawn to, without much concern for form, allowing me to more easily critique and challenge this very issue of female stereotypes being a norm on musical stages.⁴⁰

Since the musical has sustained itself as a popular and lucrative form of entertainment that reflects the dominant social values of the time (Knapp 2005), it has often lacked the

³⁷ Though I did not consider this at the time of making *Ascent*, Lisa Kron also began her work as an experimental, collaborative artist working in fringe contexts. As she describes in an interview (2015) with Victoria Myers, working at the WOW Cafe expanded her dramaturgical thinking and experimental practice, which inevitably laid the groundwork for innovation when she later worked on shows like *Fun Home*. Similarly, I found working in a fringe context with *Ascent* allowed me to expand my practice, developing ideas that would come to inform *Dangerous* (aiming for a commercial context), as will be explained in Chapters 4 and 5.

³⁸ And of these, *Jagged Little Pill* and *&Juliet* are Jukebox musicals rather than musicals with original lyrics.

³⁹ My feminist voice emerges from my lived experience as a heterosexual white cis-gender woman, differing from the queer identities explored in *Fun Home*.

⁴⁰ Specifically in Australia, there have been new musicals that have attempted to centre female stories, such as *My Brilliant Career* (2024), *Zombie!* (2024) and *Fangirls* (2019). *My Brilliant Career* enjoyed critical acclaim (see Story 2024) during its premiere season at Melbourne Theatre Company and demonstrated an overtly feminist message. In a recent article for *ABC News*, journalist Hannah Story (2024) argues *My Brilliant Career* is "part of a wave of new Australian musicals centred on the experiences of young women and often written by women". Though *Ascent* premiered before these works, both *Ascent* and *Dangerous* point to a shared desire among writers of new Australian musicals to centre a female story in a musical form.

dexterity to address the needs of marginalised people, such as women (see Dyer 2002). Popular culture scholar Richard Dyer looks seriously at the embedded ideological values in various forms of entertainment, arguing that “any entertainment carries assumptions about and attitudes toward the world, even if these are not the point of the thing” (2002, 2). As such, Dyer’s study of entertainment asks us to pay attention to *what* is being communicated when we engage with entertainment forms such as the commercial musical, when typically, such forms are dismissed as being ‘only entertainment’ and therefore not warranting critical engagement – as the title of Dyer’s book (*Only Entertainment*) suggests. As an artist, this notion of attending not just to the aesthetics of a work but also *what* is being communicated, whether the work is intending to be simply ‘entertaining’ or overtly political, has become an idea central to analysing my choices in creating *Ascent* and in shaping my practice when creating *Dangerous*, as will be discussed in depth in the chapters to follow.

The perspectives these scholars offer has helped me to understand my desire to branch out of the traditional book musical in creating *Ascent*. This, I believe, was necessary before creating my new musical *Dangerous*, where the notion of ‘show business’ and creating something for a broader audience was front of mind throughout my creative process. The history and context explained above pointed to a strong need for me – and all writers of new music theatre – to investigate musical writing practices with rigour and consciousness, to counter the problematic gender norms that typically occur in musicals and avoid replicating them in new work.

1.2 Key Category: Concept Musicals

Whilst the variety/revue, musical comedy and book musical forms provide an important context and foundation for understanding the prevalence of problematic stereotypes in commercial musical forms, the concept musical offers a clearer dramaturgical framework for understanding *Ascent*. It presents a musical form that speaks to my desire for experimentation *and* presenting work with a political agenda. As musical theatre scholar Christine Young-Gerber (2010) suggests, the concept musical has the potential for

innovation for those making new music theatre, since “the subject matter of concept musicals has more in common with non-musical contemporary theatre” (2010, 331), and can therefore allow the creator to introduce content that is not usually found in musicals or at the very least, to offer content in a way that is not typical for a musical. Furthermore, the concept musical is the most recent⁴¹ and “potentially least understood” (Young-Gerber 2010, 331) form of the musical, and holds the most potential for music theatre research; it can elucidate the musical’s conventions, offering scholars and practitioners new approaches and ways of thinking about and implementing them (Young-Gerber 2010, 331). Through analysing *Ascent* with Young-Gerber’s (2010) article in mind, it became evident that it was a concept musical — although it was not deliberately crafted this way.

This dynamic of doing something based on artistic impulse then making conscious sense of it through analysis is present throughout this dissertation. I have found Robin Nelson’s (2013) language of ‘know-how’ and ‘know-that’ useful in framing this experience. For instance, whilst in the ‘know-how’ aspect of praxis – that is, the way one tacitly ‘knows’ what to do when in the practice, executing – I was creating and moving towards something I wanted to make. However, it wasn’t until Young-Gerber’s article that I reframed and more clearly articulated my ‘know-how’ with what Nelson (2013) calls ‘know-that’ — the conceptual and contextual frameworks and principles at work. In other words, I became more conscious of and able to more clearly articulate what I created as an artist through the research process; specifically, here, reading Young-Gerber’s article allowed me to point to the ways in which *Ascent* was a concept musical, even though I had not deliberately set out to write a concept musical.

Since defining the concept musical is complex, Young-Gerber offers a review of key scholars, music theatre writers and historians, capturing the various definitions and ways of thinking about the concept musical in the music theatre literature. She cites John Bush Jones (2003), Richard Kislán (1995), Michael Kantor and Laurence Maslon (2010), Foster

⁴¹ Christine Young-Gerber (2010) explains that the term ‘concept musical’ came into prominence in the second half of the twentieth century. Whilst “it is not possible to verify who first used the phrase ‘concept musical’” (2010, 332), she points to John Bush Jones’ (2003) book that attempts to trace its mention in reviews, as well as highlighting the confusion that existed in early usages due to the lack of distinction between musical form and directorial concept.

Hirsch (1985), Joseph Swain (1990), Ethan Mordden (2003), Lehman Engel (1975) and Glenn Litton (1981). However, finding these scholars' definitions limiting, Young-Gerber offers a practical and clear definition and description whose key features include: a non-linear structure, "replacing a linear storyline with episodic situations that are circular in nature" (2010, 341); an emphasis on theme over plot; and songs and characters that are used to comment on and elucidate the themes rather than advancing a plot. She points to *Company* (1970) and *A Chorus Line* (1975) as exemplifying these key features, along with *Cats* (1981), *Assassins* (1990) and *Avenue Q* (2003).

Though there are commonalities that the concept musical shares with musical comedy, book musicals and the revue, there are also distinct differences, as explained by Young-Gerber (2010). The first thing she points out is the significance of theme. Whilst musical comedy favours a loose and predictable plot, there is limited emphasis on a distinctive theme; revues may employ a theme to provide a sense of unity to otherwise disconnected and unrelated items; integrated book musicals typically have a theme. However, what differentiates the concept musical is the *primacy* of theme and specifically, that it "embodies a theme" (Young-Gerber 2010, 335).⁴²

With regards to plot and character, Young-Gerber (2010, 336) explains that musical comedies and integrated musicals see characters portray a plot and this develops their characters. However, revues, like concept musicals, lack a plot to enable character development (and revues do not typically feature delineated characters). In concept musicals, it is "through the characters, multiple stories are related, each revealing a different aspect of the overriding theme. In this way, character and theme work together to create cohesion for the concept musical" (Young-Gerber 2010, 337).⁴³ In short, characters in concept musicals develop as they explore thematic issues and questions.

⁴² Though Young-Gerber does not elaborate on what is meant by this, I understand it to refer to the primacy of theme as it is expressed and materialised through each of the stagecraft elements, including the actor's physicality, and texts both musical and word-based.

⁴³ For example, Young-Gerber (2010) explains how the use of characters in *Company* sees them "placed in various situations to transcend time and space in order to explore the thematic questions through their eyes" (2010, 337). Rather than character, time and place existing to support the development of a plot, the characters exist in a range of time and place settings, and always in relation to Robert, to reveal another aspect of the theme. Young-Gerber summarises that without the lead character, Robert, "there is no viewpoint through which to explore relationships in *Company*" (2010, 337).

This made sense of my reluctance to give my characters names and elaborate backstories in *Ascent*, as I wanted to prioritise the theme and have the characters exist in ways that primarily supported that theme. Here, my implicit and intuitive ‘know-how’ (after Nelson 2013) became more conscious, clarified and articulated ‘know-that’ (after Nelson 2013) after reading Young-Gerber’s article. I thought of the central character, B, and realised she is used to explore the theme of gendered self-improvement; she repeatedly articulates a temporary sense of satisfaction with how “womanly” or “sexy” she is, or how close she is to “becoming” even though her body parts disappear as they are ‘improved’. In this way, B is developed only as far as is necessary to make a very literal feminist point about the theme, which is to say that gendered self-improvement (or aspiring towards unattainable gender ideals) can be a destructive endeavour that can lead to one’s sense of self disappearing. The other characters exist to provide different perspectives – D is the true support, advocating for B’s embracing of her authentic, messy, human self, whereas the friends A and C exist to tease and highlight B’s insecurities and need for social acceptance by becoming the ideal. Similarly, the beauty therapists and the Doctor point out B’s flaws and all the ‘work’ that must be done, often shaming B, using self-help rhetoric such as “become your best self” and presenting self-improvement as a noble, serious quest, to entice B to consent to the various procedures. The interludes where the discarded body parts find each other are similarly less about plot, and more about the development of the theme because of their repetitive, cyclical nature: each time a body part is cut away, it happily finds a companion discarded body part in the void, a cycle that is repeated throughout, highlighting the agency and intelligence of the female body.

The use of song in concept musicals is more complicated because it shares more in common with the other types of musicals. As Young-Gerber explains, musical comedy and revue have tended to focus on showcasing performers through song, whereas integrated book musicals typically use songs to advance the plot. Concept musicals, however, usually use songs in a more diegetic way. Often, songs in concept musicals occur in what Sondheim (2010, 167) calls a “quasi-Brechtian” fashion; that is, they tend to comment on the action and do not advance the plot, since plot is not primary. This is a

significant departure from the ways songs are typically used in book musicals and differs from what Sondheim's mentor and teacher Oscar Hammerstein II taught him (Sondheim 2010, 167). The other common feature of songs in concept musicals, according to Young-Gerber, is they can interrupt the action and are used in a way that is similar to spoken soliloquy, making them distinct from diegetic songs in other musicals. Whilst the diegetic song is a common feature across the various forms of the musical, the concept musical specifically creates "diegetic songs that provide commentary and self-reflection of the situations and theme" (Young-Gerber 2010, 338). In Sondheim's words, the songs in *Company* "either commented on the action, like "The Little Things You Do Together," or *were* the action, like "Barcelona," – but never *part* of the action" (Sondheim 2010, 167, emphasis in original).⁴⁴

Understanding the function of songs in concept musicals was another clear moment for me as an artist, where the tacit 'know-how' was suddenly clarified and could now deepen a more conscious 'know-that' (after Nelson 2013). The song lyrics I had written in *Ascent* did not serve to advance the plot, since there was not much of a plot to advance. Rather, they commented on what was occurring in a scene, offering criticism, voicing the central character's fears, or commenting on the experience of the action. The "Smell Song", for instance, tells the audience of B's primary concern (connected to the theme of gendered self-improvement): she worries that she smells.⁴⁵ B explains the smells that are unacceptable and connects an 'ideal' smell with an ideal, feminine, female self. The other characters speak to her fears, making nasty comments about her smell, legitimising B's concern. In the lead up to a reprise of "Smell Song", B & D have the following conversation:

D	Everyone has a smell or a waft of some sort. It's natural.
B	Natural!

⁴⁴ It is worth making mention here of Joan Littlewood's *Oh What A Lovely War* (1963). Though it used existing popular songs (rather than original songs) and was not a concept musical, its use of song demonstrates the political potential of a Brechtian approach to song. In scholar Derek Paget's article, the Brechtian use of song enabled a "double-edged sword" (1990, 249) effect, whereby a song's power was used for its nostalgic qualities, and its ability to offer satirical commentary. In this way, it allowed complex meaning making to occur to serve the political agenda.

⁴⁵ This is not to say men do not share concerns of smell, but smell has a gendered aspect. See, for example, Simmonds (2019).

- D Yes. It's human.
- B Do you hear yourself? Natural! I want to *look* natural, I don't want to *be* natural. I want to feel *fresh*!
- D You're a human being.
- B What a truly awful smell! A human *being* — what is that? A human wafting? This can't be it... Deep into the future, I can see her, I can smell her — no wait! ... I *can't* smell her at all! Yes, that's it! Less *is* more!
- D Sometimes less is less.



Sound 1: The Smell Song backing (music by: Imogen Cygler)

SMELL SONG REPRISE

- B **My future self**
- FRIENDS **No smell, no smell, no smell, no smell, no smell, no smell...**
- B **Has no smell...**
- FRIENDS **No smell.**
- B **My future self...**
- FRIENDS **No smell, no smell, no smell, no smell, no smell, no smell...**
- B **She has no smell!**
- FRIENDS **No smell.**
- Future self...**
- B **I see her, my new self...**
- FRIENDS **She is skinny!**
- B **I see her, my sexy self!**

FRIENDS **She is great!**
B **I feel her, my lighter self...**
FRIENDS **Less is less is less is less is less is less**
 is more!
 Future self...

Here, the connection between ideal gendered aspirations and smell becomes clearer. B tells us, in a soliloquised fashion, that she can see her new, sexy, skinnier, smell-less self, which the friends support. This song is absurdist and comedic but captures a genuine concern: a fear of smelling bad. Furthermore, the song, whilst being comedic in its delivery, is offering an alternative to the content female characters have sung about for a large proportion of the musical's history: heteronormative romance (see Wolf 2011). Thus, the song was aligning with my reading of Dolan (2013), because I felt offering such an alternative was a way of contributing to a politics that could be transformative, in that it could contribute to changing audience expectations for what female characters could do in a music theatre context.

Robert Reid (2018), reviewer for noted arts criticism platform *Witness Performance*, recognised the "Smell Song" (first occurring in scene 4) as the moment at which a dramaturgical reference to the musical form is made, though not in a conventional integrated musical fashion (which would see an advancement of plot), stating:

She worries that she smells. Weirdly, this is when it becomes clear that it's a musical: not because of the development in the narrative, but because the music takes on a cadence that, while dissonant, is at the same time remarkably familiar. No aria or torch song or sing-along moment, but instead a monotone maintained throughout a glorious cascade of atonal chords. "I smell," they sing. "I'm worried I smell."

This remark speaks to the feminist potential of the concept musical I was exploring through my 'know-how' (after Nelson 2013); I wanted to interrogate recognisable musical theatre conventions and offer them in a new, feminist context. Specifically, here, the use of song is employed in a quasi-Brechtian mode, commenting on and amplifying the character's circumstances and concerns, which were focused on being concerned about the judgements of others, and desperately wanting to appeal to the social ideal. B's songs and journey were not about heterosexual marriage but exploring how a heteronormative gender ideology that prescribes fixed and unrealistic gender ideals can shape one's sense of self.

With regards to the structure of the concept musical, it does not share the beginning, middle and ending typical of a book musical, instead, bringing "a circular organization to a progression of situations. The juxtaposition of the situations to illuminate thematic points fully develops the topics" (Young-Gerber 2010, 335). In this way, the lack of a conventional beginning, middle and ending enables the focus to be about illumination of the theme rather than a conclusion to a plot.⁴⁶ Sondheim describes the plot of concept musical *Company* (1970) as being nothing more than the following:

A man with no emotional commitments reassesses his life on his thirty-fifth birthday by reviewing his relationships with his married acquaintances and his girlfriends. (2010, 165)

Similarly, the plot of *Ascent* can be simply described as: the story of a woman who improves herself to death. Though the story can be summed up in a similar way to *Company*, *Ascent* has a feminist theme of gendered self-improvement, explored in each of the scenes as the central character, B, goes from appointment to appointment, starting with haircuts, perfume stores, waxing salons, pedicures and then gradually moving towards more invasive and dangerous plastic surgery procedures. Though there is a

⁴⁶ As Sondheim says of *Company*, it "does have a story, the story of what happens inside Robert; it just doesn't have a chronological linear plot" (2010, 166) and instead revolves around the theme of "the challenge of maintaining relationships in a society becoming increasingly depersonalized" (2010, 166).

series of events leading to her death, the scenes are not developing a complex plot. Rather, they enact a repetitive cycle: she arrives, she discusses what she wants and needs, advice is given, and she goes through the treatment, resulting in the body part that is being treated flying away into the void. The procedures are always abstractly depicted through movement and dance. Each cycle results in B trying even harder and going to more extreme lengths the next time, until she ‘improves’ herself to death.

Since there is no plot in a concept musical, multiple characters can have equal or similar importance as they each offer insight into the theme, enabling a multiplicity of ideas to co-exist. In this way, through embracing the multiple, the concept musical complicates the singularity required of the integrated book musical, which typically requires that all elements “get pointed in the same direction toward the same goal” (Viertel 2016, xi), serving one unifying idea (see Block 2011, 3). In other words, in the book musical, as noted musical theatre composer Richard Rodgers’ explains, “the orchestrations sound the way the costumes look” (1975, 227).⁴⁷ Young-Gerber points out that the very term ‘concept’ has a “multiplicity of theatrical meanings” (Young-Gerber 2010, 333). In this way, the concept musical may be compatible with feminism, because, as queer feminist scholars Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan (2020) explain, feminism ought to be thought of in terms of multiplicity (2020, 55). Similarly, multiplicity has come to define feminist theatres and theatre making practices (see for example Dolan 2013; De Gay & Goodman 2003; Aston & Harris 2006; Glenn 2000; Aston 1994; Goodman 1993; McCann & Monaghan 2020). From a practical perspective, following my ‘know-that’ (after Nelson 2013), I instinctively felt I needed to have multiple characters throughout *Ascent*; now I understand I was seeking a story that enabled a multiplicity of feminist meanings and perspectives. Whilst a tragic trajectory is presented for B, the interludes were intended to offer a hopeful counterpart to B’s perspective where she did not see their value. This complicated the theme and destabilised B as the primary character.

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that composer Jerome Kern, unlike his New York contemporaries, studied composition in Germany where he was exposed to Richard Wagner’s ideas around Gesamtkunstwerk (or total artwork, as it is often translated) (Richardson 2019). As Nick Richardson (2019) explains, “inspired by Wagner’s idea of Gesamtkunstwerk, Kern envisioned a new form that utilized music, lyrics and dance cohesively to tell a story” (2019, 10). Of course, Oscar Hammerstein II was the librettist who helped Kern realise this vision and went on to develop and create integrated stories that similarly aimed to unify the artforms, with composer Richard Rodgers.

Although potentially compatible with a feminist agenda, a concept musical, however, is not necessarily *inherently* feminist. This is evidenced in feminist music theatre scholar Stacy Wolf's (2014) critical analysis of the female characters in *Company* (1970).⁴⁸ Wolf argues the female characters are not progressive enough, particularly given the time in which *Company* was written and set: a time during which the feminist movement was unfolding in a very public way. Wolf argues the masculine perspectives dominate and male characters are ultimately depicted in more nuanced, vivid ways. Of *Company*, Wolf says: "The story puts the women in the position of being judged: the single women as potential wives and the married women as unattainable fantasies. The narrative itself, then, objectifies women" (Wolf 2014, 4).⁴⁹ Wolf's analysis reminded me, as the artist-scholar, to remain intentional and curious as I explored the concept musical.

The concept musical offers a structural and dramaturgical framework that, theoretically, enables feminist themes and concerns to be explored, and as concerns *Dangerous*, with the potential to appeal to a broad audience in a commercial context. However, this is only the beginning of a series of choices that need to be consciously made when creating a feminist concept musical; if, for instance, as with *Company*, the entire show is organised from a male perspective that does not allow female characters possibilities beyond the well-worn stereotypes and limited roles such as wife, mother, girlfriend, a feminist work is not likely to emerge, as evidenced by Wolf's (2014) article. Currently, there are no feminist concept musicals that exist within the commercial Australian, British or American contexts. However it is entirely possible there are independent and fringe artists making such work, and there are song cycles such as Carmel Dean's *Well Behaved Women* (2021). Therefore, after analysing *Ascent* through the lens of the concept musical, retrospectively diagnosing some of its dramaturgical features as such, I was curious about what would happen if I set out to consciously write a feminist concept musical. This will be explored in depth in Chapters 4 and 5.

⁴⁸ Wolf writes, "In this groundbreaking 1970 ensemble musical about a bachelor's encounters with five married couples and three girlfriends, Sondheim's female characters occupy a striking range of types within one show. From the bitter, acerbic, thrice-married Joanne to the reluctant bride-to-be Amy, and from the self-described 'dumb' 'stewardess' April to the free-spirited Marta" (2014, 1).

⁴⁹ Music theatre scholar Elizabeth Wollman (2014) does a similar analysis of the female characters in *Hair* (1967). *Hair* is not unanimously considered a concept musical by scholars; music theatre historian John Bush Jones (2003) gives it his term 'fragmented musicals', which Gerber-Young (2010) takes to mean concept musical.

1.3 Key Category: Composed Theatre

In addition to positioning *Ascent* as a concept musical, the theoretical writings around Composed Theatre also provided useful language and concepts in describing aspects of the dramaturgical processes and features of *Ascent* which were more experimental. Being able to discuss how I approached the creation of *Ascent* is an important part of understanding what made it feminist. In other words, the concept musical can explain *what* I made, but Composed Theatre explains *how* I made it. Furthermore, despite Composed Theatre writings lacking overt consideration of gender, these processes were able to produce a feminist work.

As noted in the precis, Jill Dolan's (2013) book *The Feminist Spectator in Action* was the key source guiding my emerging feminism at the time of creating *Ascent*. In my practice, I applied some key ideas from her introduction⁵⁰ by attempting to present female bodies doing things that would be uncommon on the musical stage, to potentially *transform* audience expectations for what female bodies could do in a musical context and perhaps beyond the theatre. Simultaneously, I was trying to avoid sexualised objectification of body parts, to support women's right to equality in all areas of life.

I first came across Composed Theatre when a colleague saw *Ascent* and told me that what I was making was Composed Theatre. Composed Theatre scholar Matthias Rebstock (2012) explains that Composed Theatre emerged from avant-garde artforms from inter and post-war contexts and was influenced by major artistic movements of the twentieth century, such as Bauhaus, Dada, Theatre of Cruelty, Happenings and Fluxus. This period of performing arts was concerned with deconstruction, post-structuralism, destabilisation of text-centrism and of mimetic theatre and the mise-en-scene, and a re-evaluation of form, meaning and meaning-making. Since language was aiming to be less representational and less mimetic throughout these major artistic movements, it could be

⁵⁰ The key ideas I took away were understanding feminism as that which supports "women's right to equality in all realms of social life and culture" (Dolan 2013, 1) and that feminists and feminist cultural forms can be part of "a transformative politics of hope so that we can imagine, together, a better, more equitable future for us all" (Dolan 2013, 1).

“structured according to musical principles” (Rebstock 2012, 24). As an artist I had always been interested in the Bauhaus artists and experimental artistic movements described by Rebstock. I had spent time in Europe during my twenties and was influenced by the more experimental theatre work and visual art I saw on various trips to Berlin and other major European cities throughout 2009-2015, including many visits to Weimar, the home of the Bauhaus movement. There was something about the use of the symbolic, simple, striking design that resonated with my emerging artistic aesthetic at the time (and, perhaps, connecting me to my German ancestry).

Rebstock (2012) finds the influence of less text-centric theatrical practitioners such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Antonin Artaud, Oskar Schlemmer and the Bauhaus artists as being relevant to understanding the experimental attempts of Composed Theatre composers Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky and, later, John Cage (see also Roesner 2016). All these artists – an eclectic mix – set the scene in defining Composed Theatre: a form of music theatre which is interdisciplinary, non-homogenous, “highly characterised and unified by making use of compositional strategies and techniques and, in a broader sense, by the application of compositional thinking” (Rebstock 2012, 19). This approach to theatre necessarily negates traditional narrative, instead relying on new ways of thinking about form and organising elements to create a theatrical experience. In this way, Composed Theatre is comparable with and has commonalities with the concept musical.⁵¹

This Composed Theatre aspect of challenging text hierarchy had been present in *Ascent* – another moment of deepening my ‘know-how’ with ‘know-that’ (after Nelson 2013); all the elements shared an important and interdependent role. Though text played a significant role, it was not, however, the only significant element used. Movement was just as important, playing an equally vital role in exploring the theme. The script is only fifty pages long, with many scenes simply noting descriptions of key action to be portrayed by choreography. Additionally, the choreography was not visually perceivable without

⁵¹ It may be possible, therefore, to categorise some concept musicals as Composed Theatre, if they also exhibit the ‘symptoms’ Rebstock (2012) describes.

costume and lighting: these three elements had to be present simultaneously, with the absence of one having a negative impact on the others. The choreography *required* bespoke costumes to be worn, and makeshift lighting to be used even during rehearsals, to enable the hiding and revealing of skin to make the images appear. Without the costumes and light, the choreographed shapes were not visible, the visual storytelling was lost, and it was impossible to rehearse. Though costumes and lighting always enhance the storytelling of any performance, they were especially critical with *Ascent*.



Video 2: Actors rehearsing in custom costumes (filmed by: Stu Brown)

In *Ascent*, the music was often communicating something different to the text and the choreography was communicating something different again, because there was not a traditional text hierarchy. For example, in scene fifteen, the Doctor is about to perform plastic surgery on B's face. The music begins with a piano, playing a lilting melodic waltz.



Sound 2: Music in scene 15 plays against the choreography (music by: Imogen Cygler)

The music was intended to create a sense of beauty, leaning into the (invisible) Doctor's ambition of creating a beautiful, perfect face. However, this is not the only story present. The textual information gained from the preceding dialogue,⁵² in combination with the music, had an interdependent relationship with the choreography and feminist framing of the body parts. That is, they all worked together to tell different aspects of, or perspectives on the feminist story simultaneously. An absence of one of these aspects would result in an incomplete, or overly simplified, singular perspective. Unlike a conventional musical where "the orchestrations sound the way the costumes look" (Rodgers 1975, 227), in this scene, *Ascent* employed the music to tell the story of the Doctor's ambition (whose body was not present during the operation sequence), whilst the other stagecraft elements – actor movements and sound-making – told other aspects and perspectives in the story, including that of the body parts undergoing the procedure, whose expression of pain contradicted and critiqued the Doctor's positive approach towards the surgery. Shortly after, these body parts escape to a more hopeful future where they do not need to conform to ideals. Looking at *Ascent* through the lens of Composed Theatre revealed to me how it was lending itself towards a feminist story. In crafting a multi-perspectival, interdependent balancing of stagecraft elements common to Composed Theatre, a feminist story, inspired by the ideas of Dolan (2013), could emerge.

Many of the aspects describing Composed Theatre are shared with Hans-Thies Lehmann's (2006) Postdramatic Theatre; furthermore, many of the practitioners discussed in academic writing concerning Composed Theatre are similarly discussed in

⁵² In this dialogue, the Doctor tries to convince B to go ahead with the surgery. B is confused, bewildered and the Doctor is calm and firm. The speech that hooks B in is as follows: "Look, it is completely your decision if you want to move forward or not. I won't force you. But this journey you are on, it is one that everyone must take sooner or later. We live in a world where there is simply no excuse to not be your best self. It is up to the individual of course, but no one is ever rewarded for being mediocre, not as a woman anyway. If you want any hope of success, you simply must put the hard work in. You know that your body isn't yours anyway, it's on loan. You might as well upgrade, refresh every once in a while."

writings on Postdramatic Theatre. I came to understand that Postdramatic Theatre was another major term that could capture the things I was drawn to when seeing experimental works in Europe. Like Composed Theatre, the interdependent use of elements in Postdramatic Theatre can result in “palimpsestuous intertextuality and intratextuality” (Juers-Munby 2006, 8) and, like Composed Theatre, Postdramatic Theatre is exploring “aesthetics of space, time and the body, as well as their use of text” (Juers-Munby 2006, 1), along with new media and technologies in the theatrical space. However, according to Rebstock (2012), the key difference is that Postdramatic Theatre is primarily organised through the visual, rather than musical or compositional ways of thinking (Rebstock 2012, 46). Additionally:

Composed Theatre is part of Postdramatic Theatre because of the set of shared symptoms... but Composed Theatre also transcends Postdramatic Theatre simply because it includes phenomena from music theatre, scenic concerts, musical performances etc.; that is, phenomena that Lehmann excludes because his focus is still on theatre and not on music, or more precisely the space in between music and theatre. (Rebstock 2012, 46)⁵³

The overlap between Postdramatic and Composed Theatre is complicated further as Rebstock (2012, 41) also notes that Composed Theatre does not necessarily need to have music. This echoes Cage’s thinking around composition, which prioritises intentionality over material; here, composition is about creating “listening situations” (Rebstock 2012, 34) and the “forming of understandable structures” (Rebstock 2012, 35). Similarly, leading Composed Theatre scholar David Roesner, quoting experimental composer Luciano Berio, defines music as “everything that one listens to with the intention of listening to music,” (2016, 14) highlighting the importance of intentionality and perception when thinking about and working compositionally in theatrical contexts.

⁵³ Additionally, the way musicalisation is understood in Postdramatic and Composed Theatre differs somewhat, because “where Lehmann emphasises the musicalisation of theatre, Composed Theatre adds phenomena that would fall under the heading ‘theatricalisation of music’” (Roesner 2012, 10-11). Composed Theatre is discussed as being connected and very similar to Postdramatic Theatre, but with a different dramaturgical emphasis on how listening and music are treated in the creative process: Postdramatic musicalisation is concerned with aesthetic and performative qualities, particularly as they pertain to language, whereas Composed Theatre is interested in the process of creating interconnected, multilayered listening situations.

Composed Theatre, then, is best understood not only in terms of the artistic elements or materials used, but also, and perhaps more importantly, by the strategies and techniques employed – that is, *how* the elements or materials are treated (Rebstock 2012, 41).

In *Ascent*, whilst there were strong visual organising principles at work, this was in the context of music and musical material. Furthermore, a feminist lens accompanied compositional thinking as the primary organising principle, as I treated non-musical material compositionally, whilst trying to imagine what it would say about the female characters and overall message of the show, asking if such choices would promote a transformative politics that could improve perceptions of women as complex human beings. For example, when choreographing props and body parts during the interludes between scenes, I thought about them as visual motifs, drawing on the idea of a musical motif (or repeated phrase). To structurally consolidate this idea, I had each visual motif accompanied by a specific sound or musical motif. Additionally, there was consideration for how the musical motif could make us feel towards the choreographed body parts or props, with the aim of creating a positive, hopeful and human sentiment towards the body parts or props (deliberately countering a sexualised or objectified framing of female body parts that often occurs in commercial musicals). To use Rebstock's language, the interludes created an "understandable structure" (Rebstock 2012, 35). Again, my 'know-how' (after Nelson 2013) was clarified through learning about Composed Theatre: at the time of creation before reading about Composed Theatre, I was thinking about the interludes (a musical term) as a music-like device to organise non-musical material – movement or props. These moments came to structure the piece as whole, to support the feminist message.⁵⁴ I now have a sense of 'know-that' (after Nelson 2013), whereby I can say this aspect certainly follows Composed Theatre thinking.

Similarly, although I was not yet aware of Rebstock's notion of a 'listening situation', with my 'know-how' (after Nelson 2013) I was creating listening situations throughout the entire creative process; the entire work aimed to create listening situations, a choice that began

⁵⁴ Latter sections will offer deeper analysis of how queer phenomenological theory and Brechtian-materialist feminism can elucidate how I was attempting to frame female body parts in overtly feminist ways.

with choosing darkness as the primary visual organiser. In the darkness, the audience had to pay attention to visual details as they emerged, in a way, 'listening' with their eyes, tuning in with full attention. To achieve this, the opening of the show had the audience sitting in complete darkness for two minutes, whilst a vast, hauntingly grandiose prelude played.



Sound 3: Prelude music from Ascent (music by: Imogen Cygler)

This was intended to not only prime the audience to attune their ears to the scored music that organised the show (created by composer Imogen Cygler), but also attune their eyes to looking for detail, attending to what was shown. There were numerous scenes where only small visual details were visible, and listening – with all the senses – was essential to understanding the full story.

Rebstock identifies two primary areas of Composed Theatre: “one that composes the different and independent elements and means of the theatre according to musical strategies and techniques and another that works with the intrinsically theatrical aspect of performing music with one’s body” (2012, 45). However, Composed Theatre writing focuses primarily on works of male composers, creators and their bodies,⁵⁵ and lacks a consciousness around gender. In leading text, *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes* (2012), historiographical accounts of the development of experimental music theatre across the twentieth century reveal predominantly male composers as the primary creators. While there is much more overt and subversive politics than commercial musical

⁵⁵ For example, one practitioner who created works for the body, Dieter Schnebel, in his work ‘Körper-Sprache’ divides the body into areas assigning them numbers, providing a series of instructions to the performer to discover a composition, doing away with the acoustic dimensions of composition (Rebstock 2012, 40-41). Though it could be argued this is a piece of choreography, Rebstock (2012) proposes that this is actually evidence of compositional thinking – the very structuring of the ideas uses non-musical material to compose. In other pieces, Schnebel both composes music and movements to correspond. Rebstock provides other similar examples, where a body’s gender goes unremarked.

counterparts, the politics are not concerning the gendered body, but artistic movements, definitions of art, responses to world wars and increasingly globalised politics (see Rebstock 2012). Even in discussing the work of experimental performer Meredith Monk and choreographer Pina Bausch, in the context of Composed Theatre, there is no discussion in terms of the feminist contributions of these artists. Such discussions can instead be found in feminist theatre, art or dance scholarly contexts (see for example Morris 2018; Maizels 2018).^{56,57}

Though it does not offer an explicitly feminist approach to making, I discovered that Composed Theatre could, as Rebstock (2012) notes, allow for an interdisciplinary approach where compositional thinking is a primary organiser in the process. Rather than relying on a traditional narrative to structure a work, all stagecraft elements, bodies and the form itself become the material which can be thought about innovatively, through the lens of creating “listening situations” (Rebstock 2012, 34) and structures. Though it shares much with Postdramatic Theatre, Composed Theatre encompasses a broader range of works that reflect its attention to how a compositional dramaturgical process unfolds. Compositional thinking engenders a consciousness and deliberateness in each choice that is made concerning every stagecraft element.

Composed Theatre’s re-organisation of the stagecraft elements and re-evaluation of traditional dramaturgical tropes has opened up new possibilities for how I think about and discuss my feminist music theatre making practice. The deconstructive, musical thinking approach turned my attention to my ‘know-how’ (after Nelson 2013) in using stagecraft elements, including bodies, and refined my ‘know-that’ (after Nelson 2013) helping me to understand what I had done. Although Composed Theatre does not set out to explore

⁵⁶ In a comparison between Bruce Nauman and Meredith Monk, scholar Michael Maizels (2018) notices a similar phenomenon, where in discussions of Nauman’s work, gender is absent. Despite working with and being influenced by Monk, whose work Maizels notes was part of an “attempt to recover and create a feminist cultural history, one grounded in a transhistorical femininity that had been obfuscated and repressed under centuries of Western patriarchy,” (2018, 62), Nauman’s work, where his body is used and its materiality the focus, is rarely, if ever discussed in terms of gender. Maizels suggests this “interpretative blind spot lies in the manner in which, as numerous theorists and historians of gender have noted, the male subject has historically been figured as the default” (Maizels 2018, 61).

⁵⁷ Similarly, Postdramatic Theatre has lacked feminist engagement. However, performance scholar Cara Berger (2019) has recently considered the feminist potential of Postdramatic Theatre forms by turning to Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva.

issues of gender, concerned as it is with process, its development nonetheless emerged from politically conscious contexts and certainly enabled me to become more conscious of how various aspects of my process had something to say about gender. As I became more conscious of what I had been doing, I was able to execute this more deliberately when it came to creating a new work, as will be explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

1.4 Summarising Ascent as a Hybrid Concept Musical and Composed Theatre Work

Ascent is best described as having elements that resemble both the concept musical and Composed Theatre. It exhibits the core structural characteristics of a concept musical, such as having the emphasis on theme rather than plot, song and characters that are used to comment on the theme rather than developing a plot, and songs used to comment diegetically on the action, rather than advancing a plot. In addition, principles of Composed Theatre explain how the stagecraft elements were brought together through deconstructing a text-centric hierarchy (associated with integrated musicals), in favour of more interdependent, compositional thinking, creating “listening situations” (Rebstock 2012, 34).

Both the concept musical and Composed Theatre can explain some of the technical elements and provide language for naming and categorising *Ascent*. Additionally, concept musicals and Composed Theatre, according to my research, have the capacity to introduce themes and approaches that are unconventional, feminist or in other ways political. I will now introduce the feminist theory that has enabled a nuanced understanding of my artistic practice in creating new feminist music theatre works.

Section 2: Theoretical Context – Intersectional Feminism and Gender

We ought not speak of feminism, but rather, feminisms. (McCann and Monaghan 2020, 55)

1.5 Feminism and Performativity

Queer feminist scholars Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan (2020) point out that there is no singular feminism, and no neat definition. They explain that feminism has a complex history, emerging out of a social movement and becoming intellectually nuanced, though greatly contested, through theoretical debate within the academy. There is not a singular definition of what ‘feminism’ is, and, as such, they suggest a defining feature is multiplicity. I have therefore been prompted to consider: as an artist, what complex histories, what concerns, which strands of feminism⁵⁸ do I want to align with?

A scholar whose work has been key to understanding the feminist impulses in my practice is philosopher and gender studies scholar Judith Butler. Though many scholars have built on Butler’s influential work, critiquing its limitations (for a detailed account see McCann and Monaghan 2020; D’Urso, Rosenberg, and Winget 2021), the foundations Butler provides in *Gender Trouble* (1990) were particularly resonant for analysing my practice and helped me build a framework that theoretically supported my use of scholars, such as Sara Ahmed.

Butler’s work came to prominence in the 1990s as a poststructuralist approach to feminism confronted a fundamental problematic notion: an assumed universal, biologically configured ‘woman’. Butler was among the first scholars to interrogate the historical, social category of ‘woman’, one that often assumed a white, heterosexual,

⁵⁸ McCann and Monaghan’s chapter “Sexuality and Feminism” in *Queer Theory Now* (2020) details various strands of feminism. This helps to build an understanding of how these strands relate to queer theory and provides a nuanced analysis of the relationship between feminism and queer theory.

middle class woman.⁵⁹ According to scholar Suzanne Danuta Walters (1996),⁶⁰ this happened just as feminists were starting to gain political and critical agency. Walters observed:

The critique of identity so central to postmodern theorizing seems to many to place feminist activism in a political straitjacket, unable to move (because moving requires reliance on identity concepts that are themselves suspect), yet desperately needing to organise women precisely around those newly suspect categories. (1996, 839-840)

Poststructuralist⁶¹ critique offered Butler a way to counter problematic grand narratives, such as those that led to a gender essentialism, prevalent in so-called 'French Feminism'⁶² (see more in Butler 1990, ix). Marking one of the starting points for what would later be termed queer studies,⁶³ Butler's lesbian-feminist, post-structuralist perspective led to her theory on gender performativity explained in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler's ideas, particularly her concept of gender performativity, elucidated some key aspects of the central character's journey in *Ascent*.

In her theory of gender performativity, Butler proposes gender as being created through repeated behaviours and actions, asserting:

Gender ought not be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time,

⁵⁹ Numerous scholars (such as Case 1990; Jagose 1996) have outlined the ontological clash that occurred as Butler problematised the category of 'woman'.

⁶⁰ Interestingly, Danuta Walters' essay title "From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can't A Woman Be More Like A Fag?)" is referencing a song from the musical *My Fair Lady*, "Why Can't a Woman Be More Like A Man" – a song that is sung by a male character who laments the difficulty of female companionship in an overtly misogynistic fashion (see Barnes 2015).

⁶¹ Poststructuralist approaches typically call into question the structural, traditional assumptions, grand concepts (such as 'truth') and fixed identities (McCann and Monaghan 2020, 8), offering a counter-discourse to dominant thinking. Though the term poststructuralism is often used interchangeably with postmodernism, McCann & Monaghan (2020, 8) clarify that poststructuralism is a branch of postmodernism, one which is premised upon the questioning of identity, interrogating its multiplicity and fluidity.

⁶² Notable contributors include Hélène Cixous ('écriture féminine') and Julia Kristeva, whose theories Cara Berger (2019) argues, have potential for evaluating feminist theatre despite earlier criticisms of gender essentialism.

⁶³ According to D'Urso, Rosenberg, and Winget (2021), one of the first scholars that determined Judith Butler a queer feminist was Alexander Doty in *Making things perfectly queer: Interpreting mass culture* (1993).

instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. (1990, 191, emphasis in original)

Here, gender is understood as a process of becoming, a process *through which* a subject is constituted. In this poststructuralist line of thinking, gender only exists during its enactment of repeated acts – it is only through doing that one can become a gendered subject, moment to moment. Or, as feminist performance scholar Elin Diamond puts it, “it’s not just that gender is culturally determined and historically contingent, but rather that ‘it’ doesn’t exist unless it’s being done” (1996, 4).

In the cast of *Ascent*, there were four female actors and one male actor, however, all the actors came together to assemble body parts to create the illusion of one unified female body (usually signifying the character B). It was not a problem that the cast featured one male actor, because I was attempting to understand *how* we came to understand female gender on the stage through embodied processes of gendering. Using my ‘know-how’ (after Nelson 2013), I was creating in a poststructuralist way by rejecting an essentialist notion of a female body (i.e. that there must be something intrinsically ‘female’ about a body part from a person assigned female at birth) and instead focused on how body parts came to be read as ‘female’ or ‘male’ (or gender non-confirming) in musical contexts.

As the central character B gets closer to becoming who she thinks she *should* be, we see less and less of her physical body. This is because each time a body part is ‘improved’ it flies away into the void. This visual metaphor not only highlights the futility of trying to ‘become’ the social ideal, but also metaphorically speaks to Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity that critiques the ontological basis of gender. For B, the gendered ideal for the woman she wants to become only exists in the moment of *doing* the act of self-improvement. As soon as the act is complete, the material body vanishes. Since “the category of ‘women’, the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (Butler 1990, 4), the more B *tries* to ‘become’ the ideal woman, the more it escapes her: it is not a thing one can *have*, it is endlessly created and re-created, in a performative sense. As a feminist music theatre

maker, I was aiming to highlight the ways power structures and social expectations can contribute to rigid gender categories and can be destructive, can shrink people and erase their identities, with detrimental, tragic consequences. In this way *Ascent* can be seen to literalise – make material – the damaging impacts of restrictive gender ideals and norms through B’s bodily disappearance as she attempts to *become* a female ideal.

As pointed out by performance scholars Sandra D’Urso, Tiina Rosenberg, and Anna Renée Winget (2021, 5), performativity holds numerous meanings, complicating its usage for feminist performance contexts. When thought of as an adjective, it is more closely associated with theatricality and “somehow similar – in form, intent, and effect – to theatre” (D’Urso, Rosenberg, and Winget 2021, 5). When considered a noun, it can be understood as “an utterance or speech act that has real-life consequences” (D’Urso, Rosenberg, and Winget 2021, 5). Whilst these two usages are recognised by D’Urso, Rosenberg, and Winget as being in conflict, they also go on to argue – building on performance scholar Shannon Jackson (2003) – that conceptualising performativity as encompassing both meanings may be of value to scholars.⁶⁴ In *Ascent*, beyond a literal theatrical presentation, both usages of performativity are apparent when analysing B’s journey: she has a sense of theatricality in how she willingly participates in the procedures she undergoes, particularly in scene 11, when she dances and theatrically performs her ‘new look’ by enacting recognisable dance steps. In the scenes with the Doctor, she plays the role of the compliant, committed patient, dedicated to improving herself, which differs from the role she plays with her friends where she is compliant in a more subservient way. Additionally, each procedure she undergoes is initiated by a declaration – a speech act – as she articulates what she lacks, how she will correct it and then, after a momentary celebration of the change undergone, declares the next aspect requiring improvement, leading to a repetitive cycle.

⁶⁴ Jill Dolan (1993) also notes the complexity around the usage of ‘performativity’, voicing concerns similar to Jackson (2003), that its uptake by scholars outside of performance studies may simultaneously uplift and draw attention to performance studies, and, problematically result in being essentialised and ‘metaphorised’ by other disciplines.

Performativity, according to Dolan, has also been “used increasingly to describe the nonessentialized constructions of marginalized identities, like white and ethnic women, gays and lesbians, men and women of color, and various conflicting combinations and intersections of these categories and positionalities”, arguing that as marginalised identities, they are “self-consciously alienated from “the real” of subjectivity to begin with” (1993, 419). As social subjects, they therefore ‘perform’ themselves as they navigate the social world. This idea of the ‘real’ is expanded further by scholar Jack Halberstam’s (2005) queer theorising of trans experience of gender norms (as noted by D’Urso, Rosenberg, and Winget 2021). Here, critically engaging with Jay Prosser’s (1998) book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Halberstam differentiates between ‘realness’ and the ‘real’, explaining the former as “not exactly performance, not exactly an imitation; it is the way that people, minorities, excluded from the domain of the real, appropriate the real and its effects” (2005, 145), whereas “the real, on the other hand, is that which always exists elsewhere, and as a fantasy of belonging and being” (2005, 145). Though in *Ascent* I was not exploring a trans experience of the ‘real’ or ‘realness’, there is a connection to be made here in terms of how a marginalised identity is being explored as it navigates the social world – in the case of *Ascent*, B’s identity as a woman. Her preoccupation with whether she has *become* a ‘woman’ yet could easily have been expressed as, “have I become a ‘real’ woman yet?” Through her attempts at becoming through various procedures, she approximates ‘realness’ but is never able to feel that she has finally become the ‘real’. The word ‘becoming’ is repeated numerous times throughout the show, in a range of different scenarios that all connect to the idea of the flux and performativity of identity, reaffirming that we only ‘become’ momentarily – through doing – in a fleeting moment of approaching realness, never reaching the real.

However, it is important to point out the tension inherent in referring to trans-specific theory: whereas a trans woman may experience the procedures that B experienced as liberating and affirming, as a cis-gender woman, this story was intending to caution against attempting to become an impossible gendered ideal and the injury this can cause to one’s sense of self and agency. The broader theme of bodily transformation through plastic surgery (or other procedures) contains both possibilities, both stories. However,

ultimately, Halberstam's (2005, 90) point is one that *Ascent* echoes: that 'realness' be explored through categories of one's own making. For Halberstam, "Resistance has to go beyond the taking of a name ("I am a lesbian"), and must produce creative new forms of being by assuming and empowering a marginal positionality" (2005, 91), or as D'Urso, Rosenberg and Winget suggest, "realness, then, is not a constant unattainable striving, but occupying categories in new and revolutionary ways" (2021, 6). This is what D tries to impart to B: to find her own way of being in the world that is no longer striving for other people's approval, but locates her own empowering sense of herself.

Performance scholars have also taken up or developed Butler's ideas on performativity further. For example, queer-feminist performance scholar Sarah French articulates the formative connection between Butler's (1990) gender performativity and the development of feminist and queer thinking in performance, particularly noting its influence on Australian independent theatre makers throughout 2005-2015 (2017, 25). French (2017) points out there were numerous misinterpretations of Butler's theory of gender performativity, where performativity and performance became conflated, however there was also, she argues, an overcorrection by Butler in the definition of performativity in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Here, Butler establishes the difference between performativity and performance, namely through asserting that performativity denotes norms and repeated acts that cannot be 'removed', as opposed to performance, which she defines as a series of choices. French (2017) points to feminist theatre scholar Elin Diamond's (1996) assertion that considers the complexities of performance, and, in so doing, finds more in common between performance and performativity than Butler may have realised. Diamond argues:

When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone's body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique. Performativity, I would suggest, must be rooted in the materiality and historical density of performance. (1996, 5)

Similarly, scholar Moya Lloyd (1999) suggests performance can be thought of as performative, since there are a range of gestural and other signs that are repeated and presented in performance, that also “exceed, constrain and precede the performer” (1999, 202). Queer performance scholars Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier in their introduction to *Queer Dramaturgies* (2015), suggest a productive point of departure in thinking about gender performativity may be to consider the material conditions of performance, since performance “always starts with a body – or, more accurately, a set of bodies in relationship to each other” (2015, 12).

Attending to the materiality and the layers of history that can exist in a performance work are important to acknowledge in my practice, particularly as I am working in an interdisciplinary form with populist roots. Performance occurs in a context of other theatrical works, which is embedded in and exists in relation to a socio-cultural and historical context. In the context of the musical, these layers have particular and often problematic associations (as will be discussed in depth in Chapter 2). French (2017, 23), drawing on Butler, points out the requirement that gender norms be repeated to produce gendered subjects, which raises the possibility that gender might be repeated differently; in my practice, it may therefore be possible to challenge dominant norms to “expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (Butler 1988, 531). This invitation to expand the range of gender performance through music theatre has formed a foundational concept in my praxis, whereby my work aims to engage with gender as a performative phenomenon that has the potential to challenge, subvert and critique problematic gender norms that have historically appeared on commercial musical stages, whilst offering possible alternatives. In my practice, this prompts questions such as: what are the histories these bodies might imply or might be encountering in my work? How are these histories challenged, critiqued or reinforced through song, dance, design and particular conventions? How can these bodies expand cultural norms through subversive or critical embodiments? Additionally, these ideas point to the significant responsibility that I and all creators of music theatre have when choosing *which* bodies appear or do not appear on stage and *how* they appear.

1.6 Feminism and Intersectionality

Challenging the fixity of gender and essentialist views of gender has become ontologically central to feminist scholarship and activism, and has led to intersectionality, more inclusivity and more critically self-reflective frameworks and theories. Similarly, within my practice, my 'know-how' (after Nelson 2013) was leading me towards intersectionality and poststructuralist thinking, but it was not until encountering feminist scholarship in a more rigorous way, that my 'know-that' (after Nelson 2013) could develop and point to exactly what sort of feminism I was working with in my practice.

Intersectional feminism points to the complexities of women's lives and is able to acknowledge and hold multiple identity categories. As a white woman, I felt it important to make work that was inclusive and had the capacity to be conscious of the racial identities of my collaborators. Previously, as McCann and Monaghan (2020, 57-62) point out, some strands of second wave feminism did not account for the complexities faced by women of colour, First Nations women and women who found themselves intersecting with a range of marginalising identity categories, including sexuality.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) landmark essay on intersectionality clearly lays out the detrimental limitations of focusing on one identity category. In it, she articulates the ways black women in the American legal system (and broader society) are "multiply-burdened" (1989, 140). According to Crenshaw, intersectional understanding can reveal the processes through which "operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon" (Crenshaw 1989, 40). Thinking intersectionally about feminism has become prominent – as McCann and Monaghan note, "intersectionality has gained popularity in recent years having recently become something of a buzzword in feminist spaces" (2020, 74). In summary, intersectionality has come to describe feminist thinking that accounts for the ways different identity markers and material conditions can intersect in understanding someone's social and physical positionality. When I came to make a new musical,

#BlackLivesMatter had gained mainstream attention, and this awareness of intersectionality was heightened in my practice.

Across her body of work, intersectional feminist scholar bell hooks urges those engaging with cultural criticism to think intersectionally. hooks' ideas shaped the creation of *Dangerous* and deepened my understanding of intersectional feminism in reflecting upon *Ascent*. She argues against oppositional thinking, advocating for a more holistic understanding of the complexity of identities and the ways privileges play out. For example, she writes:

I am continually distressed by the willingness of one group to repudiate domination in one form while supporting it in another — white men who take sexism seriously but are not concerned with racism or vice versa, black men who are concerned with ending racism but do not want to challenge sexism, white women who want to challenge sexism but cling to racism, black women who want to challenge racism and sexism but claim class hierarchy. (hooks 2006, 7)

hooks makes clear that any and all engagement with cultural artifacts, if they are to be conducive to liberation for everyone, require an intersectional lens. I felt this also applied to me, as an artist creating feminist music theatre. Similarly, she argues, interdisciplinarity – or in hooks' (2006) language, 'crossing borders' – is essential to share resources and move towards "a culture of communalism and mutuality" (2006, 7).

Throughout my research, it has become evident that such an understanding of the productive connection between intersectionality and interdisciplinarity is essential for my work as a feminist music theatre maker, as my artistic form is inherently interdisciplinary, encompassing music, spoken text, movement, sung text, writing of stage directions and more; and simultaneously my work aspires to counter the marginalising effects of the musical for women. Being aware of the numerous ways a story could be told (through music, dance, voice, design) and balancing this against an awareness of the ways different bodies could communicate different aspects of a story, led me to questions

concerning the historicity of stagecraft conventions and gestures, performance traditions and style.⁶⁵ In other words, an intersectional feminist agenda explored through an interdisciplinary form brought forward the enormous range of possible ways feminist content can be explored on the musical stage, however it also highlighted that as a creator, there are many layers of complexity I needed to keep in my consciousness when making choices about whose bodies and experiences to include or exclude in the story.

While it might not be possible to account for all aspects of identity, nor eliminate all forms of bias, queer feminist scholar Mimi Marinucci (2010) suggests that an intersectional theoretical model can increase the likelihood of greater inclusion by offering the useful analogy of a net: the more perspectives or theoretical lenses that can be added to the net, the smaller its holes and the more effective it can be in catching problematic or exclusionary practices or thinking (2010, 107). In the example of a queer feminism, Marinucci (2010, 106) explains how a queer perspective can help mitigate against biases that have existed within feminism, such as homophobia, classism and racism, because of its attention to hierarchy and forms of domination. However, she also points out that it is not a perfect solution either since queer theory has its own historical examples of racism and classism. As such, the more layers one's net can have, the more productive and illuminating it can become.

I have found this metaphor of an intersectional theoretical 'net' that encompasses and moves between a range of feminist and other theoretical discourses very useful as an artist-scholar. Each layer of theoretical knowledge offers another way to increase the strength of my critical capacity in practice. Working with a form that has historically objectified women and exploited harmful gender and racial stereotypes in the name of profitable entertainment, I recognised that an intersectional lens would be essential to help me 'catch' my usage of conventions or references that could contribute to women's oppression. Given that most musicals have been produced and created by white, cis-gender men (see Savran 2004, 216), and the benchmark for a musical's dramaturgical success rests on its adherence to conventions consolidated by Rodgers and

⁶⁵ These aspects will be unpacked further in the Chapters to follow.

Hammerstein from the mid-twentieth century (see Wolf 2011, 10), I knew that an intersectional feminism would be essential if I were to experiment with and critique common conventions or features of the musical – whether that be a concept or book musical. As an artist, I imagined that an intersectional ‘net’ could provide me with more than one way of understanding a line, a gesture, a framing of a female body, because the nature of a theoretical ‘net’ allows one to catch multiple things. For example, as a white woman, I might easily identify a moment in my work that objectifies a white woman. However, without an intersectional lens, I might miss another moment that further entrenches stereotypes about women of colour or a woman with a disability. There are no guarantees I will catch everything, but the more layers I have, the more likely I am to identify the intersections of problematic representation and writing. Additionally, as scholar David Savran notes, the musical’s reflexivity is “relentless” (Savran 2004, 216), frequently referencing its own canon and history; attending to the historicity of conventions and performance traditions is therefore crucial to avoid replicating harmful stereotypes and attitudes towards women – and I believe an intersectional lens is essential to do this.

From this research, I conclude that an intersectional lens offers a productive framework with which to attend to the complex intersections between identity markers, style, conventions and performance traditions, and makes it possible to consider identity categories across gender, sex and sexuality, race, and more, that are not fixed, but part of a broader, interrelated, interdisciplinary context. Within my practice, the terms ‘female’ and ‘woman’ draw upon and refer to both my lived experience of being a cis-gender woman, alongside a poststructuralist, intersectional approach to feminism, within which I understand gender as being a performative phenomenon, based on Butler’s (1990) theory. Overall, an intersectional feminist perspective can help retain consciousness and consideration for bodies that are different to mine, with the important goal being to become aware of and avoid replicating stereotypes across identity categories in my work.

Section 3: Conclusion

Analysing my music theatre making practice requires an understanding of conventional musical theatre, experimental music theatre, and intersectional feminist theorising. Whilst I reference and make use of conventions associated with the concept musical in *Ascent*, there are also feminist processes for making that are best described using language and concepts from Composed Theatre, despite scholarship on Composed Theatre lacking feminist perspectives.

I found that an intersectional feminist lens, which attempts to be conscious of the myriad ways people can experience gender as it intersects with other aspects of identity, is theoretically compatible with concepts from poststructuralist gender theory, such as Butler's notion of gender performativity. These theoretical concepts may serve as guidance for key themes in a feminist concept musical. Whilst the material body will be felt and seen by audiences without this theoretical framing, an awareness of these ideas is important for any practice which aims to challenge conventional stereotypes and problematic gender norms within music theatre.

The fusion of conventional and experimental, with an intersectional feminist lens explored in *Ascent* offers a unique contribution to music theatre, where feminist dramaturgies and explicit attention to feminist politics of works are in the minority.

With these foundations established, I will now introduce some key ideas that not only offer greater insight into the feminism depicted in *Ascent* but were also formative in creating *Dangerous*.

Chapter 2: Orientation and Orientation Strategies in *Ascent*

In this chapter I will introduce orientation and Brechtian-materialist feminism. These are largely theoretical concepts, which I applied to my practice to both analyse *Ascent* and create *Dangerous*. In Section 1, Sara Ahmed's (2006) work on queer phenomenology not only provides a rich theoretical tool for analysing and understanding the orientation of musical theatre – which I argue is patriarchal, heteronormative and white-centric – but also offers ways of unpacking many aspects of my feminist music theatre making practice. To demonstrate this, I offer examples from *Ascent* to argue that its feminism can be seen to differ politically and thematically from conventional commercial musicals whose female characters and bodies are frequently orientated towards, and in service to, a male-centric narrative and male heterosexual gaze.

In Section 2 I introduce Brechtian-materialist feminism. This is contextualized through a brief explanation of materialist feminism and its place in the context of feminist theatre. Brechtian-materialist feminism, I argue, provides relevant practical tools for analysing and creating feminist musicals. In the examples I offer from *Ascent*, I analyse the creative process and specific moments from performance through a combination of Brechtian-materialist feminism and Sara Ahmed's concept of orientation. I also explore Jill Dolan's (2005) utopian performatives, which emerge from materialist feminism. These tools allow me to elucidate the intersectional feminist orientation that exists in my work.

In the final section I conclude the chapter by proposing a list of dramaturgical principles derived from the analysis from the preceding chapters.

Section 1: Orientation

For bodies to arrive in spaces where they are not already at home, where they are not 'in place', involves hard work; indeed, it involves painstaking labor for bodies to inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape. Having arrived, such bodies in turn might acquire new shapes.
(Ahmed 2006, 62)

2.1 Gender, Heteronormativity and Orientation

Through analysis, it became clear that the feminism emerging in my practice was intersectional and based on a poststructuralist understanding of gender. However, the specific scholars that I found most useful in this study were those who could help elucidate gendering processes in musicals, even if they were not writing specifically about performance.

Returning first to *Gender Trouble*, the concept of the 'heteromatrix' described by Butler (1990) provided some foundational context for understanding gendering processes in music theatre. Within the heteromatrix, Butler explains gender is best understood as being part of a system that requires "compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 1990, xxx). This regulatory "cultural intelligibility" (Butler 1990, 23) assumes that the sex assigned at birth, either male or female, corresponds with the masculine or feminine gender respectively, and what follows is a requisite desire for the opposite gender – that is, masculine man desires feminine woman, feminine woman desires masculine man (Butler 1990, 23-24). This expectation is repeated to the extent that it can appear 'natural' and 'normal'. This concept is similarly discussed by Adrienne Rich (1980), who argues that compulsory heterosexuality is a means for the continuation of male power, noting:

Some of the forms by which male power manifests itself are more easily recognisable as enforcing heterosexuality on women than are others. Yet each one... adds to the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that

marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable – even if unsatisfying or oppressive – components of their lives. (1980, 640)

The heteromatrix and compulsory heterosexuality were precursors to the now commonly used term heteronormativity, coined by Michael Warner (1991). Heteronormativity refers not only to heterosexuality as being the sexual norm but is also associated with the corresponding lifestyle and socio-cultural norms that reinforce its normativity (McCann and Monaghan 2020, 11). As such, identifying heteronormativity enables a critique of “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organised as a sexuality – but also privileged” (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548).

Queer feminist music theatre scholar Stacey Wolf argues that heteronormativity exists visibly in the musical and therefore gender occurs in such a way that typically assumes masculine men and feminine women will be coupled.⁶⁶ Overwhelmingly, binary, traditional gender roles and stereotypes feature in musicals and “gender inflects and shapes every aspect of the musical” (Wolf 2011, 8; my emphasis), as most plots for musicals focus on heterosexual coupling. She explains that the dominance of a patriarchal ideology⁶⁷ means that the representation of heterosexuality is unlikely to even have been considered a choice by producers, and points to the unconscious heteronormativity of many musicals (Wolf 2002, 31; see also Wolf 2011, 8).

Artist-scholar Warren Hoffman (2014) identifies a similar phenomenon with regards to race in musicals, explaining how the white centrism of many American musicals means whiteness goes unremarked as a racial category, and musicals are only seen to be about race when they are about those who are not white. The prevalence of whiteness in

⁶⁶ Except for a very small number of recent exceptions, for example *Fun Home* (2015), *Jagged Little Pill* (2021). There are other earlier examples that explore homosexual male relationships, for instance, *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983). Another exception is *Rent* (1994), which features lesbian and queer relationships and a gender-queer character.

⁶⁷ The prevalence of patriarchal ideology is unsurprising given that, as Wolf (2002) explains, most musicals throughout the twentieth century were written by Jewish men influenced by African music.

musicals is therefore not investigated and is assumed as the norm, leading to a deeply problematic assumption about who is included in these stories.⁶⁸

Ascent can be understood as an attempt to disrupt the expectation of a heteronormative story, challenging traditional gender roles, stereotypes and whiteness by having a diverse cast from varying racial and ethnic identities, a range of body shapes, and characters who were not discussing heteronormative romance. These ideas, however, were further enhanced and clarified as I came across queer feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, whose work proved foundational to my theoretical lens – strengthening my ‘net’.

Ahmed’s intersectional feminism – most personally explored in *Living A Feminist Life* (2017) – is connected to her lived experience as a queer woman of colour. This feminism is ever present in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), where she attends to the phenomenological processes that explain how we become orientated or disorientated, through examining orientation as a gendered, racial and sexualised phenomenon. In other words, Ahmed provides another way to unpack *how* heteronormativity and whiteness become embodied and normalised. As such, it has helped me to understand how heteronormativity and whiteness have become so entrenched in the musical and how in creating a new musical, I can become more conscious of these phenomenological mechanisms.

For Ahmed (2006), orientation, as suggested by the title of the introduction “Find Your Way”, is about knowing where you are in relation to things that help you find your way. It is a spatial concept that is about how one navigates the world, whilst also connoting sexuality. In bringing these two notions together, Ahmed proposes that orientation may be about being in spaces with others in a particular way:

If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as “who” or “what” we inhabit spaces with. (2006, 1)

⁶⁸ And, as Raymond Knapp (2005) would say, who ‘counts’ as American in these stories.

Ahmed (2006) suggests that these ideas concerning space, sexuality, desire, sites, and temporalities⁶⁹ can be thought of phenomenologically, through a queer and feminist lens. Here, phenomenology can attend to and excavate embodied patterns, repeated processes, habits that shape us, our worlds, privileges and lived experiences, since it “helps us to explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures” (Ahmed 2006, 56). This framing of phenomenology and its applicability to understanding patterns and habits draws from Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) and Edmond Husserl’s (1969) use of the term ‘sedimented histories’, as well as Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of ‘habitus’. Ahmed also notes Butler’s (1990) use of phenomenology, where “phenomenology exposes the ‘sedimentation’ of history in the repetition of bodily action, that makes it a useful resource for feminism” (Ahmed 2006, 56).

In thinking about sexuality and gender, Ahmed follows Husserl’s (1969) phenomenology, stating: “heterosexuality functions as a background, as that which is behind actions that are repeated over time and with force, and that insofar as it is behind does not come into view” (Ahmed 2006, 87). In other words, the compulsory nature of heterosexuality – as with the dynamics of the heteromatrix described by Butler (1990) – is so entrenched it can go unnoticed. Similarly, as Wolf points out with regards to the musical, “Heteronormative narrative is so deeply embedded in musical theatre’s historical trajectory that few commentators even note it as a convention rather than a fact or requirement” (Wolf 2011, 8).

Ahmed (2006) proposes that repeated or entrenched ideas or emotional experiences can start to impress upon us more deeply, creating what she terms ‘lines’. Lines occur through being made repeatedly, and it is only through the doing that they exist as all – in this sense, as with gender, they are performative, “they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition” (Ahmed 2006, 16). If we think about repeating lines that make us feel a certain

⁶⁹ Ahmed notes that orientation is not just a spatial concept, writing “The temporality of orientation reminds us that orientations are effects of what we tend toward, where the “toward” marks a space and time that is almost, but not quite, available in the present” (2006, 20).

way, that take us in a certain direction, we can start to imagine how repeatedly viewing things that make us consistently feel a certain way towards ourselves, things and other people can encourage us to form particular pathways, and in so doing, over time, orientate us towards certain objects and away from others, towards certain bodies and away from others. Music theatre, considered from this perspective, may have the power to shape how we move through and relate to spaces, our materiality, how we create and monitor proximity and distance of people and objects, “‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward” (Ahmed 2006, 3) and what is within reach for certain characters, or not.⁷⁰

Though Ahmed is not writing about theatre and performance, this concept of a queer phenomenology, of a queer attention to the processes of becoming orientated, has become foundational to my thinking as a feminist music theatre maker utilising an intersectional feminist lens, because “heterosexuality as a compulsory orientation reproduces more than “itself”: it is a mechanism for the reproduction of culture, or even of the “attributes” that are assumed... such as whiteness” (Ahmed 2006, 161). Queer performance scholar Fintan Walsh (2015) has also explored Ahmed’s theory in analysing queer musical, *Alice in Funderland* (2012) by THISISPOPBABY at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, Ireland. Walsh explores Ahmed’s ideas around disorientation, where “the experience of disorientation... might also supply the preconditions for new forms of intimacy, sociality, solidarity and belonging to emerge” (Walsh 2015, 324) and uses Ahmed’s theory to consider the show’s impact. Walsh’s analysis reveals the productive potential of Ahmed’s theorising on disorientation for musical theatre contexts.

The dramaturgical assumption of – or normative orientation towards – heterosexuality is exemplified in the book musical convention known as the Marriage Trope, consolidated in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals. The Marriage Trope, as music theatre scholar Raymond Knapp (2005) terms it, occurs in countless musicals across the last century and denotes stories where two seemingly incompatible people – a man and a woman – overcome their differences through love and marriage (see Knapp 2005, 9). In other

⁷⁰ An obvious association with the term ‘line’ is lines of dialogue. As an artist I was interested in this idea and the question of how lines might impress upon audiences, actors and all involved in the realisation of a performance? And how might this contribute to the orientation of a music theatre work?

words, their differences, which stand in for opposing groups in society, can be said to be “symbolically resolved in marriage” (Wolf 2011, 9). Thus, in the Marriage Trope, we will often find “couples whose individual issues mirror or embody larger ones that turn out to be what the musical in question is ‘really’ about” (Knapp 2005, 9). In such stories, the premise that all characters are heterosexual results in the lead female character being romantically involved with the lead male character. Since they are often set up to be ‘different’ and therefore in conflict, these stories often require that by the show’s end, both leads conform to the gendered social ideals of masculine, heroic men, and feminine, passive women. Typically, the Marriage Trope requires either no change from either character in their union, or the female character needs to change, make a significant sacrifice or be tamed (see Barnes 2015), as occurs in numerous musicals, such as *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), *Kiss Me Kate* (1948), *Carousel* (1945), *My Fair Lady* (1956), *Grease* (1971), *Les Misérables* (1980), *Nine* (1982), *Miss Saigon* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1994), *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2000), *An American in Paris* (2015) and many more.

Alternatively, if the female character does not model the (conservative) social ideal by the show’s end, she is typically punished by being ostracised or exiled, suffering significant humiliation, or killed (Barnes 2015).⁷¹ Here, Rich’s (1980) concern with compulsory heterosexuality being a tool for men’s control over women is particularly pertinent, especially given men’s dominance over the production and creation of musicals (see Barnes 2015; Barnes 2022; Savran 2004; Wolf 2002). This is a point taken up by feminist music theatre scholar Grace Barnes, whose recent book *National Identity and the British Musical: From Blood Brothers to Cinderella* (2022) includes a chapter titled “Too many years lost in his story: The absent female voice”, which addresses and criticises the lack of female voices in creative leadership roles in British musicals, despite women outnumbering men in audience numbers:

The majority of shows created by male creative teams operate on a number of assumptions concerning female behaviour and femininity, resulting in a set of

⁷¹ See for example *Sweet Charity* (1966), *Cabaret* (1966), *Wicked* (2003).

clichéd behaviours, and labels, rather than three-dimensional characters prevailing: love interest, girlfriend, Mum (Divorced, Beheaded, Died) and best friend, whose sole purpose is to support the male protagonist as he achieves his goal. (Barnes 2022, 121)

The lack of a female voice in creative leadership, she argues, has had a detrimental impact on how women are depicted in British musicals.

Even in *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* (2017), a musical that celebrates (male) queer identity through the story of a young man who wants to dress as a woman in a way that is politically conscious (however, not emerging from a desire to become trans), Barnes argues that this musical “has at its core, a view that men are superior to women” (2022, 129). She argues none of the female characters demonstrate any agency – the supporting ‘best friend’ Pritti, for example, exists solely to support the lead male character. Barnes finds fault with the show’s “appropriation of femininity”, which she argues is presented as “an entitlement of masculinity” and criticises the musical’s message “that girls/women are obligated to support boys/men in this – silence being a requirement of the post-modern girl if she is to hold on to the freedoms won for her by the previous generation” (2022, 129). Whilst Barnes does not acknowledge the complexity of the male appropriation of ‘feminine’ gender traits – and risks a divisive argument⁷²– her key concern is that the musical “embodies the attitude pervasive throughout British musicals which deems boys/men more important to the narrative than girls/women” (2022, 131). In terms of orientation, Barnes’ argument suggests that British musicals are orientated towards male experiences, and this orientation is so prevalent that it is scarcely acknowledged by critics or audiences, allowing this to become normalised. Furthermore, even when heterosexual romance is not the focus of the story, female characters nonetheless remain orientated towards limiting stereotypes that have become entrenched ‘lines’ in the musical’s dramaturgy.

⁷² Barnes’ assessment of the role of drag in British musicals is centred on a concern that it displaces and replaces women and opportunities for women. Her critique of drag echoes earlier feminist critiques of drag that find it to be degrading towards women – see McCann and Monaghan (2020, 130) further discussion. There is no engagement with more complex arguments around drag, performativity and gender, as discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 4.

2.2 Orientation and Feminism in Scholarly Analysis of Musicals

Since Stacy Wolf is a leading feminist scholar in musical theatre studies and had recognised the prevalence of (largely) unconscious heteronormativity in the canon, I anticipated that her scholarship would have something to offer me in analysing *Ascent*. I also felt it vital to engage with Wolf's work so I could recognise where *Ascent* could be placed in relation to the canon, according to her feminist readings of musicals, particularly when brought into conversation with Ahmed's ideas around orientation. However, as a creator of music theatre reading Wolf's work with Ahmed front of mind, I found Wolf's approach to be limited and at times problematic. Though her work has made a significant contribution towards feminist musical theatre scholarship, I argue that practice-based perspectives are needed to develop feminist musical theatre discourse further.

In *A Problem Like Maria* (2002), Wolf revisits the musicals of mid-century America, including those by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, to arrive at readings of musicals that “show how the musical is feminist and politically progressive” (Wolf 2002, 38), despite acknowledging the conservative values of this period when a great deal of the canon was created (problematically referred to by many as the Golden Age of musical theatre).⁷³ In her later book, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (2011), she traces the usage of book musical dramaturgical tropes to offer a queer reading of *Wicked* (2003). Her queer-feminist reading relies on the spectator to attend to *how they* approach reading the musical in question. That is, the *spectator* needs to be consciously orientated towards the musical in a particular way, to be able to read progressive values. My concern is this can result in an inconsistent and optional reading of select musicals as feminist and offers little guidance for creating deliberately feminist musicals.

Wolf undertakes a lesbian-feminist approach to re-read certain musicals. She explains that deciding what a performance means is a “constitutive act” (Wolf 2002, 4), one that is

⁷³ Sternfeld and Wollman (2011) problematise the use of the term ‘Golden Age’, arguing it suggests the form has reached its cultural and artistic peak and therefore signals the point from which it has declined.

determined not only by the context of writing and initial performance but also influenced by the time and place during which a performance or reading of a performance occurs. Wolf, quoting feminist scholar Diana Fuss, agrees that “there is no ‘natural’ way to read a text; ways of reading are historically specific and culturally variable, and reading positions are always constructed” (Fuss 1989, 35). It is through reading between the lines and across the grain that Wolf reveals and unpacks the dramaturgical conventions that enforce heterosexuality (including the Marriage Trope) on the musical stage, to “denaturalise the politics of the musical” and open up alternative readings that reveal lesbian attributes and specific aspects of gender roles that counter the status quo (Wolf 2002, 31). These readings rely on a clear understanding of dramaturgical tropes employed in musicals and the socio-cultural context of creation to point out where subtly subversive enactments of gender or sexuality may be interpreted as occurring under the surface. Through this line of thinking she argues it is possible to read queerness in some musicals, offering a lesbian-feminist reading that she suggests is there for audiences to enjoy if they are “willing or inclined to look and hear in certain ways” (Wolf 2002, 5). In other words, if they can orientate themselves towards the performance material in certain ways.

Wolf proposes our involvement and attentiveness towards a musical and how we identify with it has “less to do with the characters and the narrative and more to do with bodies shaped through song and dance” (2002, 32-33). In mid-century musicals, she argues that female power is evident through the strength and athleticism on display,⁷⁴ whether singing or dancing, and that these aspects are necessary for female musical performers to play their roles (2002, 22), regardless of who or what the performer is singing about. This draws on Carolyn Abbate, who she quotes:

Aurally, [the performer] is resonant; her musical speech drowns out everything in range, and we sit as passive objects, battered by the voice. (Abbate 1993, 254)

⁷⁴ Though this is arguably non-diegetic.

Furthermore, Wolf argues, the presence of the fourth wall employed in the majority of mid-century musicals – which enables an audience to be an invisible witness to the actors on stage – means the female performer “sings less to the audience than to herself” (2002, 23); because of this, even when singing about a man, she owns the song, and the moment is about her (Wolf 2002, 23). Despite being a “self-consciously audience oriented” form, Wolf asserts the mid-century musical “is a feminine yet active cultural form that does not locate a woman as a passive, to-be-looked-at object but allows her to take up the position of self-spectacle. Women in musicals look back” (2002, 23). Here, Wolf is evoking feminist scholar Laura Mulvey’s (1975) term “to-be-looked-at-ness”, where being looked at can be experienced as an objectifying gaze.⁷⁵ Wolf argues the opposite is occurring in mid-century musicals, because the female actor can sing for herself and can experience empowerment in executing her elite level, virtuosic skills. However, it is unclear how this plays out in practice: can a female actor both be unknowingly (from the character’s point of view) observed and “look[s] back” (Wolf 2002, 23), when the convention that is the fourth wall prevents the actor directly acknowledging the audience? Furthermore, such a view necessitates that the feminist spectator’s focus is on the skills of the performer – which may be experienced as ‘battering’, according to Abbate (1993) – rather than paying attention to what she is saying, because in the majority of mid-century musicals she is singing about, or to, a man, in pursuit of heterosexual romance.

However, when it comes to Megamusicals such as *Les Misérables*, the opposite ought to occur. Here, Wolf contends that “each female character has a song that is staged with the woman alone” (2011, 145), which here is seen as a deficit:

Les Misérables diminishes women by exiling them from the set and forcing them outside of the world of the play. (Wolf 2011, 145)

The problematic representations and lack of agency within the plots are excused by Wolf in mid-century musicals because of the power felt by the skilled performer in action.

⁷⁵ In Laura Mulvey’s (1975) influential article concerning female bodies as spectacle in cinema, she explains that “in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (1975, 11).

However, the song “I Dreamed A Dream” for example, is not praised for its ability to focus on the power of the female voice (instead Wolf focuses instead on its late positioning within the first act), nor is the moment on stage read as an opportunity for self-spectacle.

Musical theatre scholar Kelsey Blair (2016) argues for the importance of considering both the messages *and* feelings when responding to a musical. Drawing on performance scholar Erin Hurley (2010), she proposes that feelings of empowerment can be manufactured through employing various ‘feeling-technologies’, simultaneously. Feeling-technologies can be understood as “mechanisms that do something with feeling” (Hurley 2010, 28) and can include all stagecraft elements such as “lighting, architecture, and audience control” (Hurley 2010, 28), and can therefore include choreography, music and more. These serve to “*orient* the spectator’s sense – notably, her vision and hearing – to the action onstage” (Hurley 2010, 28; my emphasis), effectively “directing the audience’s perceptual faculties towards [the stage]” (Hurley 2010, 29). This ‘feeling-labour’ manages the audience’s response, “potentially orchestrating it into a common, collective response” (Hurley 2010, 29). In other words, feeling-technologies are technologies of *orientation*. Because of their capacity to orientate an audience’s response, Blair’s concern is that *feelings* of empowerment can be created with feeling-technologies in one moment, but not necessarily be tied to empowerment outcomes, which can result in either diluting a musical’s message or manufacturing empowerment feelings within an entirely problematic context.

When viewed through Blair’s (2016) usage of ‘messages’ versus ‘feelings’, Wolf appears to suggest that in mid-century musicals, the audience is to enjoy the feelings created through the skilled vocal and physical performance of the female performer, regardless of *what* she is singing or dancing about. Furthermore, the performer is to relish in her experience of being witnessed, without questioning the context. This creates a problematic role for the female performer, perpetuating her history of associations “with bodily pleasures and feeling-labour” (Hurley 2010, 67) on the stage, suggesting what Mulvey warns against: “What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she

represents...In herself the woman has not the slightest importance” (Mulvey 1975, 11).⁷⁶ In terms of Wolf’s reading of Megamusicals, it appears the emphasis shifts to considering the messages over the feelings produced. However, both the Megamusicals and the mid-century musicals analysed by Wolf are similarly orientated towards heteronormativity and its associated gender roles and have therefore contributed towards limiting, normative orientations towards female bodies on the musical stage.

In looking at musicals of the 1960s, Wolf considers the female body directly:

The female protagonist’s body is something to contend with, as women’s bodies in musicals have always been something to be looked at, but more, something that is active, moving, influential. In some cases, it’s a body that dances, slides down a banister, or gathers a charmed crowd around her. And in some cases, it’s a body that is raped, pushed in a lake, or killed. (2011, 53-54)

In these stories of the single (unmarried) woman, Wolf explains that the dynamics around the female character are often contradictory, reflecting the complex gender politics of the time⁷⁷: while the narrative often represents harmful or troubling stories that see her punished for what she wants and does, the song and dance moments are often *experienced* as powerful.⁷⁸ In summary, through the plot, “the audience might *think* that the woman is being punished but *feels* how the performance celebrates her” (Wolf 2011, 55, emphasis in original) in the song and dance numbers. Again, Wolf’s argument can be understood as privileging the *feelings* over the *messages* when responding to a musical, even when the story is orientated towards a heteronormative, restrictive and indeed, punishing plot for the lead female characters.

⁷⁶ In a similar fashion, Busby Berkely’s “female chorines are depersonalised and objectified through a process of visual patterning” (Smith 2005, 55) whereby their individuality is subsumed in the abstract image.

⁷⁷ Wolf argues musicals of the 1960s framed female bodies in ways that were as complex as the social dynamics of the time, where traditional gender roles were being challenged, the contraceptive pill became available and women started to question the traditional marriage path (see Wolf 2011, 54-55).

⁷⁸ In a musical such as *Sweet Charity* (1966), we see the leading female character both pushed in a lake (more than once) and have show-stopping song and dance numbers where Fosse’s angular choreography offered a new expression of femininity – albeit one shaped by a male. Wolf advocates for the power and energy expressed through the active, moving female bodies, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the problematic plots that punish the characters who attempt to assert independence, sexual confidence and financial stability. Wolf argues that what Charity suffers in the plot, she makes up for through the power of her moments of song and dance.

In Kelsey Blair's (2016) article, the numbers at the end of the first act of two extremely popular commercial musicals, *Wicked* (2003) and *Les Misérables* (1980) are analysed. She proposes that in many musicals the amplification of feelings of 'empowerment'⁷⁹ becomes the principal point of affective connection between the stage and the audience in a musical. Significantly for this study, she also argues that we ought to attend to "how empowerment feelings are being produced in order to critique their effects" (Blair 2016, 56). Her analysis complicates Wolf's (2011) queer feminist reading of *Wicked*, where Wolf argues that *Wicked* represents a dramaturgical turning point in musical theatre's gendered history. Wolf points out that the show uses the Golden Age tropes that usually build a romantic heterosexual relationship (ordinarily resulting in the Marriage Trope) to establish a story about two women, culminating in the love story that she argues is at the centre of the show (2011, 23-24). To be sure, she does not say *Wicked* is about a queer romance, but rather, by reading the show's dramaturgy as building the focus on the female friendship – when normally such dramaturgy would build the heterosexual romance – the potential for reading a queer romance is present. Blair, however, attending to empowerment dynamics, finds *Wicked's* ending problematic, since the character Elphaba, who experiences an empowerment number at the end of Act 1, must fake her own death by the show's conclusion (because of what she sets in motion during the end of Act 1 empowerment number), resulting in a message that challenging the status quo (and thereby feeling empowered) can have punitive consequences.⁸⁰ Blair wants to draw attention to the tendency in musicals "to obscure a musical's more complicated story elements in favour of the experience of positive feelings" (2016, 65), particularly since this can result in ignoring problematic, or indeed, disempowering messages.

This proclivity towards positive feelings has also been addressed by theatre scholar David Savran who warns that the musical's commitment to pleasure enables "the manufacture of theatrical seduction and the ideological positions to which mass audiences can be seduced" (2004, 215). Similarly, performance scholar David Schlossman, in explaining why commercial musical theatre is still widely consumed by women despite its

⁷⁹ Blair arrives at a definition of 'empowerment' as the moment where a shift in power is felt.

⁸⁰ Echoing Butler's (1988, 531) observation that challenging gender norms can have punitive consequences.

problematic representations of them, proposes that “spectators may subordinate critical urges to pleasure” (2002, 153). He concludes it is through the pleasure of experiencing spectacle that musicals can make audiences feel one thing, even whilst simultaneously saying another, oppressive thing.⁸¹

Blair does not engage directly in an explicitly feminist critique; however, her argument has a feminist dimension. If female bodies can be considered feeling-technologies in musicals and feeling-technologies are technologies of orientation, the ways female bodies are framed can orientate an audience and shape how and what we think about women. The status quo representations of women throughout the musical’s history have been replicated countless times, and this can impress upon audiences, shape audiences. This is significant because “repetition is not neutral work; *it orients the body in some ways rather than others*” (Ahmed 2006, 57, emphasis in original). Such repetition shapes “what a body can do” (Abrams 2011), and “what we ‘do do’ affects what we ‘can do’” (Ahmed 2006, 59), because, as Ahmed explains, “for an object to make this impression is dependent on past histories” (2006, 2). Past histories and impressions – in this instance, seeing problematic messages and representations of women repeatedly on musical stages (sometimes in extreme examples such as a woman being pushed in a lake or sexually assaulted) – can therefore shape the way we move through spaces and people beyond the theatre, particularly if we are being encouraged, through feeling-technologies, to enjoy pleasurable feelings even if problematic messaging is unfolding. In creating such limiting ‘lines’ on stage, and few opportunities for alternatives, Ahmed’s (2006) theory would suggest there is bound to be an impact on the lives of women – and all people – beyond the stage.

⁸¹ Focusing on the casting controversy surrounding the first Broadway transfer of *Miss Saigon* (from London), Schlossman (2002) examines how commercial theatre can become an example of institutionalised (here racial) exclusion and objectification, but also a site for challenging and discussing such institutionalised exclusion or problematic representations more broadly; in this way, commercial musicals can become a microcosmic site for dealing with broader societal issues. His chapter is dealing quite directly with racism, though he does draw our attention to the ways in which racial stereotypes intersect with problematic representations of Asian women (through orientalism) and how this happens in musicals and broader society frequently, precisely because the musical reflects the values and ideals of the status quo. He also attempts to explain why, when racism and stereotypes are so clearly portrayed in shows like *Miss Saigon*, audiences (sometimes even those who are implicated, here Asian American audiences) are still ready to consume the product willingly. This argument is a useful way to think about how problematic representations of people survive in musical theatre more broadly.

Since feeling-technologies can potentially orientate an audience towards problematic messages whilst producing empowering feelings, I recognised the need to be particularly attentive in my work not just to *what* is being said – but *how* it is being said. That is, to analyse how feeling-technologies are being used, and for what purpose. It is no longer sufficient to only attend to *how* musicals make us feel because we need to be aware of *what* they are making us feel good about; we need to become conscious of how they are shaping our bodies and what they are orientating us towards (or away from). Although Wolf's analysis may be useful and important for finding moments where queer spectators may identify with characters on stage, it requires the spectator to do a lot of conscious and complex work to understand the conventions and then attend to the deep activity of reading – which may be appropriate for the literary scholar or student. Wolf's approach, however, does not offer an analysis that I find instructive for analysing my work (which is trying to be overtly feminist), or for creating a feminist musical. Rather, her analysis suggests that the shows she discusses appear not to be deliberately orientated towards feminism or a feminist agenda and it is up to the spectator (not the creator) to undertake the labour of orientating themselves towards such musicals – in very specific ways – to deduce a feminist reading.⁸²

The importance of Blair's framing (considering feelings and messages), in combination with Ahmed's theorising on orientation has become a cornerstone of my praxis. Thinking about how feelings and messages can communicate the orientation of my work allows me to address an under-appreciated problematic dynamic that exists in the canon and in some feminist musical theatre scholarship (exemplified by my analysis of Wolf's readings) and, significantly, a way to frame and think about my practice. These arguments have supported my thinking as I have developed my practice, as they emphasise the vital importance of considering the ways many musicals have presented passive, fetishised female bodies orientated towards the male's sexual desire and fulfilment of his happiness as the norm. These arguments also highlight the necessity of attending to the ways such problematic messages are reinforced through song, dance, and other feeling-

⁸² It is possible this approach could be of use to the interpreter attempting to stage problematic musicals to reflect progressive politics, however more research is needed to explore this further.

technologies, even though they may *feel* empowering. Analysing Wolf's work has consolidated my aims: I want to create what she may have wished to see and experience – feminist musicals with feminist messages *and* positive feelings.

2.3 Orientation in Practice

Thinking about orientation and feeling technologies provides useful concepts with which I can understand, specifically, what makes *Ascent* feminist. Without consciously knowing I was 'orientating' my audience towards a feminist agenda at the time of creation, I can now see that through the combination of Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology, Hurley's (2010) concept of 'feeling-technologies' and Blair's (2016) approach towards 'messages' versus 'feelings', this accurately describes what I was doing. There are many examples in *Ascent* of deliberately attempting to orientate the audience towards the feminist messaging, with some of these pertaining to the text and themes and extending to more literal attempts at orientation (even though I was not yet familiar with Ahmed's theorising around orientation). Through starting the show in the dark, making bodies invisible until body parts were revealed to make visual images, and embracing a diversity of actor bodies, I was using stagecraft elements – feeling-technologies – to challenge the usual expectations of what a music theatre work often looks and sounds like, and in doing so, orientating my audience towards an intersectional feminist message.

From the beginning, I was exploring orientation and disorientation. This was most evident in the very early decision to set *Ascent* in the dark, which visually inverted everything: that which was usually plainly visible – the outlines of bodies, the room and its depth, height, and objects and so on – were invisible. Working with darkness in this way, however, was not a simple, direct inversion; much like the act of translating from one language to another, there were not always direct translations, and a different way of thinking and making was sometimes necessary in the studio. To borrow Ahmed's (2006) language, this feature did not develop in a clear, straight line; it felt more like a curved, meandering line as I tried to gain my bearings in the dark with my collaborators. Throughout the developmental workshop process there were many months of becoming orientated – and

of feeling disorientated – towards this different way of seeing and composing visually.



Figure 6: Actors workshoping image making (image credit: Stu Brown)

For instance, a key learning from the period of experimentation and development concerned the need to have more space between body parts and people than would normally be needed if the lights were on in a conventional way. This meant actors couldn't use their trained kinaesthetic sense – their feeling – of where was the 'right' place to move to tell the story of a relationship or to create an image with another actor.⁸³ It meant that

⁸³ The cast and I all did 3 years of professional music theatre training at the VCA, University of Melbourne, though at different times. Our courses had slightly different names, teachers, and the curriculum became more holistic from when I did my training (I was part of the very first cohort to undertake 3 years of music theatre training at the VCA). However, we all covered many of the same principles and foundations.

as the director-maker I had to be reorientated in how to direct and choreograph the actor's body parts, but also, the actors themselves had to reorientate their relationships to their bodies and each other. Reading Ahmed, I was struck by her rather poetic observation that felt as though it was written about this feature discovered in the studio as *Ascent* came to life:

The body might be reoriented if the hand that reaches out finds something to steady an action. Or the hand might reach out and find nothing, and might grasp instead the indeterminacy of air. The body in losing its support might then be lost, undone, thrown. (Ahmed 2006, 157)

The usual habits of touch, leaning on or positioning in relation to other bodies in the space – the kinaesthetic and intuitive ways we would normally support each other in devising and choreography – were not useful or usable in shaping the visual images of the scenes. Indeed, the very space between, the indeterminacy of the void was discombobulating – until we learnt how to compose within it. What emerged was that the actors had to trust me shaping the images on the outside, until they started to become accustomed, in an embodied sense, to these new rules of dark-centric proxemics.



Figure 7: Actors in a body part improvisation task (image credit: Stu Brown)

Another related learning concerned the direction of the face and body parts, as most of the time it was essential for the actors to face the front (where the audience would be seated) or the visual illusions were often lost. The directionality of the body had to be very specific and deliberate, resulting in diagonal angles being unusable and any naturalistic micro-gestures or subtle turning away stylistically inappropriate. This meant the actors would frequently use direct address and embodied a performance style that was very self-aware of its being witnessed by an audience (not dissimilar to variety and musical comedy, or a Brechtian style). Additionally, the gestural language that developed became heightened, abstract, and very consciously shaped, not only because of the kinaesthetic principles identified (which had visual consequences), but also because the actors had to

factor into their overall performance the removal of costume to reveal a body part. That is, body parts could not be subtly or partially suggested, they were either visible or not, or it was not clear what we were looking at; all movements had to be deliberate and clear. It took time for the actors and for me as director-maker to become orientated towards the kinaesthetic and performance principles needed for a heightened visual frame.

Though these features of proxemics and directionality are not necessarily inherently feminist, they were conventions that were part of realising the feminist story I wanted to tell, through an aesthetic style that was more aligned with experimental theatre. This way of approaching the storytelling created an overall feeling of uncertainty and strangeness, particularly when many actors' body parts were assembled into an image and then disassembled just as quickly: in the darkness, it was hard to tell where one body began and another ended. Unlike in conventional musicals where bodies are often read as clearly defined stereotypes or archetypes, and, as David Savran (2004) suggests, there is an overarching commitment to pleasure,⁸⁴ in *Ascent*, I deliberately chose to frame the bodies in ways that expressed what I now recognise as a poststructuralist sensibility, that explored the fluidity of identity and created feelings of discomfort and uncertainty. I felt this strategic use of darkness and bodily composition would not only make it harder for me to replicate the problematic stereotypes and gender roles I had witnessed in musicals, but could also complicate how the audience might relate to and make meaning from the body parts on stage. Creating these conventions was not easy because it required myself and the cast to reorientate our knowledge gained in our professional training, which was aimed at preparing us for employment in conventional musicals.

⁸⁴ Savran writes, "No theatre form is as single-mindedly devoted to producing pleasure, inspiring spectators to tap their feet, sing along, or otherwise be carried away" (2004, 216).



Figure 8: Upper right, actor playing 'B' reveals only her face – the rest of her body is played by other actors' body parts (image credit: Stu Brown)



Sound 4: Prelude music from Ascent was the first thing the audience heard, in darkness (music by: Imogen Cygler)

The layers of orientation also extended into the realisation of the work itself. In considering the lengths the cast and I went to in reorientating ourselves towards the inverted visual field, I had to think about what the audience might need to become orientated into the world of *Ascent*. Thus, it began with a musical prelude lasting approximately two minutes, in complete darkness. When I talked with the composer about what sort of experience I was imagining, I described the feeling of being in a large cathedral and the sense of awe and overwhelm that can occur. The composer created an ethereal, liturgical sounding piece of music, complete with organ and choral vocals. Though we did not speak about it in these terms at the time, we were deliberately using music as a feeling-technology to orientate the audience towards the darkness, to embrace it as a meaningful portal into the unknown, and to forget about whatever happened prior to sitting in the theatre. Similarly, light was used as a feeling-technology with the aim of orientating the audience towards the unusual, visually reversed world of the show. In this moment at the beginning of the show, a lack of light worked to generate feelings of discomfort and disorientation that come with being in a dark space. These feelings were amplified by the music. Together, these feeling-technologies had a particular purpose: by experiencing a sense of uncertainty and disorientation being the dark, and for this to be amplified by the mood of the music, I was aiming to encourage the audience to latch on to a familiar visual form when it finally appeared, to orientate them towards seeing smaller details in the void.

Following the prelude in darkness, the first thing audiences saw was a blonde wig dancing, sashaying, ghost-like (signifying B). The lights came up very slowly, encouraging a visual grasping for form, shape, colour, something that made sense. This was noted by Robert Reid in his review:

An overture plays as our eyes become accustomed to the low light. Organ music, pre-recorded, programmed I think, but I can't be sure. We listen to its conclusion. It's not a long piece, but it feels long sitting in the dark. I'm not thinking of this as a musical yet, so I'm looking for visual clues too. On stage I think I can see movement. Maybe a face, deliberately indistinct. (Reid 2018)



Video 3: Ascent begins in darkness to orientate the audience (filmed by: Stu Brown)

Light, together with bespoke costumes were also feeling-technologies to orientate the audience (though I did not think about them in these terms at the time), which prompted me to carefully consider the ways performer skin and body parts were shown. Since the costumes and some form of lighting were required from early in the rehearsal process, this resulted in a more conscious framing of bodies and made it easier to avoid gratuitous nudity or unconscious sexualised framing of body parts, avoiding stereotypes common on the musical stage. Among the actors were different skin tones and colours, different body shapes, different genders. This was not only important from a political standpoint (as an inclusive, intersectional work), but also created visual complexity as our eyes would still see the overall image, whether the body parts were ‘uniform’ or not, particularly during scenes that involved the full ensemble. Executing the choreography precisely was far more important than visual conformity; though traditional casting of women in the chorus usually requires bodily uniformity, I was concerned with what these bodies *could* do to create visual cohesion. This was another foundational layer in building an overall intersectional feminist orientation.



Figure 9: Actors with different skin tones and colours assembled body parts to create a unified image (image credit: Stu Brown)

The visual reorientation required from working in the dark presented a heightened example of how a (visually) subversive orientation requires technical, embodied re-orientation from the bodies on stage and the creators working with these bodies. This is not necessary for a musical to be feminist, but it certainly initiated a process of making conscious, deliberate choices that were aligned with a feminist agenda. This process of becoming orientated also needed to include consideration for the audience's experience, so the project of creating a music theatre work with a feminist orientation was able to be received.

Section 2: Feminist Theatre Approaches for Feminist Music Theatre

2.4 Brechtian-Materialist Feminism as a Practical Intervention for an Intersectional Feminist Orientation

To describe and discuss some more specific scenes and choreographic moments in *Ascent*, I now turn to materialist feminism. Materialist feminism offers an ideal feminist theory for explaining and situating my music theatre practice. It is already well-established in theatre studies (see for example Goodman 1993; Fensham 2001; Diamond 1988; Dolan 1996; Dolan 2013; French 2017),⁸⁵ it includes poststructuralist thinking and accommodates an intersectional feminist lens. Its poststructuralist foundations enable any fixed or essentialist conceptions of identity to be challenged and it avoids romanticisation or totalisation of a ‘female’ identity, because “the assertion of identity is not the goal... but a point of departure for a multivalent, shifting ground of subjectivity” (Dolan 1996, 96).⁸⁶ Taking a materialist feminist approach towards analysing and making my work prompted me to ask – as with the intersectional, poststructuralist feminist lens – “what can a body do?”; it enabled me to examine how a body is situated within, or critically engages with the cultural norms of what it would be ordinarily permitted to do in the social world. In this way, I found that materialist feminism could help me unpack and explore the orientation of my work.

Dolan’s (2013) way of talking about and defining her feminism resonated with me as I was creating *Ascent and* quickly became absorbed into my practice during the writing and

⁸⁵ Dolan (1996) suggests the materialist feminist discourse has enriched feminist theatre scholarship.

⁸⁶ Performance scholar Rachel Fensham defines materialist feminism as that which “operates as a critique of the construction of gender. No longer concerned only with female experience, this model argues that both male and female are culturally and historically produced and that differences of gender are inflected by the material conditions of class and race” (2001, 89).

rehearsal process. Dolan's body of work offers many examples of how a materialist feminist approach can reveal political dynamics and feminist readings of theatre works.⁸⁷

Brechtian-materialist feminism, a specific branch of materialist feminism, provides ideas that have become significant in both the analysis of my practice and the creation of my new work. Elin Diamond's (1988) influential essay "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Towards a Gestic Feminist Criticism", has been a particularly instructive guide, as she brings together key areas of feminist theory, including theories on gender and sexuality, women's history and authorship, body, and spectator, with key areas of Brechtian theory, to explore how feminist theatres can be understood and read as feminist. I propose that Brechtian-materialist feminism can be enriched by Ahmed's (2006) theorising around orientation, as demonstrated in my analysis of *Ascent*.

Brechtian-materialist feminism draws on theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht's principles and processes for creating socially conscious, politically engaged theatre and can attend to "ideology formation in representation" (Dolan 1996, 94).⁸⁸ Though Brecht's work did not focus on the politics of gender, Diamond points out that many Brechtian concerns are shared by feminists, such as "demystifying representation, showing how and when the object of pleasure is made, releasing the spectator from imaginary and illusory identifications" (Diamond 1988, 83). Diamond's *gestic* feminist criticism, which theatre scholar Kim Solga argues is "a practice where feminist performers do not simply reflect the male gaze but refract it" (Solga 2016, 26), is able to *disrupt* "classical mimesis" (Diamond 1997, 49); an imitative style of theatre in which "a 'real world' is presented on stage, complete with characters who can often seem fixed into culturally and ideologically determined positions" (Solga 2016, 27). Diamond builds on Brecht's 'dialectical'

⁸⁷ Dolan's (1996) theoretical review of feminist performance and criticism categorises a selection of influential, edited books on the subject into three broad categories, identifying the meta debates, major discrepancies and tensions that exist among academics across feminist theatre theoretical discourse. Those categories are: "(1) a liberal feminist insistence on traditional criticism that supports the play as the basis of the dramatic experience; (2) a radical (sometimes called "cultural") feminist reification of theatre as a mimesis that can validate women's identities; and (3) a materialist feminist approach to theatre and performance as ideologically marked representation, an approach which borrows variously from psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and Marxist criticism" (Dolan 1996, 95).

⁸⁸ An example of a play with music that has been noted for its Brechtian conventions to embed a political message is Joan Littlewood's *Oh What A Lovely War* (1963). In his analysis of this play, scholar Derek Paget (1990) explains that its use of popular songs enabled it to be both nostalgically enjoyed and appreciated for the satirical message, employing a Brechtian style.

dramaturgy, which allows actors to separate themselves from their characters, as well as supporting a structure of episodes (rather than a linear plot), to allow social issues to come to the fore. In short, Diamond's *gestic* feminist criticism, according to Solga (2016, 27), offers a "gestic feminist" dramaturgy that foregrounds, heightens and embraces the contradictions and complexities of women's experiences. Since Diamond's (1988) article, there have been many examples of Brechtian conventions being used in feminist theatre (see for example Martin 1999; Varney 2000; Gow 2018; Solga 2016 28-35).

Whilst at the time of creation I did not yet have the language of Brechtian-materialist feminism to describe and articulate what I was trying to achieve (except in the final example which includes deliberate usage of the related concept, utopian performatives), Brechtian-materialist feminist approaches and impulses are evident through analysis. I suggest these approaches contributed towards an intersectional feminist orientation in *Ascent* in the examples that follow.

2.5 Example One: Legs and The Bevel – Gestic Feminist Dramaturgy in Action

The first example highlights the enactment of the classic leg and foot position of the 'bevel' as a moment of *gestic* feminist dramaturgy, that can critically engage with the practice of the commercial objectification of women performers and their legs throughout the development of the musical. This draws on Brechtian *gestus*: "A gesture, a word, an action, a tableau by which, separately or in series, the social attitudes encoded in the playtext become visible to the spectator" (Diamond 1988, 89) and the culture within which the performance is occurring, can be highlighted. For Diamond (1988), the feminist rendering of this, a *gestic* feminist criticism, can reveal the complexity of the political dynamics of gender, sex, body, sexuality and power as they exist within the theatre work.



Sound 5: Music at the start of scene 11 (music by: Imogen Cygler)

Scene 11 begins with a playful, string-based musical theme and a movement sequence where a pair of legs present themselves to 'D', the friend of the central character, 'B'. Here, B's legs are played by another actor. The actor whose legs are visible is significantly taller than the actor playing B and a trained dancer, fluent in 'chorus girl' movement vocabularies. At the end of this sequence, the actor whose legs are visible hinges forward from the hips allowing the actor whose face we associate with the character B to hover above the legs, thereby giving the illusion of a cohesive body (see Figure 11 and Figure 12).



Figure 10: Though not a bevel, this leg pose is also reminiscent of a chorus girl position, accentuating the curves of the leg (image credit: Stu Brown)

By scene 11, the audience has seen many of B's body parts undergo treatments of various kinds. They are aware of the pattern that has been established – once a body part is 'improved' it disappears into the void. The breasts have been enlarged, tummy tuck has been performed, the arms have just had their treatment and have disappeared, nails, body hair and hair on her head have all been transformed and lost to the void, so all that remains are B's head and legs. A movement sequence occurs just before the dialogue begins (in which B reports being very pleased with her progress). The sequence comprises movements that reference choreography typically associated with a female chorus: a swish kick with a long, extended leg followed by a parallel retiré, and a few chaîné turns. These movements offer context for the next movement: the bevel position, which I understand to be an example of *gestic* feminist criticism.



Figure 11: Screenshot from “Ascent sizzle reel” demonstrating the bevel position

Artist-scholar Sherrill Gow (2018), in her article “Queering Brechtian feminism: Breaking down gender binaries in musical theatre pedagogical performance practices”,

demonstrates how the Brechtian-materialist feminist approaches outlined by Diamond (1988) (and supported by David Barnett 2015, and queer theory), can offer productive potential for the feminist musical theatre creative interpreting *Pippin* (1972) with a queer feminist agenda. Gow employed Diamond's *gestic* feminist criticism when directing a section from *Pippin* that typically features tropes of a heterosexual romance narrative. Gow and the students exposed and subverted the typical "heteronormative, male-centric tone" and "dominant heteronormative narratives in musical theatre repertoire" (Gow 2018, 350), by using specific gesture and costume choices, and the body as a social signifier. Together they devised a montage that displayed sexuality in a non-judgemental, diverse way, with images showing same sex couplings and various non-normative images of sexuality to refract⁸⁹ the typical male gaze.

I similarly aimed to expose the dominant "heteronormative, male-centric tone" (Gow 2018, 35) in the musical through consciously using the bevel in the choreography for Scene 11. Indeed, the bevel typically signifies heteronormative femaleness and sexualised femininity orientated towards the male gaze. It is a classic chorus girl position, involving one straight leg and the other slightly in front, at an angle, and the knee popped. In her book *The Body, the Dance and the Text*, which examines the interplay between writing, meaning making and movement, dance scholar Brynn Shiovitz singles out the bevel as a "chorus line tradition and beauty pageant secret meant to flatter the legs and show the body at a slight angle" (2019, 105). The particular leg line created by the bevel is curvaceous and "gives the appearance of two legs morphing into one" according to the Radio City Rockettes (2016), one of the most well-known chorus girl ensembles (and for whom this is a signature move).^{90, 91} Therefore, I understand the bevel as signifying the expectation for a moving female body in the musical to appear as a 'feminine', fetishisable, sexualised object belonging to a heteronormative, patriarchal culture. Within

⁸⁹ Borrowing from theatre scholar Kim Solga (as quoted at the start of this section), who argues Diamond's *gestic* feminist criticism is "a practice where feminist performers do not simply reflect the male gaze but refract it, return it with a difference" (2016, 26).

⁹⁰ See more at: "Rockette Dance Moves: Bevel," *The Rockettes*, May 13 2016, Youtube video, 00:39, <https://youtu.be/gMIQC-qOVgQ?si=DnUVKmQVpO5KQjbD>

⁹¹ See Adrienne Gibbons Oehlers (2018) for more scholarly discussion on the Rockettes.

this gender ideology, she must take up as little space as possible as she creates the illusion of only one leg. In *Ascent*, I wanted to critique this gender norm.

For Diamond, a *gestic* feminist criticism “would ‘alienate’ and foreground those moments in a playtext in which social attitudes about gender could be made visible” (Diamond 1988, 91) both within the world of the play and within the broader social context. Indeed, I was aiming to not only problematise B’s obsession with playing into and actively pursuing the embodiment of a fixed, sexualised female ideal through the use of the bevel, but also highlight the persistence of this stereotype in the musical generally (and in society more broadly). I wanted to do this in a way that made my critical perspective clear, so I worked with the performer to execute a number of feminised movements culminating in the bevel in a very deliberate and exaggerated fashion to avoid any appearance of normative ‘sexiness’. Gow similarly remarks in her approach to creating a feminist interpretation of *Pippin*, “From very early on, my aim was to create a play world where women would take up space and not revert to playing ‘sexy’” (2018, 349). To approach directing this, she critically engaged with the performance of gender and gender roles, referring to Amy Seham’s pedagogical approach to teaching improvisation, suggesting to “[u]se the stereotype, but don’t let the stereotype use you” (Seham 2007, 142). Though I did not have this language at the time, Gow’s use of Seham’s (2007) direction to use the stereotype without letting it use you, aptly describes the approach we took in the rehearsal room to this moment: conscious, critical and playful.



*Video 4: The bevels and showgirl choreography were approached in a conscious way
(filmed by: Stu Brown)*

Additionally, Gow (2018) employed Diamond's (1988, 89) concept of 'looking-at-being-looked-at-ness'. Building on Mulvey's term "to-be-looked-at-ness" (1975, 111), Diamond suggests that in a Brechtian materialist-feminist context, the female performer has the potential for enacting "looking-at-being-looked-at-ness" or "looking-ness" (Diamond 1988, 89); that is, her awareness and consciousness of the moment she is in is central to the way she performs. In this way, Diamond is suggesting that a feminist approach that employs Brechtian conventions can enable a more agential performance, that avoids the female body being fetishized. In Gow's production, the performers "activated the consciousness of 'seeing and being seen'" (2018, 350) by making direct contact with the audience and maintaining a sense of Diamond's "looking-at-being-looked-at-ness", to avoid sexual objectification.

Similarly, in *Ascent*, the actor and I discussed being conscious of what body parts were being presented. Though this actor did not have their face visible to literally look back at the audience, the aim was to have that knowing sense of the significance of the movement

being executed, particularly when arriving at the bevel. In another gesture within this sequence – a walk – the performer took the same approach, executing an overtly, stereotypically feminine walk to highlight the ways female legs are typically sexualised in our culture, crossing the legs in a deliberate way and walking on the balls of the feet to suggest high heels. Throughout the rehearsal process, she deliberately performed a feminised ‘sexy’ stereotype, orientated towards male desire – but with a sense of knowingness. Additionally, the absence of actual high-heeled shoes was intended to performatively render this commonplace and rarely considered posture of the female leg and foot – which orientates the female bodies towards a feminised heterosexuality – strange, enacting another aspect of a *gestic* feminist dramaturgy. In terms of orientation, Ahmed notes that “sexual orientations are also performative: in directing one’s desire towards certain others and not other others, bodies in turn acquire their shape” (2006, 86); in *Ascent*, the bodies may momentarily bevel and curve into feminine heterosexuality, but in ways that render them strange, to offer a critical perspective, and thereby avoid a typical ‘straight’ line – that is, a heteronormative orientation.

The performativity of this feminised heterosexuality was further emphasised when, in the interlude that followed, the legs were freed from B and joined the other discarded body parts. Here, the true nature of these legs is revealed to be shy, clumsy, playful and not overly feminine or conventionally ‘sexy’. In another scene as B and D argue, the legs stamp, jump and flex the feet – aesthetically in opposition to the feminine ideal. By showing the legs as performatively embodying a gendered ideal and then expressing alternatives, the legs can be seen anew, their comic potential and strangeness as independent body parts rendering them agential and avoiding fixity. Here we see what the legs *do* do, then what they *can* do if in a different environment. The legs exemplify the restrictive, problematic gendering that can occur through particular embodied movement that expresses a restrictive gender ideology, then they present an alternative that has greater agency and complexity, that avoids objectification.

A *gestic* feminist criticism also allows one to read a moment within its historical context; in short, it “invites us to think about the performer and the spectator in their historical and

sexual specificity” (Diamond 1988, 90). The movement sequence of the solo legs – its particular choreography – is able to connect the “project” (as B calls it) of “becoming” the social ideal, to the history of framing female bodies on the musical stage in ways that sexualise and objectify them. As explained in Chapter 1, the musical’s development has employed the spectacle of the female body – particularly the legs – in ways that have been both objectifying and financially lucrative. The stereotype of the ‘leggy’ chorus girl is part of a totalising male-controlled, male-produced spectacle, where the female body *is* the spectacle.

In the early twentieth century, one of the most revered Vaudeville revues, the Ziegfeld Follies, focused on the female body as spectacle. It often made female bodies the centrepiece of a number with the costumes, staging, sets, and music all serving to highlight the objectified, aesthetic value of the female body, according to specific directives from the infamous producer after whom the revue is named, Florenz Ziegfeld⁹² (see Decker 2017). According to social history scholar Susan Glenn (2000), for Ziegfeld and many like him, the framing of female bodies and the presentation of female sexuality and eroticism had to be “artfully managed”, so much so that staging and “revue choreography emphasised impersonality, control and repetition” (2000, 162), giving the effect of ‘tasteful’ female sexuality. Ziegfeld’s ‘girls’, with the spectacle of uniform, compliant bodies in a unified female chorus, emerged in the era of mass manufacturing and the Henry Ford production line, presenting a fantasy that displayed desire, “sexual spectacle, commodities, male connoisseurship, and managerial efficiency” (Glenn 2000, 162). Whilst being created to be visually pleasing, theatre scholar Zachary Dunbar argues such uniform sexuality also represented an “emblem of society [built] on the ethos of conveyor-belt industries” (2010, 158).⁹³ In other words, the chorus lines of girls in American revues symbolised the male-controlled production lines of early twentieth century capitalism, and their ability to manufacture consistent, desirable products. The ultimate example of “male mastery” (Glenn 2000, 3), this passive form of female spectacle

⁹² See this overview from 06:03 in Michael Kantor, dir. 2013. “Broadway: The American Musical: Give My Regards to Broadway – 1893-1927 – Ep 1 of 6.” New York: Studio. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/edutv.614440>

⁹³ As Dunbar (2010) notes, by 1932, this was embodied spectacularly by the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes, providing another link to the bevel.

featuring the 'leggy' chorus girl and encapsulated by the bevel gesture, has, over the course of the 20th century, become emblematic of the clichéd, commercial American musical, was a feature of many musical comedy book musicals throughout the twentieth century, and persists in musicals in the twenty first century. In this way, we are not only exposed to the historicity contained in the bevel but also invited to consider the historicity of the musical and its legacy in musicals today.



Figure 12: Women in the Follies ensemble posing in variations of the bevel

When performed in *Ascent*, the bevel quotes the historical legacy of the chorus girl and her compliant, standardised embodiment of the feminine ideal, whilst also highlighting a gendered performance of legs. Analysing the bevel as an example of *gestic* feminist criticism captures how I was endeavouring to engage with problematic performance traditions in a critical way, that aimed to be subversive. It also speaks to my attempt at orientating my audience towards an intersectional feminist agenda through my 'know-how' (Nelson 2013).

2.6 Example Two: Brechtian-Materialist Feminist Approach to Characterisation

The second example will demonstrate how the performers in *Ascent* did not embody their characters in a naturalistic Stanislavskian way, avoiding ‘classical mimesis’. Rather, a literal “dismantling” (Diamond 1997, 44) of the gaze occurred, by presenting characters as a collection of various actors’ body parts and dismantling them just as quickly. This highly theatrical style of acting contributed to the feminist orientation that seeks to celebrate the autonomy and subjectivity of the female body.

As Gow (2018) and Diamond (1988) note, Brechtian-materialist feminist approaches allow the actor and character to be distinguishable, avoiding the Stanislavskian aspiration of fully transforming into a realistic character, which can restrict the female actor to embody limited and often oppressive gender ideals (Gow 2018, 350). Furthermore, a Brechtian-materialist feminist approach can enable the performer to critique social norms and highlight the performative nature of gender. In *Ascent*, the style of acting was very physical and stylised and the performers, except the actor playing B, never played just one character, making a Stanislavskian transformation into character unlikely. This was aiming to prompt audiences to consider and critically engage with their own assumptions or broader problematic cultural associations concerning female bodies.

The key way this was explored in *Ascent* was in disrupting the expectation for a normative, whole body to appear when speaking on a musical stage; rather, characters were often represented as only a head and one necessary body part, or in some instances there was no head and only a body part associated with speaking, singing or making sounds. For instance, the arm procedure technicians had only heads, hands and forearms, since these were the parts required to convey the story of improving the texture of B’s arm skin, whereas the waxing beauticians had only hands, since these were the key body parts needed to tell the story of hair removal. This approach meant that what actors were saying or singing was not simply being reinforced by their bodies, movement or gestures, as is typical in musical theatre, where the embodiment of emotional stakes in a story is typically congruent with the body’s gestures.



Figure 13: B's legs and arms are played by other actors' body parts, giving the illusion of a stretched, uncontainable body

This technique of arranging body parts to create images of scale or distortion meant the audience was constantly reminded, in a very Brechtian sense, of the theatricality of the scenes they were witnessing and would find it very difficult to see any “lamination” to character. This is drawing on Diamond, who writes:

In its conventional iconicity, theatre laminates body to character, but the body in historicization stands visibly and palpably separate from the “role” of the actor as well as the role of the character; it is always insufficient and open. (1988, 89)

The fragmentation of bodies through the specific arrangement of body parts not only attempted to “refract” (Solga 2016, 26) a problematic, sexualising gaze, but it was also aiming to frame the body parts in a way that privileged their agency and encouraged a subjective interaction between audience and the body parts, because it required their participation to piece images together and co-create cohesion. Rather than an actor

embodying a character to tell their story, the text, body parts, gestures, music, voices and more, all worked together interdependently so that a character and what they were communicating could only be experienced as a performative moment of interdependent feeling-technologies recognised by the spectator, before being dismantled. In other words, the audience had to finish the picture as it was being created, to see a clear image (and in many cases, this was about seeing a whole, unified body).

The aim of these approaches was to prompt audiences to consider the ways one might make assumptions about others' bodies and body parts, as well as one's own, and therefore invite them to consider the potential agency of body parts, and the tensions that might exist in a body when one is attempting to conform to unattainable ideals. As such, my artistic vision for challenging normative depictions of female bodies in musical contexts was approached in a way that was very Brechtian and feminist.

2.7 Example Three: Disorientation and the *Verfremdungseffekt*

Though orientation is an anchoring theoretical concept for this whole research project, my third example from *Ascent* focuses on orientation more explicitly in terms of a specific practical application. This movement sequence from Scene 15, which sees various plastic surgery procedures done to the face, demonstrates another Brechtian-materialist feminist tool, the *Verfremdungseffekt*, as a familiar-looking image (a face) is created using unfamiliar means (body parts).



Video 5: Actor body parts come together to create a giant moving face (filmed by: Stu Brown)

In this scene, many body parts from the five actors come together to create a giant moving face in a theatrical imagining of a rhinoplasty, eyebrow lift, eyelash implants and lip filler injections.⁹⁴ Here, B is resolute and decides to go through with the final stage of a full facelift, to finally and fully ‘become’ (the feminine ideal). As the scene begins, the audience is invited into a new orientation; previously, the view (for the audience) was as if looking in through a fourth wall in the consultation room. However, as the music begins and the Doctor and B disappear, the image that follows suggests to the spectator they are now looking at B’s nose, aerial view, zoomed in, as if above B lying on an operating table. This was an attempt to disorientate the audience and make the cosmetic

⁹⁴ This is following B’s final consultation with the Doctor, where, filled with panic and regret, B is told firmly and coolly by the Doctor “no one is ever rewarded for being mediocre, not as a woman anyway. If you want any hope of success, you simply must put the hard work in. You know that your body isn’t yours anyway, it’s on loan. You might as well upgrade, refresh every once in a while.”

procedures occurring seem strange, to critically engage with the problematic gender ideology they imply.

By making the cosmetic surgery procedures seem strange, I was creating the *Verfremdungseffekt*. This describes a gesture, word or anything that is done in such a way that it is heard or experienced anew; it can make a commonplace gesture or moment suddenly seem surprising, bizarre, unexpected – it can, “mak[e] the familiar strange” (Barnett 2014, 77). It is often translated as ‘defamiliarization’ or ‘estrangement’ in English, an update on the previously inaccurate translation of alienating or the alienation effect (Barnett 2014, 76). In short, the *Verfremdungseffekt* “allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar” (Brecht 1964, 192). This can be particularly useful when trying to highlight and critique problematic gender norms and ideology, since the ways gender is signified on stage can be recognised and brought into question. Diamond explains the *Verfremdungseffekt* from a feminist perspective:

Understanding gender as ideology – as a system of beliefs and behavior mapped across the bodies of females and males, which reinforces a social status quo – is to appreciate the continued timeliness of *Verfremdungseffekt*, the purpose of which is to denaturalize and defamiliarize what ideology makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable. (1988, 85)

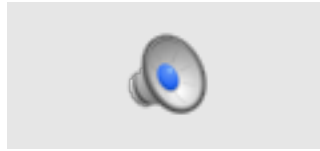
Seeing the familiar with fresh eyes is necessary for intersectional feminist theatre makers, because it is part of decolonisation. As hooks explains, “Decolonizing our minds and imaginations, we learn to think differently, to see everything with ‘the new eyes’ Malcolm X told us we needed if we were to enter the struggle as subjects and not objects” (2006, 8). When brought into conversation with Ahmed’s (2006) theorising on disorientation, the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or making the familiar strange, offers a nuanced analysis of this curious moment in *Ascent*.

The last lines we hear before the procedure movement sequence starts are:

DOCTOR: Yes. When I’m done, you will truly love yourself.

B: How romantic.

DOCTOR: What a glorious story it is.



Sound 6: Scene 15 underscore (music by: Imogen Cygler)

Beautiful piano music begins (composed and created by Imogen Cygler). The first thing to appear after a few bars in the darkness, is a female actor's leg approximately 1 metre off the ground, with a soft bend to the knee, ankle stretched. The leg is revealed in a fashion that resembles something you would expect to see in a musical: a shape or posturing that sexualises the female leg, objectifies it – continuing the feminising framing of legs in earlier scenes. This is deliberate, to give the audience a moment to be drawn into the familiar, pleasurable framing of this body part, suggesting 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. In this moment, the leg is playing the role of a nose – though this does not become clear until the eyes are added later.

However, the disorientation of this body part is soon established, as we hear an actor making sounds akin to a drill, and the leg starting to waver quickly. The actor-created sound-making is aiming to shift the viewer's orientation towards the leg, to disorientate, rendering it as more than a simple object for sexual fetishisation, disrupting any sense of 'lookingness', evoking instead 'looking-at-being-looked-at-ness' (Diamond 1988). The next surprise comes as the leg suddenly kicks downward, with the quality of a punch, accompanied by the actor making a punch-like sound: I note the term 'punch' (inferring Rudolf Laban's Movement Analysis System) due to its sudden use of time, direct use of space and heavy weight (see Newlove and Dalby 2004, 138). The effort action then shifts to quick and small dabs (sudden, direct, light), to larger, more forceful and sudden punches. Meanwhile, the beautiful piano music continues in the background with ethereal string sounds and vocalisations adding a smooth legato texture to the scene. This is offset by the continuous, forceful, violent movements of the leg-as-nose, intended to theatrically depict the processes involved in a rhinoplasty, which sometimes involves breaking the

nose for the desired shape to be achieved. The last part of the rhinoplasty sequence involves a series of wringing, twisting movements, followed by further punching kicks, eventually finished with a twist that is also vocalised by the actor. We see the transformation of the leg-as-nose: beginning with the kneecap facing the stage right wing, to being unwillingly and violently wrenched into the desired place, ending with the kneecap facing the audience, 'straight', orientated towards the social ideal.

The eyes appear next and at this point the orientation of the aerial view starts to become clearer to the viewer. The eyes are represented by two actor faces creating mirror images of each other, with the inside arm (closest to the nose) curving over the head to create eyebrows. The procedure sees the eyebrow being stretched away diagonally, represented by the inside arms of the actors extending away, the head tilting to the same corner, to imitate a brow lift. Again, the actors make sounds to accompany each of these movements, suggesting these body parts are not silent, passive objects, but are sentient. Stretching, creaking noises and finally sizzling sounds are added when eyelash implants are added, suggested by the actors' outer hands sitting on top of the head with splayed fingers, wriggling.

Finally, the lips have their procedure. Due to the scale of the face, two pairs of actor's legs are used, lying on the floor, to depict the lips. The actors lay on their sides, covering their bare legs with a black cloth until revealed. The actors made a sound that resembled a balloon being blown up, moving their legs apart, representing a lip enhancement procedure. We only see the full face for a few seconds, as the mouth opens and closes and the eyes open and close. Of course, as with all other scenes, once the procedure is complete, the lips and all facial features fly away, giving us the image of a moving face for the briefest of moments. It is performative, bizarre and grotesque.

B hopes that in following the lines followed by others, she might "emerge", she might become. However, the opposite occurs: as she follows the lines others (her 'friends' C and A) expect of her, she disappears from view. Ahmed suggests that "we follow the line that is followed by others: the repetition of the act of following makes the line disappear from view as the point from which 'we' emerge" (2006, 15). Indeed, the more B tries to embody the ideals set by her friends, the Doctor and society, the more lost and

disorientated she becomes as the lines she thought she was following disappear; the body parts are gone and all that remains is the void. The previously 'deviant' nose, the eyebrows and eyes needing redirection towards 'acceptable' lines (or eliminating all traces of lines – wrinkles) and the lips whose lines are not thick enough did not (from B's perspective) follow the "collective direction" (Ahmed 2006, 15). The complete 'improved' moving face is only visible for a few seconds before it dismantles and is gone.

Ahmed tells us, "When one thing is 'out of line', then it is not just that thing that appears oblique but the world itself might appear on a slant, which disorientates the picture and even unseats the body" (2006, 67); this description uncannily describes the impact I was aiming to have on the audience at the end of this sequence. It also speaks to the *Verfremdungseffekt*, as I was intending, through disorientation, to make the plastic surgery procedure seem strange and its associated gender ideology to be exposed. Disorientation, "as a bodily feeling can be unsettling" (Ahmed 2006 157), since in these moments anything can become possible; this can be destabilising as "the hand might reach out and find nothing, and might grasp instead the indeterminacy of the air" (Ahmed 2006, 157). In the void, this grasping for something and finding nothing is an ever-present, literal reality in *Ascent*. The disorientation caused by zooming into an aerial view not only created a moment that produced multiple layers for readings and meaning making, it also was intended to unsettle the audience, counter any romanticisation of the procedures that were taking place and estrange cosmetic plastic surgery that aims to enforce stereotypical female ideals. In this way, an estrangement occurred because of the disorientation.

There was a grotesqueness and a scale to the creation of the face – and then its dismantling – that was exciting, unusual and queer in the sense that it was completely non-normative both in terms of the image being represented and the ways the body parts were being used to create the image. Ahmed writes, "Queer becomes a matter of how things appear, how they gather, how they perform, to create the edges of spaces and worlds" (2006, 167), an idea supported by queer feminist scholar Hannah McCann, who suggests that queering can be thought of as "a process rather than an identity" (2017, 7). This queerness was further enhanced by actors making absurd sounds to accompany the

gestures. In this queer exploration of the making of and loss of a face, however, a different future is possible, as Ahmed explains:

If a face is inverted and becomes queer or deprived of its significance, then such a deprivation would not be liveable simply as loss but as the potential for new lines, or for new lines to gather as expressions that we do not yet know how to read. Queer gatherings are lines that gather – on the face, or as bodies around the table – to form new patterns and new ways of making sense (2006, 171).

In conclusion, the intention of the face lift scene is to present a feminist theatrical rendering of a facelift, that can critically engage with the character's reasons for having the procedure. Here, the feeling-technology (choreography) aims to support and orientate the audience towards a feminist message. The sequence tells the story of a woman losing her identity, losing her face, to become more like others. The way this plays out however, allows the performers to reveal the agency of their bodies and the endless capabilities of their body parts, and an ability to – as one critic put it – “transform between microscopic and wide-angle with nothing more than bodies and creativity” (James 2018). In *Ascent*, we see how restrictive, prescriptive gender norms and expectations for the body can erase one's identity and sense of self in the body. Since the body parts are presented in ways that show their agency and their storytelling potential, they contribute to an intersectional feminist orientation that invites a subjective relationship towards the female body on stage, challenging conventional, objectifying ways of representing such bodies in music theatre. I realised through the analysis of the facelift that the *Verfremdungseffekt* and Ahmed's (2006) theorising on disorientation were complementary concepts in understanding what I was trying to achieve in practice: disorientation describes how I approached the scene and *Verfremdungseffekt* describes the experience and how it felt to witness it.

2.8 Example Four: A Moment of Utopia

The fourth example turns to Dolan's (2005) idea of utopian performatives to explain the

process and choices that led to the final scene. In this example, I was more directly influenced by Dolan's (2005) book *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* when creating the final scene of *Ascent*, as I was drawing on it during the devising process. Dolan proposes 'utopian performatives', which offer further feminist development of Brecht's concept of *gestus*. She suggests that particular instances of *gestus* can create the possibility of a utopia in performance and have the capacity to suggest a world where life can feel "emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (Dolan 2005, 5). Such moments invite an audience to consider imagined possibilities for equality that surpass their everyday lives, where inequality and material oppression may be experienced.

Utopia, Dolan reminds us, literally means 'no place' and these moments she traces are not fixed or finished, but "always in process, always only partially grasped" (2005, 6); as suggested by 'performative' – they only exist in the doing. Specifically, Dolan presents utopian performatives as 'cousins' of a Brechtian *gestus*, because whilst "they provoke affective rehearsals for revolution" (Dolan 2005, 7), they are not finished. Utopian performatives – though temporary and fleeting – "make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better" (Dolan 2005, 6) and "spring from a complex alchemy of form and content, context and location, which take shape in moments of utopia as doings, as process, as never finished gestures toward a potentially better future" (Dolan 2005, 8). In this way, Dolan uses materialist feminism to articulate the ways theatre can be part of an "activist project of culture-making" (Dolan 2013, 1) and offer "a transformative politics of hope" (Dolan 2005, 1).

The example of utopian performatives in *Ascent* occurs in the final scene. By this point in the show, all that remains of B is her voice. We hear B pleading with D to inject her with the perfect perfume, one that completely captures what she believes her true smell and therefore, true self, to be. In so doing, she believes she will finally and fully "become". D refuses, devastated at the self-destructive loss of B. So, B decides to do it herself. Once injected, her voice and anything that was left of her, vanishes.

For most of the rehearsal period, this sad, tragic, and absurd conclusion was the ending of the show; each time a body part was discarded, that was the last we heard of it. The overall tone felt rather hopeless and heavy, despite moments of comedy throughout; to put it plainly, it just felt wrong. In my creative practice, when I feel stuck or I am struggling to work through a problem, I return to my initial aims and concept. For this show, I had to return to what I had defined as my feminist theatre, and its purpose: I did not want to simply point out the problems that can exist for women, I wanted to also invest in what could be possible, what all this work was for. I wanted the audience to walk away with some hope so we could collectively feel empowered to work towards a better future. I returned to Dolan, since it was her assertion that feminists and feminist cultural artefacts could be part of “a transformative politics of hope” (Dolan 2013, 1) that had driven *Ascent’s* politics.

Unlike the other aspects of the show’s creation which emerged intuitively and based on my accumulated craft as a theatre maker – or my ‘know-how’ (after Nelson 2013) – the changes I made in this example were a direct result of reading Dolan’s (2013 and 2005) work. To start thinking about a transformative politics of hope, I needed a more hopeful ending and a dramaturgical throughline that could lead the story to a hopeful place. This led me to introducing interludes throughout the show that allowed each discarded body part to assert itself with agency, playfulness, and hope. That is, each time a body part was improved and therefore disappeared, an interlude or mini scene followed, showing the new, hopeful life that the body part was beginning. Ironically, this adventure and sense of freedom, self-actualisation and exploration is what B is in search of. This throughline of hope enhanced the feminist orientation because it pointed the story towards the notion of ‘what a body can do’ in a broad, playful sense – it orientated the story towards liberation.

These changes allowed concurrent stories to unfold, as all the body parts and their stories became important. This meant there were multiple directions weaving the story together: the story of B, which took her down a ‘straight’ line of trying to become an unattainable social ideal resulting in her erasure, and the stories of the body parts, who took unconventional, ‘curved’ lines towards unknown, but hopeful futures where anything could

be possible. Ahmed argues that orientations direct us towards the future and, in doing so, “they also keep open the possibility of changing directions and of finding other paths, perhaps those that do not clear a common ground, where we can respond with joy to what goes astray” (2006, 178). In other words, the less predictable, winding path, whilst perhaps feeling like leading one astray, can provide the opportunity for joy and discovery. In *Ascent*, the less common path is that which goes against the problematic social ideal; the body parts going off the beaten track, as it were, told the story of the creativity, agency, and satisfaction one can experience when one embraces an uncertain, open-ended future, alongside the tragic story of improving oneself to death.

The final scene begins with a hair snippet (from the opening hair cut scene) returning, flying freely through the air. This is followed by the arm discarded in the arm skin smoothing procedure, the middle strip of pubic hair discarded in the waxing scene, and then a second strand of hair from the hair cut scene. Finally, the legs from Scene 11 join the others. Each time a new body part enters, there is a celebratory welcoming sound, as if to say, “look who it is!” Each of these body parts are played as if puppets, the actors finding detailed expression and personalities in their movement.

They also developed voices for them that although didn’t speak intelligible words, clearly had a desire to connect and include, to encourage and to play. Some of the parts appear boisterous, some fun, some shy, with the legs being the shyest of them all. The sound of the legs resembles a sort of honk, they walk pigeon-toed and are quite scared, reiterating that the performance from the earlier scene was not indicative of their true personality – it was thrust upon them. It is through the support and encouragement of the community the legs come to occupy more fullness, taking up more space, asserting their quirky, more confident personality with boisterous stamps, jumps and wiggling of the toes. These gestures offer an affective *gestus* that suggests the transformative potential of being part of a supportive, utopian community; the potential to become playful and joyous in taking up space.

Together, the body parts represent a community of outcasts who come together through a shared experience of being set free, off to self-actualise and explore all the world has to offer. The music reflects this journey, starting as sparse and gradually building a playful

momentum. This final scene aimed to offer “an affective vision of how the world might be better” (Dolan 2005, 6) and suggested a hopeful future overall.

As the body parts travel through space, from their unified bodily origin to the implied distance travelled in the darkness towards a temporary, utopian meeting place,⁹⁵ they attempt to become orientated. Ahmed makes a connection between orientation and distance, suggesting that distance can be lived as the “‘slipping away’ of the reachable, in other words, as the moment in which what is within reach threatens to become out of reach” (2006, 166). Indeed, the legs demonstrate that the distance between themselves and the rest of the group presents risk, presents the possibility of a new, more joyful life being out of reach and slipping away. However, simultaneously in this distance, “a space is cleared for a new arrival” (Ahmed 2006, 171); here, the encouragement from the other body parts to cross the void, shorten the distance, allows the legs to step into a new space and a new sense of self that is more confident and joyful. In going the distance, all the body parts can step into something new, arrive at something exciting, something connected, something truly utopian, if only for a moment.

⁹⁵ I also found a very literal connection between the dark void the show takes place in, and the description Dolan offers in utopia meaning ‘no place’ – with no visual indication of time or place, there really was ‘no place’ suggested.



Video 6: Final scene shows the legs gradually gaining confidence (filmed by: Stu Brown)

I found utopian performatives to be a powerful strategy for orientating a musical towards an intersectional feminist agenda. In *Ascent*, it was necessary for the utopian performatives to be contextualised by a dramaturgical through line of hope, to ensure a hopeful ending could be achieved in a way that felt, from my perspective, emotionally satisfying.

Section 3: Conclusion

2.9 Dramaturgical Principles

It is possible to summarise the analysis of *Ascent* into some key principles. These have guided the creation of the new feminist music theatre work, *Dangerous*, presented in Chapter 3 and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

The principles are as follows:

1. An intersectional feminist ethos underpins the agenda of the work, that advocates for “women’s right to equality in all realms of social life and culture (Dolan 2013, 1).
2. The work is orientated towards “a transformative politics of hope” (Dolan 2013, 1).
3. This may be achieved structurally through opting for a concept or other alternative structure (as opposed to a linear, dramatic narrative).
4. It may be achieved directorially (i.e. embodied in the production) and/or in the text by employing tools (such as Brechtian-materialist feminist strategies) that work to:
 - a. Allow gender stereotypes and problematic gender norms to be exposed, subverted or challenged (this includes stereotypes that intersect with other aspects of identity).
 - b. Prevent the performer from becoming fully ‘laminated’ to their character so these notions can be challenged.
 - c. Create female roles that do not necessarily require being orientated towards a heteronormative plot (or can critically engage with this historicity).
 - d. Provide hope for a better world for us all, a potential way forward or feelings that serve a feminist agenda.

2.10 Concluding Remarks

Becoming aware of the orientation of a musical has helped me understand how female characters become gendered in the musical through processes that identify them as

passive, sexualised and connoting 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. Considering the orientation of a musical alongside both its feelings and messages, enabled me to specifically identify what I found problematic in particular musicals and scholarly analyses of musicals (such as those by Stacy Wolf).

In my analysis of *Ascent*, I have identified where I have used Brechtian-materialist feminist approaches to contribute to an intersectional feminist orientation. A *gestic* feminist criticism enabled me to understand the complex, multi-layered moments in *Ascent*, that both acknowledged historical contexts and offered a critical perspective. This also highlighted the common movement of the bevel in terms of its historicity, connected to problematic gender norms in music theatre. Using feeling-technologies to create feelings of disorientation was another strategy to critique gender norms.

Through *Ascent* I wanted to propose that there is joy and substance, there is personality and celebration to be found in bodies and body parts, whatever their gender identity. I wanted to contribute to rejecting problematic compartmentalisation and objectification of body parts on the musical stage and in the broader culture, through processes of reorientation which could render female body parts agential, intelligent, creative and worthy of being seen and heard. Following the processes of questioning, challenging and subverting norms and expectations for female bodies and body parts in music theatre, utopian performatives also provided positive, hopeful moments to suggest potential ways of living beyond the performance. The body parts in their 'no place' of the void, through gesture, comedy and play, offered a dramaturgy orientated towards hope.

By taking theoretical propositions and observations seriously, I have been able to articulate the complexity and innovation in my feminist music theatre making practice and discover some new approaches for making more inclusive and politically conscious work. Additionally, the analysis and reflection offered has resulted in a set of dramaturgical principles. However, because these principles have been largely determined by analysing and reflecting on an existing work, I wanted to understand the extent to which they might be useful in creating a new feminist work.

Since the practice-based process requires the creative artifact to be experienced to understand the contribution to knowledge this thesis has produced, the next chapter will present the book and lyrics for *Dangerous*. An analysis of key features, aspects of the musical's development and writing process will follow in Chapters 4 and 5. Retrospectively analysing a project in a practice-led fashion is a particular process, where details in memory can be lost and things can be neatly organised in one's mind, with the benefit of hindsight. Chapters 4 and 5 were written as the creative writing process was unfolding, and therefore document the failures, learnings and insights that only the practice-based process can reveal.

Chapter 3: Book and Lyrics for *Dangerous* (Creative Work)

Precis

Dangerous is a new musical for which I have written the book and lyrics.⁹⁶ Here, I move away from the music theatre director-maker role working intuitively and responsively in an experimental aesthetic, towards a more conventional lyricist and book writer role.⁹⁷ The music is composed by my collaborator, Peter Rutherford. The inspiration and impetus for writing the musical emerged after reading Glenn's (2000) book, where she proposes that the Vaudeville stage of the early twentieth century was an incubator for the emergence of early modern feminism. The book highlights female performers of self-made spectacle who captivated audiences with their audacious reimagining of, and challenges to the conservative, restrictive gender norms of the time. At the same time, women of the suffragist movement were similarly challenging gender norms, advocating for the right to vote and have a public voice, and using spectacle in creative and theatrical ways to draw attention to their cause.

These early feminists were exciting, ground-breaking artists and activists, who demanded economic and political opportunities, as well as recognition that women should also enjoy sexual fulfilment. They embodied the 'New Woman' – one who “experimented with new forms of public behaviour and new gender roles” (Glenn 2000, 6). As Glenn (2000) explains, these women did so during a time when female spectacle was simultaneously tightly managed by male impresarios and producers (such as Florenz Ziegfeld, introduced in Chapter 1) who objectified and exploited female bodies for commercial gain. Specifically, the New Women of the theatre who performed on Vaudeville stages had a unique place in society in that they were “not only permitted but expected to live

⁹⁶ A very early initial draft of this work, formerly known as *The 100 Year Revue*, was explored in a week-long workshop at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), University of Melbourne and then created through a year-long commission for Monash University's Jeanne Pratt Artist In Residence (JPAIR) program in 2020 and explored again in another week-long workshop at the VCA. However, the work took a significant shift in 2021 through the process of this practice-based research PhD. Whilst the residency and workshops were invaluable in permitting experimentation and risk taking, little of the content created during the residency and workshops has carried through and I consider these early years a valuable proof of concept phase.

⁹⁷ There are many roles and collaborative models that creators of new musicals can take on and this can vary from project to project. For example, Lin-Manuel Miranda wrote the book, music and lyrics for *Hamilton* (2015), but collaborated with book writer Quiara Alegria Hudes on *In The Heights* (2008). Stephen Sondheim wrote the music and lyrics to most of his works but never the book, and in a couple of instances earlier in his career – *West Side Story* (1957) and *Gypsy* (1959) – contributed only the lyrics.

unconventional lives and play unorthodox parts” (Glenn 2000, 6-7). Some Vaudeville stages therefore became a place for challenging gender norms, exploring gender ideology and critiquing societal expectations for women: this notion became important to the development of *Dangerous*.

Dangerous has been intentionally created for a broad audience (unlike *Ascent*). As such, many music aesthetic and design elements suggested throughout the book reference those found in popular culture, whilst still providing opportunities for period style elements to be co-present, creating a fusion not dissimilar to popular musicals such as *Hamilton* (2015) and *Six* (2017). The book combines popular aesthetics with traditional Vaudeville acts, to reinvent and reorientate them towards an intersectional feminist agenda. Such Vaudeville acts, which are documented in a guide from the time, *How To Enter Vaudeville: a complete illustrated course of instruction* (LaDelle 1913), include the Tableau Vivant, Animal Acts, Soft Shoe/Song and Dance, Female Boxer Acts and Ventriloquist Acts. Also referenced throughout the book are choreographic tropes such as the chorus kick line, the chorus girl bevel and other similar gestures, and *Ziegfeld Follies*-inspired geometric patterns and formations in choreographic stage directions.

Dangerous has a hybrid form: a concept musical with a book musical plot. It consciously applies a poststructuralist, intersectional feminist lens. The premise sees five women who played a notable role in women’s suffrage from the US, UK and Australia, putting on a Vaudeville style variety show, accompanied by an original contemporary score that fuses popular music styles with Vaudeville styles. Each suffragist gets a Vaudeville act to tell a story about a time she was ‘dangerous’, encouraging us – the audience – to be more dangerous in how we advocate for feminist issues, since, as they point out, there are a lot of things that still haven’t changed, despite women (from their countries of origin) having had the vote for more than one hundred years. These women are also brought into conversation with my interpretation of the New Woman: a twenty-first century woman who is lured into the backstage world of the musical by the show’s host, the MC.

The MC – a symbolic representation of the patriarchy – aims to keep the New Woman on side, to help him execute the show as usual. However, the suffragists' acts and their subsequent conversations backstage with the New Woman aim to educate and covertly convince her to put an end to the MC and set them all free. They must tread carefully, frequently indicating they are being watched and urging the New Woman to figure out her "weapon of choice" so that when she is confronted with danger she is prepared. As the MC catches on to the suffragists' plan, he charms and manipulates the New Woman, convincing her that he sees incredible talent in her, and requests that she prepare a solo act for inclusion in the Vaudeville show. By preparing for her solo act, she is distracted from the increasing violence that is befalling the suffragists on stage.

However, the violence onstage becomes increasingly overt and starts to spill over into the backstage world, resulting in the suffragists, one by one, going 'missing'. The New Woman doesn't understand what is going on; so, in desperation, the suffragists risk being overheard by the MC and ask the New Woman to kill the MC and put an end to the danger. They hatch a plan for the New Woman to fill in for an injured Suzie (Susan B. Anthony) on stage and, at the end of the act, kill him. The New Woman, worried about the potential criminal consequences, is assured by the suffragists that the audience will think it's part of the performance, since that's what is assumed each time one of them meets a violent end on stage. The New Woman tries to execute this request but is instead captivated and distracted by the audience's applause and adoration of her.

The remaining suffragists try again to re-orientate the New Woman towards their goal, but the MC's weaponising of the audience's love is too powerful for the New Woman and serves to strengthen his grip on her. In a last plea, Truth (Sojourner Truth) attempts to get through to the New Woman to get her to take responsibility for her role in the dangers that are unfolding, because only she has the power to shape a different story – one where liberation is possible – since the suffragists have already lived their stories. Finding this proposition too overwhelming, the New Woman refuses and chooses to align herself with the MC. It is not until all the suffragists have been eliminated and she is left on her own that the New Woman suddenly feels her own body in danger, now vulnerable to the

insidious power of the MC. Through an embodied experience of danger, she realises what the suffragists were fighting for and what they were trying to get her to understand. In this moment, her orientation changes from being aligned with the patriarchal MC, towards a feminist desire for female liberation. Upon this change in orientation occurring, the MC multiplies and seeks to destroy her as she is now a threat to his power.

The only way to defeat the MCs is to use what she learnt from each of the suffragists. As she does this, the suffragists return and together they conquer the MC. This brings about a moment of utopia – after Dolan’s (2005) utopian performatives. However, it is only a moment; the New Woman recognises the feeling of liberation as being temporary. She realises, with the suffragists, the MC is never truly gone, that this is a role that is played by many people in many situations on stage and off. She realises that a truly dangerous weapon is needed to counter such a relentless force. Suddenly, the New Woman realises what her “weapon of choice” will be when she encounters an MC again. She explains to the suffragists the most effective weapon against the MC is to do the opposite of what the patriarchy requires – to be orientated towards love: love of self, love of others, love of community and to support each other in our quest for liberation, following bell hooks’ philosophy (see, for example, hooks 2000). Together, they discover that the most dangerous thing one can be in an “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 2004, 45), is orientated towards love: as a muscular, active, binding force that can empower and uplift.

Dangerous

A new feminist musical

Book and lyrics by Jayde Kirchert
Music by Peter Rutherford

Content Warning: violence against women, along with themes of oppression and discrimination on the basis of gender and racial identity.

Songs & Scenes

ACT 1

Scene 1

Dangerous (Inez, Suzi B, Edith, Em, Truth and ensemble)
Hello There, Lady (MC and New Woman)

Scene 2

Scene 3

Pony Patter (Inez, MC and ensemble)

Scene 4

Scene 5

A Double Act (Suzi B, Lizzie, MC and ensemble)

Scene 6

The Female Boxer (Edith, MC and ensemble)

Scene 7

ACT 2

Scene 1

The F Word (Truth, Em and New Woman)
Paradox (New Woman and Truth)

Scene 2

Like A Lady (Em, MC, additional MCs)

Scene 3

Scene 4

Black Face (Truth)

Scene 5

Paradox (Reprise) (New Woman, numerous MCs)

Scene 6

Dangerous (Finale) (Inez, Suzi B, Edith, Em, Truth, New Woman and ensemble)

Note: song lyrics appear in **italicised bold font**. Stage directions appear in **italicised font**. Stage directions have been carefully inserted, please consider them part of the text.

Character List

MC (male voice)

The MC is played by the women of the cast, using subversive drag (drag that is used to disrupt, expose and challenge gender stereotypes). The voice of the MC is provided by a man, who gives us the typical master of ceremonies tone: charismatic, commanding, charming, a little cheeky, epitomising 'show business'. The MC is not a character per se – 'he' has no psychological reality or depth or relationships. He is best thought of as a persona and will be played identically by each person that plays him. Gestures are to be precise, very rehearsed and with the elegance and experience of thousands of hours of performing for rowdy and easily distracted audiences. Any 'jokes' that are harmful to women are performed in a knowing, exaggerated way. The MC should evoke a feeling of strangeness – we have seen this sort of act before, but it is a caricature of itself: it's as if it is knowingly quoting itself as it is occurring (for the Brechtian practitioners, the aim is to produce a *Verfremdungseffekt*).

The New Woman

A young woman in her early to mid-twenties who goes on a journey towards self-empowerment and feminist reckoning. She begins with feminist tendencies but is generally unsure of herself and her place in the world and finds the political rhetoric of the suffragists quite overwhelming. Whilst learning from the suffragists, both backstage and through their acts about the need for feminist activism and action, she constantly encounters opposing views from the MC, who tries to lure her back into the familiar, status quo, patriarchal way of thinking. As the stakes get higher and she feels the danger increase, she realises what is at stake when women seek liberation. This catapults her into taking responsibility for herself and committing to brave feminist action to make the world a better place for all. She ends the show as a strong, empowered, articulate person, who has matured into a knowing, adult woman. Australian accent.

Inez Milholland (aka Inez)

Inez Milholland was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, U.S.A. She became a symbol of the suffragist movement in the U.S; her iconic image on a white horse has become synonymous with the suffragist movement. She was among the first women to pass the bar and become a practising lawyer in the U.S. She was married but also an advocate for 'free love'. She was also from a wealthy family. She died at 30 years old shortly after a speech she gave on a long, exhausting suffrage tour (she suffered from pernicious anaemia). In this imagining of her she is charming, the life of the party, clever, but direct and at times blunt. She is the kind of person for whom it seems there is always something interesting and fascinating going on.

Susan B Anthony (aka Suzi B)

Everyone has always heard of Susan B. Anthony – a fierce and determined suffragist. She was born in Massachusetts in the U.S.A She moved to Battenville, NY at six years old and at seventeen moved to Philadelphia to attend a Quaker boarding school. She never married and did not have any children. She was a Quaker, an abolitionist, part of the temperance movement and started out as a teacher. She contributed to the Married

Women's property act (1860) being passed. She started giving speeches in public at a time where it was not socially acceptable for women to do so. In 1878, her and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had Congress consider an amendment to give women the right to vote. This was ratified in 1920 – after her death (1906) – and was colloquially known as the Susan B. Anthony amendment. In this imagining of her she is whip smart, warm, bold, very logical and with a quirky sense of humour.

Edith Cowan (aka Edith)

Edith Cowan was born on a remote sheep station at Glengarry near Geraldton, Western Australia, Australia. She was integral to the Australian women's suffrage movement, particularly in WA where there is now a university named after her. She also appears on the Australian \$50 note. Her mother died when she was seven and she was sent to a boarding school. In 1876 her father shot and killed her stepmother and was executed. She was married with 5 children. She fought for female suffrage, better education and access to healthcare for women and children. She was the first female MP in Australia. In this imagining of her she is strong, agile, daring with a hard exterior but kind heart.

Sojourner Truth (aka Truth)

Born as Isabella in Swartekill, New York, U.S.A., Sojourner Truth was born into slavery. She was forced to marry an enslaved man and had 5 children. She escaped just before slavery was abolished. She was the first black woman to win a legal case against a white man to reclaim her son. She went on to become an influential speaker with a deep spiritual calling. Her most famous speech is the 'Ain't I A Woman' speech, however since Dutch was her first language and she grew up in the state of NY, the dialect suggested in the most famous record of this speech is unlikely to be accurate. In this imagining of her she has a spirit as big as a mountain, is potent and economical in her speech and has a great sense of perspective.

Emmeline Pankhurst (aka Em)

Emmeline Pankhurst was born and grew up in Manchester, England, U.K. She was married with 5 children. She was the founding leader of the Women's Social and Political Union, known for its militant tactics to achieve women's suffrage. She was imprisoned multiple times and took part in hunger strikes. She had a profound impact on the political landscape of Britain and was a remarkable public speaker. In this imagining of her she is precise, strategic, friendly and the person who always gets the job done.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (aka Lizzie)

Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were friends after meeting at the famous 1851 Seneca Falls convention and worked hard together for women's suffrage for decades. Stanton was born and raised in Johnstown, New York, U.S.A. She was married with 7 children. Stanton and Anthony had a collaboration that made them a political force to be reckoned with. In this imagining she shares Suzi B's quirky humour, she is a great supporter, intelligent and has the temperament of an experienced teacher.

Other characters: Wardrobe person, Assistant Stage Manager. Ensemble as ponies, jury, boxers, protestors, Karrakatta Club (K Club), MCs

ACT 1

Scene 1

House lights go down and a music motif plays to get the audience's attention

Signage indicates audience should applaud

Drum roll. In front of a classic red curtain, an MC appears in a classic tux complete with top hat, tails and a perfect moustache. Music highlights this sudden appearance! Note: the MC is played by various women of the cast throughout, in subversive drag, lip synching to a pre-recorded male voice.

MC Ladies and gentlemen, how welcome you are and how THRILLED I am to have you join us for the GREATEST show in the world! I've been entertaining audiences for a looooong time, and I know what you want... I know just how you like it. I have stamina – ladies, I can go the distance, I can go for one hundred years! And that's just what I've done.

Signage indicates audience should applaud

But all good things must come to an end. After one hundred years, tonight is our last performance.

Signage indicates audience should sound disappointed

I know, I know. A lot has changed since the curtain first went up, let me tell you. For one thing, people have gotten much more attractive. Go on, give yourselves a hand.

Signage indicates audience should applaud

Not like that sir, keep them where I can see them. *Some* things never change.

Signage indicates audience should laugh

Yes, boys will be boys and girls will be girls and tonight I'm going to introduce you to five personally selected bombshell, powerhouse beauties! Oh, my girls are special. They changed the world by working for equality, for the right to vote! – that's right, once upon a time it was us gents who ran the show, but all good things must come to an end. *[drum fill]* Ha ha ha!

Signage indicates audience should laugh

I know what you're thinking – voting? Democracy? I don't want to hear about that for two and a half hours. BORING. I am with you there! Don't you worry, I have trained them well. Tonight is not about politics, tonight is about entertainment and we're here to go out with a bang! That's right ladies and gentlemen, it's all about snappy comedy, enchanting singing, nimble tap dancing, glamour and glitter, poses and pageantry – and let's not forget, the most talented animals you've ever seen! Oh yes, I'm talking about those WILD girls, those dangerous girls – here they are ready to bite – my stars, my pretties, my lionesses: the suffragists!

Signage indicates audience should applaud

Dangerous

Each suffragist stands in front of an image representing her act, in the style of a tableau vivant.

ALL *If they won't respect us
If history neglects us
We gotta get...
Dangerous...*

Spoken, overlapping:

INEZ “How long must women wait for liberty?”

SUZI B “The only question left to be settled now is: Are women persons?”

EDITH “Women are very desirous of being placed on absolutely equal terms with men. We ask for neither more nor less than that!”

EM “We want to have this power in order that we may try to make this world a much better place for men and women than it is today.”

TRUTH “I am a woman's rights.”

ALL *Here's the way it's going to be:
We're done playing by the rules,
Of the patriarchy.
We're back to finish what we began,
End this never-ending story,
'Cause it's still perilous,
It's still dangerous
To be a woman.*

*If they won't respect us?
If history neglects us?
We gotta get... dangerous!*

ALL
INEZ **WHO is she?**
INEZ.

*I rode forward into light
As Joan of Arc upon white horse,
Destination: White House,
Leading women in our cause.
The “pretty” lawyer was attacked
And some girls left for dead.
But the story that persisted was
My “pretty” dress instead.*

ALL
If they won’t respect us?
We gotta get dangerous.

ALL
SUZI B **WHO is she?**
SUZI B.

*I strove to make injustices
Quiver – quake in fear,
And uphold the constitution
Whose position seemed quite clear:
No citizen be denied the vote,
So I took up my right.
But I was brought to court, so gladly fought
The judge who put up a fight.*

ALL
If they won’t respect us?
We gotta get dangerous.

ALL
EDITH **WHO is she?**
EDITH.

*I couldn’t stand watching women
Bear the brunt of reckless men,
And forgotten children to repeat the cycle
Over and over again.
A woman’s voice was needed
In the place where voices count.
Even though I was elected
The house barely heard me out!*

ALL
If they won’t respect us?
We gotta get dangerous.

ALL	<i>WHO is she?</i>
EM	<i>EM.</i>
EM	<i>I saw leaders come and go, Whose laws shape life for all. Attempting change by civil means They just ignored our call. A toff in power saw our lives As a game of cat and mouse, He took us more seriously When we blew up his summer house.</i>
ALL	<i>If they won't respect us? We gotta get dangerous.</i>
ALL	<i>WHO is she?</i>
TRUTH	<i>TRUTH.</i>
TRUTH	<i>I endured the worst of men: Worked, enslaved and scarred. Fled one day with only hope And one babe in my arms. The truth is that I knew my worth, And saw good in others too. Felt woman's time rising up – I knew what I had to do.</i>
ALL	<i>This is us, the suffragists:</i>
INEZ	<i>Inez.</i>
Suzi B	<i>Suzi B.</i>
EDITH	<i>Edith.</i>
EM	<i>Em.</i>
TRUTH	<i>Truth.</i>
ALL	<i>Telling you to get dangerous!</i>
ALL	<i>(so) Feel your feet and stamp them loud – (say) I am a Dangerous Woman now! Let us hear your voices howl: (say) I am a Dangerous Woman now! Nothing sends a shiver Like a woman crystal clear. Ready to get dangerous? You gotta let us know you're here!</i>
	<i>(It's like we said) If they won't respect us?</i>

***If history neglects us?
We gotta get... (gotta get, gotta get, gotta get)
Dangerous!***

***(so) Feel your feet and stamp them loud –
(say) I am a Dangerous Woman now!
Let us hear your voices howl:
(say) I am a Dangerous Woman now!
Nothing sends a shiver
Like a woman crystal clear.
Ready to get dangerous?
You gotta let us know you're here!***

***Time to get
Dangerous!***

The song ends. Signage indicates audience should applaud.

MC I love it when girls get angry. I really do. All that passion! All that fiercer-ness! Isn't it...*dead sexy*? Am I right or am I right?

Signage indicates audience should applaud

Glad to know you're still alive out there, folks.

Before we get to our next act, I need to know something very, very important. Who out there is ready to get dangerous?

Signage indicates audience should applaud.

I am looking for a special volunteer who is ready to have their life changed forever!

The MC heads out into the audience and music begins.

Hello There, Lady

MC arrives at an audience member and sings:

MC ***Hello there, lady.
Pardon my saying –
It's just – has anyone ever told you...
You've got a certain 'je ne sais quoi'.
I really think you could go far
If you wanted to be a big star.
With a figure like that,
You belong on the stage!***

MC You could give Inez a run for her money – and she's got a lot of it.

Signage indicates audience should applaud. MC moves on to another audience member.

MC ***Hello there, lady!
Please, don't be offended.
You got a certain look – there it is!
The light catches your eyes just so...
Surely, you already know?
Limelight will amplify that glow!
With a face like that,
You belong on the stage!***

MC Don't tell Em but her eyes are black coals compared with these dazzling diamonds!

Signage indicates audience should applaud.

The MC arrives at an audience member who will become the New Woman. She is a young woman in her early-mid-twenties, more of an introvert, curious about the show (but not a confident volunteer), the 'every person'.

MC ***Hello there, lady,
You, with the stars in your eyes –
Have you heard that before?
I see what's in you and guarantee:
The audience will set you free.
Success awaits if you come with me –
'Cause with legs like that:
You belong on the stage!***

MC What's your name, little lady?

Offers mic

NW Uh –

Takes mic away before she can be heard answering

MC Beautiful! You are *it* little lady. I can see it. Deep down you're... edgy. Independent. Fierce. You're ready to challenge the status quo and tell the man where to go! Am I right, is that you?

Offers mic

NW Uh... yeah...

MC Yes! *You* are the New Woman.

NW Me?

Signage indicates audience should applaud

MC So tell us, where are you from, New Woman?

Offers mic

NW Uh –

Takes mic away before she can be heard answering

MC You are from the depths of eternity, you are what has come before and what lies ahead, you are the epicentre of hope for a brighter future!

MC offers mic

NW Thank you?

Takes mic away

MC Let me ask you something. Do you want to make the world a better place?

Offers mic

NW *(clears throat)* ...Yes.

Signage indicates audience should applaud

MC Of course you do!

***In this day and age,
If you want to change the world,
If you want to make front page,
For the words of a girl
To become all the rage –
The only possible way
Is to become a star!
A really big star!***

MC takes NW towards the stage.

MC This is *your* time little lady! It'll never happen again!

NW (*nervous laughs*) ...I'm not a dancer or anything –

MC This is show business kid, not rocket science.

NW But I don't know about performing (or rockets...)

MC You're a woman aren't you?

NW Yes.

Reaching the stage

MC You'll be a natural! Listen, there are a few golden rules as old as the biz itself. Follow them and you can't go wrong. These people know what I'm talking about!

MC First: **You gotta get a gimmick...** (*MC tips his hat*)
Make sure you make 'em laugh! (*MC does a slapstick joke*)
Then give 'em that old razzle dazzle... (*MC throws glitter confetti from pocket*)

Soon you'll see:
To get their ear you gotta catch their eye... (*MC flashes body part seductively*)
Whatever you say, say it with a smile. (*MC smiles*)
Or a nudge and wink – (*MC winks*)
Try not to make them think.
A bit of skin won't hurt – lift that skirt,
And add in a cheeky front row flirt.

MC Watch this. (*To audience member*) I can take you backstage and we can get *dangerous*, if you catch my drift...

Signage indicates audience should laugh

There's no business like show business,
Not any business I know!
I hear you asking when is it my turn?
No day but today!
If history neglected you,
Or just plain forgot,
If you want to reach the masses –
Flaunt it, whatever you've got.
Even if it's not a lot.

***What good is sitting alone in your room,
Wishing for things to change?
Put down your knitting, your book and your broom –
Get up here on the stage!
Their ears await you,
Their eyes are hungry,
Attention will be paid!
The name on every pair of lips
is gonna be yours!
This is your time.
If you've something to say –
This is the moment –
Seize the day!
Oh, wouldn't it be lovely,
To be a star?
A great big star...
A star!***

MC takes the NW backstage. Signage indicates audience should applaud

Show time music. Instantly, the MC returns onstage from the opposite side of the stage. Though it is a different body enacting the role, everything else is identical to the previous MC.

MC We'll catch up with our New Woman a little later. But now – right now, I have something MAGICAL coming your way! I have promised you a lot of things already – and you can hold me to each and every one – but did I mention we have a string of ponies ready to dance, just for you? (*to audience member*) Giddy up – this lady's childhood dreams just came true! Wait until you see what they can do...neigh! Not to mention this Italian Stallion (*indicating his crotch*)...

Signage indicates audience should laugh

We now switch the focus to what is happening backstage as the onstage MC fades away

Scene 2

INEZ Why, hello darling! I'm Inez.

SUZI B & LIZZIE Welcome!

EM Alright?

INEZ And that's Suzie B, Lizzie, Emmeline –

EM Call me Em, love.

INEZ And Edith –

EDITH I've been waiting for an Aussie.

INEZ And darling Truth.

TRUTH It's a pleasure to meet you, New Woman.

NW Thanks. What does the New Woman mean?

INEZ Darling, it's going to be a fabulous evening.

EDITH You just be you, sweetheart.

NW Ok. And what do I have to do exactly?

The suffragists look at each other. Inez steps forward

INEZ All you have to do is pay attention. Eyes. Ears. All of it. Do you think you can do that?

EM Can you do that, love?

NW Yeah, I'll do whatever.

INEZ It will really, really help us.

SUZI B All of us.

TRUTH We want you to succeed.

NW Do I have to go on stage or something?

INEZ Yes, but don't worry about that just yet. Let me ask you something, darling. Do you believe in us?

NW Believe in you?

INEZ Yes.

NW Sure.

INEZ Fabulous. Now, don't you worry about a thing. You just pay attention – just follow along darling – and you'll know exactly what to do when the time comes.

SUZI I've got a good feeling about this one.

LIZZIE Save the best til last?

Suzi B and Lizzie leave

EDITH We're in your corner.

Edith leaves

NW Where is everyone going?

TRUTH The show must go on.

EM Even on closing.

Em and Truth leave

INEZ Listen darling, I don't have long before my act – the first half is mad – but I will be back soon. Just stay right here and remember what I said: watch carefully and... you'll be marvellous.

NW Ok...

Scene 3

Back to onstage

MC That's right, she's my prettiest, my peppiest, my princess, it's suffragist Inez Milholland and the pleasing ponies of Pony Patter!

Pony Patter

The MC catches a whip and leads the ponies on. The ponies (incl Inez) enter

**MC (as tamer) See the ponies pitter patter, treading lightly, "titter, tatter".
Clippity clop til I say STOP! (pause)
Before returning to the former patter.
Aren't they beautiful?**

INEZ **See me patter like a pony,
While you act like...you own me (neh - eigh).**

**Yeah I'll do my famous pitter patter,
While you little boys go "titter, tatter".
(Underneath this trot I got a serious matter,
But I'll get to that when we get past this first bit of clatter).
ALL Clippity clop and 1,2 pop**

MC cracks whip to signal next section where the ponies start to turn

**MC Forming patterns turning,
OH they love to hear you cheering.
See them churning out the tricks & kicks –
So stunning and entertaining!**

**INEZ You like to see me turning –
Oh, you like to see my... gait?
Build you up to hear you yearning,
Then I'll make you... wait.
(to the ponies) – When you see them lean in that way,
That's when you gotta give 'em HEY!**

+PONIES HEY!

INEZ You there, give our rights a voice.

MC Nay! (MC cracks whip)

I + PONIES HEY!

INEZ We deserve an equal choice!

MC Obey! (MC cracks whip twice)

**ALL You gotta drill 'em 'til it sticks,
Until then you do your tricks...
Clippity clop and 1,2 pop.**

Ponies make clicking pony trot sounds with their mouths

**MC It's a pretty sticky game, getting little ponies pretty.
Getting tricky pony trotters trotting –
Got to start them when they're yearlings.
Got to crack the whip and whip it,
Got to get the gaskins going.
Got to practice 'til it sticks, so the girl can do her tricks –
Do your tricks!**

**INEZ I used to wish from Father Christmas
To grow up to be a pony, like me:
Clean picked hooves,
Long brushed mane,
So pretty, shiny, graceful, tame...
I'd prance to please,
And to appease,**

**And gain acclaim in
Incremental degrees.
But pretty looks do not collect respect,
So, I must redirect their gawking,
As I'm walking – feel their eyes –
Grab their ears – hear me talking!
They may balk, but it's hollow.
Hook 'em in so they follow –
Follow my mane, see it swish.**

MC **The most beautiful sight,
Sets your heart alight! INEZ Got the gist?
Watch the pony wave her mane –**

INEZ **Yeah, I did it with my brain.**

MC **My ponies are of the finest pedigree!
Time to demonstrate your perfect anatomy.**

*Ponies have formed a long straight line and one by one present a leg, showgirl style.
MC assesses all the legs*

PONIES **When you see them lean in that way,
That's when you gotta give em –**

Inez presents a mannequin leg in place of her own. MC is drawn to it.

INEZ **HEY! You like what you see?**

MC **This beauty is through the roof!
Loveliness from hock to hoof. [MC leans towards Inez's leg]**

INEZ Oh yeah?

MC Oh yeah...

INEZ + PONIES Oh yeah?

MC Oh yeah!

INEZ Theeeeeennnn – you can have it!

She whacks him with the mannequin leg in the groin.

Then, a bugle sounds, all freeze.

*Ponies now commence the most beautiful, glamorous part of the choreography,
embodying the movement vocabularies of the Ziegfeld Follies (and similar). Though
men are mentioned, no male-identifying actors should appear on stage. The
choreography and injuries indicated in the stage directions represent the story of the
suffragists being attacked by groups of men on their way to the White House.*

Though the MC's lines are broken up with stage directions, they should follow straight on with a rapid pace in the style of a horse race commentator, and the stage direction action should occur as he is speaking.

INEZ Girls just wanna have fun-damental rights!

PONIES ***Clippity clop and 1,2 off!***

MC And they're off! The suffragists already picking up pace along Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House to see the big man in the big house – nothing in their way as they go to plead their case for women's suffrage – wait, what is this? No one expected this – a man, big man, a BIG group of men growing in size veering out to the right and OH! –

A pony on the end stumbles, rolling her ankle and hobbling for the rest of the number

PONIES ***1,2 pop!***

MC One man charged straight into Suffragist Sarah! She'll struggle to make it to the White House now –

The ponies create weaving/staggered patterns with their formation

Suffragist Helen pushing out wider as four drunk men approach, weaving, dodging – and here come more from nowhere – 8 men! count them 8! – aiming at Suffragists Tessy, Betty, Sally – PUNCH –

A pony falls to the ground, but choreography continues and becomes more elegant. This pony will try to rejoin but ends up crawling off

I just saw a 1, 2 punch – and SLAP! –

Two more ponies are injured, one falls to the ground the other stumbles. The one on the ground will stay there and eventually will be pushed or dragged off, the other will try to join the group even as it is impossible to continue as normal

– the girls are surrounded! Man 1 is still going strong, relentless, kicking those already down – a policeman spits at Suffragist Sally, she must be in a coma on the sidewalk now! – wow you can't take your eyes off this, like a car crash (*another pony goes down*) – cockfight (*another pony goes down*) – porno (*another pony goes down*) – PLACE YOUR BETS –

The ponies that just went down are starting to recover.

I'd like to say it's once in a lifetime, but we all know that's –

PONIES **1,2 pop!**

Ponies now start to have long, white, thin-ideal mannequin legs they will use as decorative props to heighten the hyper-feminine choreography.

MC The police part for a pack – a stampede of angry guys, coming up from behind – these girls haven't got a hope in hell, not a hope in hell –

Formation parts in the middle

– up through the middle now – SMACK! –

Legs are now flying through the air in a graceful, but bizarre fashion

– there they go face-planting onto the bitumen – but that's not all folks, we got another hundred years to go at least! At least! At least Man 3 didn't join in – not all men – but Man 2 is galloping now, jeering at Suffragist Inez, Man 4 and Man 5 coming through tripping (*they trip in a canon, the plastic legs highlighting this*) 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – no 10 suffragists, 10 suffragists tripped and pushed, bowled over like 9 pins, 9 pins –

Formation of plastic legs is reminiscent of bowling pins

– that's what you get for showing your pins – OH!

Legs are flying everywhere as if a bowling ball hit a strike. Now the chaos and violence described in the text is visible in the bodies on stage and the Follies style movement vocabulary is mostly gone.

– did you SEE that – suffragist Helen sent flying, girls turning into birds, hot chicks, when the boys will be boys, it's a zoo, we're all crazed animals, violent animals – Man 1 takes back the lead, swinging punches – they'll never finish the march now –

A turning point in the choreography will now suggest the ponies are finding ways to fight back, led by Inez. The plastic legs will now become weapons, rather than decorative props. More militaristic, rhythmic.

INEZ ***If they won't respect us,
We gotta get
+PONIES ...dangerous!***

The pony formations now start to box in the MC

MC Suffragist Inez ambling up the outside, beginning well, she's exhausted but pushing on, now mid-field, charging at the angry men with all she has, those pony trotters trotting, gaskins going, a length and a half away from

the front two, they're really running now, terrified of what the Pony of all Ponies has in store – where has this power come from? – no one can say, but she makes a sudden surge, more Suffragists join her – another and another and another and another and another and another – they all join her, blazing ahead, getting stronger and stronger and stronger! They find a poor blameless bystander to take out their rage – come on girls, it wasn't me, it was – it was. – AH!

MC is thrown into the trapdoor by the ponies, shouting

ALL Yeah! (*adlibs*)

INEZ ***Go forward into light!***

ALL ***Go forward into light!***

When we see you lean in that way,

INEZ ***We know you're ready to give it to 'em –***

ALL ***HEY!***

INEZ (*spoken*) How long must women wait for liberty?

Horse sounds with mouth now sound like tick tock sounds. MC pops back up

MC Good question, but time's up, my princess!

MC grabs Inez and takes her down with him into the trapdoor. She screams.

Black out. Signage indicates audience should applaud.

Scene 4

MC pops up from an unexpected place (the more bizarre the better).

MC 1 Bet you didn't see that coming.

MC disappears then re-appears from another place

MC2 Don't worry, the girls can never get rid of me.

MC disappears then re-appears from another place

MC 1 I'll always be around. Though I can't say the same for them.

MC disappears and re-appears from another place

MC 3 Just when you think I'm gone...

Disappears and re-appears from another place

MC 4 ...1,2 pop! Here I am again! I can get anywhere...or reach anyone...

Disappears and re-appears from another place

MC 2 Like that. All it takes is a subtle (*a gloved hand appears somewhere unexpected*) ...sleight of hand...

Signage indicates audience should applaud

MC 1 No, no, I'm not a magician. I just happen to know the backdoors, trapdoors, open doors, closed doors, secret tunnels. It was made for guys like me [*wink*].

MC 1 continues onstage which fades out of focus as we cross to the backstage world.

Inez appears from the trapdoor backstage. There are performers from Pony Patter huddled around and Truth and Em who have come to see if Inez is ok. Inez protects her injured wrist but trying to avoid drawing attention to it.

INEZ What a warm welcome back. Thanking you darlings, you can go now.

EM You got done already, love.

INEZ After 50 speeches in 28 days across 8 states on my deathbed, I think I'll survive a little sprain.

TRUTH It's a message. Give up now.

They look at the New Woman, who is on her phone

INEZ Darling, I thought I told you to pay attention?

NW I was watching.

INEZ Watching what exactly? This 'thing' you modern people are so obsessed with?

Inez takes the NW's phone out of her hand

NW Give that back.

TRUTH Inez.

INEZ Tell me, darling, what happens in here that is so very important?

NW Nothing.

INEZ Excusez-moi?

NW Nothing.

INEZ Well, while you were looking at 'nothing' –

TRUTH When we say pay attention, we mean it.

EM We're not being funny, love, you're being (*covertly*) tested.

INEZ You simply must keep your wits about you. For all our sakes.

Inez gives the phone to Truth who leaves to get rid of it

NW Hey, I need that!

TRUTH Tonight is our last chance. We can't afford distractions.

Em stops the NW

EM Steady on.

INEZ I'll die a hundred deaths if it means the future is safe for women. But if you are more interested in 'nothing', we might as well hang up the costumes and go back to our graves –

EM What Inez is trying to say is we have high hopes for you.

NW What exactly do I have to do?

EM It will all make sense soon enough. But, we must take care...

NW I think there's been a mistake, I'm not the right person for all this.

EM You're here now, love, you might as well carry on.

NW Can't I just go back to my seat?

Em urges Inez to say something encouraging

INEZ Darling, you were chosen because he thinks you're stupid. Don't prove him right.

EM A moment on stage, all eyes on you, all ears open to what you have to say. That's all it takes to change the world.

NW Do I have to perform? Can someone tell me what –

Inez draws her close

INEZ ***Pick your weapon of choice...***

NW My what?

INEZ ***Your weapon of choice.***
EM ***When you have the stage,***
 You have a voice.

+INEZ ***Don't waste it,***
 Be prepared to face it
 With your weapon of choice.

A rack of costumes comes past, and they pull away. Em leaves, Inez follows

WARDROBE You must be the New Woman, here, I've got some options.

INEZ (*leaving*) Eyes. Ears. Everything.

NW Wait, you still haven't told me what I have to do, or when. I don't want to look like a loser out there.

WARDROBE Missy, you need to get back here!

Wardrobe person grabs the New Woman and starts holding costumes in front of her.

NW Sorry, you've got the wrong person – how do I get back to my seat?

Suzi B and Lizzie are seen walking past.

SUZI B There she is!

Suzi B turns and startles NW on account of her half/half face: they are both in half/half outfits – half male-gentleman (looks like MC) and half female-lady (middle-upper class) of their era.

NW Ah!

WARDROBE Shhhhh!

NW Sorry.

LIZZIE Susan tends to have that effect on people. My husband always said, "Susan stirs the puddings, Elizabeth stirs up Susan, and then Susan stirs up the world!"

SUZI B I simply enjoy confounding people's expectations of me.

LIZZIE Everyone has always heard of Susan, you see. She gets away with a lot.

Wardrobe person leaves

SUZI B But this isn't about me. We need you.

NW No, there's been a mistake.

SUZI B It's normal to feel like that. But you have quite the opportunity before you to change things for the future!

NW Isn't this the last show?

SUZI B Maybe for us – but it could be the dawn of a new era if you get this right.

LIZZIE We can see there's something about you –

SUZI B Something... dangerous.

LIZZIE Dangerous.

NW Dangerous?

SUZI B I haven't been this hopeful since we passed the married women's property act.

LIZZIE We believe in you.

Suzi B draws her close, Lizzie stands guard

SUZI B ***You need a weapon of choice...
When you have the stage,
You have a voice.***

LIZZIE ***Do not underestimate***

SUZI B ***Or hesitate***

L+S ***With your weapon of choice.***

NW What the heck is going on?

LIZZIE You must take this seriously.

SUZI B We prefer the two-pronged attack:

LIZZIE We approach from both sides –

SUZI B Pincer grip. Then, we get in their heads –

LIZZIE – we do not let them get away –

SUZI B Until we can figure out a way to get them into ours.

NW Wait, what am I supposed to do?

SUZI B Never mind what you're *supposed* to do, dear. One must *choose* to live on the dangerous side, or you cannot expect anything to change.

NW Ok sure, but first someone needs to tell me what I'm meant to do out there – I don't even know when – no one is telling me anything –

SUZI B There will be a simple task for you to perform.

NW What kind of task?

SUZI B We don't know yet.

LIZZIE It depends on a few things.

NW Just tell me what to do so I don't make a fool out of myself.

SUZI B You'll know what to do when it's time – (*looks around*)

LIZZIE – If you've been paying attention...

SUZI B That's all we can say...

Lizzie and Suzi B leaving

SUZI B But this is our last chance, so failure is impossible.

They leave

NW Wait!

Scene 5

Back to the onstage world

MC1 ...and that is what I call political correctness gone mad. But the show must go on and there's no show without a host –

MC2 (*suddenly appearing*) – or two.

MC1 You know what they say...

MC2 What do they say?

MC1 Two heads –

MC1+2 Are better than one!

MC1 Sometimes two heads are needed to keep my girls in line!

MCs laugh and signage indicates audience should laugh

MC1 (*to audience*) You call that a laugh? Read the sign, dummy.

MC2 Oh, too good for those jokes now?

MC1+2 Kidding!

MC1 Had you worried there, didn't we?

MC2 Seriously, my girls and I,

MC1 We need each other like...

MC2 Salt and pepper.

MC1 Like...

MC2 Yin and yang.

MC1 The masculine –

MC2 And the feminine.

MC1 And that's what you're about to see in this next act!

MC2 We now present not one, but –

MC1+2 TWO suffragists:

MC1 Or is it technically four?

MC2 You might get more than you bargained for with:

MC1 Susan “Suzi B” Anthony, supported by her devilish dear friend,

MC2 Elizabeth “Lizzie” Cady Stanton –

MC1 That’s right folks, double trouble awaits with my infamous, ambiguous, duplicitous girls who will give you the best of both worlds –

MC2 If that’s what floats your boat in....

MC1 (*Wolf whistles, then*) You know it does. Look at this sudden sea of spontaneous boners!

MC1+2 It’s every man’s dream, it’s A Double Act!

A Double Act

Throughout the act Suzi B and Lizzie will swap sides and use the half/half outfits to play different roles and illuminate the text, clarifying who and what is being referred to.

In this first bit they are knowingly putting on a sort of working-class New York Vaudeville persona

SUZI B Say Lizzie, whaddya call that getup?

LIZZIE Taking myself out for a nice date.

SUZI B Oh yeah? I call it: taking matters into my own hands.

LIZZIE Seems to me the only way to get a point across these days.

SUZI B Ain’t that the truth? If they won’t hear me out that-a way, they’re bound to hear me out this-a way.

LIZZIE Right! We catch their eye from that side and their ear from this side.

BOTH ***There’s always
Two sides to every story,
Two sides to every coin.
If you always got his side,
You ought to hear hers.
If it always falls heads,
When does tails get a turn?***

BOTH ***You could say it’s***

LIZZIE *Two sides of the same story,
Two sides of the same coin.
But the coin's worth nothin'
If it's not whole,*
 BOTH *So equality
Should be our goal!*

SUZI B *But since we've heard so much of that side,*
 LIZZIE *And not much of this,*
 SUZI B *To even up the airtime
He'll have to seal his lips. (LIZZIE: shhhhhh)*

SUZI B *Yes, we've heard this side, (LIZZIE: siiiiiide, side, side)
For a long time, (LIZZIE: whyyyyy, why, why)
It's about time (LIZZIE: tiiiiiiiime, time, time)
For this side to have a say. (LIZZIE: Hey!)*

BOTH *We need a 1,2 swap.
It's just a 1,2 swap.*
 SUZI B *So, pop open your ear boy,
Try not to fear,
LIZZIE The things she has to say
Are worth a cheer.*
 BOTH *So it's a 1,2 swap.
Add a 1,2 stop. (LIZZIE: and listen!)*
 SUZI B *Time to zip your gob chap –*
 LIZZIE *Be quiet unless you're gonna clap along.*
 So we hear

BOTH *Two sides of the same story [LIZZIE: he said, he said AND SHE said!]
Two sides of the same coin [LIZZIE: heads or tails? Give 'em an even
chance]
Two sides of the same road [LIZZIE: which side are you driving on?]*
 SUZI B *One plus one is two but really one – [+LIZZIE] when they join!
Yes we'd do much better
If we put our heads together.
Two heads are better than one.
But it won't work if he gets all and she gets none.*

SUZI B Hey Lizzie, suppose there's an amendment that goes something like, oh I don't know, [*extremely fast, but making perfect sense of it*] **"All persons** born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, **are citizens of the United States** and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive **any person** of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law;

nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

LIZZIE Just supposing...

SUZI B Just supposing there was such an amendment, wouldn't you say that gives **all persons born in the United States** the same privileges –

LIZZIE I see where you're going with this...

SUZI B You do?

Lizzie turns to face her 'man' side to us. This is a classic inept young male minion (think of the pimply teenager with a voice that hasn't properly broken on The Simpsons).

[LIZZIE] MAN But the constitution says only men are allowed to vote, so I'm afraid I can't register you ma'am.

SUZI B My dear, are you acquainted with the 14th Amendment to the constitution of the United States?

MAN ...Yes ma'am.

SUZI B Then you are aware that all persons born or naturalised in the United States are citizens.

MAN Yes ma'am but –

SUZI B Then as a citizen – since I am a person – on that, would you consider me a person, sir?

MAN ...Yes ma'am.

SUZI B I am pleased to hear it, though you don't sound entirely confident. For argument's sake, let us grant that I *am* a person who was, in truth, born in the United States. In such an instance, would I not have the same rights and liberties as *all* citizens?

MAN Uhh...?

SUZI B And naturally, this would include the right to vote. Yes?

MAN Uhhhh... I'll have to get my manager...

We see Suzi B following a line of ensemble members dressed to appear as men. Suzi B gets to the front of the line and drops her voting slip in the ballot box. Suddenly, police sirens and flashing lights occur, and she is arrested. A courtroom emerges.

ENS ***Never say never,
Not until you've met her -
And don't be scared
If what she says conflicts ya.***

MC takes on the role of judge. Lizzie leads the ensemble who are dressed to appear as an all-male jury.

LIZZIE *(Fosse-esque)* Psssssst...

MC as JUDGE The court cannot listen to a rehearsal of arguments the prisoner's counsel has already consumed 3 hours in presenting.

ENS+LIZ ***Two sides
To every story...***

JUDGE The fact is you cast an illegal vote.

SUZI B The fact is our constitution states all persons born in the United States are to be considered citizens.

JUDGE The Court must insist, the prisoner has been tried according to the established forms of law.

LIZZIE *(Fosse-esque)* Jazz...

SUZI B Yes, your Honor, but by forms of law all made by men, interpreted by men, administered by men, in favour of men and against women.

LIZ *(Fosse-esque)* Hacha!

JUDGE The prisoner must sit down – the court cannot allow it!

ENS+LIZ ***New sides,
We need a 1, 2 swap.***

SUZI B Whether native or foreign born –

JUDGE Order! –

SUZI B – black or white, rich or poor –

JUDGE Order! –

SUZI B – ignorant or educated, drunk or sober, awake or asleep –

JUDGE ORDER! –

SUZIE B – each and every man is my political superior.

LIZZIE (*Fosse-esque*) Whoopee!

ENS+LIZ ***Pop open your ear,
Try not to fear.
The things she has to say
Are worth a cheer.***

SUZI B The only question left to be settled now is: are women persons?

JUDGE Susan B Anthony, you are hereby fined \$100 for your recalcitrance.

LIZZIE Shame!

The ensemble remove the male clothing of the jurors and echo Lizzie's 'shame' adlibs.

JUDGE Case dismissed!

LIZZIE Say, did you ever pay up?

SUZI B Ha! Like hell I did!

Judge requests payment. Suzi B and Lizzie do a slapstick routine to get rid of the MC as Judge. Then the ensemble join in a soft shoe dance to celebrate.

S+L ***The coin's worth nothin'***
 If it's not whole,
 +ENS ***So equality***
 should be our goal.
 But what's that really about?
 Really, really about?

ENS ***Men!***
 S+L ***Their rights and nothing more.***
 ENS ***Women!***
 S+L ***Their rights and nothing less!***

S+L ***You might find this vote talk***
 A bit passé,

+ENS ***But your problems
Echo those of our day.
Men!
Their rights and nothing more.
Women!
Their rights and nothing less.
You're still talking about it.
Lots of talking about it...
It needs a 1,2 stop,
Then a 1,2 go –
Action speaks the loudest
Oh, dontcha know!***

SUZI B ***So now you get the gist,
It's time to lend your ear,***

LIZZIE ***To other sides of other stories
You didn't hear.***

S+L ***Never forget:***

+ENS ***There's two sides,
Or four sides?
Never know until you hear how many more sides,
More than one side
Of the story!
Of the story!
Of the –***

Lights snap out and we hear Lizzie fall to the ground.

SUZI B Lizzie!

Then we see the MC pop up:

MC (a la Velma Kelly in Chicago) I completely blacked out, I can't remember a thing...

Signage indicates audience should laugh and applaud.

Glad to hear you're still alive out there folks... it's like I always say...

Transition to the backstage world

Scene 6

New Woman is looking through a props box searching for a weapon. She will pull out foam swords, pretend guns etc. She may also have a Viking helmet.

NW ***Weapon of choice...***

***What's my weapon of choice?
When you have the stage
You have a voice...***

MC appears, startling her.

MC Have you figured it out yet?

NW is badly covering

NW Figured what out?

MC What's all this, little lady?

NW Nothing.

MC No need to be embarrassed. It is a glamorous, fascinating world. Can't blame you for being curious...

NW Can I please go back to my seat now?

MC No! Not another word! You cannot deprive the world of your... magnificence! I know a New Woman when I see one. I chose you. You're not like the others. That's why I've decided you deserve your very own act. And if all that goes well... who knows?

MC will start putting the weapons and helmet away

NW Oh, no, no, that's not a good idea –

MC It's the best idea I've ever had! I can make dreams happen.

NW I'd really like to go now.

MC That would be a horrible, murderous crime! The world needs your talent! And... the girls need you. They're tired. They're about a century old – some older. They've had 100 years to make me some money but they're... out of touch. I need a new show and a new star. People don't care for their PC BS and their politics. But look at what you've chosen, this hat. This prop. *You* understand what it's all about.

NW What would I have to do?

MC A song!

NW On my own?

MC Little lady, there's no barricade here.

NW I mean, do I have to be alone?

MC A solo act, your time to shine!

NW I can't sing.

MC You can lip synch.

NW Lip synch?

MC It's easy. Anyone can do it.

NW Should it have a message or something?

MC A what now?

NW A message?

MC Ha ha ha, where did you hear a thing like that? Little lady, let me remind you what this is about: *fun*. Remember fun? Remember good old-fashioned entertainment?

NW But you said it was about making the world a better place.

MC I'm gonna let you in on a show biz secret: no one cares. It's just a show! If you are so concerned with such a thing, it is possible to do that by making people feel nice for a moment. But remember the rules:

***You gotta get a gimmick,
Make 'em laugh,
Give them that ol' razzle dazzle.
Soon you'll see
To get their ear you gotta catch their eye.
Whatever you say – say it with a smile –
Or a nudge and wink –
Try not to make them think...***

Can't wait to see your act!

MC vanishes. NW is looking for him – or someone, anyone to help her.

NW Wait, come back!

EDITH Are you alright, sweetheart?

NW Oh. Hello.

EDITH We met before. I'm Edith Cowan. From the \$50 note? First female MP in Australia? There's a university named after me. What on earth do they teach you in school? Do any of us ring a bell?

NW Yeah, like, I've heard of Susan B. Anthony.

EDITH Everyone's always heard of Susan. That's the problem, us Aussies are so obsessed with what's happening in America, or anywhere else, but never stop to grapple with our own history. And you – you don't know your women's history. These are your stories you're missing out on.

NW Sorry.

EDITH For who? What have you learnt so far?

NW Me?

EDITH Who else am I talking to?

NW Uh... I'm supposed to pay attention.

EDITH Good. So, I won't be wasting my breath. You must know where you've come from to know where you're going. My mother died when I was seven. My father pushed me aside, couldn't bear to look at me. I was the spit of her, you see. He started to rot. Somehow found a sweet young thing and got her knocked up. Knocked her about. Drink and poverty infected him. He took it out on her, like a cowardly poacher out to hunt an endangered bird. I wanted her death to mean something. For all the women like her, who suffered at the hands of men like him, to get some power back, get some control over their lives. What are you here for?

NW I don't know.

EDITH Come on, stand like you mean it. What's the point of all this?

NW To get women the vote?

EDITH You've got the vote. Don't you?

NW Yes.

EDITH So, it's bigger than that. Why else would we be here?

Draws her close

EDITH ***What's your weapon of choice?***

NW I haven't figured that out yet.

EDITH ***When you have the stage,
You have a voice.
Make it count.
Time to be brave,
Be dangerous
It's the only way...***

NW Why are you all talking about this dangerous stuff? Isn't this just a show?

EDITH He comes swinging at you in the dark, how are you going to defend yourself? You need something real, something that will get the job done –

INEZ enters in a flurry

INEZ Darlings, have any of you seen Suzi B? Lizzie seems to have vanished, and Suzi B just missed her cue with me –

EDITH Liz is gone? Liz?

INEZ I know – you need to catch on quicker!

NW Catch on to what?

EDITH Back off Inez, it's my turn.

INEZ Try harder!

EDITH Inez, we know that approach doesn't work with this generation.

INEZ Darling, perhaps you haven't cottoned on yet, but each time you check out or wander off, there are consequences –

EDITH Shhhh!

NW I was looking for a weapon, like you said, and then I got told I have to do an act, and this is all just a big misunderstanding –

INEZ An act? (*To Edith, melodramatically*) It has been marvellous knowing you, darling. Give my love to Emmeline, won't you?

EDITH Inez.

INEZ You know very well once he gets them to do an act it's over. They can't handle it.

EDITH Go and find Suze. Go.

INEZ leaves

EDITH Don't mind the drama queen, sweetheart. What's your act?

NW I don't know yet.

EDITH You don't have long to figure it out.

NW How do I get my phone back and get back to my seat?

EDITH Come on, haven't you ever wanted to do something meaningful? Something that was worth the effort? Something bigger than yourself?

NW Yeah. Yes.

EDITH Then let's make that happen! But first, you can't let your guard down back here. Stay focused. Stay alert, watch and take in everything. Everything.

NW Yes, yes, eyes and ears.

EDITH Don't forget, we're in your corner. It will all make sense soon.

NW Ok.

EDITH Back in a jiffy.

EDITH smiles and leaves. Transition to onstage world

The Female Boxer

MC Here she comes ladies and gentlemen, it's my favourite girl from down under...the covers! Don't let her tough exterior put you off, she's a pussy cat. Come on Edith, we wanna hear you purrrr!

Edith's act begins with her focused in a pool of light as she wraps her hands and puts on boxing gloves

EDITH ***I looked around
And I never saw anyone***

*Treat a woman like she meant anything at all.
 She can birth life, thought –
 Anything at all –
 She is worth more,
 She deserves more
 Than any man who knocks her up
 Then knocks her out.
 Picks on someone smaller
 For a bout...
 How about it then?*

The stage transforms into a boxing ring. MC plays the role of the announcer. Another MC plays the role of the Referee. All the opponents throughout will appear with the MC top hat and moustache.

MC (as ANNOUNCER) On my right in the blue corner: the true-blue Aussie battlers, well prepared, well trained, they were born to play this game, iiiit's THE BOYS NEXT DOOR! On my left in the red corner: we've never seen one of these in the ring before, but *she* insisted, you heard right, tonight to make history, it's the fiery *lady* here to fight for women's suffrage, iiiit's Edith Cowan!

Now iiiiiiiit's showtime!

K CLUB ROUND 1: Get the vote for the girls!

Ding Ding!

MAN (*whistles*) Give us a kiss, love.

EDITH ***Here we go,
 On the blank canvas.
 Ready to rumble,
 Feet already doing their dances.***

K CLUB ***POW!***

EDITH ***Your first jab – thought you'd land it.***

MAN Oh, you like it rough?

EDITH ***I see your tactic brawler,
 I can dodge but I'm not a crawler.
 I'm a fast mother –***

K CLUB ***– BAM –***

MAN BITCH!

K CLUB ***He hits hard.***

EDITH ***But I'll hit back just as hard –***

K CLUB ***– POW –***

MAN Get back to the kitchen, witch...

EDITH ***You're here for you,***

But I'm here for all.
 MAN ...so we can get back to running all this.
 K CLUB ***When he hits, he hard***
To keep you in your place
So you're too scared to spar...
 EDITH ***Do your worst, I'll take your body work.***
My body has bled, it has shed and bred,
You got nothing on me.
 K CLUB Ooooooooooft!
 MAN Stupid woman. Serves you right.
 EDITH ***I cannot rest,***
The battle isn't won...
Coz there are millions of women who
Need rights to better live,
 K CLUB ***– BAM –***
Since their drunkard husbands
Leave them with nothing but their kids.
 K CLUB ***– WHACK –***
 EDITH ***We're half the population,***
We birth it – we work hard.
We deserve our say,
And that's just the undercard.
 K CLUB ***POW – JAB!***
 EDITH ***Getting the vote is just the beginning –***
Give up man! I'm not leaving without winning.
 K CLUB YEAH!
 EDITH ***1,2 POW!***
Go cower with your cornerman.
Lick your wounds,
Lick your mouse,
Edith Cowan's in the house.

MC ANNOUNCER Well no one saw that coming! He got beaten by a girl! Edith Cowan
 – the ultimate underdog has won the girls the right to vote! There's no
 telling what the next round will bring. Time to toughen up boys...unless
 you want a female Prime Minister! Ha ha ha!

EDITH ***I cannot rest,***
Nothing is won,
Until every woman is respected
By every son
By everyone.
 K CLUB ROUND 2: Get the job – to be MP!

Ding Ding!

MALE May the best man win.
K CLUB YEAH! (*Edith is hit*) Ooooooooooft!
MALE You don't belong here. It's unnatural.
EDITH ***I'm always in 'the ring' whether you see or hear.
At least if it lands in here I get a cheer.
When he hits, he hits hard
To make you feel
You're too small to spar.***
MALE We won't give up our positions that easily.
EDITH ***I'm a novelty, expected to fail,
But then the moment
When the element
Of surprise kicks in –
It's sublime –
In a cinch we're in a clinch,
And I'm beyond time.
– WHACK – CRACK –***
K CLUB
MALE Is it in the interests of the community that women should sit in parliament
and fill the highest Ministerial appointments? [scoffs] No.

EDITH ***If elected I'll give the kids a better start,
As I firmly believe with my whole heart:
Each child deserves health and dignity,
Each woman deserves the same decency.***
MAN One of her 'emotional' rants!
K CLUB – ***JAB! –***
EDITH ***State kitchens to feed those left destitute,
Child endowment payments – I will give her what she's due,***
MAN She should be grateful for what she's got!
***Childcare so women can work and earn –
If I get your vote this is what you get in return!***
MAN So she says!
K CLUB – ***POW! –***
EDITH ***A vote for me is a vote for a better life,
Whether you be sister, daughter, wife.
They let us have the vote now they have to let us in –
Women of WA you need me to win!***
KCLUB YEAH!
EDITH ***1,2 POW!
Playin' possum don't work, possum.
Lick your wounds,
Lick your mouse,
Edith Cowan's in the house.***

MC ANNOUNCER After another intense battle Edith Cowan has your vote, making her the first female MP in Australia! Tough titties Draper – she just took your job, mate!

EDITH ***I cannot rest,
Nothing is won,
Until every woman is respected
By every son
By everyone.***

K CLUB ROUND 3: Make change – with bills, bills, bills!

Ding Ding!

EDITH ***Peak-a-boo!
I see you!
Mate,
You better bring your sense of humour,
You're gonna become a glass jaw sore loser.***

K CL + E JAB –

EDITH ***– that's for when he –***

K CL + E POW –

EDITH ***– that's for when he –***

K CL + E ***Wham, bam – thank you mam! –***

EDITH ***That's what you meant, buddy.***

K CLUB Ooooooh!

EDITH ***Now I've earned the right to speak, sir, I was elected –
Please curb your beak sir! I will not be interrupted.***

K CLUB JAB –

EDITH ***Your anger's weak and needs to be redirected,
I will not be meek; I seek to be respected.
Marriage or sex should not disqualify women
Practising law nor any job she wants to try, listen!
Her child's birthright is her right, that's my submission
Consider these bills the price of my admission –***

She gets hit hard and everything goes dark into slow mo.

Ensemble create a new image of women marching in protest as we see the men speaking, being interviewed by the press. The men are played by women in drag, lip-synching like the MCs. It's as if Edith has been knocked out and this occurs as a vision for her:

MALE I think it's very hard to deny that there is an underrepresentation of women–

ABBOTT But now, there's an assumption that this is a bad thing.

K CLUB POW! – ***that's what it felt like when he***
SCOMO Listen, we don't want to see women rise only on the basis of others doing worse.

K CLUB BAM! – ***that's what it felt like when he***
ABBOTT What if men are by physiology or temperament, more adapted to exercise authority or to issue command?

K CLUB JAB! – ***that's what it felt like when he***
SCOMO True! And anyway, this is the lucky country. Not far from here, women's marches, even now, are being met with bullets, but not here in this country. This is a triumph of democracy...

K CLUB POW! – ***that's what it felt like when he***
ABBOTT What the housewives of Australia need to understand as they do the ironing...

EDITH ***I will not be lectured by this man.***
I will not. Not now, not ever...

Returning to boxing ring, starting to recover to real time:

MC REF	1!	EDITH	<i>It's been more than 100 years</i>
K CLUB	1,2 up!		<i>How much longer will it take?</i>
MC REF	2!		<i>Violence and abuse of power,</i>
K CLUB	1,2 up!		<i>Lives are still at stake.</i>
MC REF	3! 4! 5!		<i>I cannot rest the battle isn't</i>
K CLUB	1,2 up!		<i>Ever won,</i>
MC REF	6! 7! 8!		<i>Until we're respected...</i>
K CLUB	1,2 up!		<i>By every son, everyone.</i>
K CLUB	1,2 up!		<i>So, Cowan ain't cowering!</i>
K CLUB	<i>Cowan ain't cowering.</i>		
MC REF	9!		<i>Cowan ain't cowering.</i>
K CLUB	<i>Cowan ain't cowering.</i>		

EDITH (Getting up) ***Gotta roll with the punches***
Here we go!

MC MAN This bill will cut solicitors and barristers from their jobs.

EDITH Women won't get anywhere while men keep them out.

MAN Surely you do not want to bring women down to the level of men?

EDITH No. I want to raise men to the level of women.

MAN Do not rush in where angels fear to tread.

EDITH Women are very desirous of being placed on absolutely equal terms with men. We ask for nothing more nor less than that.

EDITH ***When you see them looking that way,
Take your chance, give em a –
Hay! maker.***

MC pops up, interrupting

MC Don't mind if I do!

We see the wind up of the punch and just before impact, blackout. We hear Edith fall to the ground.

Signage indicates audience should applaud

Scene 7

Backstage. Ensemble hover around Edith, there is quiet, sharp commotion and she is seen in the shadows being carried off. New Woman sees a little of what's going on, but it's hard for her to make it out. There is an ASM the NW talks to. NW is wearing a skimpy costume.

NW What happened?

ASM clears New Woman away

ASM You're going to need to move –

NW What's going on?

ASM Careful, behind you!

NW is moved out of the way by Truth as a large set piece comes through.

TRUTH It's not safe back here on your own.

NW I'm waiting for Edith.

TRUTH Where did you get that costume?

NW I was told to wear it. For my act. I'm singing a song. Well, sort of –

TRUTH I see.

NW They said I had to.

TRUTH I see.

NW What? Do I look... fat?

TRUTH I don't care about your size and nor should you. You ought to be grateful for all the space God gave you in this body.

NW Where is Edith? Isn't her act over now?

TRUTH I assume you haven't seen Inez for a while? And Susan?

NW No...?

TRUTH Time is running out.

NW I know, I should practice.

TRUTH You need to be very careful with your act, otherwise –

They hear a thumping coming from the other side of a door that goes into the backstage trapdoors and "let me out" faintly heard. Truth goes to it and opens it carefully and Suzi B bursts out. Her hair is messed up and she is flushed, lightheaded and hobbles out.

TRUTH Susan! What in God's name?

NW Are you ok, Suzi B?

TRUTH What happened to you?

NW People have been looking for you.

SUZI B What are we up to? I need to get back on for Inez –

TRUTH It's too late for that. What happened?

SUZI B The curtains, in the trapdoor tunnel.... *[recovering]* Smothering is definitely my least favourite.

NW Who did this to you?

TRUTH Come then, let's sit you down.

SUZI B I will be fine.

She tries to take a step and almost falls again

SUZI B Argh!

TRUTH You need to rest.

SUZI B It's just a twisted ankle.

TRUTH You can't walk.

NW Truth, I need my phone, I'm calling the police –

TRUTH They can't help you.

Drawing the NW close

TRUTH ***Weapon of choice***
+SUZI B ***You need your weapon of choice.***

NW I think we need more than the prong thing right now.

SUZI B The two-pronged attack is my weapon. You must know what yours is.

TRUTH Everything we're telling you is for your own safety.

SUZI B And ours.

Em enters hurriedly

EM Suzi B, Truth you're ok.

TRUTH Susan's been better.

SUZI B I'm fine.

Susan goes to stand but the pain stops her in her tracks

EM You got done too.

NW I think we should get out of here.

TRUTH It doesn't matter where you are.

EM How are you going to do the song after interval, love?

NW Never mind interval!

SUZI B I'll find a cane. There's bound to be one of those lying around.

NW Let's go, let's get you to a doctor.

TRUTH We can't walk out on a job half done.

NW She's not walking anywhere!

EM But you are...

TRUTH Yes...

NW What? Why are you looking at me like that?

EM Do you think you can learn a few steps during the interval? It's dead simple.

NW No, no, I don't want to be involved anymore –

TRUTH It's too late for that.

NW I'm not a dancer and this place is nuts.

SUZI B He won't let you leave.

NW No one can keep me here. I paid for a ticket!

SUZI B Go over to that door. Go on, try it.

NW goes to the door. She can't open it.

NW I'm a free citizen, this is illegal. There are laws against this.

TRUTH Laws don't stop people doing bad things.

EM You can put an end to all this, once and for all.

SUZI B She's right. But you'll need to go on stage.

NW How can I go on stage with all this going on?

EM As long as you play along, do the girly stuff he wants, you'll be safe.

SUZI B I've got a plan: I'll sing offstage, and you stand in for me. Then, at some point there will be an opportunity to *end* things...

EM Yes, yes, that could work!

SUZI B After the song is over, the MC will come over and congratulate you for stepping in. He'll get nice and close, and you just go along with it. Then, when you've got him... (*She gestures to kill him*)

NW WHAT?

S+T+E *SHHHHHHH!!!*

SUZI B It's the only way to save us and yourself.

TRUTH Unfortunately, I think she's right.

NW I'll go to jail!

EM Keep a lid on it! (*Gestures that they are being watched*). It will be part of the performance.

TRUTH That's what people think when it's one of us.

Em pulls her close

EM ***No time to waste!***
+T ***It's time for you to face it...***
E+T+S ***Try out your weapon of choice.***

EM We will be there to help you, love.

SUZI B You can be prey. Or predator. (*Susie does the pincer gesture*)

Cross to onstage

MC ...but if you ask me, what did she expect going out dressed like that! Now folks it's time to stretch your legs and get a refill from the kegs! I must say the cocktails go really well with the second half. That's right ladies and gentlemen, we're just getting started, plenty more excitement and lethally fun acts to come right after a short neck break. I mean break. Fellas, I'll see you at the bar. And you, I'll see you out the back and we can get... dangerous... (*winks*). What do you say? (*to audience*) Can't you see I'm busy? Get out of here you bunch of alcoholics. What's a guy got to do to get a root around here?

Signage says interval and house lights come up

ACT 2

Scene 1

Onstage

Drum roll. In front of a classic red curtain, an MC appears as we saw at the opening of the show.

Signage indicates audience should applaud

MC Ladies and gentlemen, how THRILLED I am to welcome you back to the GREATEST show in the world! It has only been twenty minutes, but I bet it felt like one hundred years for the ladies who just spent the entire interval waiting in line for the bathroom.

Signage indicates audience should laugh.

(The actor mouths the ‘correct’ word)

Folks, the best axe is yet to come. *(actor as MC looks confused and tries again)* Best act. The best act is yet to come! I cannot wait for you to see what ghost is in store *(again, actor as MC looks confused, tries again)*. What... the host – that’s me! – what the HOST has in store. But first, I need to check: are you having fun?

Signage indicates audience should cheer

I can’t hear you...

Signage indicates audience should cheer louder

At least pretend you’re enjoying yourself. Think of how much money you’ve spent on the tickets, the dinner, the parking, the babysitter, the snacks for the babysitter – it cost you an arm and a leg! Not literally... no... So, are you having fun?

Signage indicates audience should shout.

That’s more like it! I’m not just saying it, you’re the best audience we’ve ever had! The best!

Signage indicates audience should applaud.

Now, it’s time to get real. As sometimes happens in the magical place that is the live theatre, things go wrong. People get hurt. Plans change. A few of our suffragist starlets have taken an early bow tonight.

Signage indicates audience should sound disappointed

I know, I know. But have I got a treat for you! That little lady of yours – that's right, the New Woman – is going to *slay* your new favourite, naughty little song – not literally, of course... Put your hands together – or should that be, put your hands up! – for The F Word!

Signage indicates audience should applaud

The 'F' Word

NW will mime Suzi B's sung parts as she sings offstage.

EM	<i>It's the word that stops traffic – Declares you're empathic</i>
ALL	<i>To women.</i>
SUZI B	<i>Many ways to define it But one thing underlines it</i>
ALL	<i>For women:</i>
TRUTH	<i>Rejection of the system that</i>
ALL	<i>excludes us,</i>
TRUTH	<i>Objection to the structures that</i>
ALL	<i>deny us!</i>
	<i>Politically provocative, A challenge to the normative Behaviours that objectify Oppress or misidentify.</i>
EM	<i>Hear our voices! We want equal choices!</i>
ALL	<i>Regardless of gender identity, Background, ability, ethnicity, Even if you've never heard of "patriarchy", You have to agree, The F word is just about equality!</i>
	<i>The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word</i>
	<i>But only say it when you mean it – Say, say, say it when you mean it, Mean it!</i>
TRUTH	
ALL	<i>Only say it when you mean it – Say, say, say it when you mean it, Mean it!</i>
TRUTH	

SUZI B *Let's not confuse it*
 E+T *With sexuality,*
 SUZI B *Or with misandry.*
 SUZI B *Let's not confuse it*
 E+T *With a particular hair style –*
 E+T *It's much more versatile!*
 ALL *Please don't use it as a put down*
 TRUTH *Cause it don't make sense –*
 ALL *Join the cause and help your sister*
 Help to recompense.

EM *Hear our voices!*
 ALL *We want equal choices!*

Regardless of gender identity,
Background, ability, ethnicity,
Even if you've never heard of "patriarchy",
You have to agree,
The F word is just about equality!

The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word (F word)
The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word (F word)
The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word (F word)

TRUTH *Now people let's get a few things straight:*
This is not about fellas, this is not man-hate.
Feminists come in all shapes and sizes;
(Whether) gay, straight, pan or bi – the system marginalises –
But let's not underestimate different concerns,
Different bodies, different privileges – we all need our turn.
And another thing to catch up people not yet woke:
"Women" includes transgender folk!
And another thing I must declare outright:
"Woman" isn't shorthand for a lady who's white!

EM *"Deeds not words!" –*
 All my sisters say...
 +SUZI B *"Deeds not words!"*
 EM *Do you hear us?*
 ALL *"Deeds not words"*
 EM *Make some noise!*
 ALL *"Deeds not words"*
 ALL *Regardless of gender identity,*
 Background, ability, ethnicity,
 Even if you've never heard of "patriarchy",
 You have to agree,

The F word is just about equality!

***The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word
The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word
The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word
The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word
The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word
The eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh- F word
Feminism!***

Signage indicates audience should applaud

MC What did I tell you, when someone's got it, they've got it, and that little lady has got *it*! Who knew she had that in her!

Signage indicates audience should applaud. MC goes to the NW and puts his arm around her

It's the best part of my job, discovering new talent! The hardest part is making room for them all, I'm just surrounded by so many *drop-dead* gorgeous ladies!

We hear Suzi B scream from in the wings. Truth and Em look at each other, then to the NW.

But it's like I always say, when there's a will, there's a way. [*threatening*]
It's time for you two to go... [*light*] and get ready for your next act! Let's hear it for Truth and Em – aren't they to *die* for?

The NW clutches a weapon concealed in her costume. The MC walks the NW downstage

MC And you, New Woman, show us that fabulous little 1,2 step again.

She complies. We now have view of both the backstage and onstage worlds

What a good sport! Ladies and gentlemen...

Truth and Em have been looking for Suzi B. They find a cane and an empty chair.

TRUTH Susan's gone.

MC ...a star is born!

EM Bastard!

Signage indicates the audience should cheer. It's as if the NW is suddenly under a spell, receiving the energy and warmth from the audience

MC Tell us, little lady, what would be your dream stage role?

NW My dream role? Oh gosh, I've never thought about that.

TRUTH He's getting to her.

Truth and Em are trying to get her attention to 'do it' without the MC noticing. She is drinking the stage time in, getting giggly and overwhelmed.

EM What you doing, love?

MC Come on, every young girl has stood in front of the mirror and dreamt of a life where she gets to be the star. Folks, I think she needs a little encouragement.

Signage indicates audience should applaud

NW Oh, if I could just be on the stage again, I'll take any role!

TRUTH God damn it!

EM Shit awful bastard!

MC Of course you would.

EM We're as good as done.

MC I hear there are some pretty big showbiz movers and shakers in the audience tonight, so let's hope you get your wish, little lady. But just remember – I discovered her first!

TRUTH I'll get her back.

MC When you've got it, flaunt it!

EM Truth...

MC That's what I always say, little lady!

EM ...this one is over.

MC How about it folks, shall we get her out here again for an encore?
Signage indicates the audience should cheer

MC The people have spoken!

TRUTH How are you giving up so easily?

EM There is nothing easy about it. I can't bear it.

MC Give us that little swirl again.

TRUTH Then we have very different ideas about what one can bear.

MC laughs and encourages her to keep going

EM But we've been here before, haven't we?

MC Would you look at that!

TRUTH You white girls might be able to wait another one hundred years, but we cannot.

EM We know it's useless trying to get her to care or listen if she isn't ready.

MC Beautiful! One more time!

TRUTH What happened to your fire? This is our last chance and –

EM Truth! Love, you're a genius.

MC At this rate you'll have your own show by next week. Now, run along little lady, we'll see you again soon.

EM Time for a little smoke. For old time's sake.

Have you got a lighter?

Truth hands her a lighter.

TRUTH I know that look. Are you sure?

EM Dead sure. We're going home like shooting stars.

NW comes offstage and we now focus on the backstage area

NW I wish I could stay out there forever!

EM That feeling can get addictive, love.

TRUTH You ought to be more careful with what you wish for.

Em looks at Truth and leaves.

NW Sorry, I couldn't find the right moment to... you know... There was so much going on –

TRUTH Never mind, there's still one more chance. Have you practised your act yet?

NW No.

TRUTH Would you like to run through it, and I can give you some pointers? If you get it right, you'll be in a good position to... you know (*gestures 'kill him'*)...

NW Right, yes. You mean right now?

TRUTH You don't have long.

NW Sure.

Paradox

She grabs her (gimmicky) hat and props. This number is performed like a pop song in concert. The choreography is objectifying (the body is on display, body is spectacle).

NW ***Wear less.
Wear more.
What a prude...
What a whore.
What a bore.
How obscene...
Make him beg.
Don't be mean.***

***She's gone too far.
She hasn't gone far enough.
Try a bit harder...
But don't be a try-hard, darling!***

***Be natural.
Be you!
Don't get fat...
(Like you know who)
"I'm worried about you –
Eat more."
Men like curves,***

But less is more.

***She's going too far.
She hasn't gone far enough –***

TRUTH Ok.

NW What?

TRUTH What is this about?

NW Uh... being a woman?

TRUTH What are you trying to say about being a woman?

NW I'm not actually singing it. Look, I'm trying to help but this whole situation is really messed up.

TRUTH The best thing you can do right now is let the song come from you and what you really think.

NW Well, this is me and this is what I think. I told you I wasn't the right person.

TRUTH Let's take it from the top again.

NW starts the number again and we cross to the onstage world

Scene 2

Puppeteer is played by an MC. He has a large case containing Em, who has been made to look like a ventriloquist doll.

Signage indicates audience should applaud.

PUPPETEER How are we doing ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls?

DOLL from inside suitcase can be heard

EM DOLL And gender non-conforming folks.

PUPPETEER Speaking of not conforming –

EM DOLL Non-conforming!

PUPPETEER Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls –

EM DOLL And? And? –

PUPPETEER I think it's time for you to meet my favourite gal pal, my best lady friend, Dolly!

EM DOLL I have a proper name! –

PUPPETEER Of course you do, Dolly.

EM DOLL Emmeline.

PUPPETEER (*scoffs*) Emmeline – where did you pick up a name like that?

EM DOLL Stop stalling and let me out!

PUPPETEER Uh-uh Dolly, only if you behave.

EM DOLL Of course I'll behave!

PUPPETEER (*warning*) Dolly...

EM DOLL (*she sighs. Then, girly*) I promise, papa.

PUPPETEER That's more like it. Here she is, the one and only: Dolly!

Puppeteer opens suitcase. EM DOLL gasps for air. Signage indicates audience should applaud.

EM DOLL Finally, I have been released from prison!

PUPPETEER Dolly, you're so dramatic.

EM DOLL Dramatic? I've been in solitary confinement.

Signage indicates audience should laugh

PUPPETEER Now Dolly, that's the case you came in. That's where you belong.

EM DOLL I wish, sir, that you could put yourself into the place of women for a moment before you decide where we belong.

Signage indicates audience should laugh

PUPPETEER Stop being a nuisance or you're going back in the case!

EM DOLL You call that being a nuisance? So sensitive... And they say women are the emotional ones!

PUPPETEER I'll give you something to be emotional about...

EM DOLL Hear that? He's threatening to dip back into the Middle Ages to repress a woman with a sense of self-worth. Will you let him do that to me?

Signage indicates audience should boo

PUPPETEER Oh come on, it was just a joke. Why must you be such a killjoy?

EM DOLL Whose joy am I killing? Certainly not theirs.

Signage indicates audience should laugh

PUPPETEER You always have to take it one step too far, don't you?

EM DOLL Well, we women, because we are women, must do far more than the men ever did.

Signage indicates audience should laugh. The puppeteer has had enough and goes over to the sign instructing the audience what to do.

PUPPETEER Time to get on with the show.

He unplugs it or destroys it, so it no longer works

Maestro, if you please!

He puts her into position on his lap and his hand up her dress (to control her as a puppet) – she shrieks.

Like A Lady

PUPPETEER ***I've found the perfect one.
Beautiful, quiet, but lots of fun.
Everything is the way it should be,
For she learnt these things just for me...***

He will make her body do all these things and he will sing for her (she lip-syncs), but she will immediately do the reverse when he's not looking.

Watch how she "sits"...

Like a lady

DOLLY *Like a lady.*

MC *Knees together,
Neck is long,
Ankles crossed –
Well, not for long! (he winks, she kicks him)
Watch how she “smiles”...
Like a lady.*

DOLLY
MC *Like a lady.
Gums well covered,
Teeth are white,
Soft, plump lips –
She doesn’t bite! (she bites)*

DOLLY
MC *Watch how she bends...
Like a lady.
Like a lady.
Easily fits in any space, (she makes herself big)
Flexible, but
Tight in the right place. (she makes a fist as if to punch)
Hear how she “thinks”
.... (the melody of “like a lady” plays)
She has no need,
For she’s content.
Provided for,
For I’m a gent. (she rolls her eyes)
She sits!
She smiles!
She bends!
Oh, she’s the perfect doll!*

PUPPETEER Dolly, what do you say we give these folks a couple of jokes?

EM DOLL Your jokes or mine?

PUPPETEER What do you call a woman who talks back to her husband in the living room?

EM DOLL A human being asserting her right to be taken seriously in the living room.

PUPPETEER You’d call her: missing from the kitchen!

Ba dum ching

Puppeteer laughs heartily, Em rolls her eyes

PUPPETEER What do you call a woman protesting on the street?

EM DOLL A woman who wants to make this world a much better place for men and women than it is today.

PUPPETEER You'd call her: sorry! Or she will be! Ha ha ha!

Ba dum ching

EM DOLL I've got one! You have two little babies, both very, very hungry. One is patient, the other is not. The patient baby waits and waits and waits. Why has she not been fed? ...Because she didn't make enough noise!

PUPPETEER Back in the case with you –

EM DOLL No man was ever removed for asking a question.

PUPPETEER These people just want a good time. You're ruining their evening – you're being difficult on purpose with your *politics*!

EM DOLL You cannot make omelettes without breaking eggs.

PUPPETEER You are not funny.

EM DOLL They say women have no sense of humour –

PUPPETEER Time for some real comedy!

Puppeteer goes off to get a cream pie.

EM DOLL But if it were not so serious, what is being done by men *would* create a sense of humour in women.

MC Puppeteer returns with a trolley of pies and a couple of MCs hold Em, while she struggles and protests.

PUPPETEER You need some sweetening up Dolly.

The Puppeteer pushes a cream pie into her face and laughs maniacally. She struggles, suffocating.

PUPPETEER ***Watch how she fights...***

Like a lady!

This is for

Your own good.

Be a good girl,

Just like you should!

Music continues. The other MCs will now attach Em to a spinning wheel, her wrists and ankles strapped to the wheel. She will protest.

PUPPETEER For my next trick, I will translate what Dolly is *really* saying while she goes round and round in circles.

MC spins the wheel and will continuously throw pies at Em's face.

PUPPETEER (*badly providing Dolly's voice*) I'm so hungry for your cream, nom, nom, nom...

EM DOLL We are going to win!

PUPPETEER ...mmmm give it to me!

EM DOLL No matter how we find ourselves imprisoned!

PUPPETEER ...You can put your cream in my pie any day.

EM DOLL You know little what women are.

Making eating noises, with sexual inflections. Wheel slows. She is exhausted and very dizzy.

PUPPETEER (*licks some pie off her face*) Delicious!

MCs release her, they leave her in a dizzy heap, trying to regain her bearings.

PUPPETEER **Hear how she “thinks”...**

The melody of “like a lady” plays. Puppeteer is licking his fingers that have pie on them, as if he has just enjoyed a delicious meal.

***She has no need,
For she's content.
Provided for,
For I'm a gent.
She sits!
She smiles!
She bends!
Oh, she's the perfect –***

Em uses the lighter she obtained from Truth and sets his tie on fire

MC AHHHHHHHHH!

MC Puppeteer runs around panicking and leaves the stage whilst EM gives this speech:

EM Women, hear me! You need to make more noise! If the world is ever to change, we need to be more obtrusive, more aggressive or we will be ignored for another one hundred years. Stamp your feet! 1,2 stamp! 1,2 stamp. This is our last chance! 1,2 stamp!

Lights go out. MC returns and opens the case Em came in.

MC It's time for a little magic.

EM Don't stop! 1,2 stamp, 1,2 stamp!

MC Abra-cadabra!

MC rounds her up, with the help of other MCs, guiding her until she ends up in the case.

EM Don't stop! 1,2 stamp!

The case is quickly shut and locked, but her head, feet and hands are visible.

MC Let's see how well those legs still stamp when they are given the opportunity to run free... that's right, for my next trick – a crowd favourite – it's time to saw this woman in half!

EM This is not part of the act! Help me, make noise!

He puts a gag in her mouth

MC Oh Em, you're so dramatic! It's just a show. Girls will be girls!

She still tries to scream

Perhaps I should see if Truth will join us, and we can play a bit of mix and match? Or the New Woman? A sort of...ménage a trois?

She stops

Keep it simple then? I agree.

He pulls presents a giant saw

Ladies and gentlemen, prepare to be amazed!

Watch how she...

He saws through the box and Em screams for a bit then stops.

Like a lady...

He finishes sawing through and then separates the two halves

***Splits in half so magically,
Double the fun
But quite bloody...***

He spins the two halves

***She spins!
She smiles!
She glides!
Oh, she's the perfect doll!***

Backstage world takes focus now

Scene 3

Backstage

NW I don't like this dress.

TRUTH Focus on what matters. You are our last chance.

NW Why does it have to be so serious and meaningful if I'm just using it to...
you know (*does the 'kill him' gesture*)?

TRUTH Because you never know who is listening, and whose life you might
change.

NW How do I know this isn't all an act? Right now. You and me and all the
'dangerous' stuff that has supposedly happened?

TRUTH What difference would it make?

NW Is any of this even real?

TRUTH Does it feel real?

NW You know, the only person who actually helped me or gave me any clear
information is the one I'm supposed to k-

TRUTH SHHHH! If he's your idea of a person then we really are doomed.

NW If all of you couldn't get rid of the MC and you've been trying so hard for so long, how the hell am I going to out-manoeuvre this guy?

TRUTH Because you've got the benefit of our wisdom.

NW What wisdom is that? To be heard as a woman you have to trick men into listening with your legs, like Inez, even though they can attack you if they don't like what you stand for. Or the best you can do is prove the game is rigged. Or if you manage to get in the ring and win the game, it doesn't matter, it won't matter, you won't be listened to or respected or remembered in the end. Even if your face is on money. And then what tactics are left? Burning things down?

TRUTH Those women put themselves in danger for everyone. For you.

NW I never asked them to.

TRUTH Well it happened, so are you going to face it? Those are stories we can't change now, we've already lived them, mistakes and all. Your time is rising but the way I see it, you're terrified to meet it. Scared about what you might become. Scared to try something, to actually do something, however imperfect. Scared that you might actually be powerful.

NW I know I'm not powerful –

TRUTH – Scared about how angry you might be when you realise all the lies you were fed your whole life. How did you ever believe all that? Oh lord, the burn of hot anger will sting –

NW I don't need this.

She goes to leave

TRUTH It's got nothing to do with this place.

NW Leave me alone.

TRUTH The past is never over —

NW Truth, I'm gonna let you in on a little show biz secret: no one cares. You can say whatever you want, you can try and make it all mean something, but at the end of the day this is about fun. Remember fun? Remember good old-fashioned entertainment?

NW goes to leave

TRUTH Does Jim Crow mean anything to you?

The name stops the NW

You ever heard of the blackface act?

A type of act, big on the Vaudeville circuit, really big in the 19th century. An abominable, caricature performance of the African American, by the white American. After all that capturing, trafficking, enslaving, murdering and raping, the white American needed a way to unwind, relax, have some 'fun'. So, he slapped on thick black grease paint and a stupid voice, flopped about, called it race, and had a good old belly laugh. And it was a hoot for the white folks. They loved it. Some still do.

Now, Jump Jim Crow was a blackface act that was so successful with white audiences, that the racial segregation laws in the United States that murdered African Americans were known as Jim Crow laws. That demeaning, nasty, cheap, ugly business was so popular, so successful with white audiences, that character, that bit of 'good old-fashioned entertainment' became the namesake for those laws. Laws that killed. Laws that boiled up hate, that dehumanised. That suffocate. Laws that reverberate in all of us today: women, children, trans people, men, no matter the colour. We all still feel Jim Crow, jumping, jittering in the shadows. We *all* feel him – differently though, very differently. But make no mistake: we all feel him.

Some feel his claws growing from deep in their nail beds. Some his rattling hollow bones. Some dance his dance, or wear his hat, or stamp his feet, or punch with his fist. Some have to endure his presence every day, some have to watch themselves refracted back through him, feel themselves splintered into millions of jagged shards that cannot be contained, while some continue to laugh. And some just watch.

She removes her costume and lets her hair out

I'm done with 'good old-fashioned entertainment'.

NW I don't see what any of that has to do with me.

Truth leaves and we transition to the onstage world

Scene 4

MC She is our goddess of exotic, she's powerful and hypnotic, ready with the swords to swallow and smiles to follow – oh those hips don't lie – it's the titillating, the dream-making... all singing, all dancing Sojourner Truth!

Black Face

Truth is in a simple outfit with no obvious make up or special hair style: just herself, honest and present.

MC Well, well, forgot something?

TRUTH (to audience) It's time for you to know the truth.

MC (*leaving*) This will cost you.

TRUTH I'll pay it.

*1,2 too many times,
Tried to keep the peace,
Kept my mouth shut,
Curved my lips upward.
I won't use the word smile –
An empty performance
To keep them happy for a while.*

*1,2 too many times,
Did I acquiesce,
And just say "yes sir", "yes ma'am",
Rather than feel the rod,
Or a swift hand land
On my face,
Or some other place.*

*1,2 too many years
It did take to know
My own true voice,
And the voice of God above.
The voice that says
By your being alive
You are worthy of love.*

*So no paint on this skin.
A costume I don't wear.
I am here and I say no,
It's not my problem
If you cannot bear
A real face,
A black woman's face.*

*1,2 too many promises
Did that captor make:*

***"I'll let you go
If the wool is spun,
And the fields are sown –
Then your freedom's won."
I believed him.***

***But "1 hand let you down,
did not work" he said,
"You did not perform after all."
So I could not go,
Could not own myself,
"Only got yourself
To blame."***

***1,2 too many years
It did take to know
My own true voice,
And the voice of God in me.
The voice that says
By your being alive
You were born to be free:
Isabella.***

***1,2 things that I owned
I grabbed, and my youngest babe.
At the break of day
I walked out and claimed
My rightful place!
A real smile on my face,
A free black woman's face!***

***So no paint on this skin.
A costume I don't wear.
I say no and I'll say it again –
It's not my problem
If you cannot bear
I've a human place,
A black woman's place.***

***1,2 so many times,
I would listen as the
White woman spoke
Of equality.
A question arose,
Aren't I woman?
Doesn't that include me?***

*Look at my arm –
How it has worked,
And look at what it can do.
Look at my guts –
They ate as much as any man,
And bore the lash too.
Look at my mouth –
It cried for my mother
When my babies were sold.
I am a woman's rights!
You heard me right!*

*All of me is real.
A human heart inside.
If I paint my face,
Do a song and dance,
You get to set me aside.
Like my captor set me aside.
Like the white woman set me aside.
So I won't behave,
I will not hide,
I'll no longer nod,
And obey.
No slave!
No smile!
No song and dance!
1,2 no! – no more!
1,2 no! – no more!*

*We are who we are,
We were born to be free,
That includes all of you,
And that includes me!*

*So, I will not paint a mask
That is expected of me.
I will not sing and dance
An identity
That you want to see me be.
I deserve complexity.
I will not repeat that history.
I will bare, proudly,
This real face,
This black woman's face.*

MC (*slow clap*) Nice try. It was cute. Earnest.

TRUTH I will not allow my life's light to be determined by the darkness. I'm going home like a shooting star.

Truth faces him, strong and tall. He walks towards her. Blackout. We hear a body fall to the ground.

Scene 5

Backstage. The NW is looking for a way out. She sees a door ajar and goes through. The door closes behind her. She is trying to find her way and panics when she realises she is trapped.

We hear heavy, sinister breathing

NW Who is that?

Breathing sound continues

NW Stop it. Let me out!

Suddenly the MC appears in front of her

MC1 Going somewhere?

NW AH!

From behind MC2 appears

MC2 Shhh!

NW Don't you shush me. I want out.

MC1 But your act!

MC2 Your dream!

NW Dreams change. Let me out.

MC1 Now, now, little lady. I understand. You're scared.

MC2 (*A la Leading Player in Pippin*) You look frenzied...

MC1 You look frazzled...

MC2 But just remember you've got something those suffragists don't have –

MC1 or had –

NW What do you mean, had? What have you done to them?

MC2 The audience loves you!

MC1 You and your...

MC1+2 TALENT.

NW I don't want to perform anymore.

MC1 But you're a natural.

NW I don't want to be in this play.

MC1+2 Awwwww...

MC1 Tell me, kiddo, what's eating you?

MC2 Is it stage fright?

MC1 Boo!

NW I want to go home. I want to go back.

MCs You can't.

NW No, *you* can't, you can't do this –

MC1+2 It's just you and me and... (*repeating in canon until NW interrupts*)

NW Where are they?

MCs Who?

NW Edith and Inez and Suzi B and –

MC1 Oh, my girls. They're so cute.

MC2 They always think they're in charge.

MC1 They think because they get up on stage and say what they want, they have some real power.

MCs Hahahahahaha...

MC2 And maybe they have a little bit, sometimes, when that's what the people want to see.

MC1 When it works for me.

MC2 When it's in fashion!

MC2 But then we get to this bit of the play, and it always seems to come as a disappointing surprise for them.

MC3 pops up

MC3 Surprise!

NW Where are they?

MC3 I'm gonna let you in on a secret, little lady...

MC2 You're in a machine –

MCs And I pull the strings.

MC3 The sooner you understand that, the sooner you can get back to the real stuff...

MCs Fun! Remember fun? Yay!

The MCs all applaud quickly, enthusiastically.

NW What happened to them?

MC2 Let me put it this way:

MC1 When people try to play a role that's not theirs to play, someone needs to...

MC3+2 Restore equilibrium.

MC1 Well put.

MC3+2 Thank you.

NW What did you do?

MC1 It's a dog-eat-dog world.

MC2 Sacrifices have to be made –

MC3 To make room for the new –

NW Did you hurt them?

MC1 It wasn't me.

MC2 It was you.

NW Me? I didn't do anything!

MCs Exactly.

MC3 You're...

MCs Dangerous...

MC2 Someone needs to stop you before it's too late...

The space opens up and mirrors start to appear, circling the NW.

NW Let me out! Someone help!

The mirrors create the illusion there are more MCs than there really are. They will approach her, and she will try to fight them off, but will never succeed hitting them because they disappear too quickly, pre-empting her every move.

NW You can't kill me. I paid for a ticket, people saw me, people know I'm here. You'll never get away with it –

MC2 Women get killed every day. Always have. Always will.

MC1 It's spectacle.

MC3 It's great for business.

NW You're sick.

MCs (*al la West Side Story, Gee Officer Krupke*) Sick! Sick! We're all sick, sick, sick –

NW Help me! Help! Why are you all just watching?

Signage indicates audience should applaud

MC1 Beautiful! So heartfelt and honest. What a performance!

NW You can't let him do this to me!

Signage indicates audience should applaud

MC2 What a fine actress!

NW He'll kill me like he killed the others!

MC1 So authentic! So moving!

MC3 Listen little lady, they have their own problems.

MC1 They want good old-fashioned entertainment...

NW No, that's not – that's –

MCs That's show business!

Signage is flashing brightly, fervently, urging the audience to applaud

MC1 Come on you ungrateful rats, she's more talented than your left nipple!
Show your appreciation! She's here to entertain YOU! Greedy, hungry,
ravenous, always-consuming –

Sounds of applause fill the space

MC1 New Woman. If you want to survive...

MCs Join us.

Paradox (Reprise)

The mirrors are gone and there are more MCs – as many as possible, perhaps even some on connected puppets. They start to box the NW in through a chorus line of moving formations and kicks, with automated precision. In the centre of it all, they start to dress the NW who struggles against being transformed into an MC with the top hat, moustache etc.

NW ***It's gone too far!***

ALL (MCs) ***It hasn't gone far enough!***

NW ***Try a bit harder...***

MC1 Don't you want to finally be heard?

MC2 Don't you want to finally be seen?

MC3 Don't you want to finally have some –

MCs Real power?

MC1 It's your dream role!

MCs ME!

She has transformed into an MC. The NW is now leading the chorus of MCs

NW ***Be practical.
Be you.
Let him win –
You know who...
It's sad but true,
Behind closed doors...
If you fight the fight
He'll pluck out your claws!
But I've come too far!
You haven't gone far enough.***

ALL ***You haven't gone far enough.***

NW ***It's not just a performance
It's the end of the line...***

They form a classic chorus (kick) line

ALL	<i>You haven't gone far enough. You haven't gone far enough. You haven't gone far enough. You haven't gone far enough. You haven't gone far enough. You haven't gone far enough. You haven't gone far enough.</i>	NW	<i>This is the end lady. Don't let it get to you. But if you don't like it, Say you don't like it? I know I don't like it. Nobody likes it! What are you gonna do? What would the suffragists do?</i>
-----	--	----	--

NW breaks ranks. She removes the MC pants and extends her leg

NW ***Wear less.
What for? (MCs see the leg and are drawn to it)
Get 'em to lean in...
For more!***

NW kicks a few of the closest MCs, opens the trapdoor for at least one to roll into while singing:

***Hey! You there give our rights a voice,
Hey! We deserve an equal choice!***

This summons Inez, who pops up out of trapdoor to join NW in the fight

INEZ How long must women wait for liberty?

**NW+INEZ *Gotta work smarter lady,
NW Use your brains now lady...***

Inez and NW do a slapstick push to get rid of a few more MCs that approach whilst NW sings:

***Who could I be, we be?
If all women could be persons?
If all persons could be persons?***

Those MCs are gone, and Suzi B appears to join the fight

SUZI B The only question left to be settled now is: are women persons?

**NW+SUZI *Gotta get tougher, lady,
NW Time to be strong lady.***

Inez and Suzi B help the NW spar with an attacking MC

**NW *To be on absolutely
Equal terms with men –
Neither more nor less than that!***

NW defeats the MC with a KO who then rolls away and Edith enters to join the others

EDITH Women are very desirous of being placed on absolutely equal terms with men. We ask for neither more nor less than that!

**NW+EDITH *Time to be loud, lady,
NW So you can't be ignored, lady.***

NW stamps and the suffragists echo. Then NW sings:

**NW *Make some noise,
And make this world
Better than it is today!***

They surround an MC

NW 1,2 stamp! 1,2 stamp!

They make so much noise with their feet, then one of the suffragists gives NW a lighter. She flashes it and the MC runs away. Emmeline appears.

EM We want to have this power in order that we may try to make this world a much better place for men and women than it is today.

There is one final MC to overcome. The suffragists are in support of the NW, who approaches the MC

NW+EM ***Time to get brave now, lady***
NW ***Believe in yourself, lady***

They form a chorus line and approach the MC, unified, strong, like a wall of power

NW ***Because I'm a woman,
She's a woman
We are all powerful women, aren't we?***

The MC takes himself off. Truth appears

TRUTH I am a woman's rights.

The suffragists now cover the NW in a circular formation, as she changes into a new costume

ALL ***Wear less
What for?
Gotta work smarter, lady! (lady)
Gotta get tougher, lady! (lady)
Time to be loud now, lady! (lady)
Time to get brave now, lady! (lady)
You got this! You got this! (oooooh)
You got this far!***

The NW is revealed in a dazzling costume that matches the suffragists

So go too far!

Choreography now suggests they own the space

***You can't go far enough! (You got this, you got this!)
You can't go far enough! (You got this, you got this!)
You can't go far enough! (You got this, you got this!)
You can't go far enough!***

Scene 6

The song finishes. They hold their final positions, breathing in the feeling of freedom

NW This is it! This is what we've been trying to – you've been trying to reach –

SUZI B Yes.

EDITH A new ending.

TRUTH A new beginning.

They breathe in the moment

NW But... he isn't really gone, is he?

EM No.

NW Will he ever be gone?

INEZ I don't think so.

NW When will he come back?

SUZI B That's not the right question.

TRUTH He's not a person.

EDITH It's a role.

NW So... we can refuse to play it. Can't we?

TRUTH Wherever there is someone seeking control, someone who is greedy, someone who is forceful or undermining, someone exploiting another, someone exploiting the planet – the MC makes an appearance.

NW ***Weapon of choice***
We need a weapon of choice...

Dangerous (Finale)

NW ***We've used looks to lure.***
Wit to win.
Gotten so good at the game.
Force to frighten,
Truth to enlighten,

But too much remains the same.

***In this day and age
Where shame,
Leads many to blame
Their body as a failure.
In this day and age
Where pain,
Is passed on again and again,
Hurting many along the way.
We need a weapon so dangerous
It cuts the thickest chain.
This weapon is
Really dangerous...***

SUFFs	<i>Dangerous!</i>
NW	<i>Love your every inch!</i>
SUFFs	<i>Dangerous!</i>
NW	<i>Heal from within.</i>
SUFFs	<i>Dangerous!</i>
NW	<i>Celebrate your gifts. And radically rejoice the skin you're in!</i>
NW	<i>In this day and age Where greed, Tends to be the seed From which motivation grows.</i>
+SUFFs	
NW	<i>In this day and age Where fear, Tends to steer What we say and what we think we know.</i>
+SUFFs	
NW	<i>You need a dangerous weapon To confront the status quo. A really dangerous weapon...</i>
SUFFs	<i>Dangerous!</i>
NW	<i>Live from your heart.</i>
SUFFs	<i>Dangerous!</i>
NW	<i>Be the change you seek.</i>
SUFFs	<i>Dangerous!</i>
NW	<i>Love courageously.</i>
ALL	<i>And do not stop 'till everyone is free!</i>

***NW+EDITH+EM In this day and age
Where violence,
Tends to contaminate silence,***

So creative thoughts can't flow.
 NW+TRUTH+Suzi B *In this day and age*
Where division,
Tends to foster antagonism,
For anyone you don't know.
 NW+INEZ *You need a really dangerous weapon*
To subvert what's been so –
 +ALL *A really dangerous weapon...*

A human pyramid starts to take shape

ALL *Dangerous!*
 INEZ *Stand as tall as you are!*
 ALL *Dangerous!*
 SUZI B *Know from where you speak.*
 ALL *Dangerous!*
 EDITH *Demand respect and dignity.*
 ALL *And do not stop till everyone is free!*
Dangerous!
 NW *Find your allies.*
 ALL *Dangerous!*
 EM *Lean on them when you feel weak.*
 ALL *Dangerous!*
 TRUTH *Lift each other up.*
 ALL *And do not stop 'till everyone is free!*

The suffragists start to ascend the human pyramid

ALL *It can be dangerous out there,*
We've known this from the start,
But don't let that fact infect
Your precious tender heart:
It bears the seed we need
To feel freedom.
The power of one heart is great,
The power of two is more,
But 1 2 limits us to
What we've done and been before.
If 1 and 2 join forces,
Grow bigger than you and me,
1 2 (Inez) pop, (Suzi B) swap, (Edith) pow, (Em) stamp, (Truth) no –
Becomes 1 2 ... 3.

The last climber – the NW – reaches the top. She reaches a glass ceiling. A hammer is passed up to her. Then, she hits it with the hammer until it finally smashes. Once it

smashes, shiny rainbow confetti falls from the ceiling and the pyramid is dismantled bit by bit.

ALL

Dangerous: be a radical lover!
Dangerous: lift each other up!
Dangerous: feel the unstoppable power!
Together we can be free.
A dangerous weapon of choice:
A community.
Together we can change the world!
We will not stop 'til everyone is
Free!

Blackout.

Chapter 4: Writing a Musical with an Intersectional Feminist Orientation

In this chapter I unpack early decision-making processes concerning thematic and conceptual content, dramaturgical structure, character function and key plot and action in the writing of *Dangerous*. Whilst feminist in its orientation and grounded in rigorous thinking and theory, *Dangerous* aims for broad, commercial appeal in a way that is typical for a musical. Its creation has been an exploration of the question: can I create an unapologetically feminist, yet entertaining musical that could be enjoyed by the same sorts of audiences who are likely to attend musicals such as *Hamilton* (2015), *Six* (2017) or *Wicked* (2003)?

In Section 1, I discuss the initial inspiration for *Dangerous*, which draws heavily on Susan Glenn's (2000) socio-historical analysis of the American Vaudeville stage, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, and its intimate ties with the American suffragist movement and empowered female performers. Section 1 also discusses some of the key moments in the early stages of ideation and planning *Dangerous*. It makes note of a failed experiment, where the revue structure – though having a strong connection to the historical material as the primary form of musical entertainment discussed in Glenn's (2000) study – was found to not provide adequate dramaturgical buttressing for a compelling theatrical story to unfold. When moving towards dramaturgical choices and functions of characters, I draw on *Assassins* (1990) and music theatre scholar Scott Miller's (1997) analysis of *Assassins* for structural guidance in forming the foundations of *Dangerous*. This allowed me to experiment with the relationship between form and feminist messaging, to arrive at a hybrid concept book musical structure.

Section 2 details the deeper layers in the writing process, explaining how many of the dramaturgical features of *Assassins* concerning character function and plot-based action are not only present in *Dangerous*, but are also developed by applying an intersectional feminist orientation. The features discussed include the function of the narrator figure, an intermediary character and the historical characters and how they are explored using a backstage 'limbo' scene device.

Although the act of writing about this process can make it appear a straightforward, linear process, the experience of it was messy, challenging and required me to hold unresolvable tensions throughout. What was new about my approach in the creation of this work was the intention to be conscious of each choice I was making as the writer and considering the potential impacts through an intersectional feminist lens. This, I believe, gave my writing greater clarity.

Section 1: Ideation and Structuring

4.1 Initial Inspiration

After reading Glenn's (2000) work (before any writing had begun), I felt compelled to create a musical that elevated and celebrated the creativity, courage and rigour the women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries displayed in challenging societal expectations for women's roles in social and cultural life. I was particularly excited by the way spectacle was leveraged to create powerful messages and capture the attention and imaginations of the public, both on and offstage. My source material had feminist concerns at its centre; indeed, the book's subtitle is "the theatrical roots of modern feminism". It told a story about women engaging in transformative politics to improve the world for everyone, which connected with my interest in Dolan's (2013) feminism.

After reading that the "1880s to the early 1920s was an era of unprecedented cultural visibility and voice for women" (Glenn 2000, 216), I started to explore what similarities could exist between women of that period compared with today, particularly considering the renewed mainstream attention towards feminist issues following the #MeToo movement (see Burke 2024). Glenn notes the theatre of the early twentieth century "licensed women to say not only "look at me" because I am bizarre, funny, critical, graceful, melodic, or beautiful, but "listen to me" because I have something to say about what it means to be a woman" (Glenn 2000, 217). However, she also discusses the tension that existed between self-made, empowered women of the Vaudeville stage and

the so-called 'stage-managed' women of the commercial revues, or, in other words, between "active and passive female spectacle" (Glenn 2000, 3). This was during a time when female spectacle was frequently implemented in the expression of male mastery (Glenn 2000, 3). Whilst the *Ziegfeld Follies* 'girls' had sexuality managed and 'tastefully' controlled,⁹⁸ there were simultaneously Vaudeville acts by female performers where this was either satirized or challenged in other ways that asserted female performers' desires to be seen and heard as complex, intelligent human beings. Glenn also details the involvement of the suffragist movement on the Vaudeville stage, explaining that suffragists would at times get on stage to perform suffrage plays, tell audiences at intervals of their cause, and sometimes seek endorsement or support from Vaudeville stars. After learning this, I felt confident that the world of the early twentieth century Vaudeville theatre would be a resonant and relevant setting for a musical that could speak to and stage many of the tensions that continue to exist for contemporary feminists as they try to have their voices heard today.

Both on stage and off, the suffragists were engaged in performance and "tactics of excess" (Glenn 2000, 221) to convey their political agenda. I was struck by the scale, breadth and variety, and the indefatigable theatrical creativity of the suffragists in advocating for enfranchisement, who presented:

Elaborate street parades and pageants, delivered open-air speeches and held outdoor rallies, arranged auto, trolley and train tours (called suffrage specials), put on street dances, outdoor concerts and demonstrations, launched hot air balloons, performed shows in Vaudeville theatres, wrote and performed pro-suffrage comedies, satires and dramas, made movies, put up billboards, electrical signs, and window displays, manufactured and sold buttons, badges, clothing, and other consumer goods designed to promote the cause, and used every conceivable form of publicity stunt to call attention to their campaign. (Glenn 2000, 129)

⁹⁸ Ziegfeld, after all, was known for hand selecting the Follies girls; his "simple idea" (Decker 2017) as he called it, was to present these women in the most spectacular and aesthetically lush way, stating: "I believe in beauty, and nothing is more beautiful than a beautiful woman. I make the very best possible display of them" (Ziegfeld 1914).

Whilst the British suffragettes were known for their more violent tactics,⁹⁹ the Americans were more interested in deploying non-violent strategies to generate publicity (Glenn 2000, 130). They were trying to “transform the perceived threat of women’s political power into a visual spectacle of moral heroism and beauty” (Glenn 2000, 147), and as Glenn notes, they were diligent in adhering to specific dress codes and behaviour.

As early as 1912, American suffragist Harriot Stanton Blatch recognised the power of the media, announcing her era as the “advertising age” (Glenn 2000, 132), in which “leaders of any movement do well to study...the methods of the [theatrical] press agent” (Glenn 2000, 132). However, in embracing publicity and media to gain attention, the suffragists acknowledged that they had a problem: the qualities that were socially expected of women in this period were timidity, respectability and not speaking out in public, as this was thought to be a ‘masculine’ trait. The stereotypes they had to confront, as Glenn (2000, 133) illustrates, were the ‘mannish’, ‘ugly’, unmarried, ‘domineering’ spinster or ‘bad’ mother. Therefore, the suffragists strategically embraced ‘feminine’ qualities to gain access to public space to prove that politically conscious women could be attractive, and worthy of being paid attention.

However, in doing so, they also struggled with the bind that women, even ‘pretty’ women, were not to be taken seriously in public life. For example, suffragist Inez Milholland, who was conventionally attractive, effective as a public speaker and successful in capturing public attention, and able to take up public space, was nonetheless objectified.¹⁰⁰ Despite being a successful lawyer, what was frequently commented on in the press was her “young...immediately attractive appearance” providing, according to *McClure’s Magazine*, an “agreeable surprise” (*McClure’s Magazine* 1912) to the male attendees at events (Glenn 2000, 142). Performers, Glenn explains, became useful advocates, often being conventionally attractive, already visible in public life and in the business of appealing to peoples’ emotions through their work as performers. However, because the

⁹⁹ Glenn elaborates on the “militant methods” of the British suffragettes including, “heckling cabinet ministers, mass demonstrations, and arson and property destruction” (2000, 129).

¹⁰⁰ Linda Lumsden (2004) provides an in-depth biography of Inez Milholland’s life and work in *Inez: The Life and Times of Inez Milholland*.

public – including the theatre-going public – were already conditioned to seeing women in a particular way, attempts at “remak[ing] their image for public consumption” (Glenn 2000, 148) and political mobilisation were strained, leading to a paradoxical relationship with the theatre. These complex dynamics presented some early ideas for dramatic tension and conflict in *Dangerous*.

Despite the problematic early roots of the book musical outlined in Chapter 1, where the Vaudeville stage was host to demeaning stereotypes, Glenn’s study reveals a more empowering, complex feminist story of self-made women challenging the status quo and using the theatre and the Vaudeville musical stage to do so. It was this strand of history that was new to me, that I wanted to elevate and draw attention to, as a way of reclaiming the musical stage for a feminist agenda in the twenty-first century. Just as the women in Glenn’s study did over one hundred years ago, I had the urge to use spectacle and entertainment to draw audiences in, whilst having a feminist orientation and message.

4.2 Revue Structure: A Failed Experiment

My analysis of traditional book musicals and their political shortcomings led me to seeking alternative ways of structuring *Dangerous*. I wanted to attempt a variety or revue style structure as this was commonly used by the empowered female performers and suffragists who appeared on stage at the turn of the twentieth century. I wanted to see if I could create a modern equivalent of what they might have presented one hundred years prior.

However, with no characters and no plot, I found it difficult to complete a satisfying full draft using this structure. The small amount of time that existed in each suffragist’s act to obtain and sustain the audience’s attention, build a premise, and execute a sequence of events that had an effective political message made it difficult to build complexity or nuance. Furthermore, the acts that featured dramatic tension or stakes all followed a similar and problematic structure of featuring an act of oppression, then having the victim overcoming oppression. Though the playing style was intended to be satirical and

knowing, I was aware that I would be asking actors to re-enact traumatic stories of women being oppressed to make a point that women still suffered, and this ought to change. The balance of power remained with the oppressor, because the material was not demonstrating a transformative politics, or if it did, it spent so much time establishing the problem that the small amount of liberation at the end did not redress the problematic dynamics depicted – which is Wolf's (2018) critique of the depiction of the female characters in *Hamilton* (2015). When I tried a different approach – focusing on stories of female empowerment and songs about community, love, supporting each other – it was, quite frankly, boring. There were no stakes. There was nothing earned, and it felt naively optimistic and disconnected from material reality.

Though I had followed the dramaturgical principles I identified in making *Ascent* – in other words, in a 'know-what' way (after Nelson 2013) as I had followed my principles in a technical, craft-focused way – my sense of 'know-how' indicated something crucial was missing as I reviewed and attempted redrafts. In my practice journal I was trying to understand why, after a year of working on this piece, it was not having the impact I was seeking. Some of the reflections I made in my journal included: "With no plot and no characters, how is anyone going to care? Concepts do not necessarily translate to feelings" and "without characters, the premise feels too ambiguous" (Jayde Kirchert, May 2021, Practice Journal).

I came to realise that without a plot or characters for an audience to care about the work was tipping too far into intellectualism and would struggle to connect with mainstream audiences. I hypothesised that *Ascent*, despite lacking a complex plot, was able to connect with audiences because even though some of the characters were deliberately superficial and simplistic there was still an emotional, episodic story of human transformation – of *becoming* – that focused on a character journey.

In my attempts to avoid a book musical dramaturgy, a central protagonist and traditional integrated musical theatre conventions, I had gone too far in the other direction of having little an audience could follow or care about. I decided that I needed to have characters,

I needed to have at the very least, a loose story that would connect them, I needed to have stakes, and a structure that would enable these things to come together coherently without resorting completely to a book musical structure. It was time to start again, this time creating a concept musical.

4.3 Concept Structure: Early Choices

4.3.1 Establishing the Intersectional Feminist Orientation

It was only through retrospective research and analysis that I came to understand *Ascent* exhibited structural features of a concept musical. In thinking about another way to approach *Dangerous*, I felt compelled to attempt the concept musical again, this time deliberately, starting with a conscious attention towards orientation. My research suggested that the concept musical could be compatible with a political message, whilst also offering a possible opportunity for innovation of musical theatre conventions. I started to imagine how a deliberate intersectional feminist orientation could filter through all my writing choices, from arriving at key themes, to developing characters through to writing purposeful and complex Brechtian-feminist conventions.

As a politically conscious writer of music theatre I was intrigued by the concept musical and its conventions because “organizing a musical around a theme that can be separated into multiple issues or thematic points for exploration allows the creator(s) to comment upon questions that would be difficult to address in a linear story format” (Young-Gerber 2010, 336). Additionally, because the concept musical developed from the entertainment-focused revue, musical comedy and integrated book musicals, it simultaneously has elements that enable it to have commercial appeal for a broad audience, as evidenced by *Company* (1970), *A Chorus Line* (1975), *Assassins* (1990) (to name a few). Here, the dominance of theme allows the concept musical to

move beyond the original light entertainment popular in the late nineteenth century, and continue an art form used by writers to make political and social statements

that remain palatable to the general public because of the medium through which they are presented. (Young-Gerber 2010, 336)

Moving from initial ideas to taking the first steps in crafting the structure, I returned to the initial inspiration, re-reading Glenn's (2000) account of the New Woman – a name given to a woman at the turn of the twentieth century who was deliberately challenging gender norms. There was something about the concept of the New Woman that continued to resonate with me, and I felt shared something with feminists today. In my journaling, I made some notes with the title "WHY SHOULD ANYONE CARE?" as I tried to understand what it was in Glenn's work that resonated with me, in the present moment, and what, therefore, I needed to capture in my book and lyrics to connect with a broad audience. I wrote a list of all the reasons why this source material could make for a compelling, feminist musical and why people needed to know about it:

WHY SHOULD ANYONE CARE?

- If we learnt about this history/stories over the last 100 years maybe we'd not still be fighting for the same sorts of things?
- If we know about these stories maybe we can all do better
- They were better than us at protesting! More creative, bolder, ambitious (impossible project)
- Singular focus — the vote was useful in that regard to unite people
- This is women's history
- Is it about bringing us together? Being so fractured, competitive, out-woke-ing, who is most disadvantaged, the guilt around that
- Capitalist machine — they used PR and marketing, leveraged the system sort of like social media can do now
- They were DANGEROUS! What made them dangerous? The dream to be heard and respected as humans, which doesn't sound dangerous at all, but to actually enact it and request it truly is, in an environment where there is hostility for those who do not conform to the patriarchal gender roles which

require women to be quiet, not to speak and create freely.
(Jayde Kirchert, June-July 2021, Practice Journal)

I also considered recent feminist protests and presence in the mainstream media, aimed at highlighting the suffering many women have experienced living in a patriarchal culture.¹⁰¹ In drawing this comparison, and reflecting on my own lived experience as a woman living in a patriarchal culture, as well as keeping in mind an intersectional feminist net (as described in Chapter 1) inspired primarily by the ideas of Crenshaw (1989), Ahmed (2006; 2017) and hooks (2000; 2003; 2004), I broadly surmised that whilst the complexities of privilege and oppression intersect in different ways, both the feminists of today and approximately one hundred years earlier had in common the seeking of liberation from danger and threats to their personal safety. Taking a broad summative approach that I could personally relate to, was the first step in arriving at the key themes for the concept musical.

By focusing on the theme of danger and its relationship to female liberation, I could see the potential to speak to the aspects of patriarchal culture that threaten women's bodily autonomy and create conditions that condone violence and sexual objectification (for more, see hooks 2004). I imagined that pairing the concept of danger with female liberation could provide dramatic tension and would also allow me to align with Dolan's (2013) feminism, whereby women's right to equality and freedom in all areas of life is central, and the possibility of a transformative politics could emerge in the storytelling. I imagined the act of seeking liberation as a female as being inherently dangerous, however, I also saw this as a potentially transformative act with individual and broader societal impact.

¹⁰¹ In particular, I was contemplating the international #MeToo movement (see Burke 2024), events such as the 'Pussy Hat' march in the US (see *Pussyhat Project* n.d). Specifically in Australia, the 'March4Justice' in Melbourne (see *March4Justice* n.d), and media interest in the stories of sexual abuse endured by Young Australian of the Year Grace Tame and former public servant Brittany Higgins (see Karvelas 2022), came to mind (to mention but a small handful).

Young-Gerber's (2010) article acknowledges Joseph Swain's (1990) proposition that a framing device helps to organise a concept musical. Whilst she asserts a framing device is not necessarily needed to organise a concept musical, I found it to be a useful way of thinking about the role a Vaudeville revue could play in the world of *Dangerous*. Rather than only functioning as a stylistic reference point or initial inspirational background, I decided that the Vaudeville revue could be the framing device through which an important metaphor – performance – could illuminate the concept more fully. That is, *what* is being performed could reveal another aspect of the relationship between danger and female liberation. As I allowed this thinking to deepen through journaling and creating visual flowcharts and tables (see Fig. 14, 15, 16), it became clear that in each act of the Vaudeville revue, the themes of danger and female liberation needed to be explored *through* performance. This meant that the performance styles and conventions had to be speaking to the themes every step of the way, so every layer of the dramaturgy had an intersectional feminist orientation.

With so many potential women from the Vaudeville stage and suffrage movement providing inspiration, I needed to narrow my focus. I contemplated creating fictional characters who would be fusions of a suffragist and notable female performer of the time. However, in thinking about what could be relatable for people who were accustomed to seeing musicals such as *Hamilton* (2015) or *Six* (2017), where historical figures were depicted on stage, I decided instead to choose five women who played notable roles in the women's suffrage movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In making the selection, I considered suffragists and activists mentioned in Glenn's (2000) study such as Inez Milholland, Harriet Stanton Blatch, Emma Goldman, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Alice Paul, Christabel Pankhurst, along with those I already knew a little about: Emmeline Pankhurst, Sojourner Truth and Australian suffragist, Edith Cowan. When I started to research the lives of all these suffragists, I was particularly drawn to those women who had done something especially dangerous, where they put their bodies, their rights, or their liberty on the line.

In thinking about commercial appeal, I chose suffragists from Australia, the United States of America and the United Kingdom, because the U.S. and the U.K have established commercial musical theatre precincts (Broadway and the West End respectively), and Australia, though much smaller in comparison, has a growing presence on Broadway and the West End, evidenced by writers such as Tim Minchin, Eddie Perfect and Yve Blake writing for Broadway and West End shows. Australian exports such as *The Boy From Oz* (1998), *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (2006), *King Kong* (2013), *Strictly Ballroom* (2014) *Muriel's Wedding* (2018) and *Fangirls* (2019) have had success on Broadway or the West End. Additionally, my identity as an Australian citizen compelled me to include an Australian.

In summary, the final selection of characters was determined through prior awareness of their life's work, or learning about their story through Glenn's (2000) study, along with being compelled by a dangerous story that was orientated towards women's liberation, and, applying the intersectional feminist net, ensuring an overall mix of cultural backgrounds.¹⁰² The suffragist characters in *Dangerous* became: Inez Milholland, Emmeline Pankhurst, Sojourner Truth, Edith Cowan and Susan B. Anthony (supported by Elizabeth Cady Stanton).¹⁰³

However, arriving at these characters was not without complexity. When writing for the character Sojourner Truth I was confronted with a lineage in musical theatre writing of white people circumscribing black identities,¹⁰⁴ discussed at length by music theatre scholars Raymond Knapp (2005) and Warren Hoffman (2014). However, the alternative of only writing white characters did not feel viable, particularly given the public discourse around the lack of representation and opportunities for people of colour in musical theatre (see, for example, Tongue 2020). This was not an issue I encountered in *Ascent*, because I was not deliberately writing for racially diverse bodies. Rather, I was working with a diverse cast and allowing the variety of bodies to demonstrate inclusive politics, rather

¹⁰² However there remain many identity markers I was not able to include directly, such as ability, neurotype, class.

¹⁰³ See the Character List (p.128-129) for an overview of each suffragist.

¹⁰⁴ Which occurred despite black creators developing their own musicals particularly throughout the 1930s. See Glover (2023) for more.

than the writing itself attending to racial politics directly. Though I was deliberately using theory from feminist scholars of colour (Crenshaw 1989; Ahmed 2006, 2017; hooks 2000, 2003 and 2004) to create an intersectional ‘net’ with which I could think through broad conceptual and structural choices, I was nonetheless concerned about how I would move forward into conceptualising and voicing a character such as Truth without replicating the problematic politics of representation that exist in the canon.

Given Truth’s most famous speech “Ain’t I A Woman” was widely available and well known, I decided that in writing her song lyrics I would draw inspiration from her words to allow something of her authentic voice to be present. However, I discovered different versions of the speech, which were inconsistent with one another as Truth was illiterate and did not write them herself (see Painter 1996, 174). Watching an interview “Nell Irvin Painter – The Power of Ideas” (2000) where historian Nell Irvin Painter discusses her book *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (1996), I came to learn that the speech’s title and repeated refrain throughout the speech, “Ain’t I A Woman” or rather “Ar’n’t I A Woman” as it was originally known, was the invention of Frances Dana Gage, a white woman whose embellished version of the speech was printed twelve years after it took place in 1851 (Painter 1996, 164). The title that it evolved to be known as, “Ain’t I A Woman”, perpetuates an inaccurate suggestion that Truth had a southern dialect (Painter 1996, 270-271).¹⁰⁵ Painter’s research clarifies that Truth was a New Yorker, with Dutch being her first language, as this was the language spoken by her slave owners (1996, 7). The version of the speech that Painter suggests is the most accurate was written by Truth’s friend, Marius Robinson (1996, 125-126).

Drawing solely from the Robinson speech, which does not contain any reference to “Ar’n’t I a Woman”, did not, however, provide a straightforward solution either. Although it may have been more historically accurate to omit “Ar’n’t I a Woman” or “Ain’t I a Woman”, Painter’s (1996) account of Truth describes the varied symbolic role she holds for feminists – and, in particular, black feminists – exemplified in this phrase. This symbolic

¹⁰⁵ Painter explains this change was “in the interests of authenticity” (1996, 272), as she became inaccurately employed as a spokeswoman for southern slave women by historians in the late twentieth century.

position has changed to accommodate the political needs of different time periods, with Truth having been depicted as “a patient Christian, a rolling stone, an itinerant preacher, a quaint speaker” (Painter 1996, 271-272) and, in the late twentieth century, a female equivalent of Malcolm X (Painter 1996, 273). Painter also notes that bell hooks’ first collection of essays was titled *Ain’t I A Woman* (1981). Truth’s name has become synonymous with this phrase, and both her name and the phrase have become symbols of strong black womanhood, which, Painter suggests in the “Power of Ideas” (2000) interview, “works for us because we still need to hear it” (2000, 15:36).

Given all this, I felt the symbolic resonance of that phrase, despite not being Truth’s invention, needed to be at least referred to in her song. I repurposed the phrase in standard English (no Southern dialect) in the lyrics, “So I asked a question, aren’t I a woman?” and then developed the idea further, later in the song with “I’m a woman, aren’t I? I’m a person, aren’t I?” This allowed the phrase to be heard in a way that did not perpetuate a false Southern identity but also allowed it to exist as a development towards the anchoring idea of “I’m a person, aren’t I?”, whilst acknowledging a complex historicity around the potent phrase. Whilst this approach did not negate the complexity of my identity creating text for another, I started to see my role as the writer as being in dialogue with source material and biographical material that was aiming to elevate and celebrate the ways she has become a resonant and culturally significant figure for intersectional feminism.

The speech provided a valuable starting point to help begin the process of translating biographical research into the world of *Dangerous*. In early experiments this approach proved creatively satisfying, so I decided to take a similar approach with all the other characters too — using their publicly available speeches (which were more accurately documented) as the launching pad for the lyrics to their songs. As I did this creative work, being in dialogue with source material and biographical material, two key things emerged: firstly, I decided that I was not going to aim to write historically accurate representations of these women. I would attempt to use biographical research to inform my approach, but I needed to have freedom to imagine them as characters within the world of *Dangerous*,

which would require them to do and say things they never did according to historical records. Secondly, as I compared the speeches of these women, I could see the theme of danger and desire for liberation was present across all the speeches and I wanted this to drive how they were developed, so I could maintain a concept musical dramaturgy (whereby the conceptual themes are primary, not character-based plot).

Rather than absolve me from the concerns I had about writing for characters whose experiences were different from my own, starting with their words heightened a sense of danger throughout the writing process. I felt a great sense of respect and a desire to honour the legacies of these women. I also considered how important these women could be to those who are already aware of them and their life's work. Throughout the writing of *Dangerous*, I was conscious that, despite my best intentions, I do not have control over how audiences receive this writing; there would always be the possibility that my interpretations and creative responses to the suffragists' words could evoke negative, critical responses. The danger of perpetuating the very dynamics I was seeking to subvert was very real throughout the process and existed as an unresolvable tension in every stage, of every draft of the script.¹⁰⁶

As I held these issues in mind, I continued to move forward with exploring how the characters could exist in the concept musical *Dangerous*, with the Vaudeville framing device and conceptual themes of danger and women's liberation. I decided these five women would present a Vaudeville-style revue show, with each suffragist performing a Vaudeville act depicting a time they were dangerous in seeking women's liberation. However, rather than the acts literally and realistically enacting each suffragist's story (as one would expect in traditional a book musical), the performance style and the way the story was theatricalised would take precedence and would contribute to elucidating the themes. Here, a conscious attention to Vaudevillian and musical theatre conventions

¹⁰⁶ My approach to writing the suffragist characters was also supported by informal conversations in my teaching practice with people from a range of backgrounds grappling with similar complex issues. At the time of writing I have been a Lecturer in Music Theatre at the University of Melbourne for 5 years, facilitating numerous conversations around intersectionality and identity politics as they relate to personal issues, broader industry and form-specific issues with students, but also in the broader industry through organising and leading events such as *Music Theatre Futures* (2020 and 2024).

meant the themes, as expressed through the performance styles, would be more important than a plot-driven format.

I created a table to help imagine the possible choices for realising each suffragist's story, combining the name of the suffragist, a famous quote attributed to them, a possible act type, the dangerous event they enacted in real life, a general theme, a possible modern day equivalent or resonance, along with a possible pop music reference (which was later removed) and a potential gesture that could function as *gestic* feminist criticism, encapsulated by the refrain of "1, 2 [insert gesture]".

Figure	Susan B Anthony	Emmeline Pankhurst	Sagouner Truth	Edith Cowan	Lizzie Millholland
Quote	"men their rights and nothing more. Women their rights and nothing less." Failure is impossible	"Deeds not words" "I would rather be a rebel than a slave." "you have no more male..."	"Ain't I a woman?"	"Women are very desirous of being on absolutely equal terms with men..." "I want to ride on to the back of the wagon!"	"Women of the West..." "Mr President, how long must women wait for liberty?"
Act Type	Burlesque/drag comedy act	Marionette/doll show up the doll	Tightrope or trapeze	Female boxer or 'strong man'	Pony Act
Real life scenario (quote comes from)	X	X	X	X	X
General theme	standing up for yourself by ignoring the "rules" - asserting right to make being choiced	Tolerating invasion of the body - a "patriarchal" that you've "brought upon yourself" - asserting right to safety & bodily autonomy	Pointing out the hypocrisy of a narrow approach (excluded) - asserting woman's right to be included, diversity	Confronting the battle field/arena - asserting right to speak & be respected	Challenging, encouragement to look at women & not listen - asserting right to be heard, I have things to say
Modern Day resonances?	Cher Bard, Greta Thunberg, women's olympic team uniforms	#MeToo (domestic) violence against women, sexual assault in parliament	Intersectional feminism, black lives matter	Julia Gillard, mine going speech, arc speech	Lack of literacy, around women thinkers, contributions to history are. Victorian beauty standards (no men will pay attention)
Pop Music reference/style	Madonna	Amy Winehouse?	Aretha Franklin, Tina Turner, Missy Elliot	Pink?	Taylor Swift
Linking metaphor (links ideas to overarching system)	1, 2 gag/punchline (rule of 3) Smile	1, 2 [Silence] - hold her, possess her - she comes out - she's in control - for them who is in control	1, 2 catch/switch locate switch	1, 2 hook/fix	1, 2 step/pose pop

Figure 14: Table with early ideas for characters and their Vaudeville acts (August 2021)

As I moved from initial planning and brainstorming towards mapping out a structure and thinking in more detail about how the thematic concepts would play out in scenes, I became concerned about the complexity of writing a concept musical with multiple characters and stories, whilst centring a political issue and aiming for commercial appeal. In my practice journal I wrote:

Constantly thinking about how this story is relevant or clear to a general audience. Also thinking about how Sondheim would do it. What did he do with his book writers in concept musicals like *Assassins*, *Company* (and *Follies*)? (Jayde Kirchert, May 2022, Practice Journal)

I decided to seek out examples where other writers had successfully attempted this and turned to Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's *Assassins* (1990). Whilst not feminist in its orientation, *Assassins*, like *Dangerous*, is a highly political concept musical which features numerous characters based on historical figures across different time periods. *Assassins* also employs Vaudeville-style performance traditions in the songs to theatricalise some of the key moments in the book.

4.3.2 *Assassins* as a Structural Guide

Musical theatre scholar Scott Miller's (1997) article examining *Assassins* (1990) led me to consider *Assassins*' contributions to the development of the concept musical and find theoretical and practical ways of discussing the similarities and differences between *Assassins* and *Dangerous*. His article pinpoints the specific ways *Assassins* can be seen as a landmark development of the concept musical by explaining how it has drawn on and further developed concept musical conventions introduced by earlier musicals such as *Cabaret* (1966), *Pippin* (1972) and *Chicago* (1975). These musicals also happen to be musicals that I have been personally drawn to, and I was able to imagine they could also dramaturgically influence the writing of *Dangerous*. Writing *Dangerous* with this article in mind has led me to develop *Assassin*'s innovations further, using an intersectional feminist orientation through practice-based research.

In Miller's article, the types of concept musicals are identified as follows:

Musicals built upon a central concept (usually an important social issue) instead of a linear story; musicals whose central concept is most important but that still employ a linear plot; musical character studies with no linear plot but no unifying concept either; and musicals that do not fit into any other categories. (1997, 187)

This first category, which Miller assigns to describe *Assassins*, is problematically described as the 'pure' concept musical. Musicals in this category do not feature a linear plot, and the concept is the most important and overarching aspect of the show's organisation.¹⁰⁷ I unsuccessfully attempted to map out a 'pure' concept musical where there was no plot at all, however I was unable to finish it because I lost creative interest (and therefore suspected that an audience might not find it interesting). I felt with the framing device and earlier choices already made, there was nothing driving the storytelling with this structure. I experienced Miller's observation first hand, that pure concept musicals (lacking a plot) can be "harder for audiences to understand because without a story the audience must discern for themselves what the show is about, and there is often no traditional emotional payoff at the end since there is no story conflict to resolve" (1997, 187-188); *Assassins* is therefore a rare example of the pure concept musical being successful.¹⁰⁸ As I reflected on the pure concept version of *Dangerous*, the scenes appeared to be unfolding in an overly didactic way and I was concerned this version would struggle to connect with audiences. Having experienced similar issues with trialling the revue structure, I knew the form needed rethinking.

As I worked through alternatives, I found Miller's hybrid category helpful. In describing the hybrid category, he points to *Cabaret* (1966) as part book musical, part concept musical,

¹⁰⁷ In offering a chronological understanding of the concept musical's development, Miller (1997) determines the first 'pure' concept musical to be Kurt Weill and Alan Jay Lerner's *Love Life* (1948). He argues this musical, which had no linear plot and organised by theme, paved the way for *Cabaret*, *Company*, *Pippin* and *Assassins* to have Brechtian style 'commentary' songs (this should come as no surprise given that Weill worked extensively with Brecht).

¹⁰⁸ Though, as Miller (1997, 202) notes, *Assassins* was not an immediate box office or critical hit on Broadway, it was celebrated in London and around the world in various successful professional productions. In particular, the Roundabout Theatre Company's 2004 revival – over a decade after the off-Broadway premiere (1990) – won five Tony Awards.

featuring both a linear plot and a strong concept integral to its structure. Specifically, The Kit Kat Klub scenes, he argues, operate more like a concept musical in that they are non-linear and break the fourth wall, with little dialogue. However, these scenes also sit alongside scenes and integrated songs that are linear, with a fourth wall, which function more like a traditional book musical.¹⁰⁹ Another musical Miller makes special note of is *Chicago* (1975). Unlike *Cabaret*, *Chicago* does not feature integrated book songs at all in favour of having every song performed as a Vaudeville style number – yet it still has a linear book-style plot. I started to experiment with the notion that *Dangerous* could be a hybrid concept musical, with a strong concept supported by book-style scenes, with or without integrated songs. Having this freedom to bring aspects of the book musical structure into the concept musical helped me to experiment with a new outline for what could happen scene by scene, where I could explore how the characters could be connected, how a plot and character journeys could develop and elucidate the concept, and experiment with the dramaturgical purpose for each song (as pictured below in Figure 16 and Figure 17). This was a breakthrough moment where I could see the potential for a structure that could be compatible with an intersectional feminist orientation, whilst employing familiar musical theatre conventions (plot-based story, character journeys) that could increase the likelihood of the musical having broad appeal.

¹⁰⁹ However, Miller (1997) explains the film version directed by Fosse, eliminated the book songs completely.

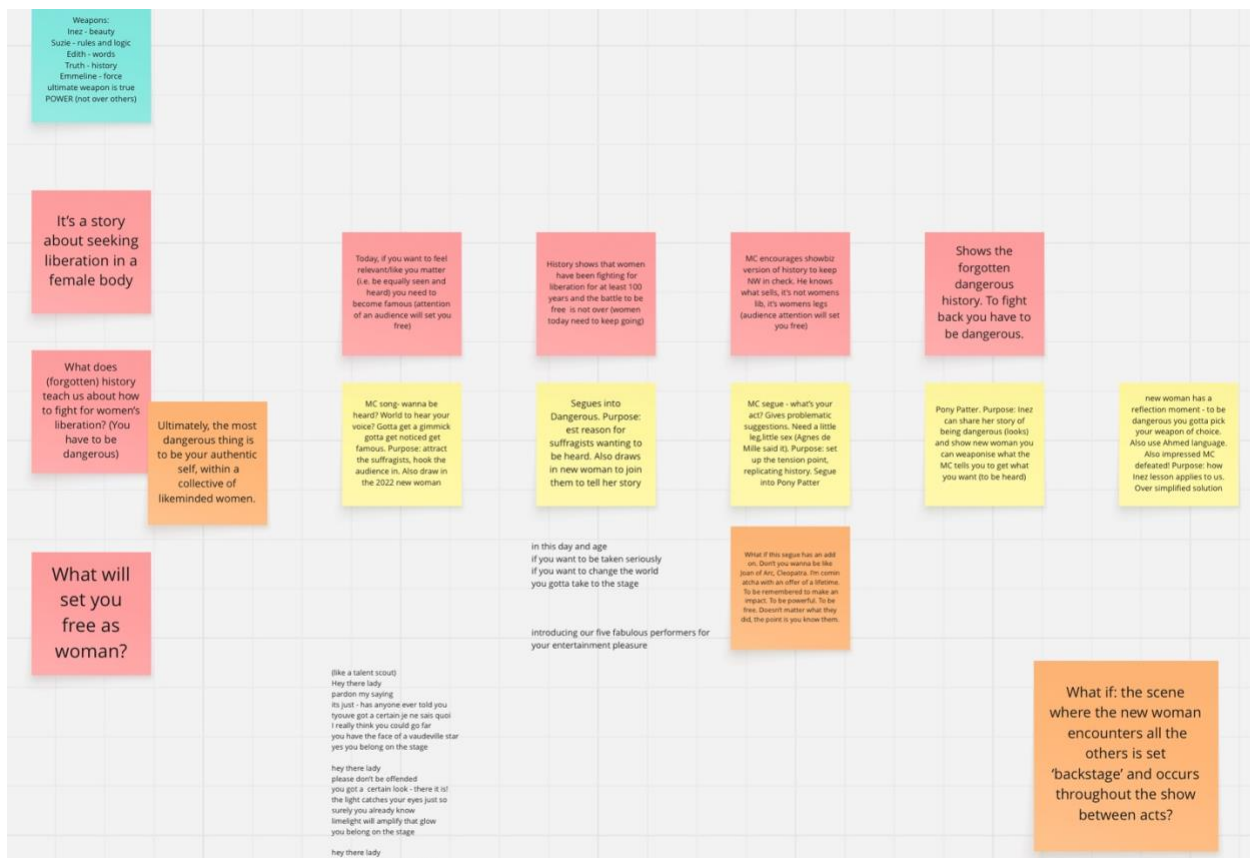


Figure 15: Part 1 of revised concept structure incorporating a book-style plot (February 2023)

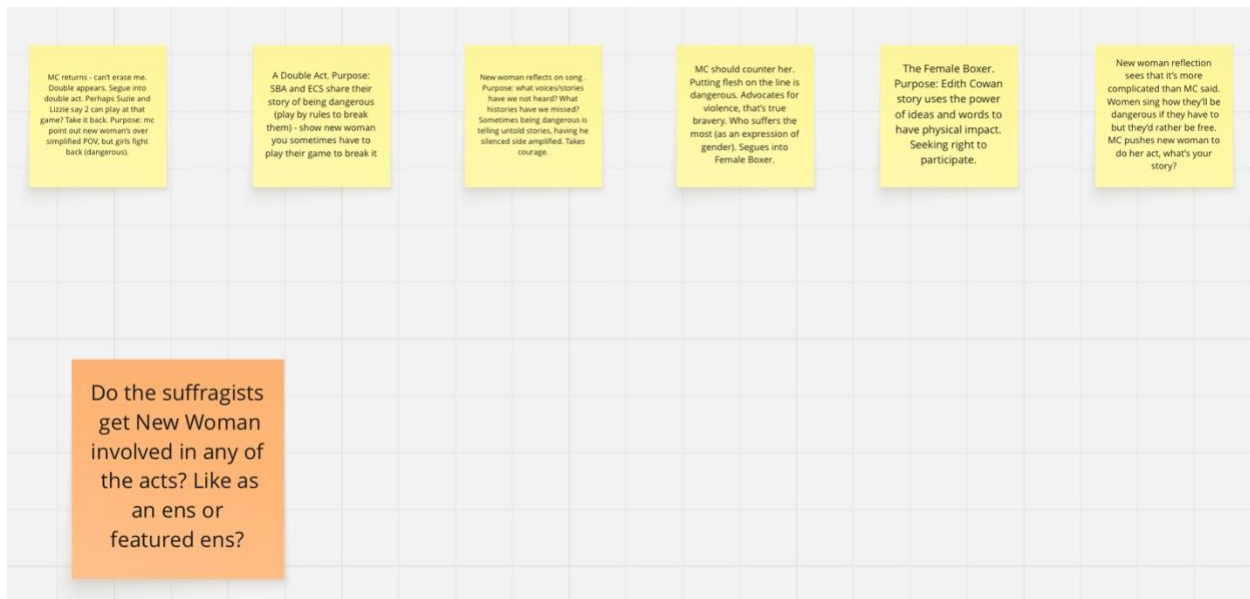


Figure 16: Part 2 of revised concept structure incorporating a book-style plot (February 2023)

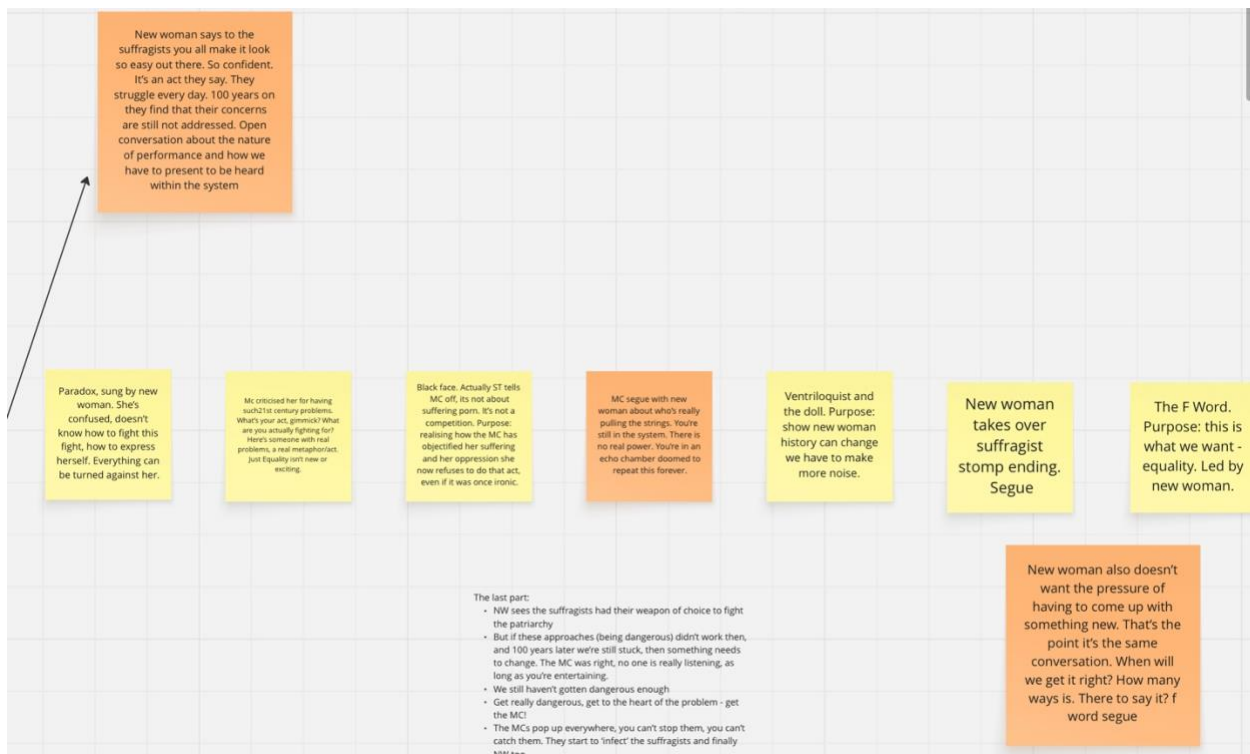


Figure 17: Part 3 of revised concept structure incorporating a book-style plot (February 2023)

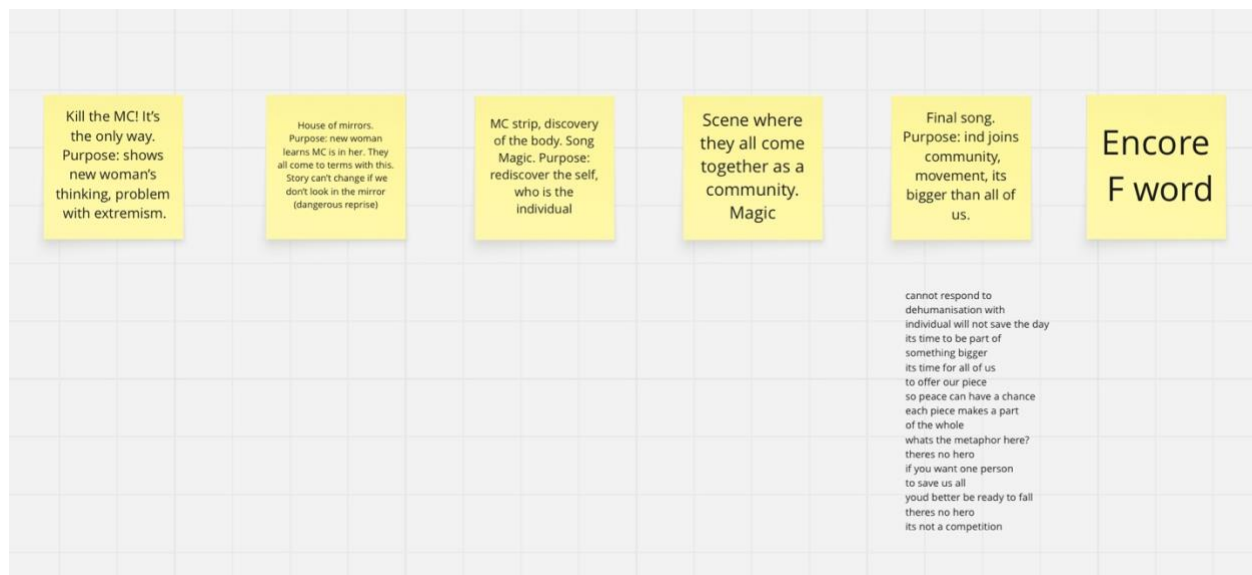


Figure 18: Part 4 of revised concept structure incorporating a book-style plot (February 2023)

As I started to move towards the broad brushstrokes of a concept musical structure, I found *Assassins* and the musicals that influenced its conventions to be helpful; in particular, the notion of a hybrid concept structure helped open up possibilities beyond the limiting 'pure' concept musical that, according to Miller (1997), defines *Assassins*.

Section 2: The Writing Phase

I realised the lack of feminist orientation in *Assassins* presented a unique research opportunity to develop the concept musical elements identified by Miller (1997) for a feminist work. My practice-based research in writing *Dangerous* has therefore further developed the innovations of *Assassins* (as well as *Cabaret* and *Chicago*), through applying an intersectional feminist orientation. They include:

- **A narrator/devil figure and framing device:** an influential and powerful narrator figure similar to The Emcee from *Cabaret*, Leading Player from *Pippin* and the Proprietor in *Assassins* (though not a narrator, the Proprietor has a related dramaturgical function). In *Dangerous*, this character is called the MC, and is developed further by having multiple actors play the role in a Brechtian-materialist feminist fashion, employing the use of subversive drag.
- **A character that can connect the audience to the complex ideas of the show** and to the contemporary moment: here, a character in *Dangerous* called the New Woman mirrors the Balladeer in *Assassins* and is able to provide a point of audience connection.
- **Backstage ‘limbo’ scenes and multiple historical characters who are highlighted:** the book-style scenes in *Dangerous* draw on *Assassins* and *Cabaret* by using a ‘limbo’ device. Additionally, multiple historical characters are highlighted as each suffragist performs her act, which draws on the ways *Assassins* highlights the various assassins across different time periods and places. These two devices form the structure of the musical.

These features were explored on the floor with professional actors in a 2-day workshop (September 26 and 27, 2023) which included a table read and some proof-of-concept experiments in a studio at the University of Melbourne, Southbank campus. This was followed up with a further table read of a revised draft of the script three months later (December 4, 2023), also in a studio at the University of Melbourne, Southbank campus. I will include observations and personal reflections from the workshops and readings throughout the next section and following chapter, as they were a formative part of the

book's development and allowed me to test out theoretical notions in a practical context. Importantly, they allowed me to arrive at some preliminary conclusions about the viability of my approach towards creating a hybrid concept musical with an intersectional feminist orientation.

4.4 Narrator Figure: MC and Subversive Drag

In thinking about the broad structure of *Dangerous*, I wanted to create a character who could help maintain the momentum between the Vaudeville acts in an entertaining manner and, simultaneously, further illuminate the concept. I was inspired by *Cabaret* (1966) and *Pippin* (1972) which both have narrator figures, but also by the Proprietor in *Assassins* (1990) who, although not a narrator figure (since he only appears in the opening scene), occupies an important and related dramaturgical function by introducing the framing device and, like the narrator figure in *Cabaret*, occupies a symbolic relationship to the musical's themes. I saw an opportunity to take this convention of the narrator figure and its relationship to the framing device and explore its potential for creating a musical with an intersectional feminist orientation.

The obvious choice for a narrator figure who would introduce the Vaudeville revue framing device was a host or Master of Ceremonies. This character would be able to comment on the action on stage for the benefit of the audience and help tie together the various acts, aligning with concept musical conventions. This occurs in *Cabaret* (1966), where the Emcee hosts the acts of the Kit Kat Klub, guiding the audience in and out of that world. Similarly, the Leading Player in *Pippin* (1972) watches and comments on the action in scenes, encouraging the central character to make choices that drive the story forward. The Proprietor in *Assassins* was another useful reference point, as a character who draws the audience into the framing device of the 'Shoot To Win' game, but also entices the assassins from different time periods to take part in the game, giving them their guns and bringing them together in a fictional setting.¹¹⁰ Since I was planning to bring together

¹¹⁰ As exemplified in the lyrics of "Everybody's Got The Right" (see Sondheim 2011).

suffragists from different places and time periods in book-style scenes, a character who could set up a framing device to fictionally accommodate this historically impossible scenario was needed. The MC in *Dangerous* would therefore be inspired by a combination of the Emcee in *Cabaret*, the Leading Player in *Pippin* and the Proprietor in *Assassins*. The MC would be an extension of the framing device (the Vaudeville revue) and have a direct relationship to it, and would facilitate a fictional assembly of characters, directly address the audience, provoke, guide, entice and act as a go between the world onstage and the auditorium.

From Miller's (1997) article, it became clear to me that the MC needed to represent a central theme, rather than function as a character would in a traditional book musical to retain the emphasis on conceptual theme rather than plot. Miller notes the Emcee of *Cabaret* and the Proprietor of *Assassins* both act as symbolic representations, with the first representing "the decadence and willing ignorance of the German people" (1997, 193) and the latter representing "America throughout its history", that is, the land of the myth of equal opportunity – along with easy access to firearms (1997, 193). The Emcee and Proprietor therefore represent problematic or dangerous forces in society. This prompted me to explore the idea of the MC in *Dangerous* as a character who could illuminate or speak to the central thematic concept of the relationship between danger, women's liberation, and the systemic oppression of women – in other words, the patriarchy. I realised putting the MC in opposition to the feminist orientation of the overall musical could offer me what I was seeking in terms of creating stakes: it established the MC in opposition to the suffragist characters who would align with the intersectional feminist worldview of the show, providing a point of dramatic tension.

bell hooks' (2004) book, *The Will To Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*, deepened my thinking around men, masculinity and patriarchy, and further encouraged me to write the MC as a symbolic persona, rather than a conventional book character. hooks' (2004) book philosophically engages with the ways the patriarchal system oppresses us all, as she reminds us that although men within a patriarchal system may benefit more than women (and in different ways, according to numerous factors such as race, class, ability and

more), they also suffer from the negative effects of patriarchal masculinity. Following this thinking, by having the MC represent a symbolic persona, I could avoid attaching the structural issues created by a patriarchal system to an individual person, allowing for a broader exploration of the patriarchy as a system that can't be blamed on one human representative. In my journal, I reflected on hooks' writing, noting her emphasis on the ways patriarchal masculinity gains its value and meaning through the pursuit of external, dominating power, and that we need to work to eradicate the system, not maleness, masculinity or men (Jayde Kirchert, June 2022, Practice Journal). I concluded that the stylised repetition of problematic forms of maleness and masculinity in a patriarchal society is often characterised by performances of violence and domination. I wanted, therefore, to explore how such performances shape gender roles in performative ways: as speech acts *and* as theatrical enactments.

I knew the MC would need to be provocative to help create dramatic tension and embody the patriarchy clearly. However, I was struggling with what this would entail in terms of power dynamics on stage and how this would sit within an intersectional feminist orientation. In reflecting on the previous version of my musical that utilised a revue structure, a learning I identified was that I was dissatisfied with repeating problematic oppressive dynamics on stage for the sake of establishing a point of dramatic tension. Initially seeing the role played by a male actor, inspired by the Emcee and Proprietor (and original production of *Pippin*), I was concerned with how much power would be given to a male character who was, for all intents and purposes, in charge of the playing space, as the Master of Ceremonies. Earlier drafts had the MC reigning power over the suffragists and controlling who could say what and what was allowed to happen, in order to create stakes and dramatic tension. However, when evaluating these drafts, the questions that I circled in my script notes included:

Why don't they just overthrow him? Why do they stay? Why do they keep playing this role/story that he has set for them? Where is the power for the women? (Jayde Kirchert, 2022, Personal Script Notes).

I struggled to resolve these questions in a satisfying way that would fulfil an intersectional feminist orientation and agenda, because the answer was always that the women had to be compliant and “go along with it”. I was also concerned with creating a show where a group of female characters were organised around a central, dangerous male figure, particularly since I was so critical of *Six* that did just that.¹¹¹ I decided that whilst I needed to define the MC as an extension of the framing device and symbolically represent an aspect that was in tension with the conceptual themes, I also needed to have a very conscious and deliberate approach to *how* the role would be played so the balance of power was always with the women of the story. This would allow traditional female gender roles on the musical stage to be challenged and support the intersectional feminist orientation of the musical.

Since I was already thinking about gender performativity and its relationship to performance, Judith Butler’s (1990) famous example of drag (to explain gender performativity) came to mind when thinking about how the MC role could be played. Considering the possibility of the role being played by a woman in drag was appealing, as this could be a way to subvert expectations for female bodies on the musical stage and simultaneously highlight problematic gender ideology. In other words, this approach to playing the MC could direct the actors and audience towards the text and story in ways that invited a Brechtian sensibility, and create a distancing to reveal both the performativity of gender and emphasise the intersectional feminist orientation of the musical.

In beginning this part of my research, I was reminded of a performance I saw in 2013 by Sisters Grimm (Ash Flanders and Declan Greene) of their play *The Sovereign Wife*.¹¹² In this performance, actors of various ages, gender, racial and ethnic identities purposely swapped roles after each act. In her analysis of this play, queer feminist theatre scholar Sarah French (2017) argues that this show presented drag in a subversive way. French (2017, 123) acknowledges the problematic issues pertaining to drag discussed by

¹¹¹ As will be unpacked in Chapter 5.

¹¹² I saw this work at Melbourne Theatre Company in July 2013 as part of the Neon Festival of Independent Theatre.

feminist scholars, such as the question of whether drag entrenches or disrupts the gender binary, and its potential to degrade women and contribute to oppressive patriarchal ideas about heteronormative femininity (see Dolan 1985; Phelan 1993; Schacht 2001, 2002; Solomon 1993). However, she also points to scholars who assert its politically subversive potential (such as Butler 1990, 1993; Garber 1992; Halberstam 1998; Muñoz 1999).¹¹³ Drawing on Carole-Anne Tyler (1991), French reminds us that we ought to avoid making broad generalisations about drag and instead engage more specifically with the content of each drag performance to determine its political impact. For French, “successful drag performances simultaneously expose the normalised operations of gender and the instability of heteronormativity” (2017, 24-25). This resonates with thinking about what constitutes queer performance: to make a political challenge to heteronormativity and its subsequent gender roles, the representation alone does not suffice – there needs to be an attention towards the material and structural, dramaturgical contexts and conventions (see Campbell and Farrier 2015, 13).

Sisters Grimm’s work takes a queer and feminist approach to drag which “effectively subverts gender binaries” and demonstrates the “political potential” of drag (French 2017, 123). French suggests that “the cross-gendered and cross-racialised casting choices in the Sisters Grimm performances produce highly subversive instances of performativity that potentially allow spectators to perceive the social and ideological construction of all gendered and raced identities” (French 2017, 166). As such, Sisters Grimm “offer queer feminist revisions of patriarchal history to reconfigure dominant power relations” (French 2017, 188) – a goal I could relate to in creating *Dangerous*. In their plays, their queer readings of film conventions and tropes enable Sisters Grimm to critique and subvert the problematic gender and racial ideologies embedded within the films they engage with, as well as in the theatre forms within which they work (for example, they often employ traditional dramatic structures, such as a three act, linear plot driven play) (French 2017, 116). In summary, French (2017) argues Sisters Grimm’s subversive use of drag emphasises “the ways in which identity categories appear fixed within dominant

¹¹³ According to Stephen Farrier (31 January, 2025, email message for Jayde Kirchert), ‘radical’ drag has also been used to describe politically subversive drag (see, for example, Cole 2017; Jacob and Cerny 2004).

discourses yet are inherently fluid, ambiguous and indeterminate” (French 2017, 220) and simultaneously highlights the “constructedness of the performances and the worlds they represent” (French 2017, 220).

The politics of drag are further complicated when focusing specifically on the bodies doing drag; drag is not the same across male and female bodies, and *who* is doing the drag matters. As queer performance scholar Stephen Farrier explains, the structural inequalities that exist in a patriarchal society mean that “a male-identified person presenting a performance in attire associated with females is not the inverse of a female-identified person performing in attire associated with males” (2017, 175). Additionally, there are differences between drag kings and male impersonators. Whilst Farrier notes a lack of scholarly writing on drag that historically explores male impersonators and drag kings, which may be, in part, attributed to the dynamics of patriarchy where “the activity of men figures more fully than that of women (2021, 97), Farrier points to queer scholar Jack Halberstam, who outlines the differences between these two primary modes of performance:

Male impersonation has been a theatrical genre for at least two hundred years, but drag king is a recent phenomenon. Whereas the male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of maleness as the whole of her act, the drag king performs (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act. (Halberstam 1998, 232)

The theatricality of drag kinging identified by Halberstam spoke to the playing style I imagined for the MC; I was interested in the potential of drag kinging to expose problematic masculine gender norms through performance. Additionally, as theatre scholar Eve Shapiro (2007) points out in her study of the performance group *Disposable Boys Toys*, drag king performances can expand one’s conception of gender, since it provides “one way to unbraid gender and sex and broaden the meaning of ‘woman’”

(2007, 258). This description of broadening the gendered category of woman aligned with my political and artistic aim of expanding the possibilities for women on musical stages.¹¹⁴

As an artist invested in expanding the possibilities for female gender presentation on the musical stage, drag, particularly if consciously subversive, presented a productive way forward in thinking about how the MC could be played. It enabled an assertion of a female masculinity that could simultaneously expose and critique the widespread normalisation of problematic gender stereotypes and heteronormativity in musicals, whilst creating different possibilities for gender performance in such contexts. Therefore, I needed to communicate that it was an essential aspect of the book, so I indicated in the character descriptions that the MC would be played by a woman using subversive drag.¹¹⁵

Another reason for specifying the use of drag was to be subversive was due to the musical's history of using drag in ways that are problematic. For instance, as outlined in Chapter 2, music theatre scholar Grace Barnes (2022) draws attention to the ways that drag in British musicals tends to displace and replace women and reduce opportunities for women performers. Music theatre scholar Stephanie Lim similarly argues that drag roles that require "male performers to *perform femaleness*" (2023, 285, emphasis in original), may exclude female performers from taking on such roles. She writes:

Many instances of drag in musical theatre have been restricted to larger-than-life, comedic roles, as in the cases of *Hairspray's* Edna Turnblad, *Chicago's* Mary Sunshine, *Matilda's* Miss Trunchbull and *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder's* Lady D'Ysquith. (Lim 2023, 285)

¹¹⁴ Interestingly, in terms of form, Farrier notes drag kinging occurs most often in variety forms, which are "popular in that it appeals to a mainstream audience and is not considered to be high art" (2021, 101). This association is useful in supporting my aim to create a work for a broad audience.

¹¹⁵ See an outline of the MC in the Character List (p.128).

When employed as a casting practice, Lim suggests that drag in the musical may perpetuate and exploit “stereotypes of brash, eccentric and unattractive women” (2023, 285).¹¹⁶

I also wanted to differentiate my use of drag from crossplay, which Lim explains is “when a participant takes on the target character’s gender, one *different* from their own” and gender-bending, “when the actor or participant changes the target character’s gender to better fit their *own* identity” (Lim 2023, 284; original emphasis). These strategies, which I suggest are attempts at reorientating musicals with an otherwise heteronormative orientation, offer but “a temporary solution to the larger problem of male-domination that currently plagues Broadway musicals” (Lim 2023, 296). Therefore, the aim of insisting on subversive drag in *Dangerous* was to highlight and subvert audience and actor expectations for gendered performance in musical theatre contexts and contribute to the overall intersectional feminist orientation of the show, rather than resorting to problematic gender roles and limiting usages of drag.

Butler argues drag is not a realistic copy of gender, not a copy of an ‘original’; it is, as French puts it, “a simulacrum (a copy of a copy), that exposes the very absence of an original” (2017 22), revealing the fallacy of a ‘natural’, inevitable, essentialist notion of gender. The idea of a simulacrum has a deeper resonance in the world of *Dangerous*, as it speaks to the idea of imitation prevalent on the early twentieth century Vaudeville stage, as explained by Glenn in her (1998) article, “Give An Imitation of Me”. Here, imitation and mimicry are explained as a tool largely exploited by female comics at the turn of the twentieth century. Though this sometimes problematically involved mimicking gender or racial stereotypes, another more subtle form of mimicry also occurred, one where personalities were often satirically impersonated. These performances, Glenn argues, were part of a cultural moment where women “provoked a critical dialogue” allowing them to “situate their comic practices within the cultural discourses of their day”, suggesting

¹¹⁶ In discussing *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983), Lim (2023) points to Ryan Donovan who notes the use of drag in this musical emerged as a response “to the homophobia surrounding the cultural moment in which the show was produced” (Donovan 2019, 142), thus differentiating it from the comedic, stereotypical drag roles.

that such female comics had an “extraordinary degree of self-consciousness about how their performances related to larger cultural concerns” (Glenn 1998, 48).

Taking the idea of a simulacrum quite literally and wanting to ensure the actors playing the MC would not appear to be “laminated” to their character (after Diamond 1988), I suggest in the book that the MC in *Dangerous* is played by multiple female actors, sometimes with many MCs appearing on stage simultaneously. This is intended to not only create the *Verfremdungseffekt* – by seeing a familiar figure of an MC being replicated across numerous, diverse bodies – but to also satirically mimic a problematic gender ideology to enable the performers to participate in the contemporary cultural discourse around gender, as the female comic performers did over one hundred years ago.

The first clear moment that there are numerous MCs in *Dangerous* occurs in Act 1 Scene 4. In this example the MCs finish each other’s sentences, as if they were one mind in two bodies – or copies of each other. In writing this section, I envisaged the actors playing the MC would arrive at specific movement vocabularies and embody a deliberate, heightened style of gesture, so the idea of being copies of each other would be clear. These movements would need to reference the hyper masculine gender presentation that is required within a patriarchal gender ideology, to enable the MC to reveal such gestures and behaviours as an ideology, whilst simultaneously critically engaging with this ideology through comedy and satire.

I explored this scene during the September practical workshop,¹¹⁷ to test out the idea of a simulacrum and imitation in the gestural performance of the MC.

¹¹⁷ On Wednesday 27 September 2023 at a studio at the University of Melbourne, Southbank campus.



Video 7: MC experiments for Act 1 Scene 4 (actors: Natalie Gamsu and Ursula Searle, MC voice provided by Peter Rutherford)

The actors and I experimented with movement and arrived at a gestural sequence that was heightened and offered a playful interpretation of the text that explored Brechtian-materialist feminist tools, such as *gestic* feminist criticism. As I had assumed, the movements had to be deliberate, heightened, and precise with particular attention paid to the angles of the body and the shapes from the audience point of view. Here, I was drawing on what I learnt from *Ascent*, where bold, clear, front facing shapes were the most impactful. As this was an early workshop with minimal rehearsal time, the actors and I were looking for whether the ideas had potential and demonstrated moments that, with further refinement, could offer the effect I was after. We thought of this as a proof-of-concept exploration.

Inspired by Gow's (2018) Brechtian-materialist feminist approach towards using stereotypical gestures to highlight problematic gender ideology in directing a queer feminist production of *Pippin* (1975), I wanted to explore a *gestic* feminist criticism on the words 'masculine' and 'feminine', to test out whether the stereotype could be referenced

in a way that offered critique. From conversations with the performers, my perception was that a *gestus* was able to emerge because the actors approached the task in a knowing, deliberate way. The context (of the given circumstances, the text and the dramaturgical purpose of the MC) allowed a critical feminist attitude to emerge. The orientation of the actors and I towards the task of finding heightened, stereotypical gestures allowed a playful sensibility to emerge, which gave the gestures a tongue in cheek quality. My impression of this was that the power was with the female actor, that she was using the stereotype knowingly to highlight the absurdity of the gender ideology, similar to descriptions offered in Gow's (2018) study. In my practice journal I reflected on the vital importance of this exploration during the workshop:

The process of hearing this draft read aloud by actors was difficult. In hearing the text anew, I could feel where things weren't working. But what encouraged me to keep going, even when I felt overwhelmed with feelings that it was an impossible show to write, were the MC experiments. There were flashes, moments, where I could see the potential of subversive drag. It was entertaining, unsettling, at once familiar and alienating. I thought, this works. (Jayde Kirchert, September 2023, Practice Journal)

To further the idea of the MC as a symbolic persona rather than a traditional character, the description I offer of the MC makes note of a specific costume and facial hair:

Drum roll. In front of a classic red curtain, an MC appears in a classic tux complete with top hat, tails and a perfect moustache. Music highlights this sudden appearance!

In prescribing this I imagined each actor who would take on the role of the MC would have the exact same accessories – the top hat, the fake moustache, and tails to match the identical movement vocabulary. My aim here was to orientate the actors towards the MC's material appearance in a specific way that would create distance from the role. By referencing stereotypically masculine visual accessories, I wanted to give the performers

interpreting this text the permission to explore masculine stereotypes in playing the MC, rather than aiming to realistically “lamine” (after Diamond 1988) themselves to a character. In reducing the powerful male figure of authority to removable and temporary symbols, supported by a heightened gestural language, I was aiming for the gender ideology to be exposed as performative; only existing when being done, to highlight its instability and open up the possibility of alternatives.

To test this idea out in the workshop, I invited the actors playing the role of the MC to wear the same black hat. This became particularly useful when there were multiple MCs in the same scene. The actors were of different ages, racial identities, and body shapes. Yet the hats, combined with the similar gestural language, gave me the impression of a shared identity. As we explored the use of the hat and gestures on the floor, the actors found a great sense of play and freely explored stereotypical movements to highlight and interpret the text. My impression as I watched the actors putting the hats on, playing in the studio mirror, was that the hat offered a clear, temporary entry into the MC’s world, bringing with it associations of a powerful, masculine, theatrical male figure. The hat seemed to act as a filter, providing a contextual reference point against which gestures could be assessed for their coherence with the overall persona or not. In other words, it was as if the hat provided a litmus test for if we were on the right track: I observed that anything that did not sit well within the world suggested by the hat was not right. Though we had limited time, the workshop suggested this approach had potential for engaging with gender ideology in a subversive, yet playful, comedic, and very theatrical way.



Figure 19: 3 actors play the MC, surrounding the New Woman

To further this Brechtian convention of creating distance between the performer and the role, I also specified in the stage directions that the voice for the MC would be pre-recorded by a male actor, and every actor playing this role would lip-synch to this recording. An extensive use of lip-synching was inspired by Dickie Beau, a British performer who is known for doing entire one-man shows lip-synching to pre-recorded voices, often of well-known people. His attention to detail and uncanny ability to lip-synch accurately gave me a profound appreciation for the wide application of this skill when I saw his performance of self-devised work *Re-Member Me* (2018).¹¹⁸ Glen D'Cruz

¹¹⁸ I saw this work in October 2018 as part of the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts. See D'Cruz (2019) for an analysis of the performance.

describes the affective impact of Beau's performance as "audacious and irreverent...the recorded voices unsettling the very idea of corporeal presence being coincident with a singular body and voice" (2019, 47). As Farrier notes, lip-synching has long been a feature of drag queen performances and can play a role in community forming and connecting to shared history, since "the situated lip-synch also serves as a calling to a particular vision of history" (2015, 196). Farrier, here, is referring to the incidence of drag queens lip-synching to songs, particularly of 'divas', where there is a negotiation between the pre-recorded voice, as it existed in the past, and the contemporary moment. However, rather than connecting with the bodily queer history of recorded diva singers and passing on queer culture, *Dangerous* is lifting up the history of patriarchy and how it can enact violence on women's bodies through performative speech acts. Farrier, drawing on Carol Langley (2006), explains that lip-synching also provides "the choreographic aspect of drag; serves as a vehicle of recognition; produces texture, layering and complexity" and "makes a political statement" (Farrier 2015, 195). Additionally, lip-synching presents the potential for "postmodern parody" and "the ability to challenge reality" (Farrier 2015, 195). In *Dangerous*, such a convention, along with the identical visual copies of the character appearing, are intended to contribute to the *Verfremdungseffekt*, which can challenge normative associations and ideology by estranging the familiar.

This aspect was the most difficult to achieve with limited time, as the level of rehearsal needed to arrive at the precision and uncanny quality I witnessed in Beau's work requires a significant amount of rehearsal. In the workshop we focused on achieving a broad, brushstroke version, focusing on a few key sentences or words to align the lip movements with the audio recording, then continuing general mouth movements. This, in conjunction with the hat and gestures produced a convincing proof of concept, which warrants further exploration and workshopping in a future, more in depth rehearsal process. In particular, the questions I was still left with were around whether this convention of lip synching could be sustained for an entire performance, and whether it would retain its uncanniness as it became more familiar to an audience.

As I reflected on the workshopping process I thought back to Ahmed's (2006) ideas around orientation and the relationship subversive drag could have with the types of roles typically available to female actors in musicals. In particular, the notion of 'lines' became quite useful in framing the opportunity subversive drag could present to challenge gender norms in musicals. That is, if the MC was to be played by a single male-identifying actor, the power dynamics that would emerge would reinforce existing, problematic lines one would typically expect from a musical. Such lines frequently prescribe masculine men to take control of a space and the bodies and things within it. In this context, power would be assumed to belong to the MC, as the masculine male figure, and the female bodies would be organised in a subservient or objectified relationship to the MC. However, having diverse female cast members playing the role of the MC in a satirical, heightened and knowing way offers a challenge to traditional orientations and expectations for what female bodies can do in a musical. Since the role does not belong to one actor, all the actors on stage have the opportunity for transformation and an active role in the development of the story. They also disrupt any perceived lamination to their suffragist or ensemble roles, as they can switch between their characters and the MC persona. These aspects enable new, unconventional 'lines' to be created for female bodies on the musical stage, particularly when there are multiple copies and multiple lines co-existing in the playing space.

My intersectional feminist orientation requires a diversity of body shapes and racial identities in the casting (as reflected in my workshops with the actors). Therefore, I aim for the emphasis to be on what these bodies *can do* to create the illusion of a shared persona – that is, the movement – rather than requiring uniformity based on physical traits (as has historically been expected in female choruses). Whilst the MC represents traditional patriarchal masculinity, my experience of seeing him played using subversive drag by numerous female actors in the workshops disrupted the conventional line, instead replacing it with numerous, unpredictable lines. In other words, if the traditional MC is a single straight line, the subversive drag persona in *Dangerous* is intended to twist that straight line, splice it, curve it, and take it in unexpected directions.

To sum up, the approaches I have outlined towards the MC character aim to draw attention to the problematic gender ideology of the patriarchal system, whilst allowing the female actors to maintain power in the space. These early decisions, informed by a post-structuralist, intersectional feminist lens, contribute to an overall orientation that creates the opportunity for new, more empowering lines for female bodies on stage and offers a feminist innovation of the concept musical device of the narrator figure. In early proof of concept workshops, problematic gender ideology was revealed and the typical lines that might be expected – literal lines of dialogue as well as the ways the bodies move through space and in relation to others – were exposed and critically engaged with through a Brechtian-materialist feminist approach to subversive drag.

4.5 Point of Audience Connection: The New Woman

I initially resisted having anything that resembled a ‘hero’ character, as I was concerned that this may engender a traditional linear plot and book musical structure. However, based on the findings from the earlier revue version of the show identified in Section 1, I felt a character was needed that the audience could potentially identify with to help explain the complex gender and power dynamics, without resorting to didacticism. To represent a transformative politics (after Dolan 2013), I decided this character ought to undergo a *transformation* that ultimately orientated her towards the intersectional feminist message of the show. I also needed to ensure the learnings and transformative journey of this character illuminated the central themes to maintain the overall emphasis on concept.

This character, called the New Woman, was initially inspired dramaturgically by the Balladeer in *Assassins*. Miller suggests the Balladeer represents everyday American people who may be “eager to oversimplify, happy to see things in black and white. Good is very good and bad is very bad” (1997, 193). The Balladeer has a rigid moral compass that tends to reductively moralise the issues at hand (for instance, he demonises Booth quickly, but as the show unfolds this judgement is brought into question). The Balladeer reveals the political themes in a way that allows the audience to come to understand their complexity gradually. I wanted to see if I could apply the dramaturgical function of the

Balladeer drawing attention to the issues of national identity, belonging and entitlement, to a feminist political context, to take the audience on a journey of becoming orientated towards an intersectional feminist agenda.

Initially, I saw the New Woman representing young feminists coming into adulthood. However, analysing the Balladeer allowed me to take a broader view with my character, and she came to represent those who might have a cursory understanding of feminist politics or gender, but for whom the thought of dismantling or standing up to the patriarchy could seem overwhelming, terrifying, pointless, or impossible. In this way, she could be someone who goes on a journey to learn about the complexity of the issues surrounding the patriarchal system and why there is no 'quick fix', just as the Balladeer exposes oversimplified arguments around the issues of why America has produced so many assassins wanting to shoot a President. In short, the New Woman in *Dangerous* could create an opportunity for the audience to come to their own deeper understandings of feminist issues. For this reason, I decided this character should start the show in the audience, with the intention of the audience genuinely believing for as long as possible that she has been randomly selected by the MC to participate in an audience participation segment. In this way, I hoped she could function as the bridge between the world of the Vaudeville performance and the real world of the auditorium, helping the audience identify with her and her journey.

I wanted the stage space of *Dangerous* to become an "incubator for modern ideas about femininity" to enable my character to be an "active participant[s] in and critical observer[s] of [her] own cultural moment" (Glenn 2000, 7), just as the New Woman had done one hundred years prior. I felt compelled to recycle the name New Woman, to evoke an important moment in early modern feminist history, where women at the turn of the twentieth century were using the stage to "cultivate their individuality and their uniqueness" and demonstrate "the distinctive force of their personalities" (Glenn 2000, 7). Rather than create a New Woman character from the time period of the suffragists, I decided the New Woman should be a contemporary young woman so I could draw the parallels between the broader issues the suffragists were fighting for at the turn of the

twentieth century, and what feminist of today continue to fight for. In other words, the New Woman would suggest the link between now and then.

The Balladeer's journey of learning about the various assassins – especially Booth – structures *Assassins*. Similarly, the book of *Dangerous* is structured by the New Woman's journey encountering and learning about the different suffragists. As I analysed *Assassins*, I saw how the Balladeer had a song to sum up his judgement of each assassin's story. In a draft of *Dangerous*, I attempted to mimic this device by having the New Woman sum up each act through conversing with a suffragist backstage. The aim was to allow these moments to chart her shift in orientation, beginning as a young woman with feminist tendencies, towards an empowered, knowing feminist activist. However, when I had actors read the script aloud, instinctively my sense of 'know-how' (after Nelson 2013) alerted me to a major problem. I reflected in my journal:

I had a lot of doubts after the reading. How broadly will this appeal? It's so dense and political. I had a heavy feeling in my gut that it wasn't right, something was missing. I didn't feel the release at the end I was hoping for. I could feel the rhythm slowing and scenes feeling sticky. I started to question everything. It was painful to not have arrived and to now feel I didn't know where I was going or if the journey had been worthwhile. I was disorientated. (Jayde Kirchert, September 2023, Practice Journal)

After informal discussions with a colleague and much reflection, I translated the 'know-how' impulse into a 'know-that' (after Nelson 2013) dramaturgical diagnosis, when I realised the New Woman's journey as a studious learner, happily building her orientation with only a few minor challenges along the way resulted in a lack of stakes. In an attempt to craft a clear trajectory for the New Woman, I oversimplified the transformation and made it too easy, which had a diminishing effect. By the end of the reading, I also felt there was not enough of a transformation to satisfy my aim of following Dolan's (2013) concept of a transformative politics. It was all too easy and the character did not experience enough of a change. Additionally, the world was not dangerous enough for

the New Woman – there was not enough at stake to engender a large change. Overall, the show was not living up to the title *Dangerous*.

In redrafting, I retained the development of her orientation towards feminism as central, however I had her start from a place of greater uncertainty and created more obstacles and less certainty overall in her journey. Her journey of becoming orientated towards an intersectional feminist agenda would still hold the book together, but it would take more twists and turns, creating more tension and stakes. In orientation terms, she would remain disorientated for longer, and multiple possibilities for which choice she should or could take would remain open for longer.

When comparing the New Woman to the Balladeer, I realised that the premise of having volatile, violent assassins occupying the majority of the stage time in *Assassins* provided sufficient tension and stakes to sustain the musical, and the Balladeer functioned as a counter voice. In *Dangerous*, the suffragists were largely aligned and whilst I was able to explore more friction between them in later drafts, ultimately the stakes and tension needed to be in the relationship the suffragists had with the New Woman and how both parties related to the MC. This was a useful realisation to come across because it reminded me that using another musical as a structural guide has its limitations.

Emphasising a lack of clarity for the New Woman's journey became a great source of dramatic tension as I redrafted *Dangerous*, which also spoke to my lived experience as a woman living in twenty-first century Australia. Whilst the suffragists had a clear issue (women's suffrage) on which to hang their dissatisfaction at their position within a patriarchal society, the issues women may face today are as complex as they are diverse. Thinking about the New Woman character was a lesson in balancing a political agenda with the dramaturgical needs of a theatrical work. The danger in prioritising politics over dramatic tension was that the work became, quite frankly, boring. As a writer, this is the most dangerous and scary place to be. As I continued to redraft and refine, I continually asked myself "where is the danger?" to find ways of locating dramatic tension and stakes in the relationships between the New Woman, the suffragists and the MC.

4.6 In Limbo: Backstage Scenes

The use of 'limbo' is identified by Miller (1997) as occurring in *Cabaret* (1966), and later in *Follies* (1972) and *Assassins* (1990). The limbo scene Miller describes in his article (1997) about *Assassins* occurs at the end of Byck's scene as it transforms into the song "Another National Anthem". In this song all the assassins from different time periods come together in a limbo space to criticise the notion of the American Dream and eventually chase down the Balladeer, taking charge of the space and the story (Miller 1997, 200-201). In the *Assassins* (1990) libretto, the term appears in the stage directions in Scene 10 where John Hinckley and Lynette Fromme sing "Unworthy Of Your Love" and again in Scene 17 (the final scene in the 1991 version of the libretto) where the assassins sing a reprise of "Everybody's Got The Right". Though Miller does not offer a definition of a limbo scene, he makes note of the "plastic nature of time" (Miller 1997, 192) throughout his analysis of *Assassins*, a musical whose non-linearity, he argues, enables the assassins from various times in history to "interact across the barriers of time" (Miller 1997, 192). I have interpreted this term to connote those scenes which occur in a place not bound by traditional, 'realistic' limitations of time, location, and history, and which may allow characters from different times and places to coexist in fictional circumstances.¹¹⁹ I propose that, as the word suggests, the defining feature of a limbo scene is that it occurs in an in-between, liminal place. In *Dangerous* I was interested in experimenting with the limbo scene as a specific device through which I could build a hybrid concept musical structure that would enable multiple characters from different time periods to co-exist, create fictional interactions to help build dramatic tension, and sustain an action driven plot that served the conceptual themes.

In experimenting with history, place and time, I am also critiquing heteronormative gender ideology through a queer approach to dramaturgy and temporality. This allows temporality to become a tool through which bodies may be orientated in non-linear and non-normative ways. Queer performance scholars Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier (2015) apply

¹¹⁹ A similar concept is what playwright Stephen Jeffreys would call "open time, open place" (2019, 39), which describes a way of conceiving of time and place that is flexible.

queer scholar Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) ideas on temporality to dramaturgy, suggesting that "moving between temporalities as part of a dramaturgical approach is a way to resist the straight timeline of 'history' and to allow the re-emergence and 'reimagining' of figures from the past" (Campbell and Farrier 2015, 153). By challenging the 'straight' line of history, the limbo device can be seen as a way of queering the musical's orientation to time and history, allowing for more creative freedom to explore the suffragist characters in ways that do not locate them within the confines of chrononormativity – that is, away from the heteronormative expectations for a 'productive' life that involves marriage, reproduction and child-rearing (see Freeman 2010, 3-4). This was an important choice to make, as it meant I was not confined by the timelines or facts of their lives (some of them did indeed marry and have children) and could therefore liberate my story from a heteronormative orientation that requires the female characters to exist as a romantic interest for a male character and to move beyond "the most obvious and time-worn stereotypes" (Wolf 2018, 168).

Since I had already selected the Vaudeville revue as the framing device, the obvious choice for a limbo scene setting was backstage; that is, backstage from the Vaudeville show. Backstage stories have occurred in a range of musicals over the last century, such as *Show Boat* (1927), *Kiss Me Kate* (1948), *Gypsy* (1959), *Cabaret* (1966), *Singin' in the Rain* (1983), *Phantom of the Opera* (1986) and *Curtains* (2006) to name but a handful. As Scott McMillin explains, backstage musicals "are about putting on musicals, so that the plot is about the means of its own production" (2006, 102). However, he also notes that as book writing became more sophisticated later in the twentieth century, there were greater innovations in how the backstage story could be explored, citing *Cabaret* as a prime example, where "the cabaret is a metaphor for the rise of Nazism" (2006, 102). He suggests that "the backstage musical has probably taken on more new lives than any other subgenre of theatre in the last fifty years" (2006, 102).¹²⁰ Notably, in the backstage convention, the songs are diegetically performed:

¹²⁰ In explaining why, he acknowledges that shows about performers more easily substantiate song and dance numbers. However, he also argues there is a further dramaturgical explanation, since other musicals do not require backstage conventions to justify transitioning into song. What he suggests is that these instances are richer

Thus, not all diegetic numbers belong to the backstage convention, but all numbers from the backstage convention are diegetic. What they all have in common is that they are called for as performances in the book. (McMillin 2006, 103)

In thinking about my aim for eventual commercial presentation, I imagined that in utilising the familiar backstage convention, my audience could be eased into – or orientated into – a familiar type of limbo space. There was also a link with the concept musical's use of song and the backstage convention's use of song, both of which are diegetic; therefore, the backstage convention could be dramaturgically compatible with the concept musical structure. I also knew I could exploit the pressure inherent in a backstage world, created by the competing needs of the show occurring on stage. For instance: there is the need for relative quiet to avoid the audience hearing backstage noise, the importance of time, particularly around cues, entrances and exits of people and things, and the nerves and anxiety that can exist in the time before a performer goes on stage.

Despite the natural pressures created by a backstage limbo world, when I heard the actors read the backstage scenes in the September draft, I was struck by how expositional they felt and how intellectual the suffragists' points were as they tried to convince the New Woman to become orientated towards their feminist aims. In my experience, the feminist issues I cared most about – for example, having bodily autonomy – ignited my feelings and impacted my body. I wanted my feminist theatre to *feel* like feminist theatre, not just present feminism theoretically, on the page. In other words, I wanted to find a way for the backstage scenes to support my intersectional feminist orientation and message, but to do so in a way that ignited and spoke to the feelings I felt in my body.

Erin Hurley identifies the actor's relationship with their body as "primary – both inasmuch as her body is her instrument and enabler of her working life" (2010, 69), and similarly, as a director and teacher, I rely on sensations in my body to guide me as to whether a scene is resonating and making emotional sense so I can determine its likelihood of affecting an

dramatically for having song and dance numbers when they are "called for by the book" and that such a convention of breaking into song and dance can offer "such a mine of dramatic advantages that it becomes worth attention in the book" (McMillin 2006, 103).

audience. In preparing to redraft, I aimed to apply my sensitivity to feeling in my writing practice. One way this unfolded was by imagining many different possibilities for how the action in the backstage world could unfold, and paying special attention to how each possibility was making me feel and whether tension and stakes were being felt in my body. In this way, I was attending to the ways the text and ideas acted, according to what Hurley (2010) calls, a 'feeling-technology'. Though there is no guarantee an audience would have the same experience as me (and it was beyond the scope of this study to explore this), it was a useful starting point to orientate my writing self towards the feelings my writing could potentially elicit and to explore a feeling-led way of orientating my musical towards an intersectional feminism. In my journal I started to explore different possibilities to adjust the plot through the phrase 'what if', followed by a note about how it made me feel:

What if:

- The MC ends each act? Actually knocks them off? – this feels dangerous, I feel tight but a bit excited
- The NW's real task is to defeat (kill) the MC – this feels dangerous, I feel determination
- The NW turns out to be just like the MC and disappoints the suffragists – this feels useful but would only be a moment, not an end point
- It takes being alone to realise her physical vulnerability, her inner MC and the danger – this feels promising, I feel an openness
- The NW calls on the suffragists to help her and they are all able to return – this feels satisfying, I feel a sense of hope
- The setting operates as a sort of purgatory, the suffragists are all ghosts who have to relive and the NW is the key to their freedom – this feels uncertain, might be useful to revisit but I don't feel openness to this idea now (Jayde Kirchert, September 2023, Practice Journal)

Though I was instantly drawn to the idea of the MC ending each act with violence, one of my earlier concerns from the initial draft was around requiring actors to re-enact violence

and oppression for the sake of making a point about the challenges women face in a patriarchal world. However, as I went through the 'what ifs' list, the actions that were eliciting a physical response and emotional resonance were the more aggressive, heightened, and violent options. Again, I was faced with an imperfect choice: replicate violence against women on stage – albeit in performative theatrical ways – or have a dramatically 'dead' musical (though of course there were other directions I could take, I had invested so much time and energy in the circumstances and world of *Dangerous*, I could not entertain the idea of starting again (again) or taking the work in a completely new direction). I decided to take the approach that mirrored how I felt in my lived experience as a woman and chose to heighten and intensify the 'dangerous' feelings by including more violent acts. I did this with the proviso that I would aim for the balance of power to be with the women as much as possible and to prioritise their voices and perspectives, rather than giving too much voice to the oppressor. As with other major decisions, I was aware of the dangerous potential of taking this approach and this remained another point of tension throughout the writing process.

In attempting a redraft, I returned to the idea of the backstage area. I reflected on my own experiences of being in these areas, particularly the space in the wings; a threshold zone where one crosses over from the 'real' world into the world of make-believe that is charged with the attention and energy of a witnessing audience. I was reminded of musicals such as *Show Boat* (1927) and *Cabaret* (1966) where the performance space and the act of performing consciously, diegetically on stage, enabled the writers to use performance as a metaphor, bringing into question *what* was being performed. In *Show Boat*, Warren Hoffman (2014) argues, racial identity is highlighted through the metaphor of performance; the white characters have choices as to the roles they play (both on and offstage), and this reveals the injustices suffered by African Americans living in a society where white is the accepted norm. In *Cabaret*, director Hal Prince, as noted by scholar Linda Mizejewski (1992), was aiming to draw American audiences' attention towards the ways spectacle and performance could seduce and distract people from a dangerous, insidious power, as a way of warning the Americans that the Holocaust could happen anywhere (including America).

These examples got me thinking about the full potential of the backstage limbo world for a political message. I decided to follow a similar logic to *Cabaret*; I wanted to boldly explore how the backstage limbo scenes could highlight the performative nature of the roles we play in a patriarchal gender ideology, both onstage and off, and how that can feel. I realised that this could offer a feminist development of the backstage limbo device, because it could demonstrate the research insight I discovered when applying Ahmed's (2006) argument regarding orientation to performance: that what we see, feel and experience on stage can impact what we see and experience offstage. When watching a musical theatre performance, our bodies are turned towards certain bodies and objects in certain ways – ways that require and promote heteronormativity – which, over time, can create lines. These lines can then prime us and inform how we relate to bodies and objects beyond the theatre because these habituated lines, over time, come to form an orientation. Additionally, if the lines on stage mirror the lines one is habituated to offstage (as is typically the case with the majority of musicals mirroring the status quo), then they are doubly reinforced and deepened through feeling-technologies.

In *Dangerous*, I came to understand that although the suffragists attempt to claim ownership of their bodies and promote a feminist message in their performed acts, they are always in danger of being harmed by the MC, whether they are onstage or offstage because, as long as the MC is in charge, everything is orientated towards the MC's patriarchal ideology: in the MC's Vaudeville revue, everyone has a role to play and when people try to play a role that isn't theirs, someone must "restore equilibrium". The suffragists know their bodies are in a system that requires them to ultimately be subservient to the MC. The consequences for trying to deviate from this orientation, to step outside the lines their bodies are required to follow, are violently punitive.¹²¹ This is exemplified in the penultimate scene, where the MC explains to the New Woman what has been happening to the suffragists.¹²²

¹²¹ Echoing Butler's observation, "it is quite clear that there are strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations" (1988, 531).

¹²² In this reading, male actors provide the voice of the MC and the female actors signify their embodiment of the role by wearing the black hat.



Video 8: Act 2 Scene 5, the MCs tell the New Woman what has happened to the suffragists. (Actors: Asha Khamis, Emily Carr, Ursula Searle, Kristy *Nguy*, Chelsea, Suze. MC voices: Tyran Parke and Peter Rutherford)

The violence began to take on a fundamental role in clarifying the notion that onstage and offstage experiences are connected – even if we do not initially perceive this. The violence begins to occur to the suffragists in the onstage world, however, it eventually starts to seep into the backstage areas, and this when the New Woman realises what the suffragists have been trying to explain: that for women danger is everywhere. Even if one does not physically experience violence, one can feel it – and this feeling shapes us. In this way, the violence started to take on a clear dramaturgical and metaphorical purpose and strengthened the backstage scenes, whilst also aiming to draw attention to the ways the threat of violence in a patriarchal system orientates us in particular ways.

As the backstage scenes evolved through various drafts, they came to contain discussions about how the New Woman should use her stage time when she is asked to perform an act by the MC. Though the suffragists try to encourage the New Woman to use the stage space to say something important and political to make the world a better place for women, the MC works to preserve the notion that the stage is a non-political

space for 'traditional' entertainment. The backstage world is, for the most part, occupied by the New Woman and the suffragists. Many of the scenes see the suffragists attempting to orientate the New Woman towards their agenda, with their ultimate aim being to get the New Woman to do something onstage that will help reorientate the world of the show. They believe the MC is the key: if she can eliminate the MC, then everyone will be free to finally tell a new story – no longer required to relive the stories where they battle in a patriarchal world, but free to imagine a world where women feel liberated because they are no longer in danger.

The suffragists believe they are being covert in their conversations backstage with the New Woman, however the MC, as an omnipotent presence, catches on. To ensure his power prevails, the MC finds the New Woman alone backstage and takes the opportunity to try and orientate her towards his ideology by confusing her and framing women's liberation as an unnecessary and tiresome venture; the focus is on having fun and feeling special. He tells her she will perform an act and in asking for advice about what she should do ("shouldn't [my act] say something?") the MC warns her that audiences do not care about serious political questions ("this is about fun"). In other words, the MC attempts to turn the New Woman away from the suffragists' notion of the public space (the stage) as a platform through which a female voice can be taken seriously, and towards the stage as a place where you need to say everything "with a smile", and appealing to traditional gender roles are seen as the backbone of good old fashioned 'entertainment' – that audiences expect and will reward with adoration and applause.

In a further attempt to convert her to his ideology, the MC assures the New Woman that if she wants to change the world, she can do that by following his advice because "it is possible, if you are concerned with such a thing, to do so by making people feel nice" – no painful, difficult change of orientation required. This rhetoric is aiming to allude to Blair's (2016) concern that positive feelings can be manufactured in disempowering contexts. The MC's position allows the New Woman to separate the performative world of the stage from the rest of her life by dismissing her feminist impulses in the context of the Vaudeville show, implying they have no place in the theatre. If the New Woman plays

the role ascribed by the MC, she is promised feelings of pleasure and validation, providing an emotional antidote to the conversations about danger she has with the suffragists. This also draws on Savran and Schlossman's concerns about the musical's commitment to pleasure over critical engagement, as explained in Chapter 2.¹²³

When pushed by Truth in one of the last backstage scenes, the New Woman cites the MC's claims that politics don't matter and the real power lies with those who speak to the dominant ideology, because history is doomed to forever repeat itself. In this ideology, the female body is required to be objectified because it entertains the public. The New Woman purports that this allows her to feel seen – however, she is conflating public validation with true, inner power. Truth challenges the New Woman's flippant remarks ("you can try and make it all mean something, but at the end of the day people just want fun"), by giving the example of the blackface character Jump Jim Crow, explaining that a dismissive attitude that sees 'entertainment' as being inconsequential to the 'real' world is a dangerous weapon that can perpetuate insidious, problematic values and ideas that can contribute to harmful oppression, even legitimising acts of violence. This dialogue echoes the concerns expressed in *Cabaret* (1966) – if we fail to pay attention, bad things can and do happen. In explaining the historical context behind the term "Jim Crow Laws", Truth points out the powerful impacts that entertainment can have on a culture and how they are always connected.

The New Woman refuses to take responsibility in the conversation with Truth, finding herself overwhelmed, not knowing which way to turn, feeling disorientated. She tries to instead convince herself that the world of the performance on stage and the real world beyond the stage door really are separate, believing she can go back to her old life and escape. In trying to leave the backstage area however, she finds herself captive in a narrow trapdoor tunnel where multiple MCs find her. What is 'real', what is 'performed' and what is 'performative' starts to become unclear, confusing the New Woman as she struggles to accept that, contrary to what the MC led her to believe, the performance on

¹²³ David Savran warns that the musical's commitment to pleasure enables "the manufacture of theatrical seduction and the ideological positions to which mass audiences can be seduced" (2004, 215). David Schlossman proposes that "spectators may subordinate critical urges to pleasure" (2002, 153).

stage is *both* performative, *and also* has ‘real life’ consequences offstage – both backstage and in her life beyond the walls of the theatre.



Video 9: Act 2 Scene 4, Truth explains to the New Woman why entertainment always matters (Actor: Asha Khamis)

In this moment the New Woman is literally trapped in a dark, liminal space, evoking Ahmed’s conception of disorientation: “A bodily feeling of losing one’s place, and an effect of the loss of place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body” (Ahmed 2006, 160). The threat of violence occurs through the MC, in stage directions such as “We hear heavy, sinister breathing,” and threatening text such as:

MC2	It was you.
NW	Me? I didn’t do anything!
MC3	You’re...
MCs	Dangerous...
MC2	Someone needs to stop you before it’s too late...

Additionally, attending to a feminist historicity of the 'backstage', the threat of violence in this scene also intentionally evokes a meta-theatrical moment highlighting the many stories that have come to mainstream media attention concerning women's personal safety in backstage areas (see, for example, Knowles and Branley 2018). It is also an allusion to the frightening statistics of violence against women in Australia.¹²⁴ This is intended to again remind the audience of the contemporary relevance of these issues, where women are often in danger either backstage in their places of work or more broadly behind closed doors, 'offstage'. As the New Woman is confronted with her personal safety, I intend to also remind the audience of the persistence of danger in women's lives. In this way, meta-theatrical comments are being made which are brought into a feminist context, with my aim being to suggest questions such as: when and why do we ignore our feelings in instances when danger is present? In what ways do our performances of gender *require* that we ignore the dangers present in a patriarchal system that wants us to focus on individual experiences of being celebrated, whilst requiring compliance to a restrictive, harmful gender ideology? Again, danger and the threat of violence plays an important role – here, in connecting the musical's message to contemporary issues, thereby aiming to increase the potential for impact on a broad audience.

The New Woman goes from being aligned with the MC's self-interested 'show business' rhetoric, that accepts female objectification and oppression as an inevitable part of the economic equation, to being in a place of disorientation, of not knowing where to turn or how to go back (literally and ideologically) and feeling alone. The New Woman's experience of confusion, overwhelm and disorientation is then materialised scenographically in the backstage space, as noted in the stage directions: "The space opens up and mirrors start to appear, circling the NW." At this point the confined, limbo backstage area starts to expand until it subsumes the entire performance space. The use of mirrors can be thought of as a feeling-technology intending to amplify the experience of an endless, expansive limbo, to highlight the New Woman's experience of extreme disorientation. This is theoretically and dramaturgically significant because:

¹²⁴ For example, "On average, one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner" and "1 in 3 women (30.5%) has experienced physical violence since the age of 15" (*Our Watch* 2023).

The point is not whether we experience disorientation (for we will, and we do), but how such experiences can impact on the orientation of bodies and spaces, which is after all about how the things are “directed” and how they are shaped by the lines they follow. The point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do – whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope. (Ahmed 2006, 158)

After collapsing the backstage and onstage divide in the world of the musical both metaphorically and materially, the New Woman begins to locate herself within a feminist orientation. The backstage world truly serves as a limbo space for the New Woman, as a place of in between, of disorientation. Following Ahmed’s suggestion above, that what happens after an experience of disorientation is what matters, from this point onwards, the New Woman begins to act from a place of feminist empowerment and locates a deeper strength, bravery, and creativity, following a feminist orientation. This establishes the groundwork for a transformative politics of hope, paving the way for the utopian performative moment by the show’s conclusion.

This was also the point at which the concept musical structure and the book-style scenes converged. I had thought of the Vaudeville acts as functioning dramaturgically in the mode of the concept musical, whereas the backstage limbo scenes functioned dramaturgically as a book musical. Spatially, these two structures were distinguished by the onstage Vaudeville show and the backstage limbo space. However, at this moment where the New Woman experiences the peak of disorientation, not knowing what is real and what is performative, the dramaturgical and spatial (scenographic) aspects of the concept and book musical worlds also begin to collide, creating a third, truly hybrid structure and space, at the same time as the New Woman locates herself on a feminist path. This is something I realised upon reflection in my journal:

I set out to write a feminist musical, working with a concept-hybrid structure because I couldn’t see a way to make a feminist book musical work. I had felt as though there

was something inherent in the traditional book dramaturgy – that the conservative values of the time of its maturation are somehow embedded in the conventions. I'm not sure that is necessarily true, but I do find it fascinating that the moment at which the NW finally arrives confidently on her feminist path is where the form takes a turn, where the two worlds collide, and the plot has to be tied up through the fullest expression of the conceptual themes. There is something that feminist content can do to form if it is followed. If content really does dictate form as Sondheim suggests, then feminist content can inspire innovations in form. (Jayde Kirchert, December 2023, Practice Journal)

As I was learning to listen to my body more in the process of writing, I allowed the New Woman to similarly understand what her journey was all about and which direction she should take once she felt her body was impacted. That is, as the New Woman starts to challenge the pull of the patriarchal orientation and feels the danger of doing so through the threats of the MCs, she makes the choice to become orientated towards a feminist agenda. As she gradually gains control of the space, it transforms into a utopian space, mirroring the shift in power, leading towards a utopian performative by the musical's end. This, coincidentally, inversely mirrors *Assassins*, as the final limbo scene (in the 1991 version of the libretto) allows the assassins to gain control of the space and assert their dystopian domination. In this way, the backstage limbo device allows the orientation concept to become materialised to clarify the feminist message: it is only once the New Woman realises that there is no distinction between the onstage and offstage worlds, that the urgent need for feminist action becomes clear. Additionally, the limbo device and its transformation was a means through which the feminist content could enable a feminist form to emerge.

Section 3: Conclusion

Taking the dramaturgical principles arrived at through work on *Ascent*, I sought to create a new musical with an intersectional feminist orientation that aims to have commercial, broad appeal. This process began with the excitement and inspiration generated in reading Glenn's (2000) book, where the potential for shining a spotlight on spectacular, inventive women was possible. However, the creative process was not linear or straightforward and failed experiments were necessary to arrive at the creation of a feminist hybrid concept musical.

By taking *Assassins* as an example of a concept musical with numerous characters based on historical figures and a strong political message, I was guided towards the structure of the book for *Dangerous*. Along with inspiration from *Cabaret* (1966), *Pippin* (1972) and Miller's (1997) analysis of these works, I took the devices of the narrator/devil figure, connecting character and the limbo scene, and developed them using intersectional feminist theory and practical experiments. From initial inspiration to structuring and writing scenes, the process of crafting a hybrid concept musical with an intersectional feminist orientation required constant reflection, cross-checking and analysis, and was messy, imperfect, and always in danger of slipping into the problematic power dynamics I was trying to challenge and critique. The central character's decision to commit to a feminist path converged with the collapse of concept and book dramaturgies and towards a truly hybrid dramaturgy in the musical's final section.

Chapter 5: Writing Feeling-Technologies

In this chapter I focus specifically on processes for writing the lyrics and stage directions of *Dangerous*. These areas of writing are further layers that contributed to the overall intersectional feminist orientation I was trying to instil in the book of *Dangerous*. I approached writing the lyrics and stage directions as feeling-technologies that could orientate the audience and provide both messages and feelings aligned with an intersectional feminist agenda orientated towards female liberation.

In section 1, I first acknowledge that the lyrics in *Dangerous* are inspired by other recent original musicals with contemporary music styles such as *Six* (2017) and *Hamilton* (2015). By applying Ahmed's (2006) and Blair's (2016) ideas to analysing the lyrics of *Hamilton* and *Six*, and drawing on scholarly analyses of these musicals, I argue that whilst enjoying broad popularity and emulating popular music styles and their positive associated feelings, these musicals do not exhibit an intersectional feminist orientation due to their lack of feminist messaging. I therefore carefully delineate the stylistic influences of these musicals on my lyric writing and identify their benefits (stylistically providing powerful feeling-technologies) and limitations (not being orientated towards a feminist message) and offer comparative analyses of the lyrics of *Dangerous* with lyrics from *Six* and *Hamilton*.

Section 2 presents "Pony Patter" as the first case study example from *Dangerous* exploring how stage directions can be used as powerful technologies of orientation. This production number contains numerous stage directions which complement the lyric writing, demonstrating the productive potential of Brechtian-materialist feminist approaches to execute an intersectional feminist orientation. Here, *gestic* feminist criticism and the *Verfremdungseffekt* are explored as a means for maintaining and indeed reclaiming some performance styles and conventions for a feminist agenda – in other words, re-orientating them – where they have otherwise been associated with female objectification or oppression on the musical stage.

The second case study example that explores stage directions as technologies of orientation is the final song "Dangerous (finale)", which uses Dolan's (2005) concept of

utopian performatives. This offers an important framing for one of the final images suggested in the book and anchors the orientation of the entire work. Stage directions are shown to be important assets in building an intersectional feminist orientation.

Section 1: Lyric Writing as Feeling-Technology

Dangerous owes aspects of its lyric writing style to recent original contemporary musicals such as *Six* (2017) and *Hamilton* (2015). However, usage of stylistic components inspired by these musicals in *Dangerous* is complex, as neither of these musicals exhibit a clear intersectional feminist orientation or feminist message. Structurally, *Six* may be considered a loose concept musical, as will be explained below, and *Hamilton*'s structure follows a traditional book musical, however both musicals incorporate popular music aesthetics and styles in an original storytelling context, which contribute to their broad appeal.¹²⁵ *Dangerous* looks to these commercially successful and influential musicals by similarly employing popular music style features in the lyric writing in the context of an original story, but it does so in a way that attempts to provide feminist messaging to contribute to the musical's overall intersectional feminist orientation. Whereas *Hamilton* and *Six* present positive feelings associated with familiar contemporary music styles, but messages that do not promote women's liberation or equality, *Dangerous* aims to present both feelings that evoke positive association with popular music styles and messages that align with an intersectional feminist orientation.

5.1 The Opening Number

As Jack Viertel (2016) explains, the opening number's function is to tell the audience what the show is about and what to expect. He uses the example of concept musical *Company* (1970) (among others) to explain how its opening number – also called “Company” – sets audience expectations for the tone of the musical and provides a sense of what world the musical is presenting (Viertel 2016, 46-47). To further this point, I propose that the opening number of a musical *orientates* an audience towards the show's world, style and politics.

¹²⁵ Whilst there are examples of recent musicals including *& Juliet* (2019) and *Jagged Little Pill* (2018) that make a conscious attempt at writing a story with a feminist orientation, these are Jukebox book musicals and therefore entail a different process than creating an original concept musical with an original score, as the songs and their lyrics are already predetermined. See Rodosthenous (2017) for more on this issue.

To make clear the orientation of *Dangerous*, I decided that the opening number needed to be a diegetic, pop concert style song, where the suffragist characters would consciously perform to an audience. This would serve several purposes that would contribute to the musical's orientation. Firstly, popular music styles are typical of variety and revue shows which helps them appeal to a broad audience. The pop concert style of performance would facilitate a direct connection between performers and audience and set up the convention of direct address and audience being included in the world of the (Vaudeville) framing device. Secondly, knowingly performing in the style of a music concert would allow the song to operate as a feeling-technology in a similar way to the songs in Jukebox musicals, where positive feelings associated with attending live popular music events are evoked (see Taylor 2012), whilst communicating a feminist message. Thirdly, a pop concert style song would introduce the metaphor of performance, which could help elucidate the conceptual themes. The song itself would be called "Dangerous" and explicitly and directly communicate with the audience about who the suffragists were, why they have returned to a modern audience and what they want to achieve. By writing the lyrics in the style of a contemporary pop song, I was also aiming to convey the contemporary relevance of the themes and issues of the musical.

Imagining pop song style lyrics for the opening number, I wanted to invite the audience to consider the suffragists in a new light and challenge any preconceived notions they may have about the women's suffrage movement or indeed the feminist movement. In a similar way to the suffragists over one hundred years ago, I am conscious of the range of complex attitudes towards feminist concerns (see for example Crispin 2017, 12-13; McCann and Monaghan 2020, 54-88; D'Urso, Rosenberg and Winget 2021, 1-23). A pop song style in the lyrics could evoke positive feelings people may associate with pop music to celebrate these suffragists. Indeed, I wanted to encourage audiences to feel the passion and joy often reserved for popstars and pop music towards the suffragists, given the enormous social and cultural impact the suffragists have had.

I was ready to embrace the complexity of pop music's historicity and associations, and expected I would need to be attentive to the relationship between gender roles, feminism

and pop music to use pop music lyric writing styles in a conscious, deliberate way. The first challenge arose, however, in realising how large an umbrella term pop music is: pop music is a broad category and encompasses many sub-genres (and it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide an in-depth analysis of this often subjective term).¹²⁶ Pop music, on the whole, as with rap and hip hop (which tends to be subsumed under this term), has generally been guilty of presenting and perpetuating gender stereotypes and derogatory, objectifying images of women. Sociology scholars Adrienne Trier-Bieniek and Amanda Pullum point out the generic expectations for gender roles in pop music:

In general, men are presented as hyper-masculine, performing songs that make the girls in the audience scream, while holding their guitars at pelvic height, an obvious ode to their masculinity. Female musicians are usually expected to be attractive, per the cultural standard, above all else. (2014, 82)

Overall, gender stereotypes abound and “derogatory images are far more common” than positive images of women (Weitzer and Kubrin 2009, 4).

However, Trier-Bieniek and Pullum (2014) also point out the pivotal role of pop music in the “mobilization, framing, and collective identity formation in many social movements” (2014, 85), noting the significance of protest songs and pop music generally in mobilising and drawing attention to various social causes and issues, including those concerning feminism. In their book *Popular Music and the Politics of Hope* (2019), Susan Fast and Craig Jennex similarly recognise “the diverse ways popular music can productively contribute to the collective political projects of queerness and feminism” (2019, 1), and deal specifically with “minoritarian performers” (2019, 2) whose work challenges “hegemonic ideas about gender, sexuality, race, class, age, ability, and incarceration” (2019, 11). In doing so, they draw on scholarship that explores the productive potential of popular music styles (see for example Fast 2001, 2012; Jennex 2016). Fast and Jennex propose:

¹²⁶ Scholars who write about pop music often contain their analysis to specific artists, a few categories or sub-genres or time periods.

In a social reality structured by patriarchy, heteronormativity, white supremacy, and ongoing processes of colonization, imperialism, and exploitation, experiences of aesthetic beauty and hopefulness [in popular music] are particularly productive for queer and feminist political action. (2019, 9)

Pop music is a flexible, catch-all term appearing in a range of political contexts – some progressive and some not. Therefore, in choosing my pop music references for lyric writing for the opening number, I decided to be specific when looking to pop songs for stylistic inspiration and to draw on songs primarily based on the messages of their lyrics (as this varies greatly between artists).

When I started to explore ideas for the opening song, the main reference I kept returning to was Beyoncé's song "Run the World (Girls)". There was something about its drive and feel that I wanted to capture in my opening song. Though its music video problematically depicts highly sexualised female spectacle, Trier-Bieniek and Pullum note its message, "serves as a rallying call, encouraging women to continue to fight for access to education and for social, cultural, and political empowerment" (2014, 98). Overall, they find the song "celebrates women's achievements and the power they have earned" (Trier-Bieniek and Pullum 2014, 99). Trier-Bieniek and Pullum helped me make sense of my 'know-how' (after Nelson 2013): I realised I wanted to elicit the feelings evoked by Beyoncé's song, especially the feeling of a rallying call, because I wanted the audience hearing "Dangerous" to feel motivated to get on board with its feminist message. Though much of the feeling tone in *Dangerous* will be achieved through the music and vocal delivery, I maintain that the lyrics are also an important feeling-technology and the starting point from which my composer begins.

In trying to understand how Beyoncé created this feeling for the feminist message in her song, I considered the impact of the repeated call and answer style lyric, "who run the world? Girls (girls)" featured countless times throughout the song. However, I do not believe it is the repetition of this question alone, but the message this repeated question

contains that gives it a charged energy: that it is girls who are in charge.¹²⁷ When thought about in terms of being a feeling-technology, the lyric's power can be seen to emerge from its combination of both message and pointed, rhythmic repetition (along with other aspects of the song including rhythm, melody, instrumentation and the like). Beyoncé's feminist idea, repeated, ignited feelings of female empowerment in me as the listener. To mimic this, "Dangerous" has a repeated refrain, "If they won't respect us? We gotta get dangerous." By making this a question, I was aiming to emulate Beyoncé's rallying call and answer style lyric containing repetition and a feminist message.

Whilst "Run the World (Girls)" provided a stylistic starting point, the large amount of lyric repetition in the song was not conducive to a theatrical context that required condensed storytelling. I realised that my opening number could draw on the opening number of the musical *Six* (2017), as it too has historical characters and a diegetic pop concert setting. I was particularly interested in whether *Six*'s opening number "Ex-Wives" could provide a structural guide for introducing key characters, providing some backstory and establishing the premise of the show. However, I knew there would be some problematic politics to navigate, as I set out below.

5.1.1 *Six*: Problematic Politics

Six (2017) offers original songs that are stylistically reminiscent of popular music in the context of an original story. *Six*'s score references artists such as Beyoncé and Miley Cyrus (Paulson 2020) and similar styles are also emulated in *Dangerous*. As artist-scholar Grace Barnes (2020) notes, despite being touted as 'feminist' by reviewers, *Six* is riddled with problematic politics. For Barnes, a feminist musical is "a show with an authentic female voice that advocates equality and empowers women both onstage and off" (2020, 148) – a definition that echoes Dolan's (2013) suggestion that feminist cultural forms advocate for women's right to equality in all areas of social and cultural life. According to Barnes, this is not achieved in *Six*. Therefore, I felt it important to understand *Six*'s politics

¹²⁷ This is not an entirely unproblematic message, but at the very least is aiming for women's voices and achievements to be acknowledged.

by unpacking Barnes' (2020) article and nuanced this further by bringing Barnes' analysis into conversation with Blair's (2016) notion of 'feelings' versus 'messages' of empowerment and Ahmed's (2006) orientation. This helped me discern which aspects of *Six* I did not want to replicate and which aspects were useful as inspiration for feeling-technologies.

Six elicits feelings of empowerment and enjoyment that claim to celebrate women, despite the messages and overall orientation of *Six* struggling to demonstrate a conscious, intersectional feminism. In an argument similar to Blair's (2016), Barnes (2020) identifies the tension between the feelings of pleasure and enjoyment for the audience and the reality of the show's premise and messaging, writing:

Regardless of how much fun the show may be, there is something unsettling about the reduction of the abuse and murder of women into a fun night out, particularly when dressed up as female power. (2020, 146)

In other words, although the feelings the show elicits may be fun and enjoyable, the show has, "at its core the abuse of women by men in positions of power" (Barnes 2020, 139). Indeed, Barnes (2020) argues the dominance of enjoyable feelings has the effect of trivialising the problematic aspects of the premise, that sees the former wives of Henry VIII competing against each other in a pop song competition to establish who was most adored by him and who suffered the most at his hands. For instance, there is the concerning implication that being beheaded is 'sexy' – a point she notes is overlooked by critics who, like the critics of *Hamilton*, are reluctant to engage with the messages of the musical, instead highlighting the feelings it generates.

Barnes (2020, 141) points out that, like the women in *Hamilton*, the women in *Six* are limited to playing problematic stereotypes. Despite there being no male character appearing on stage, King Henry "is more clearly defined than the women of the title" (2020, 146) and almost every song is either about the abuse he enacted or the extent to which he feels favourably towards the wives. In orientation terms, the narrative can be

seen as orientated towards the abusive King Henry for the majority of the show. This parallels the challenges I faced when crafting the MC in *Dangerous*, where I was concerned about orientating a show towards a single, powerful male figure and the problematic message this might purport. Though, by the end of *Six*, the wives eventually determine to stop trying to outcompete one another and set out to start new lives as pop stars, this too reinforces patriarchal norms, because it suggests that to be taken seriously, or even just seen and heard as a woman, you need to be a famous pop star – and one who is willing to use her body as spectacle. In this way, *Six* reinforces the lines of heteronormative gender ideology that typically occur in commercial musicals, rather than offering a feminist message or orientation.

When I watched *Six* and saw how much the audience was entertained, a question arose: what if these songs had empowering messages, as well as *feeling* empowering? Barnes suggests “the songs are intended not to empower, but to placate” (2020, 142), supporting Schlossman’s observation that “spectators may subordinate critical urges to pleasure,” (2002, 153). More specifically, the songs may be intended to evoke *feelings* of empowerment, even though the messages and premise are not empowering (and indeed, frequently appear misogynistic). As an artist, this made me even more determined to create a musical that had both feelings and messages of empowerment for women.

The success of *Six* and its immense popularity with female audiences is largely attributed by Barnes (2020, 142) to the ways it mirrors female experiences of victimhood. She suggests that details of the reality of disempowerment are suspended by the audience in favour of celebrating and having their experiences validated by women who are familiar historical figures. Considered through Blair’s (2016) language, this forms an affective point of connection, a fictitious and temporary feeling of empowerment between stage and spectator, where feeling-technologies such as skilful singing, bright lights and high energy choreography, “forms a pact between the women onstage and the women in the auditorium to dispense with the reality of their own powerlessness in the face of male violence and focus instead on the fictional female triumph” (Barnes 2020, 143). Put simply, the overwhelming pop concert spectacle that occurs in *Six* conveys positive,

relatable feelings, masking and escaping the reality of its deeply problematic messages. The points Barnes raises, and the ways her argument highlights Blair's (2016) key concerns, which, along with an attention to orientation, shaped how I referred to *Six* when seeking lyric-writing style inspiration.

5.1.2 “Ex-Wives” and “Dangerous”

When *Six*'s opening number, “Ex-Wives” begins, we hear each wife character tell us how she died: “Divorced, Beheaded, Died, Divorced, Beheaded, Survived” (*SIX* 2020). When I was in the audience for the Melbourne (2022) season of *Six*, I noticed the strong response from the audience who were captivated by the suspense created in introducing the characters one by one, with minimal text and being barely visible, if at all. These feeling-technologies, initiated by the writing, provided inspiration for “Dangerous”, where I chose to similarly introduce the suffragist characters one by one, by having them share something they said in their real life that summed up their story, in a way that aligned with the intersectional feminist orientation.

Structurally, in “Ex-Wives”, each wife is given a verse to describe what happened to her and suggest there is another side to her story. Here is an example from *Six*, introducing Catherine and Anne (*SIX* 2020):

ALL	DIVORCED
CATHERINE	My name's Catherine of Aragon Was married twenty-four years, I'm a paragon of royalty My loyalty is to the Vatican So if you try to dump me you won't try that again
ALL	BEHEADED
ANNE	I'm that Boleyn girl, and I'm up next See, I broke England from the Church,

yeah I'm that sexy
Why did I lose my head?
Well my sleeves may be green, but
my lipstick's red
(SIX 2020)

Whilst my reading of the lyric content of these verses did not suggest the intersectional feminist orientation that I was aiming for with *Dangerous*, I could see the convention of having each character present herself and tell her story could be an economical way of allowing the audience to get to know historical figures they might not be familiar with or know little about. As such, the verses of “Dangerous” allow each suffragist to announce herself and tell a condensed version of her story from a time she faced danger in fighting for women’s liberation. Here are the equivalent verses from *Dangerous* introducing Inez Milholland and Susan B Anthony:

ALL	WHO is she?
INEZ	INEZ. I rode forward into light As Joan of Arc upon white horse, Destination: White House, Leading women in our cause.
ALL	The “pretty” lawyer was attacked
INEZ	And some girls left for dead. But the story that persisted was My “pretty” dress instead.
ALL	If they won’t respect us? We gotta get dangerous.
ALL	WHO is she?
SUZI B	SUZI B.

I strove to make injustices
 Quiver – quake in fear,
 And uphold the constitution
 Whose position seemed quite clear:

ALL No citizen be denied the vote,
 SUZI B So I took up my right.
 But I was brought to court, so gladly fought
 The judge who put up a fight.



Video 10: Workshopping a music draft of Inez and Suzi B's verses in the opening song "Dangerous" (Actors: Asha Khamis, Ursula Searle, Kristy Nguy, Natalie Gamsu, Lisa-Marie Parker with composer Peter Rutherford)

While both sets of lyrics have rhyming couplets and short phrases, the key difference between the lyrics of *Six* and the lyrics of *Dangerous*, can be summed up in terms of orientation: whilst *Six*'s lyrics orientate the audience towards a show whose message is concerned with the ways the women were oppressed (or killed), and how they now locate their power through markers of sexual attractiveness, *Dangerous*' opening number aims to orientate the audience towards a show whose message is concerned with the

dangerous and brave things the suffragists did in seeking women's liberation. In other words, the lyrics from *Six* unfortunately reduce the women's introductions to stereotypical comparisons with dating or wearing lipstick, whereas the lyrics from *Dangerous* insist on pointing out the gender-based injustice that has occurred and how they tried to combat this through feminist *action*.

Six is able to suggest an enjoyable pop song concert performance style through the repetitive chorus lyrics and moments where the audience is invited to participate. The lyrics change slightly each time in the second half of the chorus (after "six wives"), but the rhythmic pattern remains the same:

ALL WIVES Welcome to the show
 To the histo-remix
 Switching up the flow
 As we add the prefix
 Everybody knows that we used to be six wives
 Raising up the roof
 Til we hit the ceiling
 Get ready for the truth
 That we'll be revealing
 Everybody knows
 That we used to be six wives
 But now we're – Ex-Wives
 (*SIX* 2020)

Similarly in *Dangerous*, the following chorus recurs, drawing from the pop song lyric style suggested in "Ex-Wives":

ALL (so) Feel your feet and stamp them loud –
 (say) I am a Dangerous Woman now!
 Let us hear your voices howl:

(say) I am a Dangerous Woman now!
Nothing sends a shiver
Like a woman crystal clear.
Ready to get Dangerous?
You gotta let us know you're here!

Additionally, in “Dangerous” the audience is invited to be an active participant, with the suffragists inviting the audience to stamp their feet and use their voice, particularly in the last line of the chorus “You gotta let us know you’re here” – intended to encourage the audience to identify emotionally with the suffragists and their objective. By suggesting gestures and using evocative, action-based language in the lyrics, the repeated chorus aims to make the audience feel excited, empowered, and connected to the suffragists and their message – and hopefully to make the connections between this and their own lives, thereby attempting to engage them in a transformative politics. “Ex-Wives” also uses some direct address, similarly, calling upon the audience to “make some noise!” and urging them to join in, “Come on, come on, come on!” (*AussieTheatre* 2022). However, since *Six* supports problematic and stereotypical gender norms, I read these calls to action as asking its audience to perpetuate the status quo. Conversely, *Dangerous*, from its opening number, is using lyrics as feeling-technologies to compel the audience to engage with the feminist proposition in its message through bodily action and vocalisation.

Through drawing on pop song “Who Run the World (Girls)” I began the process of crafting the lyric tone for the opening number of “Dangerous”, keeping messages and feelings in mind concurrently. In doing so, I was consciously establishing the tone of the overall musical and chose to embrace a pop concert performance style in the writing of the opening number, suggesting the central metaphor of performance, creating a direct relationship with the audience, and encouraging them to embrace the suffragists’ message. These deliberate attempts at eliciting positive feelings associated with attending a pop music performance are done in the context of messages that are orientated towards women’s liberation.

Despite its problematic politics, I was able to use *Six* as a guide to introduce the key characters and provide condensed backstories, which also introduced the conceptual themes. Importantly, when using *Six* as inspiration or guide, I needed to consciously maintain the feminist orientation of *Dangerous*. This is not an exhaustive account of the choices made in setting up the world and tone of *Dangerous*, however indicates the productive potential of consciously attending to the orientation throughout lyric writing when writing a new musical. In doing so, both the content and the feelings this content might generate can be deliberately crafted *before* set to music.

5.2 *Hamilton*: Feelings and Messages

Employing rap and hip-hop styles in some lyrics, *Dangerous* has also been inspired by the ground-breaking musical, *Hamilton* (2015). Not only does *Hamilton* succeed in employing popular music styles through its innovative use of rap and hip hop in its storytelling, but as Jack Viertel notes, “rap is great way to tell a theatrical story” (2016, 15) because it enables complex details and large, urgent, personal, and political ideas to be communicated in a short space of time (2016, 15-16). Significantly for this project, “rap provides a medium to mobilize feminist strategies of resistance” (Forman 1994, 54) and therefore offers a tool for feminist issues to be expressed in ways that avoid dilution or oversimplification. However, taking inspiration from *Hamilton* and employing rap and hip hop was not without its complications.

Wolf (2018) outlines the problematic gender politics of *Hamilton*, a task that sits in tension with the overwhelming international success of the show with audiences. She states:

The show feels so cool, hip and yes, revolutionary (not to mention the against-all-odds frenzy to score a ticket) that critics, spectators and musical theatre students do not want to find fault with its politics, including its gender politics. (2018, 168)

Wolf specifically explains that “*Hamilton* puts women on the sidelines and relegates them to the most obvious and time-worn stereotypes” (2018, 168), being “muse, wife and whore” (2018, 177). Though not using Blair’s (2016) language explicitly, Wolf is pointing to the ways in which *Hamilton* is able to elicit positive feelings, whilst presenting problematic messages about the women characters.¹²⁸ A large cast tells the story of America’s founding fathers, yet, as Wolf points out, only three female characters are seen on stage (plus a ‘gender-neutralised’ ensemble) and they exist to serve the romantic side of the plot, for the most part acting as distant observers of the action driven by the men. A song such as “Helpless”, sung by Eliza, is found by Wolf to be lyrically problematic; whilst being a “terrifically enjoyable and engaging production number,” that is able to produce pleasurable feelings, in terms of its messaging it depicts “Alexander’s rise up the social ladder through marriage and how Eliza exists to help build him up” (Wolf 2018, 172). In discussing the final scene where Eliza is on stage, which Wolf points out many have praised for its focus on the female character, she reminds us that:

Theatrically, it is a powerful final moment of self-reflexive historiography with a woman downstage centre. Nevertheless, the story she tells is his. This gesture cannot undo what the past 150 minutes have been about: men. (2018, 168)

Similarly, David Savran is critical of the “self-described ‘revolutionary’ musical” (2017, 30), taking issue with its messaging by arguing the musical “preaches a kind of bootstraps entrepreneurialism highly compatible with contemporary U.S.-style neoliberalism, while unmistakably sidelining the women” (2017, 30).

Additionally, an intersectional lens reveals the problematic racial dynamics that lurk in the professional productions of *Hamilton*. Whilst critics and academics such as Elissa Harbert (2019) have praised *Hamilton* for its colour conscious casting, anthropology scholar Lyra Monteiro (2016) critically engages with the problematic aspects of people of colour playing the founding fathers, particularly when it comes to the issue of slavery and slave ownership. Monteiro argues that “it is problematic to have black and brown actors stand

¹²⁸ This demonstrates a development in Wolf’s analyses compared with those explained in Chapter 2.

in for the great white men of the early United States in a play that does not acknowledge that the ancestors of these same actors were excluded from the freedoms for which the founders fought” (2016, 93).¹²⁹

For all its artistic innovation, *Hamilton*’s orientation does not challenge gender norms or stereotypes for women, rather, it reinforces them, following the lines of the traditional book musical. The female characters in *Hamilton* are orientated towards the male characters, existing within a heteronormative plot that requires conventional heterosexual coupling. This is because *Hamilton*’s structure follows a book musical dramaturgy based on the template consolidated by Rodgers and Hammerstein in post-war, mid-century America. As such – and as discussed in Chapter 1 – a book musical dramaturgy employed uncritically and without conscious attention to the dramaturgical conventions that institute problematic gender norms is unlikely to produce transformative politics aiming to improve the lives of women (or anyone for that matter); rather, it is more likely to reinforce the existing gendered lines that orientate the bodies on stage and the audience towards a status quo, patriarchal, heteronormative gender ideology. *Hamilton*’s replication of this orientation is perhaps not surprising given the lack of female leadership in the creative team: the book writer/lyricist/composer, choreographer, director and music supervisor/orchestrator (and indeed the majority of the creative team) are male.¹³⁰ However, this coupled with the problematic associations of the dominant musical style – rap and hip hop – warrants further, closer attention for feminist musical creators.

5.2.1 The Historicity of Rap and Hip Hop

Rap and hip hop are widely associated with graphic violence and deeply misogynistic content, an assumption acknowledged by sociologist Ronald Weitzer and criminologist

¹²⁹ Leticia Ridley (2021) offers an intersectional feminist reading of *Hamilton* that complicates the discourse further, asking the audience to consider how the “modes of care” the three female characters invest in challenge assumptions about “the role that patriarchy has in determining how they see each other.” However, she also notes that whilst the innovative casting of *Hamilton* “subverts dominant racial and gendered expectations” there are also limitations when relying on casting to “fix the systemic issues that displace marginalized theatre artists from the Broadway stage” (Ridley 2021).

¹³⁰ See: “Cast and Creative”, *Hamilton An American Musical*, Access date July 11 2023, <https://hamiltonmusical.com.au/cast-and-creative/>

Charis Kubrin (2009) who have conducted research into rap music. In an analysis of over 400 rap songs, they conclude a significant proportion (over one fifth) present extreme examples of misogyny. They also confirm the gender roles in rap music overall are “both essentialist and normative” (Weitzer and Kubrin 2009, 24). Weitzer and Kubrin identify five problematic themes that emerged in their survey of rap and hip-hop songs:

a) derogatory naming and shaming of women, (b) sexual objectification of women, (c) distrust of women, (d) legitimization of violence against women, and (e) celebration of prostitution and pimping. (2009, 11)

Weitzer and Kubrin explain that whilst rap lyrics have portrayed a hegemonic masculinity that aims to subordinate black women, because of its international consumption, it can be seen to be attempting to subordinate and control all women (2009, 6). Importantly, Weitzer and Kubrin argue, “Such images have real-world effects insofar as they contribute to gendered socialization and perpetuate gender inequality” (2009, 6). In terms of Ahmed’s (2006) orientation, rap music may therefore be seen as a feeling-technology whose ‘lines’ of rhythmic text (lines of text and lines as described by Ahmed) can orientate its listeners towards women in ways that are oppressive and deeply problematic.

However, they also caution against overly blaming rap music for broader misogynistic views in society, suggesting the hegemonic, limiting and harmful gender roles that are evident in much rap music do not emerge on their own, since they exist in a culture and music industry that reward and encourage the creation of such material (Weitzer and Kubrin 2009, 12-13). Additionally, they point out that “misogyny does not characterize rap music as a whole” (2009, 27), and rap also explores other subject matter and concerns, arguing that “this music has served as a consciousness-raising, politically progressive, liberating form of popular culture” (2009, 27).

Rap’s potential for feminist empowerment and the development of feminist views has been explored by scholars such as Kalle Berggren, who points to the emergence of feminist hip hop in Sweden where “the masculine norms of the genre are simultaneously

resisted and resignified as many female rappers incorporate some elements commonly associated with masculinity but mobilize them in their challenging of masculine norms” (Berggren 2014, 233).¹³¹ Sociology scholar Valerie Chepp (2015) analyses the relationship between rap and hip hop and black feminism between 1996 and 2003, noting scholarly support (such as Forman 1994; Perry 1995; Roberts 1995; Rose 1994) that suggests women artists including Queen Latifah, Salt-N-Pepa and the Real Roxanne created self-defining and empowering rap lyrics. Chepp terms these artists second wave rappers, whose lyrics, she argues, contribute a powerful black female voice to rap.

Since rap and hip hop’s beginnings as a window into “the lived experiences of youth in disadvantaged, black neighborhoods” (Weitzer and Kubrin 2009, 8), it has evolved into an internationally recognised, “influential worldwide music genre in recent decades” (Berggren 2014, 234). Norwegian hip hop artist and scholar Kjell Andreas Oddekalv similarly writes “Rap, and by extension hip-hop, is a global phenomenon” (2022, 11), however, he also points out the unavoidable complexity of this phenomenon, whereby “this globalisation of the cultural expression has led to a variety of local appropriations” (2022, 116). Thinking intersectionally about the historicity surrounding rap and hip hop and my positionality as a white woman writing a new musical brings into focus the complexities of local appropriations in a musical theatre context. Confronting the incidence of appropriation is a difficult reality of working in a musical theatre that reflects contemporary music tastes. Even in the early twentieth century, jazz – another style that emerged from black American culture – was the popular music of its time and was employed by white (often Jewish) composers writing for the musical stage (see Wolf 2002, 17). As a feminist musical creator, I have had to sit with this and carefully consider how I want to contribute to musical theatre, and what historical narratives I intend to participate in through my contribution that consciously employs popular music styles which originate in cultures I do not identify with.

¹³¹ Though this is not presented unproblematically: “On the one hand, it makes visible the performance of masculinity beyond male bodies, but on the other hand, it risks reinforcing traditional dichotomous view of gender” (Berggren 2014, 247-248).

Oddekalv also sits with this political and artistic complexity. He declares that his work *is* cultural appropriation¹³² as an artist and scholar who is an outsider to African American culture. This deliberate claiming and naming of the nexus that exists between his passion, his identity and the politics of the music style's origins allows him to arrive at a particular stance, whereby he considers himself a 'guest' of the hip hop culture, following rapper Akil the MC's thinking. He writes:

My engagement with hip-hop as a musician and a scholar is an appropriation of the cultural expression, but my take on hip-hop (music and research) is derived and delivered with the utmost respect for its roots and history. (Oddeklav 2022, 117)

In foregrounding his privilege, Oddekalv does not seek to negate or dismiss the tensions of his position as a hip-hop scholar and artist but rather aims to "use it as productively as I am able to in challenging White supremacy in music studies" (2022, 116). Similarly, my acknowledgement of my positionality does not give me permission to employ music styles that emerged in Black culture thoughtlessly or casually but requires me to acknowledge my status as a respectful guest in this cultural terrain and maintain consciousness of the inherent tension in my appropriation of rap and hip hop. As Oddekalv asserts, this tension is unresolvable, but not a reason to avoid the style altogether, particularly, I argue, if there are usages that have dramaturgical merit (which occurs in *Hamilton*) and are aiming to challenge gender stereotypes. Recognising my positionality has instigated a conscious utilisation and an awareness of rap and hip hop's historicity, leading me to employ this lyric style in ways that support the story and message, rather than simply because it is popular.

¹³² And "the type of cultural appropriation that my thesis and music exemplifies is not one of Whiteness attempting to subjugate Blackness but rather one celebrating Black music in general and hip-hop and rap specifically" (Oddekalv 2022, 118).

5.2.2 Hamilton and Dangerous

Most of the time feminist music does what music has always done for social movements: it educates listeners about women's struggles and motivates them to create social change. (Trier-Bieniek and Pullum 2014, 88)

Since rap and hip hop can evoke anti-feminist messages and associations, I decided its use in my feminist musical would require deliberate and nuanced application. I would therefore need to be selective and conscious in how I employed stylistic features in the lyric writing – inspired by *Hamilton* – to retain an intersectional feminist orientation in *Dangerous*. The rap and hip hop lyric writing style, when seen as a feeling-technology, is capable of creating an atmosphere of excitement and dynamic power in *Hamilton*, orientating the audience towards positive, enjoyable feelings – “so cool, hip and yes, revolutionary” (Wolf 2018, 168) – in moments where both the musical's message and cultural associations with the style can be simultaneously problematic for the women on stage. According to Jeremy McCarter, co-author of the book detailing the creation of *Hamilton*, rap has a unique energy and feel, distinct from “rock or jazz or any other kind of pop music: the lyrical density and storytelling ingenuity I heard on my headphones seemed closer to the verbal energy of the great plays of the past than almost anything I saw onstage” (McCarter in Miranda and McCarter 2016, 10). The challenge in writing rap lyrics for *Dangerous* was to explore how to use rap as a feeling-technology to orientate the audience towards the feminist agenda and message whilst navigating its complex historicity. As with the choices around structure and plot, this felt fraught and required constant reflection and thought.

Some of the styles of rap that are demonstrated in *Hamilton* enable a lot of information to be conveyed in a short time and this economisation was something I was aiming for in

the lyrics for Edith Cowan's act, as I wanted to cover three key events in one song.¹³³ For example, Lin-Manuel Miranda crafted the song "Take A Break" to do a lot of things dramaturgically for the plot and character development "without an ounce of fat" (Miranda and McCarter 2016, 168); the song, Miranda explains, is able to "introduce us to Philip, let us know that Angelica and Hamilton are still letter-flirting, and see that Hamilton's work is driving him to distraction" (Miranda in Miranda and McCarter 2016, 168).

When I employed rap lyrics, I decided to do so in contexts where it would deliberately acknowledge and foreground rap's dominant associations with misogynistic attitudes towards women. Rap-style lyrics feature most prominently in Edith Cowan's number "The Female Boxer" where they are intended to evoke a context that is misogynistic, hyper-masculine and exhibiting a gender ideology that requires binary, essentialist gender roles. This is because these attitudes and ideology dominated the socio-political context for the events being depicted in the number: achieving women's suffrage, becoming the first female MP in Australia, and proposing bills to change laws that would benefit women and their children. Additionally, the theatrical metaphor of the boxing ring setting for the number suggests a similar culture. Edith is in a game that was not designed for her, that ridicules, mocks, and attempts to belittle her, and this is dramaturgically enhanced by evoking the culture of misogyny often associated with rap and hip-hop styles.

In this way, Edith's use of rap can be seen as a disidentification strategy. Rather than "buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology" or "attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere" (Muñoz 1999, 11) queer scholar José Esteban Muñoz explains that disidentification is a survival strategy through which a "cultural logic" can be transformed "from within" (1999, 11), where the subject "tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form" (1999, 12). In this way, disidentification "would establish new possibilities while at the same time echoing the materially prescriptive cultural locus of any identification" (Muñoz 1999, 30). Rather than identifying with and assimilating, Edith can be understood as disidentifying with the performative elements of the boxing ring-rap

¹³³ The three events included in Edith's song only depict one part of her life, which was filled with numerous successful campaigns and advocacy for social justice.

game. This requires Edith to work much harder than the men, but, in taking the “raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionally that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture”¹³⁴ (Muñoz 1999, 31), she is able to reinvent the game to her advantage and transform the logic of the boxing ring by proving her ability to adapt and outmanoeuvre her opponents, tapping into an “active kernel of utopian possibility” (Muñoz 1999, 25).

Early attempts at writing rap lyrics were not achieving the excitement that I experienced witnessing *Hamilton*. I knew that to be a respectful guest, I needed to do further research and be better informed about the technical aspects of rap lyric writing. Therefore, when redrafting the lyrics for “The Female Boxer” I decided to refer to the ‘I want’ song, “My Shot” from *Hamilton*.¹³⁵ This song demonstrates Hamilton’s intelligence and wit through the use of complex multisyllabic rhymes and internal rhyme structures, as explained in an insightful analysis of the song by *The Wall Street Journal* (2016). Understanding that Miranda made this choice to demonstrate the character’s centrality to the story and their strong command of language prompted me to think dramaturgically about the style of lyric writing. I took a closer look at the first verse from “My Shot”:

HAMILTON I'm 'a get a scholarship to King's College
 I prob'ly shouldn't brag, but dag, I amaze and astonish.
 The problem is I got a lot of brains but no polish
 I gotta holler just to be heard.
 With every word, I drop knowledge!
 I'm a diamond in the rough, a shiny piece of coal
 Tryin' reach my goal. My power of speech: unimpeachable.
 Only nineteen but my mind is older.
 These New York City streets get colder, I shoulder

¹³⁴ This is not unproblematic however, as a white woman takes on the music style that originated with disenfranchised young black men. However, she is disidentifying with the culture of misogyny in rap, which, as discussed earlier in the chapter, may subordinate and control all women due its international consumption (Weitzer and Kubrin 2009, 6).

¹³⁵ As explained in *Hamilton: The Revolution* (2016) which details the creation of the hit musical, “My Shot” is a classic example of the ‘I want’ song where “the hero steps downstage and tells the audience about the fierce desire that will propel the plot” (McCarter in Miranda and McCarter 2016, 21).

Ev'ry burden, every disadvantage
 I have learned to manage, I don't have a gun to brandish.
 I walk these streets famished.
 The plan is to fan this spark into a flame
 But damn, it's getting dark, so let me spell out the name.
 (Miranda in Miranda and McCarter 2016, 26)

When reading Miranda's lyrics aloud, I enjoyed the feeling of power that came with the experience of verbalising the intricate, skilfully crafted rhymes. I wanted to evoke something similar for Edith, that would also demonstrate her intelligence and command of rhetoric and language. However, I realised Edith and Alexander's journeys are different and I needed to reflect this lyrically: Alexander is quick-witted and orientated into a masculine world from the beginning; Edith, on the other hand, must learn to play the game as she goes. As such, I determined her earlier verses ought to have simple patterns of assonance or imperfect rhyme (highlighted orange), followed by a simple rhyming couplet (highlighted green):

EDITH	Here we go On the blank canvas Ready to rumble, Feet already doin their dances
K CLUB	POW!
EDITH	Your first jab - thought you'd land it.
MAN	Oh, you like it rough?
EDITH	I see your tactic brawler, I can dodge but I'm not a crawler.

As she gains confidence, I gave her internal rhymes within a line (highlighted blue):

EDITH	Do your worst, I'll take your body work. My body has bled, it has shed and bred,
-------	---

You got nothin on me.

After she has won a round, her confidence grows and her command of the game improves, I decided she should have more internal rhymes (highlighted red):

EDITH I'm in 'the ring' each day whether you see or **hear**.
 At least if it lands in **here** I get a **cheer**.

As she progresses and starts to really understand the game, I wrote more complex patterns. Here, she attempts a more intricate (imperfect) internal rhyme structure:

EDITH I'm a novelty, expected to **decline**,
 So the **moment**
 The **element** of **surprise** arrives -
 It's **sublime** -
 In a **cinch** we're in a **clinch**,
 And I'm beyond **time**.

At this point however, she does not yet have the dexterity and fluency of Alexander Hamilton, who effortlessly delivers multisyllabic, perfect internal rhymes at the end of his first verse:¹³⁶

HAMILTON The **plan** is to **fan** this **spark** into a **flame**
 But **damn**, it's getting **dark**, so let me spell out the **name**.
 (Miranda in Miranda and McCarter 2016, 26)

The style of lyrics Miranda gives Alexander Hamilton in “My Shot” exudes a self-confidence and attitude of determination. It made sense that, by the end of the song, Edith should have a similar sense of command and utter belief in her ability in the face of

¹³⁶ See a great explanation of this: “The Rap on ‘Hamilton’: American History Meets Hip Hop”. 2016. *The Wall Street Journal Youtube Channel*, June 7 2016. Youtube video, 3:31.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zh8rlcRoMp8&ab_channel=TheWallStreetJournal

seemingly impossible tasks (something the two characters have in common). Towards the end of the song, she has won two rounds and is pursuing her objective with full confidence, determination and ferocity. She is also at the peak of her skill and demonstrates a great command of the game, so I crafted a complex multisyllabic internal rhyme structure for her (which also had moments of assonance):

EDITH Now I've earned the right to speak, sir, I was elected –
Please curb your beak sir! I will not be interrupted.

K CLUB JAB -

EDITH Your anger's weak and needs to be redirected,
I will not be meek, I seek to be respected.
Marriage or sex should not disqualify women
Practising law nor any job she wants to try – listen!
Her child's birthright is her right, that's my submission
Consider these bills the price of my admission –

Edith's journey sees her beginning with a clunky attempt at rhyming patterns and eventually demonstrating complex poetic rhyming and rhythmic lyrics, emulating Alexander Hamilton's lyric style. Whilst both Edith Cowan and Alexander Hamilton share similar objectives in their respective musicals – such as seeking freedom from oppressive forces – and both characters' actions shape the course of social politics in their respective countries, Edith's journey is one where gender and navigating the world as a woman is at the core of her concerns. Drawing inspiration from a masculine male protagonist (Alexander Hamilton), I wanted Edith's lyrics to demonstrate a determination to match the bravado of the masculine space she is in and confront the dangers to her physical and social existence by declaring her power and asserting her skills – and doing so by allowing her to claim the powerful feeling-technology of rap and hip hop style lyrics for herself.

Through offering a comparison between “My Shot” from *Hamilton* and “The Female Boxer” from *Dangerous*, it is possible to see the productive potential for rap and hip-hop styles in an original musical with an intersectional feminist agenda. By allowing the

historicity of rap and hip hop to support the premise of Edith's song, and by consciously and selectively employing some of the stylistic features of Miranda's writing in a distinctly feminist context with a feminist message, I found it creatively enjoyable and politically empowering to use a rap and hip-hop lyric writing style. Importantly, if the story is aligned with an intersectional feminist orientation and the stylistic features of rap and hip hop are consciously chosen because they support that storytelling, I believe it is more likely the work will generate positive feelings associated with the power and dynamism of rap and hip hop in support of a feminist message. All of this exists imperfectly within the reality of rap being a music style which I (respectfully) appropriate, given my cultural identity.

Section 2: Stage Directions as Feeling-Technology

In addition to thinking about lyrics as a feeling-technology to orientate the audience, I propose that stage directions can similarly function as feeling-technologies. Since stage directions specify to the interpretive practitioner the action that bodies and objects are to undertake, they can be seen to suggest a show's orientation in visual and embodied ways: visual for all witnessing and participating in the interaction and embodied for the actors enacting the action on stage. In this way, I propose stage directions can be thought of as feeling-technologies in the same way as lyrics, lighting effects or any other mechanism to do with feeling, and as such, I have found them to be a useful and powerful book writing tool, through which to suggest and enhance the orientation of a new musical.

As theatre scholar Tiffany Stern (2019) explains in her chapter "Stage Directions", stage directions have evolved both in how the term is used and what it connotes. She argues that since the role of the director came into existence in the 19th century, "the battle for creative ownership of the play, between playwrights and directors, was born" and "it took place in stage directions" (Stern 2019, 8).¹³⁷ Stern suggests that literary stage directions that are largely irrelevant to the theatrical representation have given rise to the dismissal of stage directions by actors and directors. Since stage directions have been traditionally inconsistent across various editions of playscripts, depending on whether they have documented a production, originated from a prompt copy of a script, or been written with the author's express intention, they are, by nature, seen as a "secondary text, open to revision and change; they tend to be treated as such" (Stern 2019, 10). Indeed, I have noticed as a director that stage directions will vary between score and script in some musicals, and between editions. Sometimes they indicate things that are useful to staging and sometimes they are clearly markers of a previous production. Certainly, Stern's point about them being 'secondary text' and therefore treated as changeable rings true, from my rehearsal room experience. Therefore, I have considered carefully what stage

¹³⁷ She offers a notable example from Samuel Beckett, a playwright who wrote extensive stage directions, providing a statement in a program to a performance of his play where his stage directions were ignored: "a production which dismisses my directions is a complete parody of the play as conceived by me" (Beckett in *American Repertory Theatre* 1984).

directions to offer and how to frame them, in the hope of having them taken seriously by interpreters.

In the book of *Dangerous*, I specify that the stage directions are deliberate and to be thought of as being as vital to the book as the written lyrics or dialogue. They are also essential to realising the feminist orientation of the musical, because I feel they are necessary to understanding the intention of some of the images suggested and, in some cases, specify the tone or the effect to clarify its contribution to the show's feminist politics. Some moments, for example those described in "Pony Patter", if not handled correctly, could easily perpetuate problematic representations of women. For this reason I have been careful to specify stage directions which I believe are achievable, yet still leave room for interpretation.

Applying the learnings from analysing *Ascent*, where many stage directions and choreographic images could be understood as *gestic* feminist criticism or the *Verfremdungseffekt* and contributed towards a feminist orientation, I approached the writing of many stage directions in *Dangerous* by thinking about them in Brechtian materialist-feminist terms. In the first case study "Pony Patter", I was able to explore some of these stage directions with actors and this helped me understand how the stage directions translated to embodied practice and an embodiment of orientation on the floor, which in turn helped me to edit and refine them in subsequent drafts. The second case study example is from the "Finale", which looks to another Brechtian-materialist feminist device, the utopian performative, in shaping stage directions that represent the (temporary) destination towards which the show's orientation leads.

5.3 "Pony Patter"

"Pony Patter" is the first of the suffragists' acts following the opening number. In this number, Inez Milholland's story of leading a suffragist march on horseback down Pennsylvania Avenue through a mob of violent men (see Lumsden 2004, 86) is theatricalised through a pony dance number. *How To Enter Vaudeville: a complete*

illustrated course of instruction (LaDelle 1913), notes animal acts as a desirable and lucrative act for the aspiring Vaudevillian. “Pony Patter” draws inspiration from footage of “Tom Tinker’s Pony Patter” (*Library of Congress* 2009), believed to have been filmed circa 1918-1919. In this act, the ponies are choreographed to move in particular ways, engage with props, and wear feathered headdresses.¹³⁸ In watching this footage, I was reminded of the Ziegfeld Follies showgirls, similarly choreographed, often using props in specific, objectifying ways and with their elaborate costumes and headdresses.¹³⁹

The discipline and training required for ponies to conform to choreography for entertainment purposes seemed like a useful metaphor through which I could explore the ways women have been expected to conform to restrictive gender ideals on the musical stage (and in broader society). A pony act, with its tightly controlled arrangement of ponies parading their beauty for all to admire, also resonated with Inez Milholland’s frequent association in the public arena with her beauty (see Lumsden 2004). The suffragists were highly aware of the need to be attractive and appeal to a feminine ideal to be heard in public, and to counter negative stereotypes for politically active women who were described as being “unseeded, mannish, and domineering”, or depicted in the media as “spinsters who could not or would not marry or as married women who had neglected their homes and children, henpecked their husband, and generally inverted the natural order of gender relations” (Glenn 2000, 133). The challenge the suffragists faced was to “transform the perceived threat of women’s political power into a visual spectacle of moral heroism and beauty” (Glenn 2000, 147). “Pony Patter” speaks to the necessity for a suffragist like Inez to use her beauty to capture the attention of those in power and influence public discourse. The number does not shy away from depicting a problematic culture where women are only seen (and barely heard) if conventionally attractive and is deliberate in highlighting how such a culture can lead to objectification that permits violence against women.

¹³⁸ See the video here: “Tom Tinker’s Pony Patter”. 2009. *Library of Congress Youtube Channel*, July 11 2009. Likely filmed circa 1919 in Chicago. Youtube video, 2:18. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vIW98dPxpM&ab_channel=LibraryofCongress

¹³⁹ See: 06:03-07:35 in Kantor, Michael, dir. 2013. “Broadway: The American Musical: Give My Regards to Broadway – 1893-1927 – Ep 1 of 6.” New York: Studio. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/edutv.614440>

Detailed choreographic stage directions are not commonplace in a musical's book, however, I felt it was vital to provide some key moments to maintain the feminist orientation, given the fine line I was treading in requiring the performers to embody problematic ideals so they could be undermined and critiqued. I intended for the choreographic stage directions to speak to this complicated intersection of parading conventional beauty, using bodily spectacle to capture attention and having an underlying intention of undermining dominant power in the lyrics. Since there were many things at play simultaneously, I wanted the stage directions, whenever possible, to evoke a *gestic* feminist criticism, as this would be able to accommodate the complexity and consciousness required.

A choreographic interpretation of pony movement was the initial starting point for imagining the stage directions necessary for guiding the shape of the number and making the feminist orientation clear. In watching "Tom Tinker's Pony Patter" (*Library of Congress* 2009), I was reminded of the bevel. From identifying my usage of the bevel as *gestic* feminist criticism in *Ascent*, and knowing the bevel was commonly adopted by showgirls such as those in the Ziegfeld Follies, I knew it had the potential to dramaturgically support the intention to critique dominant norms and power whilst pointing to the musical's historical usage of female legs as spectacle. Therefore, throughout the song the repeated lyric, "Clippity clop and 1,2 pop" was followed by a stage direction "(bevel)", suggesting the song lyrics, heard diegetically, required the leg to be popped. Inez and the chorus of women dressed as ponies would knowingly conform to the conventional requirement that female bodies appear orientated towards the male gaze, using the bevel gesture to do so. However, this is only momentary; as the song progresses, Inez reclaims the gesture and 'refracts' the gaze (after Solga 2016, 26) by simultaneously exposing and critiquing the beauty standards it implies. This segment offers the bevel as *gestic* feminist criticism *and* then renders it strange once Inez replaces her own leg with a 'perfect' plastic limb, creating the *Verfremdungseffekt*. This story is told through the stage directions in the following excerpt:

MC **My ponies are of the finest pedigree,
Time to demonstrate your perfect anatomy!**

Ponies form a long line and as a unified chorus they bevel/brush. Then they each turn to reveal their 'best' leg, one at a time.

MC	She lives to give you unbridled joy,	PONIES	See me patter like a pony,
	Unbridled when you ride her boy,		While you act like you own me.
	No time to be a wussy,		1,2 pop!
	Just grab her by the pussy!		What?!
	You can do anything,		1,2 pop
	whatever you want.		1,2 pop,
	You can do anything,		1,2 pop
	whatever you want.		1,2 pop.

Inez presses forward to gain the focus, with a mannequin leg presented in place of her own. MC is drawn to it.

PONIES **When you see them lean in that way,
That's when you gotta give em -**

INEZ **HEY! You like what you see?**

MC **This beauty is through the roof!
Loveliness from hock to hoof. [MC leans into Inez's leg]**

INEZ Oh yeah?

MC Oh yeah...

INEZ + PONIES Oh yeah?

MC Oh yeah!

INEZ Theeeeeennn - you can have it!

She whacks him with the mannequin leg in the groin. Other ponies support in the mayhem, acquiring mannequin legs.



Video 11: Excerpt from a draft of "Pony Patter" explores the bevel as feminist gestus. (Actors: Ursula Searle, Lisa-Marie Parker, Asha Khamis, Natalie Gamsu, Kristie Nguy, Suze with composer Peter Rutherford.)

Not only is the use of the bevel drawing on the problematic history of the ways female bodies have been exploited for use as spectacle (as explained in Chapter 1), but offering a plastic leg has another, very specific historical connotation, referencing a Fanny Brice sketch.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ The sketch can be found here: "Fanny Brice and the Follies Girls 1934". 2011. *Historycomestolife Youtube Channel*, Aug 2 2011. Filmed 1934. Youtube video, 01:21. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87TqWDhmDGM&ab_channel=historycomestolife



Figure 20: History Comes To Life, 2011, “Screenshot of Fanny passing her prosthetic leg”, Fanny Brice and the Follies Girls 1934

This is intended as a nod to the ground-breaking female comedienne who dominated the Vaudeville circuit and frequently appeared in Ziegfeld Follies shows. In the sketch, Brice simultaneously exposed and critiqued the notion that “to be truly funny a woman would have to be either unattractive (excessive) to begin with or be willing to sacrifice her beauty and other feminine attributes in the service of laughter” (Glenn 2000, 49). Enacting an homage to Brice’s sketch offers multiple layers of meaning. Inez’s wit and ability to draw attention to the problematic objectification of the male gaze becomes comic because of its strangeness and ability to reveal the absurdity of a theatrical history that has typically required fixed, homogenous, impossible male-centric expectations for female bodies. This is exactly what Brice was highlighting when she performed the original sketch almost a century ago.

The purpose of the workshop was not to find the perfect staging, but to explore staging possibilities on the floor to see if the section's imagined potential was feasible as embodied action. I also wanted to ensure that what I had written allowed the power to remain with the women in the scene. The actors and I played with the stage directions looking for ways to incorporate the playing style we had explored for the MC – a heightened, caricature of a stereotype. We tried variations of angles and pathways for the MC, formations for the performers and timing of the lines with the action suggested by the stage directions. The composer also had some draft music that underscored the section. Though there were moments that offered clarity, comedy and a sense of the women having power over the MC, upon reflection following the workshop, it became apparent the section was overwritten and felt laboured. Lyric and stage directions were saying the same thing twice so everything was taking too long. I decided to cut some lyrics to rely more on simple, clear stage directions (and less on lyric).

*Ponies have formed a long straight line and one by one present a leg, showgirl style.
MC assesses all the legs*

PONIES ***When you see them lean in that way,
That's when you gotta give em –***

Inez presents a mannequin leg in place of her own. MC is drawn to it.

INEZ ***HEY! You like what you see?***
MC ***This beauty is through the roof!***
 Loveliness from hock to hoof. [MC leans towards Inez's leg]
INEZ Oh yeah?
MC Oh yeah...
INEZ + PONIES Oh yeah?
MC Oh yeah!
INEZ Theeeeeennnn – you can have it!

She whacks him with the mannequin leg in the groin.

Since the workshop revealed to me which parts of the stage directions (and lyrics) were effective and which were not, I was able to rewrite a condensed version of this section, which was more economical and dramatically engaging. When this new version was read

in the second workshop, my impression was it had the potential for greater comedic and political impact because it moved more quickly, and the images were clearer.



Video 12: Actors read an updated version of the leg sketch in “Pony Patter” (Actors: Asha Khamis, Emily Carr, Ursula Searle, Kristy Nguy, Chelsea, Suze. MC voice: Tyran Parke)

I had underestimated that stage directions – as all feeling-technologies and indeed all elements of a script – can require as much workshop time as a new song or scene. Thinking in terms of feeling-technologies invited me to take the same level of responsibility for stage directions as with any other aspect of the writing, because it was going to be deliberately doing something to make people feel, and to orientate them.

The number “Pony Patter” also features a section that is reminiscent of a horse race. Here, a connection is made between the maltreatment of horses for entertainment purposes and the ways women can be maltreated for entertainment purposes; the implication being that the same dynamics of domination and oppression, of violence and objectification that exist in the horse racing environment also permeate our entertainment culture. In this section, violence against women is deliberately trivialised and

sensationalised as beautiful, symmetrical, Follies-style choreography is occurring, to make the link between the culture of sexualisation and objectification of female bodies. I imagined that the stage directions could suggest the *Verfremdungseffekt*, to encompass this complexity.

To do this, I brought familiar elements together with the aim of creating an unsettling experience: spoken text telling a familiar story of violence against women enacted by men; the text delivered in the familiar style of a horse race commentator; stage directions suggesting female dancers executing choreography in the style of the Ziegfeld Follies showgirls; stage directions suggesting dancers using additional mannequin limbs as props (since novelty props were frequently used in Follies numbers). Where one of these elements alone would not necessarily create a strange experience or offer critique, the combination of these elements could create the *Verfremdungseffekt* to highlight the dangerous culture of sexual objectification of female bodies (through the choreography), profiteering and domination (through the horse race elements) that contributes to violence against women (literalised in the text).

The final version of this section in the script¹⁴¹ was arrived at following the workshop on the floor with actors. Through the workshop process, I attempted to interpret my stage directions with the actors, exploring Follies-style choreography and shapes. Though most were not trained dancers, the suggestion of the style they were able to embody allowed me to see which images and parts of the movement were most impactful and most important to note as stage directions, and which aspects would be left to a choreographer to shape. In the studio, the moments that were most impactful were those that captured my initial intention, clarifying the tone and the type of choreographic stage directions that best worked with the text. For example, in exploring the text “bowed over like ninepins”, we discovered an image where the plastic legs could fan up and out, which was visually reminiscent of bowling pins flying in slow motion as if hit by a strike, but also still maintaining the movement style of Follies showgirls. It had multiple layers of meaning but

¹⁴¹ See “Pony Patter” (p.141-146).

still echoing the text, whilst also creating the *Verfremdungseffekt*, as the prop legs appeared strange, flying through the air without bodies, maneuvered by smiling showgirls.



Video 13: Workshop of “Pony Patter” horse race section to determine stage directions (Actors: Kristie Nguy, Asha Khamis, Lisa-Marie Parker, Natalie Gamsu, Ursula Searle and Suze. MC voice: Tyran Parke)

However, workshopping the material on the floor revealed many moments that did not work and were too confusing. As I witnessed the music, text, movement, props and bodies all working together on the floor, there were some moments when I quickly realised that in trying to achieve so much with symbolic images, sometimes it was difficult to process. In my journal I wrote:

There are too many things occurring simultaneously. I think this is a danger and could make it easy to dismiss the message, because too many ideas are competing for attention. It’s too difficult to take it all in. (Jayde Kirchert, September 2023, Practice Journal)

As part of this discovery, it was surprising to me how dominant the music felt in establishing the tone and shaping what I paid attention to. After discussions with the composer the solution was to try to establish some norms and then work to subvert theme one by one, rather than going straight to subversion.

I approached the redraft by first thinking of the stage directions as providing the shape and structure. I then thought about how the Follies-style choreography could be established as a norm. To gradually disrupt this norm, I noted in the stage directions that most of the dancers should maintain the norm (continuing the Follies-style choreography), whilst one or two dancers should embody the impact of the violence suggested in the text. To layer in another subversion, props were added much later to make the choreographic norms strange, aiming to create the *Verfremdungseffekt*. Gradually, more and more dancers would demonstrate and embody the violence suggested in the text to subvert the choreographic norms established, until finally, the violence in the text would be clearly demonstrated in the choreographic stage directions. I then added in a turning point where the dancers could regain power, led by Inez, by having their props become weapons. I was thinking of my conscious use of violence noted in Chapter 4, where I needed to ensure the balance of power would be with the women when depicting misogynistic or harmful ideas, to maintain the feminist orientation.

In the second read through, although the actors were not embodying the stage directions on the floor, I felt it was so much clearer and, thinking as a director for a moment, the potential for a clear staging was evident. Importantly, because the writing was more economical and the shape of the stage directions were more carefully crafted, the feminist message and orientation was also coming through more clearly.

In these examples of stage direction writing, *gestic* feminist criticism and the *Verfremdungseffekt* were used as feeling-technologies contributing to the intersectional feminist orientation. In writing “Pony Patter” I have been very specific about how bodies and props ought to be organised and orientated through stage directions – sometimes to pay homage to a noted, subversive female performer, sometimes to chart a dramaturgy

of establishing – then disrupting – visual, embodied norms. Through practical workshops, I was able to better understand the relationship between my intention as the writer and the way the writing on the page translates when it is embodied by actors. I was reminded of the vital importance of studio exploration in the writing process, particularly when it comes to a multi-layered, complex balancing of meanings and valences in stage directions. In this feminist work, I found that handling multiplicity with care requires time and space to allow an embodied process to be part of the writing process, so that messages can remain clear and there is potential for an audience to connect to the material.

5.4 “Dangerous (Finale)”: Arriving at the Destination

After consciously crafting moments of Dolan’s (2005) utopian performatives in *Ascent*, I knew this device could be a way of enacting what Dolan (2013) calls a transformative politics of hope. Given the exploration of challenging themes throughout *Dangerous*, I felt it was important to leave the audience renewed with energy to go out into the world, inspired to enact positive change, having felt “the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential” (Dolan 2005, 2). Additionally, when reflecting on musicals I had attended during the practice-based research period (2022-2023), such as *&Juliet* (2019), *Moulin Rouge* (2018), *Hamilton* (2015), *Jagged Little Pill* (2018) and *Six* (2017), even in those musicals whose central characters experienced tragedy or disappointment, there was a positive outcome and positive feelings encouraged through feeling-technologies (including the use of an encore) by the end of the musical. In aiming for a commercial context, I felt it would be wise to align with existing commercial works in this regard, particularly since I believed I could do so whilst maintaining an intersectional feminist orientation.

During the early stages of the very first drafts, I was inspired by an animated image I saw on social media, of women helping each other to climb up higher, created by illustrator Libby Vander Ploeg (Libby Vander Ploeg, Instagram post, March 9 2022, accessed 24 March 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca2N-KYp6Kp/?hl=en>). When it came time to

write the final scene of *Dangerous*, it came to mind as it perfectly captured the idea I wanted the New Woman to articulate by the end of her journey.



Figure 21: Gif image by Libby Vander Ploeg (image credit: @libbyvanderploeg)

Though I knew I needed to have a final song in which the lyrics explained what the New Woman had learnt in detail, I felt that a metaphoric image needed to also be offered in the stage directions to amplify the feelings the song was aiming to generate. By finding the right image and suggesting this in the stage directions, I was aiming to create a utopian performative moment that could have an impact on how the audience felt returning to their own lives. As Dolan (2005) explains, “The affective and ideological ‘doings’ we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives also critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm” (2005, 7). Additionally, I wanted to evoke a sense of community, rather than focus on the achievement of the individual by the show’s conclusion. Dolan (2005), in describing the types of performances she analyses for their utopian performatives talks about them

offering “expressions of hope and love” for “a more abstracted notion of ‘community,’ or for an even more intangible idea of ‘humankind’” (2005, 2), which speaks to the idea and feeling I was aiming for when beginning to write the finale.

The finale begins with the New Woman recognising the choice that she has – and indeed all the suffragists have – in what role they choose to play. As Truth explains, “Wherever there is someone seeking control, someone who is greedy, someone who is forceful or undermining, someone exploiting another, someone exploiting the planet – the MC makes an appearance.” In trying to figure out how to maintain the feeling of freedom the New Woman has achieved with the suffragists after momentarily eradicating the MC, the New Woman realises she finally has an answer to the question the suffragists have been asking repeatedly throughout the musical: what is your weapon of choice? Her response is to choose to embrace love rather than force and fear, as a guiding principle in how she will now live in the world. This reflects hooks’ philosophy and observations about the potential of love to transform our society and our lives:

To live our lives based on the principles of a love ethic (showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate), we have to be courageous. Learning how to face our fears is one way we embrace love. Our fear may not go away, but it will not stand in the way. Those of us who have already chosen to embrace a love ethic, allowing it to govern and inform how we think and act, know that when we let our light shine, we draw to us and are drawn to other bearers of light. We are not alone. (hooks 2000, 101)

The New Woman’s lyrics create links between what she has learnt from the suffragists and what challenges exist in the world today, from her perspective. The suffragists join her, thrilled that the New Woman has indeed come through in offering a development on their feminist arguments and logic, building upon their ideas, and adding her own. The New Woman, feeling she is not alone, and supported by the suffragists, declares love as a dangerous act in a patriarchal world, singing proclamations of self-love, communal love and love of life. This culminates in the stage directions which attempt to symbolically

capture and actively embody the utopian performative notion of transformative politics that make the world a better place for women. The performers come together as “a human pyramid starts to take shape”. The song continues and they help each other up, creating a higher and higher structure, and “the suffragists start to ascend up the human pyramid”. Finally, “the last climber – the NW – reaches the top. She reaches a glass ceiling. A hammer is passed up to her. Then, she hits it with the hammer until it finally smashes. Once it smashes, shiny rainbow confetti falls from the ceiling, and the ladder is dismantled bit by bit.” Danger and women’s liberation are in a constant dance throughout the book scenes; as the New Woman learns more and gets closer to arriving at her own confident, assured feminist orientation, the dangerous events increase in severity and the stakes are heightened. The tension builds until this final moment of release, where the insidious danger is mostly dissipated and women’s liberation is experienced as a hopeful, utopian moment through the final song, but one where there is still a level of risk (literalised in the human pyramid).

Something that emerged in the first workshop through discussions with a colleague who read for one of the characters, was that the image of a human pyramid and confetti falling did not have the impact I was aiming for, because in that version each act was ending with a suffragist defeating the MC, which meant there were many images of female empowerment and success before we got to the final scene.^{142, 143} Therefore, the final scene was more of the same dynamic. This perspective gave me a lot to consider in writing stage directions in the broader context of the musical. Attending to the detail of stage directions and the action they suggest in the context of the entire musical revealed something to me about their power as feeling-technologies that is easy to forget when writing words on a page: if we are used to the same feeling being created over and over, it may risk losing its potency. This conversation with my colleague about stage directions was so important that it led me to redrafting the plot and reimagining aspects of the

¹⁴² The draft workshoped in the first September workshop had the suffragists defeating the MC at the end of their acts. See Chapter 4 for more detail on the implications this choice had regarding lack of stakes and inadequate tension.

¹⁴³ These stage directions were never workshoped as they rely on spectacle that is not possible to replicate in the workshop environment, requiring harnesses, circus trainers to build the human pyramid and rigged machinery to execute the falling confetti.

musical's premise, so the final image could have the uplifting impact I envisioned. In my journal I wrote:

I needed to figure out a way for the human pyramid at the end to have the impact I imagined was possible. It's an image that I feel captures the feminism I am aiming to express in my musical. It speaks to the feelings I want the audience to be left with by the end. I know sometimes you have to "kill your darlings" as the saying goes, but the human pyramid feels like an anchoring image, and I think the symbolic destination for the entire musical's orientation. (Jayde Kirchert, September 2023, Practice Journal)

In the follow-up reading of the new draft in December 2023 where more danger was added and the suffragists no longer defeated the MC at the end of each act, the final image had greater potency. Attending to my body and how I felt as I listened to the reading, I experienced a feeling of relief and release; it confirmed the utopian performative was needed, because there was no other opportunity to fully release throughout the rest of the musical, as the redraft consciously worked towards increasing the tension. This observation was echoed by the actors who had been part of both workshops. The general sentiment was that the redraft was much more dynamic and felt more dangerous, which allowed the final image to have a greater payoff (even as we were imagining its impact in the context of a table read).

Prior to undertaking this research, I had underestimated the power and political potential of stage directions. In the example of the finale of *Dangerous*, I discovered that the stage directions that suggested the final image (of a ceiling being smashed after the creation of a human pyramid) was the anchoring image, the destination, towards which the entire musical was orientated. Through writing stage directions with a utopian performative in mind as the anchor, I was able to create a positive ending to the musical whilst maintaining an intersectional feminist orientation. It should be noted that a utopian performative does not necessarily guarantee a feminist work, but if used in service of a feminist message and concepts, can serve to amplify and celebrate these aims.

Section 3: Conclusion

In this chapter I have found lyric writing to be an important feeling-technology that requires deep consideration to avoid replicating problematic ideologies that can accompany some book musical conventions, or the problematic misogynistic connotations and associations that have come to be synonymous with popular musical styles such as rap and hip hop. By taking a careful and conscious approach towards lyric writing, the examples in this chapter reveal that it is possible to take aesthetic inspiration from contemporary musicals and popular music styles, even if these sources are not feminist in their orientation. However, to avoid compromising the politics when writing a new musical with an intersectional feminist orientation, the historicity of these sources needs to be consciously engaged with, and there must also be a sufficient dramaturgical rationale for employing these styles. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge one's positionality when writing in popular music styles that do not align with the cultural background of the writer. I found the idea of being a 'respectful guest' when engaging in appropriation a useful way to orientate myself into the cultural world of a style such as rap and hip hop.

By thinking about stage action in terms of *gestic* feminist criticism and the *Verfremdungseffekt*, I found it possible to contextualise and re-orientate performance conventions that have historically been used to objectify women on musical stages. In *gestic* feminist criticism, layers of historicity and an intention to highlight and critique problematic gender norms – exemplified in “Pony Patter” through the bevel – can inform interpreters of the book that the use of problematic conventions has a specific objective. A comedic homage to Fanny Brice in “Pony Patter” created the *Verfremdungseffekt* to reclaim the bevel and render the *gestus* strange. Another feminist tool, the utopian performative, provided an anchor for the overall orientation of the whole musical. Crafting the stage directions by considering them within the context of the musical's action throughout was important to ensure they could have the potential to operate as powerful feeling-technologies. Workshop time with actors working on the floor was an essential part of arriving at stage directions that offer clear instructions to creatives who will eventually interpret my written text into embodied action.

Conclusion

Evaluating the Aims

This project has arrived at an understanding of what constitutes feminist music theatre within my practice and offers a number of approaches that can enable the creation of new feminist music theatre works. The four major types of musicals were explored, with special attention paid to concept musicals. A theoretical, intersectional feminist lens was also introduced. Ahmed's queer phenomenological concept of orientation was brought into conversation with Blair's notion of 'feelings' and 'messages' and feeling-technologies. Together with my intersectional feminist lens, I was able to evaluate the extent to which existing works could be considered feminist, further developing the discourse in academic analyses such as those by Stacy Wolf. Brechtian-materialist feminist tools enabled more nuanced analysis of my work and built upon the orientation and feeling-technology concepts to propose specific interventions to build a feminist dramaturgy.

Importing Ahmed's queer-feminist theoretical tool into a music theatre making and writing practice demonstrates the creative and scholarly potential for music theatre practice-based research projects. Considering orientation at different points in the making and writing process enabled me to attend to and experiment with my processes in the studio working with actor bodies, choices around content and message, form, style, types of dramaturgical conventions and ways they are used. Looking at orientation in these ways across the thesis points to the broad applicability and productive potential for other creators looking to reinvent music theatre for an intersectional feminist agenda.

I discovered that when writing a music theatre work whose concerns and thematic content are feminist, Brechtian-materialist feminist conventions such as the *Verfremdungseffekt*, historicisation and *gestic* feminist criticism could be employed to help specify how the bodies on stage ought to be orientated and offer possibilities – that go beyond conventional musical theatre norms and expectations – for what these bodies *can* do. Thinking about dramaturgical conventions and tools as feeling-technologies which orientate the bodies on stage (and the audiences towards these bodies), gave me a language to recognise and point to the intersectional feminist dramaturgy in my previous

work, *Ascent*, and enabled me to build and develop a feminist music theatre dramaturgy in my new work, *Dangerous*. In creating *Dangerous*, I also felt the need to consider the possible impact of each creative choice from an intersectional feminist perspective.

The dramaturgical principles I arrived at were a useful summary of the priorities and approaches that have come to inform my practice and were helpful to refer to throughout the creation of *Dangerous*. I arrived at the term ‘principles’ as opposed to guide or instructions, because I intuited that the multiplicity inherent in feminist practices makes it problematic and likely impossible to determine, or prescribe, fixed rules. I also learnt that particular formal features do not necessarily guarantee a feminist work – for example, as described in Chapter 1 and again in evaluating *Six* in Chapter 5, writing a concept musical, whilst formally being compatible with a feminist agenda, does not necessarily result in a feminist work. The nature of my enquiry working with these dramaturgical principles has, therefore, centred on teasing out, with curiosity, the historicity and technical aspects of dramaturgical tools and theoretical concepts to explore how they can assist in realising a work that is feminist, in ways that are open-ended and in constant evolution, rather than functioning as a checklist. I kept the key ideas in mind when creating *Dangerous*, such as working from an intersectional feminist agenda, aiming for a transformative, hopeful politics, exploring non-traditional structures, using strategies such as Brechtian-materialist feminist tools and utopian performatives to orientate the musical, and being conscious of how every choice may be employed as a feeling-technology to orientate the audience.

In reflecting on my process and the majority of works in the musical theatre canon, I do not believe that musical theatre creators, from Hammerstein to Miranda, *intended* to create problematic representations of women in their musicals. I do believe that, based on this research, problematic norms and assumptions are replicated when dramaturgical conventions, tools and form are not attended to consciously – and challenged. I found that orientation and feeling-technologies provided me, as the creator, a greater consciousness around what is being said and how it is being said and prompted interrogation of potential historical associations and broad cultural connotations. I believe

other creators could also employ these approaches to make more politically conscious, dramaturgically robust musicals.

The defining feature that now characterises my approach to making feminist music theatre, as demonstrated in this thesis, is a consciousness around each stage of development and writing. Whilst being aware of all the potential ways a musical's book can impact a contemporary audience is an incompletable task, given the diversity of human experience and identity markers and preferences, it is a task that is nonetheless important and worthy of undertaking. Committing to the task of increasing consciousness around the possible impacts of every layer of writing *Dangerous* has grounded my process in a desire to be accountable, responsible and, I believe, has resulted in more thoughtful, skilfully crafted work. Making conscious, deliberate choices is an aspect of book writing that has benefit for any musical theatre writer, regardless of their political orientation.

Starting in an experimental style was necessary for me before moving into a work aiming for broad appeal. I felt there was greater freedom to experiment with form and content; it gave me the space to explore feminist ideas and tools in a space that is perhaps already orientated towards the non-normative. The more experimental act, I believe, was blending musical theatre conventions with a Composed Theatre approach. In creating a musical that aimed for broader, commercial appeal, I turned to musicals such as *Assassins*, *Cabaret* and *Chicago*, which, whilst having relatively broad appeal, have also experimented with possibilities for the musical's content and form. These musicals, along with others, provided a strong starting point from which I could develop the structural components of a concept musical for a feminist agenda, which resulted in a hybrid form. Indeed, both the works discussed in this thesis exhibited hybrid forms. I believe hybrid forms emerged as they best expressed and structurally supported my feminist ideas.

This has led me to consider, in light of Sondheim's dictum "content dictates form" (Sondheim 2010, xv), whether feminist ideas for music theatre necessarily *require* bespoke feminist forms, or if they can exist within conventional, traditional structures. This

provocation is the beginning of the next area for research. In particular, I want to understand whether I could create an original feminist book musical. If content is to dictate form, then a piece with a feminist message should be feminist in its formal realisation and not bound by the values and expectations for narrative and structure that typically accompany the book musical. I hypothesise that if the idea is feminist, then a conscious attention towards the way the musical's conventions are used would be necessary to ensure it remains feminist. For instance, the Brechtian-materialist feminist conventions may enable a feminist approach towards writing the book musical, or it may be possible to queer certain conventions as the maker (not simply in a scholarly literary analysis, as per Stacy Wolf's readings). But the more nuanced question that remains, and requires further research, is once conventions are being 'queered' or reorientated, to what extent are they being changed and impacting the form? Whilst it is possible a book musical structure could tell a feminist story, I maintain that there are numerous pitfalls that may emerge, even as the story may revolve around a central female figure or figures (as with *Wicked*). Jukebox musicals *Jagged Little Pill* and *&Juliet* suggest that a feminist orientation is possible within a book form (though they are not without their issues as discussed in the introduction), and there exists a mainstream appetite for such works – however, they are not original musicals with original scores.

Limitations

Some aspects of this research are limited and, at times, remain speculative. The creative work created for this thesis is the book and lyrics for a new musical, which is an incomplete piece of work, lacking a complete score and a full realisation with the attention of an audience. I deliberately chose to end the creative part of this project at the point where I would hand the book over to the composer, for a range of reasons outlined in the Introduction.

Additionally, limiting the scope in this way allowed me to offer a close and detailed analysis of the process for the book writer creating a new feminist musical *prior* to working in depth with other collaborators, addressing a gap in the literature. From determining the

message of the work, to suggesting its orientation through feeling-technologies that range from lyric writing styles to stage directions, along with determining the overall structure and narrative devices, the book writer can provide the strong foundations for a feminist musical upon which other creatives can build. Regardless of the next steps, this remains a valuable scholarly contribution and offers a rare insight into this part of the creative writing process of a musical's book.

But it is not the end of the book writer's work; the collaborative nature of writing a musical necessitates rewriting and editing as the other creative layers are added. I have documented and analysed this from the workshop process when exploring two of the songs for which draft music had been written. After hearing and seeing the songs and text working together as they were embodied by performers, I was compelled to rewrite. I cut and reshaped lyrics and stage directions with the memory of the presence of music and what it could communicate; I was able to edit out sections that felt overwritten when music was added. This process will continue as more music is added. Additionally, lacking a complete score, the overall feel and tone of the musical is only suggested by my work as the book writer. It is impossible to ignore the way music can influence the atmosphere, mood, and the overall way an audience feels. Whilst the composer has been lightly involved offering suggestions and his perspective on the work in development, I anticipate a lot will shift as the music is composed.

My hypothesis and rationale behind the crafting of lyrics to harness the positive feelings of existing popular styles and musicals remains hypothetical until the music is complete, and an audience provides feedback pertaining to its affective impact. This next crucial stage of development of the musical will further illuminate whether another aim – creating a feminist musical for broad appeal – is possible to achieve. In attempting to make work that could have broad appeal whilst being orientated towards unapologetic feminist politics, I am aware there may be conversations as other creatives come on board concerning the extent to which the feminist politics could be softened or made less overt. Of interest, then, is *to what extent* can a feminist orientation – a feminist message – be maintained in a work that aims for broad appeal? There exists a tension between aiming

for broad appeal and maintaining a feminist orientation at every layer of writing. At this stage, with a small amount of music and no producer or director needs to satisfy, it can be maintained and recruits popular music stylistic features to use as feeling-technologies to encourage audiences to embrace the feminist politics. Moving forward, it will be necessary to work collaboratively with the composer and then start to workshop with a director, a producer and actors; only then will the shape of the musical and the overall tone become established. My hope is that even if superficial adjustments are made, the orientation for this work is so strong, foundational and integral to every aspect of the musical, that its political agenda will withstand the processes of further development.

The intersectional feminism that I use is limited by my lived experience and the reality of maintaining a feasible scope for a research project. Working in an interdisciplinary area of scholarship, with an emerging feminist discourse, meant it was necessary for me to limit my focus to the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Further work is needed to address other identity markers, and their political intersections are experienced on the musical stage. The issue of how to write for bodies that are different from my own is complex, and one of the big challenges all writers and creatives face in this present moment, where a heightened sensitivity to issues of identity politics, appropriation and ownership of story are prevalent across art forms. Part of the research process requires artists to continue to experiment and explore possible ways to move forward, because the alternative – to only write biographical material, or nothing at all – is not much of an alternative.

Another limitation that was pointed out to me by one of my supervisors was the way an American sense of pace, rhythm and historical content permeates the musical form generally, and my musical *Dangerous*, specifically. Having three out of five suffragists being from America has undoubtedly influenced the pace and rhythm of the dialogue. This is, in part, due to the source material that provided the initial inspiration – it was focused on the American suffragists with passing reference to British suffragettes. My insertion of a Briton and an Australian into the group of suffragists was an attempt to broaden the applicability of the story to people from other locations such as the United

Kingdom and Australia. However, I also recognise that the choice of a Vaudeville revue as the framing device is a choice that focuses on an American iteration of the variety form. Whilst this form was popular in Australia, I have used sources that refer to the American theatre and Vaudeville as the foundation of the American musical. This is perpetuating the dominant presence of America, reflecting the problematic symbol of the ‘international’ as being one where America dominates (see Lee 2012). Whilst this may contribute to Edith’s bemoaning of Australians (“we’re so obsessed with what’s happening in America, or anywhere else, but never stop to grapple with our own history”), the focus was on telling women’s stories that feel relevant for understanding global and glocal perspectives on contemporary feminism. Furthermore, this is representative of Australia’s anglophone theatrical history, which has its roots in American and British Vaudeville and Music Hall, European Opera and Operetta, Shakespeare, Minstrel Shows and American, British and European plays (see Waterhouse 1990).

Looking to the Future

Prior to undertaking this research, I worked primarily in an intuitive way. Now I am able to understand my intuitive impulses more clearly, and my work benefits from having a more rigorous analytical and research-informed process. Whilst I have found it useful to take a practice-based approach to researching how feminist musicals can be made, there was an unintended impact on my creative practice; at times, concepts and ideas tended to dominate and needed to be balanced with story, character, energy and play. Having time in the studio to do practical work was vital to ensure my practice could benefit from the research process.

Barnes (2020) suggests that a lack of a framework with which to critically analyse commercial musicals may explain the mislabelling of *Six* (2017) as feminist. However, as has been argued in this dissertation, feminist theatre critics such as Diamond (1988) and Dolan (2005 and 2013) along with Ahmed (2006) and Blair (2016) provide many tools that can be employed to evaluate a musical’s feminism, along with numerous scholars whose theories can be creatively imported to better understand the musical and its conventions.

Perhaps what Barnes is pointing to is a lack of connection between feminist criticism within the academy and that which occurs in the industry and media. With so few examples of musicals that demonstrably have a feminist orientation, feminist music theatre makers and writers are being called upon to reinvent the form from a politically conscious place, however without clear frameworks upon which to base fundamental choices that ultimately determine its orientation. By employing the dramaturgical principles arrived at in this study, *Dangerous* is positioned to employ the feel-good aesthetics and stylings of *Six* and *Hamilton*, to tell a message of feminist empowerment and liberation, orientated towards a better future for women. In doing so, it may provide an example for others to follow, both in terms of possible ways to analyse musicals to determine their orientation, and possible ways to approach the creation of a feminist musical.

That said, this thesis documents just one approach to making a feminist musical and my hope is that further research from other scholars will uncover numerous approaches and frameworks for creating feminist music theatre works. My research may help another feminist music theatre maker in beginning her process of creating a feminist music theatre work, and I hope she feels empowered to use what is useful, but ultimately, make it her own way.

The next stage in the development process for *Dangerous* will be for the composer to complete the score and then to workshop and pitch to commercial producers, with the aim of having a full professional production realised. The dissertation, book and lyrics that were produced however, are nonetheless valuable, and have allowed me to understand my process with greater depth and precision. Therefore, this thesis may be of use to other aspiring music theatre makers and writers.

As concerns the future of music theatre, I would like to encourage other creators intending to make a feminist work, to do so intentionally and consciously. There are countless intersections that can focus and personalise one's feminism. The awareness that now exists in the broad culture around gender equality, and the willingness people are

increasingly finding to speak out and rectify gender-based injustice on social media and mainstream media broadly means writers can no longer ignore gender and what happens to female bodies on stage. My practice details very specific approaches and tools from feminist criticism and imported theoretical frameworks, and that approach will not be right for every creator. But every creator can take the time to question each step of their process, each convention, each tool – and consider how the bodies on stage are being orientated, shaped and directed. And, most importantly, every creator can take the time to ask: what can my work contribute to broader societal ideas about how women are valued, on and beyond the stage?

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Appendix 1: Video recording of Dangerous (reading)

[Act 1 reading \(December 2023\)](#)

[Act 2 reading \(December 2023\)](#)

Appendix 2: Music samples of Dangerous

From Extended Play (EP) recording, *The 100 Year Revue*, created in 2020 through the Monash University Jeanne Pratt Artist In Residence (JPAIR) program, produced by Phil Turcio:

- [Paradox](#)
- [The F Word](#)
- [Pony Patter](#)

From September 2023 workshop:

- [Dangerous \(opening song\)](#)
- [Pony Patter](#)

Appendix 3: Ethics Plain Language Statement

Plain Language Statement – Performers – *Dangerous*

Victorian College of the Arts, Faculty of Fine Arts & Music

Feminist Orientations: approaches for an intersectional feminist music theatre dramaturgy



Student Researcher:

PhD student Jayde Kirchert

Supervising Researchers:

Primary Supervisor, Assoc Prof Dr Yoni Prior

Co-supervisor, Assoc Prof Dr Alyson Campbell

Introduction

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project. The following few pages will provide you with further information about the project, so that you can decide if you would like to take part in this research.

Please take the time to read this information carefully. You may ask questions about anything you don't understand or want to know more about.

Your participation is voluntary. If you don't wish to take part, you don't have to. If you begin participating, you can also stop at any time.

What is this research about?

This research project uses an intersectional feminist lens to understand how to make music theatre that is feminist. It does this by paying special attention towards the ways in which the female body is framed, looking at how music theatre has traditionally oriented audiences to feel certain ways towards certain bodies. The project is guided by practice, by taking a practice-led analysis of an existing work (*Ascent*) performed in 2018, then applying the learnings of this analysis towards a practice-based methodology for creating a new music theatre work (*Dangerous*).

This project critically responds to the commercial, populist form of musical theatre (in which I trained professionally), where I argue the female body has been frequently and problematically objectified and employed as a dramaturgical tool in musical theatre, thus normalising problematic representations of female bodies and gender.

Key questions being addressed by this research project include:

- What might a feminist music theatre work look and sound like?
- What makes my music theatre work feminist?
- How can political aspirations for the feminist music theatre maker can be realised in a form that aims for a commercial life? What role do feeling technologies (i.e. stage craft elements) play in creating music theatre with both broad appeal and a feminist orientation?

This project involves my reflecting on artistic processes that led to the creation of a work performed in 2018, as well as documenting and evaluating my artistic processes leading to the creation of a new work (yet to be performed).

What will I be asked to do?

Should you agree to participate, this is what your involvement will look like:

- In this project you will be required to rehearse and perform material from new music theatre work, *Dangerous*, as directed and agreed, for a filmed reading outcome.
- You will be required to read the script before committing to the reading, so you can make an informed choice about your involvement.
- In the dissertation pertaining to the new music theatre work *Dangerous*, the researcher will discuss the creative process, which you are involved with. Though you will not be named in the examples in the dissertation, it is possible that you may be identifiable due to images and video of your work in the reading appearing in the dissertation. By being involved in the reading, you consent to the researcher discussing examples that may refer to a character you performed during the reading, however you will not be directly named nor will your performance be evaluated. The focus will be on the researcher's creative development of the new work.
- You are invited to specify how you would like to be referred to in the dissertation's acknowledgement section which will list the artists involved in the reading of *Dangerous*.
- You are invited to specify how you would like to be identified (as the researcher may provide a statement about the overall make up of identities of those involved in the dissertation)

What are the possible benefits?

Participating in this study, you will be contributing to a new and exciting area of research. The possible benefits of this project include:

- Introducing practice-based research methodology to musical theatre, a small but growing area of research, where feminist approaches are not prevalent.
- Furthering the discipline of music theatre, introducing some rigorous and influential intersectional feminist thinking and approaches.
- Development of new feminist music theatre making practices.
- Development of new feminist music theatre works.
- Raise awareness of intersectional-feminist practices for the benefit of those who interpret music theatre work.

What are the possible risks?

Because you will not be asked to do anything beyond the expectations of a professional development environment, the risks are minimal. There is a small chance, as with all performance material, that you may find some of the themes of the work personally

challenging. This is why you will be required to read the script before agreeing to participate.

Themes explored include violence against women and oppression on the basis of gender and race. Depictions of these themes will not be realistic. Rather, they will be depicted in ways that are highly stylised, consciously performative and abstracted.

The researcher is trained in consent principles and will be holding the space in a way that is consent-led.

To ensure artist wellbeing is prioritised and to mitigate any potential risks associated with challenging material, a Distress Protocol will be explained on the first day of rehearsals and reminded throughout the rehearsal process. This enables all artists to be responsible for their own professional boundaries and to be participating in rehearsal activities with full, informed consent.

If at any point you feel you need additional support, you are encouraged to call the Support Act Wellbeing Hotline 1800 959 500 or contact admin@supportact.org.au or visit <https://artswellbeingcollective.com.au/get-help/support-act-helplines/>

Descriptions of moments that include your character's involvement will not name you specifically and are reflecting on the researcher's creative development process, not your performance. There is a chance you may be identifiable, even though you will not be named in the examples in the dissertation, due to the small number of people in the cast and images and videos of the reading used in the dissertation. Should you be concerned please contact the researcher with any questions.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation is completely voluntary. You are able to withdraw unprocessed data at any time. You will be paid relative to the amount of work completed. Involvement or non-involvement will have no bearing on future opportunities working with the researcher.

Will I hear about the results of this project?

The dissertation, once complete, will be emailed to you.

What will happen to information about me?

Data, including the consent forms will be kept in password protected secure university cloud storage and a backup external hard drive, password protected and only accessible by the researcher. It may be retained for future research, such as academic journal publications for a maximum of 5 years, after which time it will be destroyed. Your name will never appear in any of the examples in notes or in the dissertation. Data including the videos and images will be kept indefinitely. Images may be used in future journal publications pertaining to this research project. Videos will not be distributed and retained only for the purposes of examination and for the researcher to use in reflecting on her process and artistic archival purposes. Should there ever be an intention to make the videos available to other people publicly or privately, your consent will be sought explicitly.

Is there any potential conflict of interest?

No.

Where can I get further information?

If you would like more information about the project, please contact the researchers;

PhD student Jayde Kirchert

Primary Supervisor, Assoc Prof

Dr Yoni Prior

or Co-supervisor, Assoc Prof Dr Alyson Campbell

Who can I contact if I have any concerns about the project?

This project has human research ethics approval from The University of Melbourne

22923. If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this research project, which you do not wish to discuss with the research team, you should contact the Research Integrity Administrator, Office of Research Ethics and Integrity, University of Melbourne, VIC 3010. Tel: +61 8344 1376 or Email: research-integrity@unimelb.edu.au. All complaints will be treated confidentially. In any correspondence please provide the name of the research team and/or the name or ethics ID number of the research project.