# Dance-Floor Dramaturgy: New Approaches to Making Theatre Queerly

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Declaration

*I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university. All sources are acknowledged as References.*

Abstract

‘Dance-Floor Dramaturgy’ is a constellation of practices, rehearsal techniques, and modes of meaning-making that I have created and developed to make theatre queerly. The aesthetic, languages, and interdisciplinarity of the dance floor establish key methods and philosophies for queer dramaturgies (Campbell and Farrier 2015) that are discovered through my practice research process. Dance-Floor Dramaturgy establishes a distinct approach to theatrical form that explores and captures queer potentiality, mobilising José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of queer futurity, which looks to the past to illuminate the future using a philosophy of hope and collectivity to reach for the utopian. Dance-Floor Dramaturgy goes beyond theorising to make an intervention into practices of theatre-making, dramaturgical frames, methods of audience engagement, and deeper representation of queer narratives and performers.

This thesis is underpinned by over a decade of work as Artistic Director of Outbox, a company that collaborates with LGBTQIA+ communities, artists, and performers, and uses as case studies three productions that explore timely and critical facets of queer culture. *Affection* deals with queer people living with HIV, *And The Rest of Me Floats* interrogates the construction and performativity of gender, and *GROOVE* is the culmination of the project, exploring the queer dance floor as a site of cross-generational exchange.

Through this practice research, I invent constituents of the queer making process that I term pulses. The pulses can be used as distinct dramaturgical functions, or work in conjunction to produce queer work. Rather than providing a toolkit, the research offers insights and approaches to performance making that

illuminate queer experiences. By commingling co-created theatre-making, dramaturgical theory, and queer futurity, Dance-Floor Dramaturgy produces a transformative framework that allows the performer (and, by extension, audiences) to explore their past and future selves, their dreams, and desires.

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Personal thanks must be given to my friends and family. Particularly my parents, Margaret and Larry, whose support and love is never-ending.

This is for Barry - my greatest collaborator, friend, and love. I could not have done ANY of this without you.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the LGBTQIA+ individuals, communities, artists, and activists who have given their time, commitment, and energy to Outbox.

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How to read this thesis

This thesis will be submitted as an electronic document with embedded links to clips of the practice; alternatively, the thesis can be read as a hard copy with examples of the practice available to view on the submitted USB device with each clip clearly labelled.

For Chapters Two and Three, the entire performances of *And The Rest of Me Floats* and *GROOVE* have been submitted for assessment. It is recommended that the chapters are read first with corresponding clips before watching the whole productions.

Practice Documentation (Accompanying USB and Embedded Clips)

Chapter One Documentation:

*Affection* Clip 1: Rehearsal

Duration: 00:01:02

*Affection* Clip 2: 'Glamorous'

Duration: 00:02:20

*Affection* Clip 3: 'Waiting Room'

Duration: 00:03:32

*Affection* Clip 4: 'TRIP'

Duration: 00:01:43

Chapter Two Documentation:

*And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 1: 'Jokes'

Duration: 00:06:52

*And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 2: 'Plastic'

Duration: 00:02:32

*And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 3: 'Medicine'

Duration: 00:02:53

*And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 4: 'Grid 1'

Duration: 00:03:21

*And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 5: ‘Grid 2’

Duration: 00:01:38

*And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 6: ‘Grid 3’

Duration: 00:02:26

*And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 7: ‘Religion’

Duration: 00:08:02

*And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 8: ‘Punctuate’

Duration: 00:00:43

*And The Rest of Me Floats* (Bush Theatre 2019) Full Production

Duration: 01:21:49

Chapter Three Documentation:

*GROOVE* Clip 1: Opening

Duration: 00:03:58

*GROOVE* Clip 2: ‘FREE YOUR BODY’

Duration: 00:05:51

*GROOVE* Clip 3: ‘TRANCE’

Duration: 00:03:07

*GROOVE* Clip 4: ‘FUTURE’

Duration: 00:03:39

*GROOVE* Clip 5: ‘LE DANSE’

Duration: 00:04:55

*GROOVE* Clip 6: ‘LAVINIA PAINTING’

Duration: 00:02:35

*GROOVE* (Shoreditch Town Hall/Oxford House 2022) Full Production

Duration: 01:07:49

*8.*

*New Year's Eve, 1989. In a very small, terraced house in suburban Swindon, UK, 8-year-old me is curled up on the sofa. The telephone rings unexpectedly and it is my Uncle Denis, calling my mum to explain that we are all going to the Working Men's Club to celebrate Hogmanay. As a single mother with two children dressed for bed and settled in for the evening, she protested this spontaneous plan. Children weren't allowed into the club and women were very rarely welcome. Then something magical happened; Mum clambered our wriggling limbs out of pyjamas and into semi-smart party gear to ring in the 1990s. I do not remember how we travelled the short distance to the Working Men's Club, but I do remember my trepidation as I was smuggled under my uncle's coat, past the near-ancient man on the door. I was thrust into the least conspicuous corner of the room and handed a bag of crisps and a blackcurrant and lemonade. Just above my head lay a canopy of cigarette smoke that stung my eyes, its potent scent commingling with musk, powdery and floral perfumes, leather, lager, and sweat. Through the adults' legs, I can see a demarcated space where the swirling, viciously coloured carpet stopped and tiles of tacky, black linoleum replaced it. As the men filled the carpet with football punditry and rapid ale swilling, the women took their stiletto-heeled shoes to the dance floor. Disco lights of flashing primary colours bounced across their permed hair and sequinned shoulder pads as familiar beats and rhythms propelled this small army of women into action. I saw formal adult bodies become free and lithe, connected by a physical language. I want to remember that a mirror-ball hung above their heads and the fragmented light glittered and shimmered above the tobacco clouds, but I don't*

*quite recall if that's the way it was. I do know that's how it made me feel. In the mundane, heteronormative, and misogynist setting of the suburban Working Men's Club, the dance floor on the horizon was a key to a queer future – a quotidian moment of potentiality.*

* * *

I begin this thesis with a memory that sets the scene for my theatre-making practice and doctoral study – the aesthetic, physical languages, and interdisciplinarity of the dance floor. The site of the dance floor establishes key approaches and philosophies for queer dramaturgies that are discovered through my practice research process. I devise and direct theatre productions that are never far away from a mirror-ball and a glitter-drop, and the starting point for this thesis was to interrogate my fascination with this aesthetic. In turning to queer theory, and more specifically queer *futurity*, I discovered that my proximity to the dance floor can be silly, fanciful, and camp, whilst simultaneously unlocking modes and practices that embody and articulate dramaturgical strategies to make theatre queerly.

Theatre-making practice is the first term of reference in this thesis and the discoveries could not be made through theory alone. I use the term 'practice research', characterised by UK Research and Innovation in 2023 as 'the production of outputs in non-text-based forms including artefacts, performances, and exhibitions' (Duffy and McCallum 2023), throughout the thesis to establish an approach that puts theatre-making at the centre of the enquiry and as the primary tool of investigation. My practice is underpinned by over a decade of work with Outbox, a queer theatre company that I founded in 2010 and continue to lead

artistically. I come to this research with an aim to invent inclusive practices and strategies for queer performers and theatre-makers. I use the term 'theatre' as a distinctive form and although the practice blurs interdisciplinary boundaries, I acknowledge that live art has different strategies and systems for creating and documenting queer practice, and the differences and possibilities between the forms for performance-making practices (see Johnson, 2014; Kaye, 2008; Shalson, 2012). I look to the 'postdramatic' theatre of Hans-Thies Lehmann to help define the theatre Outbox creates. Lehmann defines postdramatic theatre as the overlap between theatre and performance art, and categorises this subsection of performance as theatre because:

> postdramatic theatre, again and most definitely, does *not* mean a theatre that exists 'beyond' drama, without any relation to it. It should rather be understood as the unfolding and blossoming of a potential of disintegration, dismantling and deconstruction within drama itself (2006: 27)

I will also engage with 'new', or expanded, dramaturgies (Behrndt &Turner, 2014; Trencsényi & Cochrane, 2014; Trencsényi, 2015) to help define the theatrical realm that my practice inhabits.[1]

Throughout the thesis I include autobiographical memories, usually at the beginning of each chapter. I do this to illustrate the lack of division between myself, the practice, and this research. Using 'autotheory' as an approach – which theorist Lauren Fournier defines as 'the commingling of theory and philosophy with autobiography – as a mode of critical artistic practice indebted to feminist writing and activism' (2022) – connects my lived experience as a queer person to my research questions and, ultimately, the theatre I create with the company.

[1] I extend this discussion later in the introduction.

Queer futurity

In 2010, after almost a decade of teaching, directing, and making theatre professionally, I began to question why I had never made work with my own community. I was frustrated with the lack of theatre that represented intersectional LGBTQIA+ people, particularly those further minoritised within that category (e.g. women, trans, Black and Global Majority, disabled, and older people). I saw 'gay plays', usually in fringe venues in London, that centred conventionally handsome, six-pack-adorned white, male actors. There is, and remains, a demand and an audience for gay theatre, but I wanted to explore *queer* themes in intersectional and interdisciplinary ways, and to create new modes of making and rehearsing.[2] The theatre that I wanted to create had a social and political function – the aim was to tell the forgotten and unheard stories of queer communities as a means of bringing people together and increasing queer representation. The impulse was to make theatre with communities, and communally, that did not sacrifice aesthetic values. This was a quest for 'quality' theatre before I began to question the value systems and hegemonic factors that might deem a theatre production of high quality. There is a scarcity of queer characters, narratives, and plays in UK theatre, film, and television that was even more evident in 2010 when I founded Outbox. This scarcity means that when LGBTQIA+ characters are introduced into narratives they are often lonely, miserable, and in trauma, and whilst I do not want to avoid the too-often-painful experiences of queer communities, joy and hope are powerful tools of resistance, visibility, and power. The theatre I make looks to the past to uncover the ways in which the future can be brighter, a concept I now understand better through queer futurity, a concept established by José Esteban Muñoz (2009).

[2] I expand upon the difference between 'gay' and 'queer' dramaturgies later in the introduction.

My conception of ‘Dance-Floor Dramaturgy’ is an original contribution to the field of queer dramaturgies that goes further than *demonstrating* facets of queer futurity by practically embodying them. Queer futurity is the insistence that queerness is always in the distance; Muñoz argues that queerness is ‘in the horizon’ (2009:11), it is an ideality that remains out of reach. Futurity is the rejection of the present to call upon the past to imagine a radical queer future. The text establishes a critical, intersectional approach to queer theory that is imbued with hope (drawing upon philosopher Ernst Bloch). Queer futurity could also be perceived as a counter-response to queer negativity, the turn towards anti-relationality in queer studies. Theorists Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman describe anti-relationality as understanding queerness ‘as a negation of identity, belonging, and even the social itself’ (2022: 11). Leo Bersani argues in *Homos* (1995) that the homosexual should reject identity-based notions and, extending upon this refusal of kinship and relationality, Lee Edelman’s *No Future*: *Queer Theory and the Death Drive* conceptualises ‘reproductive futurity’ (2014). In other words, the future is not the domain of the homosexual as the dominant cultural logic is biological reproduction and heteronormative notions of linearity. Without pursuing a binary between queer negativity and futurity, this research sits in companionship with the latter’s philosophy of hope and collectivity. Making collaborative devised work relies on collectivity, which I expand upon later in the chapter, but also the intersectionality of the communities, performers, and artists involved. Queer negativity is a convincing polemic, but it fails to include or consider identities beyond the white, gay, male. Anti-relationality refuses to acknowledge that it is a *privilege* to rebuke notions of identity and community. As scholar Angela Jones argues, queer negativity ‘ignores at worst and neglects at best the necessity of emancipatory politics for many queers whose

material conditions make embracing the negative a political privilege or luxury' (Jones 2014: 4).

Whilst queer futurity is imbued with hope, and centres community, this does not mean that it plays into what Lisa Duggan defines as 'homonormativity' (2003) – the rendering of queer politics and lifestyles to align with heterosexual norms. Queer futurity is a rejection of the assimilationist politics of the 'here and now' and an insistence that the political imagination and collectivity of the past can help us establish an alternate 'then and there'. It is important to establish that this argument does not fall into assimilationist gay politics; Muñoz rejects what he describes as the 'place at the table' (1999) standpoint, instead imbuing his work with the radical queer politics of 1970s gay liberationist groups such as Third World Gay Revolution. In these examples of looking to the on-the-ground work of the queer movement, Muñoz is able to critique what he describes as the contemporary, North American LGBT movement whose 'critical imagination [was] in peril' (Muñoz 2007:10).

Muñoz is significantly informed by the thinking of the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch in his argument, using hope as a methodology and the concept of 'concrete' utopias. 'Utopia' comes from the Greek *ou*– "not" – and *topos* – "place". This is commonly translated as "nowhere" but could be closer related to the Blochian concept of "not-yet-here" (Muñoz 2009:3). Muñoz distinguishes between abstract and concrete utopias stating that a concrete utopia is 'relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential' (ibid). Just as queerness is out of reach, the same applies for a concrete utopia. Utopia is always in the distance, but we might reach towards it or feel glimpses of it in art and performance. The 'liveness' of performance offers this potentiality for transformation and collectivity through its space, locality, and the communion that a queer audience may experience.

There is a temporality in queer performance that has a specific form to rehearse and reimagine moments of the past that can illuminate the present, thus creating a momentary feeling of utopia for a queer community, what performance scholar Jill Dolan might describe as 'fleeting intimations of a better world.' (2005: 2) Performance is uniquely positioned to explore queer futurity (the 'not-yet-here' in terms of space/place and time) as it is a spatial *and* temporal art form.

In *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (2005), Jill Dolan argues that the theatre is a place that utopian performatives can be felt. In the book, Dolan looks largely to the work of queer and feminist theatre-makers, such as Split Britches and Tectonic Theater Project's *The Laramie Project* (2000). Dolan describes utopian performatives as

> small but profound ways in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (2005:5)

Dolan and Muñoz illuminate my understanding of the theatrical signs in my theatre-making practice. I can trace the aesthetic of my theatre-making back to that night in the Working Men's Club in Swindon I share at the beginning of the thesis. Peeking between the adults' knees to see the glitter curtains and the stiletto heels under the mirror-ball is a utopian performative that I have been trying to capture ever since. Queer performance-makers often create theatre to escape a present that Muñoz describes as 'impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and "rational" expectations' (2007:27). Utopian performatives can provide alternate worlds, however briefly, that do not deny the trauma of the past and, using the model of the concrete utopia, stop the ideology be naive and banal. This thesis furthers the field of queer futurity by

practically embodying the concepts and making production work that consciously imagines and creates utopian performatives that harness queer potentialities. Muñoz differentiates between *possibility* as existing within a 'logical real' that is within the present, and *potentiality*, which can be present but does not exist in present things (2009: 99). We can understand potentiality as futurity as it sits temporally on the horizon rather than the present. The aim of Outbox's theatre work is to create a collectivity amongst queer communities, artists, and audiences that conjures potentialities.

Making theatre as queer collectivity

At the heart of this practice research is collectivity, which Muñoz insists upon as an essential need to understand queerness (2007:110). The productions that Outbox make are co-created with a company of queer performers and a creative team, who are always in dialogue with the LGBTQIA+ communities we work with. This can take the form of workshopping ideas with an LGBTQIA+ youth group, conversations with LGBTQIA+ elders, intergenerational meetings, and sharing the work in rehearsal, performance, online, and in post-show workshops. Working in this way is political; it is still rare to cast and collaborate with exclusively queer performers, and weaving community participation through our creative processes ensures that our work remains for, with, and by LGBTQIA+ people. My aim as a director is to create spaces where queer people can dream and imagine, as Sara Ahmed articulates, a 'space to breathe' (2010: 120). Queer performance scholar Stephen Greer argues for the significance of 'emerging, collaborative modes of practice' (2012: ix) in *Contemporary British Queer Performance*. Greer posits queer, co-created performance-making practices as vital modes of protest and activism, prompts for

social change, and as enacting and disseminating national and community histories. These lineages of queer collaborative performance practices, including companies such as Gay Sweatshop and Bloolips, significantly inform my practice research. I begin the making and rehearsal process armed with research questions and thematic propositions, but it is through co-creation and queer collectivity that the discoveries are made.



Fig. 1: *HOOKUP* by OUTBOX at Hackney Showroom, 2015. Image: Bronwen Sharp.

The aesthetic and tropes of the queer dance floor are present in my work with Outbox from our first production in 2010. I applied for and secured a funding award from the National Lottery Community Fund to run a two-week performance-making residency for young LGBTQIA+ people. This resulted in sharing a performance in a studio space at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. The project was advertised online and in leading gay and lesbian magazines and publications, such as *Attitude* and *DIVA*. Fifteen young people arrived on the first day of the project –

the performers were not being paid and I had never met any of them before our first introductions. Happily, all fifteen performers stayed until the end of the project. I was surprised that many of the performers were either in professional actor training or were already professional actors as I had assumed that people joining us would be novices or amateur actors. These professional actors were tired of the lack of LGBTQIA+ representation, the scarcity of roles, and the fear of being stereotyped as a queer actor and/or the characters they played being stereotypes. The performers who were in actor training, or had graduated from acting schools, found the lack of queer inclusion and heteronormative casting and gender roles in these institutions stifling at best, and traumatic and damaging at worst. The two weeks of making and rehearsal felt like community and much-needed respite from heteronormative conventions and systems of casting, rehearsal, and performance. Our final sharing was a devised piece based titled *SSA* (or 'same-sex attraction') that was based around conversion therapy; the company created a fictional conversion 'camp' where queer people had been sent to 'get better'. In this fictional space, the characters found each other, a sense of community, and a space to share their stories free from the oppression of the outside world. In hindsight, the form of the play mirrored the experience of the performers and creatives in our makeshift, temporary queer community. Making my first production with an all-LGBTQIA+ company was powerful; the practice felt necessary and retrospectively I can see how healing it was for me as an individual, not just for the participants. The image from *SSA* that stays with me is of performer Stuart Matthews lip-syncing to Alison Jiear's 'I Just Wanna Dance', under a mirror-ball, a glitter-drop cascading from the ceiling. This image, that could be interpreted as trivial, is one of the cornerstones of this PhD study that I can

trace directly to the Working Men's Club that I describe at the beginning of the thesis. The dance floor was the defining aesthetic of an emerging queer dramaturgy.

Our performance of *SSA* allowed me to develop my idea of an LGBTQIA+-led theatre company, and I secured National Lottery funding for a further three productions and a national participation programme. In 2011, Bette Bourne, founder and director of Bloolips, heard about the company I was establishing and invited me to her home in Notting Hill.[3] Over tea, she offered wisdom and generosity and regaled me with stories of the Bloolips and her time in the Gay Liberation Front. Bette's major piece of advice was 'just book the venue, dear, then you will have to put on the show'. I went to the Drill Hall, London, a theatre space with a history of queer performance, and pitched a production called *The Front Room* based on the history of gay liberation, inspired by testimony from queer elders.[4] I had to think of the company name, Outbox, on the spot. Since that moment, the reach of Outbox's work has been intergenerational and continues to ask how we bring younger and older LGBTQIA+ people together, which I expand upon fully in Chapter Three. I have directed and devised eight productions with Outbox to date, three of which I detail in this thesis. Outbox productions and projects have now been programmed and produced by venues across the UK, including the National Theatre, Southbank Centre, Royal Court, the Bush, Contact, Leeds Playhouse, and Bristol Old Vic, but our work mostly originates, and is happiest, in community centres, warehouses, and on dance floors. Although the company has become 'professionalised' – performers generally audition for roles and are always paid for their work – our community ethos remains, and participation work is at the core of all our working practice. Outbox

[3] Bloolips were a gay cabaret and drag theatre act founded by Bette Bourne in 1977. They performed in the UK and internationally for 25 years.
[4] The Drill Hall, London was a venue that produced work with gay and lesbian themes from 1984 – 2012. It is now owned by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA).

consistently deliver theatre-making workshops to LGBTQIA+ groups across the UK, run drama-training programmes exclusively for trans performers, create and disseminate online training programmes, feed into policy-making, and lead on inclusive casting initiatives across the theatre industry. The participation projects Outbox make are reciprocal to the productions and feed into the research aims, objectives, and questions which I elaborate on in each chapter.

## (Queer) Dramaturgy

In *Tendencies* (1994), queer scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a definition of queer as:

> the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signal monolithically' (1994: 8).

Sedgwick's positioning of queer with radical experimentation and a 'criss-crossing' of identity lines is pertinent to my understanding of dramaturgy. Paying more attention to the first section of Sedgwick's definition – '*the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning*' – I am struck by how these words could also define a dramaturgical process. My connection of the philosophies of queer and the evolution of a 'new' dramaturgy have fuelled this research to formulate my original concept of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy.

'Dramaturgy', like 'queer', is a purposefully slippery term to define. In theatre in the UK, dramaturgy is often seen as either the work of a literary department (curation and programming of plays for a season of work), a role first established by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in Germany in the eighteenth century, or as a critical friend or 'outside eye' on a production. The role of the production dramaturg is to develop the *mise en scène*; the dramaturg might provide research on the socio-

political and historical context, and ensure that there is clarity and cohesion in the story being told to the audience. In this research, I am less interested in the *role* of the dramaturg, rather the holistic process of dramaturgy, and, more specifically, what dramaturg and scholar Marianne Van Kerkhoven first defined as a 'new dramaturgy' in 1994. New dramaturgy was introduced as a term by Van Kerkhoven when attempting to demarcate a new, process-conscious and postmodern style of theatre-making, noticing that in this mode of storytelling 'causality and linearity lose their value, storyline and psychologically explicable characters are put at risk, there is no longer hierarchy among the artistic building blocks used' (1994: 18–20). A new, or 'expanded' dramaturgy holds similarities with Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of 'postdramatic theatre', wherein the elements of theatre are organised to produce an effect rather than serve a text, in that a new dramaturgy does not prioritise a singular component of the performance-making process (e.g., the text or playwright).

Synne Behrndt and Cathy Turner propose dramaturgy as 'a critical engagement with the processes and architectonics of making and articulating performance' (2010: 148). Particularly resonant with my practice is dramaturgy being analogous with architecture. When making a piece of theatre I consider the craft of architecture; this invites me to cogitate the shape, presentation, and appearance of the material, but also how it feels to be *inside* of the structure, ensuring that the structure can be navigated, utilised, or serve a meaningful function for the community that surrounds and inhabits it. As Bernadette Cochrane and Katalin Trencsényi argue, dramaturgy 'has become synonymous with the totality of the performance-making process. Dramaturgy is now considered to be the inner-flow of a dynamic system' (2014: xi). This description also chimes with the holistic practice of dance dramaturg Ruth Little, who describes dramaturgy as 'performance ecology'.

Proposing a dramaturgy that goes beyond linear determinism and Aristotelian principles, Little's practice applies an understanding of 'non-linear dynamics and living systems' (Little 2023) that follow the patterns of natural phenomena. Little suggests that by looking to ecology, we can 'shift the register of our thinking to gain new perspectives on our own experience' (ibid). In the early days of Outbox, limited funding and rehearsal meant that a collaborative, devised, and non-linear dramaturgy was a necessity rather than artistic choice. However, as the work progressed, I started to understand how these structures were supporting and mirroring the non-linear queer experience. As Little posits, rethinking modes of dramaturgical structure allow me to gain new perspectives on the queer experience. An Outbox dramaturgy became established that follows the pattern of a 'new' or expanded dramaturgy – it is 'post mimetic, it embraces inter-culturalism and is process conscious' (Trencsényi and Cochrane: 2014). Extending upon these dramaturgical theories, I now look to queer dramaturgies and how my work creates new knowledge in the field.

Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier's *Queer Dramaturgies* (2016) offers international perspectives that work at the interface of queer studies and dramaturgy. The edited collection sets up a premise for thinking about where performance leads the field of queer studies and focuses on the queer practice-as-researcher. Placing the body at the centre of the enquiry, *Queer Dramaturgies* 'deals with bodies in performance in ways not always dealt with in early queer theorising' (2016: 4). Quantifying what makes a dramaturgy *queer*, Campbell and Farrier propose that alongside the narrative content and aesthetic of the show, a queer dramaturgy is also 'intricately bound up with the identity of the maker/s (self-identifying as queer), the making processes and the context in which they are seen' (2015: 13). The

authors differentiate between *gay* and *queer* theatre, establishing that gay theatre might focus on recognisably gay stories and characters, but within a character-led/plot-based form that seeks empathy from a mainstream audience without drawing attention to the theatrical act as a construct or questioning the idea of the coherence of character. Moreover, following dance scholars Fiona Buckland (2002), Jane Desmond (2001), and David Román (2011), dance scholar Clare Croft states in her edited collection *Queer Dance* (2017) that queer choreographies must centre people of colour, women, and feminist thought. She helpfully elucidates on the fecund potential of queer dance, noting its emphasis on 'public, physical action' (2017: 2) as a force for social change.

In this existing scholarship on contemporary modes of dramaturgy, I perceive a gap in knowledge around the practical application of queer dramaturgies. In this thesis I lay out a queer dramaturgical process that offers rehearsal strategies, directing techniques, movement languages, and modes of collaboration that inspire the theatre artist to conceive and develop queer dramaturgies further. It is this collection of practices and approaches to theatre-making that I name Dance-floor Dramaturgy.

## Dance-Floor Dramaturgy

I define Dance-Floor Dramaturgy as a set of theatre-making strategies that activate the aesthetic of the dance floor to create performance work that captures queer potentiality. Central to this practice is a performative exploration of the 'dance floor', which I reconfigure as a transformative framework allowing the performers (and audiences) to explore their past and future selves, their dreams, and desires. Dance-Floor Dramaturgy operates in four main ways, as a:

- *concrete space*: the dance floor as a clearly delineated area in which queer people dance and where performances might take place;
- *social and political space*: the dance floor as a site of protest, kinship, and reaching towards a queer 'utopia';
- *dramaturgical space*: the dance floor as a theatrical ecology that informs the architecture of the performances made;
- *kinaesthetic space*: the dance floor as place for corporeal exchange, influencing and engaging movement in our bodies.

By applying the aesthetic and utopian performative of the queer dance floor to the framework of the theatre-making process, the project advances theory found in the editorial work of *Queer Dramaturgies* (Campbell and Farrier 2014), and builds upon the contingent factors that Campbell and Farrier propose make a dramaturgy *queer* (centring the queer experience in making and audience contexts; an absence of desire to fix character, narrative, time, and location). Furthermore, the project extends theories found in Croft's *Queer Dance* (2017), through applying bodily ways of knowing and corporeal modes of queerness into a theatrical dramaturgy and context.

As well as being crucial to my understanding of queer futurity, I am also invested in Jill Dolan and José Esteban Muñoz's theorisation of the dance floor as a space with potential for the utopian. Dolan posits in her theorisation of the utopian, that both the dance floor and the theatre invite us 'to explore in imaginary spaces, the potential of the "not yet" and the "not here"' (2005: 20). This sentiment dovetails with Muñoz, who suggests that 'the dance floor increases our tolerance for embodied practices. It may do so because it demands, in the openness and closeness of relations to others, an exchange and alteration of kinaesthetic experience through

[which] we become, in a sense, less like ourselves and more like each other' (2009: 66)[5]. This research led me to practical exploration and the origination and development of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy. Through this conceptualisation, I began to think about the contingent practices that build and help us better understand how a Dance-Floor Dramaturgy operates.

I term the collection of theatre-making practices that contribute to Dance-Floor Dramaturgy, *pulses*. The *pulse* is the rhythmical throb of the blood pumping in the body, but also the beat that might drive us to the dance floor. I take inspiration from Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic theatrical signs (2006) to help me define the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy. Lehmann categorises and expands upon theatrical signs, stylistic traits, and signifiers such as dream images, simultaneity, and parataxis/non-hierarchy to allow the viewer/reader a better understanding of postdramatic theatre (2006: 82). I invent and develop the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy not as a 'how-to' guide, checklist, or a toolkit, but rather a collection of strategies that might allow for deeper understanding of watching, thinking about, and making queer performance. The performance-maker can adapt, utilise, draw inspiration from, reconfigure and add to the pulses so that they become a live archive of queer theatre-making strategies. We might think of the pulse modulating here to become a series of pulses.

In this thesis, I will detail eight pulses that I have invented and developed across the project. The pulses are not designed to work in isolation; often they are interwoven and interconnected to create meaning. The pulses are identified by their

[5] Muñoz clarifies that the dance floor is not a space for homogenisation or 'sameness', I will make this distinction and further this discussion in Chapter Two through the pulse of *remix*.

purpose to harness or recreate queer potentialities, practically embodying, and therefore expanding, theories of queer futurity.

Overview

In Chapter One, I use Outbox's production *Affection* as a foundation for my formulation of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy. This production was made in the summer of 2016 before I formally began the PhD in Autumn 2016. Whilst I reference the piece and refer to video clips, the production is not an assessed piece of practice. However, the production is fundamental in establishing my methodology as I invented three of the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy during this time that are critical to the rest of the research. *Affection* is a production based upon the testimony of queer people living with HIV, diagnosed from as early as 1982 up to 2016. The piece responds to rapidly rising rates of transmission of HIV in the UK in 2016 and is performed on a local site of queer significance, the dance floor of LGBTQIA+ pub, The Glory. Through staging the production on the concrete space of the dance floor and using the site as integral to the show's aesthetic, I realised and developed three pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy:

- *club-time*: inventing dramaturgical approaches to queer temporalities in performance that mirror the ways we experience time on the dance floor;
- *glitch:* finding the power in the 'glitch' (Russell 2020) to fracture realist depictions of the queer experience;
- *pose:* the commingling of bodily gesture, erotohistoriography (Freeman 2011), and dance-floor culture to conjure queer histories and futures.

This practice embodies key tenets of queer futurity, allowing the company to convey narratives of HIV without making them nostalgic or anachronistic. The dance floor

was critical in establishing a dramaturgy that prioritised languages of movement, intergenerational and intertextual communion, and non-hierarchical exchange.

Chapter Two establishes three new pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy that allowed the company of *And The Rest of Me Floats* to capture and harness queer potentiality. *And The Rest of Me Floats* is a production made with seven trans and gender nonconforming performers that utilises autobiographical performance to interrogate the construct of gender and its relationship to identity. The production is staged initially in a community hall before transferring (or transitioning) to mainstream theatres, and rather than being situated on a dance floor, uses the languages of the dance floor to establish its dramaturgy. I invented the following pulses through making the practice:

- *transition*: the theatrical transition becomes the dominant mode of performance to mirror the structures of queer and trans experiences;
- *fun-form*: extending upon Jack Halberstam's exploration of 'low theory' (2011) in order to create devising exercises and dramaturgical strategies that utilise popular modes of queer performance;
- *remix*: the commingling of autobiographies, producing a 'communal queer logic' (Muñoz 2009: 66) to share experiences without homogenisation.

This expansion of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy places trans performers and narratives at the heart of the research, and increases routes into the theatre industry for queer and trans performers.

Finally, in Chapter Three, the pulses *trade* and *scene* allow us to activate queer futurity to imagine an intergenerational dance floor which holds stories of the 'then and there' (Muñoz 2009). *GROOVE* is the culmination of the project, exploring the queer dance floor as a site of desire, care, kinship, and protest. The production is

made with six intergenerational performers, ranging from their seventies to their twenties, and practices embodied, corporeal knowledge exchange. The practice also looks to scenography to establish a new approach to queer world-making. This new knowledge is captured in the expansion of previous pulses and the invention of two new pulses:

- *scene*: utilising a dance floor 'scenographic' (Hann 2019) to embody a queer world-making practice;
- *trade*: centring 'relational generativity' (Goltz 2014) to facilitate corporeal, cross-generational exchange.

The commingling of kinship theory, scenography, and dance produced an embodied dramaturgical practice that enables interchange across generations.

When we imagine a dance floor, we might conjure a place of fun, frivolity, and escape. I proffer that the dance floor can be all these things. It can also be a space of rejection, violence, and loneliness. For many queer people and communities, the dance floor is critical – it is a place of safety in a world increasingly unsafe for queer and trans people to exist. Using the framework of the dance floor to create a new dramaturgy allows for queer modes of existence and visibility to manifest into performance and ripple into the lives of the performers, communities, and audiences that it impacts. The constituent pulses that I have invented come together collectively to form a mode of dramaturgy that goes beyond illustration or depiction; a Dance-Floor Dramaturgy actively embodies and conjures facets of queer futurity.

## Chapter One: *Affection*

## Activating the pulses of *tempo*, *pose*, and *glitch.*

*23.*

*I arrive home at 10 a.m., it's the morning after the night before and I'm still wearing the same clothes. Last night was dry-ice, laser beams, glitter, poppers, and pints. The chrome spaceship-like space of the club became a vortex where time stood still, and Kylie played on. I have slept a little, but not in my own bed. I cup my hand and breathe into it – my teeth are itchy, my tongue feels furry, and my eyes are bloodshot. There is a slightly stale smell about me: alcohol, sweat, and CK One. I've had fun.*

*I need a shower. As I undress, I glimpse a red blotch on the skin of my back in the bathroom mirror. It's tiny; it's nothing. I move closer to the mirror and examine it further. It's just a small mark on my body. It's nothing. I feel my heart sinking into the pit of my stomach. I need to inspect my body, every piece of flesh that I can reach. You were safe. You're always safe. The searching becomes frantic and my heart beats faster and faster. But you were safe. Was I safe? Is it safe? I keep looking, but I don't know what I'm looking for. I search until I calm, until this familiar ritual is over. I run the shower and I stand underneath the hot water. I try to forget.*

* * *

When I recall the memory above, I still feel the dizziness and fear of my young-adult self. It was 2004, I had graduated from university and, after the painful process of 'coming out', I was finally meeting the queer scene. Navigating this new world was

intoxicating and exciting. These were my lost teenage years; finally, I found people like me, people whom I desired and desired me. The nightclub became my church, community centre, and school. It was where, amongst the endless dancing and drinking, I found community of sorts. However, when the glow of the disco lights dimmed, the shadows of Section 28 and the early AIDS years often cast feelings of shame and stigma upon me.

Section 28, or Clause 28, was a piece of legislation that banned the promotion of homosexuality in schools, in effect from 1988 to 2003 in the UK. The clause was brought in by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government and, although I was not aware of it at the time, it had a profound effect on me and thousands of my generation. The first time that I heard the term AIDS was on breakfast radio in 1991 when it was announced that the musician Freddie Mercury had been diagnosed with the disease. Twenty-four hours after his announcement, Mercury was dead. From the outset, my AIDS education seemed to consist of the media messaging 'gay men have sex, contract HIV/AIDS, and soon after they die'. The conservative government's slogan for AIDS awareness was 'Don't Die of Ignorance', and yet my ignorance and lack of education around HIV/AIDS and its relationship to homosexuality haunted much of my teenage years and early twenties. It was only in my mid-thirties that I felt ready to research and make a production that dealt with the complexity of HIV and AIDS.

I conceived and directed the production *Affection* with Outbox in 2016 in direct response to rapidly rising HIV diagnoses in the UK.[6] The show was initially made to examine how performance can respond to, and perhaps even help reduce, the shame and stigma surrounding HIV in local (UK-based) LGBTQIA+ communities. I now understand that it was also a tool of education for myself and the company, to lessen the load for us so that we could share these crucial stories with our peers, friends, and communities. Crucial to *Affection*'s dramaturgy was the staging of the performance on the dance floor of an LGBTQIA+ pub, The Glory in East London, a site of queer significance that made the performance resonate in local and urgent registers.

Given the rise of HIV transmission in London, it was necessary to create a production that would place lived experiences and intergenerational communication at its heart. Utilising the rhythms and grooves of the performance site produced a 'corporeality', a queer kind of dance, that captured the liminality and transformative potential of the dance floor as a site of embodied knowledge and dialogue. Detailing the dramaturgy that informed *Affection*, I propose that making performance on the queer dance floor capitalises on its informal pedagogy, the site offering potentiality and possibilities that exist outside of hetero/homonormative spaces.[7] *Affection* was made in the summer before I began PhD study and therefore is not a piece of

[6] Performances were seen by 700 members of the general public; they were supported by participatory workshops for younger and older LGBTQ people and partnership work with key HIV charities and support agencies. The performance was devised by the cast and scripted by playwright Jodi Gray. The cast comprised of Rebecca Crankshaw, Aiden Crawford, Gavin Duff, Josh-Susan Enright, Barry Fitzgerald, Conor Gormally, Elijah W Harris, and Jack McMahon. The set and costumes were designed by Harry Whitham, with video design by Iain Syme and sound design by Dominic Kennedy. The production was performed at The Glory, London and later toured to A. E. Harris warehouse space in Birmingham.

[7] Lisa Duggan defines homonormativity as 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (2003)

assessed practice; however, the devising and rehearsal process were key to developing my methodology. Three of the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy outlined in the introduction were discovered in this period, which I will further unpack in this chapter:

- *club-time*: inventing dramaturgical approaches to queer time and temporalities in performance that mirror the ways we experience time on the dance floor;
- *glitch*: finding the power in the 'glitch' (Russell 2020) to fracture realist depictions of the queer experience;
- *pose*: the commingling of bodily gesture, erotohistoriography (Freeman 2011) and dance-floor culture to conjure queer histories and futures.

The pulses were discovered through a set of initial research questions:

- How does the past inform our understanding of present HIV narratives? How do time and temporality operate when making performance around HIV and AIDS?
- Can we privilege bodies, desire, and pleasure when making work around the HIV and AIDS?
- What dramaturgical process is generated by making a production on a queer dance floor?
- Can the dramaturgy of a production counteract some of the stigma and shame attributed to HIV?

The dance floor, queer-led creative team and diverse cast, structures, and dramaturgy made the show identifiably queer – a queer performance *for* queer people. Through the making process, *Affection* developed a structure that reflected

the potentiality of the dance floor, and through this innovation I began to formalise Dance-Floor Dramaturgy, which, as I define in the introduction, is a set of theatre-making strategies that activate the aesthetic of the dance floor to create performance work that captures queer potentiality.

Displaying *Affection* on the dance floor



Fig 2: Opening of *Affection*, 2016. Image: Graeme Braidwood.

*Affection* is a performance created with seven LGBTQIA+ performers ranging from their early-twenties to mid-fifties. It is based on the company's interviews with queer people living with HIV and AIDS, from the recently diagnosed to those diagnosed during the early AIDS years (1981–96). The aim of the practice was to start new dialogues around HIV at a time when transmission rates were rising in the UK and education lacking. To do this, the production would fold intergenerational testimony from those living with, and caring for, LGBTQIA+ people with HIV into the making

process and structure of the production. The location of the production would be key in how audiences engage with the issues dealt with, but also fundamental for the discovery of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy.

It was whilst dancing in the dark, cramped basement of The Glory, my local LGBTQIA+ space in East London, that I felt the glimmer of its potential for theatrical performance. It is a traditional-looking London pub that has been queerly configured; the walls are painted a deep purple and the ceilings festooned with glitter curtains and helium balloons. Upstairs, there is a small stage for drag performances and a DJ playing disco and pop classics. Later in the evening, the basement opens to accommodate a dance floor. The low ceiling, lo-fi lasers and sweaty conditions entice a mixed-queer crowd of partyers. As a queer theatre-maker, I seek places and spaces in which to stage performance that resonate with the themes and communities the work represents. To make a show about HIV and AIDS on a dance floor, a place for pleasure and joy, was a contradiction that needed to be questioned and disrupted. As queer performance theorist Stephen Greer notes, ‘tension surfaces in material and representational practices which engage with histories of violence while manifesting the radical proofs of queer survival and queer joy’ (2023: 126). The material conditions of performing our production about HIV and AIDS on the site of the dance floor manifest this tension in critical and timely ways.

The dance floor is a space where people lose inhibitions and become more physically intimate with one another; bodies become looser and connected by a rhythm, a phenomenon that Jonathan Bollen calls ‘queer kinaesthesia’ (2001: 285). I wanted to capture the utopian feeling that many of us have experienced on the queer dance floor: the flashing lights, sticky floors, and grooves and beats that travel across and between eras. The multiplicity of the dance floor provides a framework in

which various lineages and histories of HIV and AIDS can commingle with contemporary stories. In this production, performers move in and out of dialogue and testimony with no set characters, gender becomes fluid and indecipherable, and time is slippery. It is a production that deals with HIV and AIDS, that is silly, sexy, and funny, as well as haunting and memorialising. *Affection* is bound together with a queer corporeality, a kinaesthetic language that was choreographed through its relationship to queer futurity (Muñoz 2009), looking to the past to imagine a queerer future.

Situating the production in a queer space at a time of rapidly rising HIV transmission rates in London meant that we could find an audience who were directly in relationship to the content we were dealing with. Since retroviral drugs were introduced in the late 1990s, many people living with HIV and AIDS in the Global North have access to medication that means that their status is no longer terminal. Performance scholar Patrick McKelvey considers the move away from *crisis* to the *chronic* in the contemporary landscape of HIV and AIDS as a 'radical reconfiguration of the temporal structures in which the lives of people with HIV/AIDS – and queers and disabled people more broadly – are produced, experienced, and foreclosed' (2017: 268-9). This temporal transformation between crisis and chronic is embodied in the dramaturgical structure of the production and will be expanded upon when describing the pulse of *club-time*. Creating the production in the AIDS chronic (McKelvey 2017) meant that we needed to find an alternate way to stage the show and reach audiences. Following David Román (1998), the play could be considered a grassroots 'act of intervention', its Dance-Floor Dramaturgy working as a tool to erase stigma and shame, and promoting ongoing learning and empathy. Román

uses the term to describe moments of theatre, performance, activism, and countercultural events that have intervened in the histories of HIV and AIDS.

Inheriting HIV and AIDS narratives

Since the inception of the AIDS virus in the early 1980s, grassroots performance has responded to HIV and AIDS in sites outside of traditional theatre spaces (Román 1998). Queer artists have created performance as forms of pedagogy and protest, offering a collective space for activism, grief, and memorial. Activists and theorists Alexandra Juhasz and Theodore Kerr use the term AIDS Crisis Revisitation (2022) to describe the post-2010 interest in the early AIDS years. Following what Juhasz and Kerr call the 'second silence' – the period marked between the beginning of retroviral drugs (1996) and the mid-2000s – there has been a resurgence of plays, television, and films with HIV and AIDS themes in the mainstream, often looking back at AIDS 'through the prism of past activism, suffering, and mourning' (2020: 64). Playwright and scholar Jacob Juntunen argues that mainstream theatre dealing with HIV and AIDS is a process of making the radical palatable; mainstream theatre in the United States played an important part in assimilating emergent ideologies into the dominant consciousness throughout the twentieth century (2016). However, this assimilation process often erased the more radical expressions that came before. As Stephen Farrier observes, 'the dynamic problematic for queer dramaturgies is embedded in the challenge of how to represent people living with HIV and people living with AIDS in a way that does not historicise them to the extent that they appear to be "done," nor to normalise them so that they disappear' (2018: 162).

Since making *Affection* in 2016, the Channel 4 television drama *It's a Sin* (2021), written by Russell T Davies, was released and is arguably the largest

intervention in HIV/AIDS awareness brought to a popular audience in the UK. Its prime-time slot, casting of popstar and Years and Years singer, Olly Alexander, in the lead role, and star writer of queer classic *Queer as Folk* (1999) and the reboot of *Dr Who* (2005), Davies, meant that the television series depicting a group of queer friends in the early AIDS years reached and captivated the wider public's attention and imaginations. As noted by João Florêncio and Gary Needham in the introduction to a special Cultural Commons section on *It's a Sin,* the TV show was the 'the most binged on [the] streaming platform All 4. One pedagogical effect, a consequence of the series' popularity, was the uptake in HIV testing reportedly tripled in the month after broadcast' (2023: 80). There is no doubt that the TV series mitigated some of the lack of British representation of HIV and AIDS; UK viewers were able to see people like them, or their friends, family members, colleagues, represented with enough distance from the early AIDS years to allow for empathy and understanding. Scholar Hollis Griffin posits that the show is less invested in historical accuracy and more concerned with asking its audience how they 'might have reacted under a similar set of circumstances' (2023: 116).

Russell T Davies intended the series to have 8 episodes but had to cut it down to 5 for television executives, resulting in a short space of time to recapture an epic part of queer history. Researcher Gabriel Duckels locates *It's a Sin* in the genre of AIDS melodrama, constructing 'queer visions of the past through melodrama's iconic emphasis on justice, suffering, and virtue' (2023: 123). *It's a Sin* stages the death of five white men over its five episodes, one per episode, arguably because of the short time constraint it was given. The dramaturgical constraints of the length and format of the television series meant that common tropes of AIDS dramas were present, such as the dysfunctional domestic relationship between mother and son,

the underdeveloped heterosexual female character who provides AIDS education, and, of course, the multiple deaths of gay men. As ACT UP activist and scholar Monica Pearl summarises:

> For some of us, the AIDS crisis is a memory soaked in blood; for others, it is history they have not had to learn […] What it gets right about queer kinship is the ways that family was reinvented, not only during the AIDS crisis but long before that as a means of queer survival: loyalties and affinities were forged by sex and exes and community and solidarity. But *It's a Sin* lets us down in that portrayal by making its ultimate thematic focus and finale the censorious conventional domestic family. (2023: 111)

*It's a Sin*, a relatively high-budget mainstream television series, is doing a different job to the grassroots interventions of a theatre production such as *Affection*. *It's a Sin* allowed for reflection, a glimpse at the landscape of queer life in the early AIDS years, and brought a sympathetic and reflective mood to the British public. When we made *Affection*, *It's a Sin* was still in development, but alongside our work there was a resurgence of plays dealing with the early AIDS years. Our production is part of the AIDS Crisis Revisitation, although I was not aware of that term at the time of making. I will now look to two major productions in the UK that can also be viewed through the lens of AIDS Crisis Revisitation.

Recent productions of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (National Theatre, UK and Broadway, 2018) and Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance* (Young Vic and West End, UK, 2018, and Broadway, 2019) illustrate Alyson Campbell and Dirk Gindt's theory that there is a tension between 'amnesia and nostalgia' when dealing with HIV and AIDS in performance. Looking to these productions offers a lens into how popular performance views HIV and AIDS, and plays into a narrative that the virus is 'over'. There are obvious similarities between Marianne Elliott's revival of *Angels in America* and Stephen Daldry's premiere production of *The Inheritance* beyond the central themes of HIV and AIDS. Because the plays are sprawling and

epic – both are structured in two parts and have total running times of around seven hours – the plays require the audience to spend significant time and money to see the shows.[8]

The productions have cast predominantly British actors in American roles and deal with US narratives. Gindt, writing about Canadian theatre dealing with AIDS, reminds us that 'the rich theoretical apparatus offered by American queer scholarship encourages a necessary and often stimulating dialogue with American cultural products, but it also risks obscuring or subsuming non-US […] narratives and histories' (2015: 77). The limited mainstream cultural history that queer British people have of the early AIDS years (and LGBT history in general) is often based within the US context. *The Inheritance*'s cast was majority white and six-pack-adorned, and the tropes of camp and affluent gay culture were merely ornamental. The casting failed to capture and appeal to local audiences that may consist of trans and gender nonconforming people, Black and Global Majority people, and women. The 'inheritance' of the title was presented as just that, a passing down of knowledge rather than a dialogical exchange between generations. The AIDS crisis becomes a point of nostalgia to reflect upon and to judge the anti-normative behaviour (gay sex, drugs, partying) of one of the protagonists. The production was tidy and assimilationist; white, affluent gay men who have civil rights should conform if they want to survive.

Both productions engaged large mainstream audiences to critical acclaim, and it cannot be denied that they are forms of pedagogy regarding the early AIDS

[8] *Angels in America* at the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain ticket prices ranged from £15 to £65 for Part One or Part Two, with two-play day tickets £30 to £130. Part One running time was 3 hours and 30 minutes, and Part Two running time was 4 hours. *The Inheritance* at the Young Vic ranged from £15 to £104.50 per part. Part One's running time was 3 hours and 15 minutes and Part Two 3 hours and 20 minutes.

years. *Angels in America* is pertinent in its queer dramaturgical form and is a reminder that progress is not linear. I consider *Angels in America* to be one of the greatest plays to be written about the early AIDS years, because Kushner's use of unrelenting intellectual and political dialogue, and the structure that moves between both temporal and metaphysical realms, creates an epic play that speaks not only to AIDS but also the state of the nation. The National Theatre revival saw Andrew Garfield cast as the lead role of Prior, who publicly stated in a National Theatre Platform discussion as noted by British publication *Gay Times*, 'I am a gay man right now just without the physical act', and in an interview with the same publication Garfield noted that 'his research for the role consisted of watching all series of *RuPaul's Drag Race*' (Connolly 2017: nap). I argue that the casting of a publicly heterosexual man in a landmark revival distances the production further from the community the play was written about. Through its star casting, large budget, and glossy production values, this production contributes to a normative historical understanding of HIV and AIDS that does little to further our understanding of current HIV narratives, particularly outside of the United States.

Both mainstream productions look to the past in complex ways, stimulating a nostalgia for the early AIDS years that obscures current concerns and the material lived reality for those living with HIV and AIDS. In contrast to this nostalgic approach, it was pertinent for *Affection* to address the rise of HIV transmission rates in the UK. *Affection* differs from the productions I cite above because it is rooted in community, the tickets are affordable, making the production accessible, and the cast is made up of performers that all identify as LGBTQIA+[9]. The primary aim of this practice

[9] Tickets for *Affection* ranged between £10 and £15, with free tickets made available for community groups affected by the issues presented.

research was to offer contemporary, UK-based perspectives of HIV and AIDS to challenge the notion that the virus was 'over'. Relocating *Affection* beyond conventional theatre and into the heart of a community hub (the dance floor) created what Campbell and Gindt define as a 'viral dramaturgy' (2015). They propose that 'live performance is experienced as a community and creates new communities as the ephemeral moment spreads virally beyond the performance space to be taken home and nursed secretly or disseminated publicly through conversation, social media, mainstream media and scholarly books' (2015: 22). A viral dramaturgy has practical and inclusive outcomes: locating the performance on the dance floor attracted those audience members lingering in the bar who otherwise would not engage with it. *Affection* saw new communities of clubbers and theatregoers forming to experience and think through issues of HIV and AIDS, increasing the reach and depth of the performance's dramaturgy. As Campbell and Gindt note:

> mainstream artistic reiterations can be seen as part of this process of gentrification, or a selective amnesia that sanitises, rationalises and normalises the narrative, potentially producing a misleading representation of the AIDS crisis and eliding the ongoing conditions of living with HIV (2015: 22)

Devising *Affection* in collaboration with queer people living with HIV circumvented the nostalgia created by mainstream productions and the normalising of these narratives. The material we created was shaped by the contemporary HIV experiences that were shared with the company, and the collaboration was dependent on the performers and their relationship to HIV.

## Casting and co-creation

*Affection* is the sixth production created by Outbox and the casting process has developed as the company moves forward. Our first production in 2010 was an

experiment in queer theatre practices and the ‘casting’ process took the form of a call-out, more a community project than a professional casting call. I was surprised that at least 50% of the performers were professionals, many of whom had been through actor-training programmes. For the productions that followed, I created companies with a mix of those who had previously worked with Outbox and those that were working with us for the first time. It feels important to keep opportunities open and I am conscious of not becoming a closed network. For *Affection* we were looking for eight performers who identified as queer with intersectional backgrounds. As detailed in the introduction, debates continue around who has the right to play LGBTQIA+ characters and there is still a reluctance for agents to put their actors up for queer-company-led work, and a fear from some actors of being pigeonholed. This means that many traditional casting routes such as Spotlight (the UK’s largest casting service) are not adequate or fully inclusive enough for our casting. As a director, I try to be as transparent and inclusive as I can be about casting, with call-outs posted on casting services alongside social media channels. For the actor, the audition process is a glimpse into the process they could enter and it’s important for them to have a dialogue with us about how we work, what is required of them as actors and makers and, especially with a show like *Affection* that covers sensitive material, information about the content and context of the production. The casting process was not about finding actors who were living with HIV, and at no point in the process were actors asked to disclose their status.

Alongside the movement director, Coral Messam, we devised two initial tasks. The performers were asked to learn and deliver a small piece of verbatim text that we had collected for the show. We then asked the auditionees to perform a story from their own lives; we were clear that this did not need to have any relationship to

the content we were exploring. Although the production was not a piece of verbatim theatre, asking the actors to perform someone else's words became a discussion point around the topic we were dealing with, allowing us to see how sensitively the performer would approach the material. Inviting performers to tell a story from their own lives is a technique I often use in audition; it reveals something about what the actor wants to share, their interests, and what kind of theatre-maker they are. The productions are co-created by everyone working in rehearsal; therefore, actors need to have a readiness to share their ideas creatively. Once the stories are performed, we then ask the actor to physicalise key images and work with the abstract to convey the atmosphere or feeling of the story. This psychophysical approach was crucial to our rehearsal and making process.

The psychophysical approach is an acting practice that draws upon Stanislavsky's method of physical actions, which was further progressed by Michael Chekhov. This approach establishes an interconnectedness through the body and the mind, making it impossible to separate the psychological and the physical. Stanislavsky scholar and practitioner Sharon Carnicke warns against the 'bifurcation' of the Stanislavsky System, claiming that for Stanislavsky the mental is always imbued with the physical and vice versa (1998: 149–51). The psychophysical approach and its influence can be discovered through the work of practitioners including but not limited to Vsevolod Meyerhold, Jacques Lecoq, Jerzy Grotowski, Tadashi Suzuki, and Anne Bogart. Activating or awakening the body through imagery ignites the inner life in the actor, which enables emotional connection, and then plays back out through the body. This cyclical process draws upon imagination and an engaged physical practice without asking the performer to access and draw upon their own memories or trauma surrounding the subject matter. Creating

physical languages and using imagery did not inhibit intellectual responses to the subject matter, rather it allowed for questions and discussions to be processed imaginatively through physical practices.[10]

Using an embodied repertoire encouraged a deeper understanding of issues surrounding HIV and AIDS and resulted in an imaginative corporeal practice. Attention to physical languages allowed the company to represent the feeling (or affect) of living with HIV rather than the mimetic mode of psychological realism also allowed us to present multifaceted, contemporary stories. The company created a movement dialogue that physicalised the stories of men living with HIV, as well as reflecting upon and referencing the performers' own relationship to the virus. The testimony became a score that the company could play, allowing for a wide range of interpretive choices.

The four-week devising and rehearsal period saw creative team and cast coming together to co-create the production. The company received the testimonial material in various ways; listening to recordings, reading the transcribed text together, and inviting guests into rehearsal to share their story singularly or in dialogue with another person. This source material would then be interpreted through psychophysical practices, creating a palette of choreographic textures whilst also allowing the performers to process the information safely and through the body. This approach was introduced on day one of rehearsal and by the end of the first week we had found a movement dialogue that consisted of falling, dragging, lifting, and glitching. The *glitch* became a key pulse in the dramaturgy, which I detail later in the chapter. The company also responded to imagery from visual artists and music

[10] The rehearsal process was clearly structured with regular points to check-in and check-out, punctuated with games and fun exercises, and there was a mental health trained practitioner in the space should anyone on the creative team need space to discuss outside of the group context.

and sound design to create physical motifs and sequences. The body, flesh, and breath/pulse became key sources, such as visual artist Matthew Stone's textural 3D-printed brush stokes that form abstract compositions of the body. These references became a key part of the set, costume, video, and graphic design aesthetic.




Fig 3: *Affection* poster, 2016. Artwork: Harry Witham, Graphic Design: Brenda Fitzgerald.

There was an intertextuality between the actor's live body and filmed footage of their flesh, torsos, and limbs that was projected on to them, forming the backdrop of the action. The finished sound design was also created through the body, with sounds of the heartbeat, lips, and voices forming the rhythms and beats of the music. The placement of breath in the body through sustained movement, exhaustion, and breathing together gave us space as a company to imagine and co-create. Theorist Sara Ahmed articulates the relationship between breath and queerness, stating that space to breathe outside of spaces of oppression and violence is aspirational for queer people (2010: 120). The making process for *Affection* was significant beyond the actual production; it was an informal space of pedagogy and community within which we had a space to breathe and connect through these stories of our collective past.

Touch, and lack of touch, also became a pertinent motif as we experimented with holding and caressing one another and then tracing and remembering the touch/hold/embrace alone. This created a choreography of longing, a longing to be held or to be touched by another.

Elizabeth Freeman playfully reinterprets the etymology of belonging as a desire to 'be-long' or 'to long to be bigger not only spatially, but also temporally, to "hold out" a hand across time and touch the dead or those not born yet, to offer oneself beyond one's own time' (2007: 199). *Affection*'s psychophysical practice leaned into this theory and found a way to embody it in practice; creating physical gestures and choreographies of longing allowed for the performers to connect with the testimony and histories of HIV across time and temporalities.

This documentation from rehearsals for *Affection* shows the movement director and performers exploring the creation of a choreography of longing: *Affection* Clip 1: Rehearsal

This new tempo that we found as a company would affect the dramaturgy and have deep resonance with the dance floor. *Club-time* is a pulse of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy that transpires in all of my practice research outputs. The dance floor is a space where time bends, contorts, and stretches, and our dramaturgy would follow suit.

*Club-time*

Performing on the dance floor informed every element of the making process – its structure, scenography, gesture, language, and aurality. Through following the tempo of the dance floor, *Affection* resisted linear homonormative structures, and the company re-authored some of the narratives of HIV stigma and shame by playing with and rearranging temporalities (Farrier 2013, Freeman 2010, Halberstam 2005, Muñoz 2009). Farrier proposes that queering temporalities in performance might offer a way of dealing with 'this tricky negotiation with the past, representation and avoiding the amnesia that is arguably present in the current political context in the UK' (2015: 162). The dramaturgy was foregrounded in Muñoz's horizonal thinking, a reliance upon the past to consider new ways of imagining the future.

The absence of a teleological or causal narrative meant that the complex issues surrounding the virus could be presented in discursive and overlapping ways. *Affection*'s set design, a curved infinity wall of cream-coloured linoleum with no chairs, props or furniture, had no suggestion of time or place. The actors' costumes

were simple, skin-coloured T-shirts and tracksuit bottoms, so that the material could take on the imagery of the projection and did not suggest historical period. Activating the sonic and kinaesthetic landscape of the dance floor meant that a dramatic structure emerged in which pieces of poetry about the death of a lover in the AIDS crisis could rub against and infect contemporary stories about chemsex, PrEP, or an undetectable viral load. Whilst the company would understand when making a scene that it was set in the 1980s, the audience might not immediately (or ever) know the time period, and this slipperiness around time calls our responses to the virus into question. By playing with *club-time*, we suggest that the issues are present, that we are still dealing with them, and that history can allow us to re-think and re-imagine our attitudes and feelings towards HIV and AIDS in the present day and in the future.

Elizabeth Freeman's monograph *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010) presents an argument that uncovers the privilege of heteronormative time. Freeman describes the rendering and regulation of time and temporality in society as chrononormativity, defining the concept as 'the use of time to organize human bodies toward maximum productivity. And I mean that people are bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective, through particular orchestrations of time' (2010: 5). *Affection*'s dramaturgy refuses the chrononormative by distorting the orchestrations of linear time and, in doing so, also mirrors the temporality of the dance floor. Through the exploration of queering time, the production locates itself within a field of scholarship around queer time and temporality. Jack Halberstam states that time 'form[s] the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding, from the professions of psychoanalysis and medicine, to socioeconomic and demographic studies on which every sort of state policy is based, to our understandings of the

affective and the aesthetic' (2005: 152). Heterosexual society has rendered time to be normative in a linear fashion, chronologically mapping events that include marriage, owning property, having children, and this cycle repeating. Halberstam offers the image of straight people being stranded in 'hetero temporalities' and in doing so reframes the possibilities of losing ourselves in queer time. Muñoz plots queerness alongside the intention to be lost, defining it as 'illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight minds' mapping of space. Queerness is lost in space or lost in the relation to the space of heteronormativity' (2007: 72).

Bringing this theory into the rehearsal room provided a framework for the dramaturgy, giving the cast and creative team both theoretical and creative reference points. Rather than creating a false division between queer performance and theory, this scholarship allowed for the company to be autonomous in creative decisions, and unpacking the philosophy of queer time registered with both the form of the show and the themes of HIV and AIDS. Halberstam invokes the late-night dance floor as the turn away from hetero temporalities:

> Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away [. . .] a theory of queerness as a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity (2005: 7).

The nightclub's aesthetic is designed for us both to lose time and to exist in a time where the constraints of the quotidian no longer apply, particularly in a pre-mobile-phone world, when time may only be deciphered when the lights come up at the end of the night. Many of the audience members will have lost time under the mirror-ball in the site of our performance, the traces of previous experiences lingering as they experience this dance floor in an entirely new way – our dramaturgy would also reflect and refract this *club-time*. Cultural theorist Tim Lawrence charts the way in

which disco music and the location of the disco, whilst in many ways being a capitalist construct, also escapes capitalist productivity and the trappings of organised time:

> In addition, the forward march of teleological time, the time of bourgeois domesticity and capitalist productivity was upset within the disco setting, where repetitive and cyclical beat cycles created an alternative experience of temporality and the absence of clocks enabled dancers to move into a realm in which work, the work of the dance, was not required to be productive in a conventional economic or indeed heterosexual sense. Within this setting, DJs drew on a range of records that cut across temporal and spatial boundaries in order to evoke and in some respects create a radically diverse sonic utopia. (2011: 239)

Although I discovered the pulse of *club-time* during making the production *Affection*, it is utilised and woven through all the practice in the thesis. The pulse of *club-time* does not sit in isolation and, as in any dramaturgy or performance ecology, cannot function without other constituent pulses. This discovery was a springboard into the other ways in which I could extend queer theoretical impulses into embodied practice.

Through making *Affection* I began to discover that a Dance-Floor Dramaturgy follows grooves and rhythms rather than narratives, and embraces mess, nonverbal dialogue, and shifting temporalities. This became particularly apparent through Elizabeth Freeman's concept of erotohistoriography; imaginatively engaging with the issues through the body lessened the stigma and shame associated with the HIV virus. Elizabeth Freeman defines erotohistoriography as:

> The body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations. (2010:95–96)

Erotohistoriography, like the dance floor, allows for an engagement with the past that produces pleasure and embodied understanding. The embodied interaction the performers had with erotohistoriography led me to reflect upon a new pulse I call *pose*.

## *Pose*



Fig 4: 'Glamorous' in *Affection*, 2016. Image: Graeme Braidwood.

In an early rehearsal, I invited two men living with HIV, one diagnosed in 1982 and the other in 2015, to share their stories with the company. This intergenerational exchange became central to our process. One of the men, Jonathan Blake, was one of the first to be diagnosed with HIV in the UK, in 1982.[11] Later that decade, he was diagnosed with AIDS and given three months to live. In 1996, Jonathan was offered

[11] Jonathan Blake has agreed to be named in this research. Blake was the first person diagnosed with HTVL3 (the term used for HIV at the time) in Middlesex Hospital. His life has been widely reported, and the 2014 feature film *Pride* depicts a character (played by Dominic West) based on Jonathan.

combination therapy and now (at age 70) continues to live a healthy life. The second man (who wishes to remain unnamed) had been diagnosed with HIV in 2015 when he was in his early thirties. Originally, the session had been organised for the cast to ask questions, but what ensued was a conversation between the two men, sharing their experiences of diagnosis. Although the events were over thirty years apart, the similarities were startling. The meeting was a cathartic experience for both, but the younger participant remarked that it had been a particularly healing process to share his experience with Jonathan. As Kerr notes:

> [o]ne of the casualties of the Second Silence was the break in intergenerational communication. Due to mass death, mental health issues, and the lack of space that AIDS took up in public, the link of gossip, mentorship, bearing witness, intimate relationships, secret sharing, and other modes of dialogic bonding were broken. This ensured that less history and fewer lessons for survival were passed down, and that there would come a time in history when some catch-up would have to occur – the lapse in noise amid the silence would need to be filled. (2020: 199)

This witnessing of intergenerational healing and the company's ongoing intergenerational relationships set about to repair this dialogic bond. In recalling the axis between life and death that was brought about by retroviral medication, Jonathan talks of the survivor guilt that many queer men experience who survived the brutality of the early AIDS years. The dialogue between a person living with HIV and a person lost in the early AIDS years was a haunting and dynamic theatrical image that the company pursued. We worked with playwright Jodi Gray to produce a poetic monologue from a man who laments not only his own diagnosis, but also the others he has known that are no longer alive.

When rehearsing with actors Barry and Josh-Susan, I asked the latter to improvise a series of movements as Barry was reading the text. Josh-Susan, a gender nonconforming person of colour, dances professionally (and non-

professionally) in the bars and clubs of the London gay scene, and their repertoire is emblematic of vogueing: sharp and extended angular movements that frame the face and body. Kareem Khubchandani writes on the transnationalism of vogueing, a dance phenomenon that began in New York ballroom culture and was populated by marginalised trans and Black and Latinx people, noting that 'subaltern resources that can be shared between marginal black and brown subjects so that they may become legible to each other and foster intimacies where there have been centuries-long socio-political cleavages' (2018: n.p.).[12] Vogueing has long been an established part of the UK queer scene; however, many are not aware of the lineage of the dance and therefore the appropriation of trans, Black, and Latinx moves. Khubchandani cites YouTube and *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and I would add more recently, FX's *Pose*, as transnational cultural references that add to the 'circulation of queer(er) visions of blackness' (2018: n.p.). When Muñoz writes about the vogueing of the American avant-garde drag performer Kevin Aviance, he comments that the audience 'might only see the high fashion glamour as he moves and gestures on the stage, others see/hear another tune, of racialized self-enactment in the face of overarching opposition' (2009: 80). Josh-Susan was aware of the herstory of their movement and in control of the choice they made when vogueing. During the early AIDS years, vogueing became a dance of opposition and resistance among a community disproportionately affected by the crisis. The other Black members of the cast and creative team in the rehearsal space commented that this was a crucial moment of representation and arguably would translate to audiences. Following Muñoz and

[12] The ballroom 'scene' is an underground LGBTQ subculture that began in the 1980s in New York City and was founded by Black and Latinx drag queens. Drag queens belong to families or 'houses' and compete by walking the catwalk in various categories and styles. The 'vogue' is the characteristic dance of the scene popularised by Jennie Livingston's 1991 documentary film *Paris Is Burning* and Madonna's song 'Vogue' of the same year. For further critique on *Paris Is Burning* and the cultural appropriation on the ballroom scene see Bailey, 2013; Butler, 1993; hooks, 1992; Prosser, 1998.

Khubchandani, I argue that this danced expression had a deeper cultural resonance for Black and Global Majority people, who are often unrepresented in the whitewashing of HIV narratives.

In the scene the company created, performer Barry reflects upon an AIDS diagnosis. It is a glamorously defiant attitude towards death.

*I was so sure that I'd.*

*It got to the point I was so sure that I would.*

*When it got to the point I was so sure that I'd be dead next month.*

*I made the decision to.*

*I thought it was sort of glamorous. Sort of.*

*Not the end but the having.*

*(I'd seen the end. Oh, I'd seen the others. And I said, 'That's not for me.'*

*Nothankyouverymuch.)*

*I imagined myself a wisp, drifting through rooms*

*In a kimono*

*Swooning back on to sofas and*

*With a hand to my forehead like*

*I imagined myself fabulous with it.*

*I wouldn't cling on. (I'm not clingy.)*

*I wouldn't fight. (Lover not fighter.)*

*I made the decision to be so fabulous in the dying that Death would be kind and tender and sweet to me*

*Even though*

*Even though She had been so cruel and rough and bitter*

*To everyone else.*

*But not to me. She wouldn't dare.*

*Never to me.*

*So imagine my surprise when they.*

*Imagine my surprise.*

*'You're going to be okay,' they said. 'It's going to be'*

*…*

*But what about them?*

*You know?*

*But nought to them that are already*

*This 'progress', this treat*

*Ment.*

*Where does that leave me?*

In tandem with the text, Josh-Susan performs a sequence of movement with an ethereal quality. Josh-Susan's feet are fixed to the floor as their upper body moves in slow motion, as though gliding through time and space. Gestures in the sequence are akin to the ballroom scene of New York, yet staccato and high-energy vogueing is replaced by a corporeal expression that is both sensual and melancholic. There are moments when Barry's body aligns with Josh-Susan's and their gestures synchronise. Their movement physically describes phrases and rhythms in the text. Josh-Susan moves in a slower and more lyrical way as Barry becomes still.

In this documentation of the dress rehearsal, the composition of the language and the movement create a dialogue that has the effect of communicating between past and present: *Affection* Clip 2: 'Glamorous'

This moment signifies a discovery point in the making and performance process that I understand through Freeman's erotohistoriography. It was clear early in rehearsals that the trace and ephemera of HIV and AIDS were apparent in the bodies of all the performers, regardless of their status. The corporeal understanding of HIV and AIDS in queer people is imbued with heteronormative perceptions of shame. I begin this chapter with an account of my own encounter with the fear of contracting HIV and its associated shame with having a queer sexuality. Following Alyson Campbell's (2011) assertion that theatre directing in itself can be a form of erotohistoriography, I propose that through the theatre-making process, the queer encounter of HIV and AIDS can become a sensation and experience of possibility and pedagogy. Much like the collision we experience on the dance floor, erotohistoriography proposes a way through the body we might encounter knowledge and cultural histories with the potential for pleasurable sensations, rather than foregrounding shame and stigma. The stories, encounters, and meetings that the company collected from queer men living with HIV became part of what Diana Taylor refers to as the 'repertoire of embodied knowledge' (2003: 25). Taylor describes this repertoire as 'gestures, the spoken word, movement, dance, song, and other performances' (ibid) as a legitimate and embodied alternate to the written archive.

Josh-Susan performs the vogueing while standing still, engaging only the upper body and articulating the hand gestures in slow motion. In this production, the

vogueing became dreamlike and haunting. The gestures that Josh-Susan create illuminate the complex and trans-global choreographic lineages that they inhabit, and others recognise, at the same time embodying the complexity of the text. Creating this movement and using this compositional form allowed the audience to experience the narrative within both historical and contemporary contexts – Josh-Susan's body performing a complex and nuanced erotohistoriography. This commingling of bodily gesture, erotohistoriography, and queer dance-floor culture is how I define the pulse of *pose*.

The powerful intergenerational encounter that the company had witnessed was exchanged with the audience in an embodied and figurative way; the multilayered choreography was attuned to the contributor's testimony and the body of the performer telling the story. Using *pose*, the ghosts of the early AIDS years materially resonate in the labour of the actors' bodies and breath, but without confining these stories to the past or making them nostalgic. *Pose* has a connection to the past through its choreographic repertoire, whilst the body moving is in the present, and the combination of this allows us to think across temporalities and into the future.

Confronting and reflecting upon the early AIDS years emboldened the company to create work about contemporary issues around HIV. Dealing with current issues of HIV transmission proved creatively complex and rich in terms of dramaturgical structure. In 2016, the UK (and in particular London) was in the grips of what Jamie Hakim describes as a 'multi-faceted panic discourse' (2019: 250) around chemsex and its potential to lead to unprotected sex and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV. In unpacking some of this moral, sexual, and technological panic, the company initiated a new pulse, *glitch*.

*Glitch*

It was through playing physically with temporalities that a glitching quality became apparent in the movement work the company were making. At the beginning of the play, there is a sequence in which we see six of the actors standing with their feet firmly rooted to the floor and the tops of their spines connected to the back wall of the performance space – the screen of linoleum onto which their body parts were projected.

This movement sequence was created by playing with qualities of 'weight' and 'waiting'. When speaking to queer people with HIV they would often remember the point of diagnosis or would recall others asking them about how and when they were diagnosed. This moment, often depicted in films and TV series, of waiting for a health professional to give a diagnosis, is a space in which temporality becomes distorted. A short wait can feel like an eternity, particularly with the 'weight' of diagnosis.[13] I turn back to my own experiences here of inspecting my body for lesions, the weight of HIV, and the wait to contract the virus. Experimenting with the wait in the clinic and the wait/weight of history, we took the gestures of waiting and began to slow them down and speed them up. When sped up, the gestures became smaller and twitching and the movement achieved an almost hip-hop dance quality – precise, sharp and high-speed. The playing space was narrow and low-ceilinged, and projecting onto the wide linoleum screen, embodying the waiting movement at different speeds, gave the quality of a VHS tape being paused, rewound, and in fast-

[13] Stephen Farrier, when writing about the Outbox production *The Front Room* (2011), also riffs on waiting and weight, suggesting that elders carry the weight of history and for younger people there is a sense of the wait of history (2015: 1404).

forward. Bodies moving through technological temporalities creates a physical glitching effect which is then echoed in *Affection's* dramaturgy.

This footage of the opening sequence of *Affection*, shows the glitching choreography in performance: *Affection* Clip 3: 'Waiting Room'

The glitching choreography led us to think about how other scenes, text, and transitions could be glitched. In Legacy Russell's manifesto *Glitch Feminism* (2020), Russell proposes that we find liberation in the glitch between body, gender, and technology. They propose that the glitch, which is usually seen as something faulty, an error in the technological sphere, offers an opportunity to perform and transform for those people and communities who are most marginalised by heteronormativity.

> With physical movement often restricted, female-identifying people, queer people, Black people invent ways to create space through rupture. Here, in that disruption, with our collective congregation at that trippy and trip-wired crossroad of gender, race, and sexuality, one finds the power of the glitch. (2020: 27)

By offering the glitch as a form of refusal, Russell demands the autonomy and power of bodies that refuse to conform. This could be the refusal of whiteness as dominance, bodies that live outside the ascribed gender binary, and bodies that are disabled or live with chronic health conditions such as HIV. Puncturing scenes with moments that glitched the chronological flow of the scene created a Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt or making the familiar strange. The audience were taken out of the 'play' and reminded of the material reality of watching a performance and being located on a dance floor. Our production used *glitch* as a tool of power that allowed us to oscillate between the body, gender, and both the technology of the scenography but also the relationship between technology and chemsex. It was

when creating a scene entitled ‘Trip’ that we were able to utilise the pulse of *glitch* to its fullest.

*Affection* was made at a time of rapid rise of HIV transmission for men who have sex with men (MSM) in the UK. According to *The National Aids Manual*, there was a 15% increase in diagnoses from 2010 to 2016, and Black and Global Majority people were disproportionally affected.[14] This was happening against a backdrop of a newly emerging phenomenon, ‘chemsex’, which is defined by researchers at the 2016 Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections (CROI) as the ‘use of drugs to increase disinhibition and arousal’ (qtd. in Levin 2016). Chemsex often takes place at ‘chillouts’ – sex parties held at users’ homes aided by dating apps that make it easy to find party drugs, such as mephedrone and gamma hydroxybutyrate. Drug-taking at chemsex parties leads to the loss of sexual inhibition, increasing pleasure but also the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted illnesses. A report delivered at CROI 2016 stated that a survey of HIV-positive patients attending thirty clinics in England and Wales found that 37% of Londoners reported engaging in chemsex.

In the same year, the UK’s National Health Service made the decision not to fund Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), a drug commercially named Truvada that can stop HIV from taking hold and spreading throughout the body.[14] This legislation can be seen as an exclusionary tactic from a Conservative UK government, preventing essential healthcare provision for those communities most at risk of HIV.

[14] PrEP is now available in Wales and Scotland and has been available to 10,000 people in England since September 2017 as part of the IMPACT trial. It is important to note here that Truvada and HIV treatment in the Global North highlight an inequality throughout the rest of the world. The play, and indeed this article, does not suggest that HIV is a white, gay, male problem. *Affection* did, however, concentrate on a particular community that were affected by the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and asked questions of how MSM have responded to this over thirty years since the epidemic took grip. The interviews took place with men often living in the Greater London area, meaning that the context was urban and those interviewed were accessing healthcare and support services.

HIV treatment works to reduce the viral load in the blood to undetectable levels, meaning that HIV is not able to damage the immune system further and cannot be transmitted to sexual partners. Just under half of diagnosed HIV-positive men in the UK live in London, and I met with two leading organisations in the city, 56 Dean Street (Europe's largest sexual-health clinic based in Soho) and Positive East (its largest HIV charity), to gain better critical insight. I was told the same thing by healthcare professionals and support workers: that an HIV diagnosis usually means that the patient's health can be managed and their life expectancy as long as others with a negative status, but the challenge is to deal with the shame and stigma attached to such a diagnosis. By placing our performance on the queer dance floor, we would reach a community affected by the steep rise in HIV transmission. The production would thus facilitate an embodied dialogue around the issues of HIV, PrEP, and chemsex in ways that could erase some of the stigma and shame surrounding the virus.



Fig 5: ‘Trip’ in *Affection*, 2016. Image: Graeme Braidwood.

‘Trip’ is a section of the play that portrays the chemsex and chillout scene with all its (literal and metaphorical) stickiness and fluidity. This section challenged theatrical form and queered temporality to allow the audience insight into the world of chemsex. The company’s learning was supported by nurses from 56 Dean Street. The care, humour, and lack of judgement the health workers displayed infused the dramaturgy and devising process. David Stuart was a leading campaigner in raising awareness of chemsex and a healthcare worker at 56 Dean Street. Stuart categorises chemsex as the: ‘medicating of complex issues that inhibit the enjoyment of gay sex such as societal internalised homophobia, the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic within gay cultures, and religious or cultural shame that is often associated with gay sex’ (2018).

Stuart saw first-hand the damage that chemsex could do to gay men, and friends and colleagues that I know that have experienced the chemsex scene have certainly found the parties to feel dark and dangerous. I have heard of experiences of abuse and non-consensual sex as well, as the damage that the parties can have to health and self-esteem in the aftermath. However, that is not to suggest that everything connected to chemsex is negative. As theorist Jamie Hakim posits:

> chemsex is a way for some, largely migrant, gay and bisexual men to experience a sense of collectivity not only in a city where the collective physical spaces they have historically gathered are closing down due to neoliberal approaches to town planning (Campkin and Marshall 2017), but also in a wider culture in which neoliberalism has been hegemonic and that, in multiple ways, alienates them from experiencing the possibility of collectivity at all. (2019: 253)

Hakim looks to the roots and causes of chemsex rather than pathologising gay men. The counter-argument to the demonisation of chemsex is that the individual drive, gentrification, and homogeneity have propelled gay men to seek collectivity –

particularly those who are most marginalised on the commercial gay 'scene' (Florêncio 2021, Gilbert 2013, Hakim 2019). By pathologising chemsex, we remove the agency of gay men and their choices and reaffirm narratives of drug-takers being miserable and out-of-control. Through conversation and intergenerational exchange, our company understood that gay men taking drugs and having sex was not a 'new' practice. There have always been subcultures that enjoy and indulge in queer sex and pursue sexual activity that exists outside of hetero/homonormative parameters. As the parties where chemsex often takes place, chillouts can be framed as sites of queer pleasure and desire, an alternate dance floor. At the same time, we are also reminded that not everything that we experience on a dance floor is pleasurable, it can also be the site of violence and pain. Our challenge was to convey the risk of the chillout without demonising the pursuit of pleasure, intimacy, and community; our dramaturgy had to provoke questions rather than deliver answers. As queer scholar João Florêncio proffers:

> An approach of this kind allows us to frame chemsex as a practice that may be less (or not just?) about self-destruction or internalised homophobia as some public figures both straight and gay seem to believe, and more (but also?) about affirming and sustaining the life of a subculture, ensuring its reproduction not only through drug use but also through its associated ethics of experimentation and care. (2021: 8)

Using *glitch* as a dramaturgical strategy we were able to move away from realist depictions that could offer simple and unbalanced narrative conclusions. Having spent large amounts of time with people that had attended chillouts and through conversations with healthcare professionals we were also wary of presenting something that reached towards the utopian With playwright Jodi Gray, we were able to find a polyphonic characterisation that textually matched the physicality of the *glitch*. Gray playfully coined the phrase 'three-way monologue' to describe how the text suggests the different ways that a single person at a chillout might be feeling in

any one moment. The scene relied upon three actors performing the text in unison, their voices emphasising and uncovering words that fall in-between sounds. Rather than focusing on the clarity of the dialogue, the text produced a cacophony of rhythms and phonics that had the adrenalin-infused effect that one might experience in the chillout environment. It was ambiguous as to who the three voices belonged to – one sexy and confident, another nervous but open, the last paranoid and destructive. The choral sound produced sensations of risk, lust, and caution. This invited audience members to experience and feel rhythms and tempos. It sounded messy and then all at once carefully placed, bounding between the senses, and conjuring the varied sensations of the chillout.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| G o'clock baby G. Baby. | Just let go. | "Be prepared." |
| | Oh. | There's something I'm |
| What time is it? | Imagine the possibilities | thinking of. |
| Not that time means | imagine | It's taking me out of. |
| Not that this means | You're beautiful you're | I've forgotten something. |
| Time means nothing! | fuckable | I'm forgetting something. |
| I see you I see you fuck | Don't overthink it take a | It's on the tip of my |
| me I see that | step back and let go | tongue |
| | Hello. | On the edge of my brain. |
| Where have you been all | Where have you been all | |
| my life? | my life? | |
| Where have I been all my | | Where have I been all my |
| life? | | life? |

In conjunction with the text, various body parts are projected onto the naked torsos of three performers. We see collarbones, arms, and chests. The motion of the breath through the body is visible. There are encounters: skin meeting skin and the brushing of bodies. The performers are positioned in a triangular formation and move in starkly contrasting ways. Josh-Susan moves their torso in a fluid state that denotes ecstasy, their arms reach towards the ceiling as their body coils and undulates. Aiden's movement is pronounced – high-speed and staccato. He jerks and pulses through micro-actions, giving the effect of a VHS recording in fast-forward and conveying a sense of acute tension and anxiety. Elijah's body language is closed, his hands cover his face and torso as his eyes navigate the space. He seems to be lost.

This footage of the scene demonstrates the pulse of *glitch* in performance: *Affection* Clip 5: 'TRIP'

The movement quality combined with the polyphonic text and projection, created a glitch that disrupted bodies, technology, and characterisation. Finding the 'power in the glitch' (2020: 7) allowed for us to see between the cracks of the chillout, and rather than 'represent', the company were able to use an embodied repertoire to ask questions and begin a dialogue about the chemsex scene and its relationship to HIV transmission.

## Conclusions

Through the co-creation, rehearsal, and production of *Affection*, this research expanded upon theories of queer futurity by embodying them in a dramaturgical

practice. A key insight was how Freeman's concept of erotohistoriography interpenetrated all aspects of the process; the pleasure of directing and theatre-making itself (Campbell 2011) in the bodies of all the artists that collaborated to make the production and in the material that we created. Erotohistoriography proposed a way that the company could find pleasure in dealing with a painful historical past, allowing for bodily sensation and connection to histories that could inform and elucidate the present moment. Freeman's porous concept of temporality informed the dramaturgical 'infection' of issues, from the early AIDS years sliding up against, and glitching together with, contemporary stories of HIV. This infection rooted these issues firmly in the present without making them nostalgic or anachronistic.

Embodying erotohistoriography meant that the 'live bodies of performers and audiences engage with the past in a way that is always, inevitably, in the present (and "local")' (Campbell and Farrier 2016: 152). *Affection* differed from the recent mainstream portrayals of HIV and AIDS that I have cited (the 2018 National Theatre revival *Angels in America*, *The Inheritance* and *It's a Sin)* in many ways; firstly, because it engaged with the contemporary, local (London and wider UK context), *chronic* of HIV and AIDS (McKelvey 2017), revisiting past stories of the early AIDS years to illuminate future thinking. Secondly, our production cast a company of LGBTQIA+ performers who had an embodied understanding of the virus and its impact on queer communities, their lived experience producing pleasurable encounters with queer histories. Finally, and perhaps most significantly for this research, by performing *Affection* on the queer dance floor, the production centred itself within a community predominately affected by the issues explored, whilst also being influenced and informed, in a wider dramaturgical sense, by the queer dance-

floor aesthetic. The staging, site of performance, casting, subject matter, dramatic (temporal) structure, and audiences all contributed to a queer (Campbell and Farrier, 2016), viral (Campbell and Gindt, 2018), and *Dance-Floor* Dramaturgy.

Creatively responding to the aesthetic and intertextuality of the dance floor allowed for critical dramaturgical discoveries that would prevent the research from merely illustrating queer futurity, instead practically embodying and extending upon this field of research. The invention of the pulses *club-time*, *pose*, and *glitch,* begins a set of dramaturgical devices that determine ways the theatre-maker can explore and capture queer potentiality. The pulses discovered in *Affection* are woven through the rest of the practice and this thesis.

At the end of our performance each night, the set had to be packed away and the space set up for the nightclub crowd. The linoleum backdrop was rolled up and the theatre lights replaced with those of the disco variety. Some audience members left, others stayed and were joined by the partying crowd. The Glory, as the site of performance, returned to its usual space for dancing bodies, but the traces of the performance lingered. It was after the show and beneath the mirror-ball that drag queens and doctors, activists and actors would come together to have new conversations about the play and the issues within it. Knowledge was understood and exchanged through the body. In those moments of queer community, I witnessed a little of the stigma of HIV and AIDS danced away.

**Chapter Two: *And The Rest of Me Floats*.**

**Building on the pulses to discover *remix*, *fun-form*, and *transition*.**

*9.*

*I am convinced that the doctor made a mistake when I was born. One day soon, a letter will come announcing that my sex is female. That I am a little girl, after all.*

*I walk across the short landing in our suburban two-up two-down, from my bedroom to Mum's. I'm making my way to my favourite spot, her white, Formica dressing table. Heaven. Making as little sound as possible, I close the door behind me and perch on the end of her bed so that I can see my face in the dressing-table mirror. I open the top drawer and the chemically sweet smell of lipsticks, eyeshadows, and blushers intoxicate me. The chalky, bright-red stick barely meets my eye as I hurriedly smear it across my mouth. I don't try to follow the lines of my lips like a colouring book, I just let the red run free. I choose an eyeshadow – an electric blue. I apply it across the lids of my eyes, remembering the way my mum traces it across hers. Colour begins to fill the pale texture of my flesh. I take the blusher, a vivid pink, and dance the brush across my cheekbones.*

*Suddenly I hear footsteps coming up the stairs and before I can exit, I see the doorknob turning. My mum's eyes meet mine, both our faces filling with blood.*

*I sting with an intense shame.*

*The letter never arrived.*

* * *

The memory above describes a familiar feeling of being outside of the gender I was assigned. It was a feeling that pervaded my childhood. I was effeminate: I played with the girls; I hated sports; I liked My Little Ponies; I read books; I loved pop music; I crossed my legs; I made myself smaller; and sometimes, I provoked a feeling of fear, or anger, or suspicion in men and other boys.

It was whilst sitting with these memories that I began to imagine the production that would become *And The Rest of Me Floats*. This project interrogates the construction and performativity of gender and is devised by seven performers from across the queer and trans communities. The making, rehearsal, and performance processes of the production further revealed ways in which the dance floor can harness and reproduce a space of potentiality. Through this practice research, Dance-Floor Dramaturgy proposes an alternative to the exclusion and lack of representation of queer and trans narratives and performers in mainstream theatre.

Discovering the pulses *club-time*, *glitch*, and *pulse* in *Affection* offered a palette of techniques to begin the process of creating *And The Rest of Me Floats*. The physical vocabularies of the dance floor and the embodied knowledges of the club were crucial in this devising process. These modes of practice allowed the company to establish collective aims and objectives, and invited playful exploration that would find us not just exploring queer potentiality, but practically embodying it.

In this chapter, I will outline three further pulses of dance-floor dramaturgy discovered through the making of *And The Rest of Me Floats*:

- *transition*: the theatrical transition becomes the dominant mode of performance in order to mirror the structures of queer and trans experiences;

- *fun-form*: extending upon Jack Halberstam's exploration of 'low theory' (2011) in order to create devising exercises and dramaturgical strategies that utilise popular modes of queer performance;
- *remix*: the commingling of autobiographies, producing a 'communal queer logic' (Munoz 2009:66) to share experiences without homogenisation.

The aims, objectives, and research questions for the project are identified as a starting point for both the research and the rehearsal process, and then developed and refined through collective practical investigation and embodied exploration. The aim of this piece of practice research is to further develop a Dance-Floor Dramaturgy that harnesses and reproduces queer potentiality. Through this expansion of the practice, Dance-Floor Dramaturgy addresses the problem of exclusion and under-representation of queer and trans narratives and performers in UK theatre by inventing dramaturgical structures that represent and mirror their experiences. The form, dramaturgy, and venues in mainstream UK theatre exacerbate this exclusion, prohibiting and marginalising intersectional queer voices. The climate around trans issues is at a critical, damaging point for the queer community as overwhelmingly negative portrayals of trans people in the media put them at risk; therefore, this research creates a new dramaturgy that resists heteronormative, hegemonic dramaturgical structures that privilege linear and teleological narratives in order to pioneer queer and trans inclusive routes into theatre-making.

I began the process of making *And The Rest of Me Floats* with key research objectives that inform and refine the making process. In a tradition of queer performance, I wanted to focus on autobiography in performance. As bell hooks argues, 'oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subject, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story' (1989:

43). My first research objective engages with the queer performer identifying themselves as subject but tackles this in a polyphonous way. In solo queer performance, or in mainstream portrayals of queer characters, we often only see a single version or experience of what it is to be queer/trans, and so in this production I devised the performance with seven intersectional performers. *And The Rest of Me Floats* centres their biographies and engages with utopian performatives as a form of refusal to the media's overwhelmingly negative portrayal of trans and gender nonconforming people.

The second project objective was to increase representation of queer and trans performers, and develop routes into the theatre industry promoting education, empathy, and understanding around gender identity, presentation, and transition through the various dissemination points of the project. Alongside the production were eight workshops for LGBTQIA+ youth with a total of 89 participants, four workshops with trans participants as part of the TransActing programme, reaching 51 participants, and a three-day acting summer school hosted at the Southbank Centre with 25 participants.[15]

To meet the aim and the objectives, the project began with a series of questions and provocations that fuelled the research and development stages of the show:

- How can the company develop a dramaturgy that harnesses the queer potentiality of the dance floor?
- How can the form of the show capture the polyphony and non-linearity of intersectional queer voices and biographies?

[15] This is evidenced in Outbox's project evaluation 2015–2018 https://www.cssd.ac.uk/Research/Research-Outputs-and-Projects/Current-Research-Projects/and-the-rest-of-me-floats-outbox-theatre

Once the company had formed and rehearsals had begun, more specific questions were activated through collaboration:

- How does the theatrical transition function in performance when collaborating with queer and trans performers?
- Can the *transition* become the dominant form of the performance?
- What pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy emerge through inventing rehearsal techniques and engaging with critical queer ideas and philosophies?

## The transition of *And The Rest of Me Floats*



Fig 6: *And The Rest of Me Floats* performed at the Rose Lipman Building, 2017. Image: FG Studios.

*And The Rest of Me Floats* stemmed from a conversation that I had with actor Yasser Zadeh; I told him the story I begin the chapter with, and he shared with me

his experience of moving to a new neighbourhood and convincing the whole street that he was a boy called Max. This story appears almost verbatim in the final production. Despite the trans experience I detail at the beginning of the chapter, I do not identify as transgender. I present as a cisgender man and live with all the associated privileges. Like many other queer, assigned-male-at-birth people I have spoken and shared experiences with, I learned to put my femininity down to my homosexuality. However, I was called 'gay' in the school playground before I even understood what the term meant, and certainly before I had begun to *articulate* any kind of sexual preferences. In those formative experiences, it was my *gender* that was being policed. It was my *gender* that was consistently failing. Judith Butler tells us in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender is a performative act, that it is not an innate, natural, and unquestionable aspect of our being/identity. Butler's theory that gender is performative and a social construct is widely understood in queer circles, defining gender as 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (1990: 45). This interplay between gender and performativity is often misinterpreted as 'performance', connoting that gender can be performed at will, is a choice, or can be taken on and off like a costume. Butler's critique of drag as a mode of gender performativity highlights how theories of performativity easily lead to notions of *theatricality*, as concluded by Shannon Jackson in her essay on genealogies of performance and gender theory. Jackson notes that 'for Butler, a drag performance of gender parody would repeat, but not displace the norms of gender performativity' (2003: 203). Butler later quantifies in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) that gender may be a construct, but the performativity of

our gender has material consequences. In other words, Butler argues that gender has been rendered *compulsory*:

> In no sense can it be concluded that the part of gender that is performed is therefore the 'truth', of gender; performance as bounded 'act' is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'; further, what is 'performed' works to conceal, not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, un-performable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake. (1993: 224)

*And The Rest of Me Floats* acknowledges that gender is performative and is not a *performance*, and further asks how do we deal with gender *as* performative *in* performance?

The decision to include seven performers in the company was in part to avoid essentialist categorisations of gender performance, as audiences are often presented with one version of what it is to be queer or trans, which then becomes unquestionable. This project sought to stage autobiographical performance in multiplicitous and polyphonic ways, which I expand upon later in this chapter when I detail the pulse of *remix*. I wanted to create a piece of performance that reflected the identities of an intersectional collective of LGBTQIA+ people, and although the production can be termed as a 'trans performance' (Hann 2021), it was the intention of the piece to reflect gender identity across the queer community.

*And The Rest of Me Floats* began as a week of research and development workshops (R&D) that took place in April 2017. I worked with six performers, a set and costume designer, movement director and sound designer to explore how we could use form and Dance-Floor Dramaturgy to capture autobiography in

performance.[16] My instinct at this stage was to use popular forms of performance: karaoke, dressing up, and stand-up to keep the short period playful and fun. This led to the key discovery of *fun-form*, a concept I will fully unpack. There was a purposeful 'scrappiness' to the R&D – too often artists feel the pressure to make something polished as a trailer for producers and programmers, but for this period I wanted the company to invest in experimentation.

The next phase was a four-week making and rehearsal period that resulted in a two-week performance run in September 2017.[17] This production was made possible with external funding awards but at this point was not programmed or commissioned by a theatre. I hired the community hall and former library, the Rose Lipman Building in East London, for this run. The Rose Lipman's brutalist architecture hosts a large hall with an old-fashioned stage, heavy, faded red-velvet stage curtains, defunct stage lighting, 150 orange plastic chairs, a 1960s hatch to a working kitchen, and a large dance floor. Although the building has hosted theatrical productions in the past, it is mostly a stage for social performances, such as weddings, christenings, and other parties and community functions. There is a history of social dancing in the space, and I could see the potential for transformation – repurposing this dance floor as a space for queer theatre.

There was no intention of transferring the production to mainstream venues once the initial run of the show was finished, as this is – traditionally – financially

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[16] The R&D company consisted of designer Harry Whitham, movement director Coral Messam, sound designer Dominic Kennedy, and actors Josh-Susan Enright, Barry Fitzgerald, Griffyn Gilligan, Elijah W Harris, Amelia Stubberfield, and Yasser Zadeh.

[17] *And The Rest of Me Floats* was first performed at the Rose Lipman Building in 2017 with cast: Josh-Susan Enright, Barry Fitzgerald, Elijah W Harris, Emily Joh Miller, Tamir Amar Pettet, Mikko Toiviainen, and Yasser Zadeh. The production was revived at The Bush Theatre in 2019 with Femi Tiwo joining the cast. The set and costume was designed by Rūta Irbīte, produced by Ged Boden and Soph Nurse, movement director Coral Messam, sound designer Dominic Kennedy, lighting designer Jess Bernberg, musical director Neil Carter, voice coach Susan Bovell, stage manager Elliot Howe, and production manager Marco Sava.

prohibitive for show with a cast of seven performers. I wanted the show to remain experimental and queer in its form without having to craft it through the lens of the mainstream theatre industry. It was a very unexpected outcome that this short performance run attracted the attention of press, producers, and programmers. The performances at Rose Lipman Building led to meetings with various theatres. We quickly accepted an offer for a two-night run at SHOUT LGBT festival hosted by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in November 2017 and, after much negotiation, were programmed by the Bush Theatre in their 2019 season (17 months after the original production).



Fig 7: *And The Rest of Me Floats* at the Bush Theatre, 2019. Image: Helen Murray.

In the lead-up to this four-week performance run, the company spent a further two weeks re-rehearsing, refining, and updating material. An original cast member (Miiko Toiviainen) could not join at this stage, presenting an opportunity for a new performer

to join the company (Femi Tiwo), and the show was reworked to accommodate their biography and experiences. The trajectory of the performance is significant, as the production *transitioned* from grassroots, queer-led performance in a community building to a fully funded mainstream theatre. This had a direct effect on the scale, aesthetic, audiences, and production values, and fed into the research aims and objectives in crucial ways, particularly, as I will argue, around increasing positive trans representation.

Hammering cisgenderism

*And The Rest of Me Floats* began from a personal investigation in an urgent and prescient moment to discuss gender variation. In 2017, there was an onslaught of articles and correspondence in the UK press and media that maligned, vilified, and attacked trans and gender nonconforming people. The overwhelmingly negative portrayal of trans people in the media puts these communities at risk, under scrutiny, while also ensuring they are underrepresented. Statistics tell us that trans people are twice as likely to think about or attempt suicide (Haas et al. 2011; Irwin et al. 2014; McNeill et al. 2017), and key findings in 'The School Report' (Bartram et al. 2017) reveal that 9% of trans pupils are subjected to death threats at school, 44% say that staff are not aware of the term 'trans' or what it means, and 33% are not able to be known by their preferred name at school. The key findings of Stonewall's 2018 'LGBT in Britain: Trans Report' (Bachman & Gooch 2018) informs us that two in five trans people (41%) and three in ten non-binary people (31%) have experienced a hate crime or incident because of their gender identity in the last 12 months.

The political backdrop of these systemic failures towards trans people is the UK government's delayed, online public consultation to reform the Gender

Recognition Act (2014). The Gender Recognition Act (GRA) allows trans and non-binary people to apply for a Gender Recognition Certificate, allowing them to achieve legal recognition in their 'acquired' gender and change their recorded sex on their birth certificate. The GRA states that to successfully gain a Gender Recognition Certificate: 'applicants must provide medical evidence of a diagnosis of gender dysphoria and details of any treatment received; evidence of living in their acquired gender for at least two years; and a statutory declaration that they will continue to do so permanently' (Balogun, Fairbairn, Pyper 2022: 5). In July 2018, a public online consultation was published by the UK government, with an option to give trans people the right to self-identify. Self-identification for trans people would remove the administratively burdensome, and often humiliating, process of providing evidence for certification. Trans people having to produce a psychiatric report in the process of gender certification further perpetuates the myth that transness is a form of mental illness. Under the Equality Act 2010, self-identification would mean that all people with a Gender Recognition Certificate would be considered as their new legal gender and have rights and access to bathrooms, changing spaces, and single-sex hostels, etc. For trans activists and trans-inclusive LGBT charities such as Stonewall, these were welcome and progressive proposals.

The public consultation to the GRA in 2018 prompted a number of public voices to speak out in opposition to self-identification: Women's Place UK was set up in 2017 in direct opposition to the proposals; the LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) Alliance was formed in 2019 in opposition to trans-inclusive policies of Stonewall; writers J. K. Rowling and Graham Linehan have taken public anti-trans stances, particularly on social media platform Twitter, along with high-profile journalists such as Julie Burchill, Julie Bindel, and Suzanne Moore. Former professor of philosophy

at Sussex University, Kathleen Stock, has published the book *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* (2021), in which she defines ‘gender critical’ thinking as the belief that trans women cannot be considered women.

This public backlash to trans people’s right to self-identify is an example of cisgenderism. Psychologists Erica Lennon and Brian J. Mistler define the term cisgenderism to describe cultural and systemic ideology that ‘denies, denigrates, or pathologises self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behaviour, expression, and community’ (2014: 63). Lennon and Mistler use ‘cisgenderism’ rather than the more commonly used term ‘transphobia’ – a term that carries the ‘fear’ of trans people – as it captures ‘the critically central and evidently flawed assumptions that underlie the pervasive cultural system of prejudice and discrimination directed toward the transgender community’ (ibid). Cisgenderism is fuelled by misinformation and beliefs that are not critically informed, particularly on social media platforms and in the mainstream press. Just as we saw homosexuals vilified, mocked, and feared in the press in the 1970s and '80s, the transgender community are facing this large-scale prejudice, which manifests in material impacts such violence (including high rates of murder), domestic abuse, homelessness, and suicide. As performance scholar and scenographer Rachel Hann argues, cisgenderism is ‘the structural effects of systems that continually manage trans people as first and foremost mistaken, unwell, or fetishists’ (2021: n.p.).

Sara Ahmed offers a critique of the claims made by gender-critical feminists (or trans-exclusionary radical feminists) that allegations of transphobia are silencing and censoring feminist speech. Ahmed offers the hopeful philosophy of an ‘affinity of hammers’ (2016), using the imagery of a hammer chipping away at transgender people as they are asked to qualify and provide evidence of their existence.

Crucially, Ahmed offers this position as a cis woman and suggests that 'transphobia within feminism needs to be understood in relation to cis privilege: not having to come into contact with this hammering' (2016: 22). Ahmed argues further that to experience this hammering means that you acquire a hammer to chip away at the political systems that facilitate the rebuttal that trans people face. This reciprocity is what Ahmed terms the 'affinity'.

The political hope of Ahmed's affinity of hammers (2016) can be felt in our production, *And The Rest of Me Floats*. We see the performers encounter the questioning of their identity throughout the show, as I will explain later, but as they are questioned, the production steadily chips away at the system. The end of the show takes a sledgehammer to the constant questions and, in fact, the form of the traditional theatre production. Central to this production is the question: 'Do you see me?', a linguistic motif that recurs, challenging the audience to see beyond gender presentation and really *see* the person performing for them. Representation matters, and I argue below that casting seven performers from across the queer community (majority trans and non-binary) meant that we were able to keep chipping away at the normative systems that uphold the theatre industry and routes into it.

Trans representation

Celebration of the queer and trans experience is deeply political in a time when there is an urgent need to address the lack of trans rights, and acknowledge the crisis point for queer and trans mental health that I outline above. Casting trans and gender nonconforming performers allowed for the cast to author their own experiences and create pluralistic representations of queer lives that refute the negative portrayals seen in the media. *And The Rest of Me Floats* created roles and

opportunities specifically for queer and trans people and queer Black and Global Majority people, the demographic of the LGBTQIA+ community who are the least represented in mainstream theatre.

Canadian performance artist Sunny Drake describes a ‘deficit cycle’ when it comes to professional trans actors (2016: 58): due to the lack of trans roles, representation is scarce, which then dissuades trans people from entering the acting industry. *And The Rest of Me Floats* sought to increase the representation of trans and gender-nonconforming actors through the production, participation workshops, and actor-training programmes specifically for trans actors. When first casting the production in 2017, there were very few openly trans actors on agents’ books and graduating from formal training. Outbox had to be imaginative about the way that we cast *And The Rest of Me Floats*, knowing that traditional routes were unwelcoming and sometimes actively discouraging for trans and gender-nonconforming performers. For example, it was only in 2021 that Spotlight (the largest and most prolific casting service in the UK) changed its settings from the binary male and female options to include non-binary and trans categorisations. Producer Ged Boden and I looked to the more inclusive cabaret and drag scenes, and searched through social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter to find performers who might like to audition.

Queer and trans representation in this research is important, as the mainstream theatre industry excludes and marginalises these performers and narratives. When programmers and artistic directors do programme LGBTQIA+ work, it privileges white, cisgender, gay stories. The LGBT plays that mainstream UK theatre stages often exclude queer and trans people, and queer Black and Global Majority people, and promote and amplify hegemonic voices within an already

marginalised community. Hann (2021) marks the period of 2017/18 as explosive for trans performance in an online presentation for Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, 'Why trans performance matters: cisgenderism and performance making since 2010'. Hann identifies *And The Rest of Me Floats*, alongside Milk Presents' production of *BULLISH* at Camden People's Theatre (2017), *Summer in London*, written and directed by Rikki Beadle-Blair at Theatre Royal Stratford East, and Travis Alabanza's *Burgerz* (Hackney Showroom 2017 and touring) as all being significant in their portrayal of trans lives. This time period, perhaps because of the onslaught of trans discrimination in the press and social media, prompted queer theatre-makers to take action.

Increasingly, casting directors are being held to account for the casting of straight and cisgender actors in trans and queer roles. However, when looking to recent queer plays that have been critically and commercially successful – the National Theatre's production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (2018), the Young Vic productions of Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance* (2018), and Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori's *Fun Home* (2018) – white, heterosexual actors have been cast as the queer protagonists. Whilst trans representation has increased since this period, theatres have continued to cast cisgender actors in trans roles.[18]

From the seven actors originally cast in *And The Rest of Me Floats,* only one was represented by a professional talent agent. This led to the formation of The Queer House, founded by the producer of *And The Rest of Me Floats*, Ged Boden,

[18] The casting of a cisgender actor in the lead role of a trans character, Pussy Baden, in a new musical version of Breakfast on Pluto prompted Outbox, The Queer House, and queer theatre company Milk Presents to create The Trans Casting Statement. The Trans Casting Statement is an initiative to address the lack of trans performers on stage, especially in mainstream theatre spaces. The statement proposes that trans roles should only be cast with trans actors, which would limit the amount of cisgender actors being cast in trans roles and provide more opportunities for underrepresented trans talent. To read more about the statement please see the report written by academic Robin Craig https://www.cssd.ac.uk/Research/Research-Outputs-and-Projects/Current-Research-Projects/trans-casting-statement-report

and one of the actors, Yasser Zadeh. The Queer House is the UK's first agency and producing house that represents queer performers.[19] Alongside the formation of The Queer House, Outbox also delivered workshops specifically targeting trans people who had little or no access to formal drama training.[20] Performing the show in a mainstream venue allowed Outbox to expand our reach, with the playtext being published by Oberon books and the V&A, who have included a digital recording of it in the National Video Archive of Performance.[21]

Representing the biographies of seven gender-nonconforming performers placed pluralistic and intersectional queer experiences at the centre of the project. This representation mattered, particularly to our queer audiences and to the LGBTQIA+ youth groups that we engaged with. By showcasing queer and trans

[19] The Queer House is now in a transitionary period. The clients of the agency have worked with major UK theatres and in international theatre, and television and film production companies such as BBC, Complicité, National Theatre, HBO, and in the West End.

[20] In total, 80 trans participants took part in workshops that developed Dance-Floor Dramaturgy, which were hosted by Royal Court (London), Leeds Playhouse, Birmingham Repertory Theatre and Bristol Old Vic. 40 trans participants took part in a summer school partnered with the Southbank Centre that explored the devising methods of *And The Rest of Me Floats* and its Dance-floor Dramaturgy. The summer school fostered and nurtured inclusive routes into the theatre industry. 11 queer artists were mentored and developed by Outbox and were invited to perform extracts of their work at the Bush Theatre after a performance of *And The Rest of Me Floats*. This resulted directly in two of the artists, Tabby Lamb and Mika Johnson, receiving a commission from HighTide Theatre to take their work to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Three public discussion events took place after evening performances. Approximately 100 people engaged in a discussion with the cast and creative team around the research questions of the play. Approximately 100 people engaged in a panel discussion round queer representation in the theatre, chaired by theatre-maker and writer Annie Siddons and featuring Kayza Rose (ACE change-maker and advocate for QTIPOC), Dr Stephen Farrier (queer academic and co-author of *Queer Dramaturgies*), Tigger Blaize (trans actor and activist, lead collaborator of National Theatre's Trans Casting events), and Valentino Vecchietti (leading intersex campaigner and activist). Approximately 30 people engaged with a Bechdel Theatre discussion concerned with female and non-binary representation in theatre.

[21] Audience data captured at Bush Theatre proves the reach of the project to LGBTQIA+ communities. 24% of audience respondents identified as trans, non-binary, or other variations of gender nonconforming. After female (52.4%) and male (24.1%), non-binary was the third biggest gender group making up 14% of survey respondents. The LGBTQIA+ community were able to see their own narratives represented and reflected on a mainstream stage. It is also significant to note that the percentage of people identifying as having a disability was 6.5% higher than the Bush Theatre season average. A trailer was made for the performance (7.d) which has been viewed by over 90,000 people. These viewing figures are significantly higher than other plays in the season (ranging from 1000 views to 40,000 views).

talent, as well as creating utopian performatives that worked against shame narratives, allowed the company to present positive and multifaceted representation. Participatory workshops for trans young people are an intrinsic part of the devising process. The workshops deal with the themes of the play, including trans identity and expression, gender, and autobiography. Providing high-quality creative engagement for these young people, who are often marginalised and excluded, enables the participants to develop their performance skills and artistic voices, and project evaluation reports an increase in their confidence and self-esteem.[22]

The participatory workshops are a key factor in the methodology, as they help to increase the representation of queer and trans performers and develop inclusive pathways into the theatre industry. Beyond providing the company with a critical insight into the lived experience of LGBTQIA+ youth, the workshops also nurtured, tested, and developed modes of dramaturgical practice. Young people were invited to write and make work inspired by their own stories to imagine a queerer future. The workshops presented an alternative mode to the formal training schemes and youth theatre currently available to them. All workshop leaders identified as queer and/or trans and, rather than simply replicate conservatoire training, the sessions focused on devising live art from autobiography, queer forms of club dance (vogueing and whacking), poetry, and clown to nurture queerer forms of performer training.

The performances that the groups created were experimental in language,

[22] The workshops have been partnered with and hosted by some of the UK's leading theatres and arts institutions. Project partners include the Southbank Centre, the Royal Court, Leeds Playhouse, Bristol Old Vic, Bush Theatre, and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Workshops have also taken place in LGBTQIA+ youth settings across the UK, partnering with organisations in Bristol, Birmingham, Brighton, London, Leeds, Manchester, Southampton, Sheffield, and Swindon to maximise reach and impact.

corporeality, and form, and allowed me to develop my thinking around creating utopian performatives. The research developed a point of access to the theatre industry for these young people that had been previously denied them. By dismantling and reimagining the tools and methods used in mainstream theatre training and developing Dance-Floor Dramaturgy, LGBTQIA+, and particularly trans and gender nonconforming young people, were able to connect with their bodies, experiences, and narratives at a crisis point in trans mental health and negative public perception and media portrayal.[23] The work with young people and the discoveries in our trans acting programme allowed me to further discover and invent new pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy.

The pulses of *And The Rest of Me Floats*

The pulses discovered in *Affection* (*club-time*, *glitch*, and *pose*) are woven into the fabric of *And The Rest of Me Floats.* Approaching this process with these three identified pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy meant that I had a practical and theoretical starting point for how the dramaturgy would operate. The pulses gave me the apparatus to work through my initial research questions and allowed me to expand upon the practices to invent further pulses. Beginning with *club-time* meant that our company could eschew linear narrative and chrononormative arrangements of dramatic time and structure. Constructing the dramaturgy through the lens of *club-*

[23] Outbox was asked by both the National Theatre and Spotlight to advise on their trans and gender-nonconforming casting policies. This resulted in an invitation to sit on a panel at a Spotlight discussion event with 50 of the UK's leading casting directors in TV, film, and theatre. Outbox have also had discussions with the National Theatre around their Trans Casting workshops. This resulted in 50 trans performers being invited to perform a monologue for casting directors from many of the UK's leading theatres. The National Theatre recommended that actors might perform a piece from *And The Rest of Me Floats* and made the text available in their bookshop and online.

*time* steered the company towards making the *transition* the main theatrical device in the production. *Club-time* also allowed us to play with time, disrupting chrononormativity when dealing with autobiography, which led to the invention of *remix*. The choreographic practice of *pose* – finding an erotohistoriographic, embodied practice through the lens of the queer dance floor – is also embedded into the corporeality of the production. This is most prominent in the 'Grid' sections of the performance, which I elaborate further on when detailing the pulse of *transition*.

The pulse of *glitch* is deployed and most present when presenting cyberspace versions of autobiography. A common theme, especially for the digital natives in the cast, was the prominence of the internet when exploring gender identity. For many of them, the internet was a lifeline as it allowed for community and connection in their isolated teenage years, particularly in rural and suburban settings. Legacy Russell describes the internet as a 'solution to the troubled material of the body' (2020: 09); Russell uses the acronym 'AFK' (Away From Keyboard), rather than 'IRL' (In Real Life) to argue that there is no division between the digital and our 'real' lives (2009: 5), demanding an 'occupation of the digital as a means of world building' (2009: 12). Russell describes *Glitch Feminism* as a manifesto for those who are 'en route to becoming their avatars, those who continue to play, experiment, and build via the Internet' (2009: 13). The digital non-space of the internet provided the backdrop for the exploration of gender at the beginning of the play. The scene 'Internet' has actors delivering lines that might be said by concerned parents on mic, in relative darkness, which gives the effect of disembodied speech:

– Our baby is talking to strangers
– He is lonely
– They don't seem to have many friends
– They need to spend some time with real people

(Outbox 2019: 13)

As a counter-narrative to the often-negative portrayal of the internet in young people's lives, performers Yasser and Tamir create a scene in which their teenage avatars meet. Tamir is a 'two-cm avatar with a denim mini and a high pony' (Outbox 2019: 14), whilst Yasser becomes a high-flying, masculine music producer. This exchange is not examining the modern phenomenon of catfishing, but more exploring the internet as a means to self-expression and finding community. The character avatars find a way to build connection and identity away from a physical world that denies them this privilege. As performer Tamir vocalises:

> TAMIR: Back surfing the web on its temperamental wave I wave
> goodbye to my physicality he, she, they and me,
> and liberated by freedom of the internet for it knows me digitally,
> not through language but through binary code.
> I'm not in a binary mode.
> I am limitless.
>
> (Outbox 2019: 17)

The exploration of *glitch* gave licence to explore the digital and non-binary nature of their identities, sometimes reimagining and reconfiguring what a painful past looks like.

*And The Rest of Me Floats* rejects the narratives of queer and trans people that see us as victimised and in misery. In mainstream theatre, film and television, and the media, the dominant queer and trans narratives are rooted in trauma, recirculating these feelings, and further marginalising the community they (mis)represent. Queer and trans trauma narratives stabilise normativity by reaffirming perceptions of queer and trans people being inferior, displaced, and in

trouble. *And The Rest of Me Floats* allows performers to author their own stories and, whilst painful and challenging material was not ignored, the company reclaimed fun, celebration, and failure as a political strategy to portray queer and trans lives. This reclamation of joy is inherent in our dramaturgy and structures were developed to facilitate this, resulting in the pulse of *fun-form*.

*Fun-form*

Looking to scholarship around queer failure offers insights into how failing and 'getting it wrong' might conjure utopian performatives and glimpses of potentiality. Sara Ahmed (2006) and Elizabeth Freeman (2010) both speak of 'losing the way' and the queer failure to conform to the rigidity of straight time. Through the active pursuit of failure, Jack Halberstam suggests that 'under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world' (2011: 2-3). At a time of high levels of queer and trans violence, failure to pass as gender conforming carries consequences, as theorist Joe Parslow argues:

> Queer failure […] is never a simple task of choosing not to succeed. It is bound up indelibly with complex systems of regulation and violence that figure queer subjects in relation to forms of success (and acceptability) that are inculcated in normative social, cultural, and political forms of identification, including monogamy, marriage, reproduction, entering the property market, and beyond. (2018: 84)

Casting and devising a show with queer and trans performers is an opportunity to rip-up the road map of traditional processes. This meant falling out of sync with what I understood as conventional directing/devising practice, and embracing failure and queer forms of knowing and performativity. Failure can be generative in performance; as Sara Jane Bailes argues, failure *works*: 'a failed objective

establishes an aperture, an opening into several (and often many other) ways of doing that counter the authority and singularity of a "correct" outcome' (2011: 2). I approached the rehearsals with a refusal for the lineage of traditional, hegemonic directing modes, and developed methods in the rehearsal space that are more likely to be found in the pub or nightclub to create the pulse of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy that I name *fun-form*.

*Fun-form* extends Halberstam's use of 'low theory' (2011) to articulate ways in which theatrical form can transpire from popular or low modes of performance practices. Halberstam, influenced by cultural theorist Stuart Hall, defines low theory as:

> a mode of accessibility, [but also] a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the high in high theory (2011: 16).

Rehearsals utilised popular queer forms associated with the dance floor to weave together pop music and karaoke, fashion and dress-up, stand-up comedy, nightclubs and dancing, to redefine what might be considered intellectually rigorous and culturally significant. It was important to the company to utilise fun. As Halberstam asserts, queer failure is often concerned with 'darker territories of failure associated with futility, sterility, emptiness, loss, negative affect in general, and modes of unbecoming' (2011: 23). Rather than avoiding pain and anger, playing with *fun-form* had the dual purpose of opening new artistic discoveries whilst allowing us to change the atmosphere in the rehearsal room from edgier and more dangerous territory. In other words, *fun-form* was an artistic, intellectual, political, and ethical strategy.

Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier (2015) advocate for messiness as methodology for queer practice as research, stating that by using lived experience

and popular forms researchers can find their own rigour. This messiness was literal and figurative in our rehearsal space, as we were often enmeshed in microphone wires, laughter, dress-up, plastics, tears, lipstick, stilettos, rage, and drum kits. Swerving a conventional rehearsal plan, I decided to cover the room in queer objects, items, and memorabilia. This queer 'stuff' became messier and more unruly as the process went along and as we made discoveries. There was a large bag of dress-up that sat in the space containing costumes from old productions, fancy dress, and charity-shop finds. Sometimes the point of an exercise would be to find costume and make an image or proposition, other times the dress-up was just superfluous and there for fun. The dress-up became integral to the aesthetic of the piece and in moments could be frivolous, political, humorous, and illuminatory.




Fig 8: 'Fun-form', *And The Rest of Me Floats*, 2019. Image: Helen Murray.

As the director of the project, I had to undo a lot of my formative training and instincts around seriousness and rigour in rehearsal processes. When this instinct for rigidity

and normative processes kicked in, I would remind myself of Halberstam's words:

> The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours. Indeed terms like serious and rigorous tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy. (2011: 6)

Flights of fancy led to visionary insights in the same way that failure could lead to virtuosity. Sometimes *fun-form* was simply just a way of having fun, but often having fun with form led to conjuring and embodying queer futurity. For example, dress-up would often be paired with karaoke and, when coupled, allowed performers to live out their pop-star dreams. On the surface, this exercise could appear shallow but, in fact, revealed depths around gender and identity that could not be explained through the written word or normative rehearsal practices. As Freeman (2010: xiii) argues, seemingly banal or out-of-fashion ways of looking at the world can illuminate potentiality and, in this instance, karaoke sheds light on the knotty biographies and identity positions of the performers. For example, Elijah's performance of Wheatus's 2000 hit 'Teenage Dirtbag' is multilayered, becoming more nuanced according to the audience's understanding of the performer's identity position and autobiography, but also the audience member's own positionality. Elijah chose to wear a black silk negligee as he performed. This immediately subverts the presupposed assumptions around transmasculine identities. Elijah explains that he has felt more able to play with and explore stereotypical feminine clothing and identity markers, such as painting his nails and dying his hair pastel colours, since his transition. He expands further in a monologue in the show:

> solid is far from how I feel at the centre of things. Shifting, a form that comes together then apart, collapses and re-forms. A creature an animal, some otherness. HE fits but there's that context there, always attached, a footnote he* see appendix one.
> It is HE, I am that, but I will always shrink to fit. I will not spread my knees on the tube I will not talk louder than everyone else in the bar for no reason, I will cry, I will cry in public, I will paint my nails, I will be the me I always needed to be.
>
> (Outbox 2019: 47)



Fig 9: Elijah performing 'Teenage Dirtbag', *And The Rest of Me Floats*, 2019. Image: Helen Murray.

Elijah articulates embodying his maleness without conforming to the ways in which toxic masculinity operates. Costume was not the only way in which his identity is referenced in this performance, with the song choice too operating on levels according to audiences' own knowledge of gender transition. First and foremost, 'Teenage Dirtbag' is a song that many of the audience will know and has a beat that makes them want to dance. The song has a resonance for Elijah because of a love of the band in his teenage years but also when viewed through the lens of gender

transition. A medical transition instigates a second puberty, which for a trans man means the voice deepening (or breaking), body hair growing, and often mood swings and the need to sleep more. Elijah used to perform in a choir as a top soprano but, as his voice has deepened, he can no longer hit the higher notes of 'Teenage Dirtbag'. In his rendition, Elijah's failure to hit the note gave the song more resonance and power: if you didn't get the reference, it was still funny; if you did get the reference, it spoke to gender transition in a way that was not about trauma and remained fun.



Fig 10: Outbox Band, *And The Rest of Me Floats*, 2019. Image: Helen Murray.

Originally performed as low-fi karaoke track, this song developed through rehearsal into the cast performing as a live band. When rehearsing the song, Emily said that she could play the track on an electric guitar and Barry felt that he would be able to pick it up on the piano. We then picked up a drum kit and separated out the elements of the beat so each cast member could add to the rhythm. In this way, by

offering queer and trans performers autonomous ways to express their biographies, virtuosity was uncovered, meaning we could take the music in the show to the next level. This works in direct contrast to the deficit cycle Drake describes and the deficit system that often operates in actor training; this company worked with what the artists had to offer, rather than demanding the qualities that they do not possess. The final production contains four songs/pieces of music played by the band, with the fifth and final number coming back to our original karaoke style.

The microphone became as multiplicitous in the rehearsal room as it is on the dance floor. We might think of its usage by figures ranging from the singer in the band, to an MC (both Master of Ceremonies and Mic Controller), to the DJ sending out requests, to the stand-up comic telling jokes. The stand-up comedian performing on the dance floor has specific connotations for working-class folk in the UK. Their punchlines were often rooted in misogyny and racism; at the expense of women, queers, and queer Black and Global Majority people. What happens, then, when the joke is not on us? Sara Ahmed muses above on the etymology of ‘silliness’, tracing its journey from ‘blessed’ or ‘blissful’ to its current, largely negative, meaning. Using the original etymology of ‘blissful’ allowed for silliness to become a dramaturgical strategy, as well as offering an opportunity for performers to breathe and imagine other possibilities. I invited performers to improvise material based around their identity, using one central microphone to deliver the jokes, quips, stories, and punchlines. This exercise, inspired by stand-up comedy, became the penultimate sequence in the production.

This documentation shows the scene in performance. This section is directly developed from the stand-up comedy exercise and activates the pulse of *fun-form*:

*And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 1: 'Jokes'

When rehearsing the joke-telling, it became clear that not everyone found this form fun. The art of stand-up is exposing and, for some performers, it was the pressure to be 'funny' within this context that led to them feeling vulnerable. Turning to Halberstam, this is where the company let the discomfort in and allowed seemingly unconnected, painful memories to slip into the routine.

J-S: A woman dragged her child away from me the other day cos I was wearing a dress. I thought bitch what's your child going to catch… style?
Y: I went to a Disney party when I was ten dressed as Prince Eric from *The Little Mermaid*, the other parents were so offended that when my mum picked me up she said, 'We will just have to stick to animals from now on.'
T: I used to hate my facial hair so much that I dreamed about peeling skin off my jaw.
E: Any sex reassignment surgeons in the house tonight? Call me.

(Outbox 2019:62)

The positionality of the audience influenced the punchlines, particularly when performing at the Bush Theatre to a more mainstream audience. The actors refusing to perform traditional stand-up style jokes allowed the audience to take stock and interrogate the humour. The jokes pose questions about what is appropriate to laugh at: are we laughing *with* or *at* the performers? For example:

EMILY: So a lot of potential partners are confused by the prospect of dating a woman with a dick, but I mean think of it financially – 'You'll never have to spend money on strap-ons again!' I'm just kidding, I'm way too traumatised by this thing to put it anywhere.

(Outbox 2019:62)

BARRY: When I first started going to pubs in my home town, I used to

have a little ritual. I would stand on the back steps, say a little prayer, push the door open and everyone would shout ‘faggot’.

(Outbox 2019: 63)

The registers of laughter might change from recognition, to embarrassment, to guilt, depending on the audience member. The company did not change the jokes when the show transferred to a mainstream venue, but their emphasis and landing went from communion and empathy to the school-playground tactic of making fun of yourself before the bullies could – or as the review from *Time Out London* put it, ‘“And the Rest of Me Floats” sticks up two fingers at the bigots while blowing a kiss’ (Wicker 2019: n.p.).

EMILY: I often feel very watched. But right now, I feel really seen. So thanks, for seeing me.

(Outbox 2019: 64)

The jokes, near the end of the show, invited the audience to laugh away their nervousness and extended permission to them to see the many facets of the performer’s identities. This section of the show made the performers fallible, likeable, and empathetic, but also sent a clear signal to the audience that queer and trans people are not objects of derision and/or trauma.

It was when the company were experimenting with the *fun-form*, specifically stand-up comedy, that the dramaturgical structure of the show was revealed to me. The discovery of the pulse of *transition* was made in the research and development stage of the show, when playing with popular forms of performance that happen in nightclub spaces.

*Transition*

> ELIJAH: When you're acting in a play, and the director says 'can you try that transition again?' and you say, 'Again?'
>
> (Outbox 2019: 61)

The joke above playfully and poignantly riffs on the meaning of transition, both as a piece of theatrical language and in relation to gender transition. This struck me, firstly in its humour, but secondly as a key tool in developing Dance-Floor Dramaturgy. By placing the transition at the centre of our process, we dismantled a hegemonic, linear dramatic structure. In a normative process, the transition in theatre acts as the connective tissue between scenes, it is clearly defined and takes us from one section of a play to the next. Elijah's joke allowed me to think and consider the theatrical transition in a different way, and ask: What happens when the *transition* becomes central to the rehearsal and performance process?

This practice extends upon Muñoz's claim that queerness is always in the horizon (2010) by embodying the theory of futurity and translating it into dramaturgy. The discovery of this pulse, *transition* as the primary structure for performance, was crucial in exploring and developing a form in which the storytelling was always on the horizon. By expanding upon the pulses of *club-time* (the refusal of straight time and chrononormativity) and *fun-form*, a new pulse was developed. The company created a *transition* that was interrupted by scenes, dialogue, and songs.

The transition in theatre indicates the passing of time. The transition may be a moment in which the scenery moves, the actors change costume, props are found or placed differently to indicate the change in atmosphere, time, and place. As Stephen

Farrier suggests, theatre is ‘already, always a queer space’ because of the way that time and temporalities operate within it. He posits that, ‘Out-of-line temporalities are vital to theatre’s functioning given that often a historical moment is represented on stage, and that plays often jump around, temporally speaking, while the time of the performer flows differently from the character’ (2013:51). In the transitions of a naturalistic play, the location may stay the same, but often seasons pass and years go by. Theatre often plays with the chronology of time, for example Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal*, in which the action of the play, an extra-marital affair, unfolds in reverse over a period of seven years. Katie Mitchell’s production of Alice Birch’s *Anatomy of a Suicide* at the Royal Court in 2017 takes place in three time periods (1970s, 2000s and 2030s), with text from each period overlapping, interrupting, and happening in parallel. The transitions saw three actors, conveying mother, daughter, and granddaughter, being dressed and undressed in a perfectly choreographed ballet signifying the flexibility and plurality of time onstage. Director and scholar Anne Bogart articulates that:

> Theatre can uniquely and eloquently express subjective time […] the logic of time and space alters. The DNA of the art form is akin to dreaming […] and like dream time, there is a freedom of movement and mind. Time in this case, the personal or subjective time, has nothing to do with clock time. (2007:128)

The theatrical transition could already be a descriptor or function of queering temporality. Transgender studies scholars Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore offer the possibility of ‘transing’ as a ‘practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces’ (2008: 13). By shifting the function of the theatrical transition and how it operates within temporality, as well as across or between gendered spaces, we were in the process of transing the dramaturgical structure.

Transing the function of the theatrical transition resonated with the company and became not only an intellectual strategy but a practical and tangible way to organise the work. It also gave us a shared language around gender transition as a process; how we might think of gender as a non-linear journey without a fixed point, and how our making patterns and structures would mirror this. A question that all the trans members of the company are regularly asked is: 'When did you transition?' The question assumes that a transition has a chronological, linear structure: a beginning, middle, and end. The etymology of transition comes from the Latin phrase 'to go across or over', giving us a sense of the movement of the term. Perhaps when this question is asked, the interrogator wishes to understand when a medical transition took place, feeding the insatiable curiosity that many cis people have around gender and surgical transition. For many queer and trans people, their gender is always in a state of flux; it is floating and intangible without a direct destination.[24] Jack Halberstam uses the term 'trans*', the affix * 'modifies the meaning of the transivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire or identity' (2018: 4). Furthermore, Halberstam suggests that trans* could apply to all bodies; that as humans we are all in a state of flux, proposing a politics of 'transivity' (2018: xiii). Halberstam offers the asterisk as a way of disaggregating individualised categorisations of gender. They argue that by affixing the asterisk, the terminology can defy segregation of identity characteristics, allowing room for unknowing, and space for uncertainty around one's gender expression and identity.

Similarly, Stryker, Currah, and Moore use 'trans-'. The hyphen 'marks the

[24] For further exploration of how transness destabilises destination see Bey (2022) *Black Trans Feminism.*

difference between the implied nominalism of "trans" and the explicit relationality of "trans-,"remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix' (2008: 11). Stryker, Currah, and Moore understand gender as 'potentially porous and permeable spatial territories (arguably numbering more than two), each capable of supporting rich and rapidly proliferating ecologies of embodied difference' (2008: 12). The hyphen means that the prefix 'trans' can be applied to many categorisations – gender, national, generational, etc. – allowing for multiple permeations and allowing us to think and activate trans- in multimodal ways. Referencing the now academic familiarity of 'queering', Stryker, Currah, and Moore propose that we may begin to take a subject matter and trans- it. The hyphen allows for a moving, dancing terminology that might subvert and challenge gender rigidity. Through this lens, transing offers potentiality to an intersectional, gender-variant company of performers making autobiographical work. It also insists upon an interrogation into dramaturgical structure and form. By transing the dramaturgy, we accept that normative functions of theatrical storytelling and interpretation, such as the transition, can have experimental and unstable spatial and temporal categorisations.

'When did you transition?' was the first of many questions that the company recognised as a way that cisgender people try to stabilise, normalise, interrogate, object to, or commit violence to gender-nonconforming expression and identities. Our lived experiences as queer and trans people question the fixedness and universality of heteronormativity and, therefore, we find ourselves perpetually in a state of being questioned. As Ahmed articulates:

> When a question becomes a place you reside in, everything can be thrown into question: explanations you might have handy that allow you to make sense or navigate your way through unfamiliar as well as familiar landscapes no longer work. To be thrown by a question is to be thrown into a world that

can be hostile as well as startling' (2016: 22).

Queer people have always been questioned throughout history, as our existence has broken the rules and sanctity of heterosexuality and gender norms. In performance, there is dramaturgical strategy of the performers asking questions – to each other, to themselves, to the audience – that are never answered. The liminality of these unanswered – and unanswerable – questions became key in finding our *transition* and transing the dramaturgy.

As a devising exercise, I asked the company write down all of the questions that are often asked of them around their gender identity. There were commonalities and correlations here – the aforementioned 'When did you transition?' – but also questions such as 'Are you a boy or a girl?', 'What is your old name?', 'How long have you known?' The differing nature of these questions meant that in delivery they could sound perfunctory, concerned, accusatory, inquisitive, but often have the effect of violence.

The next step was to list questions that were asked of them that pertained to other aspects of their identity. This exploration of the intersecting elements of what makes gender draws upon Stryker, Currah, and Moore's thesis that gender can be made of several sets of variable – and even arbitrary – modes and makers of their identity, such as class, race, and sexuality. For example, these questions were recorded as: 'Where are you *really* from?', 'How do lesbians have sex?', 'Are you a top or a bottom?', 'What's your heritage?'

Next were the quotidian questions that were asked of us, which extended from the existential (again this could depend on the delivery) to the banal – for example 'Have you tried mindfulness?', 'How does it feel?', 'What do you fancy for lunch?'. Improvising and devising with these unanswered questions allowed us to

experiment with them in sensorial, aural, and haptic ways and, alongside numbers that represent the performers age at certain events in their lives, became the basis of our *transition*.[25] In performance, the questions hang in the atmosphere, unanswered, allowing the audience to search for the answer, find their own response to the question, interrogate why the question was asked, or long for the question to never have been uttered. Again, this will wholly depend on the audience member's own identity position. There were often laughs of recognition from fellow queer people and winces of shame from audience members who may have asked similar questions of queer people. The unanswered questions have a haptic quality to them, as though they are touching the performer with different qualities and movements with each enquiry.

As this excerpt from the production shows, to enhance this quality, I introduced a variety of plastic materials that would wrap, beat, vacuum, and float through and above the performers as the questions were spoken:

*And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 2: Plastic

The performer in turn had a haptic effect on the plastic: floating, slicing, stretching, and tearing the material. The use of plastic heightened the sense that that the impact of the interrogation was more powerful than the intention. This meant that a question could be funny, painful, and offensive all at once, and often a series of questions were carefully placed together exactly to have this impact:

F: How do lesbians even have sex?
So what, you eat pussy?
When will you marry?
Do you have any spiritual practices?

[25] I discuss the significance of these numbers later in the chapter through the *pulse* of *remix*.

Where are you from, from?
What does patriarchy mean?

(Outbox 2019:21)



Fig 11: Plastic in rehearsal, *And The Rest of Me Floats*, 2019. Image: Helen Murray.

As the *transition* progressed, the form of the questions developed. In a section of the play titled ‘Medicine’, performers deliver questions that they have been asked in a medical context, most commonly in gender-identity clinics but also by their GPs and in sexual health settings. In this section, further into the play’s *transition*, we see the performers responding to questions with their own counter-questions. This happens out of sync and not in sequential order. Medical statements and facts also tessellate with the questions, adding to the bombardment of inspective language that trans people face. Moments like this give way to the indelible trauma that exists for queer and trans people, although here the barrage of questions and statements satirises the heteronormative lens rather than mirroring it.

This footage shows ‘Medicine’, a scene staged simply with a series of authoritative gestures that render the questions grotesque. These gestures have the effect of performing the health professionals without the actors physically embodying them: *And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 3: ‘Medicine’

Extending upon the haptic and gestural elements of the questions, we then devised a sequence in which the question could be asked with light alone. Drawing upon the ways that light operates on the dance floor, we looked to how we might isolate light to see how the beams perform with the body. In this sequence of the *transition*, the performers dress and undress one another, removing and revealing items of clothing and body parts a single torchlight scours the stage, finding moments of intimacy as well as expansive tableaux. The light becomes the question as the beam has the effect of searching, objectifying, interrogating, and illuminating. By the end of the sequence there are more questions than answers: Whose body are we seeing? What part of the body do we see or identify? Can we ever really own our own body? The performers find the light; they stride with confidence in clothing that makes them feel strong and powerful. The light shining on them came to signify visibility as a form of power rather than the light being a beacon of danger. We then built upon these forms of questioning to make a physical ‘shape’ for the *transition*.

This physical shape took the form of a ‘grid’, as documented here, a dance that would take the performers and audience over and beyond the material of the play: *And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 4: ‘Grid 1’

The complex movement pattern in this clip was the base for our *transition*. The intention for the choreography was to set up a pattern of movement that would begin as highly structured and then disrupt and dismantle as the performance moved through the *transition*. The choreography was developed alongside movement director, Coral Messam, to create an exercise based around the concept of Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' (1990: 35). Butler describes the matrix as an invisible norm that renders heterosexuality and the categories of 'male' and 'female' as normal and unquestionable. This movement-based exercise sought to make the structure of the matrix visible, using the rigidity and formulaic pattern of a grid. By keeping the framework for the movement rigid and strongly controlled, the gait and gesture of the performer was accentuated.

The movement was created by observing and then copying and embodying each cast member's walk. Once all cast members had mastered each other's gait, we began to exaggerate gestures and heighten physical nuances. This exaggeration and repetition reveals the performative nature of gender as the company were embodying Butler's theory of gender as a stylised repetition of acts.

In the next piece of footage, we see the movement in the grid sequence becoming less 'natural', and beginning to move into the realm of fantasy: *And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 5: 'Grid 2'

The bodies inhabit gestures from the queer community from the ballroom culture discussed in Chapter 1, but also hyper-masculine movement and the coded glances of the lesbian bar or the cruising ground. These acts are what Muñoz describes as

queer ephemera: ‘remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures such as the cool look of a street cruise, a lingering handshake between recent acquaintances, or the mannish strut of a particularly confident woman’ (2007:65). These ephemeral codes of queer culture and sexuality were captured in performance and used the corporeality of the pulse *pose*. There is a nod and wink to queer culture that indicates to (at least some of) the audience that the performance is pointing towards a utopian performative. The tightly held grid that the performers walk along lets the audience know that this freedom is still just out of reach and that the oppression of the heteronormative gaze still captures the bodies on stage. There is something about the way that the bodies are so close to colliding that a sense of physical danger lingers, reminding us that the dance floor is not always a safe space. The music, created in the rehearsal space by sound designer and composer Dominic Kennedy, uses the beats of the queer dance floor to contain the rhythm of the performers. The beats borrow from the samples and structures of house and disco music, propelling the nostalgia of the past into a sound that feels future-bound. The grid sequence encapsulates the feeling of the dance floor in many ways: the music and visual aesthetic, the sense of violence or danger, the flirtation and the promiscuity of the performers, and the embodied queer gestures all help create a site of potentiality.

Towards the end of the show, the grid loses its rigidity, fracturing and immersing the audience until there is a sense of fluidity and celebration. The grid travels from the stage out into the audience, offering the sensation that they are implicated in the sequence rather than merely voyeurs. Elements of the scenography, as well as dramaturgical conventions, clutter and populate the grid in a deliberate attempt to blur the boundaries of time and narrative structure. The clothing

rails that set the stage become a playground as performers choose what they feel like wearing and dress up differently every night. As the grid has loosened, the gestural elements that signify queer culture have become more pronounced. Performer Tamir is now vogueing and sashaying the length of the auditorium in high heels and suspenders; Josh-Susan and Femi are spraying themselves (and the audience) with silly string; balloons and streamers are strewn across the audience.

This footage shows the final, defiant grid. The supple, plasticity of the *transition* harnessed the shifting form of the stories being told until, at the end of the show, it became completely ruptured: *And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 6: 'Grid 3'

At the heart of the play, and therefore its *transition*, are the autobiographies of the seven performers. Transing the transition allowed me to think about how we could share autobiographical performance that applied the aesthetic of the dance floor and subverted chrononormativity. The transing of autobiography led to the discovery of the next pulse of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy, *remix*.

*Remix*

In *Autobiography and Performance*, theorist Deirdre Heddon argues that autobiographical performance appeals to marginalised subjects because of its potential to engage with the 'pressing matters of the present which relate to equality, to justice, to citizenship, to human rights' (2008: 2). Whilst acknowledging the 'potential' of autobiographical performance, Heddon also notes the potential to do harm or 'fail' in its political and transformative objectives (2008: 6). However, it is the

‘hopeful gesture’ (2008: 13) of autobiographical performance that Heddon commits to, aligning the scholarship with Dolan and Muñoz. Heddon argues that the best autobiographical work can be transformational, allowing the audience to see themselves in the performer’s story. This is not a universalising tactic, rather it advocates for recognition in marginalised stories that may allow a collective, political response to transform the future.

Writing specifically about queer solo performance in their book *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* (1998), Holly Hughes and David Román make the claim that all queer people could be ‘loosely described as solo performers, insofar as we have had to fashion an identity around our gender and sexuality’ (1998: 6–7). Certainly, there is a sense that our individual queer stories remain hidden throughout childhood and teenage years, with ‘coming out’ being the point of proclamation but not necessarily acceptance. It is worth noting that queer autobiographical performance also transpires through necessity and scarcity. Often, if theatre programmers do programme a queer show, it can only be one per season (in reality, it is much less than this). As Stephen Greer notes, solo performance has a ‘relatively low cost, accessibility unfettered by industry gatekeepers, and willingness to treat the personal as political’ (2019: 6). *And The Rest of Me Floats* took the form of the solo, autobiographical show and transed it to allow for an expansion of voices and theatrical form.

The public sharing of queer autobiography can become a reclamation of something lost, a form of remembering that allows us to collectively imagine – or, I would proffer, reimagine – our pasts to understand what the future could look like. I propose that autobiographical performance became a form of erotohistoriography in *And The Rest of Me Floats*; even in remembering our difficult pasts we found a way

to find pleasure in the retelling of these stories. I will now expand upon how we played with dramaturgy and theatrical form to find pleasure in sharing autobiographies that staged transformative, utopian performatives.

I begin the devising process by making lists with the ensemble. The first list states 'what we want the show to be', and the second 'what we *don't* want the show to be'. Invariably, the second list is always longer than the first. The company were resolute that the show should not be rooted in trauma. We were conscious to tell queer and trans stories with authenticity and without pandering to the heteronormative gaze. Unlike *Affection*, where the stimulus had been other people's stories, this project started from the biographies of the performers and so their autonomy was paramount. As a company, we set the boundaries of the rehearsal space to ensure that the process could be brave; we cannot always ensure safety but can aspire to create spaces where people feel brave enough to be creative, respectfully question and challenge others. I made it clear that anything shared in the room, through conversation or in improvisations, belonged to the performer and would not end up in performance without their explicit consent. I had a huge responsibility as the director and dramaturg; I was dealing with the stories of the performer's lives and had to be sensitive as to how we selected and refined material. This is a project that, above all, required care for the process. Framing the project outside of the heteronormative lens meant that we could make the show with other queer and trans people in mind. As Heddon argues, 'each time the "homo-normative" narrative of what it is to be lesbian is recited, the more difficult it becomes to imagine, propose, recite or live other lives' (2008: 37). The aim of the project was not to educate, or to appeal for acceptance, and therefore our stories could be shared without unnecessary explanation, trauma, or homogeneity.

Early in the rehearsal process I asked the cast to prepare a timeline of their life story, including events that were important, funny, and formative to them, and particularly in terms of the way they experience their gender identity and expression. The list would be numbered from 0 years of age to their current age. For example:

*0: assigned female at birth*
*2: my brother was born*
*4: started nursery school*

I encouraged the performers not to try to entertain or be profound in these lists – they could be banal or silly as long as it meant something to them. I also shared my timeline and reiterated that this was a rehearsal tool first and foremost, and moments of their lives would only be shared in performance with consent and if relevant. After sharing the timelines in rehearsal and expanding upon the points we felt necessary with stories and anecdotes, we then collectively decided what was most relevant for the performance. I edited the 'timelines' into a collective, chronological timeline and brought this back to the rehearsal room to be read aloud. Certain moments, places and events chimed: multiple and varied coming-outs, gender-identity clinics, names and pronouns, love and sex, friendships, music, TV, and cinema. However, the company were struck with the coherence and the order of the lists; the lines and formality of the biographies did not match the experiences lived. This collective timeline felt rigid, and out of the place with the messy and unfixed biographical experiences we were detailing. For the timelines to reflect the company's experiences, I needed to go back to the dance floor. The original text that I edited was *remixed*; just like a record on the dance floor the tempo and rhythm of the piece needed to be distorted, out of time and place, finding a different beat to mirror the autobiographies we were dealing with in our dramaturgy. Here is an example of the remixed timelines:

35
34
6
5
ELIJAH nightmares about fire begin

21
TAMIR come out as non-binary

2 4
7 3 21
18
EMILY Finally, start taking hormones.
15 3 4
27

JOSH-SUSAN Colour

27

ELIJAH And the rest of me floats

The numbers began to signify life events that might be significant but unsaid, ignored, embarrassing, or traumatic. The numbers can be said by any cast member and can interrupt and overlap. The timelines bear a resemblance to the typesetting in Sarah Kane's play *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), in which the playwright uses numbers to signify the messiness of their mind and mental stability. Through arranging the timelines in a remixed way, our production was working against chrononormativity to produce and re-encounter biography as an out-of-sync set of potentialities. These messier, queerer timelines worked in sync with *transition*, to create the effect that the destination was always in the distance. The numbers were out of sequence, out of time, and out of reach, creating the sensation that the piece was never 'done' and that one's personal journey is never finite.

Queering the timelines like this allowed the company to investigate this dramaturgical device further, and we arrived at the pulse of *remix*. Alongside playing with *fun-form*, *remix* gave the performers licence to find the fantasy and joy in their biographies, retelling their stories collectively as an act of erotohistoriography. Dealing with autobiographies collectively allowed the company to find resonances, commonality, and overlaps without risking homogeneity or the illusion of sameness. Muñoz argues that:

> the dance-floor increases our tolerance for embodied practices. It may do so because it demands, in the openness and closeness of relations to others, an exchange and alteration of kinaesthetic experience through we become, in a sense, less like ourselves and more like each other (2009:66).

Muñoz elaborates that this does not mean that we become the same on the dance floor, rather that the kinaesthetic experiences prompt a 'certain queer communal logic (that) overwhelms practices of individual identity' (ibid). Using the paradigm of the dance floor, the company were able to establish ways to talk about their experiences collectively and with a unified rhythm, producing a 'communal queer logic' for our performers with the hope of spreading to our audiences. Like a DJ set on a dance floor, the performer's testimony was spliced together, playing with tempo, and disrupting chrononormativity to produce a *remix*ed version of their stories.



Fig 12: ‘Religion’, *And The Rest of Me Floats*, 2019. Image: Helen Murray.

For many of the performers, religion was pertinent in understanding some of the shame attached to breaking the rules of the gender they were assigned. In the text below, taken from the scene ‘Religion’, the *remix* allows for the dramaturgical weaving together of four performer’s experiences of religion: Christianity (specifically Catholicism for one performer), Judaism, and Islam.

B: Bless me father for I have sinned. It has been twenty-three years since my last confession

M: Be an example for your siblings, they said, you’re our firstborn. You need to be God fearing, like a Proverbs 31 woman.

T: Sh’ma Yisra’eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.

– Repeat

T: Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.

– Repeat

T: Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.

Y: Who is in that picture on the wall?

F: How come God's a man?

Y: Why do we speak another language at home?

M: Couldn't he be a woman?

Y: Does Maman Bouzorg like me?

M: But I thought God was everything?

(Outbox 2019: 36)

The *remixing* of the performer's stories of religion allowed us to take an intersectional approach whilst finding common ground. It takes some of the burden of representation away from the individual performer, facilitating an approach of collectivity that invites a communal queer logic.

This clip documents the scene in performance, activating the pulse of *remix*: *And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 7: Religion

Towards the end of the play, in a scene titled 'Punctuate', the pulse of *remix* is expanded further, *remixing* the performer's autobiographies with newspaper headlines, language from the Gender Recognition Act (2014), grammatical punctuation (pronouns, full stops, hyphens, and asterisks to speak to transing and Halberstam's trans*), costume changes, and mini-scenes.

It is at this point in the play that we encounter all of the pulses utilised in *And The Rest of Me Floats,* as documented in this short clip: *And The Rest of Me Floats* Clip 8 – 'Punctuate'

At the end of the performance, it is impossible to distinguish the *transition* from the interruptions of scenes and songs. Autobiograpical performance is *remix*ed with *fun-form*; dress-up, jokes, personal stories, and karaoke interspliced to leave the audience without answers or destinations, but with glimpses of a hopeful future.

Now watch the full performance of *And The Rest of Me Floats*

## Conclusions

This practice research has dismantled and reimagined the apparatus and normative structures of theatre itself to authentically present trans narratives. Rather than simply increasing trans representation, the research invents alternate modes of being, making, and doing theatre queerly through its dramaturgy. Embodying and utilising the dance-floor aesthetic allowed the company to collectively create a dramaturgy that harnessed queer potentiality. The visual, aural, affective, and kinaesthetic languages of the dance floor formed an interdisciplinary dramatic ecology that gave space to a polyphony of queer voices and experiences. The dramaturgy enacted the multiple and pluralistic ways that stories can be queer and emphasised that there is not a universal queer or trans experience.

Building upon the pulses discovered during the creation of *Affection* meant that we had the creative apparatus to begin the dramaturgical process, and these modes of making led to the invention of new pulses. The pulses in *And The Rest of*

*Me Floats* became less distinct, and the commingling of the tenets of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy meshes with the messiness and fluidity of queer performance. At a time of crisis for queer and trans communities, it was political to utilise *fun-form*; our production saw trans and non-binary performers taking up space, shaking off heteronormativity, and having fun at a time when both mainstream and social media were predominantly portraying their negativity, trauma, and fear. Extending Halberstam's scholarship on failure allowed our production to succeed in our aims to create more trans-inclusive routes into theatre. Silliness and frivolity shone a light on crucial facets of queer and trans identity.

*Remix*, another pulse borrowed from the dance floor, offered a way of organising autobiographies that resist the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990) and dance with alternate ways of being. *Remix* activated a communal queer logic (Muñoz 2009) so that autobiographical material could share stories with queer overlaps and connections without risking homogenisation.

A key insight was the discovery of theatrical transition as the dominant mode of performance language. By using the pulse of *transition* in this way, the company were able to embody, harness, and reproduce queer potentiality. This was significant for both performers and audience members, many of whom were in gender transition. The dramaturgy of the play mirrored trans experience rather than replicating heteronormative systems and theatrical structures. By the end of the performance, many of the audience were onstage with the performers as the *transition* gradually built and fractured realist dramaturgical structures. The distinction between audience and performers became blurred and it offered the sense that the *transition* never reached its destination. This queer futurity that performers and audiences were now all embodying was firmly in the distance.

Rather than the performance concluding, the whole auditorium became a dance floor, which purposefully enacted the principles of the Dance-Floor Dramaturgy.

When A*nd The Rest of Me Floats* was performed at the Bush Theatre in 2019, the outreach department at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama funded 100 young people from local schools to come to each weekday matinee (four in total). This was a chance for teenagers who may not have ever engaged with theatre before to see a show that centred queer and trans lives in a defiant celebration. Perhaps on that first matinee, some performers were less defiant at the thought of local young people viewing the work. For queer and trans folks, school can trigger some of the most painful memories of conforming to gender norms and being bullied if we did not fit into those binary categories. The young people filed in quietly and sat down, school-uniformed, but also uniform in their silence. They did not laugh at the bits we thought were funny. It was still. I felt uncomfortable. Towards the end of the play, performers ask the audience if anyone has a coming-out story they would like to share, and one uniformed hand raised. This young person offered her story about coming out to her mum, and at school, and her classmates cheered. When the performers invited the audience to dance, the young people stormed the stage, they grabbed the mics, they hugged the performers, and a lot of tears were shed. We found our most important audiences in those matinees, and this intergenerational, utopian performative would inform the next piece of practice in this thesis.

## Chapter Three: *GROOVE*

## Culminating the project with the expansion of the dance-floor pulses and through the invention of *scene* and *trade*

*20.*

*I'm pacing up and down a street in a deserted part of my hometown, Swindon. Swindon is a large, predominantly working-class town. I am an hour away from London on the train, but ideologically and culturally, I couldn't be further from the capital. Tonight, I'm going to a gay club. I've been into a gay space before, but this is my first time going alone and to this nightclub, London Street.*

*I pluck up courage and I walk, fast, across an empty car park. Full-steam ahead and blinkered. I pick up pace towards the stainless-steel door on the corner of an old railway building. I feel the bass before I hear the music. I knock the door and a female bouncer opens the door, asks if I've been before. I shake my head, pass my coat and my five-pound note to the man behind the counter. He is too disinterested to make eye contact and I am too terrified to attempt it.*

*The dry ice hits me first, its distinctive smell hazing around me, and all of a sudden I feel as though I've been transported somewhere else – it's the stuff of 1980s pop videos and covers me in a blanket of transparency. There is a man in his fifties, standing atop a podium. His shirt is removed, revealing his lithe, convulsing body, twitching and gliding through the 1990s New York house music. There is a large video screen playing MTV. There is a group of gay men around my age, some younger, congregated around the edges of the dance floor, not quite ready to thrust themselves into the centre. They giggle and run across the space, gesturing definitely and defiantly. There are older men seated in twos and threes, on stainless-steel tables and*

*chairs, stiller, observing. In the corner there is a group of lesbians, many are masc-presenting in rugby shirts with gelled, spiky hair.*

*I simultaneously feel like I belong and a complete alien. I am the kid in the corner of the Working Men's Club again – there is a mirror-ball, smoke fills the space, a tacky dance floor – the location is reminiscent, but the sensation is entirely different. In this melange of age, gender expression, and sexuality, I'm about to find out where I fit in.*

* * *

I begin this chapter describing my first time going to a gay club in 2001, paying particular attention to its atmosphere, scenography, and intergenerational demographic. My formative experiences of intergenerational queer clubbing have inspired much of the participation and production work of Outbox, and have particular relevance to this third piece of practice research, *GROOVE*.

*GROOVE* is a dance-theatre production with an intergenerational queer cast of performers ranging from their seventies through to their early twenties. The production positions the queer dance floor as a site of protest, belonging, identity, and desire. It uses the testimony and experiences of LGBTQIA+ people, the aesthetic of the dance floor, and the dramaturgy of the DJ set to create a utopian performative – a future-bound vision of what a cross-generational queer space might look, sound, and *feel* like. This practice is an experiment in bringing performers from across generations and performing arts disciplines (acting, clown, drag, cabaret, contemporary dance) into the aesthetic and kinaesthetic realm of the dance floor. *GROOVE* is a production that centres cross-generational, queer social dancing as a radical act of care and

corporeal exchange. It is the final practice-research performance in this study and looks to theories of queer nightlife, kinship theory, relational generativity (Goltz 2014), and scenographics (Hann 2019) with an aim to create performance where queer people can exchange *across* generations, eschewing traditional inheritance models.

In the trilogy of practice research presented in this thesis, *Affection* puts narratives of HIV and AIDS on the literal space of the dance floor; *And The Rest of Me Floats* uses the aesthetic of the dance floor to explore autobiographical stories of gender expression and identity; and *GROOVE* is the culmination of this practice, utilising the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy to interrogate the literal, social, political, and kinaesthetic space of the queer dance floor.

The memory that begins this chapter exists from a time when queer nightlife was thriving in the UK. Unlike larger metropolitan cities, there was not a breadth of clubs and bars in Swindon to suit the identity or 'scene' of the clientele, and this meant that London Street hosted a range of ages, sexualities, and gender expressions. At twenty years old, this nightclub provided safety, culture, and a form of education. I was adopted by the older lesbians almost immediately and the space became less about sex (although it was most definitely still about sex), and more about belonging. As Elizabeth Freeman pertinently notes, 'procreation cannot account for how queers make other queers' (2007: 301), positing that queer kinship is resolutely corporeal. In London Street, there was a corporeal form of queer belonging happening that existed outside of 'a notion of kinship modelled on the heteronormative nuclear family' (Bradway and Freeman 2022: 2).

In the early 2000s there were three LGBTQIA+ bars/clubs in Swindon, but in 2023 all of these spaces have closed and only a gay sauna (almost exclusively operating for cis gay men with one night a week for trans women and their admirers)

exists. This backdrop of closures is reflected nationwide: a report conducted by University College London (UCL) Urban 24 Laboratory (UrbanLab) details that since 2006 ‘the number of LGBTQ+ venues in London has fallen from 125 to 53, a net loss of 58% of venues’ (Campkin and Marshall, 2017: 6). Alongside this, the research for *GROOVE* began in 2019, before queer nightlife spaces were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic had an impact not only on the way we had to create *GROOVE*, but also the aim, objectives, and research questions of the project itself. At a time when queer nightlife spaces were taken away from our communities, the subject matter took on further importance.

It is worth noting that I am re-remembering and perhaps romanticising my formative queer clubbing experiences in Swindon. London Street, its doors closed long ago, is imbued with a sense of nostalgia. If London Street was reaching utopia, then why was I so desperate to get to London? This early-noughties dance floor was diverse in terms of age, but the image of the older man dancing shirtless was still derided by younger folks and, as is often the experience of older gay men in queer spaces, interpreted as predatory. This nightclub, despite its crowd, still privileged everything I was – white, young, and male. As I move through my early forties, I now navigate the dance floor in surprising new ways, finding my place again within queer culture. My experiences of clubbing and queer culture all relate directly to the aims, objectives, and research questions I am exploring.

The aim of the practice research is to facilitate a process in which queer people from across generations and cultural backgrounds could meet, exchange dialogue, and dance together to create performance. The space that *GROOVE* creates could help to address rifts and disconnections between younger and older

LGBTQIA+ people. These rifts are largely created and fuelled by the media, and queer nightlife venues that privilege youth, whiteness, and cisgender men. The project aims to create a space to dance amidst the backdrop of mass closures of queer spaces and in a social atmosphere dislodged by the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside the performance, we ran participation events, workshops, and a project called *BRIGHTER*, which produced a pamphlet of intergenerational creative writing and a series of short films and I expand upon later in the chapter through the new pulse of *trade*.[26] This participation work supported the production in developing strategies to bring people together from across generations to find moments of connection and exchange.

As explored in previous chapters, the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy offer the practical terminology and apparatus to 'trans' chrononormative timelines and allow the past, present, and future to rub against each other and interweave in intertextual ways. Distinctive to this practice research project, *GROOVE* is the development of two further pulses, *scene* and *trade*, that position the work across generational lines, rooted within the concrete space of the dance floor:

- *scene*: utilising a dance floor 'scenographic' (Hann 2019) to embody a queer world-making practice;
- *trade*: centring 'relational generativity' (Goltz 2014) to facilitate corporeal, cross-generational exchange.

My research objectives for *GROOVE* relate directly to the discovery of these pulses to further the concept of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy. The first objective is to interrogate

[26] To read more about *BRIGHTER*, visit https://outboxtheatre.com/BRIGHTER, where you can find links to the website, the booklet, and the short films. The production featured an exhibition which included a cross-generational podcast and an interactive exhibition.

the rehearsal and structures of making through the scenographic (Hann 2018) of the dance floor. This project begins with the visual stimulus of the dance floor and is led by the architectural and scenographic elements of the club to create the performance. The second objective is to develop a corporeal practice that centres cross-generational exchange. The research is planted firmly on the physical space of the dance floor, and centres embodied knowledges, histories, and modes of being.

To fulfil these objectives, I began with a series of research questions to take into the rehearsal room:

- How can the practice best facilitate older and younger performers coming together to create an *intergenerational* queer dance floor?
- How do we structure the making and rehearsal process to promote corporeal, cross-generational exchange? Can 'relational generativity' (Goltz 2014) be central to the practice research?
- Can scenography lead the performance-making structures?
- How do the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy operate in a performance about the dance floor? Are there further pulses to be found?

Finding our groove

The process of creating *GROOVE* began in 2019, shortly after presenting *And The Rest of Me Floats* at the Bush Theatre. The project began with a week of Arts Council England-funded research and development that took place at Battersea Arts Centre with Outbox designer Rūta Irbīte, sound designer Anna Clock, lighting designer Joshua Gadsby and a company of four actors, Jonathan Blake, A. De Castro, Ché Francis, and Mika Johnson. During this week we worked towards a

short presentation of work for an audience of producers and programmers. Having just made a successful production and experiencing the pressure of making another one, I focused on 'product' rather than finding the *groove* of this new process, and the pressure to 'make something' for an industry audience inhibited the practice research. As a director, I became goal-orientated and was too heavily preoccupied with making a 'show' for the audience, rather than approaching the work through the research questions. I found myself trying to replicate the dramaturgy of *And The Rest of Me Floats*, and used the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy – particularly *remix*, which I define in Chapter Two as the commingling of autobiographies, producing a 'communal queer logic' to share experiences without homogenisation – to reflect upon the biographies of the performers in the room. Jonathan Blake, whom I had met during the making process of *Affection*, along with A. De Castro (who stayed with the production until presentation), joined us for this stage of the development – both have fascinating lives full of stories. However, the model of two actors in their late sixties/seventies and two actors in their twenties quickly tipped into inheritance modes of 'learning' from elders.[27] There was an impulse for the younger members of the team to respect and care for the elder performers which inhibited cross-generational *exchange*, and most of the rehearsal time and energy was given over to awe-inspiring stories of queer clubbing and dancing from the past. The week of R&D felt enriching but, dramaturgically, we had not found a strong enough beat. Put simply, we spent a lot of time talking about dancing and not enough time *dancing*.

[27] See Farrier (2012) for further research on queer intergenerational work and models of 'inheritance'.



Fig 13: The cast of *GROOVE*, 2022. Image: Ali Wright.

Clare Croft's edited collection *Queer Dance* (2017) recognises the links between dance and political queer activism. *Queer Dance* implores us to imagine and investigate queerness through complex bodily ways of knowing and the pleasure of bodies moving together. Croft argues that 'dance has potential to have a particular power within queer work because dance emphasizes how public, physical action can be a force of social change' (2017: 2). Furthermore, Croft situates the sites of improvised social dancing (dance floors) as a place for 'simultaneous imagining, rehearsal, and performance of queerness' (2017: 4). This link between desire and bodies through dance means that same-sex social dancing becomes a 'political act of transgression' (ibid). This positions the queer dance floor as an alternate to heteronormative and familial ties; it is a site of meaning-making and kinship for LGBTQIA+ people. The queer dance floor:

> allows bodies to come together into many configurations of coalition and collectivity. This unsettles the primacy of the heterosexual male/female couple

> (and the nuclear family we imagine it 'naturally' creates) as society's foundation. While the dance floor is not immune to heteronormativity, its enactment of other ways to relate, valuing temporary attachments and meaningful relationships that extend beyond couples, extends possibilities for imagining how people can and do connect. (2017: 4)

Through the undoing and unsettling of not only the primacy of heterosexual coupling, but queering the form of social dancing across generations, *GROOVE* finds a dramaturgy that captures the potentiality of past, present, and future dance floors. The production insists that bodies are looked at for pleasure and that older bodies can be desired and desirable. Freeman states that 'heterosexuality works to determine who is our kin, while casting all other forms of kinship as unthinkable' (2007: 297). Kinship is established through familial ties and bloodlines in heteronormativity; it is rare that queer people grow up in queer families. Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman define kinship theory as practised in queer, feminist, and critical race studies as being able to 'contest(s) structuralist accounts of kinship, particularly as the latter naturalize the mutual imbrications of heteronormativity, patriarchy, white supremacy, and Western imperialism' (2022: 1). Extending upon queer kinship theory, Bradway and Freeman conceptualise 'kincoherence', which they define as fusing the 'mutually constituting and complicating forces, desires, practices, relations, institutions, and forms that render kinship a horizon of violence and possibility' (2022: 3). Kincoherence helps to navigate the essentialist connotations of kinship whilst also inviting the potentiality of queer bonds in the face of increasing public and political hostility. It is an insistence that social relationships cannot be 'fixed'. Noting that the 'problems and promises' of queer kinship are imbued in the fabric of queer theory, Bradway and Freeman propose that rather than forgetting kinship, we recognise that it cannot exist without *desire* (to connect or disconnect) and understanding of the 'complex relationships to

the historical, ontological, and epistemological violence that kinship engenders' (2022: 2). Bradway and Freeman further propose the concept of kin-aesthetics – the *forms* through which kinship takes place. The etymology of 'kin-aesthetics' stems from the binding of kin, kinetic, and aesthetic. Their definition highlights:

> how kinship and art are both, as social practices, bound up with the work of the body; they work on and through the materiality of the body. If kinship constitutes a mode of corporeal dependency (Freeman 2007, 298), it depends on the aesthetic to reorganize, renew, and otherwise transform the body's relational horizons. (2022: 5)

*GROOVE* embodies the kin-aesthetic: it is a piece of research in the pursuit of relational generativity using the form of dancing, or *kinetic* exchange, as its primary tool and in relationship to the *aesthetic* of the dance floor. This form of corporeal kinship will be further explored through the pulse of *trade* (riffing on the gay slang for a casual partner and the culturally important UK gay club Trade).[28]

This early week of development also illuminated the importance of scenography – the visual environment that we created would be crucial in establishing an atmosphere of social dance. In our initial R&D, we became heavily influenced by the architecture and scenography of the beautiful space we had been given in the Battersea Arts Centre. The studio had an aesthetic of grandeur and history, with large windows that flooded the room with an ethereal light. This aesthetic heavily influenced the performance we created. However, it was clear that this led us further into intergenerational tropes; we began to romanticise heritage and the nostalgic, abandoning the tacky nightclub aesthetic for a more sepia-toned, sentimental design. This wistful approach only added to the normative modes of intergenerational dramaturgy we were creating.

[28] Trade nightclub ran from 1990 until 2001 in Central London venue Turnmills.

These issues were addressed in our second Arts Council England-funded R&D in September 2021. This week of workshops was focused on design and how the visual could steer our dramaturgy. It was almost two years since our last workshops, and two years of pandemic time that had changed the world in significant ways. Alongside lockdown periods, closure of queer spaces, loss of community and income was the murder of George Floyd and the critical resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Concentrating initially on design addresses my research objectives but also helped navigate the tenderness the company felt coming back into a rehearsal room post-lockdown. Jonathan Blake had made the decision to withdraw from performing in the project, but his input and support would still heavily influence the piece. Drag queen Lavinia Co-op, who has earned legendary status on both the UK and New York drag scene, agreed to join us for these workshops, alongside A. De Castro, Ché, and Mika. We worked alongside designer Rūta, and lighting and video designer Cecil Fenn to move away from the nostalgic and travel to the highly sensory world of the nightclub, taking our cues from the architecture and design of nightclubs, the lighting design of clubs as well as pop concerts (from artists such as Pet Shop Boys and Kylie Minogue), and the countercultural fashion of club kids, from Leigh Bowery to the present day. The workshops established a design language that could be carried forward into the production (which I will unpack further in the section on *scene*), and proved the importance of the architectural space that we would perform the show in.

Our first R&D phases were fertile in creating relationships that would help us to build cross-generational spaces. The time to discover and play together led us to tropes of intergenerational work that we could now remove from the making and rehearsal process. The company's initial tendency to play to nostalgic, inheritance

models of intergenerational practice proved that new modes of working and meaning-making needed to be facilitated for the project to really find its groove. Freeman's assertion that queer kinship happens through the body, along with scholarship around queer social dance (Buckland 2002, Desmond 2001, Croft 2017), allowed me to rethink the heteronormative vision of intergenerational practice and begin to create a process that centred corporeal exchange.

Pandemic time

Originally, the timeline for *GROOVE* saw a week of R&D in 2019, a second week of development in early 2020, followed by full presentation in 2020. COVID-19 queered our production timeline in ways that we could not see coming, changing both the temporal and social context of the piece. As Bradway and Freeman note, COVID-19 'ruptured chrononormativities of education, labor, healthcare, sex, and courtship, among many other social rhythms and rituals' (2022: 5). Lockdown meant that all queer spaces were closed, apart from illegal raves and parties.[29] The COVID-19 pandemic affected LGBTQIA+ communities in intersecting and profound ways. Many queer people rely on the economies of queer nightlife for financial and creative stability (bar work, drag performance, dancers, DJs, etc.). Arts Council England-funded report 'Building a Sustainable Queer Nightlife in London: Queer Creatives, COVID-19 and Community in the Capital' (2022), written by Mark McCormack and Fiona Measham, addresses the intersection between sexuality and nightlife and the profound economic and social effects of the pandemic. Key findings of the report tell us that:

[29] See Mackenzie Wark *Raving* (2023) for further writing on illegal queer raves during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

> Queer creatives were particularly badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. 82% of survey respondents saw their income decline, by an average of 74.4%, as most jobs vanished and working from home was not possible for many. Lockdowns and changing restrictions had an ongoing and cumulative negative impact on queer creatives' mental health (a net change of -22%) and general health (a net change of -15%)
>
> Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on queer creatives' lives: on their financial security, their health and well-being and their sense of community and creativity. This was a time of unprecedented challenge and change for London's queer creatives and broader communities, and it was one that was met with resilience, innovation and creative fortitude. (2022: 9)

Alongside the practical implications of unemployment, queer nightlife provides a sense of safety, belonging, and community, which were all disrupted and displaced during the lockdown periods. I turn again to my opening anecdote and note how differently my formative queer experiences would have been set against the backdrop of a lockdown. For younger queer people who may have been isolating in their parents' homes, and older queer people who may live alone or in largely heterosexual residential homes or housing, the lockdown was particularly isolating. Theorist Ben Trott makes the case for queer 'safe spaces', arguing that the ridicule for such spaces comes from those who have never needed a place of refuge, making it easy to underestimate the impact of the enforced lockdowns (2020). Trott expands upon queer kinship to theorise 'contemporary queer socialites' and their relationship to COVID-19, noting that bars and clubs are 'alternate models of community and kin-making […] partly the product of histories of banishment from family (and from the social and political institution of the family)' (2020: 88). Trott also notes the sanctuary that bar and nightclub spaces often provide from homophobic and transphobic violence.

As communities tried to make sense of the pandemic on a global scale, there was also the feeling for many people that they had been here before. Many had lived

through, or lived in the shadows of, the AIDS pandemic, which had not received this level of public attention, criticality, or care. In queer circles, there was a sense of activism and social collectivism that drew from histories and legacies of surviving a plague. As João Florêncio attests, it is not useful to draw an equivalency between COVID-19 and HIV and AIDS, because of the stark difference in terms of 'mortality rate, social stigma, or the time it took governments and the scientific research to respond to each epidemic' (2020: 32), but we can draw comparison to the care systems that queer people were able to establish and disseminate across LGBTQIA+ communities. Florêncio (2020) and Trott (2020) both recognise the practices of care and caring as fundamental to queer communities across both pandemics. I would describe care as a radical act that was explored through activism, fundraising, but also the virtual space of queer community and partying during the lockdowns. In my social circle, partying on Zoom through virtual club nights such as Queer House Party became a ritual to escape the mundanity and heteronormativity of lockdown life. Communication scholars Stefanie Duguay, Anne-Marie Trépanier, and Alex Chartrand term the alternate use of platforms, such as Zoom, to host queer parties as 'off-label queer use' (2023: 2212). These virtual dance floors not only provided respite from isolation but became important spaces for many who feel excluded from mainstream LGBTQIA+ bars and clubs.

Scholar, organiser, and artist Maya Bhardwaj draws on the potentiality of the virtual club for Black and brown queer people, describing them 'as queer utopias and queer worlds beyond borders and the nation-states' (2022: 123). These parties exist as experiments in transnational feminist practices (2022) that can exist across borders, and create alternatives to white heteronormativity and spaces for organising and resistance for queer Black and Global Majority people. It is crucial to note that in

my description of London Street club, the crowd was mixed in terms of age and gender but was predominately white and centred whiteness. In *Queer Nightlife* (2021), Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani, and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera highlight the potentiality of queer nightlife but also acknowledge queer bars and clubs as 'sites of alienation that are circumscribed by normative modes of exclusion' (2021: 3). This is particularly felt by queer people of colour, and much of this thesis pays debt to scholarship and activism by Black and Global Majority artists, writers, theorists, and activists. Adeyemi et al. highlight the systemic racism that exists on the 'gay' scene, despite the dominant global and cultural influences (and appropriation) that all LGBTQIA+ people benefit from. I turn to Legacy Russell's concept of 'AFK' here, the acronym attesting that there is no division between our online and offline lives. Russell proclaims, the 'world AFK (Away From Keyboard) offered was not enough. I wanted – demanded – more' (2020: 6). As pandemic time stretched on, as an artist and researcher I had to create alternate queer, cross-generational practices that took place in spaces in the digital realm.

As *GROOVE* could not be an AFK production until 2022, the Outbox team thought about how we could connect with LGBTQIA+ communities and share practices during the lockdown periods. I collaborated with producer Ged Boden and associate artists Barry Fitzgerald, Mika Onyx Johnson, and mandla rae to create the *BRIGHTER* project. Based on concepts of queer futurity, the project asks queer people to 'imagine a moment, now imagine it BRIGHTER'. As we could not go to LGBTQIA+ community groups AFK, we decided to create a virtual space that could allow people to create their own pieces of creative writing. Ged and Barry designed a website that contains twelve tasks to inspire and ignite creativity, with Mika, mandla, and Barry providing prompts, provocations, tips, and hints to help along the way. We

then met LGBTQIA+ groups from across the UK online to help facilitate the process, and the website was easily accessible and promoted through social media so that any queer person could participate. We encouraged people to submit their writing to us once they had completed all their tasks and this resulted in a print and online booklet. We then made four short films inspired by and in dialogue with the texts and later hosted a virtual screening.[30]

Although the *BRIGHTER* project could not bring us together on a physical dance floor, the work allowed me to imagine cross-generational spaces where ideas, concepts, and experiences could dance together. One of the films, *Small Utopia*, written by Chase Waterman, saw Mika direct A. De Castro (both actors in the *GROOVE* R&D) – a younger, queer trans-masc person guiding and supporting an older self-identified butch, in a text written by a young, trans man. This form of dancing crosses not only heteronormative borders but trips lightly across age, gender, and borders within the LGBTQIA+ community. *GROOVE* has been made at a time when the lines between lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and the trans and queer communities are being heavily positioned against each other. As Buckland (2002), Desmond (2001), and Croft (2019) note, same-sex social dancing is transgressive, and this production extends upon this transgression through dancing across the borders of sex, gender, and age. Our dance floor centred healing and radical acts of care within our own community, grooving across gender binaries and age categories.

[30] The *BRIGHTER* screening took place virtually on Wednesday 8 December 2021.

The pulses of groove

I finally decided upon September/October 2022 to present *GROOVE* to the public. This was still a precarious time to make art, not least because the show could have been closed down at any minute due to COVID-19. This was a huge financial pressure, but we also had the ethical questions surrounding making work intergenerationally with actors who could be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.[31]

Care was central to our casting process for this production. The relationships of the cast and the community are inherent to the dramaturgy of *GROOVE*. The production required six performers from across generations and identity characteristics, called for a more interdisciplinary approach (casting the net beyond actors to look for dancers, club performers, etc.), and relied on the performer's lived experience of queer dance floors.

Working relationships were built with many of the cast members before roles were formally offered or accepted to ensure mutual trust and a casting process that centres care. For example, I worked with A. De Castro from 2019 on this show, ensuring that they felt comfortable to take part in a rigorous rehearsal process, finding ways to adapt and configure exercises to eliminate long periods of standing and sustained movement. De Castro is an internationally regarded theatre clown, teacher, and artist with decades of experience. Originally from Brazil, De Castro also managed the bars and staged shows at the UK's largest nightclub, Heaven, during the 1990s. Having completed a week of R&D with us, Lavinia Co-op came on board for the rest of the process. Lavinia has vast experience of dance, performance, and drag in theatres, bars, and clubs, but now over seventy, a full-time movement-based

[31] All actors and creative were asked to take COVID-19 tests on a weekly basis with tests provided for everyone at the beginning of the process. Masks were worn when possible and performances were programmed where audiences could be socially distanced and masked.

process creates physical challenges. Kim Tatum, widely known as Mzz Kimberley, is a long-standing cabaret star on the London scene. Kim is a singer and actress and an advocate and activist for LGBTQIA+ rights. In the 1990s, Kim became the first Black trans woman to be the face of nightclub Heaven and now she runs her own stage at London Pride. Fraser Buchanan is a dancer, producer, and teacher who runs classes on Queer Dance at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London. Macy-Jacob Seelochan is an actor, theatre-maker, and film-maker who also works the bar at The Glory (East London queer pub and site of Outbox show, *Affection*). Finally, *GROOVE* marked Sky Frances's professional acting debut after graduating from Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) three weeks prior to rehearsals beginning. With cast and venues assembled we could finally begin to explore the dramaturgical pulses that would make us groove.[32]

The pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy are a key discovery in this practice, and I had to carefully consider how I used them in *GROOVE*. For this practice, I needed to decide how and where to consciously apply the pulses and to find space for new discovery. I found that the pulses were able to extend and develop on this project and could be applied to a new dramaturgical process without becoming a set of 'rules' or formulaic. As mentioned previously, the pulses are not intended to work as a toolkit, rather a set of practices and philosophies that might allow the theatre-maker to create unique queer dramaturgies. The specificity of *GROOVE*'s aims,

[32] The full production credits of *GROOVE* are as follows:
Cast: Fraser Buchanan (he/they), Lavinia Co-op (he/she/they), A. De Castro (they/he), Sky Frances (they/them), Macy-Jacob Seelochan (they/she), Kim Tatum (she/her). Creative Team: Voice: Susan Bovell (she/her), Director: Ben Buratta (he/they), Producer: Lexi Clare (she/they), Movement: Aiden Crawford (he/they), Video and Lighting Design: Cecil Fenn (he/they), Associate Director: Barry Fitzgerald (he/they), Set and Costume Design: Rūta Irbīte (she/her), Music & Sound: Dominic Kennedy (he/him), Design Assistant: Sam DL MacKay (he/they), Assistant Director: Amber Ruby (she/they), Technical Stage Manager and Production Manager: Chaz Webb (she/her), Company Stage Manager: Bill Willden (they/she).

objectives, and research questions meant that the existing pulses could be extended, bringing new discoveries to the practice, rather than merely applying and duplicating dramaturgical structures. For example, the pulse of *remix* is used to weave together and intersect the autobiographical stories of the performers, but rather than using the spoken word, the production relies upon physical motifs and movement-based practices that embody these narratives.

The use of the pulse *remix* in *GROOVE* is best illustrated in this documentation of the beginning of the show: *GROOVE* Clip 1*:* Opening

Traditional autobiographical performance was utilised less in this production, relying more on abstract and movement-based storytelling, but the impulse to bring these strands together through *remix* is still apparent. It was a conscious decision *not* to tell the stories of the performers through the spoken word, as primarily the practice is concerned with corporeal exchange and the ways that kinaesthetic connection can promote kinship (see Bradway and Freeman 2022). I wanted to find ways to share the stories of the more experienced members of the cast that promoted mutual exchange, and avoided their lives becoming anachronistic and memorialised. For example, Lavinia's history as founder member of radical gay drag performance troupe, Bloolips, is well documented in print, audio, and in performance (notably Lavinia Co-op's *Up Yours*, written and directed by Ginger Johnson). For Lavinia, performing in *GROOVE* was an opportunity to perform without the pressure of sharing her life story or being held up as an icon. Similarly, De Castro's international status as a theatre clown and Kim's cabaret career and trans activism also mean they are held in high regard and are accustomed to sharing their stories. In

*GROOVE*, De Castro performs a monologue titled ‘I’M A BUTCH’ which, rather than centring on their life story, explores the identity position of butchness and relates it positively to the broad gender expressions and categories that they could choose from today. Kim’s story becomes a New York house track, explored further below through the pulse of *pose*. Corporeal exchange allowed for reciprocal and cross-directional exchange that centred connection rather than legacy, which I expand upon further writing about the pulse of *trade*.

The pulse of *pose* is utilised in a show about dance floors, but most notably in this documentation: *GROOVE* Clip 2: ‘FREE YOUR BODY’

This section of the show, towards the beginning of the production, sees performer Kim, tell her story from small-town Michigan to first Black trans woman to be the ‘face’ and hostess of the UK’s largest gay nightclub, Heaven. Kim compares the sanctity of the Black church in rural Michigan to the scene of Heaven, both places where minoritised folks find power through their respective communities. Theorist Jafari S. Allen names the dance floor as the central institution of Black queer communion, a space where ‘we assert (Black) bodies, putatively dangerously riddled with disease and threat of violence, not only as instruments of pleasure but also as conduits to profound joy, and perhaps spiritual bliss and transcendent connection’ (2009: 315). ‘FREE YOUR BODY’ was our attempt to create a 1990s house track, complete with anthemic refrain, as Allen notes:

> Classic house=club refrains implore the dancer to ‘free your body,’ ‘move your body,’ ‘give it up,’ and ‘let yourself go’ which may be interpreted as sexual innuendo, and is also understood in the space of the dance club as an exhortation to a deeper psychic and spiritual freeing that only takes place through the pleasures of the body. This social transcendence, or at least temporary respite, is related to the legendary spiritual transcendence that so

> many underground house partiers (in)cite. The transformation takes place through collective effervescence evoked by the music, the people and the safer space for spinning and spiralling. (2009: 318)

We were influenced to create a space in which Kim could tell the story of her transformation to nightclub queen, in a way that utilised her powerful singing voice and used a refrain that could implore the audience to set themselves free. Macy-Jacob wrote the enticing hook in the song's chorus:

> Free Your Body, Free Your Mind
> Dancing here in ecstasy, we'll groove all night

Whilst Kim became lead vocalist, Macy-Jacob and Fraser became her backing singers and dancers. Kim commanded the stage whilst her 'girls' used moves and images from vogue and ballroom culture to set the scene. Macy-Jacob and Fraser travel from Michigan to 1990s Heaven with Kim, the pulse of *pose* allowing for a corporeal, erotohistorigraphic exchange.



Fig 14: Kim Tatum in *GROOVE*, 2022. Image: Ali Wright.

Towards the end of the track, we see Kim 'spinning and spiralling' (ibid), her movement becomes more pronounced and her vocals stronger as she jokes that she has been 'moved by the spirit'. Allen's monograph, *There's a Disco Ball Between Us* (2022), conceptualises 'Black gay time space' as a temporal sociality which can 'cut into past and project or imagine a future in which we are still dancing with friends and lovers gone too soon to the ethers of the dance floor and the flickers of the disco ball light' (2022: 5). Allen defines this excessive temporal state as *extra*, 'outside bourgeois time, outside of nation time, ahead of time in culture – language, art, and fashion, for example – but also in many ways just out of time' (2022: 6). Using the central symbolic image of the disco ball, reflecting and refracting light across the dance floor, Allen extends upon futurity and distinguishes the Black gay experience from notions of (white) queer time. Whiteness affords the privilege to turn away from

normativity, whereas Black LGBTQIA+ folks 'twirl, arriving inevitably out-of-sync with these expected bourgeois temporalities' (2022: 6). The intersectional identities of the performers and the creative team set the tempo of *GROOVE*, and whilst Kim wanted to share the joy of the Black trans experience on the dance floor, she laments in 'Free Your Body' that 'there was also a lot of pain', before she quickly quips 'but THAT's a story for another time'. Allen's concept of Black gay time leads us to how we used and built upon the pulses of *club-time* and *transition* in this production.

The pulse of *transition* (which I define in Chapter Two as the theatrical transition as the dominant mode of performance in order to mirror the structures of queer and trans experiences), a key tenet of *And The Rest of Me Floats* and a critical moment in this thesis, was pertinent to the *GROOVE* process. I began to consider the *transition* of the piece more specifically and in relation to the dramaturgical structure of a DJ set. The sonic landscape of the dance floor is often controlled by the DJ, representing a mutual conversation between them and the crowd. The DJ will often start slow, build to a communal rhythm, peak excitement, then bring the crowd down again. There are moments in the set for a slow dance, toilet breaks, ecstasy, and abandon, and I wanted our dramaturgy to reflect this. As cultural theorist Tim Lawrence notes

> DJs drew on a range of records that cut across temporal and spatial boundaries in order to evoke and in some respects create a radically diverse sonic utopia. Their practice of using two copies of a record to not only collapse but also extend time – by, say, extending a particularly popular section – culminated in the creation of a new disco format (the twelve-inch single) that enabled DJs to play long mixes that were specially remixed for the dance floor. (2011: 239)

This process of *remix* would become crucial to the *transition* of our production. I would consider a good DJ set as a *transition*: there is a beginning and end but it is often undefined or undistinguishable; songs flow through each other and find beats

and rhythms to connect and shift; samples of music can interrupt, interject, and enhance the flow; and the musicality of the set can expand and retract temporalities. I worked with composer and sound designer Dominic Kennedy to make *GROOVE*'s *transition* into a 'tracklist', with every moment being underscored so that it became akin to a DJ set. Here is the final tracklist:

***GROOVE* TRACKLIST**

PART 1: **GET READY**

'ARRIVAL'

(sample) 'We Are Dancing'

GROOVE LINES: 'LIGHT BULBS' / 'MUSCLES' / 'KIM RULES'

'MIRROR-BALL'

'ECHOES 1'

'GROOVING TOGETHER'

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PART 2: **TRANSFORM**

'LE DANSE' / 'WE OWE YOU BIG TIME'

'FREE YOUR BODY'

Slow dance into…

'CAUSING A COMMOTION'

(sample) 'We Are Dancing'

'TRANCE'

'SMOKING AREA' / 'LAVINIA PAINTING'

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PART 3: **GET DOWN < RISE UP**

‘ECHOES 2 / KIM SKATING’

‘FUTURE’

‘I’M A BUTCH’

‘SHAPE-SHIFTER’

‘GROOVING TOGETHER’ remix

‘WE ARE DANCING’

The ‘scenes’ in this show became tracks, and each track was given a name (see above). The tracks were often sampled throughout (for example, the final track of the show ‘WE ARE DANCING’*)* and tracks could be repeated and remixed. The *transition* was divided into three sections: ‘Part 1: Get Ready’, ‘Part 2: Transformation’, and ‘Part 3: Get Down < Rise Up’. The audience did not know this, but it allowed the company to shape the *transition* into something reminiscent of the DJ set or the structure of a night on a dance floor.

The pulse of *club-time* was at the centre of everything we made. The way that time and temporality is explored on the dance floor was crucial to the production’s dramaturgy. The context of the nightclub allowed for the company to experiment with *club-time* further and concepts of specific nightlife temporal conditions fed into our making and performance process. *Raving* (2023) by McKenzie Wark takes the reader on an autofiction account of the underground trans and queer rave scene in New York. Wark posits raving as ‘collaborative practice to endure this life’ (2023: 5), considering the countercultural possibilities and potentialities of the rave scene as fundamental to trans and queer identity and existence. Wark, a trans academic who came back to raving after a twenty-year break, is not interested in dwelling in the past but references the 1980s and ’90s to find something in the present; the findings

that come from ‘getting lost’ (2023). Wark describes this practice as the state of ‘xeno-euphoria: time becomes stringently horizontal. Neither rising, nor falling, just sideways swelling and slimming. The body slots in, to time. Finding itself stranded through itself, through losing the form of its being in time’ (2023: 19). The state of xeno-euphoria aligns with the conceptualisation of *transition* – the temporal orientations of both are firmly in the distance and time operates *across* the production rather than through a chrononormative beginning, middle, and end. The track in the production that most keenly applies the pulse of *club-time*, and where we create the state of xeno-euphoria is ‘TRANCE’.

The title, ‘TRANCE’, suggests the sonic realm we are entering but also the behavioural state of the performers and the invitation we were extending to the audience. This track of the play was seven minutes of straight raving/dancing, which in a performance lasting shortly over an hour is a long time. I wanted ‘TRANCE’ to feel like an invitation to lose time with us; the drive of the beat might allow for the spectator’s impulse to move to override the usual intellectual response to a traditional play or performance piece. ‘TRANCE’ is the moment in the production where xeno-euphoria might take over, an incitement for time to operate horizontally and for the audience to feel lost in the production. DJ, critic, and theorist madison moore tells us that the nightclub is a portal to another dimension, describing these spaces as ‘thresholds, abstract regulation points that carry us from one state of being to another as soon as cross them’ (2019: 123).

The idea of a portal to another dimension was woven into the fabric of the whole show, but perhaps most apparent in this footage of ‘TRANCE’, as its xeno-euphoric

atmospheric allowed the performers, and hopefully the audience, space to abandon the confines of normative time: *GROOVE* Clip 3: 'TRANCE'

We see the performers pause, their eyes fixed on one person slightly outside of the dance floor. We see De Castro, now wearing a ripped T-shirt, denim, and chains, their presence commanding everyone's attention as they stride towards the group. In this moment, we see De Castro's character – an older, Latinx butch – not merely accepted into the space, but owning the space alongside the rest of the company. The portal through which time exists in this moment allows for a queer kind of communion, as moore asks: can the dance floor be more than just about queer time but a 'door or a teleportation to another universe that we slip through to access other sides of ourselves and other heightened states of being' (2019: 149)? As De Castro enters the warmth of the huddle, we transcend into darkness and laser beams, but this moment is soon broken as the lights reach out to encompass the audience again, the performers transformed a little by this moment of collectivity. 'TRANCE' was reliant on the aesthetic of the nightclub: lights, music, costume, and set were essential not only to the dramaturgy but the scenography of the piece. *GROOVE*'s scenography was a defining factor of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy, as we explore through the pulse of *scene.*

*Scene*

Our production was co-produced by Shoreditch Town Hall, but the grandeur of their building did not match the club aesthetic we required. A traditional theatre space did not feel like the right fit to hold the dramaturgy of *GROOVE,* I wanted to find a venue which had the architecture, geography, and topography, to help us define a queer

nightclub world. Eventually, we found Oxford House, a community-run venue in Bethnal Green, East London. This space houses a rehearsal space/theatre that they agreed we could completely make over (or make under, depending on your own dance-floor aesthetic). This incurred extra labour, time, and funding, but was essential to achieving our design-led objective. The production then toured to Contact in Manchester, a proscenium-arch theatre that can accommodate a much larger audience but is still rooted in community. *GROOVE*'s transition from intimate club-like space to a larger proscenium arch was an exciting, if daunting, challenge. Unlike the practice in previous chapters, *GROOVE* began with an aesthetic rather than a central theme. After the opening night of *And The Rest of Me Floats* at the Bush Theatre, the company went dancing in the basement of a Chinese restaurant opposite the theatre. This inconspicuous venue was glistening; laser beams, a karaoke stage, and electronic mirror balls made the space a sensory cornucopia. I shouted to designer Rūta mid-dance, 'This should be our next show.' We approached making *GROOVE* from a design-led perspective, creating a 'world' for the audience based upon what scenography and trans performance scholar Rachel Hann calls a 'scenographic' (2019). This design-led act of queer worlding led to the discovery of a new pulse of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy, *scene*.



Fig 15: Fraser in *GROOVE*, 2022. Image: Ali Wright.

Hann argues that scenography is central to all performance and, in her monograph *Beyond Scenography* (2019), she sets out a critical distinction between scenography (crafting of place orientation) and scenographics (that which orientate acts of worlding). In this manifesto for an 'expanded scenography' (2019: 3), Hann argues that by considering scenography as formative to all contemporary theatre-making, we can consider how scenographies '*move* spectators emotionally as well as physically' (2019: 5). The potentiality of scenography exceeds mere illustration and adornment and becomes crucial to the creation of a dramaturgical world. Hann employs the term scenographic as a 'conceptual distinction akin to the relationship between performance and performativity, theatre and theatricality, choreography and choreographic' (2019: 4). She approaches a scenographic trait as 'orientating' and scenography as 'crafting' (ibid). In a similar way to how Dance-Floor Dramaturgy approaches dramaturgy, Hann dissuades the reader from considering scenography

monolithically but instead employs a transdisciplinary approach that acts as a 'holistic strategy of theatre-making' (2019: 3). The scenographic as an act of 'worlding' becomes crucial in understanding the expanded scenography of *GROOVE* and how that plays into the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy. Hann positions 'scenes' as 'worlding irritants' (2019: 9) and posits that a 'stage-scene operates as an enacted land border that demarcates the threshold between perceptual worlds' (ibid). Through the pulse of *transition*, the 'scene' becomes merely an interruption in a broader dramaturgical conception. In *GROOVE*, I wanted to take this further so that the world of the play extends across the transition, blurring the boundaries of spectator and audience through the dance-floor scenographic. This renders the threshold between perceptual worlds, stage-scene, and audience space, as non-binary. There is a distinction between a traditional 'playing space' and the audience that becomes part of the queer nightclub world rather than the theatre. I explore this trans scenographic further through the pulse of *scene* (the term being synonymous with scenography and the gay 'scene'). Hann's scenographic concept of worlding dovetails with concepts of queer world-making (Berlant and Warner 1998, Buckland 2002). Queer world-making is defined by Fiona Buckland as 'embodied utopic imagination and power whereby queerness occupies the center, in which the heterosexual couple (is) no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture' (2002: 6). Buckland rejects the rules and borders of heteronormativity in her project of queer world-making to embrace a 'production in the moment of a space of creative, expressive, and transformative possibilities, which remained fluid and moving by means of the dancing body, as it improvised from moment to moment (2002: 4). The pulse of *scene* embodies and commingles theories of scenographics and queer world-making practices.

Oxford House, the venue for *GROOVE*'s first performances, is in Bethnal Green in East London, a queer area with a queer history. Slightly off the well-beaten track of the Bethnal Green Road, Oxford House is not a known or regular theatre venue and I was drawn to its anonymity and geographical setting. The performance would use the side entrance to the venue that was accompanied by a dingy, graffitied alleyway. This immediately conjured images of the long queue for the latest underground queer club. Once inside, an extended walkway led to a small bar area, which we configured as an interactive exhibition space, and then the performance space itself. madison moore positions the nightclub as a queer archive with 'residues of sleaze' (2021: 190), positing that the ephemera of the club – the flyers, guest lists, stamps, drink tickets – create an alternate archive of queer counterculture. moore considers the nightclub and its temporal, underground status:

> certain kinds of queer nightlife spaces like illegal raves are obfuscated and exist fleetingly, where a temporary existence becomes a kind of possibility to explore new forms, new sounds, and new ways of being. This reality is pitched against more established, centralized venues, which all too often rehearse the musical and cultural status quo and do not often take sonic or aesthetic risks that would alienate their regular clientele. (2021: 193)

The intention of moving *GROOVE* to Oxford House was to replicate this certain kind of queer nightlife space, its scenographic and dramaturgy mirroring the temporal possibilities of the queer nightclub rather than the often risk-averse theatre building. These ephemeral residues of sleaze were also considered; audience members' wrists were stamped with a *GROOVE* stamp and programmes took on the imagery of the club flyer.




Fig 16: *GROOVE* club flyer. Design: Brenda Fitzgerald.

Rūta Irbīte designed a space that was heavily influenced by the architecture of the nightclub, visuals of queer nightclubbing, and the surrealism of rave flyers of the 1990s. This unassuming rehearsal space was transformed for performance, its dark-red walls and ceilings painted black, leaving the large industrial pipes exposed. The back wall of the performance was concealed in a curved, shimmering black screen that created a feeling of infinity. The wooden sprung floor was covered in a heavy black carpet and a shiny, reflective, tongue-shaped dance floor to demarcate the space for performance. This space was black so that the coloured light could

reflect and refract as the main visual focus. The audience were not seated in traditional seating banks; drawing inspiration from nightclub seating, Rūta covered steel deck in the same carpet as the floor, on which audience could sit, lay, or stand. These 'steps' surrounded the performance space and blurred the usual dividing lines of performer and spectator. Curved seating plinths were also custom built for the playing space, and these could be moved to create different architectures within the space – simultaneously podiums to dance on and areas to rest.

Extending upon José Esteban Muñoz's question 'how does one stage utopia?' (2009: 9), the pulse of *scene* sets out to create a scenographic potentiality. Positioning utopia as a stage that can be described as both temporal and spatial, Muñoz reconsiders the term 'stage', and how it might relate to the concerned parent branding queerness as 'a stage [their child is] going through'; something that is incorrect and can be corrected over time through the coercion of heteronormativity (2009: 98). Muñoz reclaims the queer stage by enacting a 'utopian performative change', rescuing the term from the parent, and reading queer potentiality through the visual artist Kevin McCarty's images of empty, illuminated stages. McCarty's images are described as 'dwelling in potentiality', 'aestheticizing the moment, transmitting the power of its ideality. Thus, the aesthetic fuels the political imagination' (Muñoz 2009: 106). These stages are heavily lit but empty, suggesting a performance is about to 'emerge from the realm of potential to actuality' (ibid). The concept of 'dwelling in potentiality' allowed the research to draw on visual references and art works that would develop *scene* further.

Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings' *UK Gay Bar Directory*, a video archive work made in 2015/2016, captures the potentiality of performance and queer culture through documenting empty gay bars and nightclubs. Quinlan and Hasting, whose

work responds to the closure of gay bars and clubs in the UK by making an audio-visual directory of over 100 of these queer spaces, are queer women, and much of the archive responds to their alienation from cis gay male spaces – the project was limited due to lack of access to many of these bars and clubs that dominate the UK LGBTQIA+ scene. Similar to the work of Kevin McCarty, which documents the subculture of the queer punk scene, Quinlan and Hastings depict spaces that are illuminated but not populated by people. The spaces are brimming with the potentiality of what is to come and are bound with futurity. The videos take us on a tour of a gay bar, and the viewer becomes the voyeur in a space empty of people but full of beams of travelling light, the dazzle of the slot machines, dry ice, and mirrors. The videos are underscored with the samples of queer pop and disco classics, such as Bonnie Tyler's 'Total Eclipse of the Heart', which give a haunting quality to the spaces. Another project that documents the potentiality of dance floor spaces is *Nightswimming: Discotheques from the 1960s to the Present* (2015), photographer Giovanna Silva's documentation of discotheques across Berlin, Paris, London, and Barcelona. This project acknowledges that discotheques are spaces of the night but shoots them largely during the day, playing with the dichotomy of spaces both being empty and full of people. Light accentuates the scenography of these spaces, as we often see architectural grandeur such as plinths, statues, and steps all leading to the central spectacle: the mirror-ball. These visual art projects display bars and nightclubs that dwell in potentiality, while my research aim was to translate that scenographic potentiality to theatrical performance.

The images of Silva, the audio-visual archive of Quinlan and Hastings, and Muñoz's reading of the work of McCarty became starting points for the scenographic of *GROOVE*, which can be seen in the pre-set and opening of the show. Lighting

designer Cecil Fenn has translated the aesthetic of nightclub lighting to the theatrical lighting rig, and uses coloured light to extend beyond the playing space and out into the audience. The audience arrive into a deserted nightclub, reminiscent of the video work Quinlan and Hastings create for *UK Gay Bar Directory*. Composer Dominic Kennedy made a soundscape that encompasses the sounds of urban life (sirens, traffic, crowds, etc.) with samples of queer classics chosen by the cast and used for grooving sessions. *GROOVE* was designed so that the whole experience of arriving at and entering the performance space would parallel the experience of coming into the queer nightclub, a beginning that is full of memories, expectations, and potentialities.

There are certain design elements and categorisations that help us to define *scene* within Dance-Floor Dramaturgy. In *And The Rest of Me Floats*, the lighting design is bold and full of colour, an aesthetic that theatre lighting designers often shy away from. There are scenographic conventions in *And The Rest of Me Floats* that allow the performers to embody their autobiographies, for example the plastic sheets that conceal and reveal and eventually rupture, just like the *transition*. There is party paraphernalia such as balloons, glitter, and silly string that, used in conjunction with *fun-form*, help us to embody a scenographic potentiality. Most significantly, costume is used in *And The Rest of Me Floats*, to play with, distort, disrupt, and illuminate gender identity and expression. Irbīte designed huge costume rails that adorned the sides of the stage, which were full of carefully curated clothing to create a scenographic that was both beautiful and functional. Costume was also integral to the *GROOVE* scenographic. Clothing, and costume, has deep significance for the casts of *And The Rest of Me Floats* and *GROOVE*, both representing how their gender is affirmed and can be assigned by other people. Both productions use

costume to disrupt normative conventions around gender-coded clothing and create moments of transformation and gender euphoria for the performers, which I discuss below.

The pulse of *scene* is apparent throughout *GROOVE* but in this footage of a sequence, the scenographic elements come together to embody futurity:

*GROOVE* Clip 4: 'FUTURE'

In 'FUTURE', the pulse of *scene*, combined with choreography and hyperpop soundtrack, imagined what a dance floor could be if freed from the constraints of chrononormativity.[33] Associate director, Barry Fitzgerald, choreographed a routine that all six performers could participate in; the performers became cheerleaders from outer space in a sequence that seamlessly incorporated the scenographic of the show. This was our opportunity to create a utopian performative – the *scene* we created uses the past to conjure up a future dance floor that encapsulates the bodies, ages, and experiences of all the performers in the company. A recurring motif in *GROOVE* is that of smoke and mirrors, particularly hand mirrors that could divert and manipulate light. The concept of 'smoke and mirrors' is often deployed in magic and show business to draw the audience's attention away from something. Our company extended this metaphor to ageing, reclaiming 'smoke and mirrors' as a queer scenographic that rather than hiding or shielding elders from view, emphasised and magnified their form. In this sequence, the 'set' is moved for the first time, the black seating podiums slide away from each other and move to become a

[33] Hyperpop is an exaggerated form of music that borrows from Y2K (Year 2000) culture and aesthetic. The music is often synth-driven and applies effects such as auto-tune and vocal distortion. Trans artists such as SOPHIE pioneered this form. It has a sound that could be described as artificial and heavily manipulated.

futuristic, architectural structure. The shininess of the sleek black blocks turned around to reveal a mirrored surface so that the audience can see the performers, and themselves, in this utopian vision of the future-bound dance floor.

Costume was also key to the scenographic of 'FUTURE'. Rūta worked with the cast to pinpoint their fantasy attire. Hann argues that costume should be considered a key element to scenography, advocating for a holistic practice rather than costume merely adorning or centring narratological strategies positing that costume is 'unmistakably aligned with the conception and reception of bodies in theatre' (2019: 47). Each performer appears in their future-bound fantasia, from Macy-Jacob's knee-high platforms, mini-dress and high pony, to De Castro's belt chains, cut-off T-shirt, and skin-fade haircut. The performer's transformation is bound with the *transition* of the play, and the evolution of how radically they present defies normative assumptions around identity, ageing, and gender. Lavinia's evolution from grey suit and white shirt to shimmering, tasselled blue mini-dress with full drag make-up and wig is perhaps the most defined transformation in the show.

In 'FUTURE', we see Lavinia lead the charge of what the future of the club (and perhaps society at large) might be. Lavinia delivers text through a microphone that acts as a collective manifesto for what a queer future looks like. The text was sourced from a free-writing exercise, during which performers were asked to write sentences, words, and images that conjure a queer utopian future. These notes of futurity were interspersed with Polari and patter from Lavinia's past cabaret and theatre performances to create a soundscape with a central message of queer liberation.[34] Lavinia finished the monologue by scatting the words 'loving, fucking,

[34] Polari is a form of slang that incorporates elements of Romani, Italian, and cockney rhyming slang. This parlance was used in the theatre before becoming a secret language adopted by the gay community to speak freely without being understood.

loving, fucking. Fucking, fucking, fucking, fucking' until the message becomes just rhythms and sounds.

'FUTURE' imagines a queer dance-floor world where older queer people are seen for who they are: radical, desirable, and multifaceted. Our production sought to represent trans-generational relationships as generative and full of potentiality, and this is explored to its fullest through the pulse of *trade*.

*Trade*

*GROOVE* brought together a company of six actors and a creative team of people who were diverse not only in terms of age but in gender, disability, neurodiversity, and ethnicity. The performers also came from a variety of disciplines (acting, dance, drag, clown) and training routes that encompassed the formal (accredited drama and dance schools and universities) through to the informality of nightclubs and bars – and often all of the above. To resist the intergenerational inheritance tropes that began to emerge in the early stages of development, the rehearsals focused on embodied, corporeal exchange. Dancing together was a practice that took time, and trust was gradually built so that we could share our stories across intersectional histories and identities to imagine together. These embodied practices of what practitioner and theorist Dustin Bradley Goltz would describe as 'relational generativity' (2014) form what I define as the pulse of *trade*.




Fig 17: A. De Castro in *GROOVE*, 2022. Image: Ali Wright.

Intergenerational practice has been at the heart of Outbox's work since 2011. The second production that Outbox produced was called *The Front Room* (2011) and was programmed in the Drill Hall, London. The Drill Hall (now owned by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) was an integral and historic part of the queer performance scene. *The Front Room* was ambitious and perhaps somewhat naively so in its scope: it looked at the front room of a house over five decades of LGBTQIA+ history and was based upon testimonies that I had collected. I met pioneers of queer history alongside people who would consider themselves perfectly ordinary (often with the most extraordinary stories). This fascination with queer personal histories has driven every project that Outbox has made since and I have collected memories, anecdotes, and images for over a decade from those who lived through defining eras in LGBTQIA+ history. Here are a few significant moments that

have driven this research, collected from production work, attending meetings and group events, facilitating workshops, and hosting talks:

*A gay man in his late eighties draws my attention to a framed list that hangs on his wall. This is a long list of the names of all the men he had known – lovers, friends, and acquaintances – that had died during the early AIDS years. Bill sometimes had to count the names on the list at night in order to get to sleep.*

*A lesbian in her seventies tries to explain 'The Gateways Grind' to me. It becomes impossible through language, and she invites her partner of thirty years to demonstrate. They show me a slow partner dance that requires close grinding of the hips, named after the famous lesbian club, the Gateways Club, in West London*.

*A queer man in his late sixties explains to me that when he was twenty-five, he used to sleep with a man fifty years older than him, not for the sex but for the stories, as an exchange for queer history lessons.*

*A gay man in his eighties describes an image to me: he is in his local supermarket going about his business, when two boys walk past, good-looking lads around seventeen. They are holding hands. He tells the story with a mixture of disbelief, pride, and longing.*

*A trans woman in her sixties who tells me she hates the term 'intergenerational'. Can't we think of another way to describe our project?*

Goltz, who might describe these moments in my life and research as ‘relational generativity’ (2014), advocates for a multidirectional exchange across generations, and describes how generative these interactions and interjections in queer spaces can be. Drawing upon Freeman’s theories of kinship and belonging or the desire to be-long (2007), Goltz argues for a ‘queering of how we think about age, knowledge, and passing of tradition […] challenging the logic of linear temporal progression of information with age’ (2014: 1523). Looking back to my late twenties and the first time that I went to speak at a residential home for a group of elderly gay men, I remember feeling fearful of whom and what I would face. Meeting a group of older gay men challenged my perceptions about ageing, but also the notion of a future as a queer person. Ageing queerly upsets the concept of chrononormativity, and older queers are often depicted in mainstream media and, even amongst our own community, negatively. Goltz describes this phenomenon as ‘ageing as tragedy’; gay men, in this research, depicted as tragically punished, lonely, a failure, and in a perpetual state of loss (2010). The key findings from a report commissioned by Stonewall, the UK’s Largest LGBT charity, in 2011 found that older LGBT people are more likely to live alone and less likely to have children and extended family networks. Many are less inclined to access housing, social care, or health providers for fear of prejudice. These statistics, whilst having the right impulse in terms of supporting and trying to understand older LGBT people, help to define a narrative of loneliness and isolation. Within heteronormative society it is perceived that a lack of blood ties is negative, and that to live alone, therefore, must be lonely.

If queer people refuse assimilation and do not adapt to ‘homonormativity’ (Duggan 2003) with lifestyles that mirror the heterosexual experience, we can quickly be termed as predatory and sexually deviant. The nightlife space exacerbates these

assumptions and older queer people often do not feel a sense of belonging on queer dance floors. Performance artist and scholar AB Brown argues that to reframe the stigmatised presence of older people in queer nightlife spaces, we might begin to think of queer nightlife as a 'practice of longevity. Not only in terms of our physical survival – no matter our age – but in terms of longing by facilitating desire for and intimacy with long-term political work, placemaking, and community building' (2021: 67). *GROOVE* embodies theories of relational generativity by creating a dance floor that facilitates cross-generational exchange and goes further by extending the space across gender identities and ethnicities.

Intergenerationality is bound with the future, and I argue that the practice of relational generativity becomes one of *futurity* as it offers an antidote to straight time, and is a mode of imagining futures together in a multidirectional and cross-generational way. The dance floor can capture a space for desire and belonging that is generative for all ages and allow us to reflect on the longevity, histories, and embodied political practices of queerness. Looking to my own experiences and practices of relational generativity over the past decade, a recurring theme is that queer elders want to exchange practices and histories without being seen as anachronistic or thought of as antique. There is a fear for older queer people of being memorialised when they are still living. These tropes of memorialising and bestowing the elders with knowledge are easy to fall back on when making intergenerational work. For many older people that I met, the younger queer experience felt distant for them and something they were hungry to learn more about. A man in his eighties seeing the possibility of two younger men holding hands was a sight of curiosity, questions, and hope. How (and can) we facilitate an exchange that is generative for all ages and identities? When I met with one of the performers, De Castro, before

*GROOVE* rehearsals began, they stated that they ‘didn’t want to be the source of the river, they wanted to be swimming in the river with everyone else’.

It is important to note that here that like any piece of practice, much of the research does not end up in the final production and cannot be easily captured. This is most apparent when talking about *GROOVE* and the pulse of *trade*. Moments of relational generativity were plentiful in the rehearsal space and throughout the production run – for example, Kim teaching Macy-Jacob how to better care for hairpieces and wigs; Sky and Lavinia having post-rehearsal pints together; Lavinia learning how to do the dance craze ‘flossing’ on a break in technical rehearsal. I would argue that these generative and cross-generational moments came about because of the embodied work we were doing in rehearsal that allowed the company to learn together, and without hierarchy. We started every day and most afternoons with social dance. We learned to groove together, find each other’s groove, extending upon and finding new grooves. These daily grooves were found by collating a tracklist of everybody’s favourite songs to dance to; songs that encompassed genres including (but not limited to) disco, house, ballads, pop, hyperpop, indie, and world music. We established a set of grounding principles that allowed us to find each other through the movement. Often in rehearsal spaces, the director, creative and technical teams sit behind tables that create literal barriers between themselves and the performers. In a grooving session everybody in the space took part in the dancing, including creative and technical teams and me as director. It was tempting for me to stop and observe but I found that I could observe the practice in a more embodied way and gain greater trust by allowing myself to be vulnerable and join in the dancing. I recall a moment when I slow-danced with De Castro, holding each other in an embrace to Cyndi Lauper’s ‘Time After Time’. The

image of a Latinx butch performer in their late sixties holding (and leading) a slow dance with the younger, white, male director shifts perceptions of hierarchy and disrupts the embodied relationship between director and performer. Finally, we had to acknowledge how the dance-floor space operates for all bodies and abilities. Performers, regardless of age, do not want special allowances made for them or to feel that they cannot do the same job as everyone else. We made sure that our dance floor had spaces to chill and rest (and this was reflected in the set design). Time was important. We allowed the grooving sessions to go on for long periods so that people could come in and out of the dancing physically, take breaks, and possibly find a second, or even third, wind. Our only rule was that if you were taking a break from dancing you had to 'stay' with the music and the ensemble.

There is often an assumption in a theatre rehearsal room that the company will behave as an ensemble and 'trust the process'; in our room, we were expecting performers with vastly different social, political, and cultural histories to come together with ease, and initially this was not the case. Grooving sessions allowed for the company to get to know each other corporeally, understanding bodies, stories, and histories in an embodied way. Social dance removed some of the hierarchies of age and experience and a mutual kinaesthetic exchange took place. It took time for trust to be built in our company and often language and conversations became barriers. There was a natural tendency for some members of the group to take the space and hold the room with stories and anecdotes, often as a result of working in other rehearsal rooms where this had been an expectation. Movement work and choreography also presented challenges as some performers found it harder to sustain due to their access needs. Adapting the accessibility of the rehearsal room and the set design so that there are places to groove seated and with comfort,

centred a practice of care and allowed for kinaesthetic exchange to begin. We also shifted our schedule so that rehearsals started later and finished earlier, with our grooving sessions taking precedence. In a time-pressured, four-week making and rehearsal period this meant slowing down and, for me, accepting that I could not make and explore everything I wanted to. Social dancing accentuated a togetherness, it drew out our similarities rather than exacerbating our differences, which can be the normative position for intergenerational projects. Gradually, we came to a place where this social dance began to feel less performed and self-conscious; we had begun to unwind and feel rhythms together. This was when we could start to translate the grooving sessions into the creation of material.

Dancing together was central to the structure of *GROOVE*, and rather than tightly choreographing sequences we looked to social dance and the unique, individual bodies and how they moved through space to create the *transition* of the piece. From these bursts of social dance, we could then build more delicate, crafted moments of corporeal relational generativity.

In a sequence named ‘LE DANSE’, featuring performers Fraser and Lavinia, we can see the pulse of *trade* in action. Fraser and Lavinia are both social and professionally trained dancers. Lavinia took part in Martha Graham technique classes and is trained in the Alexander Technique. Fraser trained in contemporary dance at the prestigious Laban dance school in London. It was immediately clear that there was a connection between them, and a mutual admiration and respect. Translating this into a choreographic shape became a *trade* of corporeal knowledges and techniques. Rather than a movement director or choreographer setting the steps or movement, Fraser and Lavinia found their own physical language that had elements of both classical dance and the nightclub. They began by *trading* parts of

numbers and routines they had done, finding gestures that they could mirror and repeat. The piece moves from almost stillness to contemporary dance and lifts, through to a campy partner dance. Moves from Lavinia's act were incorporated into the routine, along with Fraser's contemporary dance language. Trust was central to this dance, both physically and through the emotional storytelling. Lavinia has an incredibly supple frame due to her continued dance and Alexander Technique practices but was recovering from a major surgery. Fraser supported this through vocalising the sequence and responding to Lavina's movements with real care. However, it is important to note that Fraser was not 'taking care' of Lavinia; Fraser was conscious of Lavinia's history and iconic status on the drag scene and began the work quite awe-struck. It was through creating the choreography together that they were able to find mutuality.

This footage is of the dance in performance- it is deliberately sensual, the age difference between the performers becomes more incongruous as the dance shifts and moves through time: *GROOVE* Clip 5: 'LE DANSE'

Jane Desmond posits that dance 'lets us look at bodies for pleasure, indeed, demands that this is what we do' (2001: 5), and it was crucial that this duet between older and younger body did not become sanitised and lacking in desire. Goltz warns us of the 'kindly and asexual grandfather role' (2014: 1505) that often emerges through intergenerational practice and representations of older gay men. 'LE DANSE' consciously swerves this trope to paint a relationship that, although not necessarily a sexual one, is not lacking in a mutual desire. The final dance sequence is underscored with three voices: Lavinia, Fraser, and De Castro. Lavinia's voice-

over shares memories of performing in clubs throughout the 1980s and ’90s but delivered in the present tense, Fraser’s voice-over talks of the debt that he owes to the older, queer generations (‘we owe you big time’) and De Castro’s voice-over describes how they feel when dancing with younger queer people:

> As I see you taking the dance floor, I see beauty,
> The freedom and grace the future brings,
> You make me want to know more. You make me active,
> Your way of dancing, I come awake in your presence.

‘LE DANSE’ is a corporeal love letter between generations, at once haunting, sensual, and full of radical care.



Fig 18: ‘LE DANSE’, GROOVE, 2022. Image: Ali Wright.

The second track I focus on to illustrate *trade* also involves Lavinia, this time in a moment of transformation. At the beginning of the show, the first person we see is Lavinia, entering the stage in a drab, grey suit. Often the audience had not

realised that the show had started when Lavinia emerged, looking like a latecomer to the party. As the show goes on, Lavinia loses layers of the suit to reveal an electric-blue, tasselled mini-gown and purple tights. We wanted to play with the ingrained perceptions that older people are conservative, less radical than their younger counterparts. This was an assumption that prevailed amongst many of the older queer people that I met, those in their sixties, seventies, and eighties who can be regarded as the first 'out' generation. Many of the older folk I have spoken to shared memories of pioneering sex clubs, cottaging, and cruising on Hampstead Heath. In fact, many consider younger gay people less radical – downloading an app where you can match with sexual partners as opposed to finding sex outdoors at a time when it was illegal and extremely risky. Intergenerational work often portrays a one-dimensional version of older people: sweet, kind, and soundtracked by Vera Lynn. The moment in the piece I wish to focus on to demonstrate *trade* is Lavinia painting her face. Already donning the frock, tights, and heels, Lavinia needs the face, wig, and jewels to match.

This documentation demonstrates the pulse of *trade*. Lavinia is painting her face and having already donned the frock, tights, and heels, she now needs the face, wig, and jewels to match: *GROOVE* Clip 6: 'LAVINIA PAINTING'

The sequence starts with an image the company were all too familiar with: the not-quite-ready drag queen crossing the dance floor with a wheelie suitcase. She settles at the top of the steps, stage left, and takes out her mirror (a recurring scenographic in the show) and begins to apply her make-up. I wanted this moment to happen in 'real time', so Lavinia would apply her make-up and the cues for the

show would be driven by her. After a long, frenetic, raving sequence, this was a moment of calm in which the audience could pay Lavinia and her craft full attention. As Lavinia continues to paint her face, we see projections across the back wall of the set displaying versions of Lavinia in various states of make-up. The projection is not live, we consciously wanted the moving images to be out of sync with Lavinia's action, playing with past, present, and future. Fraser and Sky then move into the space, and projections of Lavinia applying her make-up are mapped onto their backs. These embodied projections depict Lavinia passing down her craft and her history in way that does not memorialise; she is still here – in the club – but the placement of the images on the bodies of younger actors and her presence in the space reveal a corporeal kinship. Lavinia's make-up routine, projected onto Sky and Fraser's backs, embodies futurity; the layering of temporalities denotes a queer 'passing' that happens horizontally, painting an image of the future that is corporeally absorbed from the past.



Fig 19: ‘LAVINIA PAINTING’, *GROOVE*, 2022. Image: Ali Wright.

Now watch the full production of *GROOVE*

## Conclusions

*GROOVE* danced with histories, possibilities, and modes of being that allowed for a cross-generational examination of queer belonging. This practice does not seek to prove that the LGBTQIA+ community can achieve harmony if we all find a common rhythm, quite the opposite. Rather, it draws out the knotty, complex, and diverse experiences that entangle us to the notion of queerness. Making *GROOVE* was tough; the conditions of making theatre through a pandemic coupled with the ambition of the project did not always feel like the utopian performative the company were manifesting. However troubling, the concept of an intergenerational practice allowed for greater discovery in the practice research. Working against traditional modes of inheritance practice put the performers and creative team in a space of

vulnerability that allowed for a genuine interrogation into our relationship with the dance floor and each other. Goltz argues that '[g]enerativity, at its core, is a desire for connection – a desire for belonging – that sits at the foundation of a gay cultural creativity' (2014: 1525), and whilst our dancing sessions brought us closer together, the gay dance floor remains a bastion of the white, cisgender, male experience. This project expands upon Goltz's research on the experiences of intergenerational gay men to encompass gender identity, race, and disability; as much as we found similarities, our differences were crucial in making space for each other. My privilege was challenged through this research, and while I still yearn for spaces where all generations and gender identities can dance together, I must also recognise the need for some to resist this. Dance floors that prioritise queer Black and Global Majority people, trans folks, and women are vital for queerness to thrive. What *GROOVE* did provide was a space for critical dialogue between the performers and creative team. Seven weeks of dancing together facilitated a corporeal exchange that fuelled debate, uncertainty, fluctuating confidence, frustrations, and deep joy. These modes of being together varied and were not homogenous, but I left the process feeling that we understood each other better through finding our groove. This project is the culmination of the research and it was clear that simply applying the pulses would result in a dramaturgy that was formulaic and referential. Instead, the company were able to expand and rediscover how they work in a different performance-making context. This project proved that the pulses can be used as dramaturgical tools that can bend, stretch, and develop with each specific project, as well as representing an original contribution to the broader field of queer dramaturgy.

It was the conceptualisations of Black theorists such as Jafari S. Allen and madison moore that allowed for the company to move away from white structures of

queer time to create a more inclusive dance floor. Allen proposes Black gay space time which contextualises the experiences of the performers of colour, and madison moore proposing the nightclub as a portal allowed for a critical interrogation into the way temporalities work on the dance floor, and the aesthetic and conditions that fuel this. moore considers the nightclub to be a threshold from one state of mind to another, which aligns with Rachel Hann's concept of the scenographic orientating acts of worlding. This combination of queer nightlife theory and scenographics led us to the discovery of *scene*. *Scene* locates an embodied scenography as central to Dance-Floor Dramaturgy, and *GROOVE*'s expanded scenography allowed for the activation of the pulses and, ultimately, a corporeal understanding and manifestation of futurity. Additionally, the practice enabled us to conceptualise the pulse of *trade*, giving name to a practice that has been at the core of Outbox's work since near its inception. *Trade* allowed us to create a process that privileged corporeal horizontal exchange across generations. The dance floor was vital to this, and creating a space where we could groove together extends upon Muñoz's theory that a dance floor brings us closer together through 'an exchange and alteration of kinaesthetic experience through which we become, in a sense, less like ourselves and more like each other' (2009: 66). This is often interpreted as sameness but, in fact, emphasises the 'variables of difference and inequity that follow us from queer communities to the dance floor' (ibid). Through this 'communal queer logic' (Muñoz 2009), explored previously through the pulse of *remix*, we found a mode of being together corporeally that did not risk erasing our differences.

Our production ended with a call-to-arms, a statement of intent as to why we should, and need, to keep dancing together. Sky, the youngest member of our company, wrote this speech, and each night they delivered it the hairs on my arms

stood on end. I felt a wave of nostalgia, remember entering London Street for the first time, and a longing for what the future of the queer dance floor might hold. I end this chapter as we ended the production, with Sky's words.

> We come to the club to get fucked up,
> Kiss strangers, and forget, that sometimes, the outside world hates us.
>
> I've learnt more history in this room,
> than my teachers ever taught me.
> And I've learnt more about my future
> than the media wants to show me.
>
> In the streets we shout love is love,
> But in here, we make love, show love. Our Love.
> And as the air outside turns sour, I find my people, my crowd, in this underground
> And they say, what more are you fighting for?
> Then our phones light up like Christmas trees and what we see…
>
> Where there was music, now there is mourning
> They cry for the friend they have lost
> And we cry for the stranger we've lost,
> Who feels like family…
>
> And then, we are dancing
> For the ones we have battles we thought we'd won
>
> We are dancing
> 'Cause we can only hide in here so long
> We are dancing
> 'Cause this iPhone generation can't look at their phones
>
> We are dancing
> 'Cause tomorrow will come
> We are dancing
> Until we feel numb
>
> We are dancing
> 'Cause we,
> the next generation will not stand by, as those in ivory towers deconstruct the work of our elders. We will build houses on the foundations they laid and thank them every day for giving us this ability to live.
>
> We come to the club to get fucked up.
> Kiss strangers.
> And forget, that sometimes, the world outside hates us.

## Conclusion

*42.*

*I'm out dancing. It's December 2023, and I am back in my regular queer pub, The Glory. Tonight, I have been watching my mate Holly perform her drag-king act '2 Indie Boys from Reading' in the same space where* Affection *was performed in 2016. Once the show has finished, the audience are asked to leave so that the chairs can be packed away and the space transformed to dance floor. This is a familiar ritual that I describe in Chapter One but take it in with more reverence than usual tonight – it was announced earlier today that after nine years The Glory is closing. My PhD begins with dreaming about staging* Affection *there in the early days of the pub, and so it is somewhat fitting that I now write my conclusion as it prepares to close its doors. I don't stay late but have a small dance on the spot where we performed our show, and take in the lasers and cheap smoke machines for what might be the last time.*

*A week before this, I receive a text message from my friend, Mark. The message simply reads, 'I can get us the keys to…' I know immediately that he is referring to our old stomping ground, London Street. Mark runs a theatre company in Swindon that has connections to the local council, and he knows that I have been desperate to make performance in the site of the nightclub for years. This space lies empty, like so many other queer spaces across the UK, with The Glory now added to that list. London Street has not been redeveloped and the fixtures and fittings remain the same – an invitation full of potentiality that could queer the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy further –* club-time *stretching across decades and coming full circle, back to my first queer dance floor.*

* * *

I begin the conclusion to this thesis with endings, and the potentiality of new queer dramaturgies. Queer spaces, and especially dance floors, often have a shortened shelf life, whether that be due to gentrification and the increased rents in metropolitan cities, promoters and organisers moving on to other projects, being temporary from the outset, or simply going out of fashion. Now that I have established the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy, I am turning to two new projects. The first project is ambitious and will look to stage performance in and reanimate closed LGBTQIA+ spaces. I will co-create these performances with the queer communities that occupied the spaces, including footage, verbatim soundscapes, and using dance-theatre. My ambition is that this practice of reanimating dance floors – whether that be spaces such as London Street that have been left intact or spaces that have been redeveloped – could happen across the UK and beyond. I am interested in extending the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy across and into dance floors that now only exist in memory, straddling *club-time* across decades and generations to create temporary new dance floors and forming new dramaturgical ecologies. The second project that I am moving forward with is called *Graphic Content.* This is a new play targeted at teenagers which is based upon the aesthetic and form of a graphic novel. In this practice, I ask how the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy can be applied when making a performance with a narrative structure and character. The graphic novel, which already plays with queering notions of time and temporality, will lay the foundations for this, and I am going to investigate how the company can use a queer scenographic and rehearsal exercises and practices, such as *fun-form* and *pose*, to create a new dramaturgy for young people.

These new directions in practice research are made possible as a result of my PhD study and the new knowledge discovered through the development of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy. The pulses of this new dramaturgy have been developed through practice: in the earlier stages of the study I articulated and formulated the pulses through theory once a production process had finished, and then was gradually able to invent pulses that I could develop and use before and during a rehearsal and making process. Working in tandem with queer futurity, the practice is not embellishing or performing the theory, but practically embodying it, and extending it.

The first project that the thesis considers, *Affection*, developed three pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy that are embedded in the research. Despite this not being an assessed piece of practice, *Affection* sets up the parameters of a new dramaturgy that activates the principles of queer futurity. Central to its dramaturgy, and this practice research, was the decision to stage *Affection* on the dance floor. Of the three productions in the thesis, *Affection* relies least on the scenographic of the dance floor (Hann 2019); rather it dwells in the *concrete* space of the dance floor. This allowed me to draw conclusions on how the queer ephemera (Muñoz 2009) of the site, the way time is experienced in the club (Freeman 2010, Farrier 2013, Halberstam 2005, Munoz 2009), and the corporeality of the dance floor (Román 1998, Desmond 2001, Bollen 2001, Croft 2017, Khubchandani 2019) enable the company to create new dramaturgical practices.

Futurity is bound with notions of queering time and temporality, and these concepts are stitched throughout the practice research. Performing on the concrete space of the dance floor allowed for an expanded and slippery notion of time that we could apply to the subject of HIV and AIDS. Playing with the notion of *club-time* prevented stories of HIV and AIDS becoming anachronistic and contradicted the

narrative that 'AIDS is over'.[35] Working against the notion of chrononormativity (Freeman 2010) and applying the pulse of *club-time* has become central to Dance-Floor Dramaturgy. The motif of losing, expanding, playing with, jumbling, and merging concepts of temporality and time periods is critical to the dramaturgies of all three pieces of practice. *Club-time*, and more integrally the queering of time as a concept, also informs the pulses of *transition*, *remix*, and *trade*. Consciously playing with time disrupts Aristotelian principles of linear narratives to mirror the experience of the LGBTQIA+ artists and communities that we work with and represent. *Club-time* was expanded and further influenced by Jafari S. Allen's conception of 'Black gay time space' (2022), which challenges whiteness's assumption that everyone and everybody has the privilege to turn away from the conventions of categorised time. The later research is also informed by madison moore's theory of nightclub as 'portal' (2018) to another dimension, adding another layer to the pulse of *club-time*.

The pulse of *pose* takes pleasure in the embodiment of the dance floor and how corporeality can connect us to the past to imagine a queerer future. Dealing with the urgent issue of rapidly rising HIV rates in London in 2016 meant researching material that had the potential to be emotionally distressing for the actors. Activating a psycho-physical approach allowed for discovery without using psychological realism - working with imagery and physical gestures and motifs avoided asking actors to tap into memories and experiences from their own histories. Moreover, Elizabeth Freeman's concept of erotohistoriography (2010) could allow for *pleasure* in discovering and rediscovering narratives of HIV and AIDS. Kareem Khubchandani (2019) notes the transnational potential of ballroom culture and argues that queer dance can allow intimacies and connections across generational lines, and *pose*

[35] For further reading see David Román (2000).

transpires in this research as a corporeal language that can connect us both intergenerationally and intersectionally. *Pose*, as a mode of meaning-making, solidifies the embodied nature of the research; Dance-Floor Dramaturgy does not simply illustrate tenets of queer theory, rather it corporeally manifests its ideologies.

Sitting in the power of the *glitch* (Russell 2020) emerged in making *Affection* and became fundamental in employing bolder dramaturgical strategies. Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism* (2020) has become intrinsic to my understanding of the pulse *glitch*, an embodied strategy that I conceived when making *Affection*. A physical glitching motif worked in unison with the video technology we were exploring and the sound design to establish performance that explored both present stories of chemsex and rising HIV rates whilst actively reflecting upon the early years of HIV and AIDS. This *glitch* in bodies, technology, and sound produced a theatrical framework that saw 'scenes' interrupted, overlapped, and repeated – in the space of the *glitch*, bodies, genders, and sexualities could exist outside of normativity. As Russell argues, the glitch is a refusal to the 'hegemonic line of a binary body' (2020: 11), it is a 'participatory action that challenges the status quo' (ibid). The alignment of glitching and existing outside of the gender binary is most profoundly felt in *And The Rest of Me Floats*, as gender, the internet, and technology glitch together to reveal questions and theatrical propositions surrounding trans and queer identity.

Inventing and categorising the three pulses first found in *Affection* emboldened the process of making the production *And The Rest of Me Floats*. These pulses gave me the confidence to further explore an emerging dramaturgy, allowing me to eschew conventional theatre-making processes to extend upon my findings. The framework of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy was beginning to find its rhythm and the aesthetic of the dance floor became established in this devising process.

Through an early rehearsal for *And The Rest of Me Floats*, I developed the pulse of *transition*, which is significant to this research and has guided me through the devising process. Disbanding the linear structure of the transition as connective tissue between scenes meant that the *transition* became the main skeleton of the show through which songs, scenes, movement, sound, language puncture and interrupt. This is powerful as it mirrors the non-linearity, slipperiness, and refusal to conform that we live and experience as queer people and within queer communities. Although formalised during *And the Rest of Me Floats*, *transition* informs the performance architecture of all three pieces of practice research, and is a working dramaturgical strategy that I take with me into all rehearsal processes.

Constructing new dramaturgical pulses for queer performance gave permission to fail, get messy, and centre fun. *Fun-form* is a pulse that embraces silliness and low forms of performance, extending upon Jack Halberstam's theory of queer failure (2011) to create rehearsal strategies and devising techniques that cherish the fanciful path. *Fun-form* connects the dots between theatre-making practice and the dance floor, proving that the mirror-ball and the glitter-drop can be serious in their unseriousness. There is validity in queer performance processes beginning with dress-up, karaoke, drag, and jokes, rather than the table-read and text analysis of its 'straight' counterpart. We might also ask what happens when these two processes meet and we erase the binary of 'serious' rehearsal processes versus a queer devising process. *Fun-form* is not a strategy that refuses to be serious, rather it can find the fun in the serious and use 'low' forms of performance to interrogate the complex ways in which queer folks navigate a heteronormative world. *Fun-form* gives permission to the theatre-maker to tear up the rule book and use the

principles of the dance floor to guide the practice. This also permeates into how we might represent autobiographical stories on stage in the pulse of *remix*.

Just as the DJ might splice songs from different eras, genres, and artists together, *remix* works intertextually to bring the narratives of queer performers together. In acknowledging the scarcity of queer, and especially trans, stories onstage, *remix* finds a way of acknowledging the commonality in our experiences without erasing the differences, what José Esteban Muñoz terms a 'communal queer logic' (2009:66). *Remix* encounters the autobiographical as constructed rather than 'truth', allowing the performer to tell their story through theatrical forms that may encompass more abstract and *fun* forms, such as dance, song, movement, and spoken word/rap. I argue that queer dramaturgies always contain something of the autobiographical; even when playing a 'character' there is acknowledgement of the actor playing that role and their relationship to queer identity. Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier (2015) define a queer dramaturgy as having a direct relationship to the author of the work and the audience that it is performed to. *Remix* extends upon this research by finding ways to navigate the knotty entanglements of character and self, weaving together forms of autobiographical performance to present complex, rounded, and interconnected representations of queer stories. Using *remix* in an intergenerational production like *GROOVE* was imperative in sharing the stories of performers without historicising or memorialising older queer people.

Making the final piece of practice in this research, *GROOVE* – post-COVID-19 lockdowns and at a precarious time to make live performance – tested my resilience as a theatre practitioner. The confidence I found at the beginning of *And The Rest of Me Floats* was replaced with an insecurity around how to navigate making a piece across generations and identity lines. This piece of research proved that the pulses

of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy cannot be used formulaically. Although never intended as a toolkit, there is a temptation to use the pulses as such, and creating new dramaturgies following this pathway results in an approach to dramaturgy that is antithetical to queer performance-making. Constructing an original dramaturgy for *GROOVE* meant using the new knowledge I had found in the invention of the pulses, and finding ways to apply and expand them to meet the performance ecology of this original production. Rooted in this was the need for cross-generational practices that centred exchange rather than inheritance. This is made explicit in the pulse I term *trade*. exchange

*Trade* is supported by over a decade of cross-generational practice and a long-held belief that exchange across age brackets can be generative amongst queer communities. I have facilitated spaces such as workshops, rehearsals, and talks to allow for intergenerational meetings, but *GROOVE* is the first time that I have made a full production with a cross-generational cast. It was clear that my process needed to change and adapt to facilitate the needs of everyone in the space – this included reducing the amount of rehearsal hours, working at a slower pace, adapting the scenography of the show, and putting more trust and care into the *process* than the final product. Dancing together daily built trust and provided moments of corporeal exchange that Dustin Bradley Goltz would term ‘relational generativity’ (2014). Rather than sharing stories verbally, the company found that building physical relationships were key to genuine exchange. Our ‘grooving sessions’ took precedence in rehearsals and became centred in care and trust; they removed the hierarchy of age and disbanded assumed inheritance models.. As a company we began to find rhythms and beats together that could be translated into performance, trading modes of being and moving through the world to imagine spaces where we

could dance together in the future. The stories of our bodies commingled to physicalise a dance floor where bodies of all ages could belong together; we imagined and created a space that reached towards a utopian performative. Creating the atmosphere of this future dance floor relied heavily on the scenographic (Hann 2018), a specific queer aesthetic which I term as the pulse *scene*.

*GROOVE* began and proceeded with a design-led approach, but we can see a queer/trans approach to scenography across all of the production work of Outbox. Rachel Hann (2019) asks us to consider scenography as a form of world-making, arguing that the elements of scenography are a distinct and crucial component of a production's dramaturgy. The 'scenographic' is an orienting trait and in and through this practice, our scenographic becomes distinctly queer. This queer scenographic takes me back to the defining images of the practice research, images that came before any performances were made: the mirror-ball, the glitter-drop, the flashing primary-coloured lights. This iconography locates us not only on the dance floor but in a queerer world that signifies being outside of heteronormative parameters. *Scene* brings together dance-floor tropes, visuals, and architectonics, and categorises them as defining scenographic traits that establish queer worlds. *GROOVE* contextualises this pulse, 'transing' the scenographic so that the line between spectator and performer is blurred and the dance floor encapsulates audience members who enter the space. *Scene* is another concept that allows us to harness and capture queer futurity.

In the eight-year period of making this thesis, the queer theatre scene has shifted enormously. To extend the dance-floor metaphor: who I am dancing with, and the space and configuration of the dance floor, continues to expand and be in flux. In the UK theatre scene, there are more examples of queer and trans performance-

makers making mid-scale work in mainstream venues. Recent significant queer-led productions include Travis Alabanza and Debbie Hannan's *Sound of the Underground* (Royal Court 2022), Middle Child in collaboration with queer-led company Milk Presents' production *Modest* (Kiln Theatre 2023), Tabby Lamb's *Happy Meal* (English Touring Theatre 2022), and Charlie Josephine's *I, Joan* (Shakespeare's Globe 2022) and *Cowbois* (Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal Court 2023). Whilst this is positive progress, I am not advocating that for a queer artist to succeed their work should be produced in a mainstream venue. In fact, for many queer artists this would be antithetical to the principles of a queer aesthetic. For queer theatre to thrive, there must be a fringe scene where experimental work can be cultivated, nurtured, and happily fail. The cost-of-living crisis in the UK permeates into our theatre scene, funding landscape, and the patterns of programmers and producers. Whilst discussing a new Outbox project recently, a programmer in a major London venue told me that it costs so much to put the lights on in a theatre space now that it is too risky to programme a performance that will not be a guaranteed hit.

Coupled with this bleak economic climate, the Conservative government in the UK are outwardly transphobic. The UK prime minister Rishi Sunak stated at the Conservative Party conference in 2023 'we shouldn't get bullied into believing that people can be any sex they want to be. They can't. A man is a man, and a woman is a woman. That's just common sense' (McKeon 2023). The Conservative government released a draft of their non-statutory guidance for schools and colleges in England around Gender Questioning Children in December 2023. In summary, the guidance that will be rolled out to schools in spring 2024 will mean that parents will have to be informed of any changes in their child's gender identity (including name and

pronouns), a school's legal duties are bound by a child's biological sex, and that there is no 'general duty' to allow a child to socially transition (Badenoch and Keegan 2023). This governmental measure has drawn comparisons with Section 28, a Conservative Party policy brought in by Margaret Thatcher in effect from 1988 to 2003 in England and Wales, that banned the 'promotion of homosexuality' in schools. In 2023, our production of *GROOVE* was attended and protested by a group of self-proclaimed TERFS (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists). This group of people actively disrupted the performance in a violent act of sabotage, disturbing both the performers and the audience. I consider this a direct consequence of the anti-trans environment established by the British media and the blatant transphobia exhibited by the current UK Conservative government. I am now developing a production aimed at teenagers that schools may decide is not appropriate for their students to view in light of government guidance. What seems like relatively small consequences for us as theatre-makers has a much larger on culture at large, such as the brutal and tragic murder of teenager Brianna Ghey in 2023.[36]

I conclude my thesis with this sombre material as it makes the overall point of the practice research more succinct: the dance floor *matters*. In these dangerous and uncertain times for queer and particularly trans and gender-nonconforming people, we need a philosophy of hope more than ever. As theatre-makers, we help to create and sustain culture that has a profound ripple effect on people's lives. Performance creates visibility, forms of resistance, and communities that thrive beyond the performance. One of the outcomes of a Dance-Floor Dramaturgy has meant that our performers and audiences dance together long after the show has

[36] Brianna Ghey was a sixteen-year-old trans woman who was murdered by two teenagers she knew on her way home from school on 11 February 2023.

finished, as evidenced by older performers from *GROOVE* still regularly meeting up with younger castmates to socialise together. Futurity, looking to the past to imagine our futures, will sustain us as we move forward into unknown territories as theatre practitioners. Key to this is collectivity and co-creation – making space for and sustaining new and emerging modes of queer theatre-making practices. I began this PhD study, in part, to document my practice and to share my theatre-making methodologies with other queer artists. The next step is that this practice research is disseminated through publication and a series of practical workshops so that the pulses of Dance-Floor Dramaturgy can expand and modulate into new ways of thinking, making, and doing queer dramaturgies. My hope is that Dance-Floor Dramaturgy, alongside creating a system of new approaches, will stimulate dialogical and corporeal exchange – a springboard for new creative ideas amongst queer performance and scholarship communities.

My original contribution to the field of queer dramaturgies, Dance-Floor Dramaturgy, is an expanded form of theatre-making practice that offers modes of devising, rehearsal, and performance strategies to make theatre queerly. The extant pulses I have formulated come together to create a unique mode of dramaturgical practice that builds upon and extends theories and practice research in the field of queer dramaturgies. This practice has increased queer and trans representation on UK stages through co-creation with LGBTQIA+ communities and queer performers, making theatre with dramaturgies that mirror and reflect the myriad ways that queer people exist and thrive. Dance-Floor Dramaturgy captures and harnesses utopian performatives that offer glimmers of a brighter world, in dialogue with the past to reach towards a queer horizon.

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