Not a Pivot, But a Pirouette: A Panel Presentation about the Arts Academy Online in a Time of Pandemic

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This paper is an extract from a presentation given by a group of academic staff from the Arts Academy in Ballarat at *AusAct: The Australian Actor Training Conference*, which was held online in December 2020. The title alludes to the ways that the Performing Arts teaching team adapted to the restrictions placed on three-dimensional training by the global pandemic. It focuses on the impact of COVID 19's second wave of lockdown on performance training at Federation University's Arts Academy in Victoria. It plots the experiences of transitioning from live face-to-face studio classes to working online with students, culminating in a series of Zoom productions, including Second Year actors rehearsing and performing Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Third Year actors and music theatre students rehearsing and performing *A Chorus Line*, an adaptation of *Hamlet* entitled *Out of Joint*, and an Australian play, *Embers* by Campion Decent. It describes various dimensions of adapting dramatic and musical works to a new online format; the way many of the rehearsal processes simulated their theatrical counterparts; the adjusted online rehearsal cycle; the way students grew into learning online; and the unexpected discoveries of working in a new and nascent medium of performance.

Keywords: COVID-19, acting, online rehearsals, adaptation

MELANIE BEDDIE: WORKING OUT OF JOINT

I will examine here some of the steps I took to create the graduation project *Out of Joint* with Third Year Acting students at Federation University in 2020.[1] *Out of Joint* is a response to

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[1] That presentation I gave at AusAct 2020 relied heavily on visual content as seemed appropriate for a conference convened online. Only a few images are included with this paper.

Hamlet by William Shakespeare. The original play is set at a time when Prince Hamlet's world is 'out of joint'. Unsurprisingly this setting resonated with me when selecting a play to direct in a year of the COVID 19 pandemic.

I originally chose the play with the expectation of staging it in full in one of the theatres on campus at Federation University. Once it became clear that the project would need to transition to being rehearsed and performed over *Zoom* with a cast and crew scattered across the country, I began some rapid research about making theatre over *Zoom*. Earlier in the year I had been teaching acting over *Zoom* so I understood how it would be possible to direct performances and especially that part that engages with the text. As I searched the internet and conferred with colleagues, I noticed two things about '*Zoom* theatre' – it works better with less characters in each scene and that shifts in the framing create a more dynamic experience for the viewer. At this point I performed my first pirouette and decided to radically edit the play and rework the material into three discrete sections. This dramaturgical work allowed me to grasp what the scope of the project might be. I created a text that focused on the key characters and included only about a half of the original play. I saw this work of reimagining the original play as an opportunity to explore the complex and multi-faceted nature of Hamlet's character by creating roles for three Hamlets, families and friends who could bring a variety of qualities. The three-part structure of the project also allowed smaller groups of students to work on a more focused part of the play and to interpret the key roles through their own responses to the text. I began to envision a space for additional material generated by the students. This process made me aware I needed to rename the project so that it would be understood to be a response to Shakespeare's text and not a complete rendering of Shakespeare's *Hamlet.*

To open the production, I created a prologue using the text of the soliloquy 'To Be or Not to Be' spoken by the acting ensemble. This allowed each actor to engage with this iconic speech in order to refract the questions that are raised in the speech through the lens of their own character. Indeed, this became their first character building task. For the body of the piece, I reordered some of the events in Shakespeare's text to fashion three distinct worlds in which the story takes place. The textual dramaturgy and visual design of these three parts respond to key themes in the play and features separate casts, thus dividing 18 students into 3 smaller

groups. The editing process was also informed by the desire to create equality of opportunity for each of the 18 students.

Figure 1. Melanie Beddie, *Hamlet #1 and the Ghost,* video still, 2020

The narrative of each of the three sections is intended to stand alone yet they are also sequential and progress the story of the key characters. Each of the three parts is introduced by Horatio who is a witness (reliable or otherwise) to Hamlet's tragic journey. In this way Horatio fulfills the brief given to the character by Hamlet to 'tell my story' (Act 5, Sc 2, lines 310-314). *Part One: Sea of Troubles* is set in a rigid, sterile and disciplinarian world in which Hamlet is limited and confined. Yet it is also a place where spirits and ghosts can slip in through unpatrolled crevices.

Figure 2. Part 2 Melanie Beddie, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, video still, 2020

Part Two: The Play's the Thing occurs in an environment that has become decadent, indulged and off centre where Hamlet finds madness, feigned or otherwise, can be used to disrupt the status quo.

Figure 3. Melanie Beddie, Part 3 Hamlet #3, 2020.

Part Three: Shapes of Grief reveals to us a society that is wilder, rougher than before and one where the veneer of civilisation is cracking. Once again Hamlet returns to Denmark much changed.

Figure 4. Melanie Beddie, Part 3 The Grave Scene, 2020.

Further dramaturgy occurred in order to take into account unexpected challenges such as the regional remoteness of certain students, their access to stable WIFI and the limitations on the size of the room they could work in. It also became apparent that we would need to make a pre-recorded performance rather than a live stream in order to create a more level playing field for the students. These external limitations meant I needed to experiment more with the form of *Zoom* and thus the production features many different approaches to the use of the technology as I searched for how to tell each part of the story within the limitations of the online frame and the equipment available to each student. As a director within a tertiary setting, I focused on two key opportunities for learning within rehearsal: the actor's performance of the text, and the building of imaginary worlds. As this was a graduation production, I wanted to ensure the actors had a chance to work with design. This drove the decision to work with green screens rather than existing spaces. The three separate worlds were developed by feeding the actors' and creative team's imaginations with mood boards created by designer Gus Powers and with visual research presentations presented by each student on a given topic. Working on *Zoom* demands an adjustment of one's directorial and teaching processes It was in this area I needed to execute a second pirouette. In order to limit the number of screen hours each student was committed to, I scheduled shorter daily sessions for each of the three parts. This meant students were engaged online and also had time to prepare and reflect offline. I also delivered some of the text analysis and character work through specific worksheets that were intended as independent work for the actor within nominated rehearsal hours. This meant our onscreen sessions were targeted towards specific learning best served by interactions with each other. Students were also encouraged to create their own additional timetable and to work in small groups on specific tasks in breakout *Zoom* rooms.

Hamlet is a complex play to stage and a *Zoom* version presented a number of challenges, including discovering how to create the Ghost of Hamlet's Father, enact a graveyard scene in which a grave is being dug, perform a sword fight and stage a play within a play. I found I needed to adapt my directorial style, which usually relies on responding to the physical presence of the actors and other spatial inputs, in a number of ways.

Figure 5: Melanie Beddie, Rehearsing Siddon's gestures for *The Mousetrap*, 2020.

Figure 6: Melanie Beddie, The Sword Fight, 2020.

I considered a range of approaches for creating a non-naturalistic performance style for 'The Mousetrap'. Attempting to direct this over *Zoom* became laboursome and time-consuming so, against my collaborative instincts I did what Peter Brook tells us never to do and I planned on paper each and every move for the play within the play (Brook 1973). I had already begun a discussion with the two students involved about the history of gesture and given them some reading on the gestural work of François Delsarte but in the end, I decided to use the illustrations of theatrical gestures collected by Henry Siddons and Johann Engle (1822). This work presents diagrams of key gestures and poses from the popular stage of the time. I emailed my plan of the text with suggested gestures to the students who learnt these first separately and then with each other. I found not only that this method was time-efficient, but importantly it gave the Player King and Queen a very clear and repeatable framework which supported them to make something both stylised and connected to the history of performance, even within the confines of their bedrooms.

Player Queen.
So many journeys
may the sun and
moon
Make us again count
o'er ere love be
done!
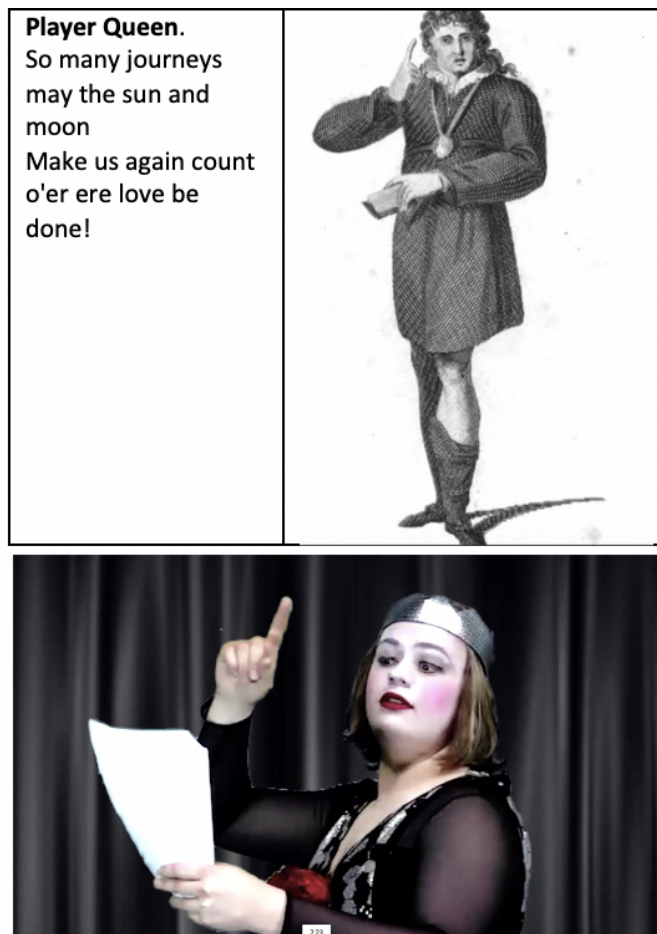
I was, very late in the process, able to make use of friendship bubbles to allow more than one person in a frame and, at the very end, take advantage of the easing of restrictions to do some simple staging of scenes such as the sword fight, which had up till then only been rehearsed and choreographed online. Shakespeare's *Hamlet is* a monumental work which only continues to reveal its complexity as one works on it. By creating a restructured version of Shakespeare's text (along with snippets of material generated by the company*) Out of Joint* afforded us the luxury of investigating multiple interpretations and responses to the original play. Making theatre is usually a corporeal and visceral experience and working on *Zoom* often felt like the inverse of this. Nevertheless, by exploring the rich language given to us by Shakespeare and adapting existing teaching and directing methods and creating independent rehearsal tasks we found our way into a process where we could meaningfully collaborate on building character and imaginary worlds to create a production over *Zoom* that responds authentically to both the text and to the conditions around us.

ANTHONY CROWLEY: ADAPTING A CHORUS LINE – ONLINE.

Figure 8. Anthony Croley, A Chorus Line image 1. Video image establishing that more than one student will play each role.

How do you adapt a legendary Broadway dance musical using the video conferencing platform *Zoom* in seven weeks, while your actors and creative team are in COVID lock-down? Factor in that you have no idea when, or even if you will be allowed to rehearse in a theatre during those seven weeks, (though one scenario involves students who reside in Ballarat being permitted, at some point, while those living in Melbourne, including the creative team, are not). Then take into account that even *if* everyone in the ensemble and creative team are allowed back on campus to rehearse in person, you won't be permitted to rehearse with any more than eleven actors at once.

For a company of young artists dispossessed of their theatre training by the pandemic of 2020, *A Chorus Line* seemed the right project to reignite their enthusiasm and provide a range of opportunities to sharpen their skills and enhance their fitness. Three core questions were unanswered as we commenced rehearsal. The first was how to leverage the work in order to provide an equitable learning experience, secondly how to translate a sophisticated, mostly through-scored dance musical using *Zoom*, and thirdly; how to effectively plan several filming contingencies. The first crucial choice was to decide what filmic concept would tell the story effectively and also accommodate student learning. *A Chorus Line* offered nineteen roles. We had thirty-eight third year students. If we had been able to perform in a theatre, we would have double-cast the roles. In this instance, we only had the time and resources to make a single video. We looked to the concept of the work itself.

A Chorus Line tells the story of a group of dancers auditioning for a Broadway musical. It examines the existential nature of being a dancer, and to a wider extent, what it means to be an actor. *A Chorus Line* had already been adapted into a movie musical of the same name by Sir Richard Attenborough (Columbia Pictures 1985), and also examined through the lens of a documentary in the film *Every Little Step* (Sony Picture Classics 2008). The latter revealed the power of that genre to tell a story within a story, and to accommodate an eclectic range of filmic elements. In addition, the concept of a group of students in the midst of a COVID lockdown, auditioning for a musical that was already about auditioning, offered a layer of relevance that was compelling and clear. It also brought the pedagogy into focus.

Figure 9. Anthony Croley, A Chorus Line image 2. Dance sequences on Zoom were rehearsed and choreographed to maximise the impact of multiple cameras.

Each student would be given a role they were ostensibly 'auditioning for'. Several actors would then audition for (share) the same role. Each student would have the opportunity to learn the entire role and perform the entire role to camera. This allowed each student to experience the complete arc of a character during the rehearsal process. All of this content was then filmed, collated and stored for the editing process, which provided as much equity as possible in the final video. In applying this pedagogy, the students were given the opportunity to rehearse all the elements of the musical and condition their bodies and voices across core disciplines of acting, dancing and singing. The next challenge was to divide the script into sections and decide which technical approach to apply to each. This in turn depended on the complexity of each section's combination of music, text, dance and dialogue. *A Chorus Line* is a sophisticated piece of writing; lyric, solo, duet, trio, quintet, full ensemble singing, underscore and dance are woven together in a specific tapestry. Earlier in the pandemic the creative team had success creating modular works online, where actors worked solo, or autonomously in pairs to rehearse smaller bespoke performances. *A Chorus Line* would require complex ensemble singing and a visual language that could keep the musical score and script completely intact. As at least five weeks of our seven-week

rehearsal period would be spent online, we had no choice but to start rehearsing and recording dance and solo/ensemble singing through *Zoom.*

My creative team and I accomplished this by experimenting with an emerging web-based technology called *JackTrip*, developed through a partnership between the *JackTrip Foundation* and Stanford University. *JackTrip* allowed us to effectively eliminate the audio latency normally associated with *Zoom*, and to rehearse large vocal ensembles synchronously. It took several weeks to successfully implement the technology, but it played a significant role during the final two weeks of online rehearsal. Several established software programs were also employed in collaboration with *JackTrip,* including the video editing program *Final Cut Pro*, the digital audio workstation *Logic Pro*, the web-based digital audio workstation *BandLab* and *Zoom* itself. In addition to ensemble rehearsals, the students, director and choreographer would rehearse scenes and dance using *Zoom* with backing tracks prepared by one of two musical directors. One musical director would focus on recording and editing the musical tracks, the other focused on vocal rehearsals and the application of *JackTrip*. This allowed us to begin filming in the third week of rehearsals, while still in lockdown. The director would guide the actor's performance via *Zoom*, while the students would simultaneously film themselves on their smartphones, then upload the footage to *Microsoft Teams*. This allowed us to integrate low-fidelity visual content with a higher level of video resolution and sound quality.

Then everything pivoted. In week five of rehearsals, two-third of the students were permitted to return to the Ballarat campus, while the students and staff living in Melbourne had to continue working online. The project navigated this inequity by utilizing video screens set up on campus. By mid-way through week six of our seven-week rehearsal, the entire company and creative team were back on campus, yet only allowed to work together in limited numbers. The shooting blueprint was further adapted as we looked for ways to keep the visual concept consistent. What evolved was both the story of *A Chorus Line,* and the parallel narrative of our gradual return to the theatre. The most challenging aspect of the rehearsal process was accepting that we were not making a piece of theatre; we were making a movie. Students were accustomed to performing a season of shows and replicating their

performance several times over. Instead, they were asked to deliver a performance far earlier than in their normal process. The concept of a documentary also proved difficult for the students to grasp. They were no longer just the actor but the subject matter as well. They were not comfortable with what they perceived as their imperfections captured on video. By and large they were not cognisant of the fact that their raw integrity and truth made the final result compelling for an audience.

It begs the question; would their performance have been any more accomplished if presented night after night on the stage, or would it simply have provided them with a sense of control and the tangible affirmation that an audience provides? The fact that the students were confronted by these questions was, in itself, a valuable learning experience. That the students inhabited their characters and gave rich, detailed performances is evidence that skills were acquired, owned and applied. That they had the opportunity to refine their skills is beyond question. Whether hindsight will provide them with a meta-cognitive grasp of the creative process and its ultimate success, only time and further analysis will tell.

Figure 10. Anthony Croley, A Chorus Line image 3 Returning to campus required physical distancing and recording sound and dance in separate sessions.

KIM DURBAN: EMBERS: MOVING FROM SPARKS OF DESPAIR TO THE FLAME OF ACTION.

When I selected *Embers* by Australian playwright Campion Decent as the production for the Third Years Actors, I was galvanised by the 2020 bushfire crisis. It seemed timely and ethical to mount this verbatim play, and, with the prospect of working with the entire Graduating Actors Company of 37 actors, a play with over 58 characters seemed right. The play was originally written to be performed by eight actors, but my vision was to utilise the full company in our Courthouse Theatre in Ballarat. Then COVID-19 happened, and these plans were dashed. I wanted to achieve an exciting Third Year-level result. As a platform, Zoom initially appeared frightening and disappointing, disembodied and fixative. In the glow of completion for the project it is easy to overlook the anxiety caused by learning and teaching remotely. Neither actors nor directors expect to view themselves when making work. The first challenge was to understand how to navigate the camera being on in people's private spaces. It seemed as if the psychology of being continually observed was a barrier to calm progress. Why this should be so, in an art form that relies on visual observation of embodied practice, remains a deep question. Is the body there, or not there, online?

I believe that when I am working in three dimensions, I plant seeds and then, like a gardener, patiently wait for this vision to grow, as I lead Mike Alfreds' text process in the space. I have worked with this method since attending a 6-week training workshop with Mike in 1988 and he describes it in detail in his book *Different Every Night*. In an ideal world, the process takes 10-12 weeks, and few of us have that time available even in the professional performance environment. Sometimes I become impatient, and I move on. One thing I have learnt is: never expect your guru to stay still either. Mike has started working with drama schools and changed his approach to rehearsal process entirely. He has reflected on this in private correspondence with me:

> The problem with students/short rehearsals is that they don't have sufficient experience to apply to these processes (usually their experience is about being blocked and asked for results); and, more important, they don't have sufficient

absorption time in which the process can do its sub-conscious work. I've always been slightly disappointed that in my drama school shows the freedom/spontaneity only tends to appear in the last couple of performances. In a way, trying to squash the whole journey into a limited time is a bit like force-feeding them with nourishment which they don't quite manage to digest. (Mike Alfreds 2020, pers. Comm., 21 September.)

Due to the restrictions of the online environment, I could not use much of the process, which is quite organic, and Zoom is so tiring. Adam (Gus) Powers, set and costume designer, and Nick Glen, lighting designer and production manager, have been my regular collaborators over some time, working on both classical and contemporary texts. But at first the task completely stumped us. The hardest task was to understand what the audience should *see*. As Richard Gregory suggests of paintings:

We have to consider a double reality. The painting is itself a physical object, and our eyes will see it as such, flat on the wall, but it can also evoke other objects…lying in space. It is the artist's job to make us reject the first reality while conveying the second, so that we see his world, and not mere patches of colour on a flat surface. (Gregory 1998, p. 178)
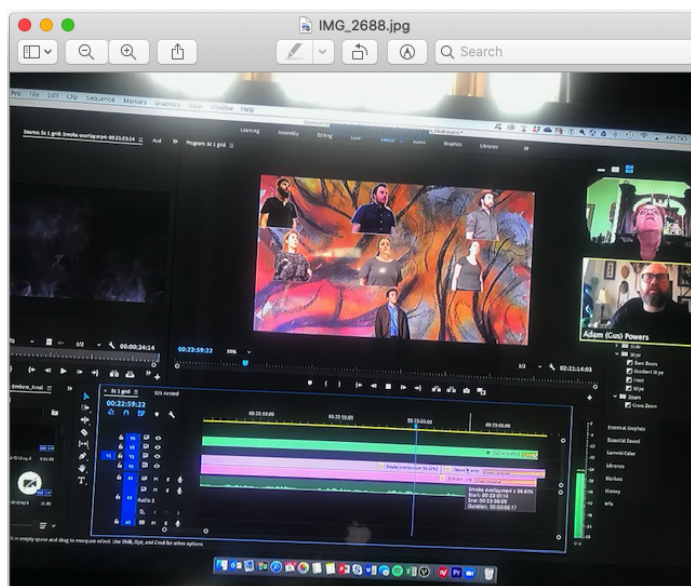

Figure 11. Kim Durabbn, A screen shot of Adam (Gus) Powers, Designer and Kim Durban, Director, editing *Embers*.

Our question was - if the play was located at one BBQ but in 37 locations, how would we create a visual world and traverse the differences? I have experienced the pleasures of editing before, but I am not a film-maker by inclination. So how would we create the shooting list? We struggled in many conversations to identify the look and feel of the world of the play, when we knew it was a verbatim text but we couldn't make it 'real', due to our distance and the realities of poor equipment. We experimented with virtual backdrops from photographs, and screen sharing, and to me, these images appeared visually dead and void. It only began to take artistic shape when we moved away from the real and into the world of the designer's watercolours, based on his memory of the real Central Victorian landscape. Engaging with this art as a backdrop required the cast to collaborate with the designers in break-out rooms, and to individually create a virtual backdrop and lighting at home, not an easy task when faced with distance, poverty, technical problems and poor internet. The art work was numerically coded and dropped individually into their personal Zoom theatres by the cast.

Figure 12. Kim Durban, A watercolour Zoom backdrop of bushland painted by Designer Adam (Gus) Powers.

Using Gus's original paintings and Nick's technical flair, it was an amazing experience to work in the virtual space. The actors faced adversity and disappointment during the making of the show, especially the blows to their hopes of live performance and an audience. Yet they rallied, and produced clear and emotionally-connected performances. Individual actors overcame technical limitation and physical distance, illness, stress and isolation. They bonded as a company in adversity, demonstrating professional attitude and creativity, as well as a delightful capacity to change and to play with the capabilities of the virtual environment. What was unexpected was the responses from the online audience members, who reported strong engagement, tears and flashbacks. This artistic experience of isolation and separation led us to an unexpected place of hope and grace.

ROSS HALL: FROM BLACK BOX TO ZOOM BOX: ADAPTING TO AN ONLINE PRODUCTION OF A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.

Figure 13. Ross Hall, An ass-headed Bottom – *This is a knavery of them to make me afeard.*

During Victoria's second COVID 19 lockdown I directed a Second Year production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* At any other moment in time this show would have passed as a stock-standard student production. Occurring as it did during the early months of the lockdown, it became something altogether different: a *Zoom* production, with music, and a cast of forty-seven.

To give you some idea of this difference: I, as director, was located in Ballarat; Anthony Crowley, the Music Director, was in Melbourne; the stage manager, Danae Crawford, was in Perth; the students, in various stages of lockdown, were scattered – as avatars – around the country; our technician, Shan McPhee, was 'roving', meaning she simply travelled to wherever and whomever, offering whatever technical assistance she could. By all accounts, it was a production that, but for COVID, would never have taken place – at least not in this form. When COVID first fell upon us and our university decided to continue teaching, my colleagues and I were left to improvise upon the general prospect of adapting three-dimensional embodied training delivered on a two-dimensional screen. Little by little, the reality of this decision began to play out. First, it was theoretically-focused subjects that were to be taught online; then, it was some skills classes. Finally, the productions became part of the online package of delivery – a square peg in a round theatrical hole, if ever there was one. Or so I thought.

If I sound slightly cynical, that's because I was. Actually, cynical is possibly not the best way to describe what I was feeling because it smacks of prior bad experiences in this mode of teaching. I had none. Sceptical is probably closer to it. What about their bodies, their voices, their living connections with others around them? Everything in my teaching experience prior to the lockdown had led me to this kind of belief about the nature of what we do as performance trainers. Of course, not wishing to appear completely disingenuous, I had in previous times spent a fair amount of energy researching dimensions of adaptation theory, so I understood that in its strictest sense adapting from one medium to another – in this instance from theatre to online – was simply a matter of making something 'fit'.[2] I could do that surely – make this a *fit.* But theorising was one thing, practice quite another. Transposing a theatrical Shakespearean project into the unexplored realm of Zoom, well… that would be a challenge.

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[2] Paul Edwards, for instance, defines adapting as 'to make fit… the intransitive verb names the task of an organism finding itself in a potentially hostile setting and seeking to fit in' (Edwards 2007, p369)

Figure 14. Ross Hall, Theseus eyeballs Philostrate – *I will hear that play.*

Looking back, my misgivings were largely derived from a fear about the new medium, or rather my capacity to understand and harness its potential. I should have taken some consolation from the fact that I was not alone: my colleagues were in the same boat, blindsided by this sudden shift in teaching modalities. No mystery then that I was so afraid of it.[3] The other thing, of course, that may have reassured me was the students' resilience in transferring to this new mode of delivery, their capacity to adjust to its idiosyncrasies

The production was some weeks away and I flummoxed for a few weeks with monologue work, secretly hoping – like the rest of us – that COVID would simply go away. When it didn't, I got more adventurous and started doing scene-work. Even with some weeks of monologue work behind us, it still seemed an impossible ask to expect the students to successfully negotiate the demands of working with complex scenes. But I felt that the solo acting work was running thin and we were in danger – all of us – of getting bored. In truth, the transition to scenes was difficult: trying to connect with someone who was situated in

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[3] Perhaps on a deeper level I may simply have been resisting change, enacting in a personal way what Stam and Raengo describe as an inherent resistance to transformation, one where all adapting is seen as subversion of the pre-existing original (Stam and Raengo 2004, p4) It goes to the very heart of the adaption discourse and is the seat and centre of persistent ideas surrounding fidelity

another part of the country; dealing with time lags between participants; regrouping after internet connections dropped out. But after we all grew tired of complaining, I noticed that the actors were becoming better at reading to others onscreen. Drop-outs in connections simply became one of the variables we had to deal with – like a muffed line, a false start, or a technical glitch in any other rehearsal. And, locked in close-up as we were, a strange and unexpected intimacy started to pervade the work. I also observed that as they became more confident with the medium, students began to explore in ways I had not foreseen. In a very Darwinian sense, they were adapting to their new environment.[4] They were – like all adaptive organisms – becoming accustomed to the conventions of their new milieu. They were exploring, adjusting, refining strategies in response to the changed circumstances around them. Perhaps most significantly, their responses were forcing me to reconsider my own.

We chose *The Dream* for a number of reasons. It aligned with our staffing availability, which had altered as a result of the lockdown.[5] It conformed to the brief of *Heightened Language* that was the overarching focus for the semester's work.[6] It could be multi-cast and accommodate music. It could be broken into three clear working teams – the Court, the Fairies and the Mechanicals. Each of these could further be divided to accommodate multiple casts. I also hoped, because of its broad stylistic palette, it might flex to meet the demands and limitations of its new online medium. Beyond that, we were pretty much flying blind into an undiscovered country. For the first time, though, given my previous experience in the online skills classes, I was at least sanguine about the possibility of coping with new contingencies.

Our Second-Year productions are Black Box shows – stripped back productions: bare boards, little or no set; basic, often emblematic costumes over rehearsal blacks. It allows us to focus on performance in a pure way, to talk about rehearsals *as* we're rehearsing. At the same time, we have students working in small self-selected production teams covering music,

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[4] Darwinian tropes abound in the broader discourse of adaptation practice, something noted by Gillian Beer For her, drawing on Darwinian principles to describe the processes of adaptation is obvious because, 'instead of teleology and forward plan, the future is an uncontrollable welter of possibilities' (Beer 2000, Pref xviii) Her description is certainly apposite in describing the journey of rehearsals during our production

[5] Understandably and for various reasons, some of our sessional teaching and directing staff couldn't make the quick transition to online teaching

[6] The Second Year of study at the Academy is conducted under the general rubric of 'style', the first semester of work being focused on texts with Heightened Language, the second on more Naturalistic texts

movement, props, programs, publicity, lighting and in this case, editing. This gives them a broader understanding of what goes into making the show.

Figure 15. Ross Hall, The actor playing Bottom improvises mouth props for a close-up bloody death.

When we started *Zoom* rehearsals two significant things happened. Firstly, in early planning sessions we found that many of the processes of theatrical rehearsal could be simulated within the *Zoom* format with a tight schedule, a group this large and with multiple casts working in a new medium, it was important to put these known structures in place. It gave our daily routine solidity. It may be useful to illustrate the kind of shape that lay beneath this routine over the four-week rehearsal cycle.[7] At the beginning of each day, warm-ups were conducted by each team in *Zoom* break-out rooms Then the full company would come together to discuss the day's work. At these meetings, practical issues would be raised through progress reports. Duties would be allocated according to the needs of the day, session and hour. Then rehearsals proper would be run throughout daily sessions. At the end of each day, the whole company would meet again to share our experience of how the work was progressing.

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[7] The logistical precision that went into this virtually inhabited regime owes much to the organisational skills of our stage manager, Danae Crawford, who was all the while improvising upon her own familiar patterns of live studio rehearsals. The ultimate success of this dimension of the rehearsal regime lies squarely with her

During this four-week cycle, we were exploring – through practice – the tenets of *medium specific theory*, which, drawing from its founding theorist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, asserts that different mediums possess 'essences' or operant properties that allow them to express in very particular ways.[8] This critical lens has also been used to explain variance from one medium to another in the adaptive process.[9] Some specific examples of students' discoveries within *The Dream* will suffice to illustrate the point.
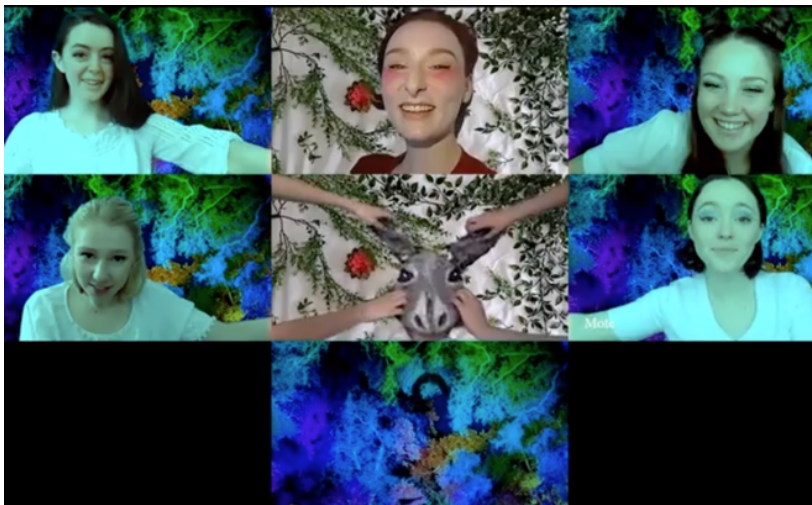

Figure 16. Ross Hall, Titania and the Fairies 'tickle' Bottom's fancy using arms of third-party assistants.

Having individual actors confined to their isolated frame on the screen created new dynamics between characters; relationships were established in terms of their two-dimensional proximity on the screen. Whilst some depth of field could be achieved within individual frames, space often became primarily defined by this proximity – depending on whether one character was above or below or next to another character on the viewing screen Using this

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[8] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in his late eighteenth-century work, *Laocoon*: *An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, sought to differentiate mediums on the basis of their specific properties (Lessing 1766, p91– 92; Carroll 2000, p41) As the title of his work suggests, Lessing was specifically examining the way the two mediums of painting and poetry worked He noted that the proper subject matter of each medium could be determined by extrapolating their constituent *physical* properties This kind of analytical lens laid the foundations for what would become medium specific analysis or theory

[9] Medium specific theory has also been used to valorise some mediums over others and to mark out creative turf across mediums Carroll, for example, asserts that 'each art form should pursue only those effects which, in virtue of its medium, it excels in achieving' (Carroll 2000, p40) The end-result of such partitioning is an inevitable narrowing of expressive parameters afforded to each medium, something which the evolutions of both film and theatre have continually and progressively belied From my experience with *The Dream*, I expect Zoom and its rivals will go on to repeat this evolutionary trend, defying attempts to confine their capabilities

principle of arrangement, students explored how they might interact with each other using their respective positions

Figure 17. Ross Hall, The Court discovers the sleeping Lovers.

Students also began to explore how they might play with the unique perspective of having each audience member view them through the lens of their own individual computer camera. Simulating the Elizabethan direct address to audience, actors could share a private moment by speaking directly to us down the barrel of their own camera. Then they could go back to interacting with other characters on another part of our screen. This dual focus became a major stylistic feature of the production. This redefining of the way space worked within the *Zoom* medium also opened up other performative possibilities. Props could pass from one frame to another. Arms could magically extend across frames.[10] The nature of sets – at least as defined by their theatrical counterpart – was also reconfigured, as backdrops could be collected and shared. Costumes could be sourced from personal wardrobes and cross-referenced with other actors in different states of the country.[11]

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[10] This, of course, was only possible in households where another occupant (in the same household bubble as the actor whose frame was the recipient of the arm or prop) could offer the assistance of a spare limb

[11] A deeper analysis of these production elements would, of course, expose the degree of difficulty it took to create many of the effects in our production, none more so than trying to achieve uniform lighting states for each of the actors in their respective 'studios'

Figure 18. Ross Hall, The Lovers quarrel – vertically.

Most of these improvised innovations came with considerable trial and error. Importantly though, most of the problems we encountered were solved by the students themselves. This was, to my mind, the second significant achievement of the project. What I initially foresaw as a restrictive 'Zoomlandic' learning space, proved to be surprisingly fertile ground. Students were certainly at times frustrated by it. But there was something else at play, a curiosity about the nascent medium's inherent possibilities. Perhaps we were all merely yielding to the inevitable nature of creative practice: a journey bearing the powerful imprimatur of discovery and experiment, of trial and error, of regrouping and coming again, of volatile contingency.

I'm certainly not being Pollyanna-ish about the impact of COVID on our studio work during 2020 – the downsides and deficiencies were numerous and lived: the fears of disembodiment, the anxiety of uncertain times, the anguish of isolation But the shared experience of continuing to create together with others in *any* available medium, the capacity to adapt, to explore, to *play* was, as one student put it, 'a hell of a lot better than sitting at home doing

nothing'. Given the circumstances surrounding the origin of the production, I'll take that as a win.

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