Making Plays and Changing (Sex) Lives:

Playbuilding as a model for teen sex education.

A practice-led research PhD project

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Abstract

This thesis deploys a practice-research methodology centred on playwriting and dramaturgy to explore how theatre created with and for young people can contribute to comprehensive relationship and sex education (RSE).

The study focuses on two original plays *Losing It* (2017) and *Man Up* (2025), presented as both scripts and filmed productions together with their accompanying teachers' resources. I created these plays in collaboration with young people, and they were performed by young actors in training from the Peer Actor Development Programme in schools and colleges in the south-east of England. The research is further informed by my long-standing role as Artistic Director, founder, and playwright-in-residence at Peer Productions (2006–present) and considers the specific creative working conditions this environment provided as a crucible for the development of new work with and for young people.

The project contextualises the plays against a backdrop of neo-liberal values and an increasingly sexualised, pornified society that exposes young people to a plethora of hyper-sexual and misogynistic digital imagery and messages. It explores how live theatre might function as a counterforce to this sexualised digital culture, particularly through its capacity as an embodied practice to awaken empathetic responses in young audiences and empower them to engage more critically when making decisions in their own lives.

This thesis makes an original contribution to the field of socially engaged theatre. It considers how techniques associated with Bertolt Brecht and Edward Bond can be repurposed and reclaimed for a contemporary feminist agenda and offers insights into practical strategies – specifically, writerly and dramaturgical tactics - which playwrights can use when making plays collaboratively with young people.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is the result of many years of practice and reflection on the complex process of making plays collaboratively with and for young people. The research would not have been possible without the insights and reflections of the many young people who have trained at Peer Productions, taken part in research and development projects and watched the plays and I am deeply grateful for their vulnerability, generosity, creativity and honesty.

I am grateful too for my brilliant colleagues and fellow trustees at Peer Productions for their many words of encouragement, their patience and their willingness to walk alongside me. I am especially grateful for their trust as I navigated complex creative problems in a challenging socio-political climate. I am also thankful that Peer, as a charity, agreed to fund this research.

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I also want to extend my thanks to my mum, my late dad, my brothers Bob and Dave, my friends Jen, Kate, Jim, Sam, Alex, Annie and Sridhar who showed unwavering support, inspiring me to keep going even when faced with many obstacles.

Finally, to my husband and best friend - Chris, thank you for allowing me the space to think, to read and to research; for parenting alongside me in the face of so many insurmountable challenges; and for continuing to believe in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. Now, you can finally say, "this is my wife the Doctor and I am her companion."

Content to note

This project includes material depicting and discussing rape, sexual violence and misogyny.

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Practice submitted as part of thesis

LOSING IT – PLAY TEXT submitted as separate file here - https://drive.google.com/file/d/149zlg2jGoKk8wHaXV--xJp9WUtj6TJG4/view?usp=sharing

LOSING IT – DIGITAL PRODUCTION
https://www.peerproductions.co.uk/digital-theatre/v/losing-it-2023

LOSING IT – ALBUM
https://soundcloud.com/peerproductionsshows/sets/losing-it

LOSING IT – TEACHERS' PACK
https://www.peerproductions.co.uk/shop/p/losing-it-pshe-teachers-pack

MAN UP – PLAY TEXT submitted as separate file here – https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Uvl__GZcsfWvXKjTiemqOlnOulnnJfVf/view?usp=sharing

MAN UP – DIGITAL PRODUCTION
https://www.peerproductions.co.uk/digital-theatre/v/man-up

MAN UP – TEACHERS' PACK
https://www.peerproductions.co.uk/shop/p/8pmgwad21i3q4ynt6mrtctvevro1ma

MAN UP – TEACHERS' PRESENTATION SLIDES
https://www.peerproductions.co.uk/shop/p/man-up-pshe-presentation-slides

NB: Teachers packs and digital versions of the productions are available on the Peer Productions website as detailed above. All resources are available at no cost, but Teachers' Packs need to be checked out via the shop and digital productions can only be viewed by those who have registered on the Peer site to access digital theatre content.

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Introduction – Making Plays & Changing Lives

"I did want to be a teenage mum but, after watching the play, I don't anymore."

The Teenage Pregnancy Project audience member, 2008

It is 2008, a full decade before I decided to embark on PhD research, and I am a fledgling theatre-maker in my late twenties touring a play I have written about the challenges of being a teenage parent, when a smiley 12 year old girl casually tells me that she had been deliberately trying to get pregnant but, after watching the play, she has changed her mind. This extraordinary exchange was to become just one of many testimonies from young audience members claiming that their experience of watching one of my plays had fundamentally changed their thoughts and behaviour. It was here that my fascination with how a play might change how young people think and behave in early intimate relationships was first piqued.

This practice-research doctoral thesis draws on my experiences as a playwright building plays with and for young people which are designed to be delivered as part of the Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum in the UK. The thesis focuses specifically on the development of two new plays - *Losing It* (2017) and *Man Up* (2025) - and these play scripts, together with supporting materials and their filmed versions, are presented alongside this thesis as an essential component of my arts-based research. In this research, I explore the tactics and mechanisms used to create educational theatrical experiences and the effects and impacts that these particular plays had

on the young people who engaged with the work as theatre-makers or audience members.

Research Questions

In a challenging socio-economic climate where young people increasingly encounter extreme sexualised and misogynistic content online via social media and pornography and where teachers and policy makers struggle to keep RSE curriculums aligned with rapid cultural, digital and political shifts, this study asks a central question:

- How can plays and playbuilding be mobilised to contribute to comprehensive sex education in the UK?

To address this central inquiry, the study examines three related sub-questions:

- How do socio-political and procedural contexts inform, shape and impact the development of plays about sex for young audiences?
- What tactics – both dramaturgical and writerly – can be used to re-envision and inform understandings of consent and intimacy, and how can these tactics be strategically employed in the making and performance of plays for young people?
- What is the relationship between polyphonic approaches to playbuilding and storytelling, and empathetic engagement?

To pursue these questions, this thesis adopts a practice-research approach underpinned by ethnographic methods and combining

playwriting, dramaturgy and reflective analysis. Using these methods, I explore how, by working with young people in educational and creative settings, theatrical processes can illuminate and intervene in dominant narratives around sex, consent, and intimacy. In doing so, it contributes original insights to the fields of applied theatre and sex education, expanding current understandings of how plays for young audiences can be developed, staged and mobilised as critical pedagogical tools.

Contextualising my practice

I am a playwright and theatre-maker with a twenty-year career dedicated to exploring the transformative power of theatre in the lives of young people. In 2006, I founded Peer Productions, a youth arts charity which blends peer education with theatre, committed to creating socially engaged theatre with and for young people, and I continue to lead the organisation as its Artistic Director. While this project focuses primarily on two plays - *Losing It* (2017) and *Man Up* (2025) - the thesis is informed by two decades of sustained commitment to creating work for young audiences. It is also deeply personal, political and urgent. I am a white, cisgender, queer, feminist playwright and theatre-maker from a working-class background. Since embarking on this PhD, I have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and I therefore identify as neurodivergent.

Ethnically, I am part of the UK majority, and this is particularly the case in Surrey where my practice takes place: 77% of Surrey residents are white British and a further 8% are from other white backgrounds (*Understanding Inequality: Who lives in Surrey?* | *Surrey-i*, no date). My

ethnicity and gender identity has afforded me the privilege of being able to advocate for my approach free from racism and transphobia. However, in other ways I notice that I fit in less well as a peer of Surrey's decision makers and gatekeepers. I now live in an affluent area which is typically categorised as middle class, but I grew up in a low-income working-class family in Essex and mine was the first generation to go to university. Although years of living in leafy suburban Surrey has softened my accent, I still feel the class divide, especially in meetings with fundholders. I am also openly queer and unapologetic about my feminist ideas. My class, sexuality and sexual politics can lead to some people problematising me as an 'angry feminist dyke' with a 'chip on her shoulder' and this can result in my concerns about gender-based violence and stereotypes being minimised or distrusted by some people. My hometown of Southend-on-Sea, when I was growing up in the 1990s, was the subject of many jokes about unintelligent and superficial 'Essex girls' and my lived experience was that of a highly sexualised culture where sexual harassment and violence were both rife. Starting to have sex before the age of consent was commonplace, and several of the girls I went to school with became mothers in their teens.

In my late teens and early twenties, I volunteered as a helpline crisis supporter for survivors of rape and sexual abuse – an experience that profoundly shaped my commitment and approach to addressing sexual violence against women and girls in my work as a playwright and theatre-maker. In parts of this thesis, I describe dramatising marginalised characters – people who are feminists, who are from low-income backgrounds, who are LGBTQ+ and who are neurodivergent – and it is important to acknowledge that, as the author of the work, I am

also from those marginalised groups. Furthermore, my neurodivergence plays a specific role in shaping my professional and academic projects. My innate drive to explore diverse projects, coupled with hyper-fixation on specific interests such as playwriting, social change and sex education, has contributed significantly to my prolific output. During the two decades in which I developed my creative practice I also became a parent to two daughters (born 2009 and 2015), both of whom are Autistic and have severe learning disabilities alongside extreme challenging behaviours. Though this may not appear thematically central to the plays discussed here, the relentless care I have provided, and the ongoing navigation of an often inhumane and inadequate UK care system have undeniably shaped me as an artist, researcher and individual, deeply informing my approach to theatre-making. As this thesis is in part an (auto)ethnographic project, it is essential to acknowledge my identity as the lead artist developing this work.

My theatre company Peer Productions began as something of an experiment. I was frustrated by theatrical productions performed in schools by older adult performers pretending to be children and teens, feeling that younger performers might connect more easily with young audiences and I was disappointed for many of the actors I worked with in the context of youth theatre, especially those from working class backgrounds, who were being rejected from drama schools and told to ‘go and get more experience’ when they often lacked the means to do so. With a seven-month pilot project, I therefore decided to see if it was possible to blend a free-of-charge meaningful training opportunity with the delivery of plays in schools performed by these young actors. Nineteen cohorts of young actors later, we continue to operate on a

similar basis. Since its conception, Peer Productions has developed into a sustainable, independent, mid-scale charity which seeks to engage and support young people as both artists and citizens through a range of training, participatory and touring theatre projects. A central strand of the charity's work has always been its training offer. Each year, a small cohort of young theatre-makers (aged 18–25) is recruited to join the Peer Actor Development Programme (PAD) – a free, full-time, year-long training course. PAD provides experiential, vocational learning, offering participants a Level 4 qualification, access to professional development opportunities and the chance to create and tour original, socially engaged plays to schools and community settings. Many graduates go on to attend leading drama schools (with a 100% success rate in 2025) and many pursue successful careers in the arts. In most years, between eight and twelve young people take part in the PAD programme.

In 2022, the organisation expanded its training work through the launch of a sister programme: the Peer Empowerment Pathway (PEP). PEP is a holistic theatre and wellbeing course for learning-disabled young adults (18–25) with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Unlike their PAD counterparts, who normally only remain with the organisation for one year, PEP learners can stay training with Peer for up to three years or occasionally longer. The PEP programme uses drama, creativity and group work to build confidence, communication and collaboration, supporting participants to develop transferable skills for employment, further education and independence. In high demand, the PEP programme has expanded from an initial offer of ten places to now supporting twenty young people each year. PAD and PEP participants now train and create work together as part of one inclusive

theatre company. At time of writing, there are twenty-nine young people training at Peer.

As the charity has grown, so too has my own practice as a playwright, with plays that I have written for Peer Productions now forming a core component of the charity's delivery. A key strand of my artistic practice within Peer Productions is my role as the organisation's lead playwright. The plays we produce are developed collaboratively with the young people enrolled on both the PAD and PEP programmes and sometimes with external groups. I work closely with participants to explore themes that are relevant to their lived experiences and social contexts. Through workshops, improvisation, devising sessions and guided discussion, we co-develop the ideas, characters and content that inspires and informs each new play. While the development process is collaborative, I take on the task of scripting the plays, shaping the ideas generated with the young people into a cohesive theatrical text. Once developed and performed by the current cohort, these plays usually continue to have a life beyond the initial group of creators. The charity retains the scripts, which are sometimes published to reach a wider audience, and the plays are subsequently revived and toured by future young theatre-makers at Peer, making them a sustainable and evolving part of Peer Productions' core repertoire. This approach allows the plays to reach wider audiences over time while maintaining a strong connection to their origins in youth voice and collaborative practice. This iterative and collaborative playwriting model sits at the heart of my creative practice and therefore this doctoral research, offering a distinctive mechanism for generating and disseminating youth-centred, socially engaged theatre. In most years, Peer Productions tours three

different plays to predominantly Surrey secondary school audiences; these reach an audience of between 10,000 to 15,000 young people.

Beyond its core training and touring work, Peer Productions delivers a wide range of participatory programmes for young people aged 8 to 19, with a particular focus on those who face barriers to engagement and who are, usually owing to a combination of learning disability, neurodivergence, mental health challenges and/or economic disadvantage, at risk of social exclusion. The organisation's initiatives include *Generation Girls* and *Generation Guys*, which each offer creative approaches to sex and mental health education for learning-disabled teenagers in special school settings. The organisation also runs *Project Purple*, an extra-curricular youth theatre programme designed to support young people experiencing social or educational challenges, and a series of holiday theatre-making programmes. These holiday sessions combine creative activities with meal provision and are aimed at children and young people with learning disabilities and particularly those eligible for free school meals. Additionally, Peer Productions often runs participatory sessions in schools or in other youth settings which explore the issues we address in our plays, and which play a part in the research and development process for making new plays for young audiences. In academic year 2024/25, 4,347 participated in Peer outreach projects.

Since its establishment, Peer Productions has been largely based in Woking, Surrey, with a brief residency at South Hill Park Arts Centre in Bracknell, Berkshire (2017-2021). Today, the organisation operates from its own dedicated premises in central Woking. The space includes a large, flexible studio (which can be divided into two), two smaller

teaching rooms, and offices, a kitchen, and breakout areas to support both staff and participants. The organisation has expanded steadily over the years, growing from an initial team of three to a core staff of fifteen and a volunteer board of seven, supported by a wider network of freelance artists and facilitators. Its funding model has remained, by necessity, flexible, in response to ongoing shifts in economic policy and the ever-evolving funding landscape. Lacking long-term core funding, Peer Productions has resourced its activities via a mixed-income approach. A range of trusts and foundations have supported the organisation with project and core grants, and some have evolved into ongoing partnerships, such as with the Community Foundation Surrey, Heathrow Community Trust, and AKO Foundation. As a member of the Surrey Wellbeing Partnership - a formal alliance of local and national charities - the organisation receives regular funding for some of its mental health focussed work and this includes some touring work, digital projects, and the Generation programmes. Education funding also plays a role in sustaining the organisation's work. For those learners on the PAD programme, who are eighteen when they begin their training, Peer Productions draws down some modest funding through their training partner college JACE training, while PEP participants are funded through statutory education budgets, with nine local authorities placing learners on the programme to date. Additionally, Peer Productions has engaged in service-level agreements with Surrey County Council to provide holiday and extra-curricular drama provision for disadvantaged young people. It receives some additional funding from individual donors via regular appeals and fundraising activities and makes a small amount of income from selling tickets for public performances.

Historically most touring work has been offered to schools free of charge with funding from various trusts and foundations supporting taking the plays to young audiences, but recently we have started to ask schools for a subsidised contribution to costs, and this is proving to be an effective strategy to bring in additional unrestricted earned income. The need for this diverse mixed income model, which requires significant staff resource to administrate and manage, is indicative of a broader problem where funding in the arts is consistently precarious. In 2024, the Campaign for the Arts reported that 'Since 2009-10, revenue expenditure on culture, heritage and libraries in England has fallen by 50.4% in real terms, from £42.42 to £21.05 per person,' (Campaign for the Arts' 2024). The material effect of these cuts has meant that many companies, including Peer Productions, are often working project to project with a lack of certainty – circumstances which make longer-term planning and impact analysis challenging. Funding scarcity also means that organisations often need to shape their work in relation to fundholders' shifting agendas; this too has a material impact on how work is conceived, described, delivered and evaluated.

Peer Productions' enduring tag line 'Make Plays, Change Lives' serves as a call to arms, succinctly encapsulating the organisation's core belief that through making, sharing and watching plays, lives can be changed. As I noted above, it was this fascination with the socially transformative potential of playbuilding that led me to undertake this PhD research project. As a theatre practitioner, I have witnessed significant positive shifts in young people's behaviours and worldviews in response to their engagement with theatre. I have seen shy participants become confident orators, those manifesting difficulties with anger learn to

navigate relationships more calmly, and those who expressed a lack of hope for a future develop successful careers in the arts. Over the years of leading Peer Productions, I have collected numerous testimonies from young audience members who reported sometimes startling changes in their attitudes towards a range of issues such as domestic abuse, drug use, and risky sexual behaviours after seeing my plays. However, while young people were telling me that their emotional and intellectual encounters with my plays were affecting how they thought and behaved, I was failing to take time to consider more substantially how this change might be occurring. It was my curiosity regarding how the aesthetic and affective experience of making or watching a play might lead to social transformation that led me to embark on this PhD research.

As the director of a socially driven arts charity, I have often felt caught between two worlds. Theatre in Education (TIE), particularly issue-based work, is frequently viewed with suspicion or condescension by the professional arts community. What Roger Wooster characterised as a generalised ‘prejudice that stereotypes TIE as being, of its nature, less professional and less sophisticated in its aesthetics’ (Wooster, 2016, p.4) has often made getting arts-based funding challenging. At the same time, social funders policy makers and sociological commentators focus on demonstrable impact and tend to overlook the aesthetic aspects of such work. As a result, the language and methods I have been required to use when describing, evaluating and defending my work have not always aligned with how I understand that work as an artist.

My creative practice sits within a broader context of applied theatre traditions. It has been developed in a neo-liberal climate and has been shaped significantly by multiple shifts in funding policy. The 1980s saw a decline in public investment in Theatre in Education (Anthony Jackson, 2013, p.29). From the late 1990s on, the delineation and expansion of applied theatre, accompanied by a turn toward service-level agreements and socially instrumental commissioning (Local Government Improvement and Development, 2011, p. 2) has contributed to uses and perceptions of theatre practice as a delivery mechanism for other goals rather than as an aesthetic form in its own right. Like many theatre practitioners committed to education and social transformation, I have had to make a case for theatre's power to effect change, often translating artistic work into the language of measurable outcomes. As Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett described close to twenty years ago, these conditions have laid the ground for an 'orthodoxy' (2008, p.4) regarding the transformational power of the arts without thoroughly interrogating the substance and basis of the creative work. It is this tension - between deeply held belief in the power of theatre and a desire for more rigorous understanding of the substantive effects of creative practice - that underpins this thesis.

My journey toward this inquiry was shaped in part by the ways in which some social commentators and funders positioned Peer Productions within the broader political landscape and the impact this had on how we articulated and delivered our work. Several of these commentators and funders championed the charity as a model of social entrepreneurship during then prime minister David Cameron's Big Society initiative. The aim of The Big Society was "to take power away

from politicians and give it to people" (Cameron, 2010, quoted by Caroline Slocock, 2015, p. 12). The Conservative government aimed to reform public services by championing social enterprise, localism and mutualism, and by reducing reliance on central government through encouraging citizens to take a more active role in addressing social issues. They promoted volunteerism, civic engagement, and community-led initiatives, while shifting some decision-making and service delivery to local authorities, non-profits, and social enterprises. In practice, the initiative failed to achieve its planned reformation. Power was not meaningfully devolved, inequalities deepened, and the market-based model of service delivery largely benefited large private providers rather than local communities. As Slocock (2015, p. 6) concludes, "the Big Society has failed to deliver against its original goals… it has not reached those who need it most; we are more divided than before."

As a fledgling start-up with a social conscience, Peer Productions was a beneficiary of the proposed transformations. In 2009, I received a financial award from UnLtd - The Foundation for Social Entrepreneurs, and in 2010 I was named one of the Future 100 Young Social Entrepreneurs by *Striding Out* - an organisation dedicated to supporting young entrepreneurs. In 2011, Peer Productions featured in a *Guardian* article on the Big Society (Salman, 2011), and in 2013 we received a *Toast of Surrey* Award for Social Enterprise. As a result, we began to adopt many of the practices and rhetorical strategies associated with social enterprise, most notably in our growing preoccupation with evaluation designed primarily to measure social impact. In her report *Surrey's Bigger Society* for the Community Foundation for Surrey, Helen

Bowcock highlighted Peer Productions as a prime example of a successful local social enterprise:

> Another example of a leading local social enterprise is Peer Productions, based in Woking, whose founder Nina Lemon won an UnLtd Young Social Entrepreneur of the Year award. For the last four years her organisation has worked tirelessly to influence young people to make positive choices according to their concept of 'peer education'.
>
> (Bowcock, 2011, p.12)

Her framing assumes the value of an agenda that aims to empower young people to make 'positive life choices,' yet it does not interrogate what constitutes such choices or how this change might actually be achieved through a theatrical encounter. The Big Society's premise, that communities are best placed to solve their own problems, aligned neatly with our model of using peer actor-educators in the devising and delivery of plays but the reality behind the rhetoric was one of financial retrenchment, as Slocock, in her 2012 critique of the Big Society, observed,

> Finance for civil society is a major problem area for the Big Society, despite Government initiatives such as Big Society Capital and the Transition Fund, which are dwarfed by projected cuts in statutory funding to the voluntary sector of £3.3 billion in the period up to March 2016, rising costs and falling reserves. Even before the cuts started to take effect, there was significant dissatisfaction from charities and social enterprises with national and local statutory funding arrangements.
>
> (Slocock, 2012, p.12)

At Peer Productions, as with many small arts organisations, securing sustainable funding has been an ongoing challenge. We have frequently found ourselves caught between competing demands with social funders

expecting quantifiable social impacts and many arts funders devaluing the aesthetic potential of socially driven theatre. Faced with financial insecurity, arts organisations have little choice but to shape their practices to donor's agendas and this can result in an overemphasis on social outcomes. My own evaluation processes, designed to meet funder requirements, frequently centred on the social problem which a given play addressed, its structure and content, and the audience response to the play in performance, rather than exploring the process through which we made the plays or how they actually worked in practice.

In her study of American social justice theatre company Fringe Benefits, Dani Snyder-Young notes that feedback surveys often reflect broad attitudinal shifts without identifying the aesthetic or dialogic elements that contributed to those shifts, insights which would be of use to practitioners. She argues that implementing surveys,

> does not offer any substantial information as to what in the performance and discussion inspired the change, and therefore the survey is not a terribly helpful tool for reflective practice(…) Change is messy and multifaceted, and the survey methodology does not give them room to see unintended changes or to understand the processes by which these changes happened.
> (Snyder-Young, 2018, p. 83).

Her critique resonates with my own experience: I was devoting time and attention to designing evaluation tools that, while useful for advocacy, offered little insight into artistic process or the emotions elicited by theatrical performance.

These tensions led me to a critical realisation: as an organisation, we may have been asking the wrong questions about our practice. In

attempting to quantify the effects of socially engaged theatre, we risked misrepresenting both the nature of the art and the complexity of its outcomes. As Snyder-Young notes above of social change, theatre is likewise messy: it is unpredictable, emotional, affective, and not always legible in linear or measurable terms. Change elicited through theatre might occur suddenly, gradually, or not at all. Operating in an underfunded field with limited opportunities for long-term research, we have sought recourse to whatever institutionally recognised evaluation tools are available to understand and advocate for the impact of our work. In this research, I do not seek to abandon questions of impact but instead I aim to reframe them. This thesis therefore asks precisely how theatre might change lives through its dramaturgy, its aesthetics, and its affective power, focusing in particular on themes of personal and sexual health education. It also seeks to interrogate how socio-political and procedural contexts inform, shape, impact and at times upend and derail the process of making plays for social change.

Methodological Overview - Wheels, Ships, Wagons and Plays

I did not discover the etymology of the word playwright until I was deep into my career as one. The term *“wright,”* as opposed to *“write,”* aligns the playwright with craftspeople such as shipwrights, wheelwrights, and wainwrights, who build, assemble, and mend ships, wheels, and wagons, and suggests the playwright’s role as a builder, assembler, and mender. This resonates strongly with my approach: I see myself as an artist who sculpts, shapes and mends words into their most effective shape. This idea that the play, like a wheel, ship or wagon, is a

purposeful, tangible, useful and dynamic tool with which to actively achieve change also chimes with my experience. In his article 'The politics of intention: looking for a theatre of little changes', Michael Balfour writes that such a theatre

> eschews big claims of social efficacy and suggests the need for a discourse which can better articulate an interdependence between the aesthetic imperatives and the possibilities of social engagement.
>
> (2009, p.347)

The purpose and the endeavour of my plays is to change the world even if, as Balfour suggests, only incrementally; I too am fascinated with the ways in which my writerly and dramaturgical tactics as part of an aesthetic craft work to affect social change. Furthermore, as a socially engaged, activist practitioner, my role as one who 'wrights' stretches beyond the shaping of a play in textual and performative form to a desire to shape, sculpt or mend an unfair social system which has persistently and relentlessly advantaged certain social groups above others. The processes are always messy, iterative and collaborative, with as much spontaneity as planned practice. In the collaborative process through which the plays emerge, to pursue a final coherent product, inevitably myself and the other practitioners involved abandon a copious amount of often interesting and engaging work, like clay discarded from a sculpture. It has proved extremely difficult to separate my methodology for making plays from my methodological approach to researching this project. The two, in practice, feel intrinsically linked, with the playbuilding process and the play texts themselves becoming dialogic sites of ongoing research.

I have chosen to adopt the term playbuilding because, having highlighted the etymology of playwright as one who makes plays, this term reflects my fascination with the process of constructing theatrical experiences through work. I use the term in part in reference to the collaborative, ensemble-based approaches developed by Canadian socially engaged theatre company Mirror Theatre and theorised by its associated practitioners Joe Norris and Kevin Hobbs. As outlined in *Playbuilding as Arts-Based Research* (Norris, Hobbs and Mirror Theatre, 2024), playbuilding is a participatory method in which performance is created collectively, often within educational or community settings, and used as a tool for reflection, knowledge production, and social engagement. The process draws on lived experience, critical inquiry, and group devising. As Norris *et al* describe,

> The process of playbuilding is far more complex than traditional qualitative research studies because the roles that the participants play are more intricate than the typical participant/observer, interviewer/interviewee, and questionnaire designer/responder relationships. With playbuilding, the A/R/Tors are a primary data source, but they are also co-researchers.
>
> (Norris, Hobbs and Mirror Theatre, 2024, p.36)

This articulation, which foregrounds playbuilding as a form of practice-based research, highlights the flexible roles undertaken by participants and the collaborative, iterative, and layered processes involved. It aligns closely with my own approach to applied theatre and arts-based inquiry.

More broadly, this thesis adopts a holistic approach to analysing the development of my theatre-making practice, focusing on how the plays work across their lifecycle: how they are made and staged, how

they are encountered in performance, and how those encounters feed back into the ongoing development of the work. In doing so, the thesis explores the dramaturgical and writerly tactics that emerge through iterative processes of making, staging, and reflection. Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt define dramaturgy as,

> the composition of a work, whether read as a script or viewed in performance. While it is a term for the composition itself, it is also a word applied to the discussion of the composition. In other words, where we are engaged in (doing) dramaturgy, we are looking at the composition or dramaturgy of the work.
>
> (2016, p.5)

But, as they insist, composition is not limited to the creative work, and the word ‘composing’, with its implication of creating, forming, arranging and combining different elements, aligns with my own theatre-making or play-building experiences. The attention Turner and Behrndt draw to the dual meaning of the term, as both the composition itself and the discussion of that composition, reflects the way this practice-based thesis approaches the plays themselves as written texts and as filmed productions, and the analysis of those plays and the processes which informed them. This work encapsulates a wide range of theatrical choices such as casting, staging, design and direction, as well as the words written and spoken. By using the terms playwright, dramaturgy and playbuilding, I foreground a craft-based approach to the business of making plays. These terms, which all resonate with the idea of construction, feel particularly appropriate given that my overall pedagogical approach is a constructivist one, in which audiences are invited to build their own ideas and interpretations through viewing and reflecting on the characters and scenarios presented.

This project is, by its nature, practice and arts-based research (ABR). I present the analysis that follows in tandem with the two play texts, their supporting material and filmed versions, and these together comprise the full scope and nature of this investigation. In using the acronym ABR, I am aligning myself with various arts-based scholars including Patricia Leavy who approaches,

> ABR practices as methodological tools used by researchers across the disciplines during any or all phases of research, including problem generation, data or content generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation.
>
> (2025, p.4)

The arts I am engaged in are facilitating, devising, writing, directing and producing my plays. These processes permeate every stage of the research endeavour and are at once the site of enquiry and the production of new knowledge. As Leavy goes on to explain, ‘Epistemologically, ABR assumes the arts can create and convey meaning’ and ‘recognizes that art has been able to convey truth(s) or bring about awareness (both knowledge of the self and of others).’ (2025, pp. 5-6). In this project, these insights are realised through the creation and staging of original plays that use the artistic processes of writing, devising, and directing as both methods of inquiry and means of generating new knowledge about young people’s experiences of sexuality, identity, and empathy within a hyper-sexualised culture.

I have chosen to approach my arts-based research project as a creative, collaborative ethnography: as James Clifford had it, ‘writing culture’. I adopt the term ethnography here in its most fundamental form,

with the Greek *ethnos* meaning people or cultural group and *-graphy* meaning writing. This is a project where people, and the writing with and of people, lies at the root of the practice. Ethnography, particularly since the interventions of the Writing Culture debate, is now widely understood not simply as the descriptive study of cultures but as a reflexive, co-constructed and politically situated practice that draws attention to issues of authorship, voice and representation (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Oxford Bibliographies, 2014). These debates reframed ethnographic practice as something dialogical, where researcher and participants enter into meaning-making together, emphasising listening, relationality and the situated nature of knowledge. I describe this work as collaborative because of the co-produced approach, with a dialogical method that centres listening (to both what is said and unsaid) at the heart of the process. I foreground the descriptor creative because of the importance of creative endeavours such as playwrighting, improvisation, acting and play within the method as well as the intuitive, organic and ultimately 'messy' ways in which the ideas were developed and crafted.

I am drawn to and feel a kinship with the ways in which youth theatre practitioner and academic Kathleen Gallagher describes her own ethnographic practice as inherently collaborative and creative. I recognise in my own work what she frames as a process of situating,

> my knowledges in conversation with the knowledges of others (collaborator researchers and practitioners, artists, research participants) and to carefully consider the 'power relations of those involved in the research and the material and social circumstances of its enactment, and especially the material consequences for those living in the "sites" of the research.
>
> (Gallagher and Kushnir, 2022).

With our shared dialogic approach and commitment to recognising and addressing power inequalities in the work, my work treads a similar epistemological path to Gallagher and Kushnir.

Within this broader arts-based research field, my own practice sits more specifically within the field of Research-based Theatre (RbT). RbT feels like a term so broad as to be almost meaningless, failing to capture the multitude of different ways in which theatre can be integrated across the full research process, from devising and data generation through to the analysis and dissemination of findings, a multitude that George Belliveau and Graham Lea (2011) themselves catalogue, building on a term already in use by the mid-2000s (Mitchell, Jonas-Simpson and Ivonoffski, 2006). Quality theatre and playwriting, presumably, are research-based on some level, whether or not that research is named, systematised or made visible to an audience. I will now turn to two specific subgenres of Research-based Theatre which inform my own practice: ethnodrama/ethnotheatre and playbuilding.

In Johnny Saldaña's book *Ethnotheatre Research from Page to Stage* he describes ethnotheatre as,

> Ethnotheatre, a word joining ethnography and theatre, employs the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre or media production to mount for an audience a live or mediated performance event of research participants' experiences and/or the researcher's interpretations of data. The goal is to investigate a particular facet of the human condition for purposes of adapting those observations and insights into a performance medium. This investigation is preparatory fieldwork for theatrical production work. (2016, p.3)

He differentiates ethnotheatre - the process of theatre-making - from ethnodrama, which he describes as ‘a written play script consisting of dramatized, significant selections of narrative […] simply put, this is dramatizing the data’ (2016 p.3). Unlike many other practitioners and companies, including Mirror Theatre, Tectonic Theatre and the young companies producing theatre-in-education playwright Mark Wheeller’s early work, the work I have made is not a mode of verbatim or documentary theatre, where participants’ or subjects’ words are used directly in the fabric of the dramatic text. Rather, it involves a significant process of reimagining and creative translation to bring the ideas to the stage. Saldaña’s definition does allow for this – as he puts it, ‘in some cases, production companies can work improvisationally and collaboratively to devise original and interpretive texts based on authentic sources.’ (p.3). But the majority of examples he cites do include extensive verbatim material.

It is worth pausing on two examples that illustrate how ethnodrama practitioners have handled this tension between verbatim fidelity and creative licence, since they help locate my own practice more precisely within the genre. Keen and Todres (2007) note that Mienczakowski's *Busting: The Challenge of the Drought Spirit* uses fiction only to link and connect otherwise verbatim material, a much narrower licence than my own process allows, where invention shapes the play in its entirety rather than joining fragments of transcript. A closer precedent for my own approach can be found in Kim Wiltshire and Paul Hine's Project *XXX* (Wiltshire and Hine, 2014; Wiltshire, 2015), a piece of multimedia theatre exploring the effect of internet pornography on young people's relationships. Like my own work, Wiltshire and Hine deliberately avoided

verbatim theatre, choosing instead to build composite, fictionalised characters from workshop material precisely to protect the anonymity of the young people involved, while drawing on the same theoretical resources, Saldaña and Norris, that inform my own practice.

For the purposes of this project, Saldaña's assertion that within ethnodrama 'the script or performance text is solidly rooted in nonfictional, researched reality—not realism, but reality' (2016, p.14) is particularly significant. Saldaña's discussion of dramatic work that is simultaneously rooted in truth yet entirely imagined, alongside his consideration of truthfulness, realism, relatability, and authenticity in representation, provides a set of ideas to which I return throughout this thesis. In this context, realism is understood not as reality itself but as a set of theatrical conventions associated with naturalistic representation, including linear narrative, psychologically coherent characters, and the maintenance of the fourth wall. Reality, by contrast, refers to the social, political, and experiential conditions of the real world that the work seeks to engage with. As Saldaña notes through Augusto Boal's assertion, 'I don't care about realism – I care about reality' (2016, p.6), a commitment to reality does not necessitate adherence to realist form. I understand this distinction as one that legitimises non-realist dramaturgical strategies as means of engaging truthfully with real-world concerns**.** This distinction is pertinent to my own practice, in which plays engage directly with real-world concerns while frequently departing from realist conventions through techniques such as direct address, shifts in narrative perspective, and self-conscious theatricality. These strategies allow the work to remain rooted in researched and lived realities while

employing non-realist modes of storytelling as a means of reflection, critique, and education.

Although much of the work created as ethnodrama has been made by social researchers with an interest in theatre rather than theatre-makers with a social conscience, thinkers in this field too have grappled with the competing needs for social value and artistry. As Judith Ackroyd and John O'Toole explain, both require attention if the work is to affect an audience and ultimately be socially effective.

> Both the social and artistic are necessary. You can have an outstanding ethnodramatic play script about a riveting social issue, but if it's poorly mounted and performed, audiences will be unlikely to care about its content. And, you can have an outstanding production company with first-rate actors, but if the content of their script has little to no socially conscious merit and artistic quality, then the purposes of ethnotheatre are all for naught.
>
> (Ackroyd and O'Toole, 2010, p. 32)

Similarly, in this thesis, and my practice as a whole, I attend to both artistry and social value with my focus on how carefully crafted playwriting and dramaturgy can be deployed in the pursuit of social change. My play *Man Up,* in particular, has ethnodramatic roots. I use existing research exploring the ways in which algorithmic forces affect vulnerable young men exposing them to extremist misogynistic content as a primary inspiration for the play. In its final form, the play enacts ethnodramatic principles by transforming research findings into embodied narratives that invite audiences to engage emotionally and critically with the material.

The work arguably has even more commonality with ‘Playbuilding as Arts-Based Research’ as Joe Norris and Kevin Hobbs describe,

> Although playbuilding shares similar epistemological underpinnings with the non-fiction novel and with ethnodrama, it is different in both process and intent. First, the intent is not to report findings but to provide evocative texts (Barone, 1990) that invite live audiences to engage in discussion for the mutual learning of all. Through audience participation, it takes a democratic pedagogical approach. It “dialogically inserts itself into the world, provoking conflict, curiosity, criticism, and reflection.
>
> (2024, p.10)

Their ideas which position plays as a site of enquiry go beyond reflecting a given situation back to audiences and are instead designed to provoke debate and reflection. They align strongly with my own artistic intentions where the play and accompanying teachers’ resources are carefully curated to try and tease out critical thoughts and reflections from young people. When reflecting critically on these complex ethnodramatic, playbuilding processes, I am again reminded of the importance of chaos and spontaneity as crucial parts of a carefully planned process. In looking for a methodology which will allow for and actively embrace the chaotic, unpredictable and iterative aspects of the creative process, I have found Melissa Trimingham’s insight into Practice as Research methodology very helpful. She argues that ‘the ‘disorderliness’ of the creative process must be incorporated into the methodology’ (2002, p.56) and she categorises this methodology as not a linear but a circular or spiral model of progression. This chimes with my experience of playbuilding as a mode of research that often feels chaotic, in which what initially appear to be creative dead ends become, on further reflection, the nucleus of new and more insightful creative practice.

Trimingham's model therefore provides a methodological justification for valuing uncertainty, failure, and iteration as productive elements of the research process. Further to this, I have drawn extensively (in Chapter 2 especially) on Catherine McNamara, Jenny Kidd and Jenny Hughes' (2011) work which acknowledges, accepts and embraces the usefulness of mess, as a critical framework with which to examine my own practice.

Structure of thesis

In Chapter 1, I provide a literature review of existing research which resonates with my project and its critical concerns with sexual and emotional health and wellbeing. I begin by reviewing governmental and NGO reports and sociological research related to the state of relationships and sex education (RSE) in the UK, arguing that a radical overhaul is needed if it is to meet the changing needs of contemporary young people navigating an increasingly pornified culture. I then move on to review existing scholarly work in the fields of Applied Theatre, Theatre in Education and Theatre for Social Change positioning myself within these fields as a playwright committed to using an ethnographic, playbuilding approach to create socially transformative work. I examine the interdependence of aesthetics and intervention in theatre and explore how emotion, feeling, and empathy contribute to audience experience, and ultimately, social impact. I offer messiness, a feminist approach to the theatre manifestos of Brecht and Bond and affect theory as meaningful critical lenses through which to explore my practice. Overall, this chapter provides evidence to support my argument that there is a critical need for rethinking our approach to educating young

people about sex and offers insight into existing literature in comparable fields which has informed the development of my thesis.

In Chapter 2, I use Jenny Hughes, Jenny Kidd and Catherine McNamara's ideas about artistry, improvisation and decomposition (2011) as essential components of a 'messy' process, to provide insights into the development of three of my plays designed to support RSE: *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* (developed in 2008), *Losing It* (developed in 2015) and *Man Up* (developed in 2025). By analysing specific moments from these three different projects, which bookend almost twenty years of practice, I aim to provide valuable insights not only regarding how my methods have evolved and developed but also how the socio-political climate has informed and affected the development of the work. In providing this analysis I offer insights for artists, educators, and researchers into both the critical importance of responding to the socio-political climate and its effect on young people, and the value of adopting an iterative, 'messy', creative process to ensure that the work created remains both relevant and empowering for young people.

In Chapter 3, I move on to provide a critical analysis of the creative, dramaturgical and writerly tactics I used to develop my play *Losing It,* particularly in relation to the ideas of Bertolt Brecht and Edward Bond. I argue for how their ideas can be repurposed and adapted in a digital postmodern age, not only in service of a feminist agenda, but also to engage young people both empathetically and critically with challenging issues related to early sexual experiences. This rigorous, in-depth analysis into the specific tactics I used in the creation and delivery of *Losing It*, offers a meaningful case study for

playwrights and theatre-makers seeking to make socially engaged work for young people which provides an insight into how aesthetic and creative decisions influenced the reception and effectiveness of the theatre experience.

Chapter 4 then explores a significant shift in my practice, where academic research regarding masculinity and sexuality became the primary driver of the creative process behind the development of a new play *Man Up*. I explain that, while the project shares an iterative, devised approach with my previous work, unlike previous plays it positions the play as a tool for disseminating specific research on 'incel' culture to contribute to broader efforts to reduce misogyny and promote gender equity. Reflecting on my ethnodramatic method, I trace how key ideas from the research evolved into dramatic material and reflect on the impact of this process on young collaborators and audiences, focusing on the role of empathy, care, and authenticity in socially engaged theatre. This chapter builds on discoveries in the development of *Losing It* outlined in Chapter 3, and provides, in some detail, an analysis of the conditions which have allowed the development of bold but sensitive work tackling challenging issues and the ethnodramatic theatre-making processes which ultimately contributed to the *Man Up* script. By these means, the chapter illuminates methods for creative practitioners who work with young people and also highlights, for researchers in social sciences, the potential to use an ethnodramatic approach for disseminating their research.

I conclude by revisiting my research questions and considering how my development of two key texts, *Losing It* and *Man Up,* have

contributed to my understanding of how to make plays, which are designed to awaken an empathetic response, with and for young people. I consider the broader potential of using live theatrical experiences to educate a generation who are bombarded by digital messages and offer pragmatic advice for playwrights seeking to work with young people in a socially transformative way.

This thesis is both urgent and important. As I will explain, there is growing evidence garnered in a range of contexts that young people are struggling in their interpersonal relationships and that they lack the socio-emotional skills to navigate transitioning to adulthood. There is also an alarming rise in sexual harassment, sexual violence and misogynistic rhetoric in UK schools which has been at least in part informed by the access to hardcore, violent and dehumanising pornography that smartphones afford, and the struggles of existing approaches to sex education to address the needs of young people. Concurrently, there is a lack of funding for young people to engage in artistic work as both makers and audiences, and these circumstances particularly impact those from less privileged backgrounds. In this thesis I argue that, by engaging in creative experiences, underpinned by a culture of care, young people can develop the critical thinking and empathic skills needed to negotiate intimate relationships and advocate for themselves in early sexual experiences ultimately reducing their risk of becoming the perpetrators or victims of sexual violence.

Chapter 1 – Making Sense of the Field: Mapping Theatre, Sex & Learning

In this chapter I review key literature related to my project to provide context for my work and to position my practice research in relation to current scholarly discourse. This project is, by its nature, an interdisciplinary undertaking which draws upon research from varied academic fields including but not limited to theatre and performance studies, sociology, psychology, philosophy and pedagogy. It is also a multi-modal study which uses the process of researching, devising, writing, producing and evaluating plays as a form of arts-based research (ABR), and more specifically Research-based Theatre (RbT), as outlined in the Introduction, and it is these practices that form the nucleus of my research. Whilst the scope of scholarly literature is therefore vast, the project itself remains sharply focused on how plays and playbuilding can be mobilised to contribute to comprehensive sex education in the UK. The sources examined here inform this inquiry by situating the practice within its socio-political and educational contexts, by offering dramaturgical strategies for addressing consent and intimacy, and by framing polyphonic playbuilding as a means of fostering empathetic engagement among young audiences. In this thesis, I use the term polyphonic initially in a practice-based sense to describe the intentional inclusion of multiple, sometimes conflicting, voices within the playmaking process; a more detailed theoretical discussion of polyphony, drawing on Sally Mackey's work (2016, p.487), follows in Chapter 3.

Drawing on governmental and NGO reports, as well as my own experiences facilitating RSE, I begin by showing how the marginalisation

of RSE within the British National Curriculum has led to poorly conceived lessons that frustrate both teachers and learners. I argue that the current curriculum fails to prepare young people for the realities of a “pornified” culture, leaving them vulnerable to the prospect of becoming victims and perpetrators of sexual violence. I highlight some of the factors shaping young people’s understanding of sex and relationships, including the normalisation of misogynistic online content (Regehr *et al*., 2024), and call for a radical rethinking of RSE that embraces creative pedagogies and in particular theatre performed by young people as a valuable component of comprehensive sex education.

Next, I situate my practice as a feminist playwright and theatre-maker within applied theatre, theatre-in-education, and theatre for social change. Aligning myself with scholars of applied theatre including Helen Nicholson and Matthew Reason, I argue that aesthetic and interventionist intentions are interconnected rather than opposed. My analysis then turns to how a play might function beyond a technique for awareness raising. I consider specifically the role of emotion, feeling and empathy, drawing on James Thompson’s ideas, which provide useful insights into the interplay between effect and affect and the ways in which a ‘startling’ affect could initiate a lasting social effect. I position these ideas in relation to affect theorists Brian Massumi and Gregory J. Seigworth, and Melissa Gregg’s theories regarding an affective space of potentiality. With the importance of emotion, feeling and affect now centred, I consider Nicola Shaughnessy, Bruce McConachie and Jill Bennett’s thoughts on the possibilities of empathetic engagement and consider the importance of the empathic response in my own practice. These ideas are central to my argument and in both chapters 3 and 4, I

draw further on concepts of affect and empathy to provide new critical insights into how I, and other socially engaged theatre-makers, might be able to create conditions in which these affects can circulate in ways that re-envision and inform understandings of consent and intimacy and more broadly build empathetic engagement.

Finally, I emphasise playwriting as central to my enquiry, noting the scarcity of research on the playwright's role in theatre-in-education projects, while noting exceptions such as Mary Cooper, Sarah Jane Dickenson and Mark Wheeller. To bridge this gap, I draw on Brecht and Bond, whose dramaturgical strategies illuminate how writing can affect audiences. My practice-research further engages with feminist theatre traditions, particularly around the staging of rape and rape culture, and I conclude by aligning with Elin Diamond's (1996) argument that feminist adaptations of Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* can dismantle and critique patriarchal norms. Overall, this literature review provides important context evidencing the need for a radical overhaul in approaches to RSE and offers a grounding in the different philosophical pedagogical and dramaturgical ideas which underpin the practice I explore in the rest of this thesis.

Learning about sex

This study particularly focusses on school-based RSE, but it is vital to acknowledge that young people learn about sex from a wide range of different sources including family, friends, television and film, books, social media, and pornography. In this section, I consider the roles played by school based RSE, pornography and social media in influencing young people's understanding of sex and relationships. There is compelling evidence that high quality RSE can reduce harm including the risk of sexual violence. In 2018, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) concluded that Comprehensive Sex Education, which is age appropriate, scientifically evidenced and human rights-based, contributes to improved outcomes for young people including,

> Delayed initiation of sexual intercourse, decreased frequency of sexual intercourse, decreased number of sexual partners, reduced risk taking, increased use of condoms, increased use of contraception.
>
> (UNESCO, 2018, p.28)

Eva Goldfarb and Lisa Lieberman's (2021) systematic literature review examining three decades of school-based RSE also supported the idea that RSE can reduce both sexual and domestic violence as well as combating rape culture and preventing child sexual abuse. Unfortunately, there is also significant evidence that pedagogies surrounding sex, relationships and intimacy are not working for young people in England with a long -term deprioritising of the subject coupled with a lack of investment in training negatively impacting young people's

experiences. As far back as 2012 an Ofsted report identified that personal, social health and economic (PSHE) education in schools was, ‘not yet good enough’. Additional they identified that RSE needed improvement in one third of schools, with one third of subject leaders ‘inadequately trained’ (Ofsted, 2012, p.3). Despite changes to the curriculum mandating compulsory RSE in 2020, the situation does not appear to be improving with many teachers continuing to feel ill-equipped to deliver the subject:

> A recent joint survey by the NSPCC and teaching union NASUWT found that nearly half of secondary school teachers (46%) do not feel confident delivering RSE (2022). Similarly, in a Sex Education Forum survey (2018a) a mere 6% of teachers had learnt about RSE as part of their initial teacher training, and less than half of teachers said their training to deliver RSE is adequate.
>
> (Sex Education Forum, 2022, p. 11)

Young people consistently report that school-based RSE does not address the topics which they feel are most urgent and that it fails to adequately prepare them to navigate early sexual experiences and relationships. The Sex Education Forum’s 2019 poll identified significant gaps in learning particularly about sexual pleasure and pornography and their 2022 poll of English 16 and 17 year olds found no evidence of improved practice.

> more than one in five (22%) young people rated the quality of RSE as ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’, an increase of 4 percentage points since 2019. The poll also revealed that ‘basic, mandatory aspects of the curriculum, such as healthy relationships, and how to access sexual health services are frequently missed’, with close to 3 in 10 (28%) young people saying that they had not learnt about ‘how to tell if a relationship is healthy’.
>
> (Sex Education Forum, 2022, p. 4)

The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) found a ‘focus on the physical aspects of reproduction and the lack of any meaningful discussion about feelings, relationships and values’ (2000, p. 11). Although national surveys inevitably involve some degree of self-selection and therefore reflect the views of those motivated to take part, their findings consistently highlight young people’s dissatisfaction with school-based RSE. In my workshops in Surrey schools attached to *Losing It* in 2016 and 2017, participants echoed these concerns: they told me that their RSE prioritised the physical aspects of reproduction whilst failing to address the complexities of emotions and relationships. Overall, young people who took part in my workshops said that their sex education provided good information about puberty, reproduction, contraception and STIs (sexually transmitted infections) but little coverage of consent, sexuality, pornography, gender, rape/sexual violence or sexual pleasure. Taken together, both the national survey data and the testimonies from my workshops support the idea that this underperforming of the curriculum is ongoing and systemic.

Although school-based education clearly has an influence on teenagers understanding of sex and relationships, online pornography arguably has a far greater impact on young people’s collective understanding of consent and intimacy. Access to smartphones among children has increased substantially in recent years. A 2024 UK survey found that 59% of children aged eight to eleven owned a smartphone, rising to 95% among those aged twelve to fifteen (Statista, 2024). As access to smartphones and broadband expands, so too does children’s exposure to online pornography. Evidence from multiple studies highlights the early age at which children are now encountering

pornographic material. The Children's Commissioner (Rachel de Souza, 2023) found that exposure is 'widespread and normalised – to the extent that children cannot "opt out"', reporting that the average age of first exposure is thirteen, with 10% of children having seen pornography by age nine, 27% by age eleven, and half of those exposed having seen it by age thirteen. Similar findings were identified by Elena Martellozzo *et al*. (2016) in their research for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), which revealed that by ages eleven to twelve, most young people had already encountered pornography, and by fifteen to sixteen, 'young people were more likely to have seen pornography than not' (p.26). Together, these studies demonstrate that exposure to pornography among children and adolescents is not exceptional but typical and is now a routine feature of growing up online. Early exposure has been associated with an increased likelihood of risky and violent sexual behaviour. Miranda A.H Horvath *et al*. (2013) found that pornography exposure shaped young people's sexual beliefs and was linked to engagement in 'risky behaviours', while Gemma McKibbin (2017) suggested that early access to pornography may contribute to sexually harmful behaviour among children who sexually abuse others.

Martellozzo *et al*. (2016) further argue that some children and young people are turning to pornography as a substitute for sex and relationships education, with significant effects on their understanding of sexual relationships. These findings were echoed in the workshops conducted as part of my own research, where many young people reported that pornography was their primary source of information about sex (see Chapter 3). Martellozzo *et al*'s report notes that watching

pornography can distort expectations and lead to the imitation of behaviours seen on screen, including:

> Rough-sex; copying the illegal activities defined as extreme pornography in the UK, (for example actions which are likely to cause damage to breasts or genitalia).
>
> (Martellozzo *et al*., 2016, p.42)

Research from the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC, 2020) also identified links between pornography consumption and physically aggressive sexual behaviour. In Martellozzo *et al*'s report the academic findings are echoed in the voices of young people themselves. As one thirteen-year-old boy observed, 'One of my friends has started treating women like he sees on the videos – not major – just a slap here or there.' A thirteen-year-old girl explained, 'You can learn bad things like watching anal sex, and then some boys might expect that from their partner' (Martellozzo *et al*., 2016, p.38). Such comments illustrate the internalisation of behaviours and expectations learned through pornography. Flood (2009) takes this argument further, suggesting that pornography use among young men 'intensifies attitudes supportive of sexual coercion and increases their likelihood of perpetrating assault' (p.392). This is reinforced by the Children's Commissioner's (2023) review, which reported that:

> Young people are frequently exposed to violent pornography, depicting coercive, degrading or pain-inducing sex acts; 79% had encountered violent pornography before the age of 18. Young people expressed concern about the implications of violent pornography on their understanding of the difference between sexual pleasure and harm. Indeed, this report finds that frequent users of pornography are more likely to engage in physically aggressive sex acts.

(de Souza, 2023)

Alongside exposure to pornography, ‘sexting’, often referred to by young people as ‘sending nudes’ has become a prominent feature of adolescent sexual culture. Jessica Dully *et al*. (2023) found that 19.3% of individuals under eighteen had sent a sext, 34.8% had received one, and 14.5% had forwarded a sext without consent. Although some studies suggest that sexting can be a ‘normative, and sometimes even positive, part of adolescent sexual development’ (Dully *et al*., 2023) it remains clear that the creation and distribution of self-generated sexual images, both consensual and non-consensual, has become commonplace among teenagers in Europe, Australia and America.

This cultural shift, towards an increasingly sexualised culture in which sexualised images are commonplace, should not be shied away from when creating plays addressing issues of gender and sexuality for young people. With some young people seeming to struggle to understand that the representations and narratives portrayed in porn may be different to those experienced in sexual encounters in real life, there is a clear need for increased critical understanding and media literacy around pornography. There is, as Paul Byron *et al*’s 2021 review identifies, a lack of peer reviewed scholarly material on this topic and what research is available tends to focus on a top-down approaches designed to educate young people to acknowledge the unrealistic aspects of pornography to protect them against its perceived harms (p. 788). Their study identifies that much existing research seem to equate ‘unrealistic’ with any sexual practices which fall outside of,

> sexuality that is ‘good,’ ‘normal,’ and ‘natural’ should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female.
>
> (Rubin, 1992, cited in Byron *et al*., 2021, p.790)

As a practitioner committed to a sex positive and queer inclusive approach, it is clear that pedagogical approaches to building porn literacy need to move beyond identifying porn as ‘unrealistic’ to a more nuanced understanding of authenticity in pornographic films which acknowledges the blurred lines between what is real and what is performative. Aidan McGlynn 2021 study asks the question, ‘how fictional is pornography?’, and explains,

> Even when we are dealing with a recognisably fictional pornographic film, the performers that depict the characters in the nominal portrayal are really engaged in many or all of the sexual acts being shown. In that sense, they’re not just acting; to think they are involves ignoring how the nominal portrayal of such films is depicted by real people, objects, places, and actions.
>
> (McGlynn, 2021, p.800)

Young people’s widespread access to pornography has had a significant impact on this project and I will explain in more detail in Chapter 3 the ways in I have experienced, first hand, young people’s understanding of sex and sexuality being constructed actively by watching porn. In Chapter 3 I will engage more with scholarship related to authenticity and will also argue that watching a live production could serve as a remedy to consuming ‘hyper-realistic’ (Baudrillard, 2001, p.174) sexual content

re-engaging empathetic responses which have been potentially eroded by watching pornography (Dines, 2011).

The issue of young people encountering online content that is violent, hypersexualised, or misogynistic in its imagery, ideology or rhetoric extends beyond pornography. There has been an alarming increase in the numbers of young men identifying as incels. As Joe Whittaker *et al* describe,

> Incels are a primarily online sub-culture community of men who forge a sense of identity around their perceived inability to form sexual or romantic relationships. The incel community operates almost exclusively online, providing an outlet for expressing misogynistic hostility, frustration and blame toward society for a perceived failure to include them.
>
> (Whittaker, Costello & Thomas, 2024)

Whittaker *et al*'s research into the psychological and ideological characteristics of individuals who identify as incels shows a pattern of significant mental-health vulnerabilities. Their study identifies high levels of depression, suicidality, anger and a pronounced sense of victimhood combined with elevated indicators of neurodiversity and a shared belief system that positions women, particularly feminists, as responsible for their marginalisation. These findings resonate with broader analyses that situate the incel community within the wider manosphere: a loose network of online spaces that promote rigid forms of masculinity, hostility toward women, and anti-feminist sentiment. Anne Speckhard & Molly Ellenberg (2022) emphasise that incels occupy a distinctive position within this ecosystem, sharing features with other "beta male" subcultures located in the geek and gamer realms. Drawing on Debbie Ging's work, they note that these spaces are often characterised by a

mixture of aggrieved entitlement, perceived social exclusion, and a collective narrative of grievance. Taken together, this research highlights how online misogynistic cultures such as incel communities produce and sustain powerful narrative frameworks through repetition, collective identity, and shared grievance. For my practice, this raises questions about how theatrical storytelling, particularly polyphonic and dialogic forms of playbuilding, might intervene in or complicate such narratives. The play *Man Up* emerges from this context, exploring how performance can create spaces for critical reflection on masculinity, consent, and intimacy that differ from the closed, self-reinforcing structures of online forums.

Historically, the manosphere has thrived in obscure corners of the internet but Kaitlyn Regehr *et al*'s 2024 research project examines the popularisation of extreme misogynistic ideology in social media and its detrimental effect on young people. It draws particular attention to the algorithmic forces within the TikTok platform which they argue grooms vulnerable young men by masquerading extreme content aligned with incel ideology, once limited to the dark web or obscure discord servers, as gamified entertainment. This content normalises misogynistic attitudes towards women threatening the safety of both online and real-life spaces for young women and girls. A study by Jessica Ringrose *et al* revealed that most of the women and girls surveyed reported widespread digital sexual violence, image-based sexual harassment and image-based sexual abuse (Ringrose et al., 2021)A 2017 freedom of information request to UK police by Barnardo's and the Times Educational Supplement (TES) respectively revealed that in the previous four years allegations of peer sexual abuse had risen by 78% with

sexual offences taking place on school properties increasing by 255% (Busby, 2017) Furthermore, the 2024 Unison Sexism in Schools teachers' Survey found that 'sexual harassment, sexist language and gender stereotyping are a major issue in schools.' with a quarter of secondary school teachers saying they had witnessed sexual harassment of female pupils and members of staff.

I include this important research into the impact of social media on young people's actions, and the role it plays in making spaces unsafe for women and girls both online and offline, because it provides critical context for the work I have created. In 2023, I made the decision to retire *Losing It* and to write a new play, *Man Up*, following a noticeable increase in disruptive and abusive behaviour from young men within school audiences. This shift marked a turning point in my practice, prompting a reconsideration of both form and pedagogical approach in response to changing audience dynamics. Research by Kaitlyn Regehr *et al*. (2024), a collaboration between University College London (UCL) and the University of Kent, provided the foundation for *Man Up*, an ethnodramatic piece created to communicate these findings to young people in an accessible and dialogic form. The project was supported through a partnership with, and partial funding from, the University of Kent. I discuss the making of this play in depth in Chapter 4.

One of the central responses to these challenges within my practice has been an increased emphasis on peer-led models of engagement. Part of my strategy in counteracting this overly sexualised culture, in which women are routinely objectified, relies on a peer led model where young people, only a few years older than the audiences

the work addresses, help to develop and then deliver a narrative in performance which tackles the themes at hand. This is a model I have refined with my theatre company Peer Productions over the past almost twenty years; young actors aged 18 to 25 years develop and deliver plays exploring complex social issues (including those around relationships and sex) essentially acting as peer educators for their younger peers. The idea of building a theatre company on this premise came to me when I was creating a production of Tectonic Theatre's *The Laramie Project* (2001) which was performed by 16 to 18-year-olds from my youth theatre to secondary school age pupils. Although not initially intended as such, the project quickly became a vehicle through which to challenge homophobia in schools. In post-show discussions, I witnessed how the older teen performers effectively challenged and transformed homophobic attitudes among younger audience members, with some young men in the audiences appearing to quickly reconsider their views when questioned by the peer educators. This piqued my interest in why such interactions might be more effective than those between a teacher and student, as well as how these interactions might function as sites of intervention. Advocates for peer education often draw on psychologist Albert Bandura's social learning model (Bandura, 1977, 2019) which suggests that one of the ways in which we learn is by observing how other people behave and then modelling our own behaviours in response. In Peer Productions' output, the peer-to-peer element plays an essential role in how the work engages and affects young audiences, the evidence supporting peer education as an effective tool in health education remains limited. Steven Dodd *et al*.'s (2022) review of existing studies concludes:

> A number of interventions appear to demonstrate evidence for effectiveness, suggesting peer education may be a promising strategy for health improvement in schools. Improvement in health-related knowledge was most common with less evidence for positive health behaviour change. In order to quantitatively synthesise the evidence and make more confident conclusions, there is a need for more robust, high-quality evaluations of peer-led interventions using standardised health knowledge and behaviour measures.
>
> (p.1)

Research which does, at least tentatively, support the effectiveness of peer led sex education is, as you might expect, focussed on classroom based interactive sessions. A 2017 study by Emma Dobson *et al* found that peer-led sex education sessions could be more effective because learners felt more comfortable, less judged, and therefore were more willing to participate when peers led the discussions. They viewed the peer educators as more relatable and less authoritarian. They found that peer-led sessions helped to balance power dynamics, particularly around topics like gender and sexuality, fostering a more open, inclusive, and participatory learning environment. The effectiveness of peer education is not only predicated on identity. To understand the interpersonal dynamics at play when a young person delivers RSE to their peers, Jessica Fields and Martha Copp (2015) propose that empathy plays a central role. They argue that assuming that the peer educators have an affinity with those they are educating, based on shared experiences or identity, risks homogenising all young people together and instead they advocate for an alliance-based empathy which builds understanding without assuming sameness and where peer educators actively listen and stand in solidarity with peer-learners not because they have the same lived experience but because they care about the other person’s well-being and human rights.

This research unfolds two models of peer education. In chapters 2 and 3, I describe and analyse participatory sessions which were co-led by peer educators with teenage parents and secondary school students respectively. In chapter 4, I describe a move away from peer-led interactive sessions as a source for playmaking, instead adopting an ethnodramatic approach where young actors from Peer Productions interacted with existing research to develop material to inform the final script for *Man Up*. I argue that when young actors are performing these plays as part of the PSHE curriculum, they are adopting a peer educator role even if their encounters with the learners is less interactive. Dobson *et al*'s suggestion that learners find peer educators more relatable chimes with testimonies from audience members, and I explore this process of identifying with an actor and/or the character they play in more detail in chapter 4. The importance of empathy, as foregrounded by Fields and Copp (2015), is a central area of enquiry in my thesis and I explore existing literature about empathy in theatre later in this chapter and apply these ideas more forensically in Chapter 4 in my account of creating *Man Up*.

Situating this practice within a wider educational landscape, theatre's capacity to create shared spaces for storytelling, reflection, and dialogue has long seen it used to address issues of sex, relationships, violence, and gender within secondary school settings. Despite the instability of the contemporary funding environment for such work, there are theatre companies which, alongside Peer Productions, continue to deliver work in secondary schools which tackle issues related to sex, violence and gender which is delivered as part of the RSE curriculum in

schools. For example, Alter Ego Creative Solutions' play *Chelsea's Story* (formerly *Chelsea's Choice*) now produced by Theatre for Schools (2023) by Sean McGrath explores the dangers of grooming and has been seen by over 950,000 young people UK-wide. Charlie Josephine's play *Birds and Bees* (2023), which was designed to support teachers with sex education (*Birds and Bees Digital Package,* 2020) has been digitally produced by Theatre Centre and similar projects have taken place in other countries. While such projects are often widely disseminated and positively received, there remains a notable lack of sustained, in-depth research into their efficacy as educational interventions. A scoping review by Nicky Stanley *et al* (2015) into a range of different interventions regarding domestic abuse (a topic which is included as part of RSE) found that,

> The lack of committed funding for interventions has contributed to short-termism both in schools and in the domestic abuse sector where many programmes are developed.
>
> (p.168)

Despite the paucity of scholarly research on theatre-based domestic abuse prevention, with only one study (Ruth Ann Belknap *et al*., 2013) identified in their comprehensive systematic review, Stanley *et al* still include drama/theatre as one of their seven core recommendations for effective prevention programmes in UK secondary schools. This recommendation is based on compelling qualitative evidence from stakeholder consultations with both the young people and the experts who were consulted advocating for the use of theatre as these approaches had the capacity to deliver an emotionally engaging experience which felt authentic to all young people while bringing particular benefits for children with lower levels of literacy. It is this evidence base to which my own study seeks to contribute, and within

this significant gap in scholarly discourse that this project seeks to contribute new knowledge.

Jessica McElwee and Claire Fox's (2020) research supports Stanley *et al*.'s recommendation for theatre-based approaches. Their mixed-methods study, which included survey data from 294 pupils aged 11-19 years and focus groups with 20 students across two schools, analysed the effectiveness of *Love Hurts* - a drama-based intervention programme aimed at secondary-school aged young people in the UK, focusing on intimate-partner/relationship abuse and healthy/unhealthy relationship dynamics. The study found that learners valued how drama allowed them to understand domestic abuse from multiple view points; victim, perpetrator, witness, and friend. As I will explore further in Chapters 3 and 4, learner feedback about *Losing It* echoed these kinds of sentiments about the value of perspective-taking. Also, in keeping with feedback on Peer Productions' plays, learners in the *Love Hurts* focus groups described how the use of theatre created an emotional charge which was more engaging than traditional classroom-based teaching, and how the age-appropriate characters and realistic scenarios felt both authentic and relatable (McElwee & Fox, 2020, pp. 1035-1036).

McElwee and Fox's research also highlighted challenges that need careful attention in theatre-based relationship education. The study revealed significant gender differences, with female students responding more positively overall to the programme, suggesting that multiple pedagogical approaches are needed to engage students of all genders effectively. Additionally, some students, particularly female ones,

reported feeling anxious about future relationships after viewing the play, with concerns that partners ‘can change and can turn into a bad person, so you can't trust someone fully’ (McElwee & Fox, 2020, p. 1036). This indicates the need to balance warnings about abusive relationships with positive examples of healthy partnerships. Finally, their findings echoed earlier research showing that theatre works best as part of a sustained curriculum rather than as a one-off intervention (McElwee & Fox, 2020, p. 1041).

Rather than simply exploring whether theatrical performance can constitute an effective pedagogical mode for sex education within comprehensive RSE frameworks, my own study scrutinises the specific dramaturgical and writerly approaches that impact audience reception and examines how these theatrical strategies function as effective educational tools. My overall hypothesis is that a blend of inadequate RSE programmes together with increased access to hardcore pornography and widespread and normalised misogynistic online content results in young people developing unrealistic expectations and becoming less able to empathise with their potential sexual partners resulting in an increase in risk-taking and abusive behaviours. In this thesis I examine how carefully crafted plays can contribute to comprehensive sex education and I propose that watching the live event of a play, particularly when performed by young actors of a similar age, can re-envision and inform young audiences’ understanding of consent and intimacy and increase their empathetic abilities. Although these ideas are practically applied in the context of RSE, by forensically analysing my specific playwriting and dramaturgical tactics, I aim to

provide insights for theatre-makers interested in social change more widely and especially those with a feminist agenda.

Positioning My Practice within Applied Theatre through Affect and Empathy

Having foregrounded the ubiquity and potential harm of pornography and social media and the inadequacy of current pedagogical approaches to teaching young people about sex and relationships in UK schools and advocated for a creative and peer led approach, I will now situate my work more holistically within the broader and interlinked disciplines of Theatre in Education (TIE), Theatre for Social Change and Applied Theatre. My work bears similarity with earlier TIE practice from the 1970s and 80s, as documented by Anthony Jackson and Chris Vine (2013) and described by Roger Wooster (2016) as ‘classic’ TIE which was characterised by an unapologetic commitment to didacticism and a belief that experiencing theatre, whether as an audience member or as a participant, can be a powerful educational tool and therefore an agent of social change. But the rise of neoliberal values and approaches to funding cultural activity (as documented by Louise Owen in *Restaging the Future Neoliberalization, Theater, and Performance in Britain* (2024)), which has been prevalent from New Labour onwards - therefore my entire working career- has significantly influenced the work which has often been financially supported based, not on its aesthetic value, but on its promise to effect social change. I will explore these tensions between aesthetic and interventionist agendas more fully later in this chapter.

In his short essay ‘Agents of the Future – theatre-in education’ in Sandy Craig’s edited collection *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative theatre in Britain* (1980) Tony Coult draws attention to the way in which TIE, in its early incarnations, subscribed to the idea that human nature is not fixed but alterable and focussed on developing how young people think about the world they live in.

> TIE seeks to nurture creative, sceptical and analytical systems of thought in young people. TIE is a humanistic art-form. It supposes that human nature is not fixed or universal, but is determined by social activity, and is therefore alterable.
>
> (Coult, 1980, p. 84)

This description resonates strongly with my own practice which aims to use theatre as a tool to help young people to think more critically and to ultimately influence their attitudes and behaviours in early sexual relationships. My work shares an ideology with those early TIE companies, but it is important to acknowledge that my practice has been heavily influenced and informed by the changing socio-political landscape of the past twenty-five years which offered a very different working environment to that encountered by the TIE companies Coult described. After an initial period of expansion and development supported by the left-wing government, these ‘classic TIE’ companies went on to face cuts to publicly funded arts, the introduction of the National Curriculum, and changes to school budget management which resulted in a significant reduction in work in the field in the 1980s (Nicholson, 2009, pp. 37–39). My work emerged over twenty years later in a stagnant field where there was a tangible concern from some arts funders and the broader theatrical community that TIE represented ‘the

cruder use of the medium' (Etherton and Prentki, 2006, p.147) holding 'limited theatrical aspirations' (Mary Cooper, 2013).

In 2006, when I started Peer Productions, TIE varied dramatically in quality; challenges with funding, reinforced by negative attitudes towards the artform, meant that work within the field was sometimes hastily developed or poorly produced. My decision to stage my plays with young people as performers and educators, was informed by a commitment to peer education, but was also a pragmatic response to an underfunded field. Put simply, if the actors were not young volunteers, I would not have been able to deliver work in schools at the scale that I have. At Peer Productions we have mitigated the potential inequity of the young people providing unpaid labour by delivering the tours as part of a comprehensive free training programme which provides support with career development and access to drama school alongside individual mentorship and skills development. This reciprocal arrangement, where actors receive free training in exchange for performing in the plays, is itself a byproduct of the overarching funding landscape in which sustaining TIE is extremely challenging.

In ideological and aesthetic terms, I align my practice more broadly with political theatre and theatre for social change and specifically with modernist theatre thinkers Bertolt Brecht, Edward Bond and, to a lesser extent, Augusto Boal. I am especially interested in how modes of writing and theatrical expression inspired by Brecht's Epic Theatre and Bond's Theatre Event can be developed, particularly with audiences whose sustained daily interactions with online platforms may have desensitised them to extreme content and exacerbated their struggles to form real

world connections. Although the performances I develop are less interactive, I am interested too in Augusto Boal's methodology which blurs the roles of spectator and actor, thereby opening a space of performative potentiality in which social norms can be reimagined. I therefore situate my practice firmly alongside twentieth century theatre approaches designed to educate or effect social change, revisiting key pedagogic and performative principles but re-purposing them for a feminist agenda and in a post-modern twenty-first century context. I will explore these specific theatre-making approaches more extensively in this chapter 3.

It would be remiss not to acknowledge the ways in which broader and more contemporary discourse in Applied Theatre has influenced my approach. Applied Theatre emerged as a term in the late 90s, in part in response to a rise in neoliberal values which saw cultural experiences and education increasingly run like businesses (Nicholson, 2005, p.5; Owen, 2024, p.22). This period coincided with my completion of my undergraduate degree and my formation of my foundational ideas about theatre and its potential and purpose. Applied Theatre, as an umbrella term (Judith Ackroyd, 2000, p.2), which has been theorised extensively by theatre academics including Philip Taylor (2003), James Thompson (2003), Helen Nicholson (2005), Tim Prentki and Nicola Abraham (2020) Juliana Saxton and Monica Prendergast (2013) and Nicola Shaughnessy (2012), has been generally characterised as theatre which is designed intentionally to support individuals and communities. While distinctions have been made between Applied Drama as process driven and Applied Theatre as performance based (Taylor quoted in Grady, 2003, p.68) the two are often used interchangeably although, in my

experience, discourse around process and participatory projects dominates in the field.

While my work is performance-driven, in many ways it is also participatory. For the most part, as noted more briefly above, the performers and co-creators of my plays are trainee actors undertaking the project as part of the Peer Actor Development Programme – a one-year intensive training programme designed to give emerging practitioners (aged 18-25 years) a taste of making theatre as part of a working ensemble and to support them to take their next steps into the industry. They are themselves volunteer participants and they quite often work alongside me with younger groups of participants with whom we research and develop new plays. The young actors in the Peer ensemble work with me to devise specific theatrical moments, performing and reworking scenes I have written until the final play emerges. Part of the uniqueness of the practice lies in the way young voices are central to both the development and performance of the work, and this makes concerns regarding the ethics of intervention and the responsibility of navigating important and potentially harrowing material in a conscious, kind and caring way particularly pertinent. The working process is underpinned by compassion and care and this research project also explores care as a fundamental component of the practice, building on the work of Sylvan Baker and Maggie Inchley (2020), Nicola Abraham (2020) Kathleen Gallagher and Andrew Kushnir (2022) all of whom identify the importance of intentional care within applied theatre processes particularly in relation to representing real, often marginalised, people’s stories and experiences and translated on the stage.

When describing their verbatim theatre practice with young people with experience of care system, Baker and Inchley explain,

> We have aimed to underpin the design and trajectory of our research with an ethics and practice of care that positions the young people as co-researchers, with whom we share verbatim theatre-making techniques, and from whose expertise we are learning.
>
> (Baker & Inchley, 2020, p.173)

Although my own practice does not use young people's words verbatim, the centralising of youth voices, positioning of young people as expert fellow researchers, thus elevating their status in the process from one of participants to co-creators, and the reciprocal exchange between practitioner and youth co-researcher all bears similarity with my practice. This reciprocity and intentionality is echoed by Abraham who, inspired by Paulo Freire, describes how,

> Part of this process requires a dialogical approach to naming and unpacking intentions behind projects. This is not only from the perspective of the practitioner. All stakeholders and beneficiaries should be involved in this conversation for transparency, and to ensure an ethical approach is taken from the start of the project, and revisited, reassessed and refined throughout the course of the process.
>
> (Abraham, 2020, p.72)

This commitment to transparency, to a dialogical and iterative approach, where the ethical implications of the practice are revisited regularly and to the prioritisation of listening as an active action of care also resonates strongly with my own practices, as I will demonstrate in the more detailed accounts of practice to come.

Gallagher and Kushnir foreground the importance of hope alongside listening and care in their research related to making theatre with young people which ultimately explores,

> how theatre-making with young people might cultivate practices, relationships, dispositions, and values that orient them towards and support them in engaged, creative, ethical, relational, and cultural forms of citizenship.
>
> (Gallagher and Kushnir, 2022, p.27)

In the past two decades, the political context in Britain has created an environment which is socially, educationally and financially challenging for many young people to navigate. It is perhaps not surprising that I have regularly encountered in my practice young people who struggle to imagine change is possible and who therefore lack the hope and motivation to play an active role in that change. Like Gallagher and Kushnir, I too am interested in developing a theatre-making practice in which radical hope and creativity might be cultivated to enable young people to become more engaged and more ethically and socially aware citizens.

This research project is undoubtedly anchored by an activist aspiration to intervene and to make change happen. Within the education system, RSE has been allowed to languish as an underdeveloped and inexpertly delivered part of young people's learning. This scenario requires urgent remedial attention, especially considering the well-documented exposure of young people to violent sexual imagery and narratives as well as online and real-world misogyny, surveyed in the section above. Peer Productions' work has generated ample evidence from feedback questionnaires and focus groups which supports the idea that watching plays on themes relevant

to RSE opens discussions and the possibility of change for some young people regarding their attitudes to their social lives and behaviour. However, the crux of this project lies not in *if* the plays are effective but *how* they are effective. How are young people affected by their encounter with peer-led performance, and how might this encounter effect change?

To explore these questions, I attend in detail to the artistry, creative choices and writerly tactics I employ to achieve the desired social objectives. Furthermore, when I discuss how these creative choices, techniques or modes function, I explore how the work is experienced on a sensate, affective and bodily level. I have chosen to adopt the term 'aesthetics' to describe these phenomena. In making this choice, I acknowledge that I am drawing on ideas regarding representation that have been debated for many centuries, including Aristotle's conception of mimesis, which he theorised as a pleasurable cornerstone of learning and knowing, and catharsis, which he described as 'effecting through pity and fear the purification [katharsis] of such emotions' (Aristotle, 1996, p.9). In more contemporary scholarly discourse, I am also drawing on reckonings with the aesthetic experience firmly rooted in my field, including Gareth White's book *Applied Theatre: Aesthetics* (2015) and scholarly work from Joe Winston (2005) as well as his writing in partnership with Brad Haseman (2010). As Haseman and Winston explain there has been something of an 'aesthetic turn' (2010, p.466) in the applied theatre field, in part to combat an overemphasis on social outcomes, with significant scholarly input from James Thompson (2009), Joe Winston (2010) and Nicola Shaughnessy (2012). This research builds on and contributes to this

existing work in applied and social theatre and theatre in education. Additionally, it furthers the ideas presented by Applied Theatre scholars, including Michael Balfour (2009), James Thompson (2009), Helen Nicholson (2014), Matthew Reason (2017) and Dani Snyder-Young (2014) who have all discussed the tensions between the aesthetic and interventionist ambitions of theatre with world changing intentions. These scholarly interventions are crucially relevant to my practice as my plays are usually funded by social rather than artistic funders (mainly independent trusts and foundations) and are thus commissioned and booked primarily not for their artistic merit but for the tacit promise that watching them will affect social change.

This tension between intervention and aesthetics is discussed extensively by both Balfour and Thompson who share a concern that applied theatre and scholarship about applied theatre is suffering from an entrenchment of instrumental logics to the detriment of the aesthetic encounter. Balfour argues that the commissioning of transformation can ‘infect’ the way applied theatre makers conceptualise and communicate their work (2009, p347). His use of the word ‘infects’ here implies that a social agenda is in some way a contaminating force, where using theatre as a tool for social change can lead to 'aesthetic engagement being eroded in the service of pragmatism' (2009, p.350). Like Snyder-Young (2013), he cautions against practitioners espousing naive ambitions disproportionate to the scope of the project. As I noted earlier in this thesis, Balfour advocates for a 'theatre of little changes' to reclaim the aesthetic dimension of the work. Citing Jackson, he suggests creating a more 'playful' space that is less 'persuasive, coercive, objectives-driven' (2007). Balfour’s concerns are shared by Thompson whose early work

creating theatre in prisons led him in 2009 to call for ‘the end of applied theatre’, arguing that, by focusing on the intended outcomes of a project (the effect), we can neglect the ‘bodily responses, sensations and aesthetic pleasure,’ (the affect). (Thompson, 2009, pp.6-7). In my own practice as a playwright who specialises in TIE, I have not felt this tension as keenly, nor do I recognise the suffocating impact of funding agendas on the creative and political scope of the work that Thompson and Snyder-Young describe. Perhaps this is, in part, because the education system is understandably less prescriptive than the criminal justice system. Although funders’ intentions must be considered in the creative design and delivery of my work, in practice I have found that in most cases they adopt a detached position, rarely interfering or even engaging with the creation of the work itself. I would therefore align myself more substantially with Nicholson who states,

> Although I share Thompson’s sentiments about excessive instrumentality, I am not convinced that theatre-makers have favoured narrow outcomes over innovation in theatre form or performance aesthetics.
>
> (Nicholson, 2014, p.6)

I have not felt the pressures of ‘excessive instrumentality’ as, in most instances, I have been allowed a surprising degree of autonomy. I have never been asked by any funders to present a script or work-in-progress and only in very rare cases have any funders even seen the work live, largely remaining content with feedback reports documenting the audiences’ reactions. This lack of censorship has allowed me to make work which includes some riskier material, particularly exploring sex and sexuality in an always frank and often hard-hitting way. Instead, it is the material circumstances of my work, in often challenging and, at times,

hostile underfunded educational environments, which provide a key driver for the aesthetic choices that I make. Peer Productions' young audiences have not chosen to attend our performances autonomously. Encountering our work in the school setting, they are not always particularly welcoming as theatre audiences. Unfortunately, not all teachers are supportive of our work and school staff can sometimes themselves respond disrespectfully or cynically - a reaction perhaps contingent on their own significant workloads and challenging work environment. 86% of teachers in a recent NASUWT survey reported that their job has adversely impacted their mental health in the last 12 months with workload and pupil behaviour most cited as the main contributing factors. (NASUWT 2024)

Without inspired, innovative, and affecting theatrical choices and sharp, clear and engaging storytelling the messaging of the play risks being lost - failing both to emotionally affect the audience and to meaningfully effect social or political change. John O'Toole's comments resonate with my experience when he states, 'The TIE team must satisfy the aesthetic demands of the audience if the instrumental aims are to be considered' (1992, p.125) and 'the better the artistry, the better the learning' (2009, p.484). Nicholson further develops these ideas connecting effect and affect more explicitly with intervention and aesthetics respectively.

> Affect and effect may share a poetic aurality in the English language, but they are not binary opposites, and witnessing many theatrical experiences has convinced me that inspired and inspiring theatre often makes the most difference to people's lives and environments.
>
> (Nicholson, 2014, p.6)

That theatre's social effect is intrinsically bound up in its ability to emotionally affect the audience, is reinforced by my lived experience in delivering socially engaged theatre for teenagers. Richard Schechner identifies seven distinct but interconnected and overlapping functions of performance: to entertain, to create beauty, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach or persuade and to deal with the sacred and the demonic (2013, p.46). In these seven functions, the aesthetic and the social intersect. It is arguably challenging and unhelpful to separate aesthetic and social intentions, as they inform each other – and in this project, in an interconnected process of creative practice research. As Haseman and Winston surmise,

> Such experiences go beyond a mere recognition of conceptual content; instead cognition, imagination, memory and the body work in complex interrelation to produce insight and fresh understanding.
>
> (2010, p. 467)

Although he is writing about participatory theatre rather than the audience experience, Reason's linked suggestion that the intrinsic and instrumental value of art cannot usefully be separated resonates strongly with my own position: he argues that 'if art is a doing, then the artness of art cannot be considered as necessarily separable from its doing-ness' (2017, p. 46).

Through the process of creating and presenting original performances, therefore, artistic choices and social intentions are reciprocally engaged and mutually constitutive: the one is shaped by the other. In the chapters that follow, I explore how this manifests in practice

in the field of making work for young audiences in school settings. Using responses from young people in questionnaires and focus groups I examine how specific aesthetic choices, writerly strategies, and dramaturgical tactics affected them. Their responses reveal how these creative decisions, in combination with the play's educational content, contributed to their understanding of consent and intimacy. On a more macro level, this thesis contributes new knowledge to the field by employing a practice-research approach to interrogate the relationship between affect and effect, and the tension and symbiosis between aesthetics and instrumentality in applied theatre.

Making creative work collaboratively which seeks to act as an instrument for social change or, as Snyder-Young refers to it, a 'theatre of good-intentions' (2013) raises important, ethical questions. In Snyder-Young's 2013 text she critically considers the ways in which artists and commissioners have used theatre as a tactic to achieve social outcomes and pays particular attention to the potential tensions between effect and affect. She highlights the discrepancies between artists' intentions and real-world results and she problematises the lack of attention paid to unintended by-products of the work. Snyder-Young identifies a range of potential 'unintended byproducts' including some - 'Status, job security, profile in the field, grant money, flexibility, ability to recruit desired students and collaborators' (p.27) - which directly benefit the artists leading the work as well as impacts on audiences and participants which were not part of the projects original intentions. She asks:

> How can we examine, evaluate, and communicate the social value of the unintended byproducts of theatre – the relationships built, the pleasure, the catharsis? What are the effects of affect?

(p.139)

Her argument warns practitioners against making grand claims of social transformation and highlights the potentially limited impact of a theatre experience in changing attitudes and ideas, which have been reinforced by the juggernaut that is popular culture. Her warnings make for stark reading especially when I am positioning a one-off performance in a school (albeit with accompanying suggested ongoing educational activities) against a backdrop of a pervasively pornified culture where young people's access to content, which is explicitly or implicitly sexually harmful, is less moderated and more extensive than ever before. As Snyder-Young explains,

> Theatre's liveness prevents it from reaching mass audiences in the ways media does. This means it cannot have the kind of large-scale cultural impact of mass media, mainstream film, or mainstream television. Not enough people can see it. As a result, theatre projects cannot saturate global public consciousness to replace dominant narratives with ones resisting existing power structures.
>
> (2013, p.136)

However, in this research project, I argue that contrary to what Snyder-Young proposes, it is the very liveness and immediacy of the theatrical event, especially in juxtaposition with an overconsumption of digital content, which makes theatrical performance so potentially powerful as a site of education and social change. I return to this idea extensively in Chapters 3 and 4.

Snyder-Young is far from alone in her concern about the ethical implications of a theatre of intervention. Kirsten Sadeghi-Yekta and

Monica Prendergast (2022) offer a comprehensive overview of key work in the field of ethics and applied theatre over the past twenty-five years which documents increasingly sophisticated questions and arguments which applied theatre-makers and scholars have considered in their praxis: of trauma and re-traumatisation, differing notions of 'the good', and the range of expectations attaching to artistic work. Nicholson, for example, asks:

> What do we, as practitioners, expect in return for our labours? Artistic satisfaction? The participants' acquisition of skills or abilities? Do we ask participants to adopt new ways of thinking or different political values? Do we expect them to change their behaviour in particular ways? In turn, how far might our own perspectives alter as a result of the work? What about the funders? Do they have expectations of a return?
>
> (Nicholson, 2003, p.161)

Nicholson's challenging questions about the expectations of reciprocity have influenced how I have thought about and shaped my practice. In all of my work I consider carefully what I am expecting in return from the young people engaged in the practice. How, in particular, can the unpaid labour of the young researchers, participants and actors be mitigated through the benefits they receive through taking part? In the case of our touring actors these benefits take the form of a structured and person-centred accredited training programme whereas for participants there are opportunities to develop their skills and have their voices heard. For example, in The Teenage Pregnancy Project (described in Chapter 2), young parents were given support with role-playing for up-and-coming interviews for college or entry-level work.

There are undoubtedly important ethical considerations with any creative practice which seeks behavioural change, with key questions to consider regarding agency: who decides which views and behaviours are unacceptable and need changing. Ethical considerations are particularly salient in applied theatre projects addressing sex education, given that young people's sexualities are shaped, and often policed, by intersecting legal, ethical, and societal frameworks. While these frameworks can function protectively, they also have the potential to reinforce stigma, limit open discussion, and reproduce normative assumptions about gender, sexuality, and consent. Practitioners must therefore navigate a complex ethical terrain in which they are, not only facilitating education, but also engaging with the broader cultural politics of youth, sex, and power. With the exception of Stanley *et al*'s (2015) scoping review exploring interventions designed to address domestic abuse awareness raising and education, significant scholarly research regarding the use of applied theatre as a mode of sex education more holistically in a UK context is absent. Addressing a South African context, Katherine E. Low's book *Applied theatre and sexual health communication: apertures of possibility* (2020), explores her work as a sex educator in South Africa, and highlights the difficulties of defining both "safe sex" and a "safe space" in a sexual health education programme delivered using applied theatre methods. She highlights a key discrepancy between approaches. Intervention focused on behavioural change is geared towards,

> limiting risk-taking behaviour (such as unprotected sex), abstinence, or even 'harm reduction strategies': in essence, physical and emotional controls on people's behaviours
>
> (p.172)

Meanwhile, she characterises her own approach to ‘safe sex’ as,

> more about negotiating what feels safe for an individual, garnering an understanding of what that word might mean for them that is unique and appropriate to them. It is not some external expectation or value system imposed on individuals; individuals have to be able to negotiate this for themselves, on their own terms.
>
> (p.173)

Low’s emphasis on developing individual awareness and understanding, with everyone taking responsibility for themselves and their actions, reflects my own aims and objectives. My plays documented in this thesis are designed to reduce the prevalence of risky sexual behaviours, sexual harassment, gender-based abused and sexual violence and these are all behaviours which are not only legislated against in law but are also well documented to have detrimental effects on victims and perpetrators. Accordingly, the plays are not devoted to initiating debate about whether young people should be sexually active but about reducing the risk of serious harm caused by sexual assault and rape. The ethical concerns linked to Peer Productions’ projects lie in whether the approach is effective in this aim, and whether it has circumvented unintended harm.

Selina Busby (2023) uses the term axiology ‘to describe questions relating to the concepts of goodness, right conduct, value and obligation throughout the research process’ arguing that these questions ‘should underpin Applied Theatre research’ (Busby, 2023, p.16). Here Busby is drawing attention to the constantly evolving and shifting process of reflexivity in which the applied theatre practitioner must persistently consider to what she is assigning value and why. Busby describes this

as, ‘a continual ethics process that goes beyond an ethical code, ethics committees and guidelines into and beyond research with participants’ (p.16). Busby’s description of axiology as an intentional and ongoing process of assigning value feels particularly appropriate to my iterative theatre-making process which exists against an ever-shifting socio-political climate. Norris and Hobbs who, like me, adopt a playbuilding methodology, acknowledge too that, ‘who controls (is master of) the meaning and/or behaviours is an axiological focus of the playbuilding process’ (p.33). Ideas related to authenticity, representation, intention and power are ones which I will persistently revisit throughout this thesis. As I will demonstrate, the uncertainty in both the process and the socio-political environment means that creative processes and products which at one historical moment feel ethical, well intentioned and appropriate can suddenly feel anything but, in light of wider social and political transformations. Only by persistently revisiting questions related to both social and aesthetic value and by placing care at the heart of the axiological process can a practitioner attempt to navigate this challenging terrain.

Having explored the tension between intervention and aesthetics and considered the importance of asking ethical questions as part of an interventionist process, I will now turn to consider the importance of affect in my work. With my interest in the aesthetic encounter and its impact on emotional and bodily responses (alongside broader societal effects), affect theory is a useful critical lens through which to explore my work. Affect theory is an interdisciplinary framework which emerged in the second half of the 20th century. Ideas surrounding affect were initially developed by pioneers like Silvan Tomkins, who

combined concepts related to psychoanalysis and behaviourism through the lens of affect. Tomkins makes this explicit when he claims that 'the primary motivational system is the affective system, and the biological drives have motivational impact only when amplified by the affective system' (Tomkins, 2008, p. 4). With roots in both psychoanalysis - which focusses on how internal, unconscious thoughts and desires influence feeling and actions and behaviourism – which emphasises observable external behaviours – affect theory offers a potent model through which to conceptualise the holistic human condition, which is at once cognitive, emotional and behavioural. Ideas related to affect were further developed by scholars including Massumi who, building on Spinoza, theorised that,

> When you affect something, you are opening yourself up to being affected in turn and in a slightly different way than you might have been the moment before. You have made a transition, however slight. You have stepped over a threshold. Affect is this passing of a threshold, seen from the point of view of the change in capacity.
>
> **(**2021, p.34.)

Massumi's stance here, where he acknowledges the incremental nature of change, chimes with Balfour's argument for a theatre of little changes. (2009). Affect theory has been adopted more broadly by theatre scholars, which is unsurprising considering the radical potential that we as theatre-makers attest to experiencing, but can often struggle to articulate, where the audience is affected, moved or changed by encountering our work. Massumi's ideas about at once affecting and being affected have resonance too with my experience of delivering theatre in schools where there is a very real, but difficult to quantify,

dynamic between the young performers and their audiences – an energetic exchange in which both performer and audience step into a threshold of potentiality where they can at once change and be changed.

These concepts have been further explored and politicised by thinkers including queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (2003) and feminist critic Sara Ahmed (2014) and have been expanded upon by scholars including Gregg and Seigworth. Gregg and Seigworth argue that '[a]ffect is not a single, unified thing, but a variety of experiences and forces that have the capacity to push us in new directions' (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p.1): thus, they draw attention to the plurality of the affective encounter which can be at once individual and collective. Affect seems especially relevant to my study in these terms: I have sat in many school halls to watch my plays with groups of young people, and I can attest to having 'felt' something happening - tiny changes in the collective mood, a flicker of connection between actor and audience, a glimmer of recognition or a spark of empathy perhaps - and I have often been left frustrated, lacking the vocabulary or meaningful frame through which to conceptualise the phenomena I was witnessing. Affect theory, with its attention to the small, fleeting intensities that Gregg and Seigworth describe as an 'inventory of shimmers' (2010), attends helpfully to the experiences I describe but which, without recourse to such theory, remain somewhat amorphous and slippery – as the concept of affect is itself. As Gregg and Seigworth explain,

> There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be. If anything, it is more tempting to imagine that there can only ever be infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect: theories as diverse and singularly

> delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affects, worlds.
>
> (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p.1)

The openness and multiplicity of affect as a critical lens is at once challenging and desirable. Although it can be difficult to pin down with any surety, its conceptual amenability to the space between thought, feeling and behaviour makes it a useful theoretical approach with which to consider a theatrical encounter, especially one which is so rich in potentiality. Furthermore, the attraction of 'affect' lies in its association with spaces or thresholds of liminal potentiality – another concept of significance within theatre and performance studies. As Schechner explains, the live shared theatrical event, akin to religious rituals, exists in a separate space where existing rules related to time and space are suspended (2013, p.70). Seigworth and Gregg propose that 'Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon.' (2010, p.12) and this idea of being in a gap or a space in between resonates in multiple ways with both my playwriting approach and research project more broadly. The audience, in the liminal space of theatrical encounter, is involved in conceptually 'blending' whereby, as Shaughnessy explains,

> Knowledge of the 'real' through the spatiality, temporality and materiality of the here and now of the experienced performance environment interacts with our understanding of the 'not real' of the imagined and performed.
>
> (2012, p.300)

The constitution of the 'real' or 'authentic' are especially relevant to an emerging culture where AI and Deep Fake dominate, and are put to use with intent to persuade, sometimes maliciously. The mediation of

'realness', and the experience of liveness, are ideas I discuss in more detail in chapters 2, 3 and 4 where I provide a more thorough exploration of my processes of making plays.

Within my playwriting, I am interested in not just reflecting how young people do act but also how they could act differently, finding writerly tactics which allow the audience a glimpse into illuminating moments when the characters' thoughts, intentions and actions do not align and often 'acting out' how situations could have been changed. This interest has a substantive connection to affect theory. Massumi describes,

> I use the concept of 'affect' as a way of talking about that margin of manoeuvrability, the 'where we might be able to go and what we might be able to do' in every present situation.
>
> (2015, p. xvi)

Here Massumi focuses on the potentiality of the human and the possibilities for positive change. This aspect is likewise reflected in the characters and narratives I depict and my aspirations for how the plays e/affect the audience. It is this emphasis on the potential for change and the possibilities of what 'might be' or 'could be', as well as its blending of the body and mind, real and unreal, render affect theory a valuable lens through which to view the effects of my practice.

Within the field of applied theatre, Thompson advocated in the late 2000s for an 'affective turn' which addresses the risk within a results-driven culture of 'bleaching accounts of the substance and complexity of the work' and reducing 'complex experiences to indicators of effect'

(2009, p118). He argues that ‘Beauty, the call of the face, and a broad attention to the *shock of thoughts* produced by an affective register can be part of an explicitly political and aesthetic project’ (2009, p.178). Here Thompson is referencing the Deleuzean concept of ‘shock to thought’, which he describes earlier as ‘agitating’ with an ability to ‘sustain sensation’ (pp. 124-125) and as ‘a precondition for critical engagement with the world’ before going on to align it with Brecht’s desire to startle (p.135). This is relevant to my work as my plays are designed to impact not only behaviours, but also thoughts and perceptions, and I endeavour to find aesthetically startling ways to achieve that goal. Thompson makes a much-needed case for ‘the radical potential of the freedom to enjoy beautiful radiant things’ without limiting discussion to ‘identifiable social outcomes, messages or impact’ (Thompson 2009, p.16). My research, with its detailed analysis of my writerly and creative tactics and attention to the live shared experience of watching a play, explores how the aesthetic and affective experience work together to deliver the social effect.

My hope and intention are that, by providing opportunities for young audience members to experience an affective response to the work, they might consequently develop a greater sense of empathy in relation to the scenarios my plays represent. Although empathy may be the result of an affective experience, or the specific emotions triggered by an affective experience, it warrants consideration in its own right as a specific phenomenon which I am interested in investigating. In my own practice I have witnessed young people, in many workshops, struggling to understand a situation from other people’s points of view. This idea is supported by some research including that of American psychologist

Jean Twenge (2010 and 2013) in which she writes extensively about the decline in empathy among adolescents, arguing that the rise of smartphones and social media plays a significant role in decreasing empathy and increasing loneliness. In a similar way to affect, empathy remains ‘a broad, somewhat slippery concept – one that has provoked considerable speculation, excitement, and confusion’ (Eisenberg and Strayer, 1987). The word provides specific challenge for theatre scholars as Nicola Shaughnessy explains of the legacy of Brecht, ‘whose references to ‘crude empathy’ and mimesis have a tendency to be misunderstood and simplified in the critique of ‘identification’ (Shaughnessy, 2012, p.6).I was part of a generation of theatre students who were introduced to Brecht as an innovator who, through his concept of Epic Theatre, led drama away from emotionally-driven, unthinking naturalism which rendered an audience passive to a more political and intellectual mode of enquiry where the audience were left empowered; more reductive accounts present Brecht as anti-emotion. In this research, drawing on Brecht’s own writings, I demonstrate the shortcomings of this interpretation of his work, and explore empathy as a concept which is at once affective, emotional, cognitive and political.

Bruce McConachie differentiates between sympathy, which may lead to care and concern, and empathy with its unique ’perspective taking’ quality which can also lead to antipathy (2015, p.15). This distinction is a useful starting point when trying to pin down the term. Bennett’s compelling empathy model, which I encountered via Shaughnessy’s writing, comes closer to my own practice-based understanding. She writes:

> This conjunction of affect and critical awareness may be understood to constitute the basis of an empathy grounded not in affinity (feeling for another in so far as we can imagine being that other) but on a feeling for another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible. Empathy, in this formulation, is characterized by a distinctive combination of affective and intellectual operations, but also by a dynamic oscillation, “a constant tension of going to and fro.” as Nikos Papastergiadis has put it, “of going closer to be able to see, but also never forgetting where you are coming from . . . empathy is about that process of surrender . . . but also the catch that transforms your perception.”
>
> (Bennett, 2005, p.10)

Here Bennett, echoing Brecht, brings together the intellectual with the embodied and alludes to a state of in-betweenness where the person experiencing the aesthetic encounter is in perpetual flux as they oscillate between feeling for another and feeling and thinking for themselves. Shaughnessy suggests that Bennett’s definition provides a more useful framework through which to consider applied performance.

> This notion of an empathetic ‘encounter’ with something enigmatic and generally regarded as ‘inaccessible’ promoting kinaesthetic and critical empathy provides an apt introduction to the work discussed here under the rubric of applied performance.’
>
> (Shaughnessy, 2012, p. 7)

She goes on to argue that ‘empathic response is central to the transformative potential of theatre and performance as a medium which is experiential and in which knowledge is embodied.’ (2012, p.18) My research, which critically considers the relationship between polyphonic approaches to playbuilding and storytelling and empathetic engagement, builds on that of Shaughnessy (2012) and practically tests different approaches to evoking empathetic engagement as part of school based

RSE.

Having positioned my practice in the context of theatre for social change and foregrounded the significance of aesthetics, affect and empathy, I will now turn to explore more specifically the role of the playwright in Theatre-in-Education. There is a notable absence of academic research that directly examines the role of the playwright in theatre-in education although Mary Cooper (2013), Mark Wheeller (2013, 2017, 2021, 2022), and Sarah Jane Dickenson (2015) each offer valuable practitioner perspectives that inform my enquiry. Cooper reflects on the tensions of working within stakeholder and commissioner expectations; Wheeller provides ethnographic accounts of collaboratively creating plays with young people; and Dickenson offers insight into her own writerly and dramaturgical strategies. Taken together, their work begins to sketch a fragmented picture of the playwright's role, but there remains a significant gap in research that interrogates how co-creation with young people, alongside specific writerly and dramaturgical choices, works in practice and shapes audience reception and engagement. My research aims to address this gap by offering an original contribution grounded in my own practice as a playwright.

Mary Cooper's detailed chapter exploring the complex and varied role of playwrights in theatre in education in Anthony Jackson's book *Learning through theatre* (2013) offers a much-needed methodology or framework for those working in the field, identifying common pitfalls and challenges inherent in what she describes as the 'instrumental nature of the TIE brief' in which, 'not only is the writer attempting to fulfil all the

aesthetic and artistic requirements of the 'good script' but, within this, they are delegated to create an instrument of education.' (Cooper, 2013, p.110). Broadly she argues for writers looking beyond the specific brief and identifying the more universal question at the heart of the work. More specifically she advocates for open communication between commissioner and playwright, for detailed and holistic research and for a process of writing and redrafting in response to self-critique and feedback. A case study of Cooper's play *Forever* (2004), a play designed to reduce teenage conception, in another of Jackson's books *Theatre Education and the Making of Meanings* (2007) in which she conducts her own research into the efficacy of her play, offers insight into how to approach a young audience following a performance. In a process similar to my approach to evaluating *Man Up* she mainly uses semi-structured group interviews 'based on a set of semi-closed questions amplified and adjusted from group to group according to what each group wished to talk about' (p.220). However, in neither text does she venture specifically into how writerly tactics used by playwrights, in their applied theatre work, could affect an audience.

Mark Wheeller's extensive writing (2013, 2017, 2021, 2022) provides commentaries that explain his playwriting process and stands out as a rare account of a playwright contextualising and analysing the creative process of making a didactic play from start to finish. I was already aware of Wheeller's work as a practitioner when developing my own plays for secondary school audiences, particularly his commitment to addressing social issues through drama and his use of collaborative methods with young people. Wheeller, who has several plays on the GCSE curriculum, is the most prolific issue-based dramatist in the UK

and yet his plays have attracted very little academic attention. Wheeller refers to his work as verbatim and in the introduction to *Too Much Punch for Judy* (1987) he states, ‘The success and effectiveness of *Too Much Punch for Judy* stems from the fact that it is true and “Judy” is real.’ (p. 10). A more forensic analysis of his own accounts of his practice highlights the importance of young people as co-creators and of improvisation as integral to his process, and in this respect, there are clear similarities to my work. Wheeller describes how he ‘appointed a small group of sixth formers to become a structuring group’ (2021, p130) when creating his play *Graham: World's Fastest Blind Runner!* even dispatching cast members off to independently research and interview people.

> Meanwhile Fran (Jackson) and Matt were off to Scotland (by train on their own - they were 17 and today this would never be allowed) to interview Bill Aitken. They went because it saved on expenses to have them on the train!
>
> (2021, p. 141)

Wheeller, who began his career as a secondary school drama teacher, understandably frames his commentary primarily around the needs of those teaching and learning curriculum-based drama. As a result, his writing offers less detailed analysis of how such co-creative processes operate dramaturgically, or how they shape audience reception, affective engagement, and ethical responsibility. My own project attempts to extend this discussion by critically examining not only collaborative process but also the aesthetic and dramaturgical consequences of these choices, testing their efficacy through audience evaluation questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups.

While Wheeller's writing foregrounds process and collaboration, it engages less directly with questions of aesthetic strategy and the relationship between artistic form and educational purpose. These questions are taken up more explicitly in the work of Sarah Jane Dickenson. Her article 'The playwright and applied drama' (2015) challenges the notion that aestheticism and didacticism or instrumentalism are in opposition. Dickenson unpicks her own use of playwriting techniques to make plays that achieve our shared ambition of being aesthetically, creatively and educationally effective. Her techniques include using representational alongside more well-rounded characters, the exploration of memories, metaphor and a chorus that connects directly with the audience. She argues that,

> Ultimately in all the drama I create I approach the project from the perspective best explained by Heathcote when she wrote that drama 'does not freeze a moment in time, it freezes a problem in time, and you examine the problem as the people go through a process of change.
>
> (Dickenson, 2015, p.287)

Here, when Dickenson describes both the distillation of a problem or idea and the importance of characters (and potentially the audience) undergoing a process of change, her ideas have synergy with the work of both Bertolt Brecht and Edward Bond. In this thesis I build on both Dickenson's approach and the thinking of Brecht and Bond to offer insight into my own playwriting tactics testing their efficacy using audience evaluation questionnaires, interviews and focus groups.

Brecht's ideas about the potential of theatre to act as a catalyst for social change have had a strong impact on my work. Although Brecht's

learning plays were not made specifically for young audiences, he is clearly interested in the social and the behavioural - 'I show them the parables: if you act this way the following will happen, but if you act like that the opposite will take place' (Brecht, 2015, p.67). The tendency to understand Brecht's Epic Theatre as being anti-empathy is, as described by Shaughnessy, a misinterpretation. Far from being averse to engaging feeling in his audience, Brecht was, instead, fascinated by how feelings can be galvanised to action stating that,

> The key thing about epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the spectators' emotions than to their reason. The spectator is not supposed to share in the experiences of the characters but to question them, dispute them. At the same time it would be quite wrong to try to deny the role of emotion in this kind of theatre. That would be like still attempting to deny the role of emotion in science.
>
> (Brecht, 2015, p. 39)

Brecht's extensive writing sees 'humankind (as) changeable and able to change things,' (Brecht, 2015. P.65). He argued that, for theatre to make social change, it must move beyond forms which *only* 'enable the audience to have feelings' (2015, p.3), and which envelop them in narrative form that seems to unfold inexorably, a type of storytelling he termed the 'dramatic theatre'. Instead, it must awaken the audiences' activity, turning them from passive spectators into active observers who are forced to make decisions (Brecht, 2015, p.65). He proposed a manifesto for making his Epic Theatre which would achieve what he referred to as verfremdung.

> Verfremdung estranges an incident or character simply by taking from the incident or character what is self-evident, familiar, obvious in order to produce wonder and curiosity.
>
> (Brecht, 2015, p.143).

The idea of viewing the familiar with renewed attentiveness is important in my plays, where the scenarios presented are often drawn from everyday life experience, even resembling the tropes of clichéd TV or film teen drama that mediate such experiences. What elevates the work beyond these conventions is the way I aim to engage the audience to see these situations afresh. Brecht's ideas on narrative form, modes of speech and the idea of 'not that but this', all integral to *verfremdung*, are especially relevant to my practice. Brecht advocated for three modes of speech to create distance between actor and character: transposition into the third person, transposition into the past, and the vocalisation of stage directions and commentary (Brecht, 2015, p.186). While my own writing does not follow these specific modes with any strictness, I do experiment with shifting narrative approaches and speech formats to try and provoke the audience's critical faculties. Brecht's technique of 'not/but', in which actors demonstrate not only what a character does but also what they do not do, further deepens this disruption (Brecht, 2015, p.193). As Sarah Grochala explains, "Brecht is searching for a dramatic form that suggests what 'could happen' instead of what 'would happen'" (2017, p.157). David Barnett elaborates further, stating that this approach "opens up the action because it robs it of a sense of inevitability" (2017). Brecht's strategies offer practical methods for enabling the kind of affective potentiality that Brian Massumi has since theorised. This openness to multiple outcomes is something I explore extensively in my play *Losing It*, as I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 3.

Edward Bond's theory of Theatre Event, which both critiques and extends Brecht's notion of Epic Theatre, is explored across multiple letters and realised in various plays for young people including *The Big Brum Quartet* (1995-2003). Although his work is far less often focussed on specific social issues than my own, this rich body of work provides a useful philosophy and vocabulary with which to consider my practice. Bond builds on Brecht's idea that the self is malleable and changeable, conceptualising the self as a palimpsest in which there is concurrently 'a multiplicity of different selves built up over time, experiences and contexts' (Davis, 2005, p.145). Bond is likewise interested in a liminal, intermediary space or gap. He uses the concept of a gap or void flexibly to claim that this space is 'always creative and dynamic,' (Davis, 2005, p.206) and that it is this space in which humans are provoked to ask questions and 'where the most important events, conflicts and human enquiries are played out' (Davis,2005, p.129).

> The gap is the site of a two-way interaction between the self and society-world It's the way we establish our volatile relationship with material reality. In effect, you can say that we create ourselves in the gap (…) The gap is like the site of a self-theatre.
>
> (Bond, 2004 quoted in Davis, 2005, p.128)

I intend for my playwriting to encourage the audience to step into this creative gap where there is the potential for things to be different because if they can imagine change, my contention is that it becomes more likely for them to make changes in their real lives. Within this gap they can imagine themselves in different circumstances and they can begin to reconsider their behaviours in the real world. This emphasis on imaginative possibility and behavioural change also necessitates an explicit engagement with power, gender, and representation, particularly

given the contexts of misogyny and sexual violence that this research addresses.

A Feminist Perspective

This research project examines the potential to use Brechtian notions of epic theatre and Bondian concepts from his theories of theatre event to further a feminist agenda. In doing so, I am adding a practice-driven building block to the foundational work of Jill Dolan's text *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988/2012) in which she posits that although,

> Brecht's theory generally disregards the issue of gender, (…) a materialist feminist critique can recuperate some of his theories to focus on representation's perpetuation of social relations of gender, race, and sexuality, as well as class.
>
> (p.107)

Dolan argues that Brecht's epic theatre, with its non-naturalistic acting style, use of social gestus, songs and tableaux, can advance a feminist materialist agenda. She suggests that, by using these dramaturgical techniques, the act or art of representation is revealed and that this allows the audience to adopt a more reflective, critical perspective on both gender and society (Dolan, 2012, pp. 99-116). Elin Diamond develops Dolan's ideas, arguing 'that feminist theory and Brechtian theory need to be read intersectionally' (1996). She proposes that a Brechtian approach to intervention can provide feminists with a 'way of dismantling the (male) gaze,' and 'a female body in representation that resists fetishization and a viable position for the female spectator' (p. 121). Her provocation foregrounds *verfremdungseffekt* as a mechanism

to alienate and undermine accepted notions of gender and sexuality that can ‘denaturalise and defamiliarize what ideology makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable’ (p.124). The potential for *verfremdungseffekt* to be deployed as a strategy to change the way young people perceive dominant gender roles is central to my project. Diamond’s reference to gender and sexuality as being seen as ‘inescapable’ resonates strongly with my experience working with teenagers where, as I will explain in chapter 3, many young people find it difficult to perceive that even gendered behavioural norms which they personally disagreed with (such as slut shaming) might be effectively challenged or dismantled. Furthermore, Diamond’s idea, that taking a Brechtian approach to representation can resist the fetishization of the female body, feels especially pertinent in the context of a pornified youth culture is which extreme imagery and rhetoric is accessible and often unchallenged by existing school-based RSE.

These questions of representation take on particular urgency when applied to theatrical depictions of sexual violence and rape culture, given the extent to which such narratives are shaped by deeply entrenched and often unexamined gendered assumptions. Having considered the state of sex education in the UK, positioned my practice within the broader discourse of socially engaged theatre, considered my role as a playwright in the field and positioned the practice at the intersection of Brecht and feminism, I now turn to address the topic of depicting rape and rape culture on stage. This thesis places the depiction and critical analysis of both rape and rape culture at its centre. The use of rape as a narrative device has a complex and long history in British theatre with some scholars, such as Elizabeth Howe, linking the rise in explicit

depictions of rape directly to the introduction of women to the stage, which had previously been an exclusively male space, in the seventeenth century (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p.27). In her detailed analysis, feminist theatre scholar Lisa Fitzpatrick argues that rape narratives have been ubiquitously used as a conduit for messages unrelated to sexual violence. Here, I quote her insights at length; she suggests that,

> Common literary and dramatic representational strategies […] use rape and sexual violence to communicate an idea or message that may have little to do with rape per se. These include the silencing of the victim's voice, the erasure of her subjectivity, the use of her body as a site for the enactment of conflict between male protagonists, and the use of rape as a metaphor (for war, defeat, political oppression, colonization, and so on), that frequently displaces the 'realness' of rape as a lived, personal, embodied experience. [...] Sometimes, these works seek to reclaim or reinstate the victim's subjectivity; sometimes they use rape as a metaphor, or for other dramaturgical purposes; sometimes they seek to challenge dominant cultural stereotypes to capture or interrogate the lived, bodily experience of the rape survivor.
>
> (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p.8)

Having already identified Brecht and Bond as key influences in my work, it is important to acknowledge the position of women and the role of rape and sexual violence in their plays and the ways in which, as Fitzpatrick describes, the embodied experience of rape is displaced to serve messages about societal values more widely. In Brecht's early plays rape, or more specifically the threat of sexual violence towards women as a weapon of war, is present but not foregrounded. Feminist scholar Kim Solga (2003), building on the work of Elin Diamond (1996), makes efforts to reclaim women in Brecht's work. She argues that Mother Courage's daughter Kattrin, who other scholars have problematised suggesting that her female body is appropriated in the service of Marxist

politics, could be reclaimed through a radical feminist lens. She suggests that Kattrin's inability to speak is linked to the oral rape to which she is subjected before the play begins – 'soldier stuffed something in her mouth when she was little' (Brecht and Kushner, 2012, p.111) - and that because of this,

> that epic acting is always already at stake for Kattrin, precisely because she *cannot speak*, because any attempts she makes at communication and self-actualization can only be carried out in gesture. Kattrin, in other words, operates exclusively within the privileged sign-system of epic, gestic theatre […] This is not to say that every sign she makes is necessarily a *gestus*; I would argue, however, that every sign she makes is gestically potent, ripe with the possibility of signing against the representations she is assigned, of foregrounding their status as assignation.
>
> (2003, p. 5)

Solga's reframing of Kattrin as a radical embodiment of *verfremdungseffekt* (2003, pp. 5-6) prompts me to critically reflect on the ways in which I approach the foregrounding of Seren's voice and the writing and staging of her experience of rape in *Losing It*, and this is something upon which I reflect in detail in Chapter 3.

In Bond's work, there are more explicit examples of sexual violence, most notably in his 2016 adaptation of Greek tragedy *Medea* into the play *Dea*, in which the title character is repeatedly raped by members of her family and eventually becomes a perpetrator of rape herself. Scholars Florentina Gümüş and Yeliz Biber Vangölü argue that Bond's treatment of the rape narrative in *Dea* 'challenges cultural stereotypes about rape, such as the "women are asking for it" myth, the "stranger rape" myth, and the belief that rape is a sexual act, when in fact it is an act of violence,' and suggest that 'Bond diminishes the

erotification of the act of rape' by avoiding female nudity in the production he directed but they also acknowledge that the play 'does not necessarily reflect a feminist agenda nor the desire to reveal women's experience of rape' (2025, p.16). I find it difficult to agree that the play offers any societal commentary specific to rape or rape culture. In his introduction to the play text, Bond begins by outlining his dissatisfaction with the post-Thatcherite British political system with neoliberal values in which,

> Instead of a democracy we live in a market. The machinery of modern technology has come to the aid of the owners, bankers, larcenists, traitors, government – call them what you will, they all come to the same. They flood the market with products, goods, novelties, gadgets and frankly refuse. The cultural logic of this is that the consumers of the products themselves become products.
> (Bond, 2016, p.3)

He finishes then by concluding 'I write of the rape of a corpse with a beer bottle to bring back some dignity to our theatre' (Bond, 2016, p.3). Here, he clearly places his use of rape as a device for making a political statement about the state of the nation, theatre and society so, in line with Fitzpatrick's suggestion, he is using the representation of repeated and injurious acts of sexual violence as a narrative device in service of a story in which sexual violence and its embodied experience is not the focus. His unapologetic use of rape in the service of broader political arguments leaves me feeling frustrated and angry especially in the context of a society where, in the wake of the *Me Too* movement, there is far more awareness of the impact of rape and rape culture on people, especially women and girls. As an audience, we are not given any insight into the psychological motives or impacts of the sexual violence, for the victims or perpetrators and instead it appears as an inevitable

consequence of a war torn and broken society. This, together with the sheer volume of acts of sexual violence in the text, which never escapes an atmosphere of potential violence, left me feeling desensitized, depressed, and demotivated. My reaction aligns with Guardian theatre critic Lyn Gardner's review of the play's earlier incarnation, *There Will Be More*, in which she wrote, 'it's hard to resist the instinct to run from the theatre shouting, 'No, I've had quite enough'' (Gardner, 2010).

Unlike Bond, my own project focuses on how narratives of rape can be portrayed to challenge, undermine, and disrupt rape culture and rape myths, reinforcing the survivor's subjectivity and offering the possibility of societal change. My work builds on strategies employed by female playwrights discussed by Lisa Fitzpatrick such as Timberlake Wertenbaker (*The Love of the Nightingale- 1985*, *The Grace of Mary Traverse – 1989*), Sarah Daniels (*Masterpieces – 1983*, *Beside Herself - 1990*), Marina Carr (*On Raftery's Hil - 2001*), Eve Lewis (*Ficky Stingers - 1986*) all of whom have developed a range of dramaturgical approaches that, as Fitzpatrick (2018, p. 188) notes, 'preserve a sense of female agency that counters the physical violation of the rape.' These strategies often involve displacing or reframing the act of sexual violence through non-naturalistic techniques such as fragmentation, mythic retelling, stylisation, and shifts in narrative perspective that resist voyeuristic spectacle. Rather than presenting rape as a literal or sensationalised event, these playwrights foreground women's subjectivity and the emotional, social, and political consequences of violence, creating a theatrical language that privileges interior experience and resistance over victimisation.

My work also exists in conversation with more recent plays including Cordelia Lynn's *Lela & Co* (2015) and Anna Jordan's *Freak (2014)*, which Fitzpatrick describes as 'more visceral' as well as Nick Payne and Carrie Cracknell play *Blurred Lines* (2014), Eimear McBride's play adaptation of her novel *A girl is a half formed thing* (2015) and Suzie Miller's play *Prima Facie* (2022) all of which address the topic of rape from a more feminist perspective. Fitzpatrick explains that,

> Dramaturgical and performance strategies that maintain the audience's sympathetic focus on the woman's experience tend to attempt a phenomenological or morphological response to the violence of rape, often avoiding realistic or naturalistic re-enactment entirely. The exposure of the body to the gaze of the audience, the moans or cries of the female performer, or physical movements intended to represent rape are all readable as expressive of sexual pleasure on the part of both characters, or may stage male sexual pleasure while offering the female body as passive spectacle.
>
> (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 130)

Fitzpatrick's critique highlights the ethical and representational risks inherent in staging sexual violence, particularly the danger that the female body may be re-exposed to a sexualised or voyeuristic gaze even within feminist work. It is in conscious dialogue with this tension that my own dramaturgical choices are made.

In contrast to those plays noted above which, except for *Ficky Stingers,* do not show rape on stage, my play *Losing It*, places the rape of Seren, by her classmate Tim, centre stage, forming the emotional core of the narrative and it is portrayed on stage explicitly. I do this, unlike Bond and others critiqued by Fitzpatrick, in the service of explicitly exploring the emotional impact of rape and giving voice to the lived

experiences of rape survivors. I place the staged rape at the centre of the work as a specific dramaturgical strategy to show and deconstructing rape and consent for the teenage audiences.

My decision to address these topics explicitly in work created specifically for teenage audiences is a bold one, and it is something I have considered carefully and at length. I am conscious of 'avoiding certain pitfalls of staging rape—such as eroticizing the violence or exposing the female body to the scopophilic gaze of the spectators.' (Fitzpatrick, 2018 p. 111) and particularly because I am staging these plays within a school setting and for young audiences, I have had to carefully navigate the tension between the need to reveal the horror of rape, and the ethical boundaries and gatekeepers' tolerance affect what can be presented in a school environment. Fetishising the young women performing on stage or inadvertently reinforcing negative gender stereotypes and assumptions in work that mediates sexual violence is a dramaturgical risk and Anat Gesser-Edelsburg's shocking analysis of the effect of Edna Mazya's rape education play *Backyard Games* which found that 'Paradoxically, the play, which is meant to counter sexual stereotypes and gender-related violence, has been found to reproduce them' (2005) serves as a stark warning of the dangers of complacency and the importance of seeing beyond the writer's own good intentions. Concerns regarding unintentionally normalising and reinforcing gender stereotypes and glorifying violent sexual material are important in this work, as I explain in more detail in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, where I describe the specific dramatic choices, I made when staging the rape. I describe the contextual factors which led to my decision to close *Losing It* and

instead write a new play *Man Up* focussed more squarely on combatting misogyny.

In conclusion, in this chapter I have mapped the interdisciplinary terrain that underpins this research, drawing on literature from applied theatre, pedagogy, playwriting, and theories of social change. I have established the pressing need for creative, participatory, and ethically attentive approaches to RSE against a challenging landscape where extreme pornography and misogynistic content have been normalised. I have situated my creative practice, particularly my work as a socially engaged playwright, within current academic conversations about the role of theatre in education, the ethics of interventionist performance, and the pedagogical value of affect, empathy and care. I have highlighted a notable absence of critical discourse around the specific contributions and methodologies of playwrights working in theatre in education contexts that this thesis aims to address and I have positioned my practice-research within a rich intertextual framework in which rape narratives can be reclaimed and epic theatre tactics repurposed for a feminist agenda. Considering the well documented rise in dehumanising misogynistic values and dismissive attitudes towards sexual violence fuelled by both hardcore pornography and extremist social media content, the need for an innovative pedagogical intervention, which can both build empathic engagement and address these challenging themes, feels particularly urgent.

In the following chapter, I examine three plays - *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* (2008), *Losing It* (2017), and *Man Up* (2025) - as illustrative examples that bookend my wider body of creative work. While

these plays do not represent the entirety of my practice, they offer useful entry points for an analysis which specifically highlights the ways in which the socio-political context both informed and challenged the plays' creation. To support this analysis, I adopt Hughes, Kidd and McNamara's (2011) framework of artistry, improvisation, and decomposition referenced earlier. This framework enables me to locate moments of clarity within iterative, evolving, and often messy creative processes that can otherwise feel difficult to grasp.

Chapter 2 – Making Mess: Devising Sex Education Through Theatre

In this chapter, I draw on Jenny Hughes, Jenny Kidd and Catherine McNamara's conceptualisation of artistry, improvisation and decomposition (2011) as essential components of a messy process. I apply their framework to three of my plays designed to support Relationships and Sex Education (RSE): *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* (2008), *Losing It* (2017), and *Man Up* (2025). By analysing moments from these projects, which span almost twenty years of practice, I aim to provide insight into how my methods have evolved and how the socio-political context has shaped the work. This analysis offers insights for artists, educators and researchers regarding both the importance of responding to socio-political conditions and the value of an iterative and 'messy' creative process in producing work that is both relevant and empowering for young people.

My journey as a playwright and theatre-maker in sex education began in 2008 with *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* for Peer Productions. The play depicted a group of young parents attending a support group, blending naturalistic drama, agitprop, comedy and song to explore both the circumstances that led them to become young parents and the harsh realities they faced while raising children at such a young age. The play toured for eight years before I retired it, recognising the need for work that reflected evolving challenges for young people, including the pervasive influence of smartphones, widespread access to pornography, and a more diverse understanding of youth sexuality. This led to the creation of *Losing It*, which toured from

2017 to 2023. This musical play told the story of a sixth form class looking back on their first experiences of relationships and sex, and explored issues of consent, sexting, pornography, and the impact of unhealthy relationships. Then, more recently, in response to rising misogynistic and transphobic attitudes among young audiences, I retired *Losing It* and developed *Man Up* which first toured in Spring 2025. *Man Up* focuses on the challenges faced by young men and is informed by research into algorithmic risks that can facilitate the adoption of extreme views about women and girls (Kaitlyn Regehr *et al*., 2024). Although these three plays are the focus of this chapter, they exist within a broader body of my work exploring identity, mental health, relationships, and gender-based violence (see Appendix – Chronology of Nina Lemon's plays for Peer Productions). The moments from these three projects unpacked here serve as opportunities for clear retrospective reflection on an almost two-decade career making plays with young people, engaging in processes which were often chaotic, bewildering and opaque.

In my introduction, I highlighted the etymology of the word playwright, drawing attention to its original meaning as one who builds, makes and mends. I identified messiness as a key part of my creative process, noting how the discarded and surplus "clay" produced along the way plays a role in shaping the final play. Hughes, Kidd and McNamara describe their applied theatre practice in terms of artistry, improvisation and decomposition, writing:

> The term 'artistry' refers to a crafted process of research that occurs as part of or alongside creative practice. 'Improvisation' refers to actions that take place during a research process that are

> spontaneous responses to unpredictable events and venture beyond the confines of predetermined design. 'Decomposition' refers to moments when designed and improvised research processes deteriorate in confrontation with experiences that confound expectations of an orderly, rule-bound, habitable universe. The term evokes moments of practice and research which disintegrate or are unmade as part of an encounter with exceptional experience and positions these moments as a troubling and potentially enriching part of a research process.
>
> (2011, p.162)

This description resonates closely with my own experience of playbuilding as a non-linear, collaborative process. It emphasises the need to improvise in response to changing circumstances and recognises that when planned or improvised actions no longer serve the work, moments of decomposition can provide powerful opportunities to radically rethink it. In my own approach to creative practice and practice research, wherein I co-create with young people, I have allowed room for improvisation and unpredictable outcomes and indeed it is often in those moments of improvisation where the most interesting insights are revealed. The concept of decomposition also resonates with the processes of creating Peer Productions' plays, where the incidences of troubling and confronting moments have proven my planned approach and improvisational tools to be insufficient. As I will explain in this chapter in some depth, the process and/or the creative work has collapsed, like the slumping of clay on a potter's wheel, and has needed to be rebuilt in a new, and often far more interesting, shape. In my experience, young people increasingly seem to see the idea of failing, even if only briefly and in a safe space, as terrifying and this is an idea I explore more fully in chapter 4. Failures, or decompositions, both big and small, are a vital part of Peer Productions' creative process;

Hughes, Kidd and McNamara's writing outlines a framework which recognises the 'potentially enriching' benefits of these moments of decomposition, and this is highly applicable to my process.

In the sections that follow, I examine each play by first outlining its socio-political context and describing the practice through which it was developed, before identifying and analysing specific moments of artistry, improvisation and decomposition. Here, artistry refers to the intuitive, aesthetic and relational judgements made throughout the research process, including choices of form, tone, imagery and narrative emphasis. Improvisation is understood not in a purely theatrical sense, but as a necessary response to moments where the planned research process proved ineffective or insufficient, requiring immediate adaptation, reframing or reconfiguration of the work. Decomposition names those moments of breakdown where assumptions, methodologies or structures failed, producing cognitive dissonance and forcing a reconsideration of both process and purpose. By tracing how artistry, improvisation and decomposition interacted across each project, I show how the development of the plays functioned as sites of research, where aesthetic decision-making and creative risk-taking produced new knowledge rather than merely illustrating existing findings. Reflecting on these moments also reveals how my broader creative approach has been shaped by uncertainty, responsiveness and adaptation. This analysis demonstrates that working iteratively within shifting socio-political contexts is not incidental but central to the creation of theatre that is both ethically attentive and affective for young people. Each play informs the next, with insights gained through artistic judgement, necessary improvisation and moments of breakdown in one project

informing subsequent work, and collectively these case studies illustrate how socially engaged theatre for young audiences can productively navigate complexity, risk and change.

The Teenage Pregnancy Project (2008)



Figure 1 - Photo Leah Haysom-Oates as Martina in the 2008 production of The Teenage Pregnancy Project



Figure 2 - Holly Taylor-Zuntz and Rosie Horler as Genital Warts & Chlamydia in a 2015 production of The Teenage Pregnancy Project

The Teenage Pregnancy Project was built in partnership with a group of teenage mothers who met regularly at a Surrey youth centre where they received practical and emotional support with parenting. Keen to include those with lived experience in my project, I approached the youth worker facilitating the young parents' group and was able to establish a partnership and was also able to attract modest funding from the Surrey High Sheriff Awards and the Youth Opportunities Fund to support the initiative. During the period I worked with them, the young parent group numbers fluctuated, with five core members and a further three young parents who attended on an ad hoc basis. Together with my team of ten young actors, who had all volunteered to work with Peer Productions as full-time theatre makers, I ran workshops with the young parents: these workshops informed devising sessions which then, in turn, inspired the development of a script for a new play which was trialled with the young parents first before embarking on its tour to Surrey secondary schools.

The resulting play depicts a series of weekly sessions at a young parents' support group, where the characters' individual stories overlap and evolve through shared discussion and reflection. These naturalistic scenes are punctuated by a series of break-out sequences that employ a range of theatrical styles, including parody, slapstick, agitprop, audience interaction and song. These moments disrupt the realism of the group meetings to comment on issues such as contraception, consent and the social stigma of being a teenage mum, inviting the audience to engage critically rather than consume the narrative sentimentally. Each character's personal arc – Dani's search for a future career beyond motherhood, Sarah's struggle with addiction, Lucy's conflict with her parents, Martina's fight for independence, and Harry's attempts to balance education and fatherhood – feeds back into the collective story of the group. The deliberate shifts in tone and style expose the mechanics of representation itself, drawing attention to how stories of young parenthood are constructed and received. In this way, the play sought not only to elicit empathy but also to interrogate the cultural frameworks that produce and sustain the stereotypes surrounding teenage parents. The play was well received by teenage audiences in Surrey secondary schools and continued to tour in various iterations for a further eight years.

The development of *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* in 2008 took place against a backdrop where there was something of a moral panic about teenage pregnancy rates in the UK. Teenage conception rates had risen incrementally between 2001 and 2009 before then starting to decline (Office for National Statistics, 2023). Poverty, as remains the case, was a significant risk factor as well as a consequence of teenage

pregnancy, with a lack of opportunities and subsequently low educational and work aspirations prevalent in teenage parents (Local Government Association and Public Health England, 2018). Sex education strategies, as described in my literature review, were particularly ineffective, with many teachers telling us, in Peer Productions' surveys, that they felt ill-prepared to teach the subject and that they relied heavily on 'drop down' sexual education days and visiting speakers, with limited opportunities to reinforce or embed the teaching within the wider curriculum. In 1999, the Labour government launched a ten-year strategy to reduce teenage pregnancy, which focused on improving sex and relationships education, providing clearer information about contraception and helping teenage parents continue their education, develop parenting skills and avoid isolation, but this was yet to yield substantive results (Hadley et al., 2016). There was therefore a strong appetite amongst secondary schools for a piece of interventionist theatre tackling teenage pregnancy.

There were few representations of teenage mothers in early-2000s popular culture and those that were present reinforced negative stereotypes. *Little Britain* character Vicky Pollard stands out as one of the most pervasive. Created by privately-educated, middle-class comedians Matt Lucas and David Walliams, the programme was immensely popular, transferring from radio to television in 2003 and running until 2006, with further specials in 2007; viewing figures peaked at almost ten million (Jason Deans, 2005). Vicky Pollard is depicted as having numerous children by different fathers. In one sketch, Tom Baker's sonorous voice-over explains that she has left half her children at home to work on a sex-chat line, while she pushes a six-berth buggy

filled with identical daughters in pink shell suits (*Series 3, Episode 2*, 2005). As Owen Jones (2011, pp. 127–129) argues, Pollard embodies middle-class contempt for the white working class, presenting her as a grotesque figure of ignorance, promiscuity, and irresponsibility. Extending this analysis, I read Pollard as a specifically gendered caricature: the teenage mother rendered as both comic spectacle and moral warning. Her depiction reflects a broader cultural discourse in which young, working-class women were vilified as sexually excessive, intellectually limited, and complicit in their own marginalisation.

Comparable tropes circulated across other popular media of the period. BBC One's *Skint* (2005) portrayed people on low incomes as morally deficient and socially problematic (BBC One, 2005), while Channel 5's series *Life on the Dole* framed welfare dependency as a lifestyle choice (Channel 5, 2005). Tabloid coverage also reinforced these narratives: *The Sun*'s "Breed for Benefits" and "Benefit Mums" headlines depicted young mothers as manipulative and parasitic (Imogen Tyler, 2008; Tracey Jensen, 2014). These representations worked together to construct a dominant cultural narrative in which female fertility was equated with irresponsibility and poverty was recast as a personal choice, consolidating the teenage single mother as one of the most stigmatised figures in contemporary British culture.

Against this social backdrop, *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* was made and delivered in Surrey, a generally affluent area in south-east England with lower teenage conception rates than other areas of the UK, but with significant pockets of deprivation. As I noted in my introduction, I was twenty-eight and, having grown up in a working-class family in

Essex (where my personal experience reinforced many stereotypes), I knew several young women who had their children in their teens, but I was yet to become a mother myself. Peer Productions, which had only formed the year before, was in its infancy and I was yet to establish a preferred or replicable method for making theatre and remained open-minded to the many possibilities for creation and delivery. Having outlined the specific socio-political conditions in which the play was created, I now turn to an examination of key moments of artistry, improvisation and decomposition within the creative process.

Artistry and humanisation

This project long pre-dates my PhD research. I lacked formalised methodology and relied heavily on instinct without the frameworks or terminology I would later develop. However, my approach was shaped by a strong desire to humanise young parents, offering a counter-narrative to prevailing stereotypes and placing their voices at the heart of the process. In this project, artistry operated not only through creative and aesthetic choices but also through ethical, relational and dramaturgical decision-making embedded in the design of the research and the shaping of the material. Key questions arose within this process that continue to underpin my practice: how could I work ethically with young people whose lives differed vastly from my own? How could I ensure their stories were neither sensationalised nor dismissed? How could I create an engaging play for teenage audiences that provided sexual health education whilst remaining authentic to young parents' lived experiences? Despite my naivety about the complexities of the

process I was undertaking – bringing together two groups of young people with vastly different lived experiences, and making work which spoke for a marginalised, often disaffected group – I recognised the inequities of entering into the young women's support group as an artist to gather their stories without offering anything in exchange, in a process that might have felt invasive or exploitative. I sought instead to encourage their participation in the process on their own terms. For this reason, I did not bring my group of actors to my first meeting with the young parents. Instead, with some anxious trepidation, I met them and their youth worker alone, armed with a few initial ideas about how we, as theatre artists, might collaborate with them in a fair exchange of knowledge and skills. These ideas included using role-play exercises to support interview preparation for college or employment, offering workshops that could help participants advocate more confidently with professionals and decision-makers, and exploring creative sessions simply designed to help them relax, unwind, and enjoy themselves while their children were cared for by nursery staff. My initial nervousness seemed unfounded. The group were raucous, dynamic, insightful and very open and honest about the challenges they were experiencing as they struggled with parenting, finances and housing. They welcomed me warmly as we drank tea together and their children played around my feet. The idea that their stories could inform a play which might prevent other young women from facing similar challenges appealed to them enormously. Despite their apparent confidence, their bravado masked significant sadness and insecurities. Several spoke about disappointment at lacking qualifications or being unable to pursue the careers they imagined. With their children starting nursery, they faced the daunting prospect of job or college interviews after long periods of

exclusion from education. We agreed mutually that my team would offer interview preparation role play sessions whilst they would share their stories. We would perform scratch versions of the play for their expert feedback. I made it clear that their specific stories would not be recreated in their entirety: instead, I would create a hybrid narrative and characters informed by their experiences and by national research on teenage pregnancy, blurring these sources into one play for year 9 (aged 13 to 14-year-old) audiences. This transparent approach, which protected the young parents from watching actors recreate challenging and even potentially traumatic moments of their lives, made it easier for them to open up.

While I had yet to formulate an established methodology, consulting research addressing key social issues on a national or global scale was a central driver in my work even in this early project. In developing *The Teenage Pregnancy Project*, the participatory sessions with young people were the foundation of the project, with wider research providing contextual support. Although I was unfamiliar with it at the time, the approach I adopted with the young parents in this project bears similarities to that which was adopted by women's prison theatre organisation Clean Break. They describe an ethical framework which includes,

- Making it transparent for the participants in prison workshops when the playwright was offering writing workshops for skills development and when she was seeking their input to deepen her own understanding and research.
- Committing to never dramatise individual women's own stories who the playwrights met during their research period.
- Acknowledging the women anonymously who contributed to the writers' research in the play text and programme.

- As often as possible bringing the produced work into women's prisons enabling women there to engage as audiences and participants.

(Herrmann, McAvinchey et al., 2020, p.101)

Despite the commitments listed above, Clean Break discovered that 'a sometimes-uncomfortable tension existed between the participatory and produced work of the company.' (Herrmann, McAvinchey *et al*, 2020.p.100). They sought to address this gap initially by 'creating semi-professional performance opportunities for the women who had engaged in the education programme' and eventually in 2017, 'repositioning students, newly defined as 'Members', at the heart of its artistic output' (Herrmann, McAvinchey *et al*, 2020.p.101). Although, in practice, today the company continues to work with actors with and without lived experience of the criminal justice system, this positioning of their learners as expert members remains a central part of their practice. Had the young parents and I been keen to extend our partnership beyond what we had initially planned, we may well have come to a similar conclusion. However, in this project, it was the young actors from Peer Productions who played characters who were teenage parents, not the teenage parents themselves. This casting decision served to protect the anonymity, privacy and mental health of the young parents. To ask the young parents to share in performance intimate and traumatic stories so closely linked to their own experiences, especially when confronted with a potentially rowdy audience of teenagers and when they lacked the performance experience to respond to such an audience, would not have been a responsible path for Peer Productions to have taken. This level of artifice in *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* nevertheless proved to be controversial at times as I will later explain.

Keen to establish transparent working methods, during our first joint session, we co-produced rules which we wrote on paper, signed, and stuck on the wall. These covered various aspects: participants would be invited but not required to contribute, confidentiality would be maintained (barring serious safeguarding concerns), everyone would listen to and support each other, and there would be tea and cigarette breaks on request. I had co-produced group rules before, but in this context, where we were invading an established safe space and inviting vulnerability, establishing clear conduct felt especially important. These ideas of reciprocity and mutuality, where, as Nicola Abraham describes, there is 'a dialogical approach to naming and unpacking intentions' (2020, p.73), became crucial to this project. Witnessing in this process the effect of empowering participants not only as expert advisors but on their own terms, I have used similar approaches in multiple projects since.

During this project, I lost count of how many times I heard one of the young parents say, “I love my kid, but...”. This phrase became a recurring line in the script, opening and closing the play. It stands out as one of the few occasions when I included words exactly as they were spoken. Usually, my scripts grow out of creative reinterpretation and development, but in this case the phrase carried such emotional honesty and was repeated by so many of the young parents that it didn’t need to be rewritten. Keeping it word for word reflected my wish to place their voices at the centre of the work and to allow their language to shape the piece. In that sense, using verbatim speech became part of the writing process itself, a way of making sure that what mattered most to them

was heard directly. The phrase also captured something that cut against the dominant images of young mothers in the media at the time. Where the figure of Vicky Pollard suggested teenage mothers were careless or emotionally absent, “I love my kid, but...” revealed something much more complicated. It spoke of love, exhaustion and responsibility all at once. Making it the frame for the play became a deliberate choice to show the young parents as real and layered people rather than stereotypes. This desire to humanise them and to reflect their care and resilience continued to shape the work that followed.

In a 2020 article, Abraham unpacks Paulo Freire's ideas regarding the problems of representation and (de)humanisation in relation to competing priorities of funders, stakeholders and participants. She unpicks the complexity of telling stories of oppression because 'it is possible that the antagonist is also the funder of the project', emphasising the importance of 'striving for "humanization"' (2020, p.73). Perhaps surprisingly, this project was largely unencumbered by funder expectations or demands. Although Youth Opportunities Funding came via Surrey County Council, the same organisation participants identified as having uncaring attitudes towards young mothers, the funder adopted a hands-off approach, providing Peer Productions with significant operational autonomy.

Within the project’s storytelling, I was keen to foreground the young parents’ humanity by capturing both their love for their children and the difficulty of their circumstances, to tell nuanced stories reflective of lived experiences without homogenising them into one narrative. Though government research found that girls from low-income families

were more likely to become young parents (Local Government Association and Public Health England, 2018), focusing too heavily on economic circumstances risked alienating our audience. We were performing in an affluent district where most spectators were unlikely to identify with financial hardship, and framing the issue primarily as a product of poverty might have allowed them to dismiss teenage parenthood as something that happened only to “other” people. If that happened, the play would lose its power to challenge assumptions or generate empathy, reinforcing social distance rather than encouraging recognition or understanding. I therefore created four different characters, all teenage mothers but with different backgrounds. Fifteen-year-old Dani has abandoned dreams of professional singing to raise her young son; Sarah is seventeen, has two children and struggles with alcohol misuse consequences; thirteen-year-old Lucy attends private school whilst her parents attempt to cover up her pregnancy and raise the baby themselves; and sixteen-year-old Martina chose pregnancy to escape the care system and now tries to turn her life around with youth worker Geoff's help. In a later draft they were joined by young dad Harry, co-parenting whilst juggling college.

Listening to the young parents’ accounts of their experiences and then translating their stories into theatrical, curated content for them to critique and improve was a key component of the process. Whilst I was intent on humanising the teenage parent as a social figure, the young mothers' own collective anger was clearly directed at a system of oppression which they felt dehumanised them with a complete lack of individual consideration and an absence of names and faces for decision-makers. The housing system seemed impenetrable and inhuman as they were never able to speak to the same person twice and

it appeared decisions were being made by computer systems. These ideas about dehumanisation were thus explored in the play itself. We translated what they told us about their experiences of trying to source secure housing into a complex theatrical scene in which young mother Martina appears, in a bid to find secure housing, to be constantly walking as though on a treadmill which is increasing in speed whilst she is inundated and overwhelmed with questions and more and more pieces of paper delivered by faceless officials. As she steps, under her foot is a balloon pump attached to a balloon under her top so, as she walks, she simultaneously appears to be becoming increasingly pregnant. Eventually she ‘gives birth’ to the balloon, only to be told that, as she is now no longer pregnant, she will “have to fill in another form.” As she receives the news, she lets go of the balloon, allowing it, together with her sense of hope, to fly off into the air.

This scene represents a clear example of how artistry functioned within the project, operating to translate lived experience, emotional truth and systemic critique into embodied theatrical form. Depicting the housing workers as faceless and even robotic might seem contrary to Abraham’s call for a Freirean ‘striving for ‘humanization’’ (2020, p.73) in which humanisation is both a utopian dream and a ‘vocational’ calling (Freire, 2014, p.87). Abraham argues that,

> To avoid being oppressive and thereby reconstructing power hierarchies that alienate and dehumanise the practitioner has a responsibility to seek to humanise and avoid the easier representation of oppressor as a ‘monster’ rather than a human being.
>
> (2020, p.73)

I would counter that this creative decision emphasises the humanness of the teenage parent in their struggle within a brutal system and that, because the parents' frustration was squarely directed at a system rather than at individuals, the faceless officials are manifestations of the housing system rather than portrayals of housing officers themselves.

This scene did not seek only to recount the participants' experiences but also to reflect their attitudes and feelings about what was happening to them. The tightly choreographed movement, together with the robot-like, masked housing officials, sought to show the ways in which the young parents felt dehumanised and trapped in a non-person-centred system. The increasing speed and the way in which the actor playing Martina was forced to undertake physical effort, reflected the exhaustion and relentlessness which the young parents spoke about. Finally, the surreal representation of the baby as a balloon added to the dystopian and farcical feeling in the scene, drawing attention to the ludicrousness of a broken housing system. The young parents enjoyed watching this scene a great deal, laughing and whooping with recognition as they watched. Afterwards, they fed back that they felt both seen and heard and crucially that they thought the scene would be effective in explaining to young audiences, in a visually and performatively memorable way, that, contrary to many popular opinions, young mums are not immediately given a house by the government. The spectacle of this complex physical scene certainly held young audiences' attention with many reporting, in post-show surveys and focus groups, that they had genuinely believed that having a child as a teenager would open up opportunities for council housing but that this scene had changed their perceptions. Having considered the role of

what Hughes *et al*. describe as artistry within *The Teenage Pregnancy Project*, I now follow this conceptual thread by turning to a discussion of improvisation.

Improvisation and establishing trust

Although I began the project with a clear idea of how I would approach the work to respond to the needs of the young parents, I also found that I had to improvise and adapt my approach. I led eight sessions where the young actors recruited by Peer Productions came together with the young parents to hear their stories and to help them to prepare for the world of work or further study. I had carefully crafted an initial workshop plan which, after establishing group rules, would launch straight into this endeavour. It had to be quickly abandoned when the previously eloquent and outgoing teenage mothers seemed suddenly reserved and almost hostile when faced with young people of a similar age for the first time. They had developed skills to advocate for themselves and their children when speaking to adults like youth and social workers, health visitors and medical professionals. Yet, despite agreeing to workshops with actors their own age, they seemed unpractised at conversing with their peers and demonstrated embarrassment and discomfort at the situation. A Barnado's research report in 2010, exploring the barriers faced by young parents, supports the idea that isolation and bullying from their mainstream peers can make teenage mothers understandably reluctant to engage in shared activities, making them vulnerable to further social isolation (Jane Evans and Martha Slowley, 2010). The communicative barrier seemed insurmountable so, on the spot, I changed the plan to

ensure that the teenage mothers spent their first session with us entirely in positions of power. I chose drama exercises that allowed the teenage parents to act as leaders and directors of the young actors without making any requests for them to put themselves in a position in which they might feel vulnerable. For example, I used an ‘image theatre’ exercise where people work in pairs and one person sculpts the other person into a statue of different archetypal characters (a king, a teacher, a naughty child) either by moving the other person’s body (if they have consented to be touched) or by showing the other person what they want them to do by demonstrating. This simple exercise, which everyone undertook at the same time, resulted in less self-consciousness and provided the opportunity for the parents and the actors to get to know one another on a one-to-one basis. I put the teenage parents in the position of sculptor and the peer actors as their clay thus disrupting the perceived social hierarchy. This split-second decision to alter my planned delivery, likely unnoticed by the young people in the room, momentarily repositioned the teenage parents as holders of authority and expertise. In doing so, it helped to rebalance the power dynamics between those young actors who had followed, or were perceived to have followed, more conventional and often privileged educational pathways, and the teenage parents whose experiences were shaped by greater structural disadvantage. I suspect that this initial ice-breaking session was instrumental in developing trust and rapport between the two groups and ultimately played a role in enabling the young parents to later engage meaningfully in their role play sessions and contribute to the play. While moments such as this demonstrate how responsiveness and flexibility can productively reshape power dynamics, other points in the process exposed deeper ruptures where my intentions, assumptions,

or planned structures could not simply be adapted but instead broke down entirely.

Decomposition and a commitment to truth

As the play was in the service of (and sadly in some cases in replacement of) comprehensive sex education – at this time RSE was not mandatory and some schools reported that the play was the only school-based RSE that their students were receiving – there was appetite amongst young people from both groups and youth workers to include an interactive element, allowing the audience to ask questions. The teenage parents were keen to share harsher realities whilst also showing that teenage parents can still lead meaningful and productive lives. For this reason, I included Martina, a character who within the narrative starts training as a youth worker and goes into schools to answer questions about her experiences as a teenage parent. In one 'break-out' scene, the audience see Martina and her peers in this expert role, talking to the audience and answering questions. It was the only improvised scene in the production. The actor playing youth worker Geoff would go into the audience with a pot of pre-written questions for audience members to read out before throwing the floor open to their own questions. The actors would then answer in role. The company members were often asked the same question: 'Is this true? Are you really a teenage parent?'

This emerged as a key moment of decomposition where 'designed and improvised research processes deteriorate in confrontation with

experiences that confound expectations' (Hughes, Kidd, and McNamara, 2011, p.162). The question surprised me and proved challenging. The play was clearly introduced as fictitious, and a more theatre-literate audience would have understood this as merely a 'hot seating' exercise. However, for these young audiences, many were immediately convinced this was real, especially after following up with questions like 'When's your daughter's birthday?' and 'What star sign are they?' which the young actors fielded convincingly. As the interactive element was embedded into the overall piece, if the actors broke character and admitted that whilst based on true stories they were in fact actors, it would make re-engaging the audience for the final moments nearly impossible. They were left with little choice but to maintain their characters despite their own concerns about misleading young audiences. As this was an unexpected outcome, no debrief had been planned. The play would finish, and teachers would quickly whisk away the audience before we could explain the truth.

Keen to avoid misleading audiences and not wanting to suggest that a group of teenage mothers would all have the time and childcare to tour in a full-scale theatrical production, we immediately adapted our introduction. We started explicitly explaining that the actors were not the real people but that there would be an interactive element where they would answer in character. Despite this, many audiences and even teachers remained convinced the actors were real people depicting their real lives. Several schools told us this belief had been so impactful that they requested we not reveal, when we returned in subsequent years, that the actors were not young parents. While we did not explicitly comply with this request, the idea that schools were trying to maintain

this deceit felt uncomfortable. There was clearly something alluring about the idea that the actors were genuinely teen parents. Daniel Schulze, Enoch Bater and Mark Taylor-Batty suggest this contemporary obsessive pursuit of authenticity responds to a postmodern era characterised by deconstruction, detachment and irony (2017, p.49). Viewed through this lens, the audience's desire to believe that the performers were presenting their own lives can be understood not simply as confusion, but as part of a broader cultural longing for authenticity within educational and theatrical encounters.

Exploring ethical implications of this pursuit of realness, applied theatre scholars Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton argue:

> In a world filled with reality television shows, confessional blogs, homemade YouTube videos and documentary films, the seduction of what audiences are told are 'true' stories cannot be denied. Yet the presentation of people's lives can be voyeuristic and exploitative. How can these risks be avoided in the practices of applied theatre?
>
> (2015, p. 280)

Perhaps the audience's excitement reflected the wider popularity of reality-based media over the preceding decade or, more specifically, the influence of the *Safe Drive Stay Alive* programme, a road-safety initiative developed by UK emergency services in the early 2000s which was widely adopted by schools in the area at the time. This production featured real people rather than actors, including bereaved parents, crash survivors and emergency responders who shared their experiences with young audiences to promote safer driving. Usually staged in theatres or school auditoriums as part of PSHE provision, it

sought to reduce road deaths through emotional storytelling and direct testimony. A similar approach was evident in the increasing use of guest speakers with lived experience to address students on a range of social issues within PSHE programmes. As a team, we had ethical concerns about the potential harm of passing off the young actors as teen parents and feared that this misrepresentation exploited the young parents, who had not consented to have their stories shared in this guise, and also the young audiences who, in the context of offering frank and hard-hitting RSE, we believed deserved a more honest approach.

To take a comparator from Clean Break's practice, *Inside Bitch* (2019) was the company's first main stage production which centred prison-experienced women as performers. By doing this, they created the scenario that some of our young audiences believed we had: performers with lived experience of specific issues (prison or teenage motherhood) portraying those very issues in the play. In their analysis of how this work was created, Herrmann, McAvinchey *et al* reference Richard Schechner's concept of the 'not me, not not me' quality, where 'within the play frame a performer is not herself (because of the operations of illusion), but she is also not not herself (because of the operations of reality)'. They explain that in *Inside Bitch*, the boundary between character and actor was blurred in a radical effort to challenge 'constructions of representations of women in prison', offering a meta-theatrical reflection on theatre itself (Herrmann, McAvinchey *et al*., 2020, p.107). Although we used young actors rather than actual young parents, our young audiences, believing the actors to be teenage parents, may have experienced the same 'constant shuttling between its

dual relationship with what is presented' (Herrmann, McAvinchey *et al*., 2020, p.107).

In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal introduces the concept of Invisible Theatre which involves:

> The presentation of a scene in an environment other than the theatre, before people who are not spectators (…) The people who witness the scene are those who are there by chance. During the spectacle, these people must not have the slightest idea that it is a 'spectacle'
>
> (Boal, 2019, p.122)

Boal strategically employs Invisible Theatre to spark free and open debate, claiming that 'it is precisely this invisible quality that will make the spectator act freely and fully, as if he were living a real situation' and that 'the theatrical energy is completely liberated, and that the impact produced by this free theatre is much more powerful and longer lasting' (pp.125-126). To some extent, when *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* audiences were duped into thinking they were really talking to teenage parents, we had created an unintended moment of 'invisible theatre', and the energised discussions that followed bore a similar free energy to that which Boal describes. Boal argues that his own invisible theatre is ethical 'largely on teleological considerations: invisible theatre is ethical because of its ends' (Bonnie Burstow, 2008, p.277). So, if we were to accept his claim, then surely little harm could come from young people thinking the actors were teenage parents, especially if this meant they took the play's messages more seriously? In practice, the idea left me and some of the young actors feeling disquieted and uncomfortable. Boal argues:

> While the actor playing the émigré was not in trouble, Boal argues (1990: 33) it is certainly true that other émigrés have been in trouble and that an émigré months earlier had killed himself. The actors, accordingly, were conveying a ‘diachronic truth’ - that is, something which would have been true at a different time.‘ Therefore,’ concluded Boal, (p. 33) ‘everything we said was true.’
>
> (Burstow, 2008, p.280)

We experienced a similar dichotomy, where although a work of fiction, there was a 'diachronic truth' inherent in the piece. The play was based on real stories, and the situations and circumstances were truthful to young parents' lived experiences, but ultimately, they were not the stories of the actors on the stage. Colluding in this constructed narrative continually troubled me and other members of the group, largely because we had committed to providing a truthful and frank account of teenage parents’ lived experiences, and sustaining an element of artifice seemed to contradict that aim.

Overall, the aim of *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* was to provide an honest portrayal of teenage parents, challenging the reductive stereotypes pervasive in popular media while addressing the limitations of school-based sex education. Young people often distrusted existing RSE, which emphasised risk and neglected the realities of pleasure or the positive aspects of teenage parenthood. My role as playwright involved shaping the narrative to convey the messages we deemed most pedagogically effective, while remaining attentive to participants’ lived experiences. This required balancing authenticity with the need to craft a coherent, educationally relevant story. In practice, this meant interacting with multiple, sometimes contradictory, sources of truth.

Some of the young parents viewed having a baby as a positive experience, yet including these perspectives could conflict with the play's broader message about delaying sexual activity and using contraception. Likewise, all participants were mothers, with no positive portrayals of teenage fathers, and none had care experience, despite the heightened risk of teenage pregnancy for care-experienced young people (Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2004). Negotiating these tensions required careful deliberation, ensuring that omissions or adjustments were ethically considered and transparently discussed with participants. In this way, they were empowered as expert contributors while the narrative achieved its interventionist aims.

Even as a fledgling practitioner, I recognised the value of listening and acting with care and compassion. In common with Kathleen Gallagher's practice, the project positioned listening to young people as 'the bedrock of both our study and its dramaturgical expression' to create a meaningful culture of care, 'as an ethic, entwined with trust and mutuality and a clear understanding of power and processes of disenfranchisement' (2022, pp. 16-21). What this early example of practice demonstrated was the necessity of interacting with varied and sometimes contradictory truth sources and of listening to and amplifying a polyphony of voices (Mackey, 2016, p.487) within the work to piece together 'fragments' of truth to create 'an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality' (Tyler, 1986, p.205). Like Gallagher (2022, p.85) I have found Caroline Fusco's use of the word 'accurate' in favour of truthful provides a useful way of articulating the practice.

> I use the word ‘accurate’ not in the positivistic sense as it is often used—that is, ‘correct in all details’—but more in the sense of sixteenth-century uses of the Latin word accuratus, which translates as ‘done with care’.
>
> (Fusco, 2008, p.163)

From context, Fusco’s use of the word ‘care’ here seems more reflective of the act of doing with attentiveness or deliberateness – practicing carefully, rather than implying a concern for the emotional needs of the people engaged with the work but both meanings resonate with *The Teenage Pregnancy Project*. In the process, I actively sought ways for the project to be delivered in a nurturing way. This approach to care informed my desire to ensure that the young parents received substantive interview skills development in exchange for their contributions; that the space felt safe and supportive; and that, by seeing their lives reflected on the stage, they might experience a sense of pride and validation. In a similar way to that described by Sylvan Baker and Maggie Inchley, when discussing their practice with care-experienced young people, the process sought to enable young participants to ‘engage with a mode of attentive care through their participation in the process of theatre making itself’ (Baker and Inchley, 2020 p.174).

Although I led the process, narrative decisions were discussed with the young parents, and we all agreed that we needed to approach the project carefully to avoid promoting unintended outcomes – particularly the risk of encouraging young people to become parents, which was the opposite of our shared intended message. The purpose of this project was not only to provide a vehicle for young parents’ voices and experiences to be heard but crucially to try and deter other young people from following the same path, and this parameter was clearly

articulated from the start. As there was never the expectation that any one person's story would be told in its entirety, these dramaturgical choices did not feel like they undermined the young parents' contributions. To the contrary, perhaps because they were included in these discussions, they expressed feeling validated as expert consultants in the theatre-making process, and this may have had a positive impact on their self-esteem.

Earlier in this thesis, I raised the issues surrounding the practice of adult performers portraying characters who are significantly younger in TIE productions, and I suggested that using younger performers as peer actor-educators might establish a more authentic connection between actors and audiences. Drawing on Paulo Freire's concepts of democratization and dialogue (2021) and Albert Bandura's theory of social modelling (1977), I argued that young audiences are more likely to identify with characters played by performers of a similar age, which could enhance empathetic engagement. When *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* audiences began to perceive the young actors as legitimate teenage parents, this unintentional disruption of the 'not me, not not me' dichotomy (Schechner, 1985, p.138), which created an unexpected moment of Boalian Invisible Theatre, prompted me to reconsider my previous assumptions about the importance of centring real young people representing young people if, as some teachers were so keen to assert, misleading the audience to believe that the actors were genuine teenage parents was having an even greater impact. At the same time, I was starting to realise that, in the process of crafting the play, I was making critical decisions about which experiences and narratives – which truths – were to be included and omitted. Although these

decisions were being made for sound pedagogical and socially conscious reasons, I was starting, for the first time, to understand my role as playwright as one which involves curating some aspects of the stories told to me by the young participants, in a process that might be interpreted as censorial. I took on this responsibility very seriously, approaching it with a degree of care both for the needs and feelings of the young people and to the careful crafting of a narrative which could fulfil our interventionist agenda. This discomforting relationship with authenticity and truth was to become a preoccupation in my practice and it is a topic to which I will return in the examples that follow. In my experience, teenagers are particularly astute at identifying inauthenticity. Practitioners working in the field need to be particularly alert to this. This project demonstrated that ideas related to authenticity and the importance of making work which represents a diachronical truth beyond simply mirroring the experiences of those who informed the piece, are of vital importance to anyone seeking to make relevant and socially affecting theatre with young people.

Losing It – 2017



Figure 3 - Sophie Maher and Jamie Paterson as Poppy and Rob in the original 2017 cast of Losing It.



Figure 4 - The Losing It cast 2017 performing 'Sex Isn't fun.'

Losing It is the first play developed as part of my doctoral research. As a playwright and researcher, I initially worked collaboratively with a team of fifteen young actors/peer educators (aged 18 - 22 years) who co-facilitated workshops in six secondary schools, exploring teenagers' experiences of RSE, before working as a company to devise scenes inspired by what we had learned in schools. The scripted outcome was a ninety-minute play with songs which told the story of a group of sixth form students looking back on their formative relationships during secondary school. The play was performed by this same team of young actors to around 5,000 audience members in secondary schools in the Surrey and neighbouring counties in Summer 2017. Subsequently, it underwent revivals featuring new young casts for tours of the same geographic area of comparable scale in 2018 and 2019. The production was not staged in 2020 and 2021 owing to the COVID-19 lockdowns, but it was successfully revived with new companies of touring performers for further tours of Surrey and neighbouring county secondary schools in 2022 and 2023. The play was published by Salamander Street in 2020 with the aim of reaching a broader geographical audience. During this six-year period (from 2017-2023) I reworked and rewrote various elements of the play in response to the changing context and needs of the young people both in the touring company and young audiences. In 2023, I created a digital production of the play but also made the difficult decision to stop touring the live production for reasons that this section will discuss.

The Teenage Pregnancy Project sought to draw on the experiences of a specifically marginalised and disadvantaged group to inform its development, and addressed an issue which was, although

undoubtedly complex, singular in its subject matter and aims. By contrast, *Losing It* sought to fill in the many gaps of ineffective sex and relationship education and therefore to address a plethora of different issues including pornography; consent and rape; online grooming; and gender and sexuality. Indeed, the sheer breadth and scope of this remit was extremely daunting. The scale of the problems which young people were describing, supported by my research exploring their changing attitudes, made the project seem important and urgent, and its scope, though overwhelming, appropriate to the demands at hand.

By the time I came to create *Losing It*, a decade after writing *The Teenage Pregnancy Project*, a great deal had changed organisationally, nationally and globally. Peer Productions' partner schools were more than happy to continue to receive *The Teenage Pregnancy Project*, but I could see that the work felt dated and recognised that the greater and more complex sex and relationship educational needs of young people were no longer being served by the work. By 2017, in the UK, conception rates in the teenage population had declined (*Conceptions in England and Wales – Office for National Statistics*, 2023) while use of broadband as well as mobile and then smart phone technology had risen significantly, as it would continue to do in the years that followed. With this technology came an unprecedented access to hardcore pornography, and teachers were telling us that this was impacting how young people behaved in and out of school. As outlined in my literature review, these teachers' accounts were supported by evidence which identified associations between pornography exposure in young people and changes in sexual attitudes including engagement in risky and harmful sexual behaviours (Horvath *et al*., 2013, McKibbin, 2016),

alongside media reports of a marked rise in sexual offences in schools (Busby, 2017). As had been the case five years previously, the delivery of effective RSE remained inconsistent (Ofsted, 2012) with LGBTQ+ young people particularly poorly served (Terrence Higgins, 2017). In response to a growing concern about young people's sexual relationships, the Conservative government announced plans for more robust sex education (Justine Greening, 2017), although associated guidance, stating that children and young people should be taught how to build healthy relationships, understand physical and mental wellbeing, and make informed, safe choices about relationships and sex as part of a compulsory curriculum in England, did not become mandatory until 2020 (Education Hub, 2023).

During this period, the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant disruptions in education and socialisation during lockdown significantly impacted young people of secondary school age. Concurrently, escalating concerns surrounding environmental disaster, a burgeoning cost of living crisis, and heightened engagement with social media have collectively contributed to an atmosphere where young people report increased levels of anxiety and discontent compared to previous generations (Action for Children, 2023). During the period of touring *Losing It*, we also started to notice in our audiences, a significant increase in the uninhibited expression of misogynistic attitudes and behaviours potentially fuelled by young men consuming content from TikTok and YouTube influencers like Andrew Tate (Nadeine Asbali, 2022). We additionally witnessed a decline in teachers intervening to address unruly and disrespectful audience behaviour, potentially as a

result of significantly increased levels of stress and isolation in the teaching workforce (Education Support, 2023).

Again, this new play was researched and delivered in Surrey and led by me with a team of young co-investigators. The project was initiated by me with the support of the trustees and staff at Peer Productions and funded by a range of trusts and foundations including The Surrey Education Trust, the Community Foundation Surrey, Heathrow Community Trust and Surrey High Sheriff Youth Awards. By this time, I was a parent to two children, and I had recently decided to undertake a PhD which I started at Kingston University before later moving to Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. With my doctoral research underway, I was now more aware of scholarly debates within my field, particularly regarding didacticism versus aesthetics, as well as the ethical implications of taking an interventionist, artistic approach. Peer Productions was, by this point, a decade old and had become a registered charity with the increased governance that this requires. We had more established partnerships with schools, our funding position was slightly less precarious, and we were starting to build more long-term relationships with various trusts and foundations. This slightly stronger financial position brought with it some level of increased scrutiny, although funders still very rarely saw productions live, relying on our reportage to make their judgements. One local funder initially agreed quite a substantial grant for the development and first year of delivery for the project before reviewing their decision to support this thematic area and attempting to withdraw their support. Thankfully, this decision was reversed in light of my attendance at a specialist training programme in PSHE at Roehampton University and no further concerns

were raised, but this episode was indicative of a rising anxiety around how young people are educated about relationships and sex, perhaps particularly in a district with conservative political sentiment. I now return to these interrelated concepts of artistry, improvisation and decomposition, examining how they operated within the development and performance of *Losing It*.

Artistry and the art of difficult conversations

In this section, I use the term artistry to refer not only to aesthetic choices, but to the ethical, relational and dramaturgical judgements involved in designing and facilitating encounters around difficult subject matter. In the context of this project, artistry operated through decisions about scale, structure, participation and representation, shaping how conversations about sex, relationships and power could take place safely and meaningfully with young people. Breadth and scale became important factors in the development of this work. We created *The Teenage Pregnancy* project by building a relationship with the young parents over multiple sessions and establishing a rapport with genuine friendships emerging between the two groups. The workshops towards *Losing It* meanwhile were one-off events with less opportunity to form connections with and between the young participants. There were a variety of reasons for designing this element of the research in this way, not least the material considerations of many schools being reluctant to interrupt the pupils' educations with a longer-term project, but also, we wanted to hear from a range of different young people to gain a better picture of what they were encountering in sex education and how our

play might be able to enhance their experience. I encouraged schools to identify a range of different participants from a broad demographic of pupils to take part but remained reliant on those chosen by the teachers and the biases that this might involve. Some schools selected a small group of pupils whereas one local comprehensive school allowed me to work with all year 8 students. Furthermore, all the young people – young actors and participants alike – were positioned as experts. Having encountered sex education in recent years of one kind or another, they could all share informed opinions on what was and was not working. We continued to find ways to safeguard, respect and nurture the participants, which included implementing collective rule-writing at the beginning of each workshop and, in keeping with the principles outlined in my university ethics application, ensuring that the young people knew that they could withdraw their consent and leave without repercussion. Nonetheless, the brevity of the encounters, perhaps together with the in-school setting, meant that the depth of engagement tended to be more surface level and less insightful.

The workshops delivered in schools were flexible with scope to adapt depending on the needs of the different groups. All were co-facilitated by me, an experienced sex educator, alongside a subset of peer/actor educators. This structure meant that the different subsets could then come together to compare experiences, look for trends and find shared ground from which to begin improvising. Importantly, the peer educators and I were observing not only what the young people explicitly said but also how they behaved and engaged with the material. Some key approaches used in all workshops were:

- Group discussions, with peer educators supporting small groups of participants, exploring where young people could get information and learn about sex and relationships.
- Exercises where young people considered what was included in their current school-based sex education and what they thought was missing.
- Short forum theatre-style scenes exploring consent and healthy relationships performed by the peer/actor educators which the young people could discuss and critique.
- The opportunity to anonymously submit short written questions about any aspect of sex or relationships which were then discussed with the whole group as part of the workshop.

Here, artistry lay in designing encounters that could still generate meaningful insight despite their brevity, requiring careful facilitation, sensitivity to group dynamics, and responsiveness to what emerged in the room. Whereas many of the principles of applied theatre practice tend to rely on establishing group trust and connection before proceeding to project development, I became interested in how these brief encounters with different groups of young people might provide different but equally valid contributions to the final play, especially when placed alongside my longer-term process with the young actors with whom I had been working on a daily basis for over six months. Although fleeting, these workshops provided me with an opportunity to look for larger trends which, if prevalent in multiple workshop groups, would be more likely to be prevalent in our wider audiences.

For instance, in almost every group, young people asked us questions about pornography, and I return to these in Chapter 3. Knowing that their encounter with us would be brief may have led to young people being more honest and less guarded in their discourse, as they did not fear any longer term repercussions of asking challenging, rude or ‘naughty’ questions; indeed many of the young people took this opportunity to ask about the things that they had seen in pornography, which included group sex, choking, anal sex and even bestiality. In these conversations, the levels of some of the young people’s exposure to pornography was very clear, as was their lack of understanding about how the pornography they were consuming was made or its reliability as a credible source of information about sex. The recurring incidences of these questions and themes led me to realise that I needed to find a way, in the play, to unpick ideas perpetuated in pornography so as to explore and to build more realistic sexual expectations for young audiences.

Polyphony was at the heart of my dramaturgical method, enabling multiple voices to be heard, held and brought into dialogue throughout the play’s development. This multiplicity is mirrored in the play text, where a Year 13 class of seventeen and eighteen year olds look back on their years at secondary school, generating a shared narrative that threads together the experiences of twelve characters. These intersecting stories produce a nuanced portrayal of early sexual encounters, encompassing those that are abusive or violent alongside those that are joyful and consensual. Not only was it important to tell a polyphony of different stories, but it was also important to show the same event from multiple perspectives, allowing the audience to

recognise that people can experience the same moment differently and to strengthen their capacity to empathise with those varied viewpoints. Notably, the implementation of a collective polyphonic narration from the beginning of the play enables the broader group to interrogate individual characters' viewpoints and memories. This also encourages the audience to critically assess the trustworthiness and validity of each narrator. This perspective taking, as a tool to build empathy and compassion, which seemed so lacking in our workshops, has since become a central part of my writing practice. In Chapter 3, I discuss how the play's use of flashbacks, and of older characters commenting on their younger selves, creates the critical distance that makes this perspective-taking possible. While these moments demonstrate how carefully constructed dramaturgical choices could create space for reflection and distance, other points in the process required a different kind of responsiveness, where the boundaries I had deliberately put in place were tested or had to be temporarily abandoned.

Improvisation and breaking the rules

A large part of this research project had been designed to use pre-rehearsed scripted scenes performed by the young actors as a starting point for participants' discussions. I had chosen to work in this way as a protective measure to avoid anyone involved (participants, young actors, teachers or me) from talking about their own sexual experiences. I had discussed this with the young actors, and they were all aware that straying into personal experiences could put them in a risky position. However, in one workshop we were asked so many questions about

anal sex that I felt compelled to break my own rules and share details of my own life. I strategically chose to tell one group of students that I had not personally ever had anal sex. At the training course enforced on me by our funder, with colleagues who also work in Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE), this decision was frowned upon and met with derision. It even led some to question whether doing this put safeguarding into jeopardy. The course leader said, 'It's never appropriate to talk about your own sex life,' and the idea that disclosing personal information is risky and could jeopardise appropriate teacher-student boundaries is reinforced in government guidance which emphasises the importance of having clear guidelines to avoid the sharing of personal information (*Plan your relationships, sex and health curriculum*, 2022) and PSHE Association Guidance 2019 which stated, 'it needs to be agreed with pupils that lesson time is not the appropriate setting to directly discuss their own personal experiences or the private lives of others' (Teacher guidance: teaching about mental health and emotional wellbeing, 2019).

Although both these documents postdate the period in which I was conducting this research, they are indicative of a pervasive view that educators should not use their own lives to support their teaching and should instead opt for case studies or other fictionalised material. Whilst I understood the course leader's misgivings, I stood by my decision: using my own experience in this instance was useful, as it rooted the discussions more heavily in lived reality and gave the young people in the room a tangible role model with whom to identify. It made the possibility of saying no to a sexual request visible in a way that abstract discussion had not. This moment revealed a broader tension at the heart

of the work: between institutional expectations of ‘appropriate’ adult behaviour in educational settings, including clear boundaries around what should remain private, and the urgent need to address the influence of uncensored, hardcore pornography on young people’s understandings of sex and relationships. As a visiting practitioner, I was able to speak more freely about personal experience without the professional repercussions that might apply to a teacher. This exchange prompted me to reflect on how such tensions might be held, rather than resolved, within the play itself. While improvisation opened up space for new insights and possibilities, it also illuminated points at which the process could no longer be stabilised through adaptation alone. At these moments, intentions, structures, and assumptions began to unravel, marking a shift from improvisation towards decomposition.

Decomposition and cognitive dissonance

Losing It is a project that brought with it significant challenges with many moments where my planned research practice fell apart or decomposed. Here, I describe three of those decompositions, two of which bookend the timeline of this project. To give the reader the opportunity to stand alongside me in these troubled moments, I have adopted a mode of reflective writing which places the action in the current tense.

Decomposition 1 – 2017

“We’re really resilient so nothing like that has ever happened to us.”

The workshop with young people in schools has now finished, and I am working with the team of young actors who are improvising to inform my playwriting which they are then critiquing to inform rewrites. We have an extensive list of different topics which we think are important and I am trying to find ways to weave these into a meaningful narrative. One of the key topics being explored is how we are going to address the issue of rape and consent. I have shared the frankly horrific research evidencing the rising cases of sexual assaults, especially on women and girls, more broadly and especially in schools and we have spent a morning with an Independent Sexual Violence Advocate (ISVA) who has shared her experiences working with teenage girls who have been the victim of sexual violence. It is heavy and heartbreaking work. We, as a group, are having regular check-ins to make sure that the harrowing topics that we are working with are not adversely affecting the young actors' mental health. I have ensured that there is plenty of signposting to sources of additional support and have made certain that the work is interspersed with more light-hearted and digestible activities as part of their training outside of the project. I am actually quite surprised at how well the group are weathering the work and how easily they seem to be engaging with the project.

I am therefore taken completely off guard when one of the young women in the company asks to have a private word. She explains that they, as a group, have been discussing the project and that they think that I should not be focusing on rape because they have all been discussing their first sexual experiences and none of them have been raped because, 'they are just really resilient' so it's not that common or

that important. They don't want the play to make it seem like it is. This is one of the very rare occasions when I have felt genuinely angry in my work; I feel my heart pounding, a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes. As someone who has experienced the impact of sexual violence firsthand, I cannot believe that these erudite and intelligent young actors can be quite so naïve, especially considering the research they have encountered. I feel broken and personally attacked and only manage to mumble something about needing to think a bit more before I can respond before retreating to try and put myself back together. Even now, looking back on it, I feel that moment in the pit of my stomach.

Always inherent in a Peer Productions project is the way in which the young actors are themselves learning not just about themselves as theatre-makers but also about the broader social issues which we are exploring. Our mission claims a commitment to creating the artists and citizens of the future and I am shocked to realise that this vital bit of education has seemingly passed the young company by.

After having some time to gather my thoughts, I speak to the group. I try to explain, in as even tone as possible, that if none of them had experienced any form of sexual abuse then this was not a result of their resilience and much more a consequence of blind luck. I also explain that the play will be showing loving consensual relationships too, but that this part will be very easy for me to write so, although the focus in the room has been much more on exploring non-consensual relationships, this will not be reflected in the final production. This disconnect continued to trouble me though, and I wondered if perhaps the material and discussions had been of such an emotionally

challenging nature that the group had subconsciously decided to switch off as a form of self-protection rather than accept the unpalatable truth.

This moment stands out, not least because of the strength of emotion it evoked in me, but also because it blindsided me. I had been completely unaware that this was how at least some of the young actors were feeling and I struggled to understand how they could have reached this position. As I consider the moment anew some years later, where the freshness of the wound feels less raw, Sara Ahmed's work exploring the concept of the 'feminist killjoy', whose insistence and persistence in saying the uncomfortable things and challenging embedded behaviours, comes to mind. She argues that,

> If you expose a problem, you pose a problem; if you pose a problem, you become the problem. The management of a problem becomes the management of a person. In other words, one way of dealing with a problem is to stop people from talking about it or to make the people who talk about it go away. If people stop talking about a problem, or the people who talk about it go away, it can then be assumed that the problem has gone away.
>
> (Ahmed, 2023 p. 18)

Confronting the problem so intensively could have made the group anxious to find an easier solution to make the problem go away. Crucially though, if this group of highly engaged young adults were not able to confront these realities, how could I expect an audience of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds to? This moment influenced the play in two specific ways: the decision was reinforced to tell the story from a range of different perspectives in a bid to provide the audience with multiple entry points, and I committed to finding ways to embrace

lightness, humour and joy in the play to ensure that I did not risk young audiences switching off and disengaging. The importance of finding light in topics which can feel unbearably dark has since become a lynch pin in my practice and I explore this idea more fully in Chapter 4.

Decomposition 2 – 2018

“The rape won’t be too upsetting, will it?”

We are in our second year touring the play and a hassled, male teacher is organising his students in the hall. I ask him if he has read the trigger warnings provided and if he has shared them with his pupils, as per the contract he has signed. After some discussion it becomes clear that he has not done this so, with now around two hundred expectant audience members in the hall, I go on stage, by way of damage limitation and explain the triggers in the play and how to get help if you are affected. As I sit down, he comes over to me and asks, “The rape won’t be too upsetting, will it?” I am bemused. In whispered tones, as the play begins, I explain that I hope that the rape scene will be upsetting as to represent a rape as anything other than upsetting would be deeply problematic. I also explain that, if he had concerns of this nature, this needed to be articulated at an earlier point before signing our contract and ushering all of year 9 into the hall.

His cognitive dissonance in at once wanting or at least booking a play billed as a hard-hitting and frank exploration of a range of issues including rape and consent and expecting that this material could be presented in an emotionless and sanitised way, astounded me and yet

he would not be the first or last teacher to behave like this or ask these kinds of questions. I deemed his reaction to speak to a naivety about how theatre works as a form of affective education in which emotional engagement is critical and to a pervasive idea that young people, despite having access to extremely violent and sexual content online, need to be protected from anything which might make them feel something.

This teacher's comments and those of the initial young company all speak to a reluctance to engage with the harsher realities of the topic. I find myself reminded of the interview I attended with playwright Sarah Kane when I was a keen first year undergraduate drama student two months into my degree. In this interview, she addressed criticism about the sensational and shocking nature of her plays. She said,

> Some of the extreme things I've put in my plays I've put in because they're true and I've been so appalled and horrified, but genuinely compelled, that I can't help but put them in my play.
>
> (Kane, 1998)

When I feel 'appalled and horrified' or indeed disgusted and angry by things I know to be true, in this case the scale of sexual violence experienced by young women, I too cannot help but be compelled to include them in my plays. Furthermore, if, as I am suggesting, it is disingenuous and irresponsible to portray sexual violence without discomfort, then it is important to consider the role that discomfort, which this teacher was so keen to avoid, plays in my practice. Pedagogist Megan Boler suggests that education should not limit itself to cognitive

or intellectual growth but must engage a range of emotions, especially difficult ones. Discomfort is not incidental, but intentional and necessary to prompt reflection, challenge assumptions, and re-shape what we see as natural or given. Boler argues:

> The aim of discomfort is for each person, myself included, to explore beliefs and values; to examine when visual 'habits' and emotional selectivity have become rigid and immune to flexibility; and to identify when and how our habits harm ourselves and others.
>
> (Boler, 1999, pp.185-186)

She argues that this discomfort serves as a primary mechanism to unsettle and disrupt accepted beliefs and, in this way, discomfort serves similar aims as Brecht's verfremdungseffekt. I examine the staging of Seren's rape further in Chapter 3, where I use Brechtian strategies such as interruption, direct address and shifts in tone to produce an unsettling scene that resists emotional absorption and instead prompts critical reflection.

Decomposition 3 – 2023

"I want to see that again!"

We are in our last year touring Losing It. This company are the fifth company to tour the production in a seven-year period. We have copious feedback from previous productions evidencing positive changes in attitudes and understanding in our young audiences. This year's version has been reworked to reflect the audiences' better understanding of

gender diversity and is a particularly expertly performed, vibrant and dramatically impressive one. However, the audience reactions seem not be the same this year. On a few occasions, cast members have been upset by young male audience members loudly expressing transphobic and/or misogynistic views during the production or shouting abuse at the actors while they are packing up. Peer's Creative Producer has had to write to one school to explain that, as teachers witnessed and did not challenge this behaviour, we would not be returning to their school as we have a duty of care to our young actors. Whilst the behaviour at this school was particularly awful, this was not the only school where teachers did not challenge unacceptable behaviour.

Then an incident in one school forced us to question the entire project. During the rape scene, several boys had shouted out various unintelligible comments. In this performance (as can be seen in the digital version) some of the physicality of the scene is replayed in the following scene where Seren and Tim are reliving the previous night as they give statements to the police. As the actor playing Seren laid down, the cast heard very clearly from one audience member the words, 'I want to see that again.' The cast took this to mean that the audience member wanted to see the rape, which had been performed very briefly in the previous scene again and that he wanted to see it for his own sexual pleasure. In their words, 'He was getting off on it.'

The retelling of this moment by the young actor playing Tim is one that has stayed with me. He was horrified at the idea that this child could gain sexual pleasure from watching something so obviously non-consensual, and that he could openly declare this pleasure so

unashamedly and without challenge. He was also deeply, and understandably, troubled by the possibility that he may have played a part in objectifying and rendering vulnerable his friend who played Seren within this forum. While I do not accept this account as a transparent expression of individual desire, the actor's response nonetheless foregrounds how troubling such a declaration is, particularly within a peer setting. It is also possible to understand the young person's outburst as shaped by a range of intersecting social and power dynamics, including the performance of masculinity, the social currency of provocation, the normalisation of extreme sexualised content and the authority afforded by speaking within a group context where challenge was absent. Read in this way, the moment illustrates how misogynistic ideas can circulate and be articulated not only as expressions of belief, but as performative acts embedded within peer hierarchies and broader cultural scripts.

The young actors' discomfort immediately reminded me of Gesser-Edelsburg's analysis of Edna Mazya's play 'Backyard Games' designed to raise awareness of rape in Israel.

> *Backyard Games* is a rhetorically and aesthetically powerful performance that engages and stimulates its young audiences. However, an analysis of the script and performance indicate that its ultimate effect upon the audience is counterproductive to its educational and consciousness-raising goals. Paradoxically, the play, which is meant to counter sexual stereotypes and gender-related violence, has been found to reproduce them. An analysis of the drama's aesthetic reveals that through the use of language and staging, it creates a highly-sensual and male-oriented stimuli that reinforce a prevailing male view of adolescent boys as sexual beings in need of an outlet, in whatever way possible, and, on the other hand, adolescent girls are viewed as provocative victims.

(Gesser-Edelsburg, 2005).

It was difficult to know, especially as I was not present, whether the young audience member was, as I feared, getting a sexual kick from watching the scene or whether his actions were more a demonstration of some kind of toxic masculine bravado and his need to 'act out' to exert his own need for power by disrupting the show. The idea that I might have unintentionally created a male-orientated and sexually provocative narrative which served more to reinforce gender-based violence than to counteract it, in all honesty, made me feel physically sick and I was extremely tempted to cancel the tour on the spot. However, with only a week remaining of tour and following a lengthy discussion with the cast, in which we tried to weigh up the deeply problematic reaction of this one young person together with the lower level but definitely worrying reactions from some other young men, against many much more expected and desired responses, we decided to continue to the end of the tour, albeit with an additional staff member present who would stop the show if anything of this nature happened again. The end of the tour took place without further incident, but it was now obvious to me that *Losing It*, despite many years with strong feedback indicating that it was serving to achieve our educational aims, was no longer fit for purpose. I could feel that familiar intense rage building in me again and I knew that I felt compelled, just as Kane had been, to put those things in a play, so this formed the starting point for a new project called *Man Up*.

Reflecting on my analysis of *Losing It*, I am struck by how strongly my own outrage, anger and disgust shaped my early responses. These feelings often left me exposed and worried about being perceived as

unprofessional, overly emotional or as the kind of “feminist killjoy” Ahmed describes. Yet these emotions were held within a process that was never mine alone. The workshops, the conversations with the peer actor team and the shared discussions about the stories young people trusted us with continually grounded my reactions. Their willingness to engage, clarify and affirm many of my concerns reminded me that my voice was part of a wider collective effort. I remain alarmed by the growing prospect of censorship in a culture that is quick to cancel or silence uncomfortable truths. If I do not say them, who will? But, as Ahmed notes, “If you have to shout to be heard, you are heard as shouting” (2023, p.18) and once heard as shouting it becomes easier to be dismissed. The early in-yer-face tone of *Losing It* sometimes caused audiences to stop listening, and over the lifespan of the project I became increasingly committed to finding ways of being heard without shouting. The collaborative and polyphonic nature of the work helped me to do this. By allowing multiple voices to speak, question and illuminate the issues together, the project created space for approaches that were quieter, more layered and more nuanced than any I could have produced alone.

Unlike with *The Teenage Pregnancy Project*, where I was able to maintain a certain degree of distance, my own lived experiences of sexual violence, together with my horror at how young people’s early encounters with sex continue to be shaped by violence and misogyny, informed every aspect of my artistry. I can make no claims to impartiality. The activist desire for change, not through small adjustments but through substantial transformation, was a driving force throughout this project. I was reminded, too, of how easily the

boundaries between artist, researcher and participant can blur. Within the polyphonic structure of the work, where voices were layered, shared and continually in dialogue, my own voice inevitably became part of the mix. The dramaturgy made this both productive and painful. The collective narration, the shifting perspectives and the interplay between older and younger selves created openings where my own truths surfaced through the voice of a character. At times, these were truths I might not have felt emboldened or empowered to say in my own voice, or that I might have preferred to keep more deeply repressed. This interplay between personal experience and polyphonic storytelling added a further layer to the difficulty of the process, as the collaborative form itself invited, and sometimes required, a more direct reckoning with what I carried into the room. For example, when Charlotte sees her friend Ash being attacked, she says,

> **CHARLOTTE:** And I can just see one of them start pulling at their trousers, trying to take them down and suddenly I'm forgetting about Malcolm and I'm really angry. I'm angry about every obscene photo, every lewd comment and all the boys who thought our bodies were theirs to mess around with.
>
> Lemon (2020)

The scene never failed to move me. Every actor who played Charlotte affected me differently when they spoke this truth and, even editing the filmed version, I could feel my visceral bodily reaction to the performance of the words. This expression of my personal anger, even though it was spoken by an actor playing a character, felt less mediated, less translated, more raw and arguably more real than my words in my previous plays.

As I try to navigate citing my whole self, rage and frustration included, into the research, I am drawn to Ruth Behar's exploration of the 'vulnerable observer' (2022) in which she advocates for an ethnographer's emotions to play an integral role in the methodological process and the communication of research.

> When you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably. A different set of problems and predicaments arise which would never surface in response to more detached writing. What is the writer's responsibility to those who are moved by her writing? Devereux spoke in great detail of the observer's countertransference, but what about the reader's? Should I feel good that my writing makes a reader break out crying?
>
> (2022, p.16)

While Behar goes on to speak about the uncomfortable positionality of feelings within academia, the same cannot be said for the role of feelings in theatre. Like many other theatre-makers, I have long been preoccupied with wanting my audiences to feel something and for that feeling to affect the way they act in the real world.

In the intervening years between *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* and *Losing It*, it has become customary and even obligatory to include content warnings alongside theatre that engages with challenging topics and more recently this has been a source of considerable debate within the industry (The Stage, 2024). As a practitioner seeking to produce work which cares about both the people performing it and the audiences watching it, content warnings are a vital part of my safeguarding toolkit. Nonetheless, I am increasingly concerned by some of the attitudes

which accompany the practice of using so called trigger warnings and have witnessed firsthand some teachers and school administrators deciding that young people at risk of being triggered should automatically be removed from seeing the play or, at worst, that work which might provoke or trigger strong emotional reactions has no place in schools at all – “The rape won’t be too upsetting will it?”

Arguments about the dehumanising nature of pornography have been explored by feminist theorists including Andrea Dworkin (1988), Catharine A. MacKinnon (1991), Gail Dines (2011) and Julia Long (2012). While their work has been discussed and sometimes challenged within sex positive, queer and intersectional scholarship, their insights into objectification and harm remain important to my understanding of how pornography might shape emotional and relational norms. My use of Long’s work refers specifically to her 2012 analysis of dehumanisation in pornography and does not align with the gender-critical positions she has taken in subsequent years. Dines’s writing has been particularly influential in shaping my understanding of contemporary pornography and strengthened my intention to make pornography a central theme in *Losing It*, as well as my desire to find creative strategies to reawaken empathy. More recently, Himani Adarsh and Swapnajeet Sahoo (2023) identify troubling psychological effects on teenagers exposed to pornography that is devoid of care, mutuality, intimacy and respect. My focus here is specifically on how such material affects children and teenagers who often lack the real-world experience and critical capacity to interpret what they are seeing. Dines’s discussion of the rise of gonzo pornography is especially relevant, with its repeated scenes of violent penetration in which the woman’s body is pushed to its limit (2011, p.

283). Such representations encourage viewers to see the female body as an object rather than a person, and empathy for the subject on screen is diminished. I will explore the potential of theatrical experience to foster empathetic responses, and to serve as a compensating force that counteracts this unfeeling, pornified culture, more extensively in Chapters 3 and 4.

Man Up – 2024



Figure 5 - Laurie Schofield, Adnan Shinwari and Anna Scott as Lottie, Logan and Summer in Man Up 2025



Figure 6 - Kieran Jenkins, Laurie Schofield and Anna Scott in rehearsals for Man Up 2025

As with my other plays, *Man Up* was created as a piece of theatre activism in response to the changing societal and educational landscape. The play follows childhood friends Lottie and Logan from early childhood into mid-adolescence, charting the shifting dynamics of their friendship as they move through Years 7–10. Alongside them sits a wider peer group: Summer, who becomes increasingly entangled in a controlling relationship with Max, and Tommy, a neurodivergent classmate whose literal thinking and hunger for factual certainty make him particularly vulnerable to online misinformation. The play unfolds episodically, with short scenes that mark key moments in the characters' development as they negotiate gender expectations, peer pressure and the influence of online material. The actors regularly step out of character to become narrators and commentators on the story.

The project was supported by the University of Kent AHRC Impact Accelerator fund, with additional small grants from the Community Foundation for Surrey, the High Sheriff Youth Awards, the Sylvia Waddilove Foundation and the Heathrow Community Trust. This funding enabled me to draw on the *Understanding the Cel* research by Regehr, Shaughnessy and Shaughnessy *et al*. as a key stimulus during development. I provide a more detailed analysis of the funding process and its implications in Chapter 4. Working with young actors from the Peer Actor Development Programme, I planned each devising session but also allowed space for creative tangents so the work could grow organically. We began by establishing company rules of engagement, establishing a code of conduct for the team. I introduced a range of games and exercises designed to build ensemble theatre-making techniques and to familiarise the group with each other and the *Understanding the Cel* research material we were working with. I immersed myself in the topic, reading research and watching and listening to documentaries (including Ben Zand's Channel 4 documentary *The Secret World of Incels: UNTOLD* and BBC Radio 4's *The Boys Are Not Alright*). I placed key research documents and links in our shared Google Drive but, keen to avoid the devising team becoming overwhelmed, I did not expect nor particularly encourage them to read or view everything in full. Rather than overwhelming the group with extensive or highly complex material, I broke the broader topic into smaller, more manageable elements and introduced these one at a time. This allowed the actors to absorb and explore each idea before moving on to the next. For instance, we discussed the rise of extremist online influencers such as Andrew Tate and considered how their content often begins with apparently innocuous or reasonable messages before

progressing towards more explicit misogyny. We also examined gendered communication patterns, including the differences in how men speak to one another depending on whether women are present, and the distinct social atmospheres created in single-gender spaces. Another important element involved unpacking the concept of the "incel" and tracing how a term rooted in obscure online forums has entered more mainstream youth discourse. Introducing ideas in this incremental way enabled the young actors to engage critically with the material and supported more thoughtful and informed creative responses.

Almost straight away, I started writing fragments of script which were inspired by the prepared improvisations and preceding discussions. The devising team would rehearse and perform the scripted material, providing feedback which helped me to refine my writing further. By the end of the fifteen days, we had a selection of script fragments, some large pieces of paper outlining key concepts and potential characters, and a selection of post-it notes which we were arranging and rearranging to start to establish story and plot. I then worked independently for a few months as a writer using this generated material as inspiration for my script before sharing an initial draft at a read through with the devising team, the actors who would be performing the piece, and colleagues from both Peer Productions and Kent University. This readthrough was recorded and everyone was given the opportunity to feedback verbally and in writing on prepared feedback sheets. This helped me to develop the script into a second draft, which was then further refined in the first week of rehearsals with the touring cast. The play told the story of childhood friends Lottie (female) and Logan (male) (who the audience encounter from ages four to sixteen) as

they navigate the challenges of growing up together in an increasingly misogynistic world. Draft 3 was then rehearsed and toured to around 4,000 young audience members in schools in Surrey and surrounding counties in Spring 2025, shared at a public performance for friends and funders and filmed to be used as a digital theatre resource.

Man Up was made in a very different world to that in which *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* or *Losing It* sought to intervene. It is five years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but we are still very much feeling the aftermath of the cataclysmic changes in our lives. Peer Productions, as a charity dedicated to supporting young people, is witnessing firsthand in workshops and at performances a decline in youth mental health and resilience and a rise in misogynistic attitudes, which are being echoed in multiple national reports. Young people are also facing a mental health crisis of epidemic proportions. According to Tamsin Newlove-Delgado *et al*'s *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England* report by NHS Digital (2023), the COVID-19 pandemic has been an exacerbating factor in the decline in youth mental health, with young people adversely affected by disruptions to their routines, education and social interaction. They report an increase from 1 in 9 children in 2017 to 1 in 5 by 2023 with probable mental health conditions including anxiety, depression and eating disorders, with many young people struggling to access mental health services. These findings are further supported by a report from the *Royal College of Psychiatrists* (2021), which identifies a marked surge in demand for specialist mental health services for children, with the problem compounded by the lack of accessible and consistent mental health care, as noted in the *Care Quality Commission* (2022) report, which

highlights severe strains on youth mental health services. This growing sense of anxiety and mental distress is echoed in the *Children's Commissioner for England* (2021) report, which identified mental health as the foremost concern among children with 20% of respondents stating that their mental health was their biggest worry. At Peer Productions we are seeing in the young people with whom we directly work an alarming lack of self-confidence and self-esteem, contributing to a lack of maturity, with young people of all ages seeming younger than previous generations and many struggling to engage in any social interactions of any kind. As members of Surrey Wellbeing Partnership, a consortium of charities tackling youth mental health, we are hearing from our partners that anxiety and depression are at an all-time high, and schools and mental health services are struggling to meet demand with long waiting lists for mental health diagnosis and support.

Alongside a decline in youth mental health, the play was also made in response to a rise in misogynistic attitudes, experienced by me and my company directly when delivering plays and workshops in schools. The increasing prevalence of misogyny and sexual violence in schools has been widely documented, including through extensive testimonies, mainly from women and girls, shared on the Everyone's Invited Campaign website (2025). This trend was further evidenced by Ofsted's 2021 rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, which revealed that 9 out of 10 girls had experienced sexist name-calling, and 92% had received unsolicited explicit images or videos. The Women and Equalities 2023 government report on attitudes towards women and girls in education also emphasised the need for the government to address peer-on-peer sexual harassment and ensure

schools are held accountable for implementing the mandatory Relationships and Sex Education curriculum, with a focus on combating restrictive gender roles and the normalisation of pornography and sexual violence. This issue was additionally highlighted in the 2024 Unison Sexism in Schools Survey (2024), where teachers expressed concerns about the persistence of gender stereotypes, sexist language, and sexual harassment.

The Regehr, Shaughnessy and Shaughnessy *et al*, *Understanding the Cel* (2024) research – which was a key driver in making *Man Up* – found that online hate speech and misogyny, once the purview of the dark web, had now become disturbingly mainstream with algorithmic forces on social media platforms, especially TikTok, grooming and radicalising vulnerable young men to adopt extreme misogynistic views and incel behaviours. Our partner schools were also expressing concerns about a rise in misogyny, and we have seen for ourselves a dramatic change in behaviours in our teenage audiences. Having outlined the socio-political and research context that shaped the development of Man Up, I now turn to an examination of the project through the lenses of artistry, ethnodrama and playbuilding, before considering moments of improvisation and decomposition within the process.

Artistry, ethnodrama and playbuilding

Owing to the complexities and dangers of the themes in this new area of research, I did not attempt to engage directly with young men who were

experiencing misogynistic radicalisation. Instead, I chose to take an ethnodramatic approach, with Regehr et al.'s research (AHRC, 2024) at the heart of the creative process. This distinction matters methodologically. Where playbuilding, as a devising methodology, can generate its own data through lived experience and collaborative improvisation without requiring a prior body of research, ethnodrama's definition rests specifically on a foundation of formally gathered qualitative research, whether interviews, field notes, or action research, already collected and analysed before the theatre-making process begins (Saldaña, 2016). Regehr et al.'s Understanding the Cel served this function for Man Up, providing the systematically researched foundation that positions the play more explicitly within ethnodrama than playbuilding alone would allow. Working in a similar way to Joe Norris, Kevin Hobbs and Mirror Theatre Company (2024), I then used playbuilding as the creative methodology through which this research was interrogated and transformed, adopting a collaborative, constructivist approach in which the devising actors and I engaged in a shared imaginative response to the research, generating new knowledge that shaped the final play. As I will describe in more detail in Chapter 4, we as a company used game playing and improvisation to inform the development of script fragments, which, in turn, informed the development of more devised sequences that developed into new script extracts. The process was iterative and intuitive and relied on a playfulness in which uncertainty could be embraced.

To illuminate this approach further, I will now delineate how ideas about the animal kingdom were spawned from our collective creative

work and came to become a central motif in the play. As a group, we discussed the widely circulated “man versus bear” scenario that went viral on TikTok in April 2024. The trend began when a creator asked women a seemingly absurd hypothetical question: whether they would feel safer encountering an unfamiliar man or a wild bear while walking alone. In the original video, seven out of eight women chose the bear. This response resonated strongly with female viewers and quickly prompted thousands of reaction videos in which women explained that a man might choose to harm them, might not respect boundaries, or might escalate a situation unpredictably. The trend also generated significant backlash from some male users who considered the women’s response to this scenario to be unfair or misandrist, which in turn fuelled further commentary about women’s everyday experiences of threat. The original clip was viewed more than 16 million times within two months and became a touchstone for wider conversations about gendered safety (‘Man or Bear’, 2025). We discussed our own responses to the question and the different videos we had seen exploring the debate. This inspired me to write a scene, which later became Scene 15, in which main characters Lottie and Logan rehearse the same debate. When we read and staged the scene together, we agreed that it was an effective scene because we were keen to find ways to show contrasting perspectives and we could all feel sympathy with Logan who, as a man who does not engage in predatory behaviour, is frustrated at being told he is more dangerous than a bear, and also with Lottie who is understandably fearful of sexual violence.

Alongside this, our discussions repeatedly returned to the online popularity of the so called “alpha male.” The term is commonly used

within influencer culture to describe a supposedly dominant, assertive and emotionally controlled man who sits at the top of a presumed social hierarchy. This narrative is often reinforced through references to an “alpha wolf”, which is presented as biological proof that such hierarchies are natural. Because these ideas were appearing so frequently in our research and conversations, I looked more closely at the origins of the wolf metaphor. I discovered that the entire concept of an “alpha wolf” is a misconception based on early studies of wolves in captivity rather than on observations of wolves in the wild (Pappas, no date). This discovery fed directly into my thinking about misinformation and the ease with which authoritative sounding but inaccurate ideas can circulate without question. It was this insight that informed the development of Tommy’s closing speech, where he debunks the alpha wolf myth as part of his attempt to rethink what masculinity might mean:

> But there is no secret standard for what makes a good man just like there is no such thing as the alpha wolf. Man up and be whatever you want to be.
> It's your choice.
>
> (p.59)

Alongside this, as I will explain more in Chapter 4, the children’s story of Chicken Licken – as a metaphor for the spread of misinformation, echo chambers and cataclysmic thinking – had started to preoccupy me, much to the bemusement of the theatre-making group. With bears, wolves and chickens all now holding space in the project, I started to explore whether Tommy might have a special interest in random animal facts, and this eventually resulted in me peppering these facts throughout the play. In year 7, he tells his classmates that his favourite animal is ‘The Goliath frog that lives in the rainforest in Cameroon and

Equatorial Guinea in West Africa.' (p.11). In year 9, as entertainment for the group, he shares various animal facts, all of which give me opportunity, as a writer, to further explore ingrained sexist attitudes whilst maintaining a light and comic tone. In Scene 6, Tommy says, 'Did you know the female hippo, when she's lactating, the milk is actually pink' and this allows me to show Max's disrespectful and sexist attitude towards Summer when he says, 'Hey Summer, you got any pink milkshake for me?' Tommy then tells Summer, 'Sea Otters hold hands while they sleep so they don't drift apart.' She responds by holding his hand and this allows us to see Tommy's awkwardness with girls and Logan and Max's playfully disrespectful attitude towards Tommy – 'Oi oi! Tommy's pulled.' His final fact that, 'mosquitos are the deadliest animals to humans' and 'only female mosquitos bite' allows for Max's persistent sexist attitude to be reinforced when he responds by saying 'that does makes sense' and these ideas foreshadow Tommy's eventual downfall into incel ideology.

By the time we completed our research phase, we had established that something sinister was going to happen to Lottie or Summer at a house party, but we were not sure exactly what was going to happen or who (Logan, Max or Tommy) would be the instigator. The suggestion that Max, potentially in partnership with Summer, might spike Lottie's drink had been workshopped in our devising phase but it was only when constructing the final script that I realised that Tommy could act as hero, interrupting the scene by using his bear knowledge to deter Max and help Lottie get to safety. He says,

> If you are ever confronted with a bear, you should stand your ground and back away. You should wave your arms and shout to make the bear think you are bigger than you are until you can find a place of safety.
>
> (p.51)

The animal motif, which emerged organically during the creative process, served as an allegorical device to facilitate critical reflection on a range of contemporary issues. In particular, the Chicken Licken sequence invited the audience to interrogate their relationship with social media rhetoric, while the Man vs. Bear debate became a focal point for encouraging balanced argument. The accompanying teachers' pack includes an exercise in which young people revisit the scene and tally points of agreement with each speaker, helping them develop the critical thinking skills necessary to engage with opposing viewpoints. Similarly, unpicking the misinformation about wolf behaviour helps the audience to challenge conventional assumptions about innate masculinity. Overall, the animal motif functioned as a key writerly strategy to prompt the audience to adopt a more questioning and analytical stance. While these dramaturgical choices appear deliberate and carefully structured in the final play, they emerged through a process that was far less linear. The development of *Man Up* relied not only on planned aesthetic strategies, but on an ongoing capacity to respond, adapt and reframe ideas as they arose within the rehearsal room.

<u>Improvisation as inherent to the process</u>

Improvisation is by now a key pillar of Peer Productions' practice. The ability and willingness to pivot, move in new directions or abandon ideas

has become a central principle in my practice, so separating what is planned and what is improvised, when I now plan to improvise, proves difficult. As an incremental and collaborative undertaking, the devising process is awash with uncertainty wherein the play in development still has the potential to take different forms. As deviser Nina Friis reflected in our focus group, ‘that play could have turned out into so many different things.’ (2025)

Playbuilding researcher Norris also reflects on this sense of uncertainty stating, ‘I don’t know where we are going, but I know how to get there’ (p.26). When Norris asserts that he knows how to get there, he seems to be implying that he has a clear direction or process, even if he does not yet know his final destination. In Peer Productions’ projects, there is a polyphony of different voices with a process that is informed by multiple creative people and they each bring their own lived experiences, skills, knowledge, and practice into dialogue with each other, with me and with the pre-existing research with which we were engaging. On an epistemological level, like Norris’ work with Mirror Theatre, our approach is a ‘social constructivist one through which knowledge is co-constructed in dialogue with others’ (p.3). I therefore cannot ever fully pre-plan the creative process but, as I have matured as a practitioner, I have become more comfortable discovering what is unknown as the project unfolds. A more accurate reflection for me would be, ‘I don’t know where we are going, but I trust we will get there.’ At this stage of the project, improvisation has functioned as a productive and generative mode of working; however, drawing on my experience of earlier projects, I remained alert to the possibility that a more fundamental rupture or decomposition might emerge over time.

Waiting for Decomposition

As I write this in summer 2025, *Man Up* has recently completed its first tour, and the responses have been overwhelmingly positive. While there are many tiny moments of decomposition where ideas didn't work and were abandoned in favour of new ones, there have not yet been any significant moments of decomposition. As the project matures and tours again with a new cast to new audiences, I will now be alert for decomposition, as I feel sure that a moment will come when the work no longer serves its purpose and hope that this will be because youth perceptions have progressed and sexist attitudes are less prevalent. Reflecting on my experiences of developing *The Teenage Pregnancy Project*, *Losing It* and *Man Up,* I notice how each was largely made at specific moments in socio-political history in direct response to the changing needs of young audiences. Each was adapted and changed in response to the social climate and *Man Up*, like its predecessors, will inevitably have a shelf life.

As I reflect specifically on the process of making *Man Up,* I realise that the project, like *The Teenage Pregnancy Project*, was committed to care, truth and authenticity and, like *Losing It*, was driven by strong feelings. Over my extensive years of practice, I have continued to develop my approach to building and maintaining a compassionate, caring community and, as I will document further in Chapter 4, the absence of a secondary group of participants in this project perhaps made this an easier and less fraught endeavour. In making *Man Up*, we

aimed to create a ‘truthful fiction’ (Norris, Hobbs and Mirror Theatre, 2024, p.3). The work is grounded in interaction with academic research and real lived experience but, at the same time, it is built from a storytelling process with new knowledge generated though a shared imaginative approach.

The process was fuelled by strong feelings, this time not only my own but those of the young company who entered the devising process. Although many of us held strong political beliefs about gender, the creative process enabled us to develop our own empathetic responses, and this effectively melted away some of the toxicity so prevalent in the public debate. As *Man Up* deviser Nina F explains,

> I think I had a bit of an internal journey with it (…) I'm happy to be an angry feminist. I'm angry and I'm a feminist. And, I have a lot of strong views. Well, not even strong views. I just feel strongly in what I believe around it. But then I think through the process, and I don't think it's wrong to hold men accountable. I don't think it's wrong to have conversations where we're saying women are unsafe and these things are happening, and these things are real. But then, through the lens of considering the vulnerability of these young boys and what they're hearing and they're open to these ideas, it made me consider more that point of view and that lens.
>
> (Focus group with *Man Up* Devisers, 2025)

This experience of changing personal perspectives was also expressed by other members of the devising team. Our early devised work tended to fall into a trap of only focusing on the female perspective and, with the knowledge that this approach might only serve to reinforce negative assumptions and ideas about women, we had to discipline ourselves to find ways to achieve feminist objectives more subtly and consciously. Many of the group were feeling angry and this was fuelling our desire to

make the work, but we were also reckoning with the realisation that, if we expressed it angrily, we risked alienating the very people who we wanted to reach.

The idea of the work promoting an empathetic but critical response is reflected in the writerly and dramaturgical tactics I employed in this project. As with *Losing It,* I again found a narrative device which allowed the actors to take a step outside of their characters. Whereas in *Losing It* I use the idea of older characters remembering their younger selves narrating their experience of growing up from a position of hindsight, in *Man Up*, in addition to the characters they inhabit, each actor takes on a narrator role, or perhaps what might be more accurately described as a critic role (F1, F2, M1, M2, M3). These critical thinkers give a flavour of the discussions we had in the devising room and provide a commentary on the events of the play, unpacking the ideas explored for the audience and modelling critical thinking skills. The actors move fluidly and rapidly between the roles of character and critic, and this too demonstrates the potential to see things from different perspectives.

In conclusion, this chapter has examined how different socio-political and procedural contexts have shaped the development of three plays created in support of comprehensive RSE. It has also explored the writerly and dramaturgical strategies I employed to meet the evolving needs of young audiences, offering insight into the messy, complex and creative nature of playbuilding as a research methodology. These three plays, while not my only contributions to the field, serve as bookends to a critical period in both my professional development and the wider socio-political landscape affecting young people. Created during a time

marked by the rapid rise of internet pornography, the ubiquity of smartphones and shifting cultural attitudes towards sex and identity, these works reflect a phase in which my practice matured and adapted in response. It is also a period where I became increasingly comfortable with the messiness of the creative process, embracing uncertainty, contradiction and collaboration as essential elements of my playbuilding methodology.

With this overview of my practice now clearly articulated, the following two chapters examine in detail the two plays submitted as part of this PhD as practice-based responses to the central research question of how plays and playbuilding can be mobilised to contribute to comprehensive sex education in the UK. Chapter Three focuses on *Losing It*, with particular reference to the writerly strategies I employed and the influence of practitioners such as Bertolt Brecht and Edward Bond, in order to examine how dramaturgical choices can be mobilised to interrogate consent, sexual violence, and gendered power for young audiences. Chapter Four turns to *Man Up*, detailing the collaborative, ethnodramatic approach underpinning its development and exploring how this methodology enables alternative narratives around masculinity, intimacy, and responsibility to be articulated within a comprehensive sex education context.

Chapter 3 – Making Losing It: Writing Consent in a Pornified Age

The following vignette, drawn from my practice in 2009, illustrates an early encounter that has continued to inform my thinking about dramaturgy and audience interpretation when making theatre for young people.

I am facilitating a workshop for Year 8 learners about risk-taking behaviour. This is a workshop I delivered in eight different secondary comprehensive schools in the South-East. As part of the workshop, peer actors created different tableaux depicting moments of interaction. In one of these pre-prepared tableaux, a young man holds a young woman's face by her jaw, standing over her with his face very close to hers. I have instructed the male actor to look angry and the female actor to look scared. The image is created live in front of the twelve and thirteen year old learners, and they are also given the same image as a photograph on a worksheet, which asks them to consider what the young man might be saying and what the young woman might be feeling or thinking. Across all eight schools, the responses from young people were strikingly similar. They consistently suggested that the young man might be saying romantic or sexual comments like "I love you" or "I want you," and their ideas about what the young woman might be feeling often implied that she too was enjoying a romantic or sexual encounter. It was evident, from almost every answer, that the young people had interpreted this scene - one I had constructed to provoke discussion around bullying, intimidation, and gender inequalities - as a romantic or sexual interaction. This was not an isolated interpretation, but a clear pattern repeated across all the workshops.

I was both disturbed and perplexed by the young people's persistent interpretation of a scene, which I had constructed as a violent and abusive moment, as romantic and sexual. I was also struck by their apparent difficulty in expressing empathy for the young woman in the tableaux. This project became one of many in my professional practice where I was surprised by how often young participants seemed unable to interpret emotional states from body language or facial expression, or to imagine how someone might feel in a given situation. Across numerous projects, a lack of empathy and a limited understanding of the dynamics in healthy and unhealthy relationships repeatedly emerged. Finding ways to encourage a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics, and to develop theatrical strategies that might help audiences engage more empathetically, therefore became a central concern in my practice.

This chapter critically analyses the development, dissemination and evaluation of my play *Losing It* - a play about sex and relationships aimed at UK-based school audiences aged thirteen and above and performed as part of Personal Social Health Education (PSHE). As I explained in Chapter 2, it was initially collaboratively created by me working with a team of young actor/peer educators (aged 18 – 22 years) before touring with new casts for the following seven years, with an enforced break owing to COVID-19 lockdowns, and this period from 2017 to 2023 was an especially turbulent one for young people in Britain. In this chapter I argue that the young people that my plays are designed to reach are often lacking the empathetic skills of previous generations and that watching plays can potentially help them to fine

tune this important social skill and that this can positively impact their future relationships. This idea of younger generations with empathetic deficits, informed by many encounters like that described as I opened this chapter, is supported by popular psychologist Jean Twenge's research (2010 and 2013) in which she suggests that a rise in using technology and accessing the virtual world has resulted in a deficit in face-to-face communication and emotional intelligence skills in teenagers. Twenge's ideas are especially concerning when we consider that she was writing about an earlier generation who relied less on virtual interactions than the teenagers I worked with in 2017 while creating *Losing It*—and even less than the young people I aimed to reach with *Man Up* in 2025. As I discussed in Chapter 2, feminist analyses of objectification in pornography (Dworkin, 1988; MacKinnon, 1991; Dines, 2011; Long, 2012), while contested, offer a useful lens for considering its emotional impact.The commodification and repeated circulation of violent sexual imagery can contribute to a lack of empathetic engagement with those who become the subjects of many young people's sexual desires, particularly when that viewing begins before they have developed the real-world experience and critical skills needed to interpret what they are viewing online. These feminist writers were reflecting on periods in which pornography was not as ubiquitous, accessible or extreme as it is today, yet their work resonates with what I have been witnessing since 2009: young people who struggle to recognise emotional cues in others and to respond with empathy.

In this chapter, I use the development of my play *Losing It* as a case study to demonstrate how, by using specific writerly and dramaturgical tactics and producing live theatrical performances with

young actors close to the audience's own age, it is possible to disrupt this empathetic disconnect. I critically analyse my research and development process for *Losing It*, which foregrounded peer education as a tool to empower polyphonic voices in the theatre-making process. I then consider how understanding the ways in which young people access, consume and comprehend pornography impacted my creative approach. Using the theoretical teachings of Bertolt Brecht and Edward Bond, and their ideas about how theatre-making can be a tool for social change, I move on to scrutinise the writerly and dramaturgical tactics I use in *Losing It* to consider how these tactics could contribute to opening up a creative space of affective potentiality for the young audiences, enabling them to develop empathic responses which might be extended into their real life interactions. I pay particular attention to the way in which I use the staging of Seren's rape in *Losing It* as a pedagogical and dramaturgical strategy, contextualising it alongside other plays which seek to deconstruct rape narratives from a feminist perspective.

A polyphonic and peer produced model

The assembly and construction of polyphonic voices are at the centre of my practice, and this is evident in both how I research, develop and devise the work and how I construct the final play text. As applied theatre scholar Sally Mackey explains,

> Polyphony suggests a number of different voices participating in the overall project, frequently following their own routes and independent needs, sometimes harmonious and occasionally not. (2016, p. 487).

Mackey's description of a polyphony resonates with my practice which is far from a singular endeavour and instead incorporates many different voices and perspectives which all contribute to the ultimate shaping and form of the production. To develop *Losing It,* I started by running a series of workshops with secondary school pupils in years 8 - 11, co-facilitated by my team of young peer practitioners, and these workshops had a significant impact on the overall creative approach to the text and the shape of the play itself. The workshops were designed to help me better understand where young people get their information about sex and relationships, to identify any gaps in their knowledge and to try to answer some of their unanswered questions. The peer actor team and I would then discuss, debate and interrogate various ideas which emerged from these sessions, before developing improvised and scripted scenes which in turn informed the final crafted script. Alongside this work, I also reviewed existing academic and social research exploring what constitutes effective RSE and what young people might need to forge better early intimate relationships. In addition, we surveyed teachers and interviewed an Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA) who specialised in working with young people. This complex process highlighted the breadth and variety of young people's experiences, and these varied voices contributed to a rich polyphony of often dissonant voices which included the young people who took part as workshop participants, the peer actors, the voices of young people, experts and researchers (in existing research) as well as, of course, my own. Importantly, the voices within this process were not unified. As I described in Chapter 2, while broader research points to an alarming rise in sexual violence among young people, many of the participants

and peer actors did not initially perceive sexual assault as a pressing or immediate issue, particularly where it had not featured directly in their own lived experience. This incongruence between wider evidence and young people's varied lived perceptions underscores the risks of homogenising young people's experiences and identities and reinforces the need for dramaturgical approaches that can hold contradiction, difference, and uneven awareness without collapsing them into a singular narrative.

Working with peer educators as co-investigators has been central to my practice since I founded Peer Productions. As outlined in my introduction, my initial hypothesis was that involving young adults closer in age to participants would make groups more willing to talk openly, and that small-group discussions facilitated by peer educators might reduce self-consciousness around sensitive topics. At the same time, I am mindful of Nancy Lesko's warning against treating young people as a homogenous group defined solely by age, a framing which is both reductive and potentially harmful (1996, p.140).

Fields and Copp's research complicates common assumptions about peer education by identifying two dominant ways in which young people are often selected as sexuality educators. In some programmes, peer educators are selected because they belong to groups that adults conventionally admire, such as high achieving, articulate, confident students. In others, young people are positioned as cautionary figures, including those who regret early sexual activity or who are young parents, and whose stories are mobilised to warn others (Fields and Copp, 2015, p.189). Both approaches, they argue, risk instrumentalising

young people and reinforcing hierarchies rather than fostering genuine dialogue. The peer educators I worked with were not selected on the basis of sexual abstinence, sexual experience, or as moral exemplars or cautionary figures. Instead, they were young actors chosen for their theatrical skill, their capacity to work collaboratively, and their willingness to engage seriously with complex and sensitive material. While they did not conform to a single profile, many shared characteristics such as confidence, expressive ease, and comfort occupying public space. These qualities were central to their effectiveness as performers, but they may also have shaped power dynamics within workshops in ways that complicate assumptions about peer affinity. Fields and Copp argue that effective peer education does not depend on shared identity or assumed sameness, but on what they term alliance-based empathy, defined as, ‘a process of recognising conflicts present in other people’s lives – not one’s own – and developing a sense of shared concern and purpose’ (Fields and Copp, 2015, p.190).

If empathy allows one person to enter another’s perspective while retaining an awareness of difference (McConachie, 2012, p.15), then young actors, whose craft relies on precisely this skill, may be particularly well equipped to function as peer educators. My tentative assumption that young people might feel more comfortable talking to peers than to adults also finds some support in Dobson *et al*.’s comparison of teacher-led and peer-led interventions in relationship and sex education (2017, p.13).

Importantly, Fields and Copp emphasise that peer education is not only transformative for learners but also for the educators themselves.

They note that peer educators frequently experience a deepening of their own understandings through the work, as they are required to confront perspectives and realities different from their own. This resonates strongly with my experience during the development of *Losing It*. Peer educators consistently reflected that facilitating workshops altered their sense of responsibility and sharpened their awareness of the issues at stake. Nineteen-year-old peer actor Sophie observed:

> Talking to those kids made me realise how important what we are doing really is. My brother's their age and I had no idea that he'd be thinking about girls in that way. It's really opened up my eyes and made me even more determined to get the message across.
> (Peer Actor Educator reflections, 2017)

However, contrary to the assumption that peer educators are always better placed than adults to facilitate open discussion, I regularly observed that participants directed their most awkward or explicit questions towards me as the perceived adult in the room. Although I positioned myself clearly as the workshop lead, I was not framed as a teacher, and sessions operated under collectively agreed rules rather than standard school protocols. My facilitation style, including the use of humour, colloquial language, and where I dressed casually, was not consciously adopted as a pedagogical strategy but emerged intuitively from my practice. In retrospect, these choices align with factors Dobson suggests may support more open dialogue.

I also began to reflect on whether the presence of young actors, who were sometimes perceived as attractive by participants, might at times inhibit candid discussion. This was echoed by one peer educator, eighteen-year-old Jasmine, who wrote,

> Today the group definitely felt more comfortable talking to Nina about sex. When I tried to get them to talk in smaller groups, it was very hard work.
>
> (Peer Actor Educator reflections, 2017)

As a woman then in my thirties, I was perhaps less readily positioned as a sexualised figure, which may have made it easier for participants to approach me with intimate questions. This interpretation is supported indirectly by anonymous post-show feedback collected across Peer Productions' projects, in which some young audience members have offered their phone numbers and romantic or sexual overtures to peer actor educators. Taken together, these observations complicate any straightforward assumption that proximity in age automatically facilitates openness. Instead, they reinforce Fields and Copp's argument that effective peer education relies on relational positioning, care, and alliance-based empathy rather than on shared identity or assumed similarity.

The complex dynamic I observed between younger adolescent audiences and performers in their late teens and early twenties became an important consideration when developing the final text and I started to think more deeply about how young performers specifically could affect the audience. By using young actors close in age to both the characters and the audience, I felt that I had the opportunity to make something which young people would perceive as more real or genuine. Nicky Stanley *et al*'s scoping review of interventions in schools to tackle domestic abuse highlights the importance of authenticity to young people and identifies that theatre programmes with relatable characters and scenarios are often perceived as more authentic by young people.

Although there is inadequate data to draw meaningful conclusions about peer educators as facilitators of learning, the review does conclude that programmes, 'delivered with youth input (authentically)' are most likely to successfully create change. As described in Chapter 2, when young people perceive what they are seeing as authentic and truthful, they become more excited and engaged. Daniel Schulze *et al* argue that this contemporary obsession with concepts of reality is a response to a cynical and detached post-modern experience; I sought to test the idea that young people might be drawn to a more authentic live experience, as a contrast to overconsumption of online material wherein virtual interactions often took the place of real-world connections. Ideas around what is real, realistic and, with the prevalence of online pornography, even hyper-realistic started to become central to my theatre-making approach and this is a concept to which I will return later in this chapter. Reflecting on authenticity and the impact of age-proximate performers also prompted me to consider the broader sexual landscape in which young people are forming their understandings of sex and relationships, particularly in a digitalised and pornified culture.

Reimagining Sex Education in a Pornified Age: Reality, Realism and the Hyperreal

The workshops delivered in six Surrey secondary schools enabled me to build a clearer picture of how young people currently learn about sex. While their experiences and levels of maturity varied widely, most reported accessing information online, primarily through pornography or social media. Few had discussed sex with their families since learning

about reproduction in primary school. Pornography was highly prevalent, with boys reporting higher rates of access than girls, though both genders encountered it, intentionally or otherwise, from around the start of secondary school. This reflects a broader national pattern, with the Children's Commissioner for England reporting in 2023 that 10% of children had seen pornography by age nine, 27% by age eleven, and 50% by age thirteen (De Souza, 2023).

Participants were invited to submit anonymous questions about sex and relationships, which were then addressed during the workshops. These questions proved particularly revealing, illuminating gaps in knowledge that young people were unable or unwilling to articulate in group discussion. Many centred on practices commonly depicted in pornography, including anal sex, 'squirting', choking, incest and bestiality. Their framing made clear that often limited and often distorted understandings of sex were being shaped by pornographic material. One young person asked, 'Will a girl get a better orgasm if she has anal sex?' My response was factual and non-judgemental. I explained basic female sexual biology and how arousal works and clarified that while some women may choose to have anal sex and may enjoy it, for many it is not arousing and is certainly not an inevitable part of being sexually active. I was careful not to frame it as taboo, but I did challenge the assumption that this was something women were expected to want or routinely participate in. I emphasised that pleasure is individual, that sexual practices vary widely, and that no one is obliged to do anything sexually simply because it is represented as normal in pornography. The reaction was striking. Many participants had assumed that anal sex was a routine part of sexual activity and that women generally enjoyed it

as much as, or more than, vaginal sex. These assumptions appeared to be directly informed by what they had seen online. They were often unaware of the physical preparation involved or the potential risks, revealing a dangerous gap between pornographic representation and embodied reality. It became increasingly clear that if the play was to meaningfully engage with porn and rape culture, it would need to be explicit, frank and willing to address taboo subjects. The work would have to function not only as an alternative to classroom-based RSE but also to offer a
counterpoint to the hardcore pornography on which so many young people relied for their sex education.

As discussed earlier, the influence of pornography on adolescent behaviour is a growing concern. While links between pornography and adult offending remain contested, evidence suggests that early exposure shapes sexual attitudes and expectations. Research from the NSPCC and the Safer Internet Centre highlights the normalisation of practices such as sexting, with gendered patterns emerging in image-sharing behaviours. Girls are more likely to self-generate images in response to boys' requests, while boys more often share images unprompted (Phippen, 2012, p.2). These dynamic echoes the power imbalances and coercive elements present in both pornography and wider society. Amanda Cawston (2018) argues that online pornography functions as an 'externalised form of prostitution', carrying with it domination, exploitation and objectification, resulting in what she terms an 'alienated form of sexism' (p.22). Her use of the term alienation is significant here. She describes a detachment from empathy and mutual recognition, aligning with earlier observations about cognitive disconnect and diminished

perspective-taking among young people. This alienation may also relate to Jean Twenge's argument that increasing reliance on digital mediation produces psychological and emotional distance (2010 and 2013).

As outlined in Chapter 1, young people themselves describe pornography as normalising aggression (Martellozzo et al., 2016), and there is growing evidence of a crisis in teen sexual culture, from widespread digital sexual violence (Ringrose et al., 2021) to a sharp rise in sexual offences on school premises (Busby, 2017). This is particularly concerning given the prevalence of gonzo pornography, which depicts body-punishing sex in which women are demeaned and debased (Dines, 2011, p.xi). While most young men encounter pornography, a range of psychosocial and protective factors influence whether this exposure translates into harmful behaviour, a complexity beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, these patterns underscore the urgency of developing meaningful, youth-centred interventions.

My enquiry draws in part on Bandura's theory of social learning (1977), which proposes that people learn behaviours by observing and modelling others. If, as I am suggesting, watching theatre has the potential to shape attitudes through performance, it follows that repeatedly consuming pornography, particularly when it is increasingly algorithmically gamified and reinforced by dopamine-driven reward systems, may similarly influence behaviour. What became apparent in the workshops was not only the extent of young people's exposure to pornography, but also a profound confusion about its status as "real". I was struck by the strange coexistence of worldliness and naïveté within individual participants. In one workshop, twelve- and thirteen-year-old

boys who openly described themselves as ‘porn addicts’ were shocked to learn that pornography involved real people having sex. They had assumed it was staged or simulated. For many, the material’s realness was a source of genuine confusion.

This uncertainty echoes Martellozzo’s NSPCC research, which notes that a significant minority of young people want to emulate what they see in pornography and that boys in particular often perceive it as realistic, despite acknowledging that it offers a poor model for consent or safe sex (Martellozzo et al., 2016, p.1). A similar tension surfaced when a fourteen-year-old argued that pornography was better sex education ‘because it’s real so you can actually see how to do it’, before conceding that it was ‘not realistic but real’. What he appeared to articulate was that pornography feels real because the bodies and acts are real, even though the scenarios and power dynamics do not reflect lived experience.

Aidan McGlynn (2021) explores this ambiguity, outlining feminist critiques that pornography communicates harmful messages about women’s availability and deservingness of violence, while legitimising sexual domination (p.7). He addresses the ‘fiction objection’, which claims pornography cannot shape beliefs because it is fictional, arguing instead that meaning arises through the interaction between representation and shared social assumptions (p.8). For young people with limited sexual experience, these implicit messages can solidify into beliefs that circulate socially.

As discussed in Chapter 2, my plays aim to function as ‘truthful fiction’ (Norris, Hobbs, Mirror Theatre Company, p.3), presenting diachronically truthful characters and situations while remaining visibly theatrical. Audience responses to *Losing It* consistently reflected how strongly audiences connected with the play’s perceived authenticity and relatability indicating that young people place high value on experiences they perceive as emotionally truthful, even when they clearly understand them to be constructed. This emphasis on authenticity echoes the fourteen-year-old’s claim that pornography is valuable because it feels real. Shor (2024) similarly notes that viewers place high value on amateur pornography because it is perceived as more genuine and authentic (p.1153). Taken together, these responses suggest that perceived realness operates as a key epistemic marker for young people across both sexual media and live performance.

The *Losing It* process therefore illuminated how strongly young audiences are drawn to material that feels emotionally or socially ‘real’, even when they recognise its artifice. Prolonged exposure to violent pornography that feels real but is not realistic risks producing what I would describe as a diachronic falsehood, in which harm becomes normalised over time. This raises important questions about how young people construct their understanding of intimacy, and how live theatre might intervene by offering alternative, embodied encounters grounded in empathy and critical reflection. To explore this further, I now turn to Baudrillard’s concept of the hyper-real (Baudrillard & Poster, 2001, p.174).

My own early acquisition of sexual knowledge was informed by reading books which included sexually explicit material. Young adult novelist Judy Blume's *Forever*, for example, offered an unglamourous insight into awkward first sexual experiences when the seventeen-year-old protagonist Katherine chooses to have sex with her partner for the first time. As Leah Phillips writes, 'on her website, Blume shares that she wrote *Forever* at the request of her daughter (Randy), who wanted "a story about two nice kids who have sex without either of them having to die"' (Phillips, 2018). This soft-core and yet radical (for the late seventies) exploration of emerging sexuality was passed between my classmates covertly and I know we were not alone in experiencing this. In well-used shared copies, repeated handling of the same explicit passage was materially evident; when laid flat, the book would consistently fall open at that page, indicating the frequency with which it had been revisited by readers. Whilst the book clearly piqued the interests of a generation of young people, Judy Blume's *Forever* is a representation that is different in kind to digitally mediated pornography. In engaging with literary representation, the reader is required to take an active intellectual role to bring the words on the page to life in their imaginations. This is a qualitatively different process to the one undertaken by today's teenagers when they access wide-ranging and increasingly hardcore pornography via high-speed internet connections. In his TED Talk, Gary Wilson, author of *Your Brain on Porn: Internet Pornography and the Emerging Science of Addiction*, argues that internet pornography can function as a powerful behavioural addiction, driven by the same brain mechanisms that underlie substance addiction. His central message is that modern, high-speed pornography is uniquely capable of hijacking the brain's reward system, leading to real

neurological changes and real-life consequences for some users. He claims that recovery from erectile dysfunction is slower for younger men than for their older counterparts and attributes this to the profound effect of pornography on young men who use it as their sexuality is emerging in early adolescence compared to older men whose early sexual encounters were more likely to involve a degree of imagination and fantasy.

In Baudrillardian terms, a second order simulation blurs the boundaries between what is real and what is represented. Perhaps an interesting modern example of a second order simulation would be the rise of OnlyFans. OnlyFans is an online subscription platform where creators share exclusive content with followers who pay a monthly fee to access it. It functions by allowing creators to post photos, videos, or messages behind a paywall, while subscribers support them directly through subscriptions and optional tips. An OnlyFans account masquerades as offering a more personal, bespoke and perhaps authentic interaction and yet is still in its essence a simulation. As Amado J Contino explains in his blog post, OnlyFans

> blurs the line between reality and fantasy, allowing subscribers to interact directly with creators in a way that feels more personal, but is still, at its core, a simulation. Unlike pornography, OnlyFans offers the illusion of intimacy, where users can request custom content, chat with creators, and even develop a parasocial relationship with them.
>
> (Contino, 2024)

I suggest that the popularity of the OnlyFans platform may, in itself, may speak to a generation who are seeking out opportunities for intimacy but lack the skills and confidence to do so IRL (in real life).

Finally, Baudrillard frames the category of third order simulation: a representation seemingly more real than reality itself and yet detached from reality. Drawing on Lane's interpretation of Baudrillard's concept of third-order simulation, I suggest that contemporary pornography functions as a hyperreal system in which sexual models precede real-world encounters, with desire increasingly generated algorithmically rather than through embodied relational experience (Lane, 2000, pp.83–84). There is a plethora of videos on a site like Pornhub ordered and arranged according to an algorithm responding to the viewer's previous viewing behaviour. The viewer is invited to jump between videos that have been edited and presented for maximum sexual arousal. In one masturbation session a young man might become aroused by more bodies than he will ever see naked in his entire life. Many young people now watch pornography before they start having sexual encounters in real life; therefore, this behaviour literally precedes sexual behaviour. Gary Wilson explains that there is growing evidence that there is an increase in young men struggling to maintain an erection in real sexual experiences because they have become so conditioned to respond only to digital pornography. These ideas are supported by Amelia Pantazis *et al*'s 2024 study which notes a '31x increase of adolescent males presenting with erectile dysfunction since 2014'; the study cites psychogenic factors and increased online pornography use as likely causes of this startling increase.

The consumption of pornography as a third order simulation insidiously changes what is perceived to be normal or mainstream sexual behaviour. Young people feel compelled to emulate what they see online by creating their own sexual content and ‘sexting’ their peers. These images inevitably are leaked beyond their intended audience and become just one of the many sexualised images available online; thus, young people’s sexuality is distorted yet further.

While Baudrillard does not explicitly theorise a category beyond third-order simulation, contemporary digital practices suggest further intensifications of hyperreality that exceed the conditions he was writing within. One such development is the emergence of deepfake technologies, in which synthetic sexual images and videos are generated usually without the subject’s consent and are then circulated. Unlike the pornography previously discussed, which begins with filmed bodies, deepfake technology generates sexual representations which, although may appear authentic, are entirely detached from lived experience. Deepfake pornography can, therefore, be understood as an extension of hyperreal simulation, where representation no longer distorts reality but replaces it entirely. This phenomenon is perhaps particularly damaging for young people for whom digitally fabricated sexual images may be experienced as indistinguishable from real events. The ethical and affective implications of this form of representation are explored further in my play *Man Up*, where the creation of deepfake imagery of teacher Miss Windell functions as a dramaturgical device to examine consent, reputational harm, and the loss of agency in digitally mediated sexual cultures.

Having considered the impact of pornography on young people's conceptual understanding of sexual behaviour and authenticity, I will now move on to consider the challenges of reimagining a sex education curriculum in this hypersexualised climate. In workshops delivered as part of the research and development of *Losing It,* young people persistently expressed that they felt frustrated by their experiences of classroom-based sex education which they found to be only focused on the negative impact of early sexual experiences, lacking in attention to the concept of sexual pleasure and out of touch with their lived experiences. These sentiments have also been echoed in multiple surveys (See Chapter 1. pp.47-50). Although the young people wanted their RSE to be different, when I challenged them to work in groups to try and design an alternative curriculum most participants struggled. They found it difficult to imagine something radically different from their own experience and instead offered variations on or rehashes of what they had already experienced.

Over the past two decades, I have witnessed a continuing trend where well-meaning funders want to champion youth voices and place young people's participation at the heart of designing projects with even the World Health Organisation advocating 'for providing opportunities for children and young people (CYP) to meaningfully participate in the design and delivery of services.' (Aarthi Ravishankar *et al.*, 2022) This experience, where young people have struggled to imagine an alternative, highlights one of the key challenges in so called co-produced projects. Young people cannot be expected to shape change unless they have the knowledge and skills to know what change might look like. This lack of engagement towards making change happen came up

persistently in both participant and peer educator workshops. Young people of all genders, in the groups with which we worked, agreed that girls who are sexually active are ‘slut shamed’ whereas boys engaging in the same behaviour are idolised. Most agreed that this was unfair but most also felt that there was nothing in their power to change this. Even some of the more politically minded peer educators, in discussions during the devising process, shrugged their shoulders when considering the proliferation of hardcore pornography and children’s growing access to it. The peer educators’ collective feeling seemed to be that there was nothing they could do to change the situation, so they just accepted it. It was clear to me that the play needed to find a way to encourage the idea that change is possible and desirable.

Young people’s reluctance to engage in re-imagining their sex-education curriculum may also reflect a wider fatigue with participation processes that have historically felt tokenistic. Classic frameworks such as Roger Hart’s (1992) ‘Ladder of Participation’ and Laura Lundy’s (2007) ‘Model of Participation’ emphasise that meaningful youth voice requires not only space and opportunity but also influence and warn that without these conditions, participation can easily slip into tokenism. The National Youth Agency similarly argues that young people disengage when consultation is superficial or when their input does not lead to tangible change, noting that repeated experiences of ‘participation-washing’ can erode trust and willingness to contribute (NYA, 2019). In this context, young people’s difficulty in imagining alternatives to their current RSE may not indicate apathy alone, but rather a learned expectation that their ideas will not meaningfully shape outcomes – a

dynamic well documented in youth participation literature (Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2007).

My discoveries in this initial phase of research and development of *Losing It* significantly impacted the overall shape of the final production. The potential of using a piece of live theatre to change young people's perceptions of sex, sexuality and relationships became increasingly evident in the context of the workshops. In one of the workshops, students who appeared quite comfortable talking about their consumption of pornography were visibly shocked and embarrassed when two of the actors played out a dramatic scene during the workshop. When they leaned in to kiss, many of the students watching responded viscerally, covering their eyes, squealing, and physically recoiling. The liveness of having actors interact quite innocently in the space seemed alarming, even to those young people who only minutes before had been openly discussing watching hardcore pornographic material. As the research and development phase concluded, I began to think that liveness, and the possibility of showing live representations of sexual encounters, within the boundaries of decency, could prove to be radical in an age so dominated by online interactions and virtual representations. In the next section, I will explore further the challenges of depicting sexual encounters in a school setting as well as the specific writerly and dramaturgical tactics I deployed to try and re-envision and inform understandings of consent and intimacy.

Theatre Tactics

In response to the varied experiences and needs demonstrated by young people, I decided to include as wide a range of characters in the play as possible, each with different experiences and perspectives. I hoped that, by representing and platforming a polyphony of the different voices which I had encountered in my research, I might be able to provide multiple points of potential empathetic connection for the young audience members. These characters would speak openly about sex and relationships, and the topics that young participants and peer educators consistently told me were missing from their existing RSE, pornography, pleasure and consent, would be brought to the foreground. Both peer educators and young people expressed frustration that school-based RSE was overly negative and driven by fear. They reported that this emphasis made them less likely to trust what they were being taught or to experience it as truthful or relevant to their lives. Strikingly, this mirrors Judy Blume's account of her daughter, who in the mid-1970s asked her to write a book in which a girl could experience sexual feelings and engage in consensual sex without it leading to devastating consequences (Phillips, 2018). Some forty years later, I found myself similarly motivated to create a play that could rebalance the prevailing narrative that sex is inherently harmful, by portraying joyful, caring and consensual early sexual experiences.

Having identified the importance of live performance and the radical potential of using actors close in age to the audience, in this section, I will turn to consider the specific writerly and dramaturgical tactics I deployed in *Losing It* to affect the audience and effect social change. In doing this I am building on James Thompson's argument for an affective turn in applied performance in which he stresses the

importance of recognising the emotional and sensory dimensions of theatre, arguing that affect has the potential to agitate, sustain sensation, and produce a “shock to thought” that can prompt critical engagement with the world (Thompson, 2009, pp. 124–125). By focussing on specific writerly and dramaturgical tactics, I am also responding to Snyder-Young’s critique of evaluation methods in applied theatre which do ‘not offer any substantial information as to what in the performance and discussion inspired the change.’ (Snyder-Young, 2018, p. 83). In this section, I analyse the tactics I used to create the play in reference to Brechtian and Bondian approaches to making socially transformative and affective theatre. I use supportive evidence from audience feedback surveys and focus groups to make a compelling case that this combination of writerly and dramaturgical tactics, which build on the work of Brecht and Bond, can form an effective arsenal to awaken empathic responses and ultimately combat sexual violence, misogyny, and rape culture.

As I explained in my literature review, Brecht’s manifesto for Epic Theatre and Bond’s extensive writing about Theatre Event both view the individual as changeable and malleable. Both theatre-makers document a range of theatrical techniques designed to make the familiar strange and encourage the audience to question what they see on stage. In my play *Losing It* I use six different writerly tactics to create a distinctive narrative style designed to achieve a similar effect. I will analyse each tactic in turn using specific examples from *Losing It* before considering how, when used together, these techniques can change how young people think and behave in intimate relationships. These techniques are:

1. Shared poly-narration – multiple characters recount their versions of their shared history often describing the same event, providing a plurality of perspectives.
2. Use of flashbacks – Characters transform into their younger selves acting out and commenting on their experiences.
3. Mode switching – switching between different modes of speaking and specifically into the first-person continuous tense, creating a distance between actor and character and actor and text. This includes internal/ external perspective taking, giving the audience insight into the characters' internal and external worlds simultaneously.
4. Inclusion of songs – songs form an integral part of the play, drawing the audience's attention to both the absurdity of school-based sex education and the theatrical didacticism of the performance.
5. A form of 'Not That, But This' – this provides the audience with the opportunity to visit a range of parallel worlds where the story could have unfolded differently.
6. Use of liminal space and time – the play opens up an 'in between' space of potentiality.

By providing tangible examples of how I have used each of these techniques in *Losing It* and then analysing the effect and impact of each of these writerly tactics, I aim to offer strategies for other playwrights in the field regarding how Brechtian and Bondian concepts can be applied to the creation of new plays for young audiences today.

Shared poly-narration

The need to tell more than one story was evident from the different experiences and maturity levels of the young people who took part in my research. We wanted the play to speak to a wide range of young people and to reflect its varied and diverse audiences. As a company, we identified over twenty potential narrative lines of enquiry to explore. As we workshopped and devised different scenes, it became clear which stories resonated most strongly with the young actors and which, based on the workshops, would be most relevant for the young audiences. We knew that key topics like consent, sexual pleasure and pornography were persistently absent from young people's experience of RSE and knew too that some of the audience members' understanding of sexual consent and pleasure were being distorted by watching pornography. We were also driven by a shared desire to provide a more sex positive narrative, with healthy relationships showcased alongside unhealthy ones, as several young people had identified a failure to do this in school-based RSE as causing them to distrust the credibility of the lessons being taught. The interview with the Independent Sexual Violence Adviser confirmed that, as had been the case when I worked on a rape crisis helpline fifteen years previously, rape and sexual assault in this age group were prevalent with many victims and perpetrators struggling to recognise the seriousness of what had happened. Many young people still believed that rape only happens if the victim is attacked by a stranger at night and victim blaming, where the victim is discredited because she was drinking, dressing in a specific way or unable to explicitly say no, remained commonplace. Considering the devastating and lasting impact of sexual violence on young people's

mental health, wellbeing and future life chances, for both victims and perpetrators, we decided that narratives around consent needed to be prioritised most urgently. From here I started to link characters and stories together to build an on-stage community.

In order for us to cover such a wide range of topics, it was important that the characters were given a long enough timeline to make the action seem plausible and this is why I decided to open the play on the last day of year 13, giving the characters the opportunity to look back over their past seven years at secondary school. The story is told in a series of flashbacks, which are narrated by different class members from the perspective of their now almost adult selves as they act out their memories of the previous seven years. This approach allowed me to make *Losing It* a shared story. It is the story of a group of young people growing up. As the company explain in the prologue,

POPPY: We have a shared history

DAVID: We share our stories

MELANIE: We overlap

SALLY: We coincide

SEREN: Where one story finishes

TIM: Another one starts.

(Lemon 2023, p.1)

This approach enables the representation of diverse perspectives and a wide array of life experiences, providing the audience with multiple relatable characters with whom to potentially empathise. This appears to

have been effective. During the final two years of our tour, 374 young audience members participated in our post-show anonymous survey. When questioned about the character they most identified with, all of the characters received responses, ranging from a minimum of 3% to a maximum of 25%. Interestingly, comparing 2022 to 2023, we saw that there was a noticeable decrease in audience members identifying with Poppy and Rob, the romantic couple epitomising a safe, loving, and consensual relationship. Conversely, there was a significant increase in young people identifying with Mike, whose character expresses misogynistic and transphobic views. When asked why they had chosen that specific character with whom to identify, those who chose Mike mainly expressed that they found the character funny, and this in itself might suggest a change in attitudes towards sexism and transphobia where these views are increasingly seen as more acceptable and even entertaining.

Importantly, the use of a shared poly-narration, established from the outset, means that individual characters' perspectives and subjective memories are critiqued by the wider group and the audience too is invited to critically question each narrator's reliability and credibility. When, for example, talking about sex education the group cannot agree about what happened.

MELANIE: It's not like anyone ever talked to us about that stuff.

MADDIE: They did a bit. In year 8, we had that whole day where all we did was sex education.

MELANIE: Did we?

MIKE: I don't remember.

LUCY: I think I was off that day.

(Lemon 2023, p.16)

This technique is used throughout the text establishing different characters' perspectives on the same set of events. Crucially, when Poppy and Rob go on a romantic date, in Scene 12, the audience can see that, although they feel awkward exploring these new burgeoning feelings for each other, they are both very much on the same page.

ROB: But that's broken the ice and before long we're talking and it's not awkward anymore.

POPPY: And I love talking to him. I could talk to him for hours.

ROB: And suddenly time is leaping forward

POPPY: And it's so easy to be myself with him.

ROB: And I'm offering to walk her home.

(Lemon 2023, p.41)

Establishing this mode of storytelling in the context of a loving consensual relationship meant that I could then use a similar approach later in a contrasting scene in which Seren is raped (Scene 15). Adopting a similar writerly tactic means that, in both scenes, I show the ways in which the characters' internal thoughts affect their outward

behaviours. In the date scene the audience can see that Poppy and Rob share similar motivations and they are then later shown the devastating consequences when Tim and Seren have very different thoughts and feelings about their sexual contact, and this highlights the importance of clear communication in relationships. Hearing Seren voice her internal thoughts means that the audience can see that, although she had not been able to say this out loud, she has not consented to the sexual intercourse and is deeply traumatised. In this scene the storytelling is shared between Poppy, David, Tim and Seren herself. By telling the story from these four different perspectives, I aim to open up a space for the audience to really consider the fragility of the debate. Who is telling the truth in the conflicting versions of the story that they narrate? Arguably they are all telling their own truths. As the characters are narrating a past event, the audience also have the benefit of the characters' hindsight. The plurality intrinsic to the storytelling offers a space for a more objective analysis of the situation. The following exchange shows how two different contrasting perspectives of the same action are used to ask the audience to question what is happening.

SEREN: Tim's grabbing me now and he won't let go.

TIM: And I'm holding her close and she's loving it.

SEREN: And I'm hating it.

(Lemon 2023, p.51).

Many of the young people surveyed picked out this scene as being particularly impactful. One of the young people in a 2018 post-show focus group said,

> Also, if a friend may be in the situation like they give you a look like help me it will make you think. You're like no, It makes you think. I'll definitely be more certain to try and get them out of that situation if I can tell they're not happy.
>
> (*Losing It* Audience survey 2018)

This comment suggests that, at least for this young man, this scene, in which the audience is shown multiple viewpoints on what is happening as well as multiple opportunities for things to be different, has made him more prepared to intervene if he suspects a friend may be in a dangerous situation.

Use of flashbacks

By using flashbacks, the audience is not only able to see events from different perspectives but also to see characters commenting on the action as in-character bystanders who have the benefit of more maturity. This is a useful technique as it affords the opportunity for characters to express realistic but unpalatable views or indulge in risky behaviour. For example, when eleven-year-old Mike is watching a pornographic film, his perceptions are challenged for the audience by the sarcastic year 13 girls.

MIKE: And he is pushing the phone screen right up in our faces and there's a girl there and it's summer so it's hot, and she's by a swimming pool so she's in a bikini and she's blonde.

SALLY: Of course she is.

MELANIE: What's that supposed to mean?

SALLY: They always are

POPPY: Shhh.

MIKE: And she's eating an ice lolly and she's licking it. And then it jump cuts and her bikini just disappears.

MELANIE: Of course.

MADDIE: That happens to me all the time.

SALLY: Oh yep there go my knickers.

MADDIE: Whoopsie!

(Lemon 2020, p.7)

This duality on stage is intended to cause a verfremdungseffekt, allowing the audience to step back and take on a more objective or critical perspective. To contribute to this sense of alienation and to open up space for critical reflection and personal growth, I created moments in which characters occupy an in-between state. When Rob is pressured by the girls to describe his first encounter with pornography, he reenacts the memory, producing multiple layers of performance. The actor plays Rob at eighteen, who in turn embodies his eleven-year-old self. Rob therefore exists simultaneously in both timeframes: he is neither fully the child he was, nor simply the young adult he has become, but positioned somewhere between the two. The older Rob observes and responds to his younger self, allowing the audience to see how his perspective has shifted. This split makes visible the distance between past and present and foregrounds the process of reflection, signalling that Rob is no longer the same person he once was.

In *Losing It* I use flashbacks to build up different layers of each character giving the audience an insight into the key events and experiences which have shaped their young lives. Bond builds on Brecht's idea that the self is malleable and changeable conceptualising the self as a palimpsest in which concurrently there is 'a multiplicity of different selves built up over time, experiences and contexts' (Bond in Davis, 2005, p. 145). Bond's idea of the palimpsest self is typically realised less literally in his texts than in *Losing It,* but these ideas led me to consider the significance of giving the audience insights into the characters at different stages of their development. Crucially, this palimpsestic approach resists fixed or singular readings of character. By allowing multiple temporal versions of each young person to coexist on stage, the play invites the audience to understand behaviour as emerging from layered experiences rather than from innate moral traits. This framing makes it possible to explore acts of harm without reducing individuals to "evil" types, foregrounding instead the conditions, misunderstandings and developmental gaps that shape their actions. It is within this ethical and dramaturgical framework that Tim's trajectory must be understood. This is particularly important in the development of Tim who, later in the play, rapes Seren. When we see Tim as his younger self in scene four, he appears as naïve and socially awkward. He inexpertly copies his friend Mike's behaviours asking the same question as he has just been asked in a game of Truth or Dare – 'Who do you think the hottest girl in the year is?' (Lemon, 2020, p.24) and he struggles to stand up to his misogynistic friend.

MIKE: Are you gonna let your girlfriend talk to me like that? Stupid cow.

TIM: Erm.

MELANIE: Okay. I'm going to make this really easy for you. Tim, you're dumped.

(Lemon 2020, p. 24)

These insights into Tim's character when he is younger significantly contribute to the audience's understanding of Tim's later disturbing behaviour. More broadly, Bond's overall theory of the palimpsest self as flexible and informed by different experiences at different ages chimes with how I view psychological development, and this informs how I write for young audiences. It is very important to me that Tim is not seen as an evil character. Although he does a horrific thing, he is not horrific. This is similar to how Bond considers the perpetrators in his infamously controversial stoning of the baby scene in *Saved* (1969).

> They are not beasts nor are they seeking for opportunities to be beasts – they are searching for their humanness. I wanted to make clear that these people were very dissatisfied with themselves. […] The critics wanted me to create cretins instead of people in trouble, who are confused and do not understand their situation.
>
> (Tuaillon 2015, pp. 74-75)

He goes on to explain, 'The baby is killed because society is corrupt. [...] The stoning is an act of justice against the injustice of society' (Bond in Tuaillon 2015, p. 78). This has synergies with the rape scene in *Losing It*. In a post-show focus group, the young people reflected on their feelings about Tim.

BROOK: I felt bad for him I can't lie.

JACOB: I did.

SOPHIE: Why did you feel bad for him?

BROOK: Because it was rape but he was oblivious to like everything and he didn't get her opinion or anything.

(*Thamesmead School Year 10 students* focus group, 2018).

Like the young men in *Saved*, Tim is corrupted by society. In Tim's case this is a society and an education system that has not provided adequate sex education to equip him with the tools he needs to negotiate sexual consent. At the party Tim is portrayed as a socially awkward if slightly out of control young man but certainly not as a sexual predator. Seren is in no way frightened or intimidated by him when she says, '…And a couple of people are laughing because well it's Tim but I think they're being harsh so I'm beckoning him over' (Lemon 2020, p. 66). We know from his internal monologue that he does not know that Seren is not enjoying what is happening. With only pornography as a baseline, he lacks a realistic mental image of what sexual intercourse might look like and is unaware of the devastating consequences of his mistake.

TIM: And I'm pushing her on the bed as the passion takes over and it's just like I've seen online only better...

SEREN: And it's not like how it seems in films. It's much, much worse. And I can't believe this is happening...

TIM: And I can't believe this is happening. And I'm hoping I'm doing it okay and I'm closing my eyes and concentrating so it's not over too quickly...

SEREN: And I'm closing my eyes and I'm willing it to be over…

(Lemon 2020, pp.66-67).

Feedback surveys from touring audiences regularly expressed how important and impactful this scene was and two young women in a post-show focus group explained how the multiplicity of perspectives helped them to gain a deeper understanding of sexual consent and how easy it might be to misinterpret the situation.

LUCY: Like erm someone could think that they had been given permission, but they haven't in reality. They think they have but they haven't.

BROOK: It can be misinterpreted by both people. Not just the woman or just the man. Both can misinterpret the situation.

LUCY: You see from everyone's perspective and everyone's point of view. Not just one person

BROOK: It shows you how people in that situation are feeling so you know that, if that's how you feel, that's what's happening.

(*Thamesmead School Year 10 students* focus group, 2018).

By using a combination of polynarration, inner monologues and flashbacks, I aimed to provide the young audience with a more rounded, nuanced and emotionally intelligent understanding of consent and, based on audience feedback, this was effective. In addition, by demonstrating clearly that Seren and Tim are having very different experiences of the same event, I am hopeful that the young audiences will be more likely to ask questions of each other and voice their own experiences with their partners in early sexual encounters.

Mode Switching

Brecht suggests that ‘a daring and beautiful architecture of verbal forms will estrange the text’ (2015, p.187) and by switching between different modes of speech my aim is to create something reminiscent of a v*erfremdungseffekt* where the audience can see the familiar with renewed attentiveness. As Fredric Jameson discussing Brecht’s approach to narrative explains:

> Now the result is not so much to make the objective action, with all its episodes and incidents, susceptible of a divisibility and an analysis that casts a different light on them, so much as to bring an uncanny strangeness to the subjective moment of decision and action itself, the ‘proairesis’ of the protagonists with its wavering motives and intentions, its psychological impulses as well, and even its unconscious drives.
>
> (1998, p. 52)

By switching between different speech modes, I play with both internal and external perspectives.

> SEREN: And we’re in a bedroom now and it must be David’s little sister’s room cause there’s cuddly toys everywhere and I am wishing I was at home in my bedroom and that I’d never come out. I’m wishing I was seven years old again. And he’s putting a chair against the door so I can’t get out.
>
> TIM: And I’m putting a chair against the door so no one comes in.
>
> (Lemon 2023, p.66)

When Seren narrates, she describes the actions taking place on stage (Tim has placed a chair against the door) but also describes how she feels about it (she's wishing she was somewhere else.) When the year 13 characters act out their stories performing as their younger selves, they view themselves almost in the third person or in inverted commas. Although they do not speak stage directions aloud in the way in which Brecht suggested, as the example of Seren's utterance above demonstrates, their description of action ('And he's putting a chair against the door…') draws attention to the action rendering it strange. The strangeness of being neither entirely inside or outside of the character and of being between their different selves is heightened when they slip into the first-person continuous tense allowing the audience to understand and perhaps empathise with both Seren and Tim's motivation and circumstances making them question what happens in the scene.

A key component of my mode switching approach is the use of the present continuous tense. I use this tense, which is inherently current and lively, in multiple interactions between couples, to wake up the audience and allow them to see inside the various characters' minds and hear their thoughts and intentions. This urgent verbal form reflects the immediacy and urgency of early sexual feelings and, by flitting between realistic dialogue and a first person-continuous narrative, the audience are able to gain an understanding of subtext. They can begin to decode behaviour and understand that people do not always say what they mean. They can start to build empathy with the characters' situations and to think about how situations can be read differently by different people. This is a particularly potent mode for telling stories about

relationships and sex especially in the context of educating young people whose understanding about sex has been warped by watching pornography. In most pornography physical sexual acts are presented with little context or insight into how those having sex might be feeling. Negotiations about sexual consent are rarely included and a lack of consent is normalised and fetishised. If young people are expecting their own early experiences to mirror those that they have seen in porn - where women's pain and discomfort is presented as normal and perhaps even desirable – 'Will a girl get a better orgasm if she has anal sex?' - then it is unsurprising that they would struggle to be able to read how their partner might be feeling.

Songs

One of the more divisive aspects of the project was the decision to include songs. Whilst the use of songs was not to everyone's liking - one young person wrote on their feedback form that 'we all thought the songs were really cringe!' - overall they were well received by the young audiences with several saying that their favourite characters were Danno and Maxine, the all-singing all-dancing, larger than life, comedic sex educators. The play originally included six songs, developed in partnership with the young cast and local musician Lisa Von H.[1] and, as I will later explain, I made the decision to remove one song and replace it with another in 2023.

1 All the songs from Losing It can be accessed via SoundCloud - https://soundcloud.com/peerproductionsshows/sets/losing-it

I chose to use songs for five main reasons: as another way to mode switch, designed to help the audience to continue to critically engage; a method of conveying a lot of important information in a short space of time; a parody technique to critique sex education and sex educators; a means to empower specific characters to tell their stories; and a method to make the more controversial or explicit messages in the play more palatable for the schools and young audiences alike. For example, learning related to the link between masturbating to porn and erectile dysfunction is made more palatable by being conveyed via a frivolous rap (Dopamine, Dopamine, Rah, Rah, Rah) and the representation of a loving and consensual, if slightly awkward, first time is shared through a musical theatre parody (First Time). These ideas would have been difficult to address through dialogue without potentially embarrassing the young audiences and/or angering school gatekeepers but, by having the characters sing the words, even the more explicit content took on a lighter and somehow more acceptable tone. Potentially this was because, to quote Brecht,

> When an actor sings, his function changes. There is nothing more abhorrent than an actor pretending not to notice that he has left the level of everyday speech (...) During the song in particular, it is important that “the shower is shown”
>
> (Brecht in Unwin 2014, p.77).

Through my practice, I have identified song as a critical component of effective mode-switching in school settings where audiences are not necessarily wanting to attend a theatrical event and where the setting of a school hall can make it more challenging to establish a theatrical atmosphere. Whether loved or loathed, songs disrupted audience passivity, compelling attention to the messages we were conveying.

Music and theatricality emerge from this work as fundamental strategies for engaging young audiences, tools that belong in every playwright's repertoire when creating work for educational contexts.

I also used songs as a means to efficiently convey substantial information. In the original version the first song in the production was called the A-Z of Sexuality and it gave a speedy run through of the various sexual identities.

MAXINE: Let's start at the very beginning It's a very good place to start. When you're young you'd have learned your ABCs Now it's time to be concerned with LG and B.

ASH: What about T?

MAXINE: With our handy A to Z of sexuality.

SALLY: A's for asexual, that's someone who doesn't feel sexual desire.

MELANIE: B is bisexual people who're into both women and men.

SALLY: You see now, you're on fire.

(Lemon, 2020, p.23)

By creating a pastiche of Do Re Mi, I wanted to give the students the sense that this information is simple and as easy to understand as ABC or Do Re Mi. I swapped out this song for a new song called *What's the word for this?* in response to the changing conditions experienced by the young audiences, with the intent of provoking and inspiring the audience to reconsider their own behaviours. As Silberman *et al* explain in the introduction to *Brecht on Theatre*,

> Texts as well as performances are public events that invite the audience to intervene, to think and to act; they are to be used and discarded as needed under historically specific conditions.
> (Silberman *et al*, in Brecht, 2015, p.7)

This idea that a text is a response to specific historical conditions and that it can be adapted and discarded in response to those changing conditions resonates strongly with my work where, over the course of a play's life touring with Peer, I have regularly redrafted and adapted the work in response to audience feedback and the changing socio-political climate. In this case, when I first wrote the play in 2017 most of the young people we worked with told us that trans was never mentioned so this became a key message in the song. It then later because clear, from talking to the young actors, that the original song (the A-Z of sexuality) with its irreverent whistle stop tour explaining different sexual identities, was not longer as relevant for young people who were now far more conversant with different sexual and gender identities. In particular, the repeated 'What about T?' which spoke to the needs of a generation for whom gender non-conforming of trans identities were rarely discussed, no longer chimed with gender identity and gender critical debates prevalent in popular media. Structurally, I felt that the piece would still benefit energetically from a song earlier on in the play. From discussions with the young 2023 cast two things became clear. Lesbian girls were still be subjected to hyper-sexualisation from some of their male peers possibly because of the popularity of pornography featuring female same sex encounters and, post pandemic, with an emphasis on catching up on academic learning, many young people had missed out on practical condom demonstrations. Together we created a new song, 'What's the word for this?' which is at once a love song showing Sally's

emerging feelings for her friend Melanie and a catchy, tongue in cheek, pop song repeating the key steps to using a condom properly.

MAXINE: First you check the condom's date.
Make sure that it's not too late.
Check the kite mark - the safety standard.
It might look like a heart.
Now you're ready to start.
Rip it open CAREFULLY
Make sure it's the right way up
You'll know that you're on the right track
If it looks like a mexican hat.
Squeeze the tip and roll it down!
Date. Heart. Kite mark. Hat Squeeze and roll!
You're ready to go!

SALLY: Something tells me this won't apply to me
I'm tuning it out, distracted by Melanie
I'm looking over and I can't stop smiling
She laughs, and I'm nervous
My temperature's rising
She looks so beautiful
Is this so unusual?
We're messing around and my stomach is turning,
My hands are sweating and my heart is burning.
Isn't there a word for this?

(Lemon, 2023, p.18)

In this song the key things to think about when putting on a condom were repeated multiple times with the hope that the lyrics and melody might stick in young people’s heads for their future reference. Sally’s love song to her friend Melanie here is one of only two songs which predominantly features a solo voice. The other song is sung by Ash who is transgender, and their song gives them the opportunity to share their experience of their gender identity without interruption.

ASH: Where gender is concerned
For me it's quite absurd
You might say that's it
You're a boy, or a girl
But the truth as you can see
It's more complex for me
A boy A girl
I just want you to see me.

(Lemon, 2023, p.31)

When the rest of the class join Ash to sing in opposition to transphobic bully Mike's disparaging comments, the play demonstrates to the audience the power of allyship. Within a play which aims to showcase a polyphony of different voices, in this 2023 version of the play, the two solo songs were sung by two queer characters placing those identities that have been marginalised centre stage, and this further served to highlight the very different experiences of young people growing up.

Placing many of the songs in the mouths of the sex educators allowed the play to critique existing sex education provision and draw attention to some of the ludicrous hypocrisies inherent in how we teach young people about sex. Many of the young people we worked with were frustrated that RSE focussed so heavily on sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and sexual violence without acknowledging that it can also be enjoyable. We explored this by contrasting two very different songs in juxtaposition. First sex educators Danno and Maxine sing a pseudo-operatic song, inspired by *The Phantom of the Opera*, emphasising the potentially catastrophic effects of STIs.

MAXINE: If you do not take care and you do it
Or you are unaware and the condom splits

Then you should brace yourself for a nasty fright
An STI could kill you in the dead of night!

(Lemon, 2023, p.45)

Frustrated by the narrow focus of the class, the young people take over and anarchy ensues as they reclaim the space with a contrasting punk song which is another example of sexual health education which might have been considered too risqué if presented in a level heightened mode of theatricality.

ALL: Is that it? It's not fair?
I knew everything they taught us in there!
That's not sex or education
I'm staging my personal investigation
They're trying to tell us that sex isn't fun
But I love the buzz in my head
When I'm turned on
When I'm turned on
When I'm turned on
When girls are turned on blood rushes to their genitals
And makes the labia and vagina wet
It's mainly when they're tense or not turned on
That they might have painful sex!

(Lemon, 2023, p.45)

Strategically, this double song happens at a crucial turning point in the play when the tone shifts in preparation for the audience to hear Seren's rape story. This very lively exciting theatrical moment is placed here to allow the audience to share in the characters' frustrations and as a moment of release before the tension builds in Seren's story.

The play ends with a romantic duet between Poppy and Rob as they engage in loving and playful sexual intercourse for the first time. We wanted to make consent sexy and romantic and to celebrate young love whilst maintaining our frank, explicit tone. By using songs, we were able

to get away with saying and showing far more than would normally be tolerated in a secondary school hall.

POPPY: Sorry about the hair.

ROB: Don’t care.

POPPY: Does this feel alright?

ROB: Not quite.

POPPY: How about now?

ROB: Oh wow!

BOTH: Together we will learn how
Tell me what you want me to do to you

(Lemon, 2023, p.75)

As I have demonstrated, use of songs in *Losing It* was employed by me as a tactic to keep the audience engagement high by providing a sense of anarchy and excitement interrupting the narrative flow and encouraging the audience to view the action of the play with a more critical lens.



Figure 7-Finchley Simpson as Ash performing Trans 101 with the 2023 cast.



Figure 8 - Bethany Green and Rhett Winwood as Poppy and Rob performing The Consent Song 2023

Not That, But This

As playwright Sarah Grochala explains, ‘Brecht is searching for a dramatic form that suggests what ‘could happen’ instead of what ‘would happen.’ (2017, p.157). David Barnett elaborates further stating that, ‘It opens up the action because it robs it of a sense of inevitability.’ (2017). Having established use of shared narrative and use of first person present-continuous tense to allow the audience inside a range of different characters’ heads, I extend these techniques in the rape scene to allow the audience to consider how easily outcomes might have been different. The rape takes place at a busy house party, and three times different characters have the opportunity to prevent Seren from becoming a victim, highlighting the importance of collective responsibility. First Poppy doesn’t realise that her friend is not comfortable dancing with Tim so abandons her. Then David does not realise that Seren is too drunk to consent to going upstairs with Tim. Finally, Tim himself misreads Seren’s signals and does not get affirmative consent with devastating consequences. The scene hinges on a series of bad decisions where one small change could have resulted in a very different outcome. Teasing the possibility that things could have been different through use of a form of ‘not that but this’ is central to my approach to writing this scene. If Poppy had realised her friend was in a dangerous situation, if David had stopped Tim and Seren from going upstairs or if Tim had taken a moment to properly look at his classmate and realise that she was not enjoying his attention then the outcome could have been very different.

SEREN: And he’s looking at me and he’s realising I’m not into this and I want to go downstairs, and he’s upset with himself for misreading the situation but I’m telling him it’s alright and we’re hugging it out.

TIM: But that isn't what happened.

SEREN: I know. But I wish it was.

(Lemon 2023, p. 66)

It is my intention that each time the narrative begins to take another path the audience is given a glimpse into how things could have been different. It is important that only the perpetrator and the bystanders can change the outcome so as to avoid contributing to a victim-blaming narrative. The audience is willing for Seren to escape but each time she repeats, 'but that's not what happened,' they are pushed back into the horror of her traumatic ordeal. By opening up the possibility of alternative choices whilst also reminding the audience of the devastating awful of failing to act, I want them to realise their own agency if faced with a similar situation in real life. The effectiveness of this technique was supported by a year 8 student who wrote this in their feedback questionnaire:

> The abstract techniques used helped me to see the situation in more than one light, as certain situations can come across as very one sided and people can be labelled without knowing the full story. It was also helpful to see how the situation could be avoided in multiple ways.
>
> (Year 8 student post show survey, 2018)

<u>Use of liminal space and time</u>

Bond often refers to the importance of a gap, arguing that this creative space provokes humans to ask questions. Within the play I have aimed to open up a liminal space in which characters stand in between different versions of their palimpsest-selves, between their external and internal

worlds and between what has happened, is happening and could happen. Throughout the play, and in particular in the rape scene, the combination of my story-telling tactics enables the audience to enter this creative space in which they can begin to project their learning from the play into their own imagined future lives and selves. Bond writes about the power of Accident Time within what he describes as the Theatre event.

> Bond deliberately intermingles two very different events – a car crash and a cyclone – and merges them into a single metaphor. In the same way that a victim of an accident has the impression that time suddenly slows down, anyone who finds themselves in the eye of the cyclone is struck by the stillness there, contrasting greatly with the furious speed of the whirlwind all around.
>
> (Davis, 2005, p.201)

This sense of time slowing down or a liminal space out of time resonates with the rape scene. Bond makes it clear that this is not about the actors moving slowly for theatrical effect (he despises theatrical craft of this kind) but that it is the audience who enter accident time and in this space that creativity occurs (Davis, 2005, p.91). His analogy of both a car crash and a cyclone suggest something destructive, cataclysmic and extreme. This ‘Accident Time’ space and pace allows the audience to think deeply and dialectically.

> What Bond wants for his own theatre is a relationship between the audience and actors where the audience is engaged in the action of the play, with the possibility of empathy and emotion, but where the imagination is stimulated which then has to seek reason. Imagination and reason predominate. With this approach, he seeks to alienate from within the act that is without breaking the empathetic relationship forged between the actors and audience.
>
> (Davis 2005, p.166).

In this scene the forensic unpicking of each characters' thoughts, motivations and actions, together with the poetic quality of mixing different modes of speech and the moments where the narrative diverges into the realm of what could have happened, all have the effect of slowing the rape sequence down. As the party spins around her, Seren is in the eye of the storm. The rape of Seren is an extreme act which feels all the more shocking when the play takes place in a school assembly hall. The reactions from the audiences are varied. Some laugh uncomfortably, some cry and others are shocked into silence. What is clear is that the scene has an effect on the audience.

Depicting the rape on stage

It would be remiss of me to leave out of this analysis my decision to show the rape physically enacted on stage. The emotional safety and wellbeing of the young performers playing both Seren and Tim was prioritised with considerable efforts made, at every stage of the process, including casting, intimacy direction, rehearsals and performances to ensure that all actors involved were consensual and felt confident, supported and safe. The complexities of navigating this scene with the young performers is worthy of a research project in its own right, but I have chosen to focus here instead, in line with my research questions, specifically on how staging the rape functioned dramaturgically as a tactic to re-envision and inform the audience's understanding of consent and intimacy. Before I begin to unpick the difficult creative choices, it is important to consider what I was aiming for the play to do in terms of educating young people about rape and consent as these objectives

heavily influenced my process. As Lucy Nevitt points out in her book *Theatre & Violence,*

> One of the main problems with causal arguments is that they engage first and foremost with what the performance in question shows, rather than with what that portrayal does, in a broader social sense.
>
> (2013, p. 28)

Although, on the surface, showing children a rape in a school setting may seem misguided or even reckless, in a piece of theatre designed to intervene and be a catalyst for change, it is also important to consider what showing a rape in the play might do. It is also important to consider the amount of sexual content many of the young audience members will have consumed including content that shows sexual abuse and rape both simulated and real. I wanted the play to show young audience members that sex without consent is always rape and to undermine various prevalent narratives in popular discourse and which I had heard reiterated by young people in the research phase of the project. Specifically, I wanted the play to teach young people that:

- Consent needs to be actively agreed.
- While always an act of violence, not all rape includes physical violence in addition to sexual violence.
- If a victim is drunk, they cannot give consent.
- The perpetrator of rape may be a person who is trusted by their victim and who may be perceived as likeable or even naïve by their peers.
- Rape can happen in domestic settings.

- Sometimes rape victims do not fight or try to escape but instead freeze and this does not negate the validity of their rape.
- Rape has a significant impact on the victim but that people who have experienced rape can and do go on to transcend their status of 'victim' to lead fulfilling lives. There is life after rape.

Having outlined my pedagogical objectives, I will now explore in more depth the dramaturgical and writerly tactics I used to achieve these aims and the difficult questions I needed to consider as I made these choices.

As Lucy Nevitt considers in her book *Theatre & Violence*,

> Whether it is ever possible to embody a simulated rape without performatively citing a history of pornography and sexual oppression is a serious question that needs to be considered analytically and with full understanding of the performative implications of the decisions made.
>
> (2013, p.35)

This very question pre-occupied me and was particularly relevant because, as I have described, I was looking to make a play to speak to young people for whom pornography and its influence on mainstream culture is so ubiquitous. As Fitzpatrick explains, realistically staging a rape could reinforce problematic and misogynistic discourses.

> Realistic mimesis may titillate, facilitate the objectification of the woman's body, or be received in keeping with hegemonic discourses of active male desire and female sexual passivity.
>
> (2018, p.186)

Fitzpatrick notes that these concerns have meant that many playwrights have avoided staging the rape all together with the action taking place

off stage. For those that do tackle the rape on stage the realism problem - both as a mode of feminist storytelling and as a way to depict the complex embodied experience of rape in theatrical form - has meant that some feminist playwrights (including Wertenbaker, Carr and Lewis) have chosen to represent rape more abstractly and symbolically.

> Rape is therefore often signified in these plays through the presence of blood, acoustic cues, or the penetration of an object that is either symbolically or actually proximate to the woman.
>
> (2018, p.186)

The risk of the scene being titillating or reinforcing problematic gendered ideas about sexuality and desire concerned me greatly too, but I was also worried that, if I didn't, to some extent, explicitly show the rape, then the work would risk being overly coy and could ultimately reinforce the idea that rape is something shameful that should not be openly explored. I was also concerned that an overly symbolic approach might not be comprehensible for a young audience. Young audience members, who lack the theatrical literacy of an adult theatre-going audience, might miss the significance of the scene completely and this might mean that the work failed to achieve its desired pedagogical outcomes. Like playwright Yaël Farber, whose play Nirbhaya aimed to 'crack open the silence around sexual and gender-based violence' (Farber, no date) in the wake of the violent rape and murder of Indian physiotherapy student Jyoti Singh, I too thought that,

> to not show any level of violence felt to me like a cop out but to show to the full extent what had happened also feels like, not only an invasion of her privacy but…how do you show that? – you simply can't.
>
> (Farber, quoted in De Angelis, 2014)

Here Farber is wrestling with the difficulty of needing to show (at least to some extent) the violence of what Jyoti Singh experienced while also acknowledging that theatre can never truly represent that experience and that to attempt to do so could further expose Singh's victimhood to the world. As playwright April De Angelis points out,

> we are in danger, across all media, of seeing women one dimensionally as victims of violence. As a woman playwright I have always refused to show women in this way. I want to empower them, not trap them in a narrative of victimhood.
>
> (De Angelis, 2014)

Like Farber, I too was grappling with what I should show and how to show it, without the scene reinforcing the objectification of the victim and, like De Angelis, I was concerned about reinforcing a narrative of victimhood. Unlike the real rape of Jyoti Singh, where the violent brutality of six men attacking a young woman led to widespread protests across India and shocked the world, the fictional rape I wanted to depict, informed by many different testimonies, was far less visceral. The young people who I talked to in my research knew that violently attacking someone and forcing them to have sex was rape and was wrong. They were less convinced that peer on peer sexual abuse could be rape especially if the victim did not appear to verbally or physically object. To address this more nuanced lesson, I needed to make it clear that intercourse had definitively taken place. I needed to do this in a way which avoided the sexual objectification of Seren and the actor playing her and which found a way to give agency to Seren even though, in the situation, she is frozen with fear. It is also important to acknowledge too that the play was performed in a school setting, and this placed certain

limitations on what I would be able to show. The play was always preceded by the teachers' pack, and schools were asked to sign a contract stating that they had shared the content warnings with the young audience members. Perhaps surprisingly, none of the school bookers raised any objections to the staging of a rape, with the teacher who I quoted in chapter 2 as a rare exception.

As you can see in the digital production, in the scene depicting Seren's rape, the actor playing Tim pushes the actor playing Seren down onto a stage rostrum, climbs on top of her and, pushing her legs apart, loosens his belt and thrusts his pelvis towards her several times before quickly climbing off. Both actors remain fully dressed and the actor playing Seren wears black leggings under her red dress so that, even though her skirt may ride up, there is no risk of exposing her skin and I chose to do this to try and avoid the scene being read as sexy or titillating. The depiction of the rape itself is extremely brief, especially in relation to the extensive build up and aftermath. In the digital production, director Ruth Sparkes and I worked together to have the actors then retrace their steps in the following scene, in which Seren tells her sister what has happened, and Tim is arrested and questioned by the police. As Tim recounts his version of events, the audience see Seren walk alone through the physical movements of the scene. As Tim watches her, prompted by the police officers' questions, he begins to realise that what he had assumed was a consensual act of intercourse was in fact rape. Based on the change of atmosphere in the school halls (which usually fell very quiet in these moments) and audience feedback, many young people in the audience also realise, in this moment, that what they have just witnessed is a rape.



Figure 9 - Sophia Blanks as Seren in Scene 16

It is also important to notice that, alongside the physical actions of the scene, Seren and Tim continually narrate their own internal monologues using the first-person continuous tense. As explained earlier in the chapter, this use of poly narration where, in the lead up to the rape, Poppy and David also narrate events from their perspectives, opens up a space for the audience to critically consider what they are watching. In addition, the voicing of both Seren and Tim's inner monologues serves another dramaturgical function. When the audience hear Seren's thoughts, they are shown the stark contrast between what she is thinking and feeling and the way in which her body is passively accepting what is happening to her. Equally, by hearing Tim's inner narrative as he rapes Seren, the audience can understand that he is not intentionally inflicting violence on his classmate. This has the effect of disrupting the roles of both victim and perpetrator. In my literature

review I considered Kim Solga's analysis of Mother Courage's daughter Kattrin (2003) in which she argues that taking away Kattrin's voice and reducing her to only being able to communicate through gestus could serve as a dramaturgical technique to comment on sexual violence. Even though I knew that I wanted to tell a story in which, frozen with fear, a young woman is unable to voice her objection to being raped, I was concerned that not hearing Seren's voice could reinforce her passive victimhood. I was also worried that if she remained silent, depicting her body being raped on stage, without giving the audience insights into her inner thoughts, could result in her being objectified, and I noted too the ways in which most pornography prioritises the woman's physical body over her feelings or intellect. By giving Seren a voice even in her most voiceless moment, I am making a choice to give her agency to transcend the role of victim. When the audience hear Tim's thoughts, they are shown that he has not intended to cause harm. He is naïve and unaware of the consequences of his actions, and only afterwards does it become clear that he has unintentionally raped Seren. This causes many of the audience to feel sympathy for Tim and, by making him a surprisingly sympathetic character, my hope is that the young people in the audience will start to reconsider their own behaviours afresh. If Tim was depicted as unrelatable, unfeeling or even evil then the audience would be more easily able to dismiss his actions as villainous. He is not a villain, but his actions cause significant and lasting harm to Seren, and this is a problem which the play asks the audience to contemplate. The play continues to subvert the roles of victim and perpetrator when Seren and Tim are showed in a conversation that never happened where they are both able to voice the impact the rape has had on them both, but Seren is able to avoid being defined by it.

TIM: Do you hate me?

SEREN: I did then.

TIM: And now?

SEREN: No. To hate you would mean using feelings on you and I'm not letting you have that power. You're just some stupid boy who did a horrible, wicked, messed up thing that I'm going to have to live with for the rest of my life.

TIM: I'm sorry. That's what I imagine saying to you if I ever see you again.

SEREN: But that's not what happened.

TIM: I know.

(Lemon, 2020, p.76)

As this chapter has demonstrated, my approach to writing *Losing It* involved the honouring of polyphonic voices and perspectives through each phase of the creative process. I used a combination of six different writerly tactics to invite the audience to see internal and external perspectives from multiple characters and to critically engage with the happenings on stage. This anarchic piece was loud and intrusive with its musical elements and a cast of at least twelve young actors and, with its frank and often irreverent tone, and inclusion of a rape sequence, the piece was a bold choice for secondary schools and yet many rebooked the play year on year, and I was surprised that we received no significant complaints. Having made the piece in direct response to hearing young people speak about the extreme pornographic content that they were accessing online, it felt like an extreme theatrical

response was required to counteract the prevalence of hardcore internet pornography, with its inherent messages of dehumanisation and objectification, in favour of an empathy-rich experience which encourages the audience to see other people's points of view. As I explained in Chapter 2, post pandemic the play started to receive a less favourable and more disconcerting response, especially from some young men, who started to confidently and unapologetically voice their misogynistic views and support for sexual violence, often without reproach from their teachers and this made the young actors and the rest of the Peer Productions team and I deeply concerned. If we could no longer be sure that we could support the cast's emotional and physical safety, nor be confident that the play was challenging rather than reinforcing damaging ideas about gender-based violence, then the project proved unfit for purpose, and I felt I had no choice but to retire the play and consider these issues from a new angle. This led to me developing a new play *Man Up* which toured to secondary schools for the first time in March 2025. For this project I knew I would need to tread more carefully both in content and form, in response to a perhaps now more damaged and more vulnerable youth audiences who we were encountering on tour. The next chapter documents my approach to creating and producing this new play as an ethnodramatic project which centred existing research as the main starting point for a collaborative creative approach to playbuilding.

Chapter 4 – Making Man Up: Playbuilding, Empathy and Masculinity

In this chapter, I provide a detailed overview of the process of making my second play as part of this project – *Man Up*. Written for teenagers, *Man Up* explores the challenges of restrictive and confusing gender roles, and the ways in which these expectations negatively impact young people, particularly young men. It tells the story of childhood friends Lottie and Logan as they grow up together in a world where gender roles are both blurred and inconsistent. Unlike my previous chapter, which focused primarily on writerly tactics, here I reflect on the whole process, end to end – from the first workshops to the finished performance – with a particular emphasis on collective creativity, dramaturgy, and the values of care and compassion that underpin the work.

I begin by offering a contextual overview of the project, acknowledging key stakeholders, the impact of funding precarity, and the shift towards academic research becoming the primary driver for the creative work. From there, I foreground what I describe as a culture of care - an ethos of kindness and inclusion - that I argue is essential when tackling potentially harrowing issues. I explain how, at Peer Productions, we have sought to build an environment in which young artists feel nurtured, supported and emboldened to take creative risks, and I suggest that this ethos of care and empathy is not incidental but fundamental to socially engaged theatre-making. As this chapter specifically addresses collective creativity and polyphony, I weave my own reflections with those of the young theatre-makers, dramaturg and audiences drawn from semi-structured focus groups and working journals and through these interlaced perspectives, I argue for an

axiology of care, empathy and hope as vital to the transformative possibilities of playbuilding.

I situate this project in the field of ethnodrama, engaging with Judith Ackroyd and John O'Toole (2010), Johnny Saldaña (2016), Joe Salvatore (2025), and the wider scholarship on playbuilding as arts-based research, including the work of Joe Norris, Kevin Hobbs and Mirror Theatre Company (2024). In doing so, I build a case for ethnodrama as a powerful tool to disseminate research to audiences unlikely to otherwise encounter it. I also explore how my own ethnodramatic process both draws on and diverges from those of other ethnodramatic practitioners, paying close attention to how polyphonic voices are distilled into a more singular yet carefully refined voice. By tracing specific ideas in the final text from their beginnings in the research, workshops, and collaborative iteration, I show how the play emerged through a playbuilding ethnodramatic process grounded in empathy, care, and collective authorship. In doing so, I show how centring these values shapes the work and helps create performances that are impactful, resonant, and meaningful for young audiences, offering practical insights for theatre-makers committed to socially engaged, collaborative practice.

As I explained in Chapter 2, *Man Up* was created in response to growing evidence of a rise in misogynistic attitudes among young people, made visible through changing audience reactions to *Losing It* and supported by recent reports and inquiries (Ofsted, 2021; Women and Equalities Committee, 2023; Unison, 2024), alongside grassroots testimony collated by Everyone's Invited (2025). Together, these

sources highlight how restrictive gender roles, peer-on-peer harassment and harmful online material are shaping young people's everyday experiences, underscoring the urgency of addressing these issues. I developed this 70-minute one-act play over eighteen months, working with young actors from the Peer Actor Development Programme (PAD) and neurodivergent dramaturg Kieran Jenkins. The project initially took some time to begin in earnest with initial funding bids rejected and later ones delayed. This is indicative of the very real material struggles of trying to make work in this field and is reflective of a challenging funding climate in which companies like Peer Productions need to be increasingly resourceful to sustain their work as explained by the Campaign for the Arts 2024 report here.

> There have been dramatic falls in arts funding since 2010. Tax relief for the creative industries has surged, but core public funding for the UK's Arts Councils and the BBC has fallen, and investment by local councils has plummeted. Despite high public engagement with the arts, especially post-pandemic, cultural provision has contracted and remains fragile.
>
> (Campaign for the Arts and University of Warwick, 2024, p.6)

Challenges securing enough funding for the whole project meant that the young actors who were involved in the initial workshops had moved on from Peer Productions by the time funding was secured. Even when funding was forthcoming, because the company was already committed to delivering two other tours and each of these had their own requirements for actors of a specific gender and/or skill set, and recruitment for the PAD course was less fruitful than expected, it was unfortunately not possible for the same actors devising the work to inform the play and then deliver the play in schools, as would have been my preference. However, these funding delays also had an unexpected

and ultimately productive outcome: they widened participation. More young people became involved in the process, and more voices contributed to the development of the play than had originally been planned. In total, twenty-two young actors were involved in the process with ten taking part in two initial workshops in Spring 2024, a different group of seven actors undertaking fifteen intensive days of research and development in Autumn 2024 who were joined for a handful of sessions by a sixth form work experience student. The work they developed contributed to a first draft play reading in Winter 2024 which was also attended by four different actors from the same PAD cohort who, alongside Kieran, became the inaugural cast, and it was this group who acted as consultants for the final stages of script development. This complex process highlights the need for ingenuity and an entrepreneurial approach to making the work happen as I, by necessity rather than design, persistently recrafted the imperfect process in response to our changing circumstances.

At all stages of the process, the actors collaborated with dramaturg Kieran Jenkins, who also toured with the production. Now in his late twenties, Kieran is a cis male who is Autistic and has ADHD, which is relevant given that research identifies neurodivergent young men as particularly vulnerable to algorithmic grooming into incel ideologies (Regehr et al., 2024, p.14). A graduate of the Peer Actor Development Programme himself, Kieran now works as a freelance actor and facilitator, including delivering Generation Guys sessions in SEND schools for Peer Productions. These sessions focus on male identity, exploring topics like sexuality, pornography, and allyship for female friends. I approached Kieran to collaborate with me because he

understands Peer's working culture, shares my concerns about sexist attitudes in schools, and is aware of the impact of online material, including pornography as well as toxic influencers like Andrew Tate. As a younger man, Kieran brought insights into contemporary masculinity and online culture that I, as a middle-aged woman, might not have been positioned to offer. Having first taught him as an eight-year-old, I knew he would feel comfortable challenging my approach in ways my current learners might not and that this openness would be essential when addressing such potentially sensitive issues. In a post-production interview, Kieran described our collaboration as one characterised by a free and open exchange of ideas, where both of us felt able to speak without fear of reproach.

> That's always been our approach. We're both happy to say the thing even if the thing is awkward or uncomfortable. No nonsense. I'd just be able to say, 'what were you thinking?' and you wouldn't get pissed off.
>
> (Kieran Jenkins, 2025)

In the context of the false starts and complicated logistics within the process of making the play, Kieran also acted as a helpful point of continuity with whom I could sense-check and reflect throughout the process.

In many ways, my approach to writing *Man Up*, with its emphasis on using devised work to inform an iterative writing and rewriting process, has similarities with *Losing It, The Teenage Pregnancy Project,* and indeed most of the plays I have written for young people. However, this project also marked a change in direction where, for the first time, I

chose to use academic research, specifically the *Understanding the Cel: Vulnerability, Violence and In(ter)vention* research project by Regehr, Shaughnessy and Shaughnessy *et al* as a key stimulus in my playwriting process. I had previously collaborated with co-investigator theatre researcher Nicola Shaughnessy on some other projects which explored neurodiversity and, when discussing my plan to create a new play addressing misogyny, I was shocked to hear the findings of her research. Her research with Regehr *et al* identifies the ways in which algorithmic forces actively groom young men and radicalises them to believe extreme misogynistic ideas, and we both wondered whether this might, at least in part, explain why some of the audience members had started reacting so negatively to *Losing It* (as described in Chapter 2). Together we approached the University of Kent AHRC Impact Accelerator fund for financial support to create a play which would serve to disseminate the findings of this research. I matched their funding with relatively small funding allocations from The Community Foundation for Surrey, High Sheriff Youth Awards, The Sylvia Waddilove Foundation and Heathrow Community Trust2 whose interests lie more holistically in social impact and specifically in preventing violence towards women and girls by increasing social education. Our approach to funding the project is significant because it positions the play as a tool for the dissemination of specific academic research alongside its broader social aims around reducing misogyny and improving outcomes for young people of all genders. The formal collaboration with the University of Kent and their partners also added some credibility to the project, making it easier to argue, with evidence, for the urgent importance of the work. Moreover,

2 Websites with information about each of these funders can be found in the bibliography.

perhaps because each funder's contribution was relatively small, none of the grant givers seemed inclined to closely monitor or dictate any aspects of the project, and this allowed for an organic and artist led process unincumbered by funder interference.

A community built with care

To more comprehensively articulate the process of creating *Man Up*, it is important to explain the creative culture and environment that underpins work produced by Peer Productions as the organisation is now in 2025, having matured significantly since its conception in 2006. As I noted in my introduction, Peer Productions now occupies its own unshared space (Peer Place), allowing the charity to have more control over how we manage our working environment and how we work together. Peer Productions employs a team of twelve members of staff plus additional freelancers, all of whom have contributed to the evolving ways in which the company organises, operates, creates and delivers. At the time of writing, the core staff team are all white and were assigned female at birth, as the organisation struggles to recruit cis men and people of colour to advertised roles. This is one of the reasons it felt so essential to bring in Kieran, as dramaturg, to provide the project's young male contributors with kinship and a clear ally in a leadership role. Peer Place is home to two sister training companies (PAD and PEP) comprising of around thirty young actors; actors remain with the company for at least one year, with some staying for up to three years. The Peer Actor Development (PAD) Programme, whose actors contributed to and delivered *Man Up*, offers free full-time training for young adults (aged 18 – 25 years) who want to pursue a career in the performing arts,

providing support, training and experience; the Peer Empowerment Pathway (PEP) provides a holistic theatre and wellbeing programme for learning disabled young adults of the same age.

Most days, actors from both programmes take ‘practice’ where, as a daily ritual led by my colleague Suzanne Parke, they begin their day together by completing some yogic stretches and a vocal warm up. Learners playfully squabble over who gets to choose the music and occasionally the ritual varies with learners leading or teaching songs or games to the rest of the company. Learners sing along to the chosen music, adapt the exercises to meet their needs and often support each other by offering a hand to a peer who is struggling to balance in a yoga pose or providing some words of comfort to a friend who is having a bad day. Although often it is PAD learners who support those on the PEP programme, there is a mutuality to the exchange with PEP learners often endeavouring to cheer up their PAD colleagues or help them to feel less inhibited. On Fridays, practice ends with a very loud and energetic game of four square (a ball game which fosters inclusiveness as well as an acceptance of losing that is played by two teams until a final winner emerges) and learners often play the game informally in their breaks. Every Thursday, after practice, I share an idea with the company which feels important or politically relevant in ‘Nina’s thought for the week.’ Although there is a clear hierarchical staff structure, staff and learners share Peer Place and the two companies often work together as one inclusive team: even when they are engaged in separate projects, learners from different programmes chat together in their breaks and make many cups of tea in the shared kitchen area. The layout of the rather unusual building means it is necessary to walk through each

other's rehearsal and workshop rooms so there is naturally a resulting culture of openness and cross pollination between projects. Staff are supportive of each other and, regardless of their place in the hierarchy, often seek advice from each other about creative ideas or pedagogical challenges. There are no windows in the rehearsal and teaching spaces so that can sometimes mean that we feel disconnected from the outside world, and this potentially can have both positive and negative impacts on the work we make. Safeguarding and mental wellbeing are central and are talked about extensively with all learners undertaking training to support their own mental health as well as that of their peers. Learners have access to a staff mentor, with whom they meet regularly, as well as access to outsourced expert mental health support as needed. Staff endeavour to treat the learners as fellow adults, a dignity which has often not been experienced by PEP learners before, and learners are encouraged to explore and talk about their identities. Expectations and ways of working are co-produced by staff in conjunction with learners and are revisited and revised to respond to the needs of specific projects and learners. There is an intentionality in the work which is articulated and discussed with all collaborators in the shared understanding that the work is designed to socially impact audiences as well as transform the lives of the young performers by giving them to opportunity to take part in meaningful creative projects and hone their performance and theatre-making skills. This community of inclusivity and shared creativity fosters honesty alongside kindness, and this promotes a culture of self-reflection and creative risk-taking which is usually very new to learners when they first join the organisation. As the PEP programme includes extensive Health and Wellbeing sessions with significant emphasis on safe sex and relationships, and the topics tackled by our touring PAD

actors often respond to challenging social issues, there is a culture of openness and a general willingness to ask questions. PEP learners are often uninhibited from bringing their learning from Sex and Relationships up in general conversation, sometimes at the most unexpected times, and this contributes to an overall culture where few topics are taboo, and people can speak freely about themselves and their experiences.

Many actors on the PAD programme join the company having only experienced theatre-making in a school environment and with mainly negative experiences of attempting to devise to quite prescriptive criteria. Some can initially present as quite risk adverse and anxious, scared to try out new things for fear of failure or looking foolish. The openness of PEP learners actively breaks down these barriers. As PAD actor Micheal Seabrook explains,

> We were still worried about like trying to be cool I guess and have a serious actor thing about us then you just see these people who are so free and joyful and it kinda just lets you let loose a bit as well.
>
> (*Peer Productions Documentary*, 2023).



Figure 10 - A sign at Peer Place outlining company values



Figure 11 - PAD and PEP in inclusive practice 2023

This inclusive environment fosters a culture in which young people with and without disabilities are willing to be playful, to try new things and to make mistakes. Acceptance of the more obvious differences of the PEP

cohort often means that PAD learners become less self-conscious or inhibited about expressing their own individuality. As is so often the case with inclusive practice, that which was designed to be accessible to those with a specific disability improves access for everyone. Although PEP learners were not directly involved in the creation of *Man Up,* they did serve as first test audiences and their feedback was extremely useful in crafting the final piece. Moreover, I would argue that it is this caring and inclusive underlying culture, which provides a specific crucible for creative practice, which allowed the young actors involved in both devising and performing *Man Up* to feel less inhibited and more able to express themselves freely. As I will go on to explain, this discovery highlights the importance of community building and community maintaining as essential foundations in the playbuilding process, especially when tackling sensitive issues.

Whilst our windowless box at Peer Place can feel oppressive at times, it can also feel like a magical space in which normal social rules are suspended, and everyone can feel liberated to express themselves. I have described the underlying environment so extensively because it is of such vital importance to the overall ecology in which the play was built. The inclusive environment in which neurodiversity is celebrated, the many cups of tea, daily practice and four-square games, all contribute to what Norris and Hobbs describe as community building and

community maintenance. They explain that community building is essential to allow contributors to,

> feel comfortable enough with one another to voice their opinions, with the recognition that such positions are placeholders or markers and can change as the work progresses.
>
> (2024, p.92)

They describe community maintenance is vital:

> Community should never be taken for granted, and without the continual care for its members, things can slow down and become uncomfortable as the necessary degrees of trust and playfulness may not be present.
>
> (2024, p.95).

PAD actor Ben Molalign's candid comments from the devising team's focus group echo this idea of how a space needs to feel safe if we, as creatives, are to feel free to play and try out ideas uninhibitedly and joyfully. Ben said,

> And, actually, it turned out to be really, really fun once it was established that that was a safe space where we could just, excuse my language, throw shit at the wall.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

I would argue that it is a commitment to and a refining of our approach to a caring community that has allowed for so much creative work, exploring risky and sometimes taboo topics, to thrive at Peer. Expanding on this idea of care as a central component to creative practice, James Thompson advocates for an ethically informed 'aesthetics of care.'

> An ‘aesthetics of care’ is then about a set of values realised in a relational process that emphasises engagements between individuals or groups over time. It is one that might consist of small creative encounters or large-scale exhibitions, but it is always one that notices inter-human relations in both the creation and the display of art projects.
>
> (Thompson in Stuart Fisher and Thompson, 2020, p.44)

The values that are celebrated at Peer Productions of creativity, inclusion, compassion and transformation are displayed on signs in the building and discussed often and consistently across the organisation. Individuals are encouraged to reflect on their own practice and to talk about how things might be different, changed or improved. The importance of trying something and failing, without any cataclysmic consequences, is emphasised with creative freedom encouraged in the relative safety of the devising or rehearsal room. As Thompson advocates, time is committed to building a creative community in which feeling safe to be playful and to try and to fail is encouraged.

As part of building our community, it was essential to establish a clear contract of engagement or set of company rules or expectations from the outset. By co-producing these rules with the young company, we were able to support an environment where everyone felt as safe as possible to share and express themselves. Discussion generated the standard rules that I have come to expect from such processes, which involve intelligent young artists keen to develop their best work, such as: listen actively to each other, understand that everyone’s perspective could be useful, respect each other’s viewpoints and boundaries and only share stories that you feel comfortable to share and where sharing them will not harm you or someone else. I also talked to the company at some length, acknowledging the seriousness of the topic, about taking

responsibility for their own mental health and asking for support if needed, avoiding letting the topic stay with you too much outside of the devising room and wherever possible finding the light in the dark material. I explained to them that the Safer Scrolling Report (Regehr, Shaugnessy and Shaughnessy *et al*, 2024) which was one of the research outputs from the *Understanding the Cel: Vulnerability, Violence and In(ter)vention research project* that was informing our process, had specifically advised that taking a 'punitive' approach to boys' behaviours could potentially reinforce rather than counteract their restrictive and negative views about gender and that, if we sat in the seriousness for too long, our play could risk doing exactly that. It was therefore essential, both for their own wellbeing and for the good of the project, to look for ways to tread more lightly or to find the humour, joy or beauty even in this potentially very upsetting topic. I also encouraged the group to start from the assumption that, although we would all bring to the project our own gender-based experiences, when we were talking about boys and men or girls and women, we would try to avoid making gender-based assumptions about specific people in the room. We would instead, where possible, seek to look at underlying systems which reinforce gender stereotypes rather than individuals. Although I advocate that shared rule writing is a useful starting point for any creative project, it does not necessarily mean that a given rule will be strictly adhered to throughout the process, nor does it negate existing preconceived ideas and values or prevent them from rising to the surface. Interestingly this rule-writing task was not mentioned in the deviser's focus group where participants of all genders expressed initially feeling anxious about their role in the project and how to contribute effectively. I suspect that rule-writing, whilst helpful in providing some grounding and context, might

feel, especially to a new group, performative or even just too theoretical to fully grasp until they are experiencing the reality of doing the work.

In addition to working to establish a shared code for theatre-making, I was keen to try and make a more level playing field by making sure that everyone involved understood some of the key concepts and that we had a shared language with which to discuss the work. Using the glossary of terms from *The Safer Scrolling Report* (Regehr, Shaugnessy, and Shaughnessy *et al*, 2024, p.8) as a starting point, I wrote key terms on individual pieces of paper. Each group member took it in turns to pick up a word or phrase and then say quickly anything they knew about that topic, after which other group members could add to what they had said. If no one knew anything about the word or phrase, I would take the paper and share my knowledge. It was a lot of information for the group to take in but proved to be a very useful exercise as I was able to establish where there were gaps in knowledge, and it enabled me to reinforce the idea that it is okay not to know something and to ask questions. This approach allowed us to talk about some of the big ideas early on without being too earnest. With this shared vocabulary established, we were then able to shift from discussion into embodied exploration, using games and play as a way to deepen understanding and generate material.

Playing with purpose

Theatre games have been widely documented within applied theatre practice, particularly in relation to ensemble building and embodied preparation (Boal, 2002) and this section focuses on how specific games functioned within my own work. Like most theatre practitioners, in my experience, I have taken something of a 'magpie' approach borrowing and adapting different games and techniques to support the project I am working on at the time. For *Man Up* I knew that I was looking for games which would help to build focus and collaboration skills as well as a willingness to be irreverent, more embodied and perhaps less intellectual even when working with complex multidisciplinary research. Below are examples of three games which the devisers remembered playing as part of the process together with brief notes explaining my rationale for choosing those games and, where relevant, how those games impacted our ways of working.

Patterns

In this game, the group begin by establishing a pattern of claps where each person is clapped at in turn with the impetus or energy passing around the circle. Everyone can only be included in the sequence once and, when the sequence is completed, the last person claps back at the person who initiated the sequence. Once the group can competently and confidently repeat the sequence of claps, a second pattern where finger clicks are passed around the circle is established. Once the group is confident in both their clap and click patterns, they work together to try and maintain both patterns at the same time. Additional patterns can then be added into the mix, including the throwing of a ball, the saying of each other's names or walking to different places in the circle. The aim

is to try and see how many patterns the group can maintain simultaneously. I chose this game because it encourages shared focus without focusing on the specific material we were researching. It encouraged the group to work together to achieve something. When a group is effective in facilitating the game, it develops something of a hypnotic and calming quality which I hoped would help to ground the team especially when some of them felt anxious. Having experienced the game before, I knew that it works most effectively when everyone gives up responsibility for overall success and instead takes their attention to their specific individual role in the sequences. This felt like a useful approach to the overall process too. I have noticed over the many years that I have run projects with young emerging artists that they are increasingly burdened with a sense of responsibility to 'do well' and that this can inhibit their ability to be present and inquisitive in the process as their focus persistently drifts to a finished product. To 'do well' in the patterns game each individual needs to surrender some responsibility to the group and this act of practicing trusting each other, within the low-stakes context of a game, seemed like a good way to help build the group dynamic.

The 'made-up game' game.

I am unsure as to the exact derivation of this game, which I was introduced to by a previous colleague. The premise is that the game begins by one person shouting, "Let's play a game of…" They finish the sentence with an entirely made-up name for a game. The group must immediately respond by starting to play the made-up game. The rules are developed as the game is played, and one winner must be

established. As soon as the game is completed, the process begins again with a different participant saying, “Let’s play a game of…” and again making up a fictitious game. I introduced this game to the group because I hoped it might encourage them to connect with their childish sides and to tap into that sense of free and unrestricted evolving play which children enjoy. I also wanted the group to realise how quickly and effortlessly they could collaborate to invent something new as I knew the process would require them to generate multiple scenes and scratch performances without being too precious or becoming too attached to their ideas. It also helped to improve the energy and overall mood in the room which was useful when working with such serious and often heartbreaking material. The group enjoyed the game a great deal and one of the games (‘Banana’) they continued to play long after the project was finished. As deviser Kat explains,

> That's where the banana game came from. We had to create a game, but we had to create the rules as we went. Like, there were no rules. (…) and it's also that improv of saying yes.
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

Feminine and Masculine Ball

I introduced a few different games which involved the throwing and passing of both real and imagined balls around the circle. In some of these games, participants had to say a specific thing each time they received the ball. For example, if the theme were types of cheese, then with each throw they would have to say a different type of cheese. The aim is to think fast and keep the ball moving. As well as developing concentration and coordination, these games required the individuals to

respond quickly and spontaneously in the moment without filtering their responses too much. I chose these games because I knew the group were anxious to 'do well' so were often filtering their input for fear of accidentally offending or upsetting each other. As deviser Ben explained,

> It wasn't because it felt like it was an unsafe environment. It was more of like a mental blockage for me being like, okay, if I say this, is this going to upset someone? Am I voicing my opinion in the right way? So I feel like I remember trying to choose my words very carefully and express my perspective of things without harming anyone else's opinions or views. And then as the process got on, it got a lot easier to do that.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

In one of the early workshops, I introduced the idea of the feminine and masculine balls. We passed the balls between us and each time we threw the red ball we would say a word or phrase related to femininity and each time we threw the blue ball a word or phrase related to masculinity. The group noticed both how initially difficult it was to say these words freely and how quickly the words and phrases from the feminine ball became misogynistic. As deviser Emerald Castagnera explains, 'That was therapeutic. It was nice to just be able to shout slag across the room and throw it at someone' (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025). This happened so immediately that, when the group discussed it in the focus group, they misremembered the game as being 'misogyny ball.' I think that the game helped to break down some of the group's initial hesitation and encouraged them to work with the ideas in a more embodied and less cerebral way which also separated the concepts from their own belief systems. With Emerald, who is a self-described 'angry feminist', free to throw the feminine ball and shout

'slag', the potential for a freer and less self-policed approach to devising new material started to emerge. As Ben explains,

> The brief to play with and having that freedom to play with it and not having any pressure and thinking whether or not it was good or bad or fitted. Yeah in fact, when it was bad, it made it even more fun.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

Taken together, these games illuminate more than just moments of energising play; they articulate a practice grounded in negotiating the tensions between responsibility and surrender, seriousness and irreverence, intellect and embodiment. In *Patterns*, the relinquishing of individual responsibility in favour of collective rhythm echoes the collaborative ethos I aimed to cultivate across the project. In *The Made-up Game Game*, the group were pushed to experience their own capacity for invention and shared authorship, recognising that playfulness and failure could become generative rather than paralysing forces. *The Feminine and Masculine Ball* exercise again encouraged embodied play and somewhat surprisingly also destabilised ingrained cultural scripts, opening up a space for critical engagement that was at once freeing, political, and artistically productive. Playing games enabled us to build the foundations of trust, playfulness and shared risk-taking that the devising process required. Game playing enabled conditions in which the group could approach serious and often difficult research material with a lighter touch and with more openness to failure, contradiction and surprise. For my practice, this highlights the value of using games as scaffolding to support the group in moving past anxiety about outcomes and to find a collective rhythm for working together. For

the wider field, the significance lies in recognising that the seemingly modest act of playing games can prepare the ground for deeper creative inquiry with games as an essential entry point into ways of collaborating that are more trusting, embodied and in which risk taking is encouraged. Having established the importance of play and playfulness in the work, I will now go on to explore the devising process which was used to inform the final text.

Devising with Freedom

The group were encouraged to divide into smaller groups and to try lots of different ideas for scenes. I would give instructions which provided prompts (based on previous discussions) but that were deliberately broad and vague enough to allow the devisers to take them in a direction of their choosing. Such prompts or challenges began as open and conceptual. For example:

- Show me Mr. Patriarchy.
- Make a scene in which the perfect specimen of man/woman is created.
- Build an echo chamber.
- Create tiktok on stage.
- Can you do the history of social media in two minutes?

As Nina Friis describes,

> You'd be like, make something about Mr. Patriarchy. Like, show me Mr. Patriarchy. And then we'd go off and make something about Mr. Patriarchy. Or like it would be we'd have a theme or like an idea and then we'd be sent away to make something and come back and then discuss that and see what we liked or what didn't chime.

(*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

This reflective process of considering what worked and what interested us as lines of creative enquiry was a vital part of the process with each piece informing what we made next and the freedom to abandon an idea or approach that was not serving the project and start afresh whenever we chose. In his detailed analysis of his process developing work with Mirror Theatre, Norris describes some of the pros and cons of different approaches to documenting the work, which I quote at length here:

> In the early years, during the second or third rehearsal, we would often pass out blank index cards and ask us all to recall the earlier conversations. On separate cards, those gathered write catchphrases that would help us to later recall the stories that have been told and, in smaller print, write their names in the bottom right-hand corner. As the stories are reviewed, we also move to abstraction, asking, “What themes are embedded within the stories?” We then write these on cards as well. Although the cards could have been introduced at the first rehearsal, they are delayed for two reasons. First, for newcomers, the conversation is more informal without them. We want to keep the conversation open and relaxed. The veterans are comfortable with the process, but it can be intimidating the first time. Second, the cards function as a review. Our process is a spiral one, while we revisit the data again and again. It is important at this stage to keep all ideas as possibilities, and reviewing helps keep all things fresh. With the proliferation of cell phones with video cameras, for a time, we shifted from the cards to digital recordings of the presented vignettes and posted theses on a private Facebook page (see Chapter 2 p. 122). These provided detailed scene ideas and were reviewed throughout the process, refining them as the play emerged. While the recorded dramatizations were of value, we lost the abstract coding of themes dimension. Both systems have their own pros and cons.
>
> (Norris, Hobbs and Mirror Theatre, 2024, p.12)

Unlike Norris, I have never established a formal way of capturing the work developed in the crucible of the devising room. I do often film improvisations but will avoid this if I think it will make the performers feel self-conscious or less likely to take creative risks. In practicality, I find I rarely revisit these recordings as the scenes and moments which resonate stick in our collective memory, so I only really revisit recordings if I find myself stuck or looking for a new direction. I find it useful to connect sometimes disparate ideas with mind maps or lists generated by the group on large pieces of shared paper. I tend to find that my creative process, and this was especially true for this project, results in the generation of a large amount of paper which includes extracts of scripts, notes, printouts of research papers or online forum discussions, news stories and other text-based material which feels relevant or useful. Sometimes, if it feels helpful, useful bits of information are blue tacked to the studio walls. For the first time, with this project, in a bid to contain an overflow of messy paper in a studio space which is shared by the whole Peer Productions company and needed to serve multiple projects, we implemented a system whereby each project had a clear large plastic box in which we would place any paper and other material we generated. From my perspective, the box was a practical solution to managing different projects in a shared space but, for some of the devisers, it gave them a sense that they were building something, and this was important for motivation. As Kat Wells explains,

> It was like we had something tangible and then we, like put them in the box and then you could see the box fill up and it was like, oh, we're achieving something.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

Kat, like many of her peers, was unaccustomed to processes where the outcome is not immediately tangible so seeing the box fill up with notes and other resources comforted her and gave her confidence that we were making progress. Quite a few of the devisers spoke about their initial scepticism that what they were making held any value with many references to 'just playing around'. I have become comfortable sitting in the messiness of the process, but the uncertainty and chaos was new to the young team. After having had time to reflect on the process Kat, who was initially probably the most anxious of the devisers, reflects –

> I feel like, especially towards the start of the process I was like, everything is so precious and needs to be perfect. And there was a big block in that and then it's like, it is what it is. And mess, being messy, that's fun and it's okay and it's good even.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

It was important to me that the group had full creative freedom to work with different theatrical styles that spoke to them without controlling that too much. They made physical theatre sequences, pieces with audience interaction, experimented with music and song, comedy, agitprop and puppets and this is something which the young creatives really enjoyed. As Ben explains,

> This whole concept of like the puppets telling their different stories and narratives… like this about a misogyny play. On paper it sounds awful. Why would you want to explore misogyny through puppets?
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

This creative freedom with style and genre kept the cast engaged and prevented the work from becoming too fixed too early in the process. It also contributed to a playful and joyous devising room despite the gravity of the material we were addressing.

Fairly early in the process I started to introduce script extracts and together we started to formulate emerging characters, and this meant that my prompts could become more specific but still I tried to prevent them from becoming prescriptive. For example:

- Show me Max and Logan chatting while playing Fifa.
- Make a scene where there is a busy house party, but you can only use four actors.
- Show me something that helps us understand who Summer is.
- Who are in Summer/Max's family?

I introduced the characters of best friends Lottie and Logan first and soon after Summer and Max. For reasons unknown, the moment I introduced the concept of a girl called Summer the whole group took a disliking to her. As Nina F tries to explain,

> It was like Lottie and Logan and then we had this Summer girl. Who's she? She's gonna be the one that causes the issues, surely. Cause she was like the newbie.
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

In response to this, I set them the challenge of trying to humanise her. As Kat, Nina F and Ben explain,

> Kat: Okay, it was me, Nina [Friis] and Kieran. We were in the black and white room, and that was our goal. We were like, okay, out of all of the characters that we have, Summer is just like a void, but she's been labelled bitch. So, we were like, right, let's give this girl some personality. And it was like ooooh she's just a girl.
>
> Ben: But I also think that the charisma of Anna playing Summer just makes it…. You can't dislike Anna.
>
> Nina F: And her journey in the play is so good!
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

This sense of shared ownership or stewardship of the characters shines through in comments from actors who were part of the devising team and from those in the touring team alike. Devising actor Kat explains that developing the characters spoke to her need for tangible outcomes. She said,

> I think because I'm very much… I like a big picture. I like to end game things. So, I think, like, when Lottie and Logan and Max and Summer came in, it was like, oh, this is something that I can kind of sink my teeth into and build upon. So, I think character building brought me the most joy.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

Anna, the actor who then went on to play Summer, also wrote about her sense of ownership and connection to the project. In her journal she wrote,

> It's been a lot of reading, rereading, timing and picking at the script, which I have found really interesting as things are constantly evolving and changing. It was so gratifying on Saturday when we realised that the script was finally under time! What a great

> moment. This was my first time working with a new script in such detail and so collaboratively.
>
> (Anna Scott, Actor's Journal, 2025)

Reflecting on feedback from the whole team about the devising and rehearsal process, it is striking how important it was to try and strike a tonal balance between the seriousness of the work and a free and playful approach to avoid the group becoming bogged down by the gravity of the subject matter - likewise the tension between quite a few of the young company's desire to 'end game' in contrast to my need, as a playwright, to keep open as many lines of creative enquiry as possible at this stage in the process. The company's production of knowledge, in which our collective imaginations were rich sources of data (Norris, Hobbs and Mirror Theatre, 2024, p.16), was informed by this tension between free play and tangible outcomes. Alongside these tensions between lightness and gravitas and freedom and certainty was a tension between what is ephemeral and what is permanent. I wanted the group to feel unencumbered by the constant need to make work that was worthy of a finished educational play. They needed to know and understand that some of the work they made would be discarded completely or reimagined to a point where it is unrecognisable whilst knowing, at the same time, that they were making meaningful contributions to a finished production or else there would be the risk that they felt unimportant or tokenised which would be potentially harmful to both them as emerging artists and the project as a whole.

This also leads me to think about how we managed the axiological process of deciding which creative lines of enquiry to prioritise. For example, for Kat, she felt most inspired when developing characters in

part because, as an experienced actor, this represented more solid ground, and I wanted to honour her creative curiosity. For me, however, I often found myself pre-occupied by bigger conceptual or representational problems such as how best to depict virtual interactions in a live theatrical production or pedagogical concerns such as how to show misogynistic attitudes and behaviours without leaving them unchallenged but, at the same time, without the young audiences feeling preached at or patronised. This meant that the process entailed a delicate balancing act with a dynamic, responsive and varied approach in which we chose areas of focus together which allowed for everyone's creative needs to be fulfilled in the best service of the overall project. These negotiations around focus and creative priority also foregrounded a central tension within the process: how to balance collective ownership and collaboration with the responsibilities of a single authorial voice.

In chapter 3 I foregrounded the importance of polyphony arguing for the value of both engaging with a multiplicity of different voices in the theatre-making process and representing a range of different perspectives in the final play text of *Losing It.* The process of making *Man Up*, was equally informed by a range of different voices: the devising team, colleagues from Peer Productions, the researchers and participants represented in the *Understanding the Cel: Vulnerability, Violence and In(ter)vention* research outputs and, of course, my own. This time, I chose to tell a smaller story involving fewer characters to allow for a greater depth of character and story development. In the following section, I examine in more detail how we navigated a creative process that drew inspiration from a range of contributors, while

ultimately producing a play that, although it honoured the collective input of the team, remained an original and singularly authored text.

In response to the scenes that the group were creating and the discussions we were having, I started to produce fragments of script. I first adopted this way of writing under the mentorship of former National Theatre literary director John Burgess whose advice was to allow a play to find its own organic shape and to avoid being overly concerned with narrative arc and form, instead focussing on writing one good line, and then another, until you have a good scene, and then writing another. This approach serves me in processes such as this one because it allows me to remain in a space of potentiality where the play could still be lots of different things and I do not feel the pressure to end game before a range of creative possibilities have been explored. The devising actors too were excited by the possibilities. Here Nina Friis describes her initial response to encountering the first draft of the script after exploring the fragments and understanding her input to the final piece.

> It was just so interesting to see, like, you have so many things of what it could be, and that play could have turned out into so many different things. And then, like, that was the script there, and it was like, whoa. And there's thumbprints. There's just little thumbprints, little bits. And that's the bit I really like. Just, like, the little touches. I can see where that was from. (…)There's not chunks. It's just tiny touches. And that felt really special.(…) Little ideas that we just, like, came up with sprouted and grew and changed and informed something much bigger. That felt very exciting to me.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

Sometimes the written fragments were complete scenes with named characters and other times they were just a few lines of unassigned

dialogue. Sometimes they were more poetic or abstract and other times they were rooted in naturalism. I relied on the devising company to perform them and feedback their responses which then led me to refine existing scenes, abandon others and write more.

This idea, summed up so eloquently by Nina Friis, where there is both shared ownership, where the devisers feel invested and can see their influence in the play, but where they also felt quite separated from the finished piece came up quite a lot in their focus group. Shortly after completing the devising phase I delivered a guest lecture for a drama school and one of the students quite earnestly asked me whether I felt it was ethically appropriate for me to claim authorship for the play when it was being influenced by devising from the young actors. Their question made me pause for thought but, on further discussion, I realised that the student had imagined that the actors were improvising scenes which I was writing down in their entirety and passing off as my own work. The student's assumption was entirely understandable especially when considered in the context of ethnodramatic practice in which there is some hesitance to even describe the role of script generator as that of playwright. Saldaña describes writers of scripts in these contexts as 'adapting' rather than writing (2010, p.4) and Anna Glarin, who specialises in devising ethnodrama with young people, takes on his mantle arguing that,

> I assume a role of playwright in the sense that I write up the fieldnotes, these scripts are not "play scripts" in the traditional sense, but essentialised fieldwork reformatted in performative data displays
>
> (2020, p.17)

This is where my practice significantly diverges from others in the ethnodramatic field. I am not, and nor do I claim to be, engaging in a process of 'writing up' what has been discovered in the devising process. My playwriting process, as described in my introduction, is a process of crafting and shaping in which material changes form and content often quite significantly. This is not to suggest that the work created by the young people in the devising process is not rich and provocative in its own right, but I am keen to identify and to attempt to articulate a practice which, beyond the devising room, involves a significant creative process of reimagining and reshaping the final script as a more solo endeavour. Essentially, in my work, the ethnodramatic collective playbuilding forms the initial stage of the creative process but I then, informed by that material, reimagine the ideas before finally workshopping a draft text with a young company. I asked the actors whether, during the devising process, the scripts I was bringing in felt like they were informed by the work they had been making. This was Ben's response.

> No, not always. But when you would explain it being like, oh, this was inspired by like the wolf scene, for example. I was okay, yeah, I can see where that comes from. So for me, it wasn't necessarily like, we've done this and this is exactly how we've done it. Put on paper. But once you explained your thought processes and how what we've done had created, that made sense. But it wasn't obvious.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

What Ben is speaking to here is quite a convoluted and abstract process which is difficult to pin down with precision. Ideas generated from a devised scene would percolate and cross pollinate with other ideas from

generated scenes, discussions or research and would inspire me to make something new. I now turn to unpacking this process by examining how ideas, scenarios and characters were developed and woven into the final script.

In documenting this process I have realised that, in my work there is a very clear demarcation between my approach to devising work to inform the final piece and the curation of the final produced play, and this would have been the case even if the same actors had been taking part in all stages of the project. I would argue that part of the reason that such rich material is generated is because the young co-creators are, usually for the first time in their quite short creative careers, unburdened with the need to take responsibility for the messaging and aesthetic choices in a final public facing piece. They are reassured that they can make work, which is potentially unengaging, unsuitable for the audience, feels tangential or is even inadvertently offensive, in the safety of the devising crucible without having to worry about how that work might affect a potentially vulnerable audience. In discussion with me, in the devising team's focus group, the group spoke often about initially feeling worried about holding the responsibility for creating an ultimately educational production about such an important issue and how this initially inhibited their creativity. Reflecting on my approach where the young company were encouraged to be playful and free, to take both themselves and the process less seriously and ultimately to leave the responsibility for the finished product and messaging in my hands, deviser Nina Friis describes how this ultimately enabled her to be more creative without fear of reprisal.

> And then I remember a moment where you were like, I'm in charge of the big picture. Like, don't try and make sense of the big picture right now. You just work on what you're doing and make stuff that I can use, and it's my job to sort it out. And I was like, okay (…) And I just felt like a lot of times we were just playing around (…) you know what I mean? And it was just like, we could just say stuff and just see and laugh. And it just felt like, okay, not everything is so precious. And that was what made the environment freer. And then it was your job to make it make sense and useful and I felt…not concerned with that.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

This freedom to laugh and be joyous in the face of such a heavyweight topic is one which was discussed extensively by the devising team, and I will return to this theme of 'finding light in the darkness' more extensively later in this chapter. It is important to note that, to some extent, caring too deeply and becoming weighed down by the seriousness and importance of the issues we were addressing, could in effect inhibit our ability, as a company, to creatively engage with the material we were researching. We needed the freedom to be careless to inform a care-fuelled and carefully curated and constructed final piece.

Affective Solidarity and the Golden Thread of Empathy

Having described and analysed extensively the foundational culture at Peer Productions and documented my initial creative approach I will now go on to explore how this enabled the development of affective solidarity where empathy became a golden thread weaved through the creative process (see figure 12). As Thompson explains when he describes an 'aesthetics of care',

> It would not pretend to a distinction between a process and an outcome because both might stimulate affective solidarity between people – perhaps participant to participant or performer to audience.
>
> (Thompson, 2020, p. 44)

Here, and within his broader argument, Thompson is suggesting that 'affective solidarity' could be a powerful counterpoint to a 'society of horrendous and cruel disregard' (2020, p.48) and could therefore serve as a powerful foundation for socially transformative artistic practice. This concept of affective solidarity which is ultimately rooted in feminist ideals of collaborative care and democracy, I understand to mean a shared or collective inter-relational, human and ultimately emotional experience which can inform and motivate a call to activism. These ideas surrounding affective solidarity, with their attention to care, shared emotion and a potential for transformation, conceptually overlap with frameworks surrounding empathy, particularly that of Bennett whose model sees empathy as grounded in a 'conjunction of affect and critical awareness' and as moving beyond 'feeling for another in so far as we can imagine being that other' to 'a feeling for another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different.' (2005, p.10).

'Affective solidarity' also shares epistemological foundations with 'alliance-based empathy', which I referred to earlier in this thesis, and which sociologists Fields and Copp (2015) suggest is central to effective peer-led RSE. Ideas about developing empathy as a feeling for and with another person, whether real or fictionalised, have persistently risen to the surface at all stages of the project. Reflecting on the devising phase almost all the actors described how engaging creatively with material related to incel ideology shifted their perceptions making them feel more

compassionately towards people who hold those beliefs. For example, deviser Kat Wells described being aware of her perspective shifting through making the work.

> You talk about misogyny and sexism and it's like, oh, okay, women are the victims and men are the perpetrators. And I feel like we just completely, like, shifted that. Obviously, women are still the victims, but there's, again, sympathy to be had on both sides and everyone's a victim.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

This suggests that empathetic perspective-taking — a core component of affective solidarity — was occurring not only within the creative team but also among the young people who engaged with the work. This idea about an increase in understanding for and a humanising of those with incel beliefs was supported by fellow deviser Ben.

> And I was just like, I don't identify with incels. I don't want to sort of associate with people who would call themselves incels or stuff like that. And then throughout the process I just felt this huge sympathy for them.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

Fellow company member Nina Friis goes on to describe a specific moment in the process where male members of the company performed a scene with a young man in a therapy session when she felt a similar shift in her own views.

> The big shift for me was seeing that scene and he was in the therapy session and it was … like I'd just made something with Kat where I was kind of mocking them, the incels. And then he did that, and I was like, oh, God, and they don't know what they're doing to me and they're making me feel like this. And it just seemed so real. And I was like, oh, God, he's like, vulnerable to it.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

This empathetic trend also impacted the young actors who rehearsed and toured the play. Anna Scott, who played Summer, initially expressed struggling to relate with her character as she was so different from herself. However, after taking part in a series of extended improvisations in character she wrote in her journal,

> The improvs felt so real - like I believed myself as Summer in that moment, and I think it definitely allowed me to become closer to her, and get into her head a lot more.
>
> (Anna Scott, Actor's Journal, 2025)

From discussion with Anna and the rest of the actors performing the play it was clear that, through the process of developing the performance, they started to be able to understand how their characters might be feeling and thus developed an empathy for people with whom they shared very little in common.

There was also considerable evidence for both an increase in empathy and a resulting shift in attitudes and understanding in the feedback questionnaires and focus groups from young people who saw the play in their schools. Many young people expressed an increase in understanding other people's points of view. For example,

- Boys also go through things, even the same as girls.
- It changed my opinion on how to think that everyone could be going through something, and you don't know about it.

(*Man Up* post-show audience questionnaires 2025)

Hannah Newman's report for Kent University's Impact Accelerator Grant committee, analysing post show questionnaire and focus group data highlights that a similar perspective shift also occurred for one of the teachers watching the play. Referring to his response to his male students talking about extreme online content, he said,

> So I think that changed my opinion as in I need to be more, not sensitive, maybe not more aware, but I need to have a bit more empathy and understanding of yeah I think that's maybe what it's changed my levels of understanding, my level of empathy of this is how it can impact on students so when I come across that, come back to this moment and recognise that they're just as much of a victim.
>
> (Male Teacher quoted in Newman, 2025).

This teacher reflection further evidences how affective responses within the performance space can prompt shifts in understanding, even for adult observers positioned outside the target audience.

The word relatable was persistently chosen to describe the play by respondents to our post-show survey suggesting that a cognitive connection was being forged between the characters and some of the audience members. When asked why they liked a specific character many suggested that they liked them because they related to that specific character with several young people identifying specific moments which chimed with their experiences. For example,

- Because the situation she is in is kind of similar to me.
- It reminded of me.
- Because he's quiet and he was just like me when I was in my old school.

- When they guy shouted at the girl and she couldn't say anything bc (sic) she was about to cry because I have been in the situation before.

(*Man Up* post-show audience questionnaires 2025)

Newman similarly notes that many students described the play as "realistic" and reflective of situations that "happen in real life," reinforcing this strong theme of relatability in young people's responses (Newman, 2025).

These responses from young people at all stages of the project, imply some kind of permeating empathy which acts as a golden thread through the process. Related to this is also a sense of kinship, allyship or connection between the audiences and the young actors on the stage as well as the young characters in the play. In Fields and Copp's study of peer educators delivering RSE, they were observing and analysing young people delivering classroom based RSE. Although assuming the role of 'educator' involved some degree of performativity, the young people in Fields and Copp's study were essentially presenting themselves rather than embodying a formal professional identity. This allowed them to be viewed as authentic by their peer-learners." Although the actors' narrator roles (M1, M2, M3, F1, F2) feel closer to themselves – a writerly tactic to which I will later return - this feels very different to the actors in this play who are in role throughout the interaction. When analysing responses from young people, at all stages of the project, I noticed a persistent theme where they did not all always differentiate between the actor and the character. When asked which character they liked the most, many respondents based their preferences on the actor's performance rather than the character alone. For example, young people commented:

- She expressed her emotions well and she performed confidently.
- I'm not sure, I think because Lottie acts the best, idk.
- Stayed in character and the acting felt natural.
- She spoke very well.

(*Man Up* post-show audience questionnaires 2025)

Although this is, possibly in part, due to a lack of attention to the question and limited understanding of theatre, these comments do suggest that some of the audience struggled to separate the actors from their characters. Deviser Ben also alluded to a similar idea when we were talking about developing the character of Summer, whom the group had initially found unsympathetic. He said: 'But I also think that the charisma of Anna playing Summer just makes it…you can't dislike Anna!' (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025). Here he is talking about his colleague Anna Scott who originated the role of Summer on stage. A fast-talking young Irish woman, Anna has a warm, funny and charismatic presence on stage. As Ben describes, she is extremely likeable and, when Ben said this, it made me realise that Anna and Kat, who often played Summer during the devising process, both affected my writing process. As I explained in the focus group,

> That's interesting for me in terms of the blend, because obviously, at that point, I kind of know who the cast are going to be (…) Relatively early I was like, yeah, that is going to be Anna. But when I was writing, I often heard Kat because Kat had played Summer so much.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

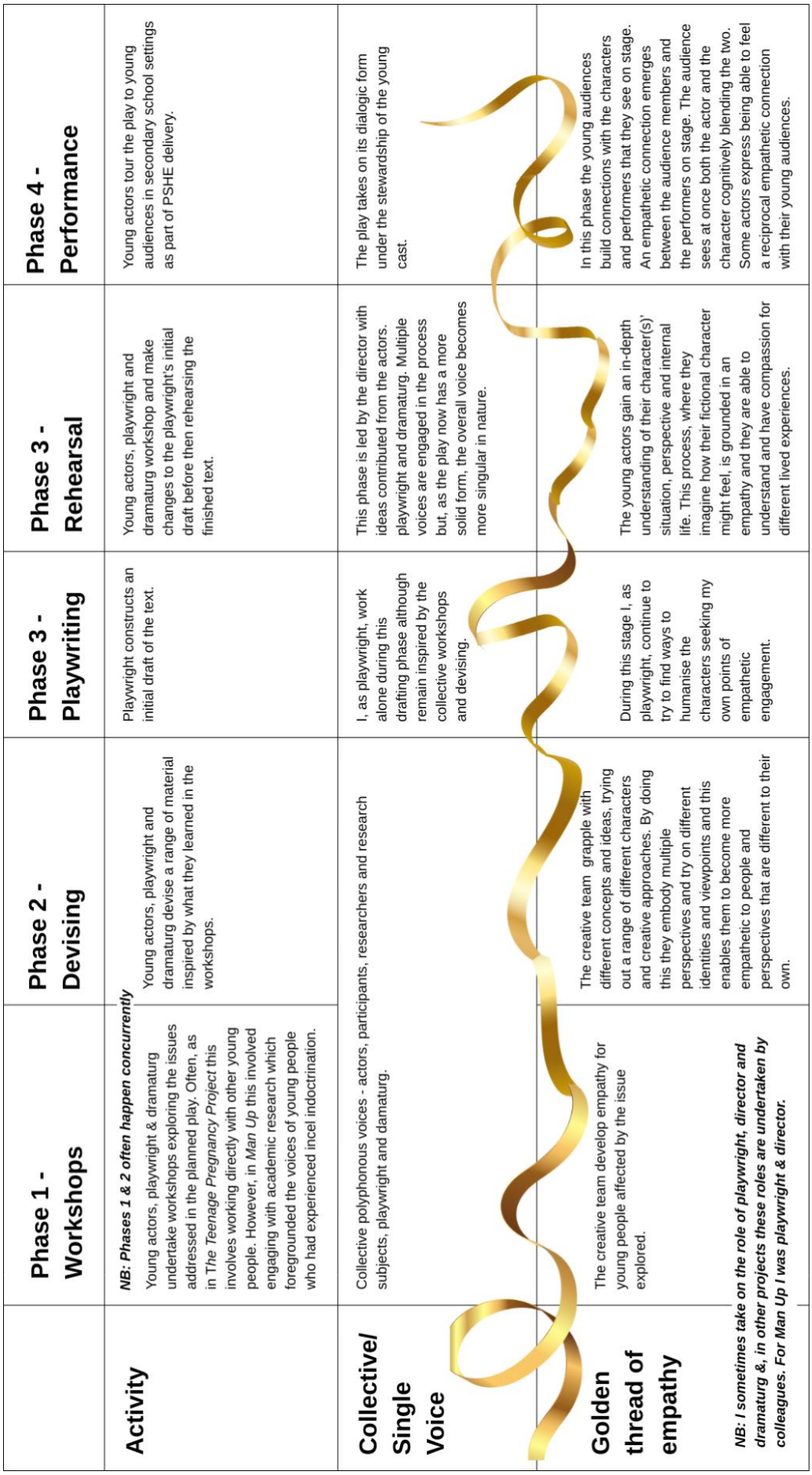
This suggests that, throughout both the process of making and the experience of receiving the play we can multitask or, as McConachie describes ‘conceptually blend’. As he explains for an audience,

> Engaging with actors playing characters on the stage involves conceptual integration, not poetic faith. Spectators combine their mental concepts of a specific actor with a specific character to create blended actor/characters.
>
> (McConachie, 2012, p.52)

Whilst they may become absorbed in the play to some extent, audience members are also able to critically analyse the performer’s abilities and, as theatre-makers, we can see the character of Summer and experience her in relation to Kat’s devised scenes and Anna’s performance on tour. This means that there is more than one site of empathetic connection. The audience can empathise with the character, the actor or indeed both and potentially this is in part, why the experience of Peer Productions’ performances can be so impactful and affective.

In this section I have considered the ways in which polyphonic voices inspire but do not dictate the writing of my plays, and I have argued that empathy is woven through the project, underpinning each stage of the creative process. I metaphorise this underpinning aspect as the empathetic ‘golden thread’, formed through engaging with a polyphony of different voices, that is crucial to the effectiveness of the play. At every stage there is a sense of ‘buying in’ from the creative team and from the young people who engage with the work, a persistent process of caring deeply about what we say and how we say it. This collective investment results in everyone caring about the characters and their given circumstances. In the context in which emotional and

sexual lives and connections are increasingly forged in the virtual rather than the real world, these moments of emotional connection become vital sites of catharsis, rich with educational potential. These findings can inform not only the work of sex educators and those making theatre for young audiences but also offer playwrights and theatre-makers more broadly a way of connecting with audiences whose lives are dominated by virtual encounters, providing a blueprint for how we, as artists, might find the human in an increasingly inhumane world.



	Phase 1 - Workshops	Phase 2 - Devising	Phase 3 - Playwriting	Phase 3 - Rehearsal	Phase 4 - Performance
Activity	***NB: Phases 1 & 2 often happen concurrently*** Young actors, playwright & dramaturg undertake workshops exploring the issues addressed in the planned play. Often, as in *The Teenage Pregnancy Project* this involves working directly with other young people. However, in *Man Up* this involved engaging with academic research which foregrounded the voices of young people who had experienced incel indoctrination.	Young actors, playwright and dramaturg devise a range of material inspired by what they learned in the workshops.	Playwright constructs an initial draft of the text.	Young actors, playwright and dramaturg workshop and make changes to the playwright's initial draft before then rehearsing the finished text.	Young actors tour the play to young audiences in secondary school settings as part of PSHE delivery.
Collective/ Single Voice	Collective polyphonous voices - actors, participants, researchers and research subjects, playwright and damaturg.		I, as playwright, work alone during this drafting phase although remain inspired by the collective workshops and devising.	This phase is led by the director with ideas contributed from the actors. playwright and dramaturg. Multiple voices are engaged in the process but, as the play now has a more solid form, the overall voice becomes more singular in nature.	The play takes on its dialogic form under the stewardship of the young cast.
Golden thread of empathy	The creative team develop empathy for young people affected by the issue explored.	The creative team grapple with different concepts and ideas, trying out a range of different characters and creative approaches. By doing this they embody multiple perspectives and try on different identities and viewpoints and this enables them to become more empathetic to people and perspectives that are different to their own.	During this stage I, as playwright, continue to try to find ways to humanise the characters seeking my own points of empathetic engagement.	The young actors gain an in-depth understanding of their character(s)' situation, perspective and internal life. This process, where they imagine how their fictional character might feel, is grounded in an empathy and they are able to understand and have compassion for different lived experiences.	In this phase the young audiences build connections with the characters and performers that they see on stage. An empathetic connection emerges between the audience members and the performers on stage. The audience sees at once both the actor and the character cognitively blending the two. Some actors express being able to feel a reciprocal empathetic connection with their young audiences.

NB: I sometimes take on the role of playwright, director and dramaturg &, in other projects these roles are undertaken by colleagues. For Man Up I was playwright & director.

Figure 12 - Table illustrating the golden thread of empathy.



Figure 13 - Kieran Jenkins in Man Up 2025 as John telling the story of Chicken Licken

From Devising to Scripted Text

Although the process described throughout this chapter was marked by freedom, playfulness and a genuine openness to not knowing where a scene might lead, it is important to note that, throughout the process we would return, at every stage, to the *Safer Scrolling* report and the wider *Understanding the Cel* research from which it emerged (Regehr, Shaughnessy and Shaughnessy *et al*, 2024) and that this remained the

backbone of the work. Games could be played freely, characters could be built without a fixed destination in mind, and ideas could arrive as unexpectedly as a half-remembered childhood story, but all of this took place in service of, and in continual dialogue with, a body of research that had already identified the patterns, vulnerabilities and pathways the play needed to address. This is precisely what distinguishes the process as ethnodramatic rather than simply playbuilding. As I outlined in Chapter 2, Saldaña defines ethnodrama not by its degree of improvisation or fictionalisation but by its foundation in formally gathered research, existing prior to and structuring the theatre-making process (2016). The freedom I have described in this chapter, then, was never freedom from the research. It was freedom to interrogate, translate and dramatise it by means other than direct quotation, and the following account of the creation of the character of Tommy and then later the development of the *Chicken Licken* story sets out to demonstrate exactly how that translation took place.

The research identifies four archetypes, each defined by a cluster of interests and vulnerabilities: Archetype 1, centred on loneliness, anti-establishment feeling, male victimhood and masculinity and power; Archetype 2, centred on neurodiversity, self-improvement narratives and a negative societal outlook; Archetype 3, centred on male appearance, dating advice and men's rights; and Archetype 4, centred on BlackPill belief, mental health and a negative societal outlook (Regehr, Shaughnessy and Shaughnessy *et al*, 2024, pp.14-15). These categories are not presented as fixed or mutually exclusive. The report's own methodology tracks ‘thematic co-occurrences’ within each archetype's data over time, and certain sub-themes, negative societal

outlook among them, recur across more than one archetype. The model, in other words, describes overlapping tendencies rather than discrete types.Every character in the play was, in some sense, born out of this research, each of them carrying traces of one or more of these archetypes into their thinking, their language or their choices

Tommy's character is a particularly pertinent example. The research identifies neurodivergent young people, and autistic young people in particular, as an existing at-risk group within the wider ecosystem of online radicalisation, while cautioning that researchers and practitioners must be ‘extremely cautious when making generalizations and associating violence with autism’ (Williams *et al.*, 2021, cited in Regehr, Shaughnessy and Shaughnessy *et al*, 2024, p.29). Having read this finding, I made a deliberate decision to write a neurodivergent character into the play. This was not a decision taken from outside the experience it depicts. I have ADHD, and dramaturg Kieran Jenkins, who worked alongside me throughout the project, is also neurodivergent, as were several other members of the devising team. This meant Tommy was shaped by lived experience within the room as much as by the research, allowing us to take the report's caution seriously rather than treating neurodivergence as a shorthand for vulnerability to radicalisation. Tommy's trajectory also maps closely to the report's Archetype 4, in which BlackPill content ‘emphasises looks-based attraction’ and frames looks and relationships as ‘genetically pre-determined’ (p.8, p.14), the fatalistic, cynical endpoint Tommy eventually reaches. His defining trait of black-and-white thinking, however, traces more precisely to Archetype 2's description of ‘self-improvement narratives’ involving ‘clear cut/black and white thinking’ (p.14). Tommy

was not mapped onto a single archetype and written to it. Instead he was built by moving across the model's categories, in the same way the research itself describes these archetypes as overlapping tendencies rather than fixed types. Tommy's catchphrase, 'Wrong!' emerged directly from the traits described in the research and illustrates how the direction of influence between writing and devising can run in both directions. Unlike the wolf material, which emerged from devised discussion before reaching the page, this catchphrase originated in my own writing and was only afterwards fed back into improvisation, where the devising team tested it across multiple scenes and situations, shaping how the trait and Tommy's character developed in later drafts.

A central challenge, having built a character capable of carrying such a trajectory, was humanising the archetypes depicted. A character built too closely around a report's categories of vulnerability risked reading as a case study rather than a person. We addressed this by developing Tommy's charm, his animal facts, his social awkwardness and his warmth toward his friends present throughout, even as his views darkened. In post-show focus groups, students repeatedly named Tommy as one of their favourite characters. Humanising the archetype in this way was not a departure from the ethnodramatic method but part of it, a refusal to let research categories flatten into character types. This humanising extended beyond Tommy's own characterisation into how the other characters were written to respond to him. *The Safer Scrolling report* is explicit that punitive responses to boys showing signs of radicalisation risk entrenching the very views they aim to challenge, recommending instead peer-led, relational approaches to bringing young men back from harmful ideology (Regehr, Shaughnessy and

Shaughnessy *et al*, 2024, p.31, p.35). Rather than having Tommy's friends confront or abandon him once his views darken, Lottie, Logan and Summer were written to keep gently returning to him, and it is this patient persistence, rather than any institutional intervention, that eventually brings him back. This was a deliberate dramatisation of the report's own recommendation, translated into the texture of an ongoing friendship rather than announced as a lesson.

If Tommy's origin shows one kind of creative journey, a deliberate, traceable movement from research finding to character choice, the story of Chicken Licken shows quite another.After the first few days of devising, I woke up one morning with the classic children's story of Chicken Licken firmly at the forefront of my mind. The story, which I must have encountered more than once in childhood, tells the story of Chicken Licken who, on seeing that an acorn has fallen from a tree, assumes that the sky is falling in. He decides it is his duty to inform the King and heads off to find him. On his journey, he encounters various other birds and shares his theory that the sky is falling in. All these birds instantly believe Chicken Licken and follow him on his quest to find the king. Having amassed quite the following, Chicken Licken and his friends meet Foxy Loxy and tell him too about the theory that the sky is falling in. Foxy Loxy tells them that he knows where to find the king and leads them into his den where he promptly eats them all. The story serves as a potent allegory for how social media echo chambers prioritise cataclysmic thinking, reinforce misguided ideas, and prevent individuals from being alert to genuine dangers, including exploitation by those who may benefit from such thinking. To break it down more specifically, I knew from the Safer Scrolling report that a 'micro-dosing'

of highly toxic content is leading to the saturation of extremist misogynistic ideas among young people' (Regehr *et al.*, 2024, p.4)

> The proliferation of misogynistic ideas and language has now moved off screens and into school yards, where they are frequently enacted in mainstream youth culture. Young people increasingly exist within digital echo-chambers, which normalize this rhetoric. This is now seeping into everyday interactions between young people, with boys lacking awareness of its impact on their female peers.
>
> (ibid)

I was beginning to realise how a tiny shred of evidence (the acorn falling) could be misinterpreted. I was also astounded by how readily some of the young men in Ben Zand's Channel 4 documentary *The Secret World of Incels: UNTOLD*, accepted outrageous theories about women and their own perceived lack of attractiveness and value without seeming to pause to question the ideas presented. The impact of incel belief systems on young men's mental health, as described in *The Safer Scrolling Report* and shown in the documentary, bore a striking parallel between the unquestioning birds blindly following Chicken Licken into a place of extreme danger, with the widespread proliferation of damaging gender ideas presenting dangers to young people of all genders.

Despite having this realisation very early on, I could not find a way to use the story in the play. The story was revisited and discussed in various ways throughout the devising process, which was quite baffling for those collaborating with me as this transcribed extract from our focus group explains.

Kat: It was early on in the process, and you came in and you were like, I woke up this morning, and my brain was like, it's about Chicken Licken. And we all went, okay, Nina's…..

Nina L: Nina's had an aneurysm?

(Laughter from everyone)

Kat: That's Great, Wonderful. That's what we're working with. And then it just. It was just like Chicken Licken just in everything we did. It was just there, lurking.

Ben: It felt like a joke. And then you explained it, and then it was like, okay, cool. This makes sense. Yeah. And then it became, like a fixation, and it was just like, okay, so this is really integral to the piece. (…) Because after we had sort of explored the Chicken Licken and the echo chambers, I was like, cool, done. And then you just kept bringing it back in, being like, “I keep thinking about Chicken Licken.” (…) Such a hyper fixation on it, that we were like, it just started to stay there in our subconscious in the back of our mind. Like, our group chat was named Chicken Licken.

Nina F: Because you were so excited about it. It really struck something with you. And we did our little scene, and.

Kat: I was like, okay, I hope we fulfilled that.
(*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

This is a very clear example of where something I had assigned as having axiological significance seemed incongruous and bizarre to the team.

I initially tried rewriting the story as a satirical take on modern online experiences.

VOICE: Once upon a time there was a young man called Milo Hilo. Hello Milo Hilo!

MILO: Hello!

VOICE: One day Milo Hilo asked out a popular girl and she laughed and laughed.

PRETTY: Hahahahahaha! As if!

VOICE: Said the popular girl and she stuck up her popular nose.

PRETTY: You're too puny. You're too poor. Look at your weak jaw.
Get out the door.

MILO: Oh no!

VOICE: Thought Milo Hilo

MILO: All women only value men for what they look like and how much money they have. I must go and tell the King!

(Abandoned script fragment from *Man Up* process.)

Although retaining the rhythm of the children's original verse structure, while talking about more grown-up issues, was mildly amusing, this version felt clunky and creatively unsatisfying, so the story remained with me, nagging at me to find a way to include it as it seemed too neat and accessible an allegory to ignore. It was much later in my writing process when I realised that I could use the story in its original form by giving it to the character of Logan's dad John to speak in a monologue about the stories he used to tell Logan before bed that have now been replaced with doomscrolling as Logan has matured into a teenager. I interspersed the story with information about how algorithms function which was spoken by narrators M3 and F2 who held Lottie and Logan's phones.

When I directed the scene, I borrowed the exercise known as Colombian hypnosis, as described here by Augusto Boal, as a starting point.

> The pairs face each other and one puts his hand a few centimetres from the nose of his partner, who must keep this distance: the first one starts to move his hand in all directions, up and down, from left to right, slowly or faster, while the other moves his body in order to maintain the same distance between his nose and his partner's hand. During these movements he is forced to assume bodily positions that he never takes in his daily life, thus reforming permanently his muscular structures.
>
> (Boal, 2019. p. 105)

By adapting the hypnosis game, which Boal originally used to physically explore the nature of political oppression where one person holds power over others, to replace the hand with a phone, I was able to show the physical hold that mobile phones can have on their users.

Like the performances devised by Mirror Theatre Company, in stylistic terms *Man Up* utilises elements of naturalism, realism and impressionism. (Norris, Hobbs and Mirror Theatre Company, p.59). This scene was amongst the most impressionistic with the combination of the Chicken Licken story and the abstract movement giving the audience a sense of the feelings we were depicting. Many audience members chose this scene as their most powerful moment. Feedback from audience surveys included,

- I found the part where they were being "controlled" by their phones. I enjoyed the composition, whilst it presented powerful and significant facts.

- The talk on doomscrolling - explains the algorithms and what they do to us.

(*Man Up* post-show audience questionnaires 2025)

Deviser Kat described her own satisfaction hearing the Chicken Licken scene in the play at the read through of the first draft.

> It was just very satisfying because I feel like the problem areas throughout the piece… we had the characters and we kind of were starting to stitch together a plot and it was all coming together, but then it was like, Chicken Licken needs to be somewhere and how are we gonna show TikTok? And throughout the whole process, it was like, where are they gonna fit? And then they merge together and just fit in perfectly.
>
> (*Man Up* Theatre Makers focus group, 2025).

Kat is speaking to our grappling within the process with the depiction of virtual experiences on stage. The Chicken Licken scene was one of the creative solutions that we adopted.

For many years now, young people with whom I devise theatre, have been telling me that conversations with peers where there is any conflict are almost exclusively carried out via text messages in WhatsApp and Snapchat either in direct messages or group chats rather than face to face. Representing this interaction naturalistically would largely involve actors sitting in silence, staring at screens while typing. Staging this insular and static activity risks producing a scene that is theatrically inert and disengaging for an audience. Some playwrights and devising teams have addressed this challenge by projecting the text of onstage messages for audiences to read, as seen, for example, in Company Three's *Brainstorm (Glasier & Lim, 2016)*. This approach introduces accessibility concerns. In my earlier work on *The Teenage Pregnancy Project*, where placards were used to reveal characters' internal thoughts, I observed that less literate audience members

struggled to follow the action. Given McElwee and Fox's (2020) findings that theatre can be particularly effective relationship education tool for audiences with lower levels of educational attainment, a strategy that relies heavily on written text therefore appeared to be a risky and potentially exclusionary choice.

In contrast, the nature of the data consumed online is extremely abundant, varied and fast-moving and this provides its own challenges for theatrical representation. I had initially thought we might generate filmed content which we could project as part of our live production and several of my other productions for Peer Productions have used this multimedia approach. However, trying to re-create a platform like TikTok, which thrives on an eclectic array of varied content, whether through live performance or recorded media, proved extremely challenging. Our live offers were physically clumsy, the prospect of setting up so many different film sets to in any way accurately represent the diversity of a TikTok feed was overwhelming, and we were struggling to work out what this approach would add to the overall learning experience. Unless we could find a way to use our re-creation to say something new about the medium, the effort that would be needed did not seem to be justified.

We did spend time working on a character called Noah who was an influencer who, after initially seeming harmless, starts to spread misogynistic content and misinformation. We discussed whether Noah might only ever appear on screen in contrast to the real-world relationships portrayed live between other characters in the play. This too proved eventually to be something of a creative dead end. We did

not want to promote Andrew Tate by name and making our own pseudo Tate figure or Tate inspired character meant we would have to depict his rhetoric and we did not want to risk further exposing the young audiences to this type of dangerous ideology especially if expressed by a character who, like Tate, might initially be attractive, charming and engaging, especially for young men. The other problem with including an influencer character of this kind was that it was offering little to support the dissemination of the *Understanding the Cel: Vulnerability, Violence and In(ter)vention* research. Key findings from that research highlighted in *The Safer Scrolling Report* identify a moving beyond specific extreme influencers to an insidious seeping of incel inspired ideas into the mainstream with the algorithm itself rather than specific individuals responsible for grooming and corrupting vulnerable young people.

A further stylistic challenge we encountered was that, if the audience are seeing what the characters are encountering online in one instance, then this premise should be followed throughout the production. This would limit what we could show, and we already knew we wanted to include young men watching pornography on their phones and characters playing computer games together online. If we were to show what the characters were seeing we would need to show, at best, copyright protected and at worst indecent, illegal and harmful material so this made this an unsuitable choice considering the age of the audience and context of the productions. We considered making a live or recorded soundscape so the audience could hear what the characters were seeing, as it were, but this too seemed to add little to the theatrical experience.

The practical and conceptual challenge of how to represent the virtual continued to frustrate me as the process continued. In Chapter 3, I described a moment in which young people who had, only moments before, been uninhibitedly discussing hard-core pornography, then started shrieking, squealing and physically recoiling when two actors in real life leant in to kiss during the research phase for *Losing It.* I posited that a live theatrical performance might act as a counterbalance to a pornified cultural experience. Ten years on, with an overconsumption of digital media and the challenge of navigating copious content and algorithms which prioritise harmful extreme material, I wondered if the same principle might apply. I started to explore what a play might look like that had no projected media, thus shifting the focus away from the specifics of showing what the characters are consuming and more towards the impact on their belief systems and behaviours. A move away from filmed media would embrace the liveness of the theatre experience. This approach would also mean that I could avoid inadvertently exposing the audiences to potentially damaging ideas.

Furthermore, our collective desire as a company was to show nuanced and sophisticated debates, which we felt were so sorely lacking in short form social media discourse. With an emphasis on ideas and theatrical liveness, I wrote several duologue arguments between characters. In what became Scene 15, Lottie and Logan argue about, if alone in a forest, whether they would rather face a bear or a man. This debate became a central pillar around which I was able to build more of the story. My aim was to unravel the debate more forensically for the young audience by providing viewpoints from different perspectives. Lottie agrees with many women online, and says she would rather face

a bear because, ‘she knows what a bear might do’ (p.41). Meanwhile, Logan is outraged that she would consider all men as one entity. He is offended and calls her paranoid, eventually walking away saying, ‘There's no point talking to you. Have a good evening. Careful you don't get raped and murdered!’ (p.42). Although the argument turns sour, it does show young people speaking face to face with their peers which we thought was important both in terms of theatrical interest and social modelling.

We noticed that, when Logan left the scene, audiences often made murmuring or low ‘oooh’ noises indicating perhaps that they were shocked by what he had said. This scene is immediately followed by the following dialogue –

F2: Logan shouldn't have said that.
M2: And Lottie shouldn't have dismissed his feelings.
M3: He didn't say it.
F2: What?
M3: That conversation never happened in real life.
F2: Well what the hell was that then?
M3: It's what they typed on their phones. Snapchat or WhatsApp.
F2: So maybe he wouldn't have if he'd seen her face, looked into her eyes.
M1: He was angry and he's right. He's not a predator.
M1: He shouldn't be treated like one.
F2: But she's right too. Everything she said was true. Women are more vulnerable to abuse from men than the other way around.

M2: But men can be abused in relationships.

F2: Yes, but not as often.

M2: And not all men are a danger to women.

F2: But some of them are.

M3: Now I don't know whose side to be on.

F2: Maybe it's not about sides.

(Lemon, 2025, p.42)

Together, these choices demonstrated that a live theatrical encounter could hold the complexity, contradiction and emotional charge of online communication without reproducing its harms, allowing us to share ideas with far greater nuance than the digital forms we were critiquing.

This sequence formed part of a meta-narrative which ran through the play where the actors, in addition to playing their characters, also played roles of performers discussing the play modelling the type of critical thinking which is identified by the *Understanding the Cel: Vulnerability, Violence and In(ter)vention* as being important to combat radicalisation. There are, of course, obvious theatrical challenges with depicting scenes in which a conversation is typed by static performers staring at phone screens but, beyond this, staging the conversation as though in real life instead of online also enabled the scene to do more. What I mean by this is that, whilst remaining emotionally truthful, the scene moved beyond a realistic mirror reflecting how things are and instead offered an alternative for how they could be. We translated an exchange that would usually be private and contained in a messaging app as a public, live and embodied encounter, drawing to the surface suppressed or clandestine ideas which are often not spoken about

publicly. In a similar way to how I showed the *Losing It* audience the alternative narratives of how Tim's rape of Seren could have been prevented, this scene showed the audience an alternate reality in which online conversation was face to face. In both examples, by offering Brechtian 'Not that, but this', and by asking the question whether the conversation would have happened if the characters had been face to face, we invite the audience to critically consider how their own values, boundaries and judgements might be different online to those in person. Ultimately, by presenting the scene and then using a tactic of dramaturgical 'bait and switch' – ('That conversation never happened in real life') we encourage the audience to continually question what they are being shown reinforcing the overall message to thinking critically about ideas and narratives presented especially in social media.

To summarise, a major challenge in the project was finding ways to depict virtual experiences through live theatre. We tackled this challenge by using Chicken Licken as a metaphorical device combining it with expressive movement to show the impact of social media. We decisively avoided using projected filmed media and instead shifted the focus to live discursive debates on stage showing conversations which would often only happen in a virtual space live. We thus circumvented showing the audience offensive content and instead brought the audience's attention to the effect the media was having on the different characters. By using a meta-narrative device, wherein the actors critiqued their characters' behaviours throughout, we were able to show and challenge damaging behaviours and ideas, thereby modelling the critical thinking skills we hoped to develop in our young audiences. Alongside the need to challenge misogyny, radicalisation, and online

harm, the process raised an equally pressing question: how could the work avoid reproducing despair, and instead gesture towards change, compassion, and responsibility?

Finding the light



Figure 14 - Man Up 2025 - Rehearsal photo experimenting with red handheld light.

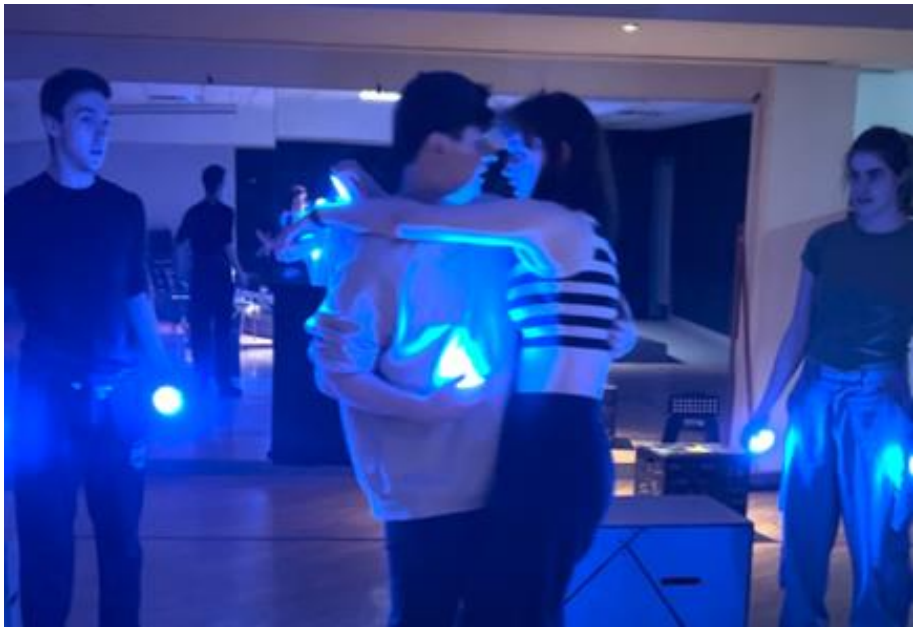


Figure 15 - Man Up 2025 - Rehearsal photo experimenting with blue handheld light.



Figure 16 - Man Up 2025 - Tommy's final speech.



Figure 17 - Man Up 2025 - Lottie, Logan & Summer with rainbow umbrella

Another significant challenge, closely connected to these dramaturgical decisions, was finding ways to avoid the theatrical presentation of the research becoming too bleak. The research we encountered as a team

was darkly challenging and creating a piece of theatre which only reflected the research's findings without offering any opportunity for things to change risked reinforcing the status quo. Like other applied theatre scholars including Nicola Abraham (2020), Rachel Rhoades (2021) and Kathleen Gallagher (2022), my aim is to build on Paulo Freire's (2021) pedagogical ideas in which he centralises hope as an active and critical force through which transformation can occur and this theme of finding hopeful light in the darkness permeated the project. As I have already described, during the devising process we constantly sought out approaches which would allow us to be free to play using a wide range of theatrical techniques to approach the subject matter. This quest continued in the narrative and aesthetic choices I made as a playwright. In the play, Tommy, who is Autistic, starts to become embroiled in incel ideas online and this results in him making a deep fake porn video of his teacher Miss Windell. This moment draws directly on the concerns outlined earlier in this thesis regarding hyperreality, where digitally mediated representations become detached from, and yet exert real consequences upon, lived experience. Following this incident, Tommy is excluded and, isolated at home, becomes even more entrenched in his misogynistic views. If I wanted to offer the audience hope then I needed to ensure that this was not the end of the story, so Logan finds compassion for his friend Tommy and convinces his classmates Lottie and Summer to join him in reaching out to Tommy to try and help him to see alternative viewpoints. The redemption of Tommy leads to his final speech in which he shares is new ideas about what being a man really means.

Tommy: Every group has their fair share of people who make bad choices and the rules of this world we live in, the

> patriarchy - our captivity, make it really hard to make good choices. But there is no secret standard for what makes a good man just like there is no such thing as the alpha wolf. Man up and be whatever you want to be. It's your choice.
>
> (Lemon, 2025, p.59)

As I argued in Chapter 3, young people are increasingly navigating a digital environment in which hyper-real simulations blur the boundaries between truth and fabrication. Tommy's creation of the deep-fake of Miss Windell is itself an example of this hyper-real logic: a fabricated image that appears more "real" than reality and yet produces real emotional and social consequences. Set against this backdrop, Tommy's final transformation offers a deliberate counter-simulation. The speech models an alternative, hopeful masculinity that stands in direct opposition to the reductive and often misogynistic narratives circulating in hyper-real online spaces. In this sense, the moment becomes real enough to matter, providing audiences with a believable and ethically grounded script at precisely the point where many of their existing scripts have been shaped by digital distortions. This scene proved to be particularly impactful with young audiences, many of the young people surveyed describing this final moment as the most powerful in the play. Several audience members elaborated on why this element of the plot resonated so deeply with them:

- When Tommy changes to become a better person.
- The most powerful part was when they gave Tommy a second chance.
- When Tommy was going through a bad time because his friends had to help him get better.

- The most powerful part was at the end when Tommy apologised for what he had done. This shows how he had realised his mistake and decided to change for the better.

- When, despite what Tommy had done in the past, the group tried to re-befriend him and steer him in the right direction even when he was going down a bad path.

- When they all went to comfort Tommy because it was a nice thing to do considering his state of mind at the time.

- The redemption of Tommy, as I feel today people aren't understanding or wanting to help others and see you as either a friend or enemy and can't see a world where instead they could help you or try to at least.

(*Man Up* post-show audience questionnaires 2025)

These reflections underscore the emotional and moral weight of the scene, highlighting the themes of redemption, empathy, and second chances that were especially meaningful to the young audiences. Importantly this element of the story demonstrates the possibility that things and people can change and showing the audience this potentiality was a crucial element of our pedagogical approach.

In the opening words of *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2021) Freire explains,

> Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope.
>
> (p.1)

Although these themes have arisen in many of my previous plays, perhaps because of the bleak knowledge from which the work was developed, with its attention to Tommy's redemption, *Man Up* may be my most hopeful yet. If, as Freire describes, we did not start from a position where we ourselves espoused hope and communicated it through the narrative, then we could risk the young audience falling into a hopelessness where they would lack the motivation to attempt to change their worlds. *Man Up*'s hopeful ending, together with its metanarrative which encourages the audience to stand back and critically consider the people and events in the play, provides the conditions for the audience to adopt a position of 'critical hope' (Freire, 2021, p.1) from which they can engage with the play and can then take this attitude into their everyday lives.

This desire to 'find the light' also impacted some of the aesthetic choices in the play. Staging plays in non-conventional theatre spaces poses certain aesthetic challenges. School halls, and sometimes even school gyms, can be challenging venues acoustically and visually; there can often be extraneous material in the background and sometimes even achieving a blackout is more or less impossible especially considering the necessary time constraints of a short get in and get out and the reality of only having a small tour van. Although our basic tour set up includes a PA, basic lighting rig and, where needed, a projector, we need to limit additional materials we bring in to each school. However, for this production, I wanted to find a way to bring some striking visual choices to the stage that would be in keeping with this theme of finding the light. Our producer Alice Underwood suggested we tried using battery operated colour-changing domestic lights designed to

go underneath kitchen cupboards as they would be safe, cheap, lightweight enough to be handheld and could be operated by the cast on stage as well as by remote control. Surprisingly, these lights proved to be very effective. As director, I used the lights first in the party scene, in part because it was challenging to create a plausible house party with only five actors on stage. By combining using the lights with stylised movement, I was able to create the impressionistic feel of a vibrant house party. The lights then returned for the final scene in which Tommy shares his newfound knowledge about the nature and status of 'being a man'. The cast held the lights, which were at this point slowly changing between colours, manipulating them so that they appeared almost alive, before proffering the lights out to the audience. This moment, which also included uplifting optimistic music from our sound designer Nick Bankiyan-Monfard all combined to create this optimistic and hopeful attitude. I continued this theme of adding vibrant colour to a fairly neutral monochrome set and costume palette by splattering the black scenic boxes with colourful paint and including a vibrantly coloured umbrella in the scene where, in the rain, Logan, Lottie and Summer go to find Tommy to try to convince him to see the world through a more nuanced and vibrant lens because, as is explained in the closing passage of the play, 'The world is not just black and white, it's every shade of technicolour' (Lemon, 2025, p.59).

These aesthetic choices serve to support the underlying messaging of the play but also, I would argue, are part of what is triggering an affective empathetic response in the audience. I was surprised by the relative lack of attention paid to such design elements in both Saldaña's *Ethnotheatre Research from Page to Stage* (2016) and

Norris, Hobbs and Mirror Theatre's *Playbuilding as Arts-Based Research* (2024). Neither text offers particular insights in this area with design choices appearing often utilitarian and minimalist - perhaps owing to the lack of available resources, or indicative that the ethnodramatic and arts-based research processes described are neither reliant nor focussed on using design as part of the aesthetic experience. Even within the broader realm of theatre and performance studies discourse, as Graham argues, 'light's atmospheric potential has rarely been considered in depth, and colloquially light is often described as 'atmospheric' as a catch-all term that precludes the complexity at stake in its generation of atmosphere, or its provocation of mood' (Graham, 2022. p.139). The innovative DIY use of handheld light contributed significantly to the overall aesthetic and affective experience as a key part of the argument of the play, which together move beyond to the mere creation of theatrical 'atmosphere'. On an ideological level the handheld and operated lighting suggests that the light comes from the performers in the play. They are in control, and they can bring the light. When they offer the light out to the audience in the last beats of the play, they are reinforcing the idea that the light also lies in the audience's hands.

On a phenomenological level, these lights and the effect they created, in conjunction with the movement and music, created a new positive dynamic of potentiality with which we left the audience. The use of light, sound and movement in these final moments of the play created a compelling and engaging sensory experience which was both impactful in the moment and memorable for the audience. By associating the resolution of Tommy's story with this final moment of light and beauty, we shared with our audiences the possibility of

transformation. Thus, the interventionist and aesthetic elements of the production worked together to startling effect. As Matthew Reason describes, ‘‘If art is a doing, then the artness of art cannot be considered as necessarily separable from its doing-ness.’ (2017, p. 46). The aesthetic choices in the work cannot be separated from its social impact because these choices contribute to the effect on the audience and it is through being affected that the audience is impacted – the argument I have sustained throughout this project, and a key insight regarding aesthetics and applied theatre that I contribute here.

This chapter demonstrates how ethnodramatic playmaking with young people can meaningfully contribute to Theatre in Education by attending to the interplay of aesthetics, affect, and social responsibility. Building on the work of Norris, Hobbs and Mirror Theatre, (2024) in particular, I have offered practical insights into how a community built on a foundation of care and compassion can be maintained and the extraordinary potential of using playbuilding as a tool to disseminate research to a wider audience. I have brought scholarship on empathy, affective solidarity and peer education into dialogue with findings from the young people engaged in the practice, as either devisers, performers of audience members, arguing that what I have described as a golden thread of empathy affects young people at every stage of the process. I have also demonstrated the ways in which my practice diverges from others in the field with an ethnodramatic playbuilding approach serving more as a foundation upon which the play is crafted rather than a complete process in its own right. I have highlighted the importance of play, following creative hunches and of trying (and potentially discarding) a range of different theatrical approaches and styles noting the ways in

which this can be challenging for an often-anxious generation whose formative theatrical education pressurises them to ‘end-game’ – that is, to focus on the result rather than embracing the uncertainty of the process. I offer an insight into the difficult balance between polyphony and authorial voice throughout the process and suggest that, with expectations carefully managed, having a strong creative leader at the helm marshalling the material can free young artists from the at times overwhelming pressures of socially conscious theatre-making responsibilities. By highlighting the ways in which some of the writing, dramaturgical and design choices affected the overall reception of the production, I make a case for theatre in education plays that are informed by academic research, co-created with young people, aesthetically driven and expertly written as powerful tools for social change.

Chapter 5 – Making Change: Towards a Socially Engaged Playwriting Practice

This thesis argues for the radical potential to use plays and playbuilding as a tool for RSE and the potential power of watching plays as a pedagogic approach to developing empathetic engagement in young people. The research advances theoretical understanding about the role of affect and empathy in youth audiences' reception of plays and offers practical insights into the process of collaborative playbuilding with young people. This practice-based project's originality lies in the application of playbuilding techniques to the process of making didactic plays for young people which explore relationships and sex as part of a school-based RSE curriculum and thus offers insights for both theatre practitioners and sex educators. Furthermore, as the project offers a wealth of material related to two plays written seven years apart, and draws on experiences of almost twenty years of making plays for young people about sex, it provides significant insight into how the macroenvironment – the socio-political, procedural, policy, legislative and cultural landscape – responds to, informs and shapes how the plays for young people are both produced and received. By focussing in detail on how specific dramaturgical and writerly tactics can be employed in the service of education, tackling sensitive socio-emotional and sexual content, the work offers insights too into the radical potential of playbuilding, playwriting and play-watching as tools for broader social education.

As I conclude this project, in the late Summer of 2025, very recent changes in UK legislation, statutory guidance and education policy, together with a continued worsening climate for the arts in schools, signal further substantial shifts in the political and cultural realities facing young people and those working with them. On a governmental level, following years of campaigning by leading children's charities, age-verification duties under the Online Safety Act 2023 came into force in July 2025, requiring those accessing pornography online to verify that they are an adult (*Online Safety Act: explainer*, 2025). Prior to this, viewers only had to click a tick box to confirm their age which meant children and young people could access such sites with ease, with the responsibility firmly on parents to implement control measures on devices and WIFI. Initial indications are that porn site traffic is significantly reduced (Edwards, 2025). A system which requires users to share a photo of their ID with a porn site provider raises concerns about data protection from many and this prompts a huge rise in VPN downloads which allow users to bypass the age verification system (McMahon, 2025). Concurrently, the UK Ministry of Justice has announced that it will take steps to criminalise the depiction of strangulation in pornography, via an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill (Ministry of Justice and Alex Davies-Jones, 2025). This action has been taken in part in response to a report by the Institute for Addressing Strangulation, which found that over half (54%) of the 18–24-year-olds in their sample had been "choked" during consensual sex (Smails & McGowan, 2024, p. 1), and a 2022 systematic review by Helen Bichard et al., which found that strangulation is an overwhelmingly gendered crime. Their review reported that strangulation can lead to

dissection of the main neck arteries, blockage of blood flow to and from the brain, brain swelling, cardiac arrest, miscarriage, and stroke. It can also cause paralysis, movement disorders, speech disorders, incontinence, and seizures, and it is thought to be the second most common cause of stroke in women under 40. Women's rights campaigners, including *We Can't Consent To This* (2025) have drawn attention to the causal link between a rise in access to hardcore violent pornography and an increase in prevalence of asphyxiation sexual practices. These two legislative changes speak to a societal concern about the impact of consuming porn on young people and especially young women's sexual experiences. Although changes to porn site access may be easy to circumvent, their introduction does acknowledge the problems of children accessing hardcore pornography and will, most likely, deter at least some young people while potentially driving others to more illicit online behaviours. We are yet to see the impacts (both positive and negative) which these legal changes might bring for young people and the wider societal implications of policing and effectively censoring the internet, and all educators in the field need to be alert to subtle shifts in the culture and be ready to respond to them.

At the same time, the secretary of state for education Bridget Phillipson has announced the government's first major revision of statutory RSE guidance since 2019 (Phillipson, 2025). This guidance adds additional content to the secondary curriculum including several of the topics addressed in my play *Man Up* such as incel ideology, misogyny and deepfakes together with content related to strangulation. Surprisingly, the inclusion of content related to incel culture in the new

statutory RSE guidance might weaken, rather than strengthen, access to funding for arts-based projects tackling the issue with some social funders avoiding funding education which is perceived as statutory and therefore presumed to be funded by the state. For example, Children in Need state,

> We don't fund work that statutory bodies (such as schools or local authorities) have a duty to provide. We do not fund work that duplicates or substitutes these activities.
> (Children in Need *A - Z Eligibility Guidance*, 2025)

The RSE guidance also makes attempts to advise teachers on how to teach about being transgender. While overall the guidance highlights kindness and respect and recognises transgendered people's legal protection against discrimination, presumably in response to the April 2025 UK Supreme Court ruling that sex in the Equality Act 2010 refers to biological sex (Steven Brocklehurst, 2025), it also includes this instruction -

> Schools should be mindful that beyond the facts and the law about biological sex and gender reassignment there is significant debate, and they should be careful not to endorse any particular view or teach it as fact. For example, they should not teach as fact that all people have a gender identity.
> (Department for Education, 2025, p.36)

The erasure of gender identity as distinct from biological sex, along with the linguistic restrictions in this guidance that specify only what must not be taught while offering little clarity on what should be included, risks silencing discussions with potentially vulnerable transgender and gender

non-conforming young people. This approach is reminiscent of the effects of Section 28, which prohibited the "promotion of homosexuality" in schools and led to widespread censorship and fear around discussing LGBTQ+ issues (*Local Government Act, 1988*). Although it is generally positive that the new RSE guidance continues to acknowledge the importance of teaching young people about gender stereotyping and explicitly acknowledges the threats of online misogynistic radicalisation and incel culture, my enthusiasm for these changes is tempered by guidance which bans acknowledging gender identity on a conceptual level. I argue that topics like the ‘manosphere’ and negative associations linked to masculinity cannot be effectively challenged without recognising that ‘everyone has a gender identity,’ and this policing of language in schools could have a detrimental impact on any artists wanting to make inclusive work in schools which acknowledges and celebrates the diversity of young people’s experiences and expressions of gender and sexuality.

While this is happening, young people’s mental health continues to decline with many lacking communication and social skills, with evidence that English teenagers are particularly struggling with socio-emotional skills, compared to their peers in similar countries with a National Foundation for Educational Research report published in 2025 identifying that,

> England has low average levels of socio-emotional skills (curiosity, persistence, emotional control, stress resistance, assertiveness, empathy and co-operation) and high inequalities in these domains relative to other OECD countries.
>
> (Lucas, Bocock and Manuel, 2025)

In terms of the role of the arts in schools and more broadly in young people's lives, evidence suggests a continuing decline with those on lower incomes most significantly impacted. One year on from its State of the Arts report, Campaign for the Arts director Jack Gamble states,

> The state of the arts in the UK remains a profound concern. Tens of millions of us engage with the arts – but threats to arts provision and funding continue to mount, arts teaching hours in English state secondary schools continue to fall, and access barriers and inequalities continue to blight our cultural landscape.
> ('The State of the Arts: one year on | Campaign for the Arts', 2025)

Although these findings paint a bleak picture, Prime Minister Keir Starmer has just announced an £88 million investment in youth clubs and schools to give pupils more access to extra-curricular activities (*Prime Minister unveils new opportunities for young people to re-connect with their communities*, 2025) including arts and more opportunities to socialise with their peers in face-to-face activities. Although I would welcome this funding, it is too early to predict how this investment might be implemented and its broader effect on young people's cultural engagement and emotional wellbeing.

I have included here, in some detail, the prevailing socio-cultural shifts which are currently impacting young people, schools and the arts because it seems as though, on multiple levels, we are standing at the edge of potential change. What is abundantly clear is that some young people in the UK are struggling; many are being harmed by pornography, others are experiencing peer-on-peer sexual harassment

or violence, more are experiencing mental health challenges and/or lack the critical socio-emotional skills to thrive as they transition into adulthood. The arts, and specifically theatre with its perspective-taking quality, offers a potentially powerful tool to enable young people to develop transferrable empathy skills but the current precarious funding situation makes delivering this work in schools extremely challenging. This project argues for a radical rethinking of approaches to reckoning with the impact of art on young people, where the affective aesthetic encounter is recognised as a crucial component of educational intervention. Plays have the potential to engage and enlighten young people on a range of different topics, and stories about gender, sex and relationships are particularly important especially against a backdrop of extremist and polarising views.

Key findings

The key findings of this research can be summarised as follows:

The method is messy - Making socially engaged plays with and for young people is and should be a messy process. Although the practice-researcher should begin with a carefully and expertly crafted approach, they must also embrace the importance of improvising in response to changing circumstances and the young people's needs and should remain alert to moments when the practice decomposes and the work needs to pivot, change course or be abandoned all together.

Playbuilding can be effectively used as a meaningful method of research - Adopting a playbuilding approach, where a polyphony of different voices are amplified and young people are actively and critically engaged in the co-production of plays, can provide a creatively rich and meaningful experience for both the playbuilders and their audiences. By using playbuilding as a process to inspire the final play, rather than as a complete approach, young people in the creative team can feel emboldened and creatively free and the playwright can expertly craft the material into a shape which is both aesthetically and educationally effective. By using playbuilding as an ethnodramatic process where the creative team engage with pre-existing academic research, the findings of complex studies can be made accessible and relatable to a younger audience.

Writerly tactics can be deployed to promote critical engagement - Playwriting approaches, initially advocated for by Brecht and later expanded upon by Bond, which promote critical engagement, can be effectively reimagined and deployed for a feminist agenda to encourage audiences to take a more analytical stance and to question accepted gender roles and narratives. These approaches, when used to offer the audience insights into different characters' internal/cerebral as well as external/physical worlds, offer a particularly powerful way to unsettle and disrupt representations in digital pornography in which the (usually) female body is often objectified and dehumanised. By deploying such tactics, writers and theatre-makers can awaken empathetic responses in their audiences. This empathetic engagement, especially when connected to multiple and conflicting viewpoints (for example in *Losing it*

when Tim rapes Seren and in *Man Up* when Lottie and Logan argue about the man and the bear) offers the audience a more nuanced and compassionate understanding, encouraging them to reject the one-sided, polarised positioning so prevalent in both social media and the wider political environment. With careful crafting, these tactics can also be mobilised to offer young people hopeful insights into how the world could be different thus counteracting the defeatist and nihilistic attitudes which digital culture can exacerbate. With careful attention paid to the design elements of the piece, the aesthetic qualities of the production can amplify its e/affect, creating an experience which moves its audience to action.

Engaging young people as co-creators within polyphonic dramaturgies supports critical thinking and empathetic development - By actively engaging with young people at every stage of the theatre-making process and by intentionally including and raising a polyphony of different voices, playwrights can resist making work which preaches to young people and only superficially tackles the issues at hand. Rather than dictating to young people how they should behave, this approach helps young people to develop their own critical faculties, supporting them to think for themselves and make their own decisions. Young artists can make a significant contribution to the crafting of plays for their peers. When supported in a safe and caring environment with careful oversight from a lead practitioner, including setting clear rules and expectations, they too can develop a deeper empathetic engagement with those affected by the issues explored, supporting the

young practitioners' development not only as artists but as people more holistically.

Aesthetic choices can significantly shape young audiences' engagement and meaning-making - Even very simple choices regarding the aesthetic presentation of TIE plays can have profound impact on how they are received by the audience and practitioners should consider design choices about lighting, music, props, costume and set with great care to utilise all the possible theatrical elements at their disposal to create an aesthetic rich and meaningful theatrical experience for their young audiences.

Applied theatre practices must remain responsive to shifting socio-political contexts in order to retain relevance - Plays written with and for young people, especially but not exclusively exploring the thorny issue of sex and relationships, must always be in dialogue with the broader socio-political climate. If made through a process of active listening with young people, then they have the potential to feel extremely relevant and alive but with this life comes a shelf life. As the macro-environment inevitably shifts, plays which seek to make social change must remain in conversation, shifting their form in response. This might mean rewriting, restaging or, as I have documented in this thesis, even choosing to retire one play in favour of building a new one.

Empathy can operate as a unifying dramaturgical and ethical principle - In a world where many young people's emotional and social lives are shaped by virtual encounters, theatre-making that foregrounds

empathy offers a vital space for authentic connection, mutual understanding and the hopeful imagining of more compassionate futures. The golden thread of empathy connecting every stage of the creative research process. By engaging with a polyphony of different voices, I have shown how empathetic exchange can underpin both collaboration and audience reception. For the young people involved, empathy became a bridge between self and other, enabling them to see the humanity in perspectives previously dismissed or misunderstood. For audiences, empathy offered an entry point into complex and emotionally charged material, creating moments of catharsis and recognition. This empathetic process extends beyond individual feeling to form what Thompson describes as an 'aesthetics of care', generating affective solidarity between artists, participants and spectators.

Areas for further research

Faced with a precarious and shifting environment, practitioners wanting to make plays for young audiences are required to adopt a multifaceted and entrepreneurial approach. The findings of this study open numerous potential avenues for further research, which unfortunately are likely to struggle to secure funding in the current academic and arts environment. Nonetheless, I identify the following key areas:

Applying the playbuilding model to new audiences – In my own practice I have worked with a range of different groups and audiences applying a similar but adapted playbuilding approach. In 2023, I developed *The Forest in Between*, a new play exploring transition to

secondary school for year 6 pupils which Peer actors and I co-created with 300 year 6 pupils. I have since developed the live version into a digital interactive product and plan to disseminate it more widely following a successful application to the Surrey Community Foundation Mental Health Scale Up Fund. Also in 2023, I developed *The Story of Us*, an Arts Council England funded project which I wrote collaboratively with young adults with learning disabilities as a piece of theatre and activism which they shared in SEND schools and in the broader community. Back in 2018, with support from a private philanthropist, I travelled to Mumbai and worked with young people there to draft a new play exploring sex, gender and relationships for urban Indian young audiences, although the play is yet to reach its intended recipients owing to COVID interruptions. Like the projects investigated in this thesis, all utilised playbuilding co-creation techniques designed to champion a polyphony of voices, but the nature of each of the different groups – younger children, learning disabled adults, teenagers in a different cultural setting to my own – meant that the approaches needed to be curated and adapted significantly. There is clearly scope for significant research which tests the viability of the approach with various groups to see if any universal discoveries can be identified.

Digital vs Live Theatre – With limited resources available to touring theatre companies, organisations, including Peer Productions, are increasingly seeking to make digital version of their live theatre offerings. The potential for increased dissemination of the core messaging is enticing, but more research is needed to understand the different ways in which young people engage with a digital versus live theatrical

experience including the impacts of potentially encountering the material alone rather than as part of a collective audience.

Longitudinal studies – Affect by its nature is not linear. How a person might be impacted by seeing a play cannot be fully understood by attending only to their initial immediate response. Furthermore, if my plays are working as they are designed to, then key messages may reach young people before they have encountered a particular issue in their lives. They may, for example, think that what they have watched is irrelevant to them, until months, years or even decades later when something happens in their life which bears a connection with the play they saw. With everyone experiencing a wide range of different inputs, it is almost impossible to correlate whether watching a specific play has had any longer-term impact and even more difficult to collate preventative effect – how could you prove that a teenager didn't get pregnant because they watched a play? This is, in part, why theatre thinkers like Balfour (2009) and Snyder-Young (2014) advise against grand claims of effect. If the resources were available, a longitudinal study comparing different modes of PSHE and the integration of drama, theatre and performance within them could be a very fruitful area for future research.

Ethnodrama as a tool to disseminate research and increase impact – As I demonstrated in chapter 4, playbuilding can be used as an ethnodramatic approach to disseminate research and bring its findings to an audience who would not otherwise easily access it. The potential for using these approaches to democratise academic research for

children and young people or any groups who would not easily be reached through other methods, offers a potent opportunity for future research.

A socially engaged playwright's manifesto

Finally, informed by my research, I would like to offer the following manifesto to playwrights wanting to build plays collaboratively, especially those who want to do so with young people.

1. **Care and practice carefully** – Care deeply about what you are going to say, how you are going to say it and, most importantly, care about the people - those whose stories you tell, with whom you collaborate and your audiences. This does not mean to mollycoddle people by avoiding that which is difficult or painful, but to take the responsibility of exploring those themes seriously and to approach them with compassion.

2. **Listen and read the room** – Listen to what your collaborators are telling you and notice what they are choosing not to share. Pay attention and read the room. Try to prioritise the voices of those affected by the issues you are exploring above those of policy makers and gatekeepers. Research ferociously and broadly, acclimatising your ear to the nuanced and broad sociopolitical and cultural environment. Keep listening, even when you think your work is complete, listen to how it is being received and, even if it is painful, be ready to change tack.

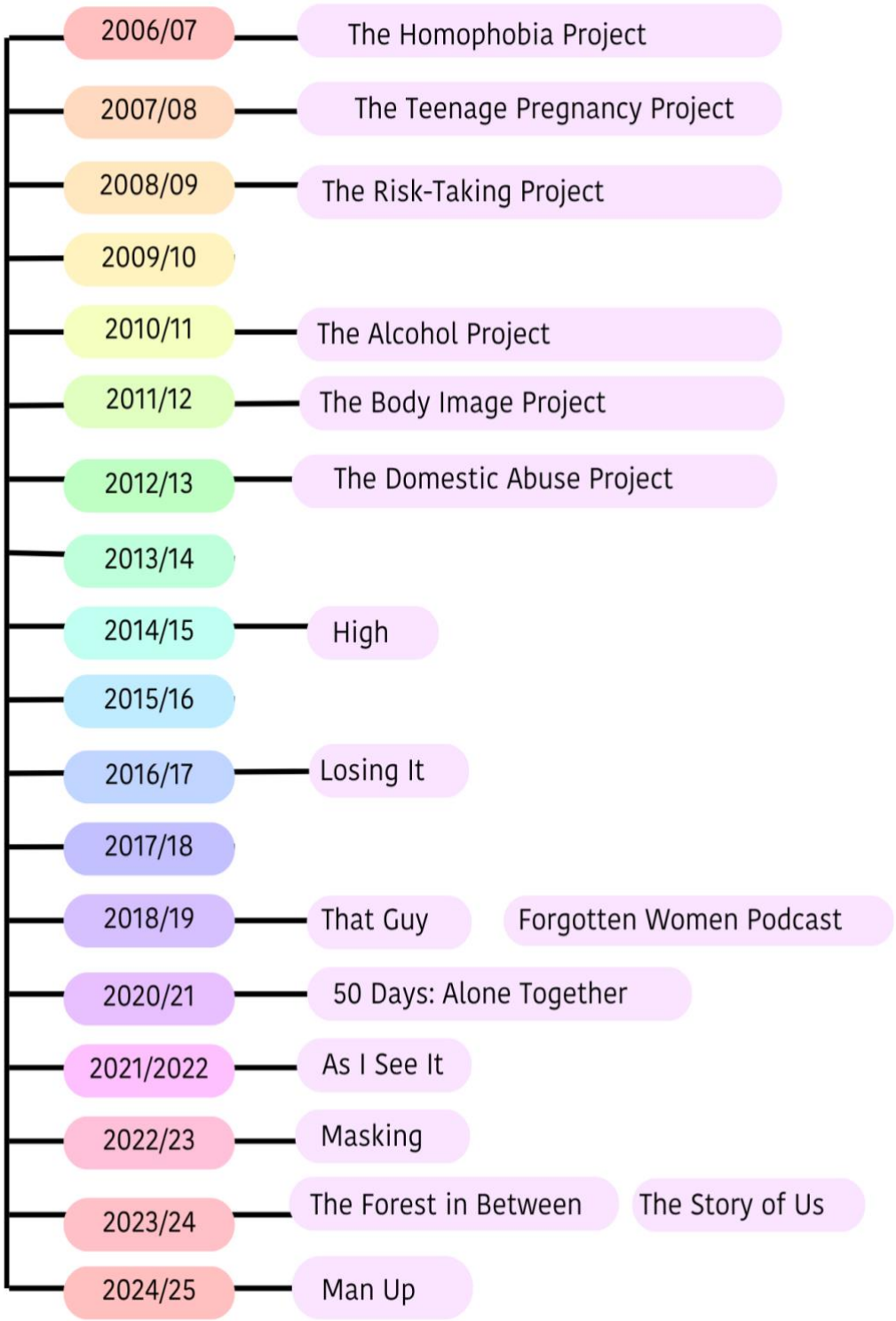
3. **Say it, don't censor** – Don't assume that young people cannot cope with emotionally challenging or intellectually rigorous concepts.

Assuming that content is too frank, too bold or too intellectual does young people a disservice. This doesn't mean that you can stage anything in a school or explore any topic with young people without due diligence; practice carefully and listen to what the young people are telling you, and don't censor or restrict the work based on what you think you know. Care, listen and make the boldest and bravest work you can because that is where the work will be at its most impactful.

4. **Embrace the mess but throw away your crap** – Accept that any process which prioritises creativity and polyphony will be messy. Try to prepare your collaborators, especially if they have been schooled in the British school system and have not been encouraged to accept failure, and explain to them that mess is necessary, desirable and maybe even beautiful. Don't be precious. Kill your darlings. Discard the slumped clay which doesn't belong in your sculpture.

5. **Do it anyway** – For most people committing to playwriting is not an easy path with few and limited opportunities to fund and produce your work. There are even more barriers potentially if you want to work with young people and especially those from vulnerable groups. It is virtually impossible to design a perfect research and development process and the more partners you bring into the collaboration (participants, schools, funders) the more challenging it can become. Do it anyway. What started for me as an experiment has turned into a sustained creative practice, and my writing and theatre-making craft has been immeasurably dramatically enriched by bringing young people into the process.

Appendix – Chronology Nina Lemon's plays for Peer Productions



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