

TOWARDS A THEATRE OF THE FABULOUS -
INFORMED BY A PERFORMATIVE QUEER AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON THE STAGE OF
AN ALL-BOYS' SCHOOL

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled “Towards a Theatre of the Fabulous – Informed by a performative queer autoethnography on the stage of an all-boys’ school” is my own, unassisted work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts (in the field of Drama) in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University in and outside South Africa.



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15 FEBRUARY 2023

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This paper is dedicated to my extraordinary mother, Androulla, and my heroic brother, Gerald. Thank you for being a part of my life and part of my story.

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AN ABSTRACT PROLOGUE

Openness may not completely disarm prejudice, but it's a good place to start. It all comes down to education. – Jason Collins¹

Equality means more than passing laws. The struggle is really won in the hearts and minds of the community, where it really counts. – Barbara Gittings²

As a queer teacher who felt discomfort in the homogeneousness of a traditional heteronormative space of an all-boys' school, in this research, I explore the extent to which a performative queer autoethnography can inform the creation of a Theatre of the Fabulous (an embodied queer pedagogy), what it could look like and how it could be used as a queer pedagogical tool in the classroom through which to identify heteronormative practices and, ultimately, move towards a space which is safe for queerness.

My strategy was to draw on queer theory and thinking about queer pedagogical writing. I hypothesised that heteronormativity, patriarchal and colonial practices are evident in all-boys' schools (Connell, 2000; Pollack, 2006; Sullivan, 1995) and that, as a queer teacher, my movements are made queer.

I used performance as research (PaR) as a methodology, with performative writing, in this work. Deeply exploring the personal, theoretical and practitioner's journey, and understanding the narration itself as performance as research, this research report is structured through six acts and different scenes rather than the traditional chapters and sections. As a Dramatic Arts teacher, I am programmed to see "all the [world as] a stage, and all the men and women [sic] merely players"³ and my queer reality as a linear theatre text filled with plot and intrigue. This format allowed me to express myself, stylistically and typographically, through not only academic/scholarly reading and writing, but also through the inclusion of interesting quotes I came across in my journey towards a Theatre of the Fabulous, musings and asides about my

¹ Land (2019)

² Blehm (2020)

³ From *As you like it* by William Shakespeare. Act 2, Scene 7.

own assumptions and suspicions, and reflections on mini-narratives which offers a broader societal visibility/invisibility of experiences in the form of blogs, online articles, social media commentary, images, prose, song lyrics and so forth. My personal writing, asides and musings are set in a typewriter font (like this). For me, this form of writing represents my personal journey reflected by my many voices (some speak more informally and colloquially than others) and roles as a queer cis male, a researcher, a theatre practitioner and Dramatic Arts teacher. Moreover, it underscores my investigation into the fluidity of and the potential for fabulousness and playfulness of queer methods.

In my exposition I contextualise the research problem and its possibilities for both formal and informal inquiry. I contemplate what it means to be fabulous and how reclaiming fabulousness has the potential to empower. I “unpick” myself and consider how my performances in various roles could possibly converge into a Theatre of the Fabulous and what this means for me as a queer teacher in an all-boys’ school. In the second act (chapter), the discourse in current literature about the setting/environment, characters and language in an all-boys’ school is framed as the inciting or initial incident in the text. I continue with my methodology in the rising action of the script as I queer education, explore queer ridiculousness and various theatre and performance praxis as a possible methodological framework for a Theatre of the Fabulous and reflect on my “messy, unruly, and leaky” data. I consider the next act as the climax of the research. I write auto-ethnographically about the “then and there” of my personal queer journey, which has culminated in my queer self in the “here and now” of an all-boys’ school. I then continue with the denouement as I reflect on my queer findings and present a queer performance writing in the form of a one-act play. The play, *Toy Soldiers*, fictionalises my account of the different voices in a private all-boys’ school setting and suggests that work still needs to be done to explain how bodies are made queer in traditionally patriarchal spaces to create a queer-inclusive environment.

I conclude that a Theatre of the Fabulous holds possibilities not only to create spaces of what I propose as “(un)comfortable” discourse of our own and others’ lived experiences in the here and now, but it also holds promise for queer teachers – and teachers who do not identify as queer – to experience more openly and, ultimately, to teach more authentically.

ACT I

EXPOSITION - A FABULOUS SPOTLIGHT

Scene 1 – Am I fabulous?

I am a queer man. I am a queer Dramatic Arts teacher. I am a queer artist. After too many years of struggling with my identity, I have come to embrace my queerness as colourful and as fabulous. There is still struggle.

In a 1994 interview with the *LA Times*, Tony Kushner, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright of *Angels in America* (1991), referred to theatre for and by queer individuals as a Theatre of the Fabulous (Pacheco, 1994: para. 5). My performance, then, of different roles of self, as a queer man, a queer teacher and a queer artist, is a form of this theatre. I create my own theatre through performance. Schechner (2003: 184) validates this when he extends the concept of performance as

the art of actualizing [and] turning possibilities into action, into performances, [where] whole worlds otherwise not lived are born. Theatre doesn't arrive suddenly and stay fixed either in its cultural or individual manifestations. It is insinuated along a web of associations spun from play, games, hunting, slaughter and distribution of meat, ceremonial centres, trials, rites of passage, and storytelling. Rehearsals and recollections pre-play and afterplay - converge in the theatrical event.

All of these different roles that I perform then “converge in the theatrical event” and are then my own Theatre of the Fabulous. But to what extent can my own performance of the fabulous manifest into a structured pedagogical tool called the Theatre of the Fabulous?

In his 2018 article in the *Pacific Standard*, Brandon Tensley further clarifies that, in the queer community, the word fabulous, “as a queer aesthetic, allows queer people not only to achieve greater visibility, but also to reclaim that flamboyance as a means of empowerment” (Tensley, 2018: para. 2) in an oppressive heteronormative society. However, as liberating⁴ as this greater

⁴ I have learnt that it is liberating because it allows one to teach authentically. I refer to this experience later in this paper.

visibility is, the article also suggests that fabulousness is “dangerous, political, confrontational, [and] risky” (Tensley, 2018: para. 3). This is true in so many communities, but in the daily blinding visibility of the spotlight on the school stage, danger lurks in the shadows of the audience, the corners of the stage and the emptiness of the wings. It seems that there is nowhere to disappear in this theatre game of hide and seek. It feels as if you just never feel safe.

Scene 2 – Come out, come out, wherever you are?

Come/ing Out
Watch out!
Here I come...
To where?
And why?
How?
Come/ing...
– S. Kotze (2021)

After years of teaching as openly queer in co-educational schools, I did not feel “safe” when I joined the staff of a private all-boys’ school in Johannesburg in 2019. Suddenly, the audience that I had learnt to embrace, beyond the spotlight, became alien and foreign. It felt as though I was forced to start my performance from scratch: from those scenes in my life when I was a scared little boy. It was contemplating those painful moments of coming out all over again. It reminded me of a line in a *Washington Post* article by Julia Carpenter (2016: para. 10): “I’ve never come out, and I’m always coming out [and it is] not safe ... you’re never off the hook for the rest of your life.” In this private boys’ school, it once again felt as if I was not “off the hook”.

Jumping out and in – and in and out – of my closet – any closet – is just like this sentence: tiring. Or, as one of my colleagues labelled it, “exhausting”.⁵ It is a perpetual running from the wings into the spotlight and then back again. The shift in focus between the suffocating darkness of the wings and the blinding light of the spotlight leaves one’s vision blurry. To

⁵ Here I refer to an informal conversation with a colleague about our individual queer journeys.

compound the confusion even further, the audience is present, watching and judging, wide-eyed, as the suspense builds like a psychological thriller on stage.

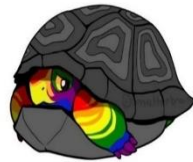
But what does it really mean to come out? To make visible = out. To make invisible = in. I suppose it depends on where you stand. Are you the performer? Or are you the audience? Queer? Man? Teacher? Artist? Researcher? Which one must be made visible? Or all? Or just that which is hidden? The one which I feel my body responds to the most awkwardly; the most uncomfortably? The one that is both the most difficult and the easiest to write when I perform it? The one with the loudest voice? That is the one! The one that wants to teach (passionately), sing (terribly), act (angrily), write (healingly) and direct (flamboyantly). The one that responds to queer not as being strange, although that is what it feels like, mostly, but the one that responds to queer as being colourful, exotic, experimental, disruptive, expressive, or just fabulous. It is the unending putting on and taking off of masks. Many masks. Some drab and sans colour, and others sparkling with fabulousness. It is all very theatrical, isn't it? Perhaps a Theatre of the Fabulous as a method to make visible? And theatre, after all, is making the invisible, visible – “the art of actualizing [and] turning possibilities into action, into performances, [where] whole worlds otherwise not lived are born” (Schechner, 2003: 184).

And making visible is not always safe. It is the double-edged sword of coming out, both sides being a sharp reminder of insecurity, vulnerability, danger, fear, disconnection and suffocation. In an online commentary piece for *Pink News* in 2013, Olly Hudson related his experiences as a gay student in a private all-boys' school. He recalled:

So conscious are most of the boys in my school of the abundance of males (and rarity of females), not to mention the homosexual stereotype, that they go over and above to assert their masculinity, an apparently quintessential aspect of which is to see whose 'banter' can descend to the deepest depths of homophobic, inane, misogynistic abuse. (Hudson, 2013: para. 5)

My queerness, which I thought was fabulous and had become my most positive performative attribute as a teacher in the co-ed (mixed-sex) schools I used to teach at before, was unexpectedly (perhaps a naïve description), in this all-boys' school environment, made visible as my queer “strangeness” once again. In this space, it was yet another mask that I had to wear. In a homogeneous student environment of all boys, I once again felt like the “other”, ironically, and involuntarily pushed into the spotlight where my muscle and mind memory dragged me back toward the path that Sarah Ahmed (2006: 554) calls the “straight and narrow”.

Instinctively my body wanted to perform “toward ... straight culture” (Ahmed, 2006: 554) and, familiarly, this caused me to feel “socially present as a deviant” (Ahmed, 2006: 554). As in the past, I wanted to retreat from the spotlight, and with a manly stride, join the closeted audience of hyper-masculine bodies where I could become my grey invisible self again: a Theatre of the Unfabulous. An image of Hue the Pride Turtle hiding their fabulousness comes to mind.



Hue the Pride Turtle⁶

Scene 3 – Shame on me

The memory of being outed, without my permission, when I was 18 years old, still resides shamefully in my body. In their explanation of the psychology of oppression, Leonard et al. (2019: 165) suggest that the oppressed “initially adopt ‘avoidance reactions’ which are responses that prevent adverse outcomes from occurring”. I transitioned from someone in hiding who consciously lied to myself, to someone in hiding who consciously lied and was found out and exposed to the whole world. Even my subsequent gay mask felt artificial and incomplete, even though I had no option, as I never wanted to meet that self again. He was such a sad, deceitful little person (bullied emotionally and physically) hiding in a closet of invisibility. He was the stranger that I was forced to create through a wrestling and making sense of degrading performative language that bullied me into what Judith Butler (1999: 43) calls a “stylization of the body” and the mind. Words such as “moffie” (Afrikaans for “faggot”) and “sissy” aimed at making my “stranger” visible had me retreat out of the spotlight, away from the stage, into an invisible closet of safety – an “avoidance”. Here, in the invisibility of my closet, I had to refashion and stylise my body and my mind into another “stranger” – a straight-acting alter ego.

⁶ Moncrief (2019)

So, I found myself in a private boys' school steeped in a colonial, Christian, patriarchal and heteronormative hegemony. For the first time in many years, I heard “moffie” and “sissy” and “that’s so gay”, and I was jumping in and out and in and out of the spotlight again. I had to make space for that almost-forgotten straight-acting stranger after spending many years trying to get rid of him. I felt a profound sense of homophobia whispered under the breaths of an audience, comprising students and teachers, who, to me, all looked threateningly alike. My immediate assumptions about this phenomenon that I saw, felt, and heard were informed by my experiences as a queer student schooled in a colonial, patriarchal, Christian and heteronormative environment. In my mind, I put the settings of these two worlds alongside one another on stage. I noticed the similarities of this place to that place, and all those shaded and dulled emotions, past and present, enveloped my body. This place was not a setting conducive to inclusivity and belonging, despite its best efforts to promote its motto that everyone was included. It brought my identity as a queer man, queer Dramatic Arts teacher and queer artist sharply into the spotlight. And through each of these lenses I saw different colours.

My further assumptions were also informed by my own experiences as a queer student and a queer teacher. If *I* felt uncomfortable coming out to my own students, my colleagues and the parent body, then there must be other students and staff alike, who not only chose to surreptitiously move out of the spotlight, and instead chose to move beyond the wings of the stage into the darkest parts backstage. Could this apply to gender, culture, race, language and whatever else they choose to hide, because in the facelessness of the audience it will be spotlighted like a drag artist on a rugby team? I suspected bullying that I could not see; passive-aggressive and maybe even active-aggressive. I assumed that some of the noses “broken straight” on some of the boys were intentional acts of aggression like my own queer nose that was broken (with the intention to straighten, I assume) by a bully. Ironically, my nose never straightened. From my own personal experience as a teacher, I further postulated that queer is made even more strange in an all-boys' school as opposed to a co-educational environment.

Scene 4 – Colourless rainbows

As a queer teacher who passionately believes in multicultural education towards social justice, I had to explore these new but familiar feelings in this new but familiar boys' school. I asked myself whether the picture I saw on the stage was really one that is multicultural and genuinely

promotes social justice. Does it reflect the Rainbow Nation⁷ script, which South Africa adds to its disclaimer at the start of each show? It is supposedly a vibrant and colourful show, which celebrates diversity and in which we all are led to believe that everyone is equal and free from prejudice. Could I echo this utopian Rainbow Nation in my own classroom with its homogeneous make-up palette? Could my teaching still be colourful? Was it possible to imagine that in an all-boys' school I could teach fabulously? Could a queer teacher, a transgendered boy and a cisgender queer boy come out without fear of persecution? However, when I heard the stifling language in the fabric of this traditional boys' school, I became despondent. I then became fearful, once again, and felt almost hopeless when the passive-aggression I sensed around me was mirrored in the national headlines in 2021 (see Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2021; Ntsabo, 2021). I cried for:

- **Bonang Gaelae**, 29, whose throat was slashed in Sebokeng on 12 February 2021;
- **Nonhlanhla Kunene**, 37, whose body was found half-naked in Edendale, Pietermaritzburg, on 5 March 2021;
- **Sphamandla Khoza**, 34, who was beaten, stabbed and had his throat slit on 29 March 2021 in Kwamashu, Durban;
- **Nathaniel 'Spokgoane' Mbele**, who was stabbed in the chest in Tshirela, Vanderbijlpark, on 2 April 2021;
- **Andile 'Lulu' Nthuthela**, 41, whose mutilated and burned body was found on 10 April 2021 in KwaNobuhle, Kariega; and
- **Lonwabo Jack**, a young LGBTIQ+ individual who had just celebrated his 22nd birthday on 17 April 2021. His lifeless body was found on a pavement the next day in Nyanga, Cape Town.

The idea of South Africa as a Rainbow Nation for the LGBTIQ+ community has come under fire. In his article, *Gay rights in name only in the 'Rainbow Nation'*, Tyrone Beason writes that “anti-gay violence, including a string of highly publicized killings and ‘corrective rape’ attacks in poor, black townships aimed at ‘curing’ lesbians of their homosexuality, has imposed a climate of fear in the country” (Beason, 2014: para. 8). The performance of the Rainbow Nation

⁷ “The term was intended to encapsulate the unity of multi-culturalism and the coming-together of people of many different nations, in a country once identified with the strict division of white and black under the Apartheid regime,” (“Rainbow Nation”, 2022)

was clearly a horror show and it made me feel powerless. I had to ask myself whether this same show was mirrored on the stage of my school. What could I then do, on my own stage, to untangle the web of tension spun so suffocatingly around me in this microcosm of an infected Rainbow Nation?

A reading of *Homophobia and Sexuality Diversity in South African Schools: A review* (Francis, 2017), which includes a multitude of studies that outline the extent of LGBTIQ+ bullying, victimisation and discrimination in schools, reveals that South Africa, across the nation, still has a long way to go before it can truly and sincerely signal its Rainbow Nation aphorism. There are also many articles which outline the ways in which even teachers feel unsafe and ask, “how do people know they will be supported – by colleagues, by school leaders, by the government?” (Small, 2019: para. 19). In its school safety framework, *Challenging homophobic bullying in schools*, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) references the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in stating that “all learners have equal right to quality education in a safe school environment” (UNESCO, 2012, as cited in DBE, 2014: 1). I had to ask: Is my own school environment safe? Do our students all feel that they are treated equally? Can an all-boys’ school be transformed so that students and staff can move in a space free from oppressive heteronormativity which forces them to assume toxically masculine identities?

I am reminded of a character in Sartre’s play, *Morts Sans Sepulture* (1941)⁸, who asks, “Is there any meaning in life when men exist who beat people until the bones break in their bodies?” I felt again the trauma of violence perpetrated against my own body. It was clear to me that our society is not safe. Our schools are not safe. Our students are not safe. Coming out is not safe. Our rainbow is leaking colour.

The DBE (2014: 4) recommends, in its school safety framework, that schools “create more opportunities for discussions ... to raise awareness about homophobia and its effects”. In answering this call, Francis and Kuhl (2020) advocate that schools move beyond mere awareness but walk out of the closet with greater “visibility”. As a queer man, as a queer teacher of Dramatic Arts, as a queer maker of theatre and as a queer researcher, I needed to “walk out

⁸ Play: *The Victors* (but literally, *Deaths Without Burial*)

of the closet”, make my queer identity visible and, in this way, interrogate heteronormative practices that perpetuate homophobia.

As one who teaches students in the classroom and has been exposed to the healing and transformative power of theatre, I needed to make sense of my own institutional positionality as well as that of others. How could I use my own space, my role as a teacher and creator of theatre, and my own position as a queer man to raise awareness? To make a difference? To help bring back the colour? The fabulousness?

When I perused the Dramatic Arts Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) 2011 syllabus (DBE, 2021), approved by the DBE and implemented by government schools and Independent Examinations Board (IEB) schools across the country, it was evident that we have a long way to go to heed the call of Francis and Kuhl (2020). An interrogation of the prescribed Grade 12 Dramatic Arts networks found that only the IEB have taken up the challenge and included two plays with queer themes in their list of prescribed plays for matriculants in 2021: *Born Naked* (2020), by ZikkaZimba Productions and Hijinks Theatre, and *The Maids* (1947), by Jean Genet. I was left with the feeling that the predominance of a machismo culture made more evident the fact that although I was “striving for ... equity in our classrooms and schools, [I was] failing to genuinely interact” (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010: 2) within the school culture and to embrace my function as a teacher who should “help to define reality for those” (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010: 2) students that I educate.

Heteronormative values determine and manipulate/define the reality for our students in our South African schools, in part, through performative language driven by, created by and underscored by curriculum content, dominant in the discourse of not only my current institution but schools around the country. I suspected that this performative language and teachers who drive the content do not always actively and intentionally work to obliterate, and disrupt these heteronormative values. As a result, they do not do enough to stop systemic othering, bullying and cancel culture prevalent in these spaces. I suspected that they did not have the tools and the vocabulary to do so. It became clear to me that, instead of trying to work from behind the keyhole of my safe little closet, I first needed to make myself “visible” – not the stranger that I had become, but the true me that I metamorphosed away from when I was a student. Second, I – and indeed all teachers – have a responsibility to “immerse [ourselves] in the world as it concurrently unfolds and evolves around [us]” (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010: 2) and not to

pretend that our classrooms insulate our students from the realities of their everyday lives. There was clearly a problem, but I also realised that there are possibilities for insight, growth, development and change.

The purpose of my research became clear as I asked myself to what extent my lived experience (the here and now and the then and there) can inform a Theatre of the Fabulous (a performative queer pedagogy), which could be used to make visible heteronormativity and, ultimately, raise queer awareness.

Scene 5 – And ... action!

I wished to develop a Theatre of the Fabulous, that is, the practice of a performance queer pedagogy, which could possibly emancipate students and teachers from a toxic⁹ normative culture to a position where we “celebrate differences rather than using them as tools of oppression ... [and to] accept each other unconditionally and with grace” (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010: 8).

While musing about how to go about this, I aimed to:

- research queer theory and queer pedagogy to:
 - understand identity, not only by examining representation of the queer body in existing literature, but instead by going “beyond the text (defined broadly) to include reflections on the world, one’s place within it, and how one’s biases and preferences are shaped by societal norms” (Pennell, 2019: 2296);
 - discover ways in which I can use these concepts in my own teaching;
 - “unpick” and map my own journey and shaping of my queer identity;
 - interrogate my own lived experiences as a queer teacher in the context of an all-boys’ school through performance as research; and
 - investigate my assumptions that all-boys’ schools propagate student and staff deviancy through a “White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective” (Ellis et al., 2010).

⁹ attempting to disempower and dominate those who are perceived to be “not the same”

I decided to:

- write a queer autoethnography using personal reflections from my queer teaching as performance in an all-boys' school to expose heteronormativity. The teaching as performance would consist of:
 - the delivery of a queer pedagogy in the form of a prescribed queer text: *Born Naked*;
 - the delivery of a queer pedagogy in the form of practical classes, which involves “combining queer bodies with queer pedagogy ... both as an example and as way for students to confront their own norms” (Pennell, 2019: 2296), which can be used to disrupt and, ultimately, transform binary mindsets; and
 - reflections on my movements in this here and now;
- use the data, obtained from my queer autoethnography, to anticipate what a Theatre of the Fabulous might look like and how it could in the future be used by teachers to “interrogate systemic heteronormativity and question [their] own place within that system” (Pennell, 2019: 2294). It could consist of teaching tools which may include:
 - a written queer text for study and performance,
 - practical exercises/workshops, and
 - structured content delivery.

ACT II

INITIAL INCIDENT – A FABULOUS LITERATURE REVIEW

Insofar as my research was situated in the space of an all-boys' school where I teach Dramatic Arts, I decided to approach the socio-cultural-pedagogic landscape as a theatrical backdrop, which could be analysed as part of a dramatic text.¹⁰ In this respect, my research questions guided me towards a queer reading of this "script" written for the "stage" of an all-boys' school. When I considered this script through the lens of the dramatic elements I identified (genre/title, setting, characters, dialogue), several themes emerged, which I explore in this chapter.

Scene 1 – A queer title and the ambivalent genre

As I navigated my way towards developing a Theatre of the Fabulous (a performative queer pedagogy aimed at identifying, interrogating, and disrupting heteronormative mindsets and, ultimately, promoting positive transformation), I thought, as a queer teacher, it necessary to think of those categories that will guide my journey in this regard.

1.1 The tension between queer theory and the masculine performance of "doing boy"

The very idea of teaching in a boys-only school made me uncomfortable and nervous and, to some degree, it still does. This is for several reasons: I was bullied by boys; I was abused and intimidated by some of the male authority figures in my life; I felt deviant and was made to feel "strange" growing up, especially in the company of boys; I felt safe in the presence of girls. I associated "boy" with hyper-masculinity, which, in turn, made my body remember threat, violence, fear, discomfort, exclusion and so forth. However, when I considered the opportunity to teach at this very prestigious boys-only school, a friend suggested that I see the boys as students and not to put them in the "boy" box. Easier said than done. However, it made me think differently about the problem of teaching only boys in a class. To this end, I was also comforted by Jon Swain's (2006: 333) suggestion that "there are different alternatives,

¹⁰ I repurposed the dramatic text as the sum of the socio-political narrative of an all-boys' school.

or possibilities, of ‘doing boy’ that are contingent on each setting using the meaning and practices available”. I realised then that I was probably thinking about boys (and men, for that matter) as “strangers” and “all the same”. Perhaps this was an opportunity to heal myself and move away from seeing a class, a theatre, filled with only boys as a potentially hostile army of hyper-masculine soldiers ready to attack. Although, the very idea of “boys” in the school’s name still makes me feel uncomfortable and still feels wrong to me, I realised that, rather than retreating into the wings, I could insert my queer lens, reflect and try to understand my position and those of others.

Why queer? Judith Butler’s (1993: 230) interpretation of queer is valuable to the extent that she describes its possibilities as follows:

The assertion of “queer” will be necessary as a term of affiliation, but it will not fully describe those it purports to represent. As a result, it will be necessary to affirm the contingency of the term: to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on means that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments.

I choose to use the word queer to identify myself because to me it is all-inclusive and shows solidarity with the entire LGBTQI+ community and its allies. In my writing I use queer as a noun and adjective (referring to the LGBTQI+ community and associated concepts) and as a verb (to queer) when I have questioned and interrogated my environment. My theories are therefore queer, and insofar as “queer theory challenges the normative social ordering of identities and subjectivities along the heterosexual/homosexual binary as well as the privileging of heterosexuality as ‘natural’ and homosexuality as ... deviant” (Brown & Nash, 2016: 5), it has focused my research on confrontation, disruption and making strange that which is perceived to be normative. But to confront, disrupt and make strange that which has been normative for decades in this space was a potentially panic-inducing prospect. It was frightening because queer theory is deeply personal in that it is “rooted in the subjective experiences of queer people” (Grzanka, 2019: 3). For me, it meant the intentional stepping into the glaring spotlight, once again, and making myself visible to myself and the popcorn-eating audiences. It is what Andrew Sullivan identifies as “moments of ambivalence, ... the panic of uncontrol ... [and] ... pathological nervousness” (Sullivan, 1995: 80). He further clarifies:

The worry that self-identification as a [*sic*] “homosexual” could obliterate the rest of one’s identity, that its culture and moral power could actually limit freedom rather

than extend it: this merely intensifies the desire to control the moment when that identity is revealed. (Sullivan, 1995: 80–81)

However, after many years of navigating potentially dangerous spaces, along with my experience of teaching in the classroom, I understood that in this unexamined text of an all-boys' school and my role within it, queering the text could help me not only ensconce myself inside the writing, but to step onto the stage, search in the darkness of the wings and beyond “to illuminate and critique taken-for-granted concepts and social dynamics, [because] it is hardly limited to the study of sexuality and gender” (Brown & Nash, 2016: 2). Stein and Plummer (1994: 82) agree, insofar as they theorise that one of the traits of a queer theory is being “willing to interrogate areas which normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality and to conduct queer ‘readings’ of ostensibly heterosexual or nonsexualized texts” and, in so doing, “disturb the order of things” (Ahmed, 2006: 565). As a queer man, my queer journey has always been overshadowed by thoughts of being a sexual deviant. And glancing at the title of the script in which “boys” features so prominently, I kept feeling a sense of “uncontrol”, “nervousness” and “ambivalence” when thinking of those boys in the same terms. Sadly, I was brainwashed to see those around me as straight and, for me, as a result, Sullivan’s words ring true when he suggests that “no homosexual child, surrounded overwhelmingly by heterosexuals, will feel at home in his sexual and emotional world, even in the most tolerant of cultures” (Sullivan, 1995: 13). So, even my intentional queering was causing tension, fuelled by a hegemonic masculinity which oozed from the pages of this script.

Kriegel (1979: 34) proposed that “to be a man is to carry a tape measure by which you measure yourself in relation to the world”. I am sure that Kriegel did not focus his lens exclusively on the fraternity of an all-boys' school, which Zernechel and Perry (2017: 1) refer to as “a haven for young men that support[s] the development of hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity”. But my assumption was that the cancer of male toxicity would be immeasurable as it grows unchecked, because in this environment the boys are never “exposed to opposing personality traits and challenges to their own idea of masculinity” (Zernechel & Perry, 2017: 1). Instead, possibly, their behaviours “include the exploitation of women, hazing, alcohol and drug abuse, and homophobia” (Zernechel & Perry, 2017: 1). Adams and Govender (2008) agree, as they extend the scope of the toxic masculinity phenomenon to an “ideology [which] proposes that men portray and maintain a specific social persona which reflects

toughness, emotional invulnerability, heterosexual dominance and success, as well as an avoidance of anything deemed ‘feminine’” (Adams & Govender, 2008: 552).

“Doing boy” then takes on a whole other meaning in this fraternal text because it provides a great deal of space for the humiliation of the “other” and the “deviant” because “the learning of desirable masculinity often succeeds through a created awareness of undesirable male figures. For example, boys are told to distance themselves from the ‘class nerds’, the ‘wimps’, or the ‘gays’” (Adams & Govender, 2008: 553). These categories are all linked to the feminine, in that environment, because the feminine are perceived as “softer”, more “vulnerable” and prone to emotions which are seen as weak and “unmasculine”. Being unmasculine is seen as failure. In this hyper-masculine environment, where “hyper” is perfection and the pinnacle of achievement, failure is not an option. It is an unrealistic goal, and it is easy to imagine that most boys will inevitably succumb to diminished self-esteem. But the tape measure never disappears. The gaze of their peers, exacerbated by social media, is ever present, and to compensate, “the masculine body [feels] pressured to achieve the perfect physique to obtain peer approval” (Adams & Govender, 2008: 553). Often, these bodies, in a show of strength and power, become the bullies, or what Swain (2006: 337) refers to as a “localised hegemonic mode of masculinity [which] serves as an idealised form of behaviour that boys can measure themselves against to discover the extent of their ‘boyiness’ or manliness”. I assumed, from the conversations around me, that many students, even teachers like me, did not feel that their boyiness measured up. Not doing boy in the right way renders one powerless. It is degrading because the boy is made to believe he is the “powerless female”. For example, boys who do not play rugby, which is the ultimate measure of masculinity (doing boy) and success, are called “pussies”. They feel powerless because it is implied that they are the wrong gender. And to gain control, there is the very real possibility that he will exert his masculine body on that which he is told is powerless: the female body and even that which is *perceived* as female. Even more sobering is that

hegemony prefers to work by implicit consent, for after all, the easiest way to exercise power, and to gain advantage over others, is for the dominated to be unaware of and therefore be complicit in their subordination. In many ways, less resistance leads to more effective hegemony. (Swain, 2006: 337)

The main traits of this fraternal masculinity are then dominance and power. In this script, the tension is palpable as queer eyes gaze and queer bodies move among hegemonic masculinity. The performance of the hyper-masculine is a priority, necessary even. It is a choice and,

according to Butler (1999: 140), this hyper-masculine identity will persist because it is a continuous “re-enactment and a re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established”. Connell (2000: 12) supports this notion by contending that “masculinities are neither programmed in our genes, nor fixed by social structure, prior to social interaction. They come into existence as people act. They are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given social setting”.

Scene 2 – A queer setting, no matter how you slice the tension

It seems that in the past and, to some degree, in the present, an all-boys’ school society was strongly encouraged to promote and cement the idealised masculine – away from the seductive gaze of the female temptress and instead under the strict control of the colonial Christian patriarchy. It is very convenient and effectively erases the fluidity of gender and non-binary identities. However, through a queer lens, it is clear that in a “boy society”, “the sex binary (male/female) and the gender binary (masculine/feminine) ... plays a part in upholding systems of inequality [and magnifies] how power is distributed” (Marnell & Khan, 2016: 12) across the pages. It is a society “where boys get their information about how they are supposed to be and how they are supposed to act as a boy (and future man), and there are constant pressures on individuals to perform and behave to expected group norms” (Swain, 2006: 334).

2.1 Heteronormativity and its deviant “brother”

In this male-normative society reminiscent of a colonial past, the default condition for the hyper-masculine role model is heterosexuality. It validates his manhood. It consolidates his power. The assumption that everyone is heterosexual and should act in this way is known as heteronormativity. Marnell and Khan (2016: 12) offer a broadening of the definition and propose that

heteronormativity teaches people to think and behave in particular ways. It is a system that regulates how people can dress, act and express desire. In the heteronormative worldview, “good” men and “good” women get married to one another, have children, and continue to play their “correct” role in society – that is, the good woman will raise the children and take care of domestic chores, while the good man will earn money and make all decisions relating to the family. Schools, churches, and the media are just some of the institutions that teach us these supposedly correct ways of behaving.

The stage directions are clear. There is a distinct marker: **BOYS remain stage right, and GIRLS (including EVERYONE ELSE), stage left.** There is a further narrowing of the performance space in that **BOYS WHO LIKE GIRLS remain, and EVERYONE ELSE, exeunt.** The heterosexual director has spoken and he “always sets the terms for the debate ... [and he does not have] to explain or detail his existence” (Sullivan, 1995: 67). The narrative gets tense. Very tense.

The negative effects of heteronormativity have been documented as its “re-enactment” and “re-experiencing” persists. Tomczyk (2020) agrees; he found in his study that “heteronormativity and cisnormativity perpetuate systems of oppression, as they are woven into school culture and the hidden curriculum” (Tomczyk, 2020: ii). But my assumption was that in an all-boys’ environment, the theatre door is left open wider for an audience of toxic men who would observe and study deviancy through lenses that compare “gay men and lesbians to straight people [and assess that] their behaviours and subcultures represented a form of social disease and psychopathology” (Grzanka, 2019: 5). This does not bode well for the “deviant”. Moving around in this space becomes a perpetual questioning of self. The reality is that there will never be a sense of belonging. The deviant will always feel rejected. And the moments of rejection can have devastating effects. In his short story, *Dancing Men* (2021), Manish Chauhan writes of such a moment with heart-breaking clarity:

Rishi lay down too, until they were beside each other. It felt good, just the two of them and from the corner of his eye, he watched as Biggie closed his. He hadn’t seen anybody look so comfortable, as though nothing else mattered. He wanted to look away but he couldn’t. Then, without giving it too much thought, he moved closer, looked at Biggie’s lips and wondered what would happen if he kissed them. He moved even closer, until their mouths were centimetres apart but before anything more could happen, Biggie opened his eyes. “What the fuck,” he said, shuffling away, as though he’d seen a rat. Rishi moved back, lay his head on the grass. “I ain’t a fag,” Biggie said. “No way.” “Fuck you. I wasn’t trying anything. I thought I could see something on your face. “Like what?” “A spider or something.” But the spell had been broken, and before long Biggie said he had to go. Rishi watched him disappear down the hill, the lights on his bike growing smaller and smaller until they were nothing. Now alone, he wiped his wet eyes with the back of his hands. Beneath the black fog, he heard the soft familiar-unfamiliar music float up out of the centre and knew exactly what it was. He watched the men, their shoulders, their calves twitching in the half-light. Their blurry shadows moving gently across the wall, their hands sometimes clasped, sometimes free, like birds traversing the sky. It made him feel sick. “Stupid fucking fags,” he shouted as he stood up and walked towards the main road. (Chauhan, 2021: 64–65)

This act of rejection that Rishi experiences in the extract has a clear, devastating effect as he, in an effort to protect himself, rejects his own sense of self, his own truth, and perpetrates the same intolerance on others.

Sullivan (1995) captures the essence of this experience in writing that “most people are liable to meet emotional rejection by sheer force of circumstance; but for a homosexual, the odds are simply far, far higher [because] the heterosexual identity ... attempts to judge homosexuality by the standards of that norm” (Sullivan, 1995: 13). My assumption was that, for the homosexual “deviant”, the “circumstance” of “rejection” in an all-boys’ environment was greatly intensified.

Stevi Jackson’s (2006: 107) explanation that heteronormativity

should not be thought of as simply a form of sexual expression [and that] it is not only a key site of intersection between gender and sexuality, but also one that reveals the interconnection between sexual and non-sexual aspects of social life

is certainly valuable. However, heteronormativity, rooted in gender in this space, is inextricably linked to sexuality. One of the main conditions of a hyper-masculinity is a testosterone-fuelled heterosexuality. And a discourse about sex and sexuality is carefully guarded, controlled, and directed by colonial religiousism. It is an unspoken taboo. The thought of “uncontrol”, of “nervousness” and of “ambivalence” is as horrifying to institutional patriarchal power as it is to the queer deviant. Well, look at that. They have something in common.

Michael Warner (1993: xxi) suggests that “het [heteronormative] culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist”. The “boy society” must be protected at all costs because there is the danger of losing its very reason for existence. Seeing queer is strange and considered disruptive. The heteronormative society is then layered with codes to keep oppressive normative structures in place. From the outside, this is no theatre of performance made from straws which can simply be dismantled with a breath of defiance. Rather, it is a rigid theatrical institution constructed from the brick and mortar of so-called universal truths.

2.2 Straightening the line: Taking pride in universal truths and queer prejudice

So, the scene was set a long time ago. Systems and “universal truths” are put in place to ensure that every boy remains on the straight and narrow and in line. Even Jane Austen, in the opening line of her novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813/2003: 1), cheekily points to one of these truths when she suggests that “it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”. The expectation is that boys must want girlfriends and that single men must want wives. It is useful to invite Sara Ahmed into the discussion once again, as she calls these master narratives “straightening devices, which keep things in line, in part by holding things in place” (Ahmed, 2006: 562). In this way, myriad universal truths are embedded in the fabric of the text. In most all-boys’ institutions these commandments are held as sacred. They are performed loudly through the whispers of tradition, bellowing religious judgements, war cries of legacy, silent codes, faded rules and regulations, rusted symbols, outdated curricula, and exclusionary culture. These “devices” are used to straighten the pathways around these schools. However, it is more complex than a mere straightening of the lines. Ahmed further articulates that the implications of making straight “means not only that we have to turn toward the objects given to us by heterosexual culture but also that we must turn away from objects that take us off this line” (Ahmed, 2006: 554). It is standing in salute, confident and in control, as a collective of brothers, backs turned away from defiant questions, frowning faces and confused bodies.

Historically, all-boys’ schools embarked on a strict regime of straightening the masculine. Connell (2000: 155) termed these as “masculinizing practices”. He proposes that these schools

defined and enforced a suitable masculinity among its boys through rigidly enforced conventional dress, discipline (prefects having the authority to beat younger boys), academic competition and hierarchy (emphasised by constant testing), team games, and gender segregation [and] ... laid more emphasis on toughness and physical hierarchy among the boys, through masculinizing practices such as initiation, ‘fagging’, physical punishment and spartan living conditions. This agenda was obviously connected with the context of colonial conquest, and the goal of maintaining racial power over colonised peoples. (Connell, 2000: 155)

William Pollack (2006: 190), similarly, calls it “gender straightjacketing”, which he states “push[es] many boys to repress their yearnings for love and connection and to build an invisible, impenetrable wall of toughness [or disguise] around themselves” (Pollack, 2006: 191). Sullivan (1995: 15) agrees and explains that, as a result, “many of us also embraced

those ideologies that seemed most alien to what we feared we might be: of the sports jock, of the altar boy, of the young conservative ... the ultimate disguises”.

Newspaper articles still abound with narratives that spotlight the negative press that all-boys’ schools receive and decry the hangover of some of their straightening practices. In her 2019 article for the *Daily Maverick*, Robyn Vorster wrote that traditions such as fagging¹¹ and hazing¹² in all-boys’ schools were “reinforced through initiation practices, which can range from relatively benign pranks to protracted patterns of behaviour that rise to the level of abuse or criminal misconduct [and that] initiation may include physical or psychological abuse, nudity, or even sexual assault” (Vorster, 2019, para. 6). There is no doubt that, over time, most all-boys’ schools have eased up on many of these “straightjacketing” practices, mainly because they are wary of the blinding gaze of the media and its resulting consequences. The legacy, however, still echoes in some shape or form. The more covert heteronormative truths continue to exist. The theatre of the un-fabulous. However, it is no surprise that many private schools that cater only for boys continue to sing, short-sightedly, from the same hymn book in their performances towards the benefits of these institutions. Their emphases are mainly on the fact that boys and girls have different learning styles and that boys are more comfortable expressing their identities next to other boys. But the arguments are tenuous, the tune is off-key, and the performance jaded and automated. It is an active and intentional “othering” which serves to further make strange and reinforce gender stereotypes. It is exactly this kind of stale and outdated narrative that is but only another form of “straightjacketing”. Psychologist and former president of the American Psychological Association, Diane Halpern (as cited in Nguyen, 2016: para. 8), muses over the need for all-boys’ schools, asking, “We don’t have sex-segregated workplaces so why would we have sex-segregated schools?” The feeling is that these institutions are indeed of another time. Sullivan (1995) suggests that “not only is the past another country; it is with other beings [and] so, for that matter, is the present” (Sullivan, 1995: 63).

¹¹ According to *Educalingo* (n.d.), fagging was a traditional educational practice in British boarding private schools and also many other boarding schools, whereby younger pupils were required to act as personal servants to the most senior boys.

¹² According to *Educalingo* (n.d.), hazing is the practice of rituals and other activities involving harassment, abuse or humiliation used as a way of initiating a person into a group.

But in his 2020 online article for the website *ThoughtCo.*, Robert Kennedy disagrees, and maintains that all-boys' schools are still relevant and lists the benefits for boys as follows:

- There are no gender stereotypes at a single-sex school, allowing the boys to feel free to explore subjects such as languages and the arts without fear of ridicule.
- Boys and girls are quite different people. Educating boys and girls in single-sex settings is not an assault on equal rights. Many believe that it is an opportunity that will ultimately enhance equality by allowing boys and girls to develop their own unique characters.
- Science has proven that each gender learns in a different manner, accelerating at different rates of learning with varying ability to process the information being presented.
- A single-sex school allows boys to explore subjects and activities that they may never have considered at a co-ed school. (Kennedy, 2020)

One can argue, however, that these arguments support a heteronormative narrative that gender and sexuality is binary and are therefore yet another form of gender straightjacketing. My assumption is that some (e.g. Connell, 2000; Pollack, 2006; Sullivan, 1995) would argue that Kennedy's points are all based on the premise that, with no girls in the environment, there is no gender stereotyping, which allow boys to be more authentically "boy" and free to pursue interests that they would not consider in a co-educational environment. Kennedy, however, forgets that in the absence of diversity, there is only one way to be and that is boy. The implication is that boys need to be what girls are not. Kennedy's arguments then have the opposite effect to that which his promulgation of all-boys' schools intends to do. Boys will instead shy away from the arts, as it is traditionally the domain of girls. Boys will only "do boy" because they want to conform rather than develop a "unique" character.

But to be fair to Kennedy, it was necessary for me then to consider the characters written into this text. After all, the performance of these characters, by actors who are assigned specific roles, must be directed, and blocked, I assumed, in very specific ways.

Scene 3 – Queer characters in a foreign land

Insofar as Boswell (1982: 82) claims that “we [homosexuals] are like strangers cut off in a foreign land”, I propose that in a fraternity of an all-boys’ school, which promotes the narrative of family as a brotherhood, the strangeness of queer is made even more foreign.

3.1 A family of brothers having dinner at a “wonky table”

Sullivan (1995: 63) claims that “human beings exist, but what they are and what they mean to each other is entirely contingent on the world they find themselves in”. The identities of the characters that make their way onto the stage of an all-boys’ school, or any school for that matter, are then shaped by their environment. Sullivan (1995: 63) further clarifies this by suggesting that “human nature does not exist; it is a spontaneous social creation”. McEachern (2014: 152) found that this “spontaneous social creation” of the identities of boys in such an environment is driven and shaped by “the idea of a school ‘brotherhood’ and [the boys and other community members] did what(ever) they could to gain membership in that fraternity” (McEachern, 2014: 152). This family of brotherhood will foster a sense of belonging. Belonging to a family is important. Family is synonymous with acceptance, loyalty, support, safety, and security. This is ideally what the private all-boys’ school strives for because when a student feels safe, cared for, and supported, then the conditions will be optimal for teaching and learning. As a result, this community will nurture and educate generations of boys who are well-adjusted and ready to conquer the world. However, McEachern found that, ironically, the opposite was true and that instead the all-boys’ school that she investigated “fostered exclusivity and reinforced stereotypical gender norms that ultimately limited its community members [as] not all of the population subscribed to the concept [of a ‘brotherhood’]” (McEachern, 2014: 153). Ahmed (2006) sheds further light on the phenomenon, describing it as “queer bodies [that] are out of place in certain family gatherings, which is what produces, in the first place, a queer effect. The table might even become wonky” (Ahmed, 2006: 568). Considering this, many characters that now emerge from the pages of this script stand queerly between the lines of the dialogue, waiting for those potentially fearless actors to breathe life into those identities. These strangers do not feel that they belong in this now-foreign land. They stand outside, beyond the borders, in no-man’s land, like shadows reflected abstractly on the back wall of the theatre. And I suspected that in the face of the very real threat of violence,

very few actors are brave enough to readily grab the script, learn these strange and queer lines and step defiantly into the spotlight, undaunted by the hostile gaze of their brothers.

3.2 Queer student identities and strange disguises (perfectionism and failure)

Whether we like it or not, our identities, be they comfortably authentic or painfully obscure, are always in the spotlight. The audience observing your life will see, in some way, how you interpret yourself and your existence. According to Sullivan (1995: 62), “one’s very existence depends upon one’s self-understanding”. In a society of boys, the slightest hint of being different is immediately visible and seen as strange. At an age when “boy” is most malleable and influenced by society, seeing oneself as strange through the eyes of others can be very traumatic indeed. It is a defining moment in one’s life when one sees oneself as different to his brothers despite his best attempts at ignoring what everyone else can see. Many queer individuals find themselves in this position and inevitably scramble for the dark recesses of the wings to find a safe costume and props closet in which to disguise themselves into a less visible and acceptable character – Perhaps looking for a military uniform and a gun. In their minds, if there is no spotlight, there is no need for panic or the feeling of “uncontrol” but instead a freedom that you control the narrative. But Sullivan (1995: 81) posits that “the trauma is real nonetheless. It is the sense of asphyxiation you feel when someone defines you without your consent ... it is [instead] unfreedom”. In an ongoing attempt to shake the feeling of “unfreedom”, the boy student will often strive for what they can control. They will strive for masculine success. Because around the table, sitting down with a family of brothers, nothing is more valued, and accepted, than the success of achieving the ideal masculinity.

Swain (2006: 338) argues that one form of this ideal masculinity is “inextricably linked to the body and that physicality and athleticism was the most cherished and extensively used resource”. Adams and Govender (2008: 555) agree and suggest that “boys may often engage in socially recognised activities, like rugby or water sports, to achieve the recognition they desire”. However, Adams and Govender (2008: 553) further postulate that this ideal masculinity, which they call “perfectionism”, is also linked to the pursuit of academic success as it is “seen as the route to employment, enabling men to fulfil the ‘providing’ aspect of their male role”. An additional disguise and another example of “perfectionism” “is young men’s repeated engagement in non-relational sex” (Adams & Govender, 2008: 553). This is an

extension of Robert Brannon's (1976) claim that the ideal masculine can be summarised as follows:

1. No Sissy Stuff: The stigma of all stereotypical feminine characteristics and qualities, including openness and vulnerability.
2. The Big Wheel: Success, status, and the need to be looked up to.
3. The Sturdy Oak: A manly air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance.
4. Give 'Em Hell!: The aura of aggression, violence, and daring.

(Brannon, 1976: 12)

The analysis of this script and the spotlighting of these characters reveal the imagined protagonist of the narrative: a hyper-masculine overachieving philandering hero. And if masculinity is the successful norm, then failure is equated with femininity, which, in turn, equates with vulnerability, weakness, worthlessness, unimportance, cowardice and softness. And heroes do not or are not supposed to fail. Failure is not an option because failure only serves to make strange, once again, and to make the queer more visible. As previously pointed out, this moving in and out of the spotlight is exhausting. Even though Sullivan (1995: 80) refers to being queer when he reminds us that "most homosexuals are not, of course, in or out the closet; they hover tentatively somewhere in between", it is still valuable because it demonstrates the results of the pathology of perfectionism. Most boys, gay or not, will hover precariously between success and failure. The irony, however, is that failure is inevitable. If you fail, you are queer. This causes the boys to exist in a perpetual state of nervousness. But this nervousness is noticeable not only in the hero but equally evident in the strange supporting characters that complete the make-up of this foreign land.

3.3 Queer teachers as strange characters at the other end of the "wonky table"

Teachers are also expected to sit around the table with the brotherhood and read from the same script. Often the staff member who is expected to participate is what McEachern (2014) labels "the school's 'preferred' faculty member ... [a] white, heterosexual male wholly supportive of the school's administration and initiatives" (McEachern, 2014: 153). Ferfolja and Hopkins (2013: 312) offer research which has shown that, around this table-reading of that script, "many lesbian and gay-identified teachers have felt compelled to hide their sexuality for fear of discrimination, dismissal, school and/or broader community rejection, and limitations on career

options and trajectories”. It is worth noting that Ferfolja and Hopkins (2013) found that queer teachers, although often not the “preferred” staff members, found greater acceptance in culturally diverse school environments. Very little research has been conducted into the experiences of queer teachers in all-boys’ schools, but one can easily deduce from Ferfolja and Hopkins (2013) that the fear and nervousness for these teachers must be exacerbated in a homogeneous environment owing to a lack of diversity. They too are made strange, even in a supporting role. At the very least, for queer teachers who find allies in school management, the expectation is often that they do not talk about or disclose their sexuality to the staff and certainly not to the students. Sullivan’s (1995) comments in this regard are valuable as he claims that

to tell a [*sic*] homosexual to keep his identity a secret in public is equivalent to telling a [*sic*] heterosexual that she should never mention her husband or children in public or relate any stories that might indicate her involvement in a sexual and emotional relationship with someone of the opposite sex. (Sullivan, 1995: 125)

Fredman et al. (2009) clarify the potential consequences of this “don’t ask, don’t tell”¹³ mindset. They suggest that if queer educators do not feel that they can talk freely about their lives, they “either knowingly or unknowingly, [reproduce] the existence of this heteronormative rule, which involve[s] passing the rule of silence on to their students” (Freedman et al., 2009: 66). Queer teachers in an all-boys’ school environment, who are scripted into a heteronormative text, experience a war on multiple fronts. Not only do they have to concern themselves with potentially hostile student and peer reactions, but the stage combat extends further: Ann Harding (2019: 14) suggests that “we need more than an army ready to battle when homophobic parents and other school leaders challenge LGBTQ teachers who choose to live and teach authentically”. Queer teachers simply do not feel safe.

Simons et al. (2021: 2) shed further light on the problem and indicate that

educators who are LGB possess multiple identities, so they are susceptible to experiencing the compounding effects of minority stress [which] may lead to concealment of one’s authentic identity, an increase of prejudice and discrimination, and lack of LGB role models.

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don%27t_ask,_don%27t_tell

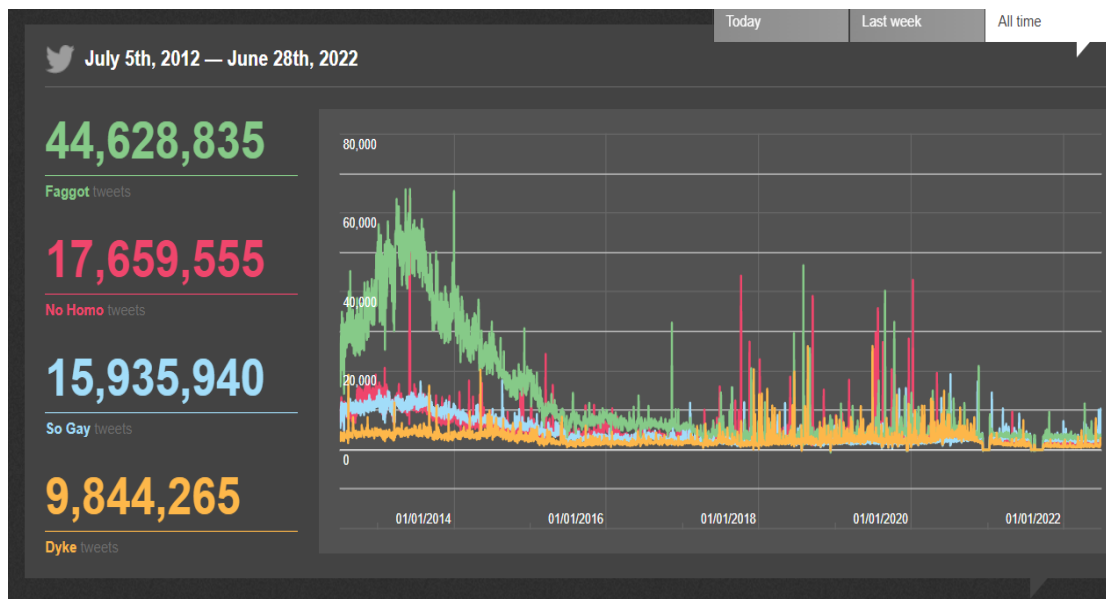
This means that queer teachers are not given the space on stage to perform/teach authentically. Teaching authentically, according to Harding (2019: 12), “is defined as teaching freely and openly inside the classroom and is achieved by creating a space in which LGBTQ lives and voices may be freely visible inside the classroom”. Catherine Lee (2020) proposes that there is a missed opportunity here if queer teachers are not given the space to teach and serve authentically. She argues that queer teachers may have qualities such as “reading people, compassion and commitment to the inclusion of others, making connections, managing uncertainty, courage and risk-taking” (Lee, 2020: 2) that suggest they will be excellent leaders and teachers. But this kind of progress is suffocated because the characters and the space in which they move and use words, spoken and unspoken, in this script continues to reinforce the oppressive power dynamics at play.

Scene 4 – Queer words and strange silences

Words are invariably instruments of power, ways in which the strong control the weak, and among the ways in which that control can be temporarily resisted, if never ultimately overcome. For these words are embedded in “discourses,” or ways of speaking that only serve to strengthen and reinforce the power relations that exist discourses of science, of morality, of psychology, of criminology, of sexuality.
(Sullivan, 1995: 63)

4.1 Bullying words

A cursory glance at the website NoHomophobes.com (Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services, n.d.) starkly demonstrates that homophobic language is a daily reality on social media platforms like *Twitter*. The website tracks the daily, weekly, and all-time use of common derogatory words targeting the queer community.



NoHomophobes.com

Since the website's inception in July 2012, it has recorded the use of the word "faggot" a staggering 44,628,835 times. Although, the daily usage of the word has declined in the last few years, Stonewall Cymru in its report, *Tackling Homophobic Language* (Kibirige & Tryl, 2017: 6), found the following:

So gay: used on average over 10,000 times daily

No homo: used on average over 10,000 times daily

Faggot: used on average over 45,000 times daily

Dyke: used on average over 4,000 times daily

Since social media is a daily reality for so many students, teachers, and parents, it is now the manuscript, in the form of a stream of consciousness, which is very hard to avoid and not to read.

The report further postulates that there is a "strong link between failure to tackle homophobic language and high levels of homophobic bullying" (Kibirige & Tryl, 2017: 9). Rewriting the script to omit such bewildering numbers of homonegative chatter seems insurmountable. Kibirige and Tryl (2017: 9) put the problem in perspective and suggest that "homophobic

language doesn't just reinforce negative perceptions of gay people but also leads to a general intolerance of being different".

If social media is a yardstick for the discourse in our society, then our schools, as microcosms, inevitably mirror the language being spoken and accepted in our schools. According to Sullivan (1995: 81), "the homophobic slur ... erases dignity because it denies individuation". As a result, the characters that navigate the stage floor are mere phantoms because "young people, gay or straight, feel less able to be themselves or take part in the activities they enjoy because they are worried about being labelled gay" (Kibirige & Tryl, 2017: 9). And, as previously mentioned, being labelled as anything other than a successful hyper-masculine student is seen as failure. In an all-boys' school, the chances of standing out from the homogeneous crowd is almost inevitable. Sullivan also suggests that difference is even further implied as

the denigration of "fags" is often linked to a denigration of femininity and of women. Beating up or ridiculing a "homo" ... [is] an activity of an insecure, unstable adolescent, who is more often than not equally contemptuous and afraid of women. (Sullivan, 1995: 113).

The reality is that we are working with boys who are intolerant of anyone who is different to what they perceive as the norm. Anyone is a target, whether they are queer or not.

4.2 "No Homo"– Everyone and everything is queer ... if you are not

The article, "Hearing 'that's so gay' and 'no homo' on academic outcomes for LGBTQ+ college students", published in the *Journal of LGBT Youth* is valuable insofar as it explains that homophobic slurs and "harassment can be overt, including directly targeted derogatory names such as 'dyke' [but] includes ambient experiences which are not directed at a specific target, taking the form of jokes about LGBTQ+ people heard by anyone within earshot" (Mathies et al., 2019: 256). The authors further suggest that subtle heterosexist harassment (microaggressions) "are more prevalent than blatant hostility" (Mathies, et al., 2019: 256).

Sue (2010: 3) defines microaggressions as "the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalised group membership". These microaggressions have an impact on the larger community. Mathies et al.

(2019) suggest that seemingly harmless or unintentional comments have the power to establish and reinforce certain mindsets. Students may readily exclaim,

the phrase “that’s so gay” ... to describe something as stupid and worthless and the phrase “no homo” at the end of a statement to affirm heterosexual and masculine identity, which both dismiss and problematize being gay. (Mathies et al., 2019: 257)

My assumption was that perhaps these microaggressions were even more prevalent in an all-boys’ school, in which the aim, as seen, is to advertise a “successful” masculinity. It is, however, interesting to note that Mathies et al. (2019) reported that half of the students who used words associated with microaggressions did not realise that their comments might have been discriminatory. The report suggests that students often use this type of language to “win social approval from peer groups or to assert masculinity” (Mathies et al., 2019: 257). Phrases such as “no homo” are now almost expected after a statement which could potentially display a sign of vulnerability, weakness, or any interest in something that might be considered outside of the norm. In their 2011 song and music video, *No Homo*, The Lonely Island comedy trio parodies individuals in a hyper-masculine industry, such as hip-hop, who frequently “straighten” themselves in a public space. They ridicule the compulsion to exclaim “no homo” after giving a compliment to a friend, expressing interest in anything feminine, sharing hopes and dreams, being their authentic selves, being vulnerable and so on. The following is an extract from the lyrics to the song:

When you want to compliment a friend, no homo
But you don’t want that friendship to end, no homo
To tell a dude just how you feel, no homo
Just say no homo so he knows the deal no homo
(Genius.com, n.d.)

It is clear from the lyrics that any utterances which are perceived as echoing homosexuality, and by extension gendered female, such as showing vulnerability, sharing feelings, being kind, complimenting a friend and expressing interest in what is not considered stereotypically masculine, is considered weakness, and qualified as “no homo”. The irony the lyrics express, however, is that what is considered feminine are human traits. “No homo” is, instead, a denial of their own humanness and used as homonegativity and denies others their humanity as well.

The song (or rather, the point its artists are trying to make) is yet another example of what Swain (2006: 333) calls “masculinizing practices”. It is an ongoing performance in a script and

on a stage carefully crafted and designed to marginalise and keep the brotherhood walking silently in paths which are defensively demarcated along the straight and narrow.

4.3 Silence is the golden rule of ... hegemonic masculinity

Expanding the performance space and trying to control the text to promote inclusivity and combat intolerance of difference, in any shape or form, is generally the mantra of most schools in the 21st century. However, in their study, Kibirige and Tryl (2017: 10) found that “despite the negative impact of homophobic language, only 10 per cent of teachers challenge it every time it occurs ... it is rarely treated in the same way as racist or sexist language”. They also found that “in schools where teachers never challenge homophobic remarks the rate of homophobic bullying is far higher than in schools where teachers always challenge homophobic remarks when they hear them (71 per cent compared to 43 per cent)” (Kibirige & Tryl, 2017: 9). Similarly, Mayberry et al. (2011) found correlating trends and practices in schools. They surmised that

despite the increase in efforts to provide protection and safety to LGBT students, antigay and homophobic sentiments and behaviours of students and teachers endure in the country's schools ... and the incidence of bullying and harassment related to sexual orientation continues to be high (Mayberry et al., 2011: 2).

Tomczyk (2020: 4) found that this intentional or intentional silence has

a consequential negative impact on youth expressing their sexuality and gender in non-normative ways, if they are forced to live on the margins, or even worse, if they need to silence their sexuality or gender expression for fear of what may result if they came out.

Although some schools have committed to putting strategies in place to negate the problem, such as anonymous reporting apps (News24, 2018), the deeply ingrained culture of keeping silent remains, especially in all-boys' schools (Sobuwa, 2020). Another strategy that schools are employing is to establish gay-straight alliances (GSAs) to encourage inclusivity and awareness. Some research has been conducted into whether GSAs indeed can improve the school environment and help to minimise instances of bullying (Marx & Kettrey, 2016). In many cases it was found that GSAs indeed make a difference as they contribute to a sense of belonging and social integration in the school environment. It was, however, also found that the establishment of these GSAs are met with vehement resistance in some instances. Parent bodies, and at times, management and some faculty members objected to these societies as they

deemed them inappropriate for students and were concerned that LGBTQI+ students and faculty members were promoting and even imposing their gay agenda on the rest of the school body. I suspected that this was even more prevalent in traditional private all-boys' schools. The other problem is that, as previously stated, making visible is also dangerous, and students might not feel comfortable exploring GSAs for fear of being spotlighted and bullied. The GSAs are therefore avoided and consequently written out of the text. Furthermore, the influence and power that alumni associations (old boys' societies) wield on these campuses might also be an obstacle to promoting change. These bodies might traditionally be averse to change as they try and hang on to what worked for them and the ways in which they were taught.

For the heteronormative patriarchy, silence is indeed golden as it ensures the absence of resistance. It is the lock to Pandora's Box. In his article for *Psychology Today*, psychotherapist Mark O'Connell (2016: para. 3) suggests that "silence has been the greatest threat to queer lives throughout history". He further claims:

Every time we fail to use words to make explicit links between queerphobia and attacks on queer people, the hatred, fear, and danger grow stronger. (For example, a disturbingly ironic post by a straight woman announcing her engagement popped up on my Facebook feed this week, including a photo of her diamond ring and a shot of the Orlando¹⁴ skyline from the boat on which she and her fiancé were celebrating, along with happy, hopeful thoughts about their heteronormative future, yet she wrote nothing about the 49 murder victims whose futures were taken from them by an act of homophobia only days before in that very city, or about the queer individuals still alive whose futures will continue to be plagued by hate, fear, and danger). (O'Connell, 2016: para. 7)

The suggestion is that silence amounts to being complicit. Therefore, silence is a performative act that emerges as a destructive weapon to ensure that the status quo remains. It is clear that a disruptive and confrontational, fabulous, dialogue needs to be written into the script to methodically break down heteronormative systems of oppression on this "unfabulous" stage.

¹⁴ The location of a mass shooting at a gay nightclub, *Pulse*, in Orlando, USA on 12 June 2016.

ACT III

RIISING ACTION – A FABULOUS METHODOLOGY, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Insofar my aims and objectives were concerned, I wished to use the following theoretical frameworks and methodologies to understand my experience and interrogate this private all-boys' school as a theatrical space:

- queer pedagogy and queer theory as methods to serve as a structural guide around which to shape a Theatre of the Fabulous
- queer performative autoethnography and queer performance as research (PaR) to live 'inside' the culture and environment of which I am a part and "to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis et al., 2010: 1); and
- Theatre of the Ridiculous to serve up queering methods of identification/disidentification for use in a Theatre of the Fabulous.

Scene 1 – Queering education

The homosexual ... learns certain rules; and, ... later on in life, to unlearn ... and every homosexual child will learn the rituals of deceit, impersonation, and appearance. (Sullivan, 1995: 13)

this is for the queer kids

this is for the queer kids

who are taught their ABC's

but not their L's, G's, B's, and T's

for the Russian government and the I.O.C

who deny Russian queers their visibility

*to the people who call me “faggot”
I wear your name-calling like a pink triangle
stitched to my sleeve
for the Harvey Milk’s, the Christine Burns’
and every queer in between
to the allies who do more than say
“your sexuality is okay with me”
for the Jamaican trans teen
who was murdered needlessly
to the television networks
who portray LGBT individuals positively
for the radical queers
the POC queers
the genderqueers
the queers who have felt excluded
this is for you
for us
this is a celebration
and an ultimatum
we are here
we are queer
& we will do more
than survive.*

– Adam Hicks (2013)

1.1 Queering

If I wanted to embark on a journey to disrupt and dismantle hegemony in the classroom and beyond, it was necessary to investigate the tenets and framework of existing queer pedagogical discussions. To this end, Grzanka’s (2019) summary of what queer theory is and what it aims to do was helpful. He theorised that queer theory is:

- a conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively, and enforced through boundaries and binary divides;
- the problematisation of sexual and gender categories and of identities in general; identities are always on uncertain ground, entailing displacements of identification and knowing;
- a rejection of civil rights strategies in favour of a politics of carnival, transgression, and parody, which leads to deconstruction, decentring, revisionist readings, and an anti-assimilationist politics;
- a willingness to interrogate areas which normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality and to conduct queer “readings” of ostensibly heterosexual or nonsexualized texts (Grzanka, 2019: 5)

This framework is valuable insofar as it provides a map to orientate the theory and praxis (as explored later through a reflection on queer performance styles) of a Theatre of the Fabulous as a pedagogy.

1.2 Queer pedagogy

According to the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education, queer pedagogy, “much like the queer theory that informs it, draws on the lived experience of the queer, wonky, or non-normative as a lens through which to consider educational phenomena” (Thomas-Reid, 2018: para. 2).

Pennell (2019: 2294) agrees and extends it to a specific definition in which she proposes that queer pedagogy is not merely advocating queer inclusivity but that teachers using a queer pedagogy should “interrogate systemic heteronormativity and question their own place within that system”. As additional discussants, Zacko-Smith and Smith (2010: 8) ask that teachers “transcend themselves and look to affect the larger world [and suggest that] this type of education fully implicates educators and administrators in the fight for societal and global change”.

I wanted to be clear about the ideas of a queer pedagogy and how I could shape my own teaching performance in line with its tenets and framework to begin the journey towards shifting the reality for myself and others. Pennell (2019: 2291) suggests that queer theory “can be used to analyse the social and institutional norms in any subject”. Pennell’s (2019) work is beneficial insofar as my intention was that my own Theatre of the Fabulous, informed by queer theory, can be used to interrogate, and make visible hegemonic heteronormative practices in

the ontology of my own environment. By using this approach in my classroom, my pedagogy would then be queered. The framework and tenets of a queer pedagogy, outlined by Zacko-Smith and Smith (2010) and Pennell (2019), informed by queer theory, guided my thinking towards the Theatre of the Fabulous. According to Pennell's (2019) suggestions, a queer pedagogy should:

- not merely be queer inclusive but it must interrogate systemic heteronormativity and question their own place in the system;
- focus on identifications [and disidentification] (as fluid ways of naming oneself) rather than identities (static categories of naming oneself and others);
- go beyond the text (defined broadly) to include reflections on the world, one's place within it, and how one's biases and preferences are shaped by societal norms;
- work in such a way that students gain comfort in being uncomfortable.
- include group work [as it is] key for student learning [and share the] tenet of many critical and social justice pedagogies of dialogue, processing and ... play;
- strive for "engaged play, rather than ... students playing a teacher-created game, [and] play with the material in a way that contributes to their own learning";
- avoid the danger in creating exclusion in our attempt to include;
- consider norms that relate to all identities, not just queer individuals; and
- focus on individual reflection and unlearning, both important concepts in social justice pedagogy. (Pennell, 2019: 2295–2304)

There are many examples of queer performances that have been devised and created while working with queer students. Tomczyk (2020: ii) refers to the ethno-drama, *Queering High School*, which highlights "the lived experience of LGBTQ youth in Alberta high schools that explored their experiences of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia". This study, like others of this nature, is valuable to the extent that it confirms, as Tomczyk (2020: ii) concludes,

that heteronormativity and cisnormativity perpetuate systems of oppression, as they are woven into school culture and the hidden curriculum. Heteronormativity and cisnormativity operate through manifestations of homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic bullying and harassment, which have detrimental effects for LGBTQ youth.

However, there are limitations to the existing research studies as they focus broadly on school cultures and environments that are co-educational. A single-sex school, in contrast, generally explicit in its name, is by its very nature more patriarchal, colonial and heteronormative. Leigh Adams and Kaymarlin Govender (2008: 552) surmise that "a traditional masculine ideology proposes that men portray and maintain a specific social persona which reflects toughness,

emotional invulnerability, heterosexual dominance, and success, as well as an avoidance of anything deemed ‘feminine’”.

My assumption was that this “traditional masculine ideology” in an all-boys’ school manifests itself as hyper-masculine and is explicitly hegemonic in nature. I have found no research on the impact of a queer pedagogy specifically focused on and in a private all-boys’ school environment. The Theatre of the Fabulous, with its pedagogical compass aimed at queering the structures in this environment, could then function to identify the unique complexities of male identities and male performativity in this homogeneous, “masculine” theatre. But this kind of pedagogy is what Blignaut and Koopman (2020) call a pedagogy of discomfort, which

invites students to critique their deeply held assumptions, and to destabilise their views of themselves and their worlds’. These authors remind us that this process of learning can be painful and traumatic, but in being directed to the future, it gives participants an opportunity to revise previously held views and arrive at new understandings. (Blignaut & Koopman, 2020: 85–86)

I had to think of ways to make students comfortable with the uncomfortable and not view them

simply as consumers of knowledge, but as active participants whose epistemic needs should be met as fully as possible in the learning spaces [but rather] they should be encouraged to cultivate a critical disposition in discourse and to welcome knowledge that unsettles them. (Blignaut & Koopman, 2020: 86)

Therefore, I had to start from the assumption that I was teaching and performing towards an uncomfortable audience who may not have been willing and ready to interrogate their own masculine ideologies and to venture into possible moments of vulnerability or uncomfortability. What makes boys in this environment uncomfortable? I was uncertain about this foreign land, this foreign script, this foreign theatre and how exactly the story was about to unfold.

Scene 2 – Queer mapping and queer stories of self

The second body of work which informed my conceptual framework is PaR, including a performative autoethnography (PA). In his article entitled *Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research*, Dwight Conquergood (2002: 145) quotes Michel de Certeau, who proposed, “what the map cuts up, the story cuts across”. This is a beneficial reference when I

consider the all-boys' school environment that I am working in as "the map" and the lived experiences of myself, the students and staff as "the story".

2.1 Queer performance as research

Conquergood (2002: 146) suggests that for research to truly understand and make sense of the location and its phenomena, there is a need to move beyond the "knowing that [and] knowing about [which merely reflects] a distanced perspective". He proposes "another way of knowing that is grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection: 'knowing how', and 'knowing who'" (Conquergood, 2002: 146). He feels that "this is a view from ground level, in the thick of things. This is knowledge that is anchored in practice and circulated within a performance community but is ephemeral" (Conquergood, 2002: 146).

My Theatre of the Fabulous had to be guided by PaR if I wanted to understand the "ground level". Norman K. Denzin (2003: 192–193) validated this when he claimed that "as pedagogical practices, performances make sites of oppression visible [and] reasserts the value of self-determination and mutual solidarity". Brad Haseman (2007: 148) articulates this approach as a "performative research paradigm". His articulation of this type of research is significant as it extends the function thereof when he claims that "practitioner researchers do not merely 'think' their way through or out of a problem, but rather they 'practise' to a resolution" (Haseman, 2007: 147) and "increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society" (Haseman, 2007: 148).

My assumption was that heteronormative mindsets are constructed on rules and regulations enforced through binary lenses that are patriarchal, religious, traditional, colonial and heterosexual. These rules create the map that is designed to imprison stories, mindsets and identities. To this end, Campbell and Farrier (2015: 84) suggest that in order to cut across this map, a queer practice as research serves to queer "normative hierarchies of knowledge [and that] it is the unruly and leaky body that presents the possibility of knowledge as somewhere beyond the apparent stability of theory's abstractions, and often beyond the notionally clean lines of academic disciplines".

2.2 Queer performative autoethnography

As a queer teacher, I have had to train myself to be “ruly” and “unleaky” (i.e. the opposite of unruly and leaky). I always had to make sure I said the right things and did the right things. I had to make sure I taught longer and harder than everyone around me and I had to make sure that whatever I did (taught, performed, wrote a play, entered a competition) had to be the best. I had to be successful. I always felt I had to prove myself. It then made sense then that a queer performance style needed to be adopted in which the body was allowed to be “unruly” and “leaky”, as terrifying a prospect as this was, in order to cut across the hegemony of the disciplined binaries of heteronormativity. Campbell and Farrier (2015: 84–86) further express the significance of a queer PaR method, which brings about knowledge, has a “messy existence [and] ... articulates how heteronormative masculinities emerge in the body [and emerge from] failure as a queer PaR method”. Failure was never an option for me. But I had to find a personal research approach which could allow me to know the personal, so that I could become my authentic self again.

I found encouragement from Ellis et al. (2010: 1), who explain that an autoethnographic approach “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist”. Spry (2009: 603) agrees, as she suggests that the process is personal because it “starts with a body, in a place, and in a time [and that] ... we offer our performing body as raw data of a critical cultural story”. Spry further underscores the intention of this research as she suggests that PA

reveals the *understory* [emphasis in original] of hegemonic systems [and that it] ... attempt[s] to critically interrupt dominant narratives by offering a performance that breaks normative patternized behaviours and remakes a transgressive co-performance with others in sociocultural contexts and histories. (Spry, 2009: 604)

It was possible that, through my performative autoethnographic journey, this remaking of a “transgressive co-performance” could define the purpose of a Theatre of the Fabulous: an embodied queer pedagogy that could be used to highlight the “understory of hegemonic systems”.

Therefore, I wanted to proceed by “reading and writing the body as a cultural text” (Spry, 2009: 604), resulting in knowledge which would inform a Theatre of the Fabulous. My autoethnographic exploration consisted of journaling my lived experience in a process that

Pollock (1998: 75) refers to as a writing that is *doing*, which displaces writing as *meaning*. My writing as doing included reflexive writing on growing up as queer (including photographs, music, significant memories, etc.), my experiences as a queer teacher in a co-educational school environment, an investigation of my own queer writing for stage, and a personal exploration of my experiences of my body and mind in this place and this time. It was indeed a messy, leaky and unruly business.

Moreover, insofar as Haddad (2019: 2) suggests that “for LGBTQ teachers ... heteronormativity has a pervasive effect on curricula (both formal and informal), extra-curricular activities, and teaching as a profession”, it was beneficial to reflect on my own queer teaching and movement in this space, as well as reflecting on open-ended discussions with staff members, which provided an even broader perspective on normative practices in the school environment. The continuous *doing* writing of these methods of recording and obtaining knowledge about the ontology could inform the theorising and practice of my Theatre of the Fabulous.

My performance autoethnographic approach was linked to my aims and objectives in that it gave “focused attention to the denotative, sensory elements of the event: how it looks, sounds, smells, shifts over time” (Hamera, 2018: 636). By taking a queer approach to performance as research, I hoped that I could unearth heteronormative “expression about the site as well as within it” (Hamera, 2018: 636). I wished, through performance, to interrogate my lived experiences within the hegemony of an all-boys’ school, the results of which would become discussable.

The script I was reading and the theatre I was standing in felt stifled. It felt serious; it felt derivative; it felt dusty, old and colourless. I wanted to clean. I wanted to disrupt. I wanted to confront. I wanted to play. I wanted to be silly and colourful. I wanted to be ridiculous. I wanted to be original and authentic. Just to let go. Just to breathe. I wanted to be me.

2.3 Queer theory to queer performance

I envisaged a Theatre of the Fabulous to include methods that were playful, messy, unruly and leaky to confront the suffocating silence of heteronormative mindsets. I looked towards queer theatre movements and performance styles that were distinctly postmodern and intentionally

deconstruct and reconstruct master narratives. I was inspired by ‘unruly’ theatre practitioners such as Brecht, Artaud and Genet, who aimed to disrupt and, as Griffiths (2002: 37) suggests, in whose works are

intrinsic and elusive traces of a “queer philosophy” (albeit unknowingly) ... and could be seen as the central inspiration for much of the artistic practices of early avant-garde theatre [as] they enabled an approach to theatre and performance that preceded, anticipated and made a remarkable contribution to the later “legitimate” forms of queer theatre that emerged.

These theatre practitioners, among whom I include Grotowski, were some of the first to queer normative practices of performance in theatre. From Brecht’s use of *Verfremdungseffekts* (alienation techniques), to Artaud’s instance on “cruelty” in performance, to Genet’s experimentation with sexual deviancy and subversiveness of gender identity in performance, to Grotowski’s dismantling of traditional performance spaces, the practices of these “deviants” of theatre are valuable insofar as they lend legitimacy to a Theatre of the Fabulous that aims to challenge traditional ways of thinking in not only the performer but the audience as well.

Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekts* in performance, such as the use of *Gestus* and presentational acting, masks and breaking the fourth wall, allow for an objective experience of societal issues and prompt the audience to “analyse and evaluate the play’s underlying ideological meanings” (Griffiths, 2002: 57). Although Brecht’s productions dealt with weighty issues, his alienation techniques, which sought to remind the audience that they are watching a play and the actors that they are merely playing a role, encourages a sense of playfulness and fun and drove home the point that theatre must not take itself too seriously. It opened the theatre door to spectators, and not merely passive observers, and welcomed a leaky and messy approach. According to Griffiths (2002: 59), when it comes to subverting ideas about identity, Brecht’s alienation “is hence an inevitable methodological practice for the agit-prop, avant-garde and queer theatres that evolved later [and] ... allows a platform for alternative and deviant viewpoints”.

Moreover, Artaud, in his Theatre of Cruelty, believed that the performative body is more capable of expressing identity (performance of what is seen as taboo) than the spoken word. He felt that a reliance on the spoken word is elitist, but language spoken through the body is more likely to break down the barriers between his spectators and performers and therefore create the conditions for both to experience a catharsis.

The body, as a signifying text and instrument with its live performative potential for subversion, inscribed tensions and inconsistencies, was the volatile locus or focal mediator for an Artaudian form of queer consciousness: a consciousness of the constructed and performative nature of a (hetero) normative ontology. (Griffiths, 2002: 42)

Artaud encourages his performers to let their bodies to articulate their own identity, free from the constraints of societal expectations. In fact, it is exactly this challenging and expression of anti-heteronormative mindsets that makes the theatre seem cruel as a result. Ironically, the cruelty leads to liberation. Artaud's objective was "not to define thoughts but to cause thinking" (Artaud, 1958: 69). It was important that I channel this method of queering performance in such a way that students felt free to communicate their own voice through a performance of their bodies.

Genet and Grotowski broke with audience/character convention by either putting the audience on stage (Genet) or producing performances in non-traditional theatre spaces (Grotowski). By doing so, they "transgress[ed] traditional theatrical boundaries and [destroyed] the illusion of character" (Griffiths, 2002: 60). The "queer" work of these practitioners is important as they subvert master narratives in favour of an authentic personal experience and, ultimately, a moment of catharsis. Furthermore, Genet "disrupts spectatorial sensibilities through cross-gender/racial performance [and actors] who play characters who play roles" (Griffiths, 2002: 67), and Grotowski demands that the theatre be stripped "poor" so that his actors offer themselves to the craft and, therefore, more authentically to the spectator. This blurring of the boundaries could potentially create the very environment within the Theatre of the Fabulous "to transcend the tyranny of social oppression" (Griffiths, 2002: 68).

I looked to a method that embraced these queer approaches and, held up against a heteronormative world, seemed ridiculous. But my disruptive queer body felt attracted to that very ridiculous sense of "messiness" and playfulness.

Scene 3 – Queer Ridiculousness

The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others. (Aristotle, 4th century B.C.E./2022)

Overall, the LGBT community, we're the same, we're like everybody else. Except we're better looking and more stylish. – Wanda Sykes¹⁵

Do we have to worry about who's gay and who's straight? Can't we just love everybody and judge them by the car they drive? – Ellen DeGeneres¹⁶

3.1 Theatre of the Ridiculous

The Theatre of the Ridiculous, with its pastiche of styles, discards rules, borrows, and allows for performances that are unruly and leaky. It was directly influenced by the “queer” and “deviant” theatre practitioners (e.g. Brecht, Artaud, Genet and Grotowski) who came before and unashamedly exploits the strides they made towards a theatre that aims to disrupt. The Theatre of the Ridiculous neatly packages these “queering” theatre styles. Embracing a camp aesthetic, it flouts binary categories of art, gender and sexuality through its use of masks, drag aesthetic, role-playing, dancing and lip-synching, among other modes of performance. Through this, it adopts a “queer ... activist stance, one which undoes hierarchies through performed acts” (Aliano, 2014: 13). The Theatre of the Ridiculous further holds up as a queer performance mode of enquiry that is unruly and leaky because, through its campness, it embraces “failure ... [and sees it] not as something negative, but rather as being significant to the work's overall meaning” (Aliano, 2014: 16). It licenses a hamming-up of performance, which leads to a liberated playfulness devoid of binary constraints. This recognition is, in and of itself, queer, and it aims to disrupt and interrogate the toxicity and competitiveness of a hegemonic hyper-masculine environment. The Theatre of the Ridiculous, as a queer performance research method, could then inform the style of my own Theatre of the Fabulous, as it satisfied the research in that it too “is work that is self-consciously preoccupied with the act of performance in all its forms” (Aliano, 2014: 14).

¹⁵ *Dear Straight People* (2015)

¹⁶ *Dear Straight People* (2015)

3.1.1 *Queer camping*

Sullivan (1995: 72) intimates that “homosexuals [*sic*] have historically reacted to their erasure [and silence] not simply by subterfuge or resistance or violence, but by a complex undermining of the culture itself, by ‘camp’, by irony, by laughter”.

“Camp” is a word that is synonymous with queer culture and has been used interchangeably to denigrate or to empower. However, defining and understanding camp has notoriously been elusive. In the online article entitled “What does it mean to be camp?”, Joobin Bekhrad (2019) mentions that the term camp possibly originates from the French term “*se camper*”, meaning “to posture boldly”. She further explains that it was first defined in the 1909 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary and “conformed to popular, contemporary notions of camp: ‘ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to, characteristic of, homosexuals’” (Bekhrad, 2019: para. 3). To this day, camp is still associated with queerness but has since been embraced by the queer community as a weapon. Katrin Horn (2017: 15) offers her own definition of camp as “an excessively stylized parody and in-group humour, capable of intervening in naturalised and naturalising discourses of gender and sexuality, while granting access to otherwise oppressive systems of meaning- and pleasure-making”. Sullivan (1995: 73) agrees and labels campness as “the most effective revolt of all; and it came from a place of humour and self-consciousness that those who see only social structures of oppression can often miss”. It is exactly this self-conscious humour that was needed to break the constraints of a patriarchal colonialist heteronormative narrative. Thomas (1996: 103) refers to camp as

a particular kind of performance in which the overt meaning of what is performed is subverted or inverted by drawing attention to the fact that it is a performance, and thus a kind of lie (drag being a perfect example).

Susan Sontag (1964/2018: 4) extends this idea and calls camp “the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre ... it sees everything in quotation marks ... it’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’ ... it perceive[s] Being-as-Playing-Role”. I was particularly drawn to camp as performance and, specifically, as theatre. It is a scripted theatrical performance that allows for freedom of expression. The words on the stage,

whimsical and biting, cut through the silence as playful confrontation. Sullivan (1995: 73) refers to this liberating performance as an

autonomy [that] may be born out of pain, or misery, out of the very forces that seek to extinguish it; but its resilience suggests the existence of a human individual separate and independent from the culture in which he operates. The space may be no more than a cultural crack, the gesture of a drag queen, the inarticulate embrace snatched from an unseeing friend, the benign silence of an understanding parent. But between the gesture and the space, there is the possibility for human freedom.

But “being camp” makes the invisible visible for the audience because it is bold and colourful. Sullivan (1995: 92) is of the opinion that “the vast majority of the culture will be at best uninterested and at the worst hostile to the whole endeavour. In a society where the market rules the culture, majorities win the culture war”. The majority are afraid of queer and strange. And in an all-boys’ school, there is a risk that the hostile glare of a potential unforgiving audience will make the performer retreat, once again, to the safety of the wings, thinking of yet another disguise.

3.1.2 Queer fabulous masks in drag



RuPaul’s famous epigraph¹⁷

¹⁷ Meme Generator (n.d.)

In her now often-quoted epigraph, “We’re all born naked and the rest is drag”, RuPaul¹⁸ dismantles oppressive master narratives by suggesting that everyone is born a blank canvas – an identity not yet constructed. She echoes Judith Butler’s (1999) claim that identity is performed. Butler reminds us that her work on gender and its performativity was meant to open the “possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realised” (Butler, 1999: viii). While both are aware of the ways in which identity, especially gender and sexuality, has been performed as result of restrictive socialising narratives like heteronormativity, they intimate that there is choice. There is a possibility to change the narrative and perform the identity one chooses. Their work was therefore beneficial for a project with Theatre of the Fabulous as its aim to suggest ways in which to deconstruct binaries, look beyond so-called universal truths and then re-define the self without restriction.

To this end, I was particularly interested in the art of drag performance for which, arguably, RuPaul is the global ambassador. *MasterClass* (2021: paras. 2–3) defines drag as

a gender-bending art form in which a person dresses in clothing and make-up meant to exaggerate a specific gender identity, usually of the opposite sex. In other words, to “posture boldly”.

While drag’s main purpose has been for drag performance and entertainment, it is also used as self-expression and a celebration of LGBTQ+ pride.

I suspected that “gender-bending” in an all-boys’ school would not necessarily be an exercise for which the boys would scamper eagerly towards the stage. However, the idea of drag performance was intriguing, and its benefits as a style of performance for the Theatre of the Fabulous were worth exploring. I was excited about the possibilities of “self-expression” and “celebration” – specifically expressing a self which one chooses to make visible and then celebrating that self in an extravagant, camp fashion. According to RuPaul, “Drag can help you understand what you are, how amazing it is to have a human body, and what you can do with it” (Winfrey, 2018: para. 35).

Drag can also be seen as a mask, which allows for unfettered expression. RuPaul was quick to point out, however, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey (2018: para. 33), that drag “doesn’t hide you. It reveals who you are”. It is a mask that reveals. It is un[hiding]. It allows one to

¹⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RuPaul>

create a different persona, an alter ego if you like, which you yourself design, free from social restrictions and oppressive narratives. It allows you to reveal those parts of you that society has prevented you from being. RuPaul further stated that she is “everything and nothing at all ... black, ... white, ... male, female [and that] seeing all the facets of yourself is the next level of our evolution – understanding who we really are” (Winfrey, 2018: para. 7). Drag allows experimentation with different types of identity expression, specifically because there is the understanding that it does not take itself too seriously. RuPaul further suggests that drag allows a person the freedom to control how other people see them. In this regard, John DeBoer’s (2004) thesis, entitled *Camping in the classroom: Ridiculous theatre as serious drama*, is a useful case study as it suggests that drag can be used in the classroom as a means to

embrace the theatricality of masculinity and femininity as valuable in performance while also knowingly using the performances as commentary on the arbitrary relationship between anatomy and gender. The characters were to be played with a wink and a smile, embracing the absurdity of the drag performance. (DeBoer, 2007: 34)

However, I was intrigued about whether DeBoer’s (2007) findings would translate to a homogeneous class of boys. From my experience working with students in a single-sex environment, it was important to create a safe space in which to explore different identities that reside in the body. I suspected that the safety of and the resultant liberating possibilities of drag, and, by extension, mask work (in all different forms) provided the conditions for students and teachers to explore what Roy (2016: 3) refers to as the “surrendering [of] one’s own identity and assuming a new, extraordinary identity, whose power seizes (possesses) the person carrying the mask”. The performer then has the freedom to explore identities both real and imagined. The mask allows the performer to create and play roles constructed by the self. The role play in performance, using masks, has the power to shield “the performer and spectator from direct identification with any political ramifications from performances” (Roy, 2016: 3), allowing for the focus to be on what is made in/visible through the embodied expression of the role during play. Whether it is dressing up in different clothing, wearing make-up or wearing a mask, the intention is that it is playful and a camp appreciation of the “exaggerated and of things being what they are not” (Sontag, 1964/2018: 3).

Furthermore, this type of playful expression transfers the power back to the individual. According to Maddie Botto (2020: para. 14) in the online article, *Deflecting Identities: Masks as Queer Iconography*, it

allows artists to use their own body both as subject and object to play on what these notions mean and why they're gendered [and] it also allows them to collapse these boundaries into each other and turn themselves into a figurative 'other' that expresses a refusal to conform to particular categories [and] thrive[s] on the rejection of binaries and the reclaiming of 'othering' labels and perceptions.

It was indeed uncharted territory in a theatre with a masculine make-up. I prepared myself for failure. I also understood that the boys would perhaps even see the attempt to play, letting go and being ridiculous, as opening up the possibilities of failure.

3.1.3 Fabulous queer failure, misfit clowns and fucking it up

Samuel Beckett's (1983) quote, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" from his play, *Worstward Ho!*, has often been used as a motivational quote to inspire one not to be discouraged by failure and to keep trying. Eventually, there will be success. However, as much as I like the idea of using this quote to spread a positive message, I tend to agree with Julien Bellos's view in his article, "Fail Again. Fail better: Samuel Beckett is tired of your inspirational posters". He believes that instead, the quote "asks us to accept failure for what it is. Failure does not need to be recuperated into triumph. It does not need a redemption story. A failure can just be. And it is inevitable" (Bellos, 2022: para. 19). The former usage of the quote implies that one can expect success after failure[s]. This could set one up for even more disappointment. The latter interpretation, however, suggests that if failure is expected and seen as inevitable, one will accept failure for being just that: failure and nothing more. And there is nothing wrong with that because everyone fails. It is a fact of life. It is in the act of trying, of being, that learning takes place. Not in the expectation of success.

In an all-boys' classroom, where failure and the fear thereof, is often seen as weak, vulnerable and cowardly, it is necessary to change the narrative. It is okay to be different. It is okay to not fit in. It is okay to be a clown. Beré (2020) calls this "misfitness" and relates it to the clown figure in literature who "represents the misfit in society and in the world on stage or on film" (Beré, 2020: 4). In this regard, Beré draws from Heidegger's (1962) theories on failure, which suggest that when expectations are not met or achieved, failure draws attention to the individual. Beré sees the clown figure, with his intentionally ridiculous actions, who inevitably fails, in exactly this way. In that moment of failure, he draws attention to himself. However, it "is really an invitation to the audience to see the world with other eyes" (Beré, 2020: 4) while challenging and interrogating the very subject in which he fails. He further advocates that

“being a misfit is one of the defining features of being human” (Beré, 2020: 5). Beré (2020) further implies that we are all misfits in some way. In all aspects of our lives, we try to fit in, whether it is at work, at school or among our own family. However, he suggests that

the clown represents the one who accepts his [*sic*] condition as misfit and makes the most of it ... [and that] the performer that performs the clown uses techniques that highlight the misfit qualities of the clown that the clown does not fit into an everyday context, the world or even into some theatrical conventions and expectations – for instance, frequently disregarding the fourth wall that protects the audience from his or her [*sic*] antics. (Beré, 2020: 5)

Failure then becomes a method through which to learn about oneself and to see the world through other perspectives.

However, it is necessary to interrogate the different types of failure. Blenkarn’s (2016) work is particularly beneficial insofar as she distinguishes between the types of failure in performance. She suggests that

the failures of those pursuing failure intentionally seem to have ... more political affect than those who fail in ignorance or who fail but would really rather have succeeded. These intended failures ... are more likely to bring about changes we desire consciously. (Blenkarn, 2016: 101)

This is an important distinction, especially in a hyper-masculine, competitive environment in which most activities are pursued with the aim and dogged intention to succeed and not merely for participating, exploring and experimenting on their own terms. When there is a carrot attached to the stick, students are less likely to explore their true selves, because giving themselves over completely to the process might reveal flaws, insecurities and perceived weaknesses that could potentially decrease their chances of success.

Bailes (2011: 25) adds that “we cannot ‘do’ without failure, in both senses of that expression (we cannot make, nor can we manage without)”. In Episode 5 of Season 7 of *RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars*, “Draguation Speeches”, drag queen Yvie Oddly proudly echoes this sentiment when she exclaims that it is through failure that we “become the people we are meant to be”, ending her speech to her fellow “draguates” with “good luck, [and do] fuck it up”.

My assumption was then, if we could, through dragging up our masks, our personalities, in class without fear of failure, not be afraid to “fuck it up”, then the possibilities to learn will open up exponentially.

Scene 4 – Messy, unruly, and leaky data

I am reminded of Haim Ginott, who wrote:

[I have] come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanised or dehumanised. (Ginott, 1972:13).

4.1 The “performative-I” fucking it up?

I wanted the research process to be credible, and not to compromise the integrity of my research by not understanding my own positionality. I was aware that I probably had many inherent biases and preconceived ideas. Being queer, I am convinced that I will probably remain sceptical of “maleness”, of patriarchy, for the rest of my life. It is ingrained in my psyche, I guess. I was worried that the panic of “uncontrol” could influence the way I perceived my environment. For this reason, it felt that I had to tread even more carefully. Clarke (2005: 12) confirms this in his suggestion that researchers “cannot help but come to almost any research project already ‘knowing’ in some ways, already inflected, already affected, already ‘infected’”.

My intention was never to speak *for* anyone else or speak *about* someone. I did not feel that I had a right to represent any community, let alone the queer community. I wanted to reflect on my own personal experience, which, of course, is queer subjective (a postmodern mini narrative) and possibly completely removed from the experiences of the individuals and groups with whom I walk these pathways with on a daily basis. I wanted to become a “convincing I-witness ... [but, more importantly, a] convincing ‘I’” (Geertz, 1988: 79) and not an eyewitness with unfocused lenses, under a spotlight, speaking a dialogue that was not mine to perform.

Denzin and Lincoln's (2008: 1) comments in this regard were indeed a cautious reminder. They argue that

qualitative research, in many if not all of its forms (observation, participation, interviewing, ethnography), serves as a metaphor for colonial knowledge, for power, and for truth. The metaphor works this way. Research, quantitative and qualitative, is scientific. Research provides the foundation for reports about and representation of *the Other* [emphasis in original]. In the colonial context, research becomes an objective way of representing the dark-skinned other to the white world.

Although it felt overwhelmingly that I was standing in a theatre and reading a text that echoed with ghostly colonial voices, I did not want my writing to flounder in the mire of a "colonial context" – a manufactured insincere, inauthentic objectiveness. Instead, I had to embark on "a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others" (Spry, 2001: 710). But I realised that in order for that self to be a convincing voice, it also had to be an authentic voice. And an authentic voice is one that should be messy, leaky and unruly – a voice that should be allowed to stand, centre stage, under the spotlight and "fuck it up". It is a self that had to embark on a journey of performance which could, ultimately, allow me to truthfully experience "sedimented meanings and normative traditions" (Conquergood, 1998: 32). After reading Spry (2006), I understood that, in order to "I-witness", I had to see myself as a "performative-I ... that seeks to embody the copresence of performance and ethnography" (Spry, 2006: 340) by

using the body as a critical tool of performative intervention upon dominant narratives, and reconstituting the self as a conflation of social/linguistic effects that de/re/constructs a relation of cultural representation may offer a researcher positionality with the ears to listen within the silences of hegemony and the heart to engage a critical empathetic epistemology. (Spry, 2006: 345)

I had to trust that my body had the possibility to write a script, along this journey, that was critically my own because "I am an un/learning body in the process of feeling" (Madison, 2005: 109). It was clear to me that if I wanted to create a Theatre of the Fabulous (a performative queer pedagogy), it would be valuable if it could be informed by an embodied lived experience, through "proximity ... an epistemological point of departure and return" (Conquergood, 1998: 149) instead of a so-called objective and scientific way of knowing others in a specific environment. To this end, I value Conquergood's (1998: 146) stance that

the dominant way of knowing in the academy is that of empirical observation and critical analysis from a distanced perspective: "knowing that," and "knowing about." This is a view from above the object of inquiry: knowledge that is anchored in paradigm and secured in print. This propositional knowledge is shadowed by another

way of knowing that is grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection: “knowing how,” and “knowing who”. This is a view from ground level, in the thick of things. This is knowledge that is anchored in practice and circulated within a performance community, but is ephemeral.

4.2 Journaling a queer power trip

The body is a multilingual being. It speaks through its colour and its temperature, the flush of recognition, the glow of love, the ash of pain, the heat of arousal, the coldness of non-conviction. It speaks through its constant tiny dance, sometimes swaying, sometimes a-jitter, sometimes trembling. It speaks through the leaping of the heart, the falling of the spirit, the pit at the centre, and rising hope. The body remembers, the bones remember, the joints remember, even the little finger remembers. Memory is lodged in pictures and feelings in the cells themselves. Like a sponge filled with water, anywhere the flesh is pressed, wrung, even touched lightly, a memory may flow out in a stream. (Estés, 1992: 200)

Embarking on an autoethnographic journey in which I wanted to record my own experiences in the there and then (growing up as queer and my queer journey towards becoming and performing as a queer Dramatic Arts teacher) and the here and now (teaching performance of a queer text in the classroom and my performance as queer teacher outside of the classroom), I had to consider my own position of status and power inside and outside of the classroom. There was a need to reflect on the way in which my role/s in this regard could inform and, ultimately, influence the devising of a Theatre of the Fabulous. It frightened me that the idea of research (performing and recording my experiences) could possibly blur the focus of my personal narrative. How would this affect my style of teaching? And how would this affect my “being” in this here and now?

I was reminded of John Steinbeck’s wisdom in *Travels with Charley*, when he wrote, “we do not take a trip; a trip takes us” (Steinbeck, 1962: 3). Instead of something to fear, and seeing it as an insurmountable obstacle, I decided to surrender to the journey and to observe and write my body, to record what the “map cuts up”, both inside of myself and outside of myself (even if this meant power and status doing the cutting), while this “trip takes me”, so that I could observe whether my own story could cut across this theatrical landscape. I endeavoured therefore to journal my “trip” and to analyse where it was leading me and how I

felt along the way. My journaling performance (free writing, monologuing and poetry-writing) consisted of daily observations of myself in the classroom (performing teaching of a queer text) and outside of the classroom (performing as a queer colleague).

The journaling took place over several months in 2022 and covers a term and a half in a private all-boys' school. I made a decision to not include the school's name in my research, as I feel that it would draw focus to a specific school, rather than my own subjective experiences of the students and space. Focusing on the name of the school would, I felt, have me thinking about the representation thereof and, consequently, assert a judgemental power I wanted to avoid at all costs. It was about my own experiences of and in, and I hoped this would mitigate a sense of control and allow me to meander along the path towards a Theatre of the Fabulous.

4.3 A queer collection

Intelligence is present everywhere in our bodies ... our own inner intelligence is far superior to any we can try to substitute from the outside. – Deepak Chopra¹⁹

Duncan (2004: 11) cautions against autoethnographic research with an

overreliance on the potential of a personal writing style to evoke direct emotional responses in readers but offer no deeper levels of reflection or analytic scholarship; lack of self-honesty and disclosure about the motivation for doing the research, resulting in the misuse of the role of author to justify actions or advocate the interests of a particular group.

My performance writing in which I reflect on my lived experience, whether in the form of free writing, poetry, monologues or play scripts, have always been deeply personal. Therefore, I was very intentional to find a method(s) with which to perform “analytic scholarship” honestly and with sincerity, and not to compromise “deeper levels of reflection” or show bias towards particular narratives. This is indeed very difficult to execute as the subject matter of the theatrical investigation places my emotions and responses front and centre under the spotlight.

At the outset of my research journey, I decided to populate a queer journal (very similar to the ones I have been keeping for years – gifted to me by my mother – and filled with ideas and

¹⁹ Chopra (2015)

notes towards several play scripts I have conceptualised and written) with artifacts, anecdotes, journaling and free writing on a daily basis. My daily writing was loosely sectioned into observations of my performance as a teacher and my performance as a colleague in this time and place. I say loosely, because I found that often the two roads intertwined and converged on the stage. I also actively made voice notes on my phone after discussions with colleagues, related school events and class interactions, so as not to stale the memory of what I was thinking at the time. My phone, specifically the notes app and voice app, was just a convenient and immediate way of recording. In addition, I actively noted and documented interesting and relevant artefacts I came across on social media, as well as online literature that pointed to specific findings as I felt that this “*grey* [emphasis in original] material ... has the potential to anchor and further ground [my] ... research in real-world social justice concerns” (Charmaz et al., 2018: 734).

I wrote very personally about how and what I experienced and wanted to reflect on my queer collection through a structured lens. This method of reflection is what Charmaz et al. (2018: 737) call a “critical self-reflection perspective ... which has a ... sense of authenticity and reciprocity ... [and] fits much social justice research” and what Dubé and Ducharme (2015: 91) refer to as a “reflective practice [which] goes beyond acquiring knowledge [and] allows for knowledge to be critiqued while taking into account the sociocultural context”. To this end, I looked towards Christopher Johns’s model of structured reflection with “the intention of enabling reflective practitioners to access, make sense of, and to subsequently learn through their experiences to become more effective in their practices” (Johns, 1994: 71). This was especially valuable as I looked to learn through my reflections, and to consider an “effective” Theatre of the Fabulous towards social justice in the theatre. My approach was to summarise and approach Johns’s model, through which I:

- paid attention to and wrote “descriptions” of my experiences, which allowed me to be creative and imaginative;
- reflected and looked at myself in context of the experience or situation;
- critically thought about the influencing factors and actions – intended or unintended;
- did not look to necessarily consider alternative strategies but, instead, focused on possible alternative ways of thinking; and
- attempted to make sense of the experience and what, if anything, I learnt. (Johns, 1994: 71)

I then spent time reading over my data (my queer collection) whenever I found the opportunity. I identified prominent themes that were frequently spotlighted along my journey. Similarly to Duncan (2004: 6) my “initial themes provided guidelines for [my] literature review and contributed to the development of a language of description that could be applied” and incorporated into my reflection and design of the Theatre of the Fabulous. I drew inspiration and felt validated by Spry’s (2018: 1095) observation of this process as “research [that] ultimately, pragmatically, brutally emanates from a corporeal body that exists within a socio-political context ... [and] it is autoethnography that activates the foundational sociocultural personally political reflexivity of that body/self”.

ACT IV

CLIMAX – THE FABULOUS PERFORMANCE

The relation that the self will take to itself, how it will craft itself in response to an injunction, how it will form itself, and what labour it will perform upon itself is a challenge, if not an open question. (Butler, 2005: 180)

Scene 1 – Memory Theatre – A queer performance in the then and there

When I embarked on this performative autoethnographic journey to write the self and see “how it will form itself” through a reflection of an unfamiliar theatre and strange dialogue I was confronted with, I contemplated whether my past self should feature in the writing of this new script. I was persuaded by Diane Daly (2021: 363), who suggests that “to renounce this childhood [the past] experience would be to renounce a large part of what I now am”. By extension, Coffey (1999: 127) proposes that “ethnography is an act of memory and [its] texts cannot be separated from the memories that shape them”. I was convinced that my current narrative, in the here and now, is inextricably linked to my past.

Immediately, the external theatre I was intent on observing became a theatre of the mind. It shifted inwards onto a stage that seemed very strange but oddly familiar. And when I gazed upwards, stage left, stage right, downstage and upstage, I was confronted with a theatre of memories, of stories, of feelings, of pictures, of emotions. I tentatively started exploring the space and discovered dusty scripts and opaque performances. I found memories that were playing hide and seek in the shadowed wings, the abandoned dressing rooms and among the worn-out theatre seats.

Suddenly, without warning, a soundscape lifted from the stage floor, and I remembered a song which lingers in my past – “It’s A Sin” by the Pet Shop Boys – a few lines in particular:

When I look back upon my life
It’s always with a sense of shame
I’ve always been the one to blame
For everything I long to do

No matter when or where or who
Has one thing in common, too
(AZLyrics.com, n.d.)

I was prompted by the song to retrieve the photo below:



Stephen – Grade 1 (or so)

What strikes me is that I love that my smile looks so natural. It is one of the very few photos I look at in which I can say for certain that the smile I see is sincere and authentic. Or maybe that is what I *think* I see. I hardly ever smile in photos. It always feels so fake. Like it is forced. Is it because I am not happy in that moment? Not happy in general? Or just painfully worried what others will say? That they will judge me. Judgement is such a big word. It is final. It is terrifying. When I examine the photo more closely, I become very sad. I think of everything that will happen in my life after this moment. I think of so many things that will make me cry. So many tears that will be shed. So many times I will not just feel afraid, but terrified. So many times I will feel small and embarrassed. And sadly, I cannot think of many moments that I would be truly happy after that. Don't get me wrong: there are happy moments, but they are fleeting echoes laced with anxiousness. And that makes me even more sad.

I mostly remembered why I never “look back upon my life” and when I wrote, I realised that it was because it was “always with a sense of shame”. It was never something I consciously thought about but instinctively knew had always been there. Every single lyric from the song, situated in my body, stained the memories with shame. I wondered why shame was such a prominent motif here. I was reminded by Macbeth’s mind that is full of scorpions and like Alice in a land of wonder, considering if this drink of memories is a poison. Moreover, I suspected that writing my memories would, like the Pet Shop Boys, compel me to ask for forgiveness. But ironically, it further persuaded me that I could only understand my “everydayness” by knowing the past. I needed to perform writing about it.

My script therefore starts with shame and the perspective in this strange-familiar theatre of memories starts to change just a little bit:

A[shame]d

Shame is painful ... it makes me recoil
Shame makes me feel sorry
Shame makes me feel sad
Shame makes me worry ... that I am not good
Shame makes me retreat
Shame makes me embarrassed for me ... of me
A[shame]d
Shame makes me silent
Shame makes me hide ... from me and from you
Shame prevents a hug
Shame prevents a touch
Shame is distance ... but it’s also just too close
Shame wants to remind me of itself
Shame wants to experience and re-experience
Shame wants to humiliate ...
Shame is a Stockholm syndrome
Shame is familiar
Shame shapes my body
Shame is my body
Shame is me
“I” Shame

It is hard for me to admit, but shame has been with me my whole life. It really feels that it has infected every fibre of my being, and, over the years, I guess I have learnt to live with it. It is

difficult to know where it starts and where it ends. Shame is also painful to write because it mostly feels that I am admitting to failure, to having done the wrong thing or just mostly being a bad person. It makes me feel vulnerable to write like this. When I re-read the poem above, I see clearly that the fear of humiliation and, often, being comfortable with humiliation is a significant part of my life. *That* in and of itself makes me feel ashamed. I mean, what “normal” person would be comfortable with humiliation? What “normal” person would be happy to retreat and hide away? It is also very clear that I have an issue with intimacy. Intimacy embarrasses me. From here to there and from there to here. Physically *and* emotionally. The idea of being emotionally intimate brings up feelings of panic and “uncontrol”.

However, thinking about this also brings a smile to my face because, despite all my musings about feeling ashamed, feeling humiliated and wanting to hide, there is a small voice in that abandoned theatre – an aside – which keeps whispering that, despite all of these experiences and emotions that I feel and write, there is this stubbornly theatrical clown – or fool, if you like – that has always cameoed when the chips were down.

1.1 A queer birth, a fabulously theatrical baptism and a misshapen childhood

I was theatrically and nakedly born on 18 January 1976 in a town called Krugersdorp, close to Johannesburg, South Africa. A few months later – I am not sure of the exact date – I was theatrically and nakedly baptised as Sophocles Kotze in the beautiful Greek Orthodox Church in Krugersdorp. Although I cannot remember any of these events, my assumption is that they *were* very theatrical. In my mind, childbirth is the ultimate soap opera, performed in the operating theatre and scripted with angst, conflict, tension and rivers of wailing. I feel the same about orthodox baptism. It also takes place in the theatre of a church but with far more thought going into the costumes, set design and props. I think I liked that. I have always been drawn to pageantry.



Baptised naked

For me, these events feel so far removed from what I imagine is reality and what must have been the “normal” at the time. It all seems foreign – a traditional Greek first name with a traditional Afrikaans last name; a Greek Orthodox church in a largely conservative Calvinist community; my naked self exposed to a congregation of clothed onlookers. I wonder what the “audience” made of this. It feels like an act of rebellion. It feels like an invasion. In such a short space of time, I was dragged up with a foreign-sounding name and became part of a family into which I did not quite fit. We were immigrants trying to assimilate in a foreign land. I also know that shortly after these events, my mother divorced my Afrikaans biological father and then almost immediately re-married into another Afrikaans family. I am a first-generation product with an Afrikaans father, a Cypriot mother, one biological brother, one half-brother and one half-sister. We eventually moved to a very small village in a rural area: conservative and traditional.

There was violence. A lot of violence. I remember some of it – that which was experienced first-hand later – but I always suspected there was so much more. I heard the whispers of it, cut off suddenly so as not to infect the ears of children. I am sure it sits somewhere in my body

though, like the trauma of being born and of being dunked naked in a cauldron in front of strangers under the glare of a spotlight. But the person that feels the least strange to me, sitting in the audience, quietly observing, is my mother.



Ma

A letter to my mother

Hello ma. I am writing this letter today because I want to thank you and I want to apologise. Even as I write those words, they feel strange when I think them. They feel uncomfortable and awkward, and I know why. It is because I don't think I have ever said them to you. I know I have uttered them a few times over the years, but it feels like it was said because it was something I was supposed to say. I wanted to say them, really say them, but I always felt that it would seem insincere. Then I would go down a path and completely overthink it and feel vulnerable and think that I will make things awkward and that I didn't really mean it in the first place. Ultimately, I would decide to leave it. Then I would feel guilty because I didn't say it. Because I wanted to. I have wanted to hug you so many times while I tried to say thank you. But I just never did. I thought it would make you feel even more sad because you would then know that I

knew that you felt sad. And if there is one thing I know about you, it is that you always tried to hide your sadness from us. You never wanted us to know.

I am sorry that you had moments in your life that terrified you, that made you feel isolated, violated, like you were trapped in a nightmare. I am sorry that there were moments in your life when you felt that there was no one who understood you, who should take care of you, who could love you the way you deserved to be loved. I am sorry that you were scared in your own home. I am sorry that you never got to experience what home means, in every sense of the word. I am sorry that you were hurt. I am sorry that you felt powerless. But what I am the sorriest about, and something that I will never ever be able to make up to you, is the fact that I couldn't and didn't do anything about it. As a small child who was incapable of understanding, I couldn't, but as an older child who did understand, I didn't. I am so sorry for that, and I am so ashamed of myself. Those moments in which I made it worse for you when you were just trying to get by, like making a sandwich for school with the very little that we had, and I criticised and complained. Those moments when you tried to console me and I pushed you away because I felt sorry for myself and made it all about me. Those moments when I left you all by yourself. I am sorry that you had (a) husband(s) who made you feel small, who humiliated you, who abused you emotionally and physically, who did not appreciate how beautiful and amazing you are and who tried to dominate you because they were small and weak.

But between my tears and shame for even thinking these thoughts, I want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart for your courage. I want to say thank you for surviving because I know in the deepest fibre of my being that there must have been so many moments that you must have thought that it would be so much easier to give up, but you never did. I want to thank you for trying. I want to thank you for asking that woman in the store for more credit because you couldn't pay, so that we had something at home to eat. For walking with four little children along the dusty road, in the middle of nowhere, because you were beaten and kicked out of the house, and then asking my Grade 1 teacher if we could stay overnight at her house. I want to thank you for that because, despite what must have been so humiliating for you, you thought of your children first. I want to thank you for trying to make the best of a very bad situation by reading about places and worlds and people that were anywhere but there and anyone but them. I want to thank you for teaching me to do the same. For

fostering within me a love of books and reading that would, in turn, teach me how to survive, escape when I needed to and orientate the world. I want to say thank you for accepting my awkwardness, my strangeness, my queerness, my narcissism, my selfishness, my short-sightedness. And I want to say that I am so sorry that I did not allow the same for you. I am sorry that I expected you to be and do what I so clearly was not being and doing. I want to thank you because through all of this and that, you have saved my life more than you will ever know, and I want to say thank you because you still do. I may not apologise enough, say thank you enough, hug you enough, but please know that in my mind I do and hopefully very soon I will know how to do that in real life...

I want to say thank you because unlike you, who never had a hero, you are my hero in every single way. I want to say thank you because I can love you.

My writing here conjured up many instances of sadness. While I reflected on some very specific memories that danced across the stage in my mind, it caused my body to react quite intensely to nauseating feelings of shame. However, it is in the detailed reading that I realise there are words and motifs projecting here against the theatre of my mind that I cannot ignore. Violence or the imminent threat of violence has always been a part of my life. Being beaten by my father and seeing my mother and brother also beaten will remain a feature of my memory script for the rest of my life. I was always scared. And coming from a family where men were the enforcers of violence (my maternal grandfather was also terribly abusive), I have come to recognise men as a perpetual threat.

I was always sceptical of men. I still am. Immediately, I feel a contradiction in my body and then wonder why, as a gay man, I am attracted to men. And shamefully, I also reflect on the fact that I am even more attracted to men who are authoritative and controlling. Strangely, I see that in my mother as well. Everywhere in the community I grew up in, it was the patriarchy that dominated, exerted power, made the rules and who I feared the most. I instinctively cower away from the patriarchal narrative but, in some way, I am attracted to it as if my mind and body tell me that is how it is supposed to be. Reflecting on this, I come to realise the toxic, dangerous and manipulative effects of power (patriarchy and heteronormativity) in our lives.

It is very clear to me now that, thanks to my mother, I learnt how to find ways to escape the violence and fear that I felt in my life. I looked inwards and started living in my imagination – in the theatre of my mind.

1.2 A crybaby on the playground

I absolutely loved the *idea* of school. By the age of 5, I was already reading comfortably, loved writing, was addicted to watching television and enjoyed playing school-school with my sister. I could not wait to go to school. My mother understood this and sent me to school a year early. In those days, you only went to Grade 1 in the year that you turned 7. I turned 6 in Grade 1 (in January, no less!). I think I enjoyed the challenge of school. It was all very theatrical in my mind. I think it was an escape that I needed. I thrived academically and always brought home excellent report cards. I thoroughly enjoyed the praise from my teachers and my family. I noticed very early on that it was a way to be the centre of attention. Although I was never the best in the class, being younger than everyone was seen as a big deal, and that was a wonderful boost for my ego. Being different seemed like a good thing. I was the centre of attention at my first-ever athletics meeting, when I had to run a race by myself because there was no one in school that was in my age group at the time. Being thrust into the spotlight, which I had all to myself, seemed exhilarating but also strangely awkward. I think I felt just a little embarrassed. However, school was shaping up to be a place where I could thrive and grow into a confident and well-rounded young person. By all accounts, I was smart, sporty and multi-talented. The future looked bright.

I loved escaping into the world of books, and I watched anything that I could on television when I had the opportunity. I suspect, from what I could see, that unlike other children my age, I was exposed to stories of people who I did not see around me on a daily basis. I vividly remember watching a Western film late one night. I was probably not supposed to stay up so late but I think my mother always gave me some leeway because she knew how much I enjoyed it. I also remember moments lying next to her on the bed reading at night. Anyway, in the very conservative, apartheid community I grew up in, most people watching films about “cowboys and Indians” always rooted for the cowboys. However, on that night, there was a scene in the film that troubled me and still haunts me to this day: A group of American soldiers come across a Native American village in the valley. After positioning themselves at the top of the valley, the soldiers proceed to shoot at the villagers, including women and children. It is a slaughter.

My childhood mind could not comprehend this. Why would they kill innocent people for no reason at all? I am convinced that moments like that made me understand, in a very childlike way, that there are bullies out there who prey on the powerless, the voiceless and the weak. Once again, I equated this with maleness. I cried for those poor people, and I have been crying ever since. But I also know that all these memories and experiences made me recognise bullies and their potential for violence very quickly. It helped shape me into a “sensitive boy” and it scared me. It seems as though I have been scared my whole life.

A soliloquy for a crybaby

I used to take the bus to school every day. I remember it well. On the side of the bus the school's name was printed in big green letters. Those letters are imprinted in my mind. Vividly. Green. I don't know why. I don't remember much. I remember dirty bare feet and school bags but not much else. I do remember the bus driver's face very clearly though, but I don't know why I don't remember any other faces. I think I mostly remember names and events and feelings. Mostly, I remember being scared. Scared of big things. I don't know; I was a little guy. Maybe that's why I felt scared all the time. Or maybe threatened? I don't know. Scared of bigness. Of God, of parents, of teachers, of seniors, of men ... I don't know if I have ever felt safe? Have you? What does it feel like? I don't know if I equate these things to fear, or to sadness, or to pain? Is love big? I dunno? Anyway, a moment I do remember very clearly is getting on the bus one day and a small boy in Grade 1 - his name was Eric - wasn't there. Neither was his older brother. I don't know why I remember thinking that at the time. Maybe I wasn't. I just remember it felt big. And when, later that day, I sat in the big hall, looking up at the principal, whose face I clearly remember and whose big prayers often caused me to nod off and always made me feel anxious, we were told why little Eric did not get on the bus that morning.

I still don't know why but out of all the billions of moments and pictures and memories and sensations stored in my brain, this is one that I remember vividly, like the big green letters on the bus. That morning, before school, Eric's father got into his car to go to work. Eric noticed his bicycle behind the car and ran to get it. His big father, in a hurry, did not see him and drove over Eric with his big car. And all I can think about is that tiny little boy running to save his bicycle. And it makes me so sad. And it feels like my heart wants to break. And I want to rip it in two just to let the sadness out because I don't

know what to do with it all. And that makes me angry. In that moment I want to jump up and scream. I want to scream so that every single faceless person in that big school hall can see how angry I am – even that big fucking principal, with his endless fucking praying who, together with his big God, allowed this to happen. And I wish that my screams will explode like a fucking atom bomb. And where was his fucking useless, careless father? Where was he? But it scares me. It is too big for me. And then the guilt and the sadness manipulate my mind into feeling sorry for him. How must that poor man feel? For the rest of his life? How can anyone live with that pain? These things are big too, and I do what I always do. I keep my mouth shut. I don't do anything. I don't say anything. I never do. I just cry.

I think crying is like a warm blanket. It is inside those folds of convulsions that I imagine safety to be. The tears make sense. Hot, splashy tears feel like the right thing. Sympathy and empathy for others make everything better. And those tears are a call for others to feel the same kind of emotions in return. Selfish, hey? I think that is the classic definition of a narcissist. Was I crying for myself or was I crying for little Eric?

I always *felt* emotions more than anyone else around me. I really got the impression that while other children were getting on with the business of having fun, I worried. When I failed at anything, I became very sad, and the only way I knew how to deal with it was to become a sore loser and make everything about me.



The look of “failure”

The moment in the image above is one that would distinctly shape the course of my life in a very specific way. I came second in a race that I felt I should have won. From that day on, it seemed as if I always came second. I was never quite the best at anything. I felt like a failure. Instead of working harder, it was easier to make excuses, to feel excuses. I didn't know any better. In the photo, I dramatically show how tired I am, instead of celebrating for my friend who came first. The feeling of failure on that day would haunt me for so many years to come. I felt ashamed. I felt humiliated. I felt that I was not good enough. I look like a crybaby.

Around that time, school was starting to feel like a place that was too big for me. I felt small. I felt as if I was just making up the numbers. At this stage of my childhood, I had also become aware that I felt safer in the company of women (my teachers and the other girls in my class). I felt I could express myself more freely. I could just be. Around them, I did not have to be scared. In those years, and throughout my high school career, it was compulsory for all boys to play rugby. Initially, I enjoyed the challenge and was good at it. It was only later, when I was in Grade 5, that the physical nature of the sport became something I started to fear. It was

during one game, when a boy from the other team ran right over me, probably because I was too scared and, as a result, did not execute the tackle properly, that my own teacher–coach ran past me, and in Afrikaans, said, “*Lekker!*” [“Nice!”]. He meant that I deserved it, and his choice of word had the connotation that he also took delight in my failure. As far as taking on memories of myself as being weak, a failure and a “sissy”, that moment, in my mind, was the one that cemented all those feelings in place for me. I never felt comfortable in a team again, and the feeling of imminent disappointment was an ever-present shadow. I understood that my coach was a bully. I knew that instinctively. I knew he was wrong. I understood injustice and it always made me angry. But, for some reason, my anger always turned into tears, which made me look even weaker. I also understood that he was the authority. He was in charge, and I was powerless to do anything about it. I felt like this with my abusive father, and I felt the same towards all the bullies I encountered after that.



Boys in a team – a brotherhood?

1.3 Brothers and heroes

A good story has a beginning, a middle and an end. But my story keeps looping back and insists on adding reminders of people and of places. My memory theatre is fragmented with images that are strobing and urgent and want to be performed. I see so many faces flashing, seated in the audience, staring for attention. I hear familiar voices murmuring to be heard. But there is one face, one voice, that appears most prominently in the theatre of my mind. It is my older brother. He sits in the corner, seemingly unobtrusive, but his presence is unmistakable. He listens. He is waiting for his time to speak.

If I could choose an older brother

If I could choose an older brother ...

What would I want?

What should I want?

What should an older brother be?

An older brother should be protective

He should be a defender

He is a teacher

He is a role model

A shoulder to cry on

A good listener

A comforter

Good

Kind

Hero

But that is too much for one person

That is too much for a young boy

It is just too much

An older brother should just be



My older brother and me

I think I have had more fights and arguments with my older brother than I have had with anyone else in my life. If I were the protagonist of my own theatre growing up, then he was certainly, in many ways, the antagonistic villain. But also, I think I have had more happy moments with my older brother than I have had with anyone else in my life. The thing is, in an abusive home, we definitely had each other to keep busy. We were closer in age to each other than to our other siblings, and we had, unlike the others, the same father. So, we were bonded in a way. We were terribly competitive. Everything, every game, was turned into some tournament that would finally prove who was the best in the world, including marathon tennis matches that lasted from sunrise to sunset. And, despite the intensity of the competition, the arguments about whether the ball was out or in and throwing tantrums like John McEnroe, we both loved every moment of it. I gave my older brother a good go. But the fact was that he was superior in every way. He was faster, stronger, more agile, more daring and more courageous. I mostly came second. This did not sit well with me, and I had to come up with different strategies to compete and win. My brother was not really interested in anything academic, and he hated school. I quickly realised that this was an opportunity and claimed that I was smarter and tried to prove I was more quick-witted. I knew that this was one area in which he was the most vulnerable. And knowing me like he did, he understood my weaknesses all too well.

Although, as previously stated, “moffie” is a derogatory word for a gay man in South Africa, I had no sense of the word in a sexual context while still at school. In the community I grew up in, I related the word to being a “sissy” and acting “like a girl” with all its stereotypical implications: not man enough, a crybaby, weak, and so on. The narrative around me was that everything feminine was weak. If I were weak or if I were a moffie, then I was like a girl. In some strange way it made sense to me because I saw my grandmother and my mother as “weak” because they were abused and because they cried a lot. The problem was that, even though I enjoyed sport, which was considered masculine, I also enjoyed many things that girls were typically supposed to like or did. I cried when watching *E.T.* with the school class (I felt embarrassed because it seemed I was the only one), I loved performing poetry (my teacher didn’t think I was very good until I came first in the eisteddfod), I enjoyed going to the library with my mother and selecting the “thickest” book I could (because the thicker the book, the smarter you are) and I also enjoyed playing dress-up with my aunt’s extensive doll collection (I especially loved the shocking pink of Superman’s suit and Barbie’s evening gowns). These interests made me an easy target.

When I hear “moffie”, I think of my brother and then, later on, his friends. It was a word that they used to cut me down to size and keep me small and in my place. No other word in my life has had a greater effect on my mind and my body. It is stained across my theatre of memory like a scarlet letter graffitied in indelible ink. Once again, my brother had the upper hand. I am sure my mocking of his being not very bright still reverberates in his mind and body, but the way I experienced my torment was to retreat even further into a closet of shame. It is only now that I understand that most of the boys and men that used that word to define me probably did not link it to my sexuality at all. Maybe I did, but I don’t think so because I didn’t even think of myself as gay until my final year of high school. I look back now, and I wonder if the reason for using the word, although rooted in sexuality, was perhaps more gender motivated than anything else. As I grew older, my memories became faded and dusty, and the word was directly linked to my gayness. I am startled to think that this may not have been the case while I was at school. I understand that it has its origins in patriarchal and heteronormative bigotry, but the language boys use is often coloured with lenses that want to exert power. I suspect I can only see that now through the lenses of contemplating my relationship with my brother. The fact is that, for many, many years, my brother and I were mortal enemies. I will go as far as to say that I disliked him intensely and was always competing with him. However, things changed between us when I left school. I have no idea what it was, but it was also around the

time that I started accepting my sexuality. I was always scared of people treating me differently if they ever found out that I was gay, but I must say, and I thank my mother's influence for this, that I never felt that there was something wrong with *me* because I am gay. I always understood, for many years, that the bullies were ignorant and in the wrong, and not I. I didn't feel like an abomination in the eyes of God, and I certainly didn't walk around wondering why I had been cursed by being attracted to boys. My problem was that I was ashamed that I was not brave enough to admit it to my friends, family and colleagues for fear of their treating me differently. I feared that they wouldn't like me anymore. I am ashamed that this makes me sound superficial and shallow as a person. Surprisingly, my brother, rather than make me feel even smaller when I "officially" identified as gay, was one of the first people to accept me for who I am. Even though my brother identifies as heterosexual, he later had a relationship with a trans woman. I came to see that he was more interested in the person than labelling sexuality. Our relationship slowly but surely started changing. Despite still harbouring many feelings of resentment, we started relying more and more on each other. My brother was always impulsive, brave and courageous, and I envied that. He had all the qualities I didn't have but so much wanted. All the qualities I berated myself and felt ashamed for not having.

I learnt about HIV/AIDS mostly because I watched many films and read widely. It was certainly not at school and certainly not from family. But I understood how terrifying and tragic it was. However, as a privileged, sheltered, white male in a very conservative South African town during the 1980s and 1990s, it was a disease that was worlds away. Even when I started exploring my own sexuality as an "openly" (only to very close friends and very few family members) gay man in my early 20s, it was not something that was at the forefront of my mind. It should have been, but I was never taught otherwise. I did not understand gay sexual health at all. HIV/AIDS was certain death, in my mind. I had watched enough television to know this. When my brother contracted HIV in the early 2000s, I was one hundred per cent convinced that he was going to die. He tried to commit suicide on the same day that he found out he had tested positive for HIV. I was the one who found him, and this remains one of the most traumatic experiences of my life.

My brother lived. A few years later, he was diagnosed with cancer. I was convinced he was going to die. My brother lived. He has now lived with the disease for more than twenty years. Over all these years I was reminded (because I always knew this, I just didn't want to believe it) and I am still reminded on a daily basis that he is the bravest and most courageous person I

know. No question about it. I don't only think this because he has overcome so much but because of the way he interacts with those around him. It is interesting that the young boy who called me "moffie" is no longer there. I think he was never there. I think it is never something he wanted to say but rather a weapon that he used to protect himself. He certainly did not intend for it to have the consequences it did. If you are only given one weapon, that is the one you are going to use. My brother suffered more abuse from my father than any of the siblings (me included) and sometimes because I felt that I instigated whatever caused my father to abuse him to make myself feel better. My brother survived being conscripted to the armed forces in a racist, inhumane South Africa. My brother is my biggest supporter and never passes up an opportunity to sing my praises to family and friends. My brother is kind, gentle, passionate, caring and smart, and I admire the hell out of him.



My hero brother

So, what do I wish to have in an ideal older brother? I wish my older brother to be exactly the way he is!

1.4 A queer rebel in high school, fabulous Bible stories, secret trysts and a suicide attempt

The Lord is my Shepherd, and he knows I'm gay.

– Troy Perry²⁰



A theatrical photo-bomb

²⁰ The title of the autobiography of Rev. Troy D. Perry's (1972) autobiography (as told to Charles L. Lucas), published by Bantam Books.



Breaking the rules ... on stage

I always felt different. Maybe everyone feels this way. Looking back, I never had “exposure to alternative models of identity, including queer models, upon which to base [my] developing individual sexual identity” (McDonough, 2007: 798). I always felt at odds with the people I was surrounded by, be it at school or around my own family. The realities I experienced around me versus the “realities” I saw in films and read about in books seemed completely at odds with each other. It felt like I belonged in the one (films and books) and not in the other. I guess this is why my body wanted to rebel and wanted to gravitate towards the theatrical. At school it felt as though I had to straighten myself, to always be on guard and try and orientate my body to act as “ordinarily” as possible. Never be feminine. Never give sideways glances. Learn to keep secrets. I am not sure when it happened, but I slowly started retreating into a closet of safety.

In my fabulous closet

I like my closet
Although it is dark ... and I don't like darkness
It gives me comfort because it is mine
I can lock the door whenever I want
I can light a candle and that gives me hope
In my closet I find clothes that I want to wear
I put them on, and it feels exhilarating

It feels dangerous
In my closet I find make-up ... all the colours
Some are dark and some are sparkly and bright
I put the make-up on, and it looks strange
It feels awkward
But it's different and I like that
In my closet I sing loudly and flatly
I can sing the songs that I enjoy
In my closet there are people I recognise
I love talking to them
I am attracted to them
I feel shy but they make me smile
In my closet I find books
I read stories of love
I read fables that are forbidden
In my closet I think a lot
I think of bodies
I think of desire
In my closet all my dreams come true

Outside of my closet I felt comfortable in acts of rebellion. It made me feel good inside. I liked things that others found strange and out of place (music, fashion, literature). In primary school, I loved going to Sunday school and listening to Bible stories. I loved singing songs in church. In high school, my bedroom wall was covered with posters of Whitney Houston and Bette Midler. I remember walking down the street and singing Whitney Houston's "Greatest Love of All" as loudly as I could with my best friend, and it felt damn good. I got my ears pierced, which at the time was one of the most unmasculine acts I could think of doing. I performed in school plays and productions because I could immerse myself, away from myself, into other worlds and other people. And let's face it, dressing up and wearing a mask is fucking liberating. The more I rebelled, the more I started to notice bullies and injustice around me. I refused to stand at attention when they played the national anthem because I could not support racial injustice. I intentionally provoked teachers who did not like my "style". I wanted to disrupt because the world did not make sense to me. These people did not make sense to me. Corporal punishment, drilling at cadet practice, hair inspections, camping in the bush and walking in a line between classes did not sit well with me. The rules did not make sense to me. They were not my rules, and therefore I would break them. But guilt and judgement were never far off the radar.

A prayer for the confused

Dear Father

As a little boy I loved the mystery of Your church
The smell of incense, lighting candles, the pictures on the wall
I felt grateful that Your Son died for us on the cross
I felt an obligation to do the right thing
I felt guilty if I didn't
I didn't understand most of what was said but it felt important
It was important to my Yia-Yia, and it was important to my mom
I liked all the stories, and I knew them well

Thank You for that

I could tell people what they did wrong, and I could see what I did wrong

But Father

Why, if someone does right, do they still get punished?

Why is it wrong when it feels right?

I know that feeling guilty is a good thing

Why am I so afraid of You and of everything?

Is guilt a good thing?

Is judgement a good thing?

But I also know a lot

I know You are good, kind and compassionate

But I also know that You can be angry and vengeful

I am confused

My whole life I have been confused

Am I supposed to be confused?

Father, please make me feel less confused

I had my first gay sexual experience in primary school with a close friend of mine. As we grew up, we continued to fool around. But always in secret. It was the kind of sexual awakening you read about elsewhere and see in the movies: an innocent sleepover and tentative hands exploring in the dark. Always in the dark. It was never anything serious and we never spoke about it outside the confines of the covers. Oddly enough, I never saw these experiences as wrong or asked for forgiveness afterwards. It felt right to me. But we kept it a secret because we both instinctively knew that talking about it was way too risky. I never labelled myself as gay in any way and I cannot recall thinking of myself as a homosexual at any time during high school. However, I did suffer from severe depression, and I suspect that it was caused by my superhuman attempts to hide my true self at all costs because the threats of being disliked, of violence and of being ostracised were ever-present companions, even if I knew that I was not in the wrong. I did not make the rules. I always felt sad. I always anticipated tragedy. I always

felt off-centre. I always felt guilty. There were very few people, maybe one or two, I was close to, but even now I question whether this was in fact the case. I don't think anyone really knew me. And I don't think I ever really trusted anyone completely. At this time, "now showing" in the theatre of my mind was a Greek tragedy, complete with melodrama, distorted masks, plots filled with sexual tension and angst, villainous characters and strange, larger-than-life scenery. Playing my part, I theatrically scooped up fistfuls of tablets, also known as my Antigone-in-the-Valley-of-the-Dolls moment, and attempted suicide. For me, it was just theatre. It was trying to make sense of it all. It was an attempt to retreat permanently to my own warm, safe and colourful closet, lock the door and throw away the key.

1.5 The Big Bad Wolf and the queer who upset the apple cart

Straight? So is spaghetti until you heat it up.

– Jet Mykles²¹

I like you

I like you because you are just like me
You talk the things I talk
And you say the things I want to say
I like that we can drink wine together
And the space between us feels possible
You are inevitable
This is inevitable
You are like a long-awaited letter found unexpectedly in the mailbox
I want to invite you into my closet and show you
There is a space for you
Have a seat
Do you like it?
I like your closet too; it has more meaning
Your space is a lot more sophisticated
I want to play around and discover what you wear
what you listen to
what you dream
I like that you touch me
Please do it again

²¹ In Mykles (2010)

I like that I can touch you
Do you want me to do it again?
Ah, these closets, mine and yours
I like them
I like you

I had my first gay relationship towards the end of my high school career. It was with my best friend at the time. He was the first person who really understood me and with whom I genuinely felt comfortable. It was only then that I slowly started thinking of my gayness in terms of sexuality and not merely behaviours. It was a sexual awakening, if you like. Of course, we were both in the closet, but he was a lot more understanding of context. He had a much better understanding of self than I did. I still pursued girls, not because I was sexually attracted to them but because it was what everyone was doing. I wanted to be liked. I think more than he did. Popularity was important to me. I think because it kept me safe. It put me in a position from where I could defend myself. I was perfectly fine with the status quo. I don't think he was.

In his book, Andrew Sullivan (1995: 78–79) writes that, according to him,

the entire politics of “outing” presupposes a binary situation in which a homosexual is either “in” or “out” of the closet. And far from undermining this structure, “outing” actually perpetuates it. It depends upon the kind of discourse in which something hidden is revealed, something shameful exposed, something secret stigmatised.

This experience of outing, as articulated by Sullivan, was exactly what I felt when my friend (un)intentionally opened the curtain of our closeted theatre and pushed me into the glaring spotlight. Again, I must reiterate, I was not ashamed of being gay but I was mortified that my secret was revealed and that I was exposed as a liar. Of course, my reaction was complete denial and to vilify my friend as the Big Bad Wolf. I felt betrayed. I felt exposed. I felt that everyone saw me as a liar. I felt guilty. I felt afraid. I had no self-confidence because it felt like I would be branded a deceitful person for the rest of my life. I wanted to get away.

I first walked away to study at university but soon realised that it was not a place that I fit in. I studied a course that society told me was “safe” and would guarantee a future. My passion was with theatre, however, but no one in my family nor any of the teachers at school guided me in this direction when it was so clearly something I thrived in. After quitting university, I felt like a failure, like a fraud, like I had no future. Then I started running. I had to find myself. I decided

to travel, study and work in Cyprus, the land of my mother's birth. I was being a rebel. I was disrupting the "potential" I had shown. I was upsetting the apple cart.

Finding myself: An inner travelogue in pictures



New friends in a strange land

Here, in the land of my ancestors, I find friends who accept me for who I am ... they are foreign, like me. There are moments when I smile again. It is tough in a strange land, but slowly, things become familiar, and you become familiar too. I see a boy and I experience "love at first sight". I think that's what it was. An attraction that does not feel dangerous.



Religious iconography

These icons were a part of my childhood. They were strange to my friends. But now, in this place, these otherworldly images seem to make sense. And they keep watching over me. Are they still judging me? It always feels like a reminder of something. Of sin? Of comforts? There it is again. Confusion. They tell me that I am alien but I refuse to believe it. I only see acceptance.



Yia-Yia

I now see my Yia-Yia everywhere I go. I see her kindness. I see her warmth. I see her gentleness. I see her playfulness and her slapstick sense of humour. But I also now recognise her strength. I now recognise the origins of her pain. I recognise masculine power and subservient women. I think I understand.



Monastery in the mountains

I visit monasteries in the mountains. These places I have read about. Spaces I wondered about. I dreamed about them as places of escape. Of solitude. Of peace. A place where I can just be. Where I can breathe. But my curious mind thinks of them as masculine spaces. Places of desire. I am definitely going to hell.



A visit from my mother after nine months apart

My mother visits and I feel my perspective shift. I now see through her eyes. This is where she truly feels at home. There is a "rightness" about her in this time and this place. But I am not there yet. And my "uncontrol", as usual, I manifest on her. Where do I belong? I cannot grant her freedom until I find my own freedom. I am selfish. I know that.



A church in my mother's village

A church in my mother's village. I am not sure what to make of it. I try to see the place through my mother's little-girl eyes. But it merely seems like a quaint little place. It is pretty. It is old. It is history. There is no connection for me.



My mother and her cousin pose outside the home of my great-grandmother

This house is one of ancestors. There are many ghosts here. I sense innocence. I sense truth. But I also sense poverty and hardship. I cannot see myself there. It is strange to me. Will I find myself when I walk inside, or will I seem like a stranger as always?



My mother on her ancestral ground in Lysos, Cyprus

I see so much beauty in my mother standing on the land of her birth. I sense hopes and dreams. I see a little girl, giggling, running through the veldt. I sense belonging. But there in the vastness, there is regret. Do we truly "find" ourselves? Where do we really belong?



The elders of the village

A photo opportunity with the elders of the village. My mother and my friend don't belong in this circle of patriarchy. It just seems queer. But there is something gentle about sitting outside, here, during the day, having coffee and letting the conversation flow. It is something small and I wonder if that means something.



A boat trip with my mother

I have never been on a boat in the ocean. My mother has an adventurous spirit. She has always been a bit of a rebel. I see a side of her, free from the constraints of an abusive marriage and a suffocating foreign land.



My mother the adventurer

Here, my mother is the heroine of my Cypriot story. She is the protagonist. She is rich and independent. She is an adventurer. She is desirable but in control. She is Aphrodite cruising on the ocean. Yes, she will face trials and tribulations, but her story will be a happily ever after. And I wish that with all my heart.



“I’m the king of the world!”

I have hopes and dreams. I want to feel carefree. I have never felt that in my body. How do I even begin to know me?



Me in Haifa, Israel in 2000

I continue to travel, searching myself, searching for myself. I find possibilities. In Israel I see potential. I feel anticipation. I find what freedom looks like, but I also recognise another kind of frightening truth. I sense danger in myself. But I quickly close that window and keep searching. I don't know. Where do I go from here? I go home.

1.6 Becoming a queer teacher with a purpose

Dreaming a purpose – a soliloquy

You paid me a visit in my dreams last night. I must say, you startled me. I did not expect you there. You were teaching as usual ... in an auditorium ... which was unusual. I was transported back to your class. I always felt the most right in that space. Maybe because it was English and I liked the stories, the plays, the poems, and the writing. But I also think you had a lot to do with it. You recognised that my puzzle pieces of crazy thoughts fit together in your company. So, there I was, sitting in the bottom row of chairs, listening to your class. But then you came up to me and asked me a question-statement that simultaneously

embarrassed me and woke me up. In your gentle voice you said, "Why are you sitting here at the bottom? You should be right at the top."

Thank you for the visit.

Dreams are so many things to so many people. Dreams are vivid performances in the theatre of my mind. To me, the "performance" above was a stark reminder that I was wasting my potential while I was trying to find myself. It was clear to me that I needed a purpose. And, as fate would have it, upon returning to South Africa, I started teaching English at a co-ed public high school. I am convinced it saved my life. The greatest moments of joy I have experienced in my life were when I started teaching. I found a community of teachers and students who, for the first time in my life, felt like family. I loved everything about it. I cannot express enough the happiness, comfort and support it brought into my life. The top leadership of the school consisted of strong women who I instantly recognised as mentors. The students were authentic, honest, willing to learn, boisterous, energetic, silly, serious, naughty and also the smartest people I knew. I received the gift of learning more from their struggles, challenges, hopes, aspirations, creativity, disappointments and frustrations than from anyone else before or since in my life. They saved my life. Although in public I was still very much in the closet at the time, they saw right through me. They recognised me for who I truly was, even if I didn't even know it myself at the time. I suspected it, but fear and angst were, as always, my powerful, influential companions. However, I had found my purpose! I worked harder and longer than I had at any other time in my life. I had to prove myself, to myself and to others. I wanted to work until I was successful. Until the feeling of failure, of deceit and of worthlessness disappeared. I eventually started teaching Dramatic Arts as well and was promoted into the top leadership of the school. I was very good at my job. But what meant more to me was working with the students and that they approved of my teaching. I have received quite a few teaching awards and have been appointed to important positions over the years, but the validation of the students is what means the most.

have never worked closely with him have often said that everything that he touches turns to gold. But if you've ever been taught by him or worked with him you realise that he puts his whole heart and soul into what he does. He invests blood, sweat and TEARS into the learners. All the awards that the learners receive are a result of all that he has invested.

You might not receive a Nobel Peace prize for changing the world but you certainly raised people who will. Thanxxx, Steve, you're the best!!!

PeZaYa

The Nobel Prize ... for teaching?

It was when I started writing for school theatre that I slowly found my truth, my authentic voice. I recognised so many of my own struggles and my own insecurities in the students. I saw injustice through their eyes. I now looked at bullies from the side and from the back instead of head-on, when I was the target. I received a sobering perspective. When I look back at my performance as a teacher and specifically my performance of writing for theatre, it is quite evident that, as far as my queer journey is concerned, it is mapped out in the pages of those scripts that I wrote for the students. When I read and perform them through a queer lens, I see tentative steps, cautious nudges, innocent yearnings, and hopeful glances. I also see that now I performed not only my "othered" voice and the "othered" voices of my students, but for the first time I wrote for the bully. I gave voice to the bully, and I started understanding the bully. I dared to write the bully because in the stage directions I had a plan. In the safety of the theatre, with our masks in place, we could respond to the bully. We could confront the bully. We could finally give the bully a piece of our mind. It was a rebellion with purpose. However, this only became clear to me much later. It is easy to look back now and think that was always the intention. It wasn't. Writing is always probing at the outset. It sometimes has no idea where it will end or how it will be read. I had no queer vocabulary. I only had feelings. I include extracts of some of the plays I had written for performance by the students at school and in festivals. In there, somewhere, is a making sense, a finding of self and a seeing of others. I look at these monologues as I wrote them at the time and try and reflect, retrospectively, on my queerness in the writing as a performance rather than the style of performance on stage used at the time of writing. Perhaps this is something I can focus on at later stage.

An anthology of extracts: A queer retrospective reflection

Unchained (S. Kotze, 2011)

Lights up on a couch – upstage centre. A couple on the couch. Two young women. The audience intrudes on an intimate moment. Later it becomes clear that they are not only communicating physically but also by means of Sign Language. DIKELEDI signs all her dialogue.

DIKELEDI: I stood watching you. Yeah ... I watched you. You didn't see me. And I just knew ... I knew ... I can't explain it. People say time stands still. I dunno about that ... all I know is that it was just ... you ... in that moment ... I was mesmerised ... there was no noise! You lifted your hand and gently stroked the hair from your forehead. I dunno what you wore, who you were talking to ... nothing ... I just recall a shadow in the background ... a presence ... then you smiled ... and in that instance everything that I ever believed to be true and natural and good and right ... my inner core ... my apprehension and my fears, my reluctance, inhibitions and regrets, my silence – vanished ... and in that moment I saw the truth ... I saw you ... and I held on ... I held on to that smile for as long as I possibly could ... I could hear my heartbeat ... I realised I was holding my breath ... and then you walked away ... I finally exhaled ... slowly. I didn't want to make a sound. If it was a dream ... I didn't want to wake up and if it was real ... I wanted to hold on ... that's the day you walked into my life ... I knew it then. You didn't, of course, but I did.

JAMES: Bullshit ... bullshit ... BULLSHIT! It is all bullshit! She's a dyke ... what are you talking about? (*to the audience*) Please tell me that YOU can see? This is all bullshit! She's a dyke! A fucking beaver-eater ... It's not natural ... How can you sit there and condone this? How can you sit there and not do anything ... Do you want your kids to see this abomination of nature? It's not natural! Fuck! Leave! If you have one ounce of decency you would get up off your arses and get the hell out of here ...

Reflection: When I read this scene from the play *Unchained*, I notice that I write with many ellipses. I think I still do. I wonder why. Perhaps there are things unspoken which I did not know, understand or could articulate. I know there is power in what is not said. I cannot always write the feelings and emotions between the dialogue. “Dikeledi” means “tears”; the character is deaf. I sense sadness here and secret language. Unspoken love. There is an exploration of queer love here. It is deeply personal and perhaps expresses the deep yearning for love. It is tentative because it is dangerous. The play also explores how men take ownership of women and cannot fathom any type of love outside of their heteronormative patriarchal thinking. I see that I wrote the imagined words of the bully – the man. I notice the homophobic language he uses, and it is jarring. Is this what he really feels or is it defensive because he loses power? At the end of the play, the man rapes his ex-lover. That is my first experience of corrective rape. I did not know it at the time. I certainly did not understand that it was and still is a pervasive

problem in our society. When I consider the title of the play now, it speaks to an unshackling from heteronormative restrictions.

Youth League (S. Kotze, 2012)

MR KHUMALO: I am good to you ... I look out for you ... I defend you ... I fight for you ... and this is the gratitude you show me. Down with all of you ... niggers, honkies, *kaffers*, half breeds ... you talk about democracy? You know nothing about democracy ... it is a word you throw around because you don't know any better ... it sounds nice in your mouth ... but it leaves a bitter taste ... you want freedom? What freedom? You fight for freedom because that's what they tell you to fight for ... (*in the following lines, BLACK and WHITE mime an execution style for each character as he [KHUMALO] mentions each of the freedoms and one of the COLOURS collapses at a time. All the while the COLOURS hum until we get to the very last COLOUR ...*) freedom of religion? To worship? Worship what? Who? You don't need to worship anyone or anything but me! Freedom of movement? Move where? Go, leave ... we don't want your kind here, you are in our way! Sexual freedom? What, you want the thing between the legs? You don't know if you are a man or a woman? Take many women, you faggots! Freedom of choice? Choose this (*obscene gesture*). There is only one choice and that is me ... I am the one and the only ... You want education? Why? So, you can think for yourselves? Freedom of speech? You only speak if you make sense ... you want to speak against me ... you face the consequences ... Freedom of information? (*Laughs*) You want information? To do what? You want to stop corruption? Who's going to stop me? You? You? You? You? (*While he laughs, the last COLOUR gets executed. Silence.*) I spit on your Rainbow Nation! Woza Yatzis! Woza Khumalo! Woza! (*He exits. BLACK and WHITE remain on stage. They look defeated. Glance at each other.*)

WHITE: Eish ... Dictators free themselves but they enslave the people.

BLACK: Dictators always look good until the last ten minutes.

Reflection: Here I see how male dictators manipulate the very people that vote them into power. I see how they make a mockery of the Rainbow Nation ideal and callously dismantle our freedoms. Men ride on the coat-tails of heteronormativity. It is their safety net. They take for granted that it is their right to control. The dictator's henchmen and the citizens of the country are mere pawns to manipulate. The character names are colours of the Rainbow Nation and he actively executes each of them. His language smacks of misogyny and queerphobia, and he is an example of the oppressed becoming the oppressor which is evident in his use of racist dialogue. Did I think here of who should safeguard our rights? Why do we allow ourselves to be oppressed?

Perfect Day (S. Kotze, 2013)

SISTER: How dare you speak to mother like that ... you faggot?! Now, look what you've done? You have gone and upset your own mother! Why? So, you can go and "have fun" with your little fuck buddy, Jacob! You are disgusting ... (*laughter*).

BOBBY: (*remorseful*) Mother, I didn't mean to disrespect you ... I just wanted to get out for a little while ... I'm sorry ... I promise I won't go anywhere ... I will stay right here with you, Mother ... (*he hugs his MOTHER ...*) (*cheering*).

MOLLY: I love you daddy ... Am I pretty, Daddy? ... but all the girls at school say I'm fat and ugly ... am I fat, Daddy? I must take my clothes off? But Daddy ... I don't want to take off my clothes ... I don't want to get into the bath ... why are you making me do this ... I love you too, Daddy ... but ... okay ... okay ... just don't get angry ... I just want you to be happy ... (*she starts taking off her clothes*). Please don't touch me there, Daddy ... no, it hurts, Daddy ... I know it's our little secret ... I promise ... I won't tell anyone... (*turning to BOBBY*) Daddy, I remember when I was a little girl ... and you used to undress me ... you stroked my back ... and then you combed my hair ... saying I'm Daddy's little girl ... I felt so special ... like I have the best daddy in the whole wide world ... and then, when I was naughty ... you used to take me into the room ... take off all my clothes ... you made me lie flat on my stomach and then you spanked me ... you spanked me hard ... I cried ... and you lay next to me and told me everything was going to be okay ... that I'm the prettiest girl in the whole wide world ... that I deserved the spanking ... but now Daddy will make me feel whole lot better ... and you touched me all over ...

BOBBY: (*becoming angrier...*) no, no, no ... why are you making me do this ... I don't want to do this anymore ... I can't do this anymore ... just leave me alone ... you are sick in the head ... What kind of a mother are you? None of the other mothers do this to their children ... Why are you doing this to me? ... you are sick ... sick in the fucking head ... I hate you ... I hate you ... I hate you ... you destroyed my life ... and now I'm going to destroy yours ... you have fucked with my life for long enough.

Reflection: Again, so many ellipses. But in this piece, I sense fear, anger and humiliation in those silences. It depicts the bullying of Molly and Bobby. They suffer bullying at school. And in these graphic scenes, physical, emotional and sexual abuse from their parents. The two lovers have something in common and it drives them to take revenge on their peers through a school shooting massacre. I once again notice the abuse of power. Those who are voiceless feel scared, feel small, are taken advantage of and bullied. I notice how "faggot" and "dyke" are prominent in my writing, even if not in a queer sexual context. Are these words just conveniently used to assert power? It is almost like the receiver of these words is instantly paralysed by them. I think of my own childhood. Is this why I wrote them?

The League of Extraordinary Boys (S. Kotze, 2014)

SLANG: Cupcakes is what we call a *wyfie* [name given to female animals, prostitute]. He is X's property and the only reason he is still alive ... because in return for favours (*lewd gestures*) ... X protects him. X is in charge and the general and master of this facility.

CUPCAKES: Hey, *wena* [you], I can protect myself. Unlike some retards in here ... this is Retard ... the only things he's good for is drooling, wanking and for tattoos ... that's about the only thing he can do ... tattoos – he brands your numbers.

RETARD: (*Disabled – walks with difficulty. He mumbles.*) Who are you calling a retard, you bitch? Just leave me alone, okay!

CUPCAKES: (*In a grotesque pantomime, he mimics RETARD*) Who are you calling a retard, you bitch? Just leave me alone, okay! (*laughs hysterically*)

WITTES: And with their bodies too ... they walk around in their short skirts all over the place ... and when a man is a gentleman, and he wants to touch her where she is asking to be touched then she treats him like rubbish. But she still wears short skirts and see-through shirts and she teases him ... he can't have it ... he can't have her ... and she looks at him, licking her lips ... and he cannot take it anymore and he grabs her and throws her down on the ground and he rapes her ... and then he sleeps ... and then he rapes her again ... again like a man (*laughs*) ... and then she runs to the *polieste* [police, slang] ... but officer, why am I guilty? She asked for it ... she asks for it every day ... I am a man ... and she is just a woman ... you understand ... you want a piece of her too, I see ... and then he rapes her too ...

X: You see, Cupcakes ... I am a young man ... I am an intelligent young man ... I know right from wrong ... My mother taught me well. She used to tell me, "My boy ... you will go far one day, you have the brains to make it in this world." She said, "you mustn't get involved with these *skollies* [thugs] ... they are not your friends." I used to say, "Ja Ma ... just get off my back, okay. You don't know what it's like out there." "If only your father was here ... it would have been better." Ja, but my father is not here. *Waar was hy?* [Where was he?] Where was he when we had no money and I had to steal from the Oubaas [Elderly gentleman]? Where was he when I had to fight for my life on the streets? When I had to use a gun to defend myself? You walk on the streets and it is a war out there. People don't know. They have no clue. You don't join a gang ... then you are unprotected. Then what must you do? Go cry to your mother? At least a father can protect you. So where is the father when you smoke drugs because it is so *lekker* [nice, good] and it makes you forget? And it makes you feel like you can do anything ... you know it's not you ... but it is a freer you, a better you, a happier you ... an invincible you. I am asking, where is the father then to say it is okay my boy ... I am right here. Where is he when your mother gets sick and there is no one ... and it is just you alone ... but there is someone, there is the 28s and they help you forget ... they tell you, you have to be scared of no one, you have to fear no one. And where is he that time I land up in the hospital when they beat me so I couldn't see for a week ... And then when he comes one day to say now he is there ... now he wants to take care of me ... I tell him that I need no one ... now he needs me. He threatens me with the police, but I am threatened by no one anymore ... and now I take out one and two and just like that I earn my number ... I earn my number out

there and I earn my number in here ... And I am still a young man ... and I am still an intelligent man ... but now, I do not know right from wrong ... I do not want to know right from wrong. Right is death but wrong is to survive.

Reflection: There is a lot here. The whole play is about boys in a juvenile prison having to join a gang to survive. Within the gang, I notice that they organise themselves along heteronormative patricarchal lines. The most masculine figure is in charge, and he has a “wyfie” – a prostitute. Cupcakes is considered the “wife” because he acts the most feminine. He is therefore considered a servant and must serve the General in every way, including sexually. One of the characters is disabled. He has very little power. Another character speaks of raping and abusing a woman and then when she reports it to a policeman, he rapes her as well. Why is power so important here? In the absence of the feminine, why is power still exerted over those who seem feminine? Or are some made feminine so that the illusion of power remains?

Born Naked (S. Kotze, 2016)

CARMEN: Any whoodles. My name is Carmen Delectable. Delectable from top to bottom ... I am sure you will agree. As Carmen, I make pretty... delectable and I make ordinary ... fierce and fucking gorgeous. Oops. I am not supposed to use that language. I said ordinary! My drag mother, Ginga Vitas, says that there is nothing ordinary about nobody. Ordinary is a mask we use to hide from the spotlight. And I ain't hiding, *gurl*. She always says ... a queen is someone with heart, sophistication, humility, inner and outer beauty, and someone who can *slay* a song so full of emotion that time gets lost in the room for those few minutes that you are performing your soul out. She says we are all born naked ... the rest ... is all drag ... every one of us ... it is up to you to dress your personality.

CARMEN: Funny enough ... my parents were very supportive. I was very lucky ... but Jamie's parents not so much. She was physically abused by her father, disowned by her mother and finally, kicked out of the house. Her drag mother “adopted” her. It was during our Ki-Ki and tea sessions in that waiting room that I came to know Jamie as one of the bravest people I know. Through all the tragedy, abuse, and heartache, she simply shrugged it off and was single minded in her determination.

CARMEN: It was Carmen who allowed me to make sense of David. It was a choice ... suicide or Carmen! And I am proud to announce that Carmen wins every single time! Fuck suicide! I chose Carmen! I chose life!

...

CARMEN: We fucked it up...

RAJA: In front of RuPaul ...

CARMEN: We humiliated ourselves ...

RAJA: In front of RuPaul ...

CARMEN: The silver lining? The whole spectacular disaster cemented our friendship and taught us that friends come first ... above all ... those are the queens that hold your chin up when the cruel reality of this world comes-a-knocking ...

RAJA: I was being followed ... by four guys ... I started running ... I stumbled and fell ... I got up again ... but it was too late ...

Reflection: I wrote this play for two boys performing in drag. I was excited by the possibilities of drag culture. I had no idea, when I started writing the play, the lessons I would learn from drag. Re-reading the extracts now, I see the value of failure. Here drag is also used as an escape, to empower and to inspire. Once again, I perform abuse here and wonder about its lasting effect in my body. I write about abuse a lot. There is also queerphobia here, but I also see the value of family, belonging and support.

Imaginary friends (S. Kotze, 2017)

NOMA: This is bullshit! Absolute bullshit. I can't believe I grew up with such a bunch of narrow-minded, gullible bunch of fucking idiots. Will you look at yourself? Have you learnt nothing from childhood? What the fuck is going on? We travelled hundreds of kilometres to escape this exact shit. I am sick and tired of living my life in fear, being manipulated by cultural and traditional fairy tales. *Logong lo ojwa lo sa le metsi* – A wood is bent while still wet. We hear traditional shit like this, which is an excuse for hitting the shit out of their children. Yea ... that is what my dad used to say when he *bliksemed* [beat, vulgar slang] me until I could not sit down ... for what? ... not wearing my shoes? For not saying yes, Daddy, please, Daddy, thank you, Daddy, amen, Daddy!! You were there! You saw! "Because he wants to mould me while I am still young!" It is fucking child abuse ... because he wasn't man enough to take on someone his own size!!! Because my mother subscribes to a world where a man can get away with any messed-up shit his imagination can think up just because he is a man. But that is how we defend these fuckers! We make our children live in fear. We scare them with *tokoloshes* [mischievous evil spirits] and ancestral shit. You know what? Sometimes, I am ashamed to be Black ... I am embarrassed. What kind of people are we that we encourage fucking *sangomas* [witch doctors] who go around and kill and dismember children ... who encourage the rape of a child because it will cure them ... Decolonisation? I say colonise the shit out of us! But nooooo, then we go and blame all this shit on the fact that we were corrupted by Western ideas in the first place! Fuck that shit ... this shit started way before ... can we not just for ONCE rise up, own up and take fucking responsibility!!! Mind our own damn business, stand up for our rights, think for ourselves, become strong independent women who do not rely on men for nothing ... can we not just be normal!? But nooooo ... this here is how we wish to represent ourselves as a Black nation ...

Reflection: Noma rebels against tradition's being used as an excuse for abuse. She vents about the submission of women to a traditional patriarchy. I used far fewer ellipses here but more

exclamation marks! Is this a more confident voice? Is this a voice that wants to disrupt; dismantle stale traditions and unpick the patriarchy? It is indeed an angry voice.

Zama Zama (S. Kotze, 2017)

THAPELO: Hi ... uhm ... my name is Thapelo. Uhm ... I am 21 years old. I am a journalist ... recently graduated ... kinda cool ... I'm kinda psyched as I am about to embark on my very first official assignment. You all know about the Zama Zamas ... the illegal miners? They are kind of a subculture that we know very little about. They mine the abandoned mines for gold. I have been fascinated by them for a couple of years now. You hear stories on the news every now and again but normally it's just a report about Zama Zama gangs fighting to establish their territory. Sometimes about the Zamas getting trapped down there. They are very secretive and protective over their territory. For obvious reasons, they do not allow outsiders in their secret society. Their activities are illegal but I get the feeling the police seem to look the other way when it comes to the gangs. The Zamas know the underground tunnels and passages better than anyone else. For the police it is almost impossible to infiltrate this world. Live and let live ... make the right noises when asked about the problem. I must admit ... I am a little nervous going down there. I am not quite sure what to expect. A friend of mine organised the gig for me. He is friends with one of the guys. It took a lot of talking and bribing to get them to agree that I come and spend a couple of days down there with them ... I am not telling my parents that because they will worry too much but I just know that when I complete my article, they will no doubt be proud. By my knowledge, I will be the first person to be allowed to document these strange, desperate people. So, mom ... dad ... this one's for you ... hi ... ho ... hi ... ho ... it's off to work I go ...

Reflection: I am fascinated by subcultures and the disenfranchised. Here I attempt to infiltrate the world of illegal mining gangs. I wonder about the extreme measures people will go to in order to escape poverty. It is a world of men with their own rules. It is dangerous and threatening. Is this how I see men? Or what they are capable of? What happens when men are confined together underground?

Kumbaya (S. Kotze, 2017)

BOBBY: (*he speaks with great difficulty*) You don't know shit ... you know nothing. What do you know about a mother who cannot look at you ... who thinks that you are a monster? Who does not want to take care of you? What do you know about a father who is impatient with you ... who hits you ... who is disgusted by you ... who screams at you ... who puts you in the car and drops you off with people you don't know ... a-ban-don-ment ... to sit here and wait ... to sit in my own shit because I cannot change myself ... to have someone touch me ... not out of sympathy but with love ... physical love ... I don't want to live like this anymore ... I don't want to be here anymore ...

NICK: Yes, kumbaya ... yes ... and to that I say amen, my beloved brothers. Amen, Bobby, you horny, checkers-playing retard. Amen, to my dearest Otto, the mutant

voyeur ... yes, don't think I don't know what you are up to, you dirty little bastard. Can I have an amen for sleazy Eazy and a double-amen for Boytjie and his Mama ... who by the way ... told me last night ... while I was on top of her ... to say ... see you later, masturbator! And let us not forget ... my brothers ... the most retarded of them all ... can I get an amen for Junior ... who so generously gave us the news that we will be moving away. I think this calls for a celebration! Because God knows where we will be moved to ... we can only hope and pray that He will look after us. That He will send us to a place of love and laughter. To a place where all our needs will be taken care of. To a place of our dreams, of our fantasies, of our imaginations! Where we can all walk! Where we can all talk! Where we get treated with dignity and respect! Where we are loved! We thank God for small mercies. I thank God for big mercies. I thank God that I am alive. (*singing*) "Kumbaya my lord, kumbaya ..." (*suddenly, OUT to the audience. Very self-assured, almost cocky ...*) Did you know that "kumbaya" means "arise, Father God" in Hebrew and NOT "come by here" as commonly thought. I suppose, it really means the same thing? Rise up, Jesus and come save us? Come save us from this ... hell? (*smirk*) I hope the irony is not lost on you? I grapple with it all the time. I am not supposed to question it ... shhhh ... don't tell anyone. I call it a monumental, diabolical, hypocritical, fucking farce with a huge splash of fucking stupidity. We ask God to come and save us ... THE VERY SAME GOD THAT PUT US HERE IN THE FIRST FUCKING PLACE? Don't get me wrong. I don't ONLY blame God. I also blame people. I blame God for ALLOWING this to happen. And I blame PEOPLE for THANKING God that this happened, then asking Him to save us and then waiting around for what? To see people suffer, to see people die, to see grown men piss themselves ... (*He laughs. Eventually his laughter turns emotional*) Kumbaya, for that boy whose father beat him to a pulp when he was barely able to walk and kumba-fucking-ya, for that boy whose mother, not wanting to be outdone by the father, gave him his first hit of smack at the age of 8! (*very emotional now*) And thank you, Lord, for that priest who that little boy trusted ... thank you for saving him ... and then touching him ... and then raping him ... and then giving him more drugs to keep on raping him ... and then ... thank you, God, for the blood on my hands ... forgive me, Father ... for I have sinned and sinned and sinned ... (*he recovers slightly*) (*Back to the cast*) So, let us celebrate my brothers ... (*they all cheer*) Let us celebrate this momentous occasion ...

Reflection: This was inspired by a real event where disabled patients were moved, abandoned and eventually passed away as the result of a lack of care. I often think of religious hypocrisy. Why do people suffer? And then why do we ask to be saved? There is a great deal of anger here. I reflect on abuse and rape again. I think about those people who are in positions of power (religious or social) who take advantage of the weak.

Woza Superman! (S. Kotze, 2018)

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. – Galatians 3:28

They call me Superman, I'm here to rescue you. I want to save you baby ...
– Eminem

For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became the transgressor. – 1 Timothy 2:11–15

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife ...
– Ephesians 5:21–33

ACTOR 1 (male): Man is physically bigger. Wo-man is physically smaller. Man has big weapons (*the MEN pick up chairs*) ... no ... (*suggestively*) ... weapons ... (*the MEN drop the chairs and proudly grab their crotches*) ... man feels powerful ... the feeling of power sends adrenaline shooting to his ... weapon ... serotonin floods his brain ... man gets horny ... lustful ... he wants to breed ... wo-man ... likes this ... because man looks very powerful ... man gets more excited ... man starts grunting and groaning ... wo-man gets ready to receive man ... man gets more excited ... wo-man gets worried ... wo-man ... tries to run ... man is more determined ... wo-man says “no” ... man hears “yes” ... wo-man shouts “no” ... man hears “yes” ... wo-man screams “yes” ... man has pride ... man ... will not be denied ... man has power ... man is in charge ... man rapes wo-man ... man says “pleasure” ...

Reflection: I have always thought about how religion legitimises men’s power over women. This scene was meant to be satirical. It clearly shows the man’s indoctrinated notion that he holds hegemony over the female body.

Malaika (S. Kotze, 2018)

ENSEMBLE: Ukerewe²² ... Ukerewe ... Ukerewe ... the island ... the land of the outcast ... the land of the free ... the land of the albino ... the leper, diseased, poverty, ... me. Here is the land of milk and honey ... here is the land of safety, here is our sanctuary. There is no hunting here. We come here because over there ... (*points to somewhere in the audience*) ... that is where I am being raped ...? By that man ... can you hear it? He rapes me because he believes sex with me will cure his HIV ... that man over there ... he cuts my arm off. It is important that I am alive while he cuts off my arm ... the more pain I feel, the stronger the *muti* [traditional medicine, sometimes associated with witchcraft] ... when I scream, he cuts off the other arm ... that woman over there buys the *muti*. She eats my flesh and drinks my blood to bring her good luck ... to get a job ... to fix her marriage ... to make his penis bigger ... that child over there screams when she sees me ... because they tell her that I am a ghost, a

²² An island in the Tanzanian region of Lake Victoria, known for its large population of people with albinism.

monster that will come at night to drink her blood ... it is said that I am sterile ... not intelligent and ... that I cannot die ... that I have no spirit ... and that I will vanish ...

QUEEN: How dare you say that to me? What about my Black skin? Where is my wealth? Where is my privilege? And the lepers on this island? They are Black, are they not? Who provides for them? And that mother over there ... she is sick ... she is dying ... there is no father. She is not ostracised because she is Black but because she is a woman ... and sick ... who provides for her Black children? Black does not mean freedom; Black does not mean liberty. Power is wealth and power is privilege. Power usurps liberty. And power's insecurity imposes poverty. Poverty is the mother of hunger, disease, crime ... of desperation. I have been spat on, cursed, and hunted like an animal. If nothing else, it should feed my revenge ... and what's the reason? We are all human – Black and white. Do we not have eyes? Do we not have hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed, and cooled by the same winter and summer? If we get pricked, do we not bleed? If we are tickled, do we not laugh? If we are poisoned ..., do we not die? Inside is our humanity. We are not our skins; you can talk about culture, you can talk about language, these are things we can use to describe who we are as people. Blackness is whatever Black people decide it is. And so is whiteness. Poverty knows no colour, no race, no culture, nor gender. It is our fear ... that is the origin of our hate.

...

QUEEN: Oh, dear God. What have You done? Look what you have done! God, why have you forsaken us? What did we do to deserve this? Where did you go? Why did you take this gift away? My child? Your child! You are a cruel God. When Abraham was about to kill his own son, You sent an angel. Where is my angel, God? Where is the angel of my Malaika? Where is the angel of these people? Why do we deserve to suffer? What have we done? What has Africa done? Where is our freedom? Where are our angels? Where? Where? Where? God! Tell me, where? (*She cries loudly*)

Reflection: I write the horrific consequences of misguided, ignorant superstitious practices specifically perpetuated and performed against people with albinism. Again, I contemplate religious hypocrisy. I ruminate about race and the implication of colour. What does it mean? Are we not all just the same? How does this give one power over another?

In conclusion, I wonder how many of these characters are me? How many of the oppressed are me? And frighteningly, how much of me is in the oppressors? I wonder about my life growing up and I cannot help but think that these extracts are, in some way, a re-performing of so many moments both remembered and forgotten. The images on the stage of my memory theatre continue to perform and I know they continue to do so in the here and the now.

Scene 2 - The refle[ct]xive theatre – queer performance monologues in the here and now

Probyn (2003: 290) reminds me that “the body cannot be thought of as a contained entity; it is in constant contact with others ... subjectivity [is] a relational matter”. The reminder is valuable insofar as my autoethnographic exploration is situated in the here-and-now space of a private boys’ school. In this theatre, I am surrounded by bodies with whom I am in contact with on a daily basis. My subjective thoughts and responses are then shaped by those around me, affected by the space in which we move together. McNay (2004: 187) extends this notion when he suggests that

the essence of social being is not encompassed in experience itself, but it does only begin to reveal itself through experience which must then be situated in a broader context ... by analysing emotions as a form of social interaction it is possible to see how they are both shaped by latent social structures and also the vehicle through which invisible power dynamics are made present within immediate everyday experience.

I contemplate my journey. How do I feel?

Crying

Yesterday I cried because I was called words ... not that I thought that I
performed those words but
Yesterday I cried because I was spoken about
Yesterday I cried because I became invisible
Yesterday I cried because I was locked up and misunderstood
Yesterday I cried because someone broke my nose even though my nose was straight
Yesterday I cried because my nose was not straight anymore
Yesterday I cried because I missed out on so much ... all my energy spent on
making myself invisible from myself and making another self visible to myself
and to others
Yesterday I sobbed because sometimes all you can do is cry for yourself and cry
for others who are invisible
Yesterday I sobbed and my heart ached for my queer fabulousness who had no space
to grow but only secretly and shamefully
Yesterday I cried with relief ... because I was given a gift to teach ... and
because through innocent eyes my queerness was celebrated ... within myself and
outside of myself
Yesterday I cried in celebration because I learnt from and through young people
who also felt invisible
Yesterday I cried in gratitude because I became visible to myself and to
others ...

Yesterday I cried because I could write for myself ... I could write myself
 visible
 Yesterday I cried and breathed and said thank you
 Yesterday I cried and put away all my tissues
 Yesterday turned into today
 And today I cry once again ... I hear those words once again ... somewhere next
 to me ... and it shakes my memory
 And today I cry my nose red with tears, and I feel my nose is not straight
 And today I cry because I am sad
 Today I cry because I see the pain of young boys through their eyes, reflecting
 my memories of yesterday.
 Today I cry because the world is cruel
 Today I cry because you make us invisible with your rules
 Today I cry with expectation
 Today I cry because I learnt from love and through love
 Today I cry because sometimes all you can do is cry
 Today I cry because I have been blessed ... I have possibility to give
 possibility and create opportunity
 Today I cry because I can share my tears and make visible myself once again so
 that others can make their invisible self visible
 Today I cry and today I smile
 Today I cry with hope
 Today I cry

Inner monologue 1: I wrote the poem above when I was thinking about my journey from past to present. The poem reflects my emotions from childhood and then finding meaning and truth about myself teaching in a co-educational public school. It expresses, in some way, acceptance of self at a specific point in time but then goes on to express a returning to a past self, filled with doubt, fears, insecurity, panic and uncontrol in my current reality. What I find interesting is that, when I reflect back, I was under the impression that I had dealt with all my past traumas, my messiness, and my insecurities when I came out to myself and then finally, lived and performed (inside and outside of the classroom) openly as queer. When I joined a private all-boys' school, it became clear to me that there was still a lot of work to be done to feel safe in this space, inside of myself and outside of myself, in this here and now.

2.1 Queering a boys' school

Back in the closet

Stepping into the closet
Because of religion
Because of patriarchy
Because of heteronormativity
This is a boys' school
This is brotherhood
That's what God wants
That's what parents want
That's what the staff want
There is safety in numbers
It is safe here in the closet.

Inner monologue 2: With a masculine hegemony around me, in a school steeped in colonial tradition, I felt a moving of my body back into the closet. My body immediately rebelled. There was resistance. The last thing I wanted was to go towards a location that I actively, and with hard work, tried to forget. I thought I had locked the closet and thrown away the key a long time ago. My hands were now actively searching for that key. It felt easier to hide in the confines of the theatre, the shadows of the wings and the familiarity of a fabulous dressing room. Sometimes it still does. I needed to look for clues. Who was directing this production that felt so strange to me? The space reeked of the past, the dialogue sounded distant, and the movements looked threatening to me. I had to write my body's expression to find the clues hidden in the well-worn theatre of the past–present.

2.1.1 Queerly walking straight lines on a map

In order to keep pace with such a world, we now think of “place” as a heavily trafficked intersection, a port of call and exchange, instead of a circumscribed territory. A boundary is more like a membrane than a wall. In current cultural theory, “location” is imagined as an itinerary instead of a fixed point. (Conquergood, 1998: 145)

I start with placing my body in this “place”, this specific “location” and within these “boundaries” to understand myself within the culture and, in so doing, perhaps a personal subjective perspective of the culture itself.

Walking queerly

There are vast open spaces here
Inside of the urban buildings
Is this what freedom looks like?
The birds fly unhindered
They are un-nervous and calmly go about their business
I walk the trails between the trees and the bushes
Here a mongoose scurries inward and there the sunlight reflects out
There is a song in the air
The sound of insects calling for rest
Water ripples rapidly round and under and inside
fields and lots and bridges and pipes
Is this what freedom feels like?
There are fences, walls and gates in the distance
I know they are there
I sometimes see them but I can sense them too
It is a warning
Is this what freedom sounds like?
The buildings are old and the ivy protectively masks the facade
Inviting stained glass reflects and refracts a hopeful spectrum
The bricks multiply and grow tall and the places small
There is a mustiness in the air
Is this how freedom tastes?
I see sameness
I see patterns
I feel feelings here
Reminders of freedom
Freedom but within the lines?
Freedom but within the fences and walls?
Freedom but within the rules scratched out on buildings?
Breathing freedom from inside a bag
There is a little bit for everyone
I need more air
I need to inhale deep and exhale uninterrupted
But the lines and the walls and the fences make this place permanent

Straight
 Locked in
 Fixed
 W
 A
 L
 K
 I
 N
 G queerly ...

Inner monologue 3: I often have to remind myself not to instinctively rebel against that which seems traditional and colonial - that which seems foreign to me – while I am walking. Why? Because if I want to learn and unlearn, I need to be fully present, open and not closed. When I look from the outside into myself, I seem strange too. But my body cannot help itself. These images, this place, this location make me nervous. My body senses restriction and it wants to walk in a straight line. I have to remind myself that it is okay to walk queerly. “Just step out of the line.” But walking queerly makes me feel awkward, uncomfortable and whispers of un(belonging) echo in my mind. I recognise these emotions; they have been my faithful companions all my life. I feel small because I ask myself what right I have to ask questions of a space moulded by decades of practice, tradition and ritual. But, in turn, my body accuses and asks what right did anyone have to impose this “sanctuary” upon this land in the first place? Does my body have as much right as the next person to walk queerly now because they walked queerly then? Is queering always queer no matter if you have good intentions or even bad intentions? There are spaces here where people congregate and bodies intersect but I suspect that the ideas that are exchanged are those of sameness, of like-for-like, and clichéd poetic repetitions recited for safety and comfort.

But this location is really beautiful. When I sit in particular spaces, specifically when the sun sets, the calmness and beauty allow for deeper breaths. It is intentionally made beautiful. I appreciate the unruliness of nature, the beauty in its unintentional messiness. There is no rigid planning – only when man is involved. There is a shaping of this unstructured beauty, though, into predictable lines and shapes for necessity’s sake. This, however, also holds its own charm. It is a precarious balance between form and function, between practical and aesthetic. It is an unyielding tension with an almost inevitable future ending. But the unruliness and messiness are what holds more sway. It is more spiritual and more immediately illicit feelings of comfort.

It does not need to be queered. It is queer in and of itself. It is the open, “built-up” spaces that I feel sceptical about.

Places of worship

Religion worries but also comforts me
I appreciate the idea of it
It asks for me to become still
But my body searches
Religion is judgement
Religion is guilt
It holds possibility
It holds good intentions when the building is empty
When religion is performed
It is both sincere and strained
I recognise the difference
It is a sixth sense I imagine
There are many distractions
Of selves and others
And they are all asking for favours
So many thoughts
Does God listen to them all?
But it's the singing that awakens me
It is ironic
In places of worship the words of praise are the sounds of lament
This place is the most dangerous
And I am confused
As usual
In places of worship

Inner monologue 4: The beauty of the chapel attracts me too. I am thankful that there are spaces like this. These are not common, certainly not in the schools that I knew before this. I enjoy its promise of pageantry, its artistic aspirations, and its promise of safety, of goodness and of kindness. But I am suspicious of these buildings of worship. I cannot help but wonder if the patriarchal finger of judgement waves most furiously in this place. It shouldn't (depending on where and how you read), according to me, but I have been burnt one too many times. I guess it is important to have moments of assembly that solidify belonging. I recognise that these spaces and these moments have purpose. I guess it is important to feel that one belongs to something that is bigger than your isolated self. But what if that bigness makes one feel even smaller? I worry about that. I wonder what unconditional acceptance looks like. My

body wants to capitulate to this space. It wants to get involved. But once again, there is resistance. I cannot focus because when the space fills up, I feel eyes and thoughts probe my mind. Is my queerness sincerely accepted here? The stories from the Bible are familiar to me. I have read them so many times. There are always lessons. My boredom thinks the lessons are ironic. They speak of love and acceptance, but it is always up to a point, is it not? There always seems to be a line in the sand. I always contemplate where that line begins and where it ends. I wait, with anticipation, with dread, for the time when those oft-quoted passages will turn the spotlight squarely on me. It just feels that my power wanes in these spaces. The majority rules after all. Is my voice loud enough, strong enough, important enough to project over this congregation and say that I am here?

Echoes of my sin - a poem of selective reading

"Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable."

Leviticus 18:22

"In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error."

Romans 1:27

"If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads."

Leviticus 20:13

"Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men ... "

1 Corinthians 6:9

Uhm

Uhm

Uhm

Will this always be my life?

A reminder

Even in my own mind

It makes me tired

Will I always be on the defensive?

Think, think, think, think ...

What is the defence?
 Avoid spaces that make me uncomfortable
 Avoid people that make me uncomfortable
 Avoid, avoid, avoid ...
 ...
 But maybe there is a reason I am here?
 Am I strong enough to rebel?
 Rebellion seems too loud though
 Maybe a quiet word here or there
 Am I strong enough?
 ...
 You see, now I have lost my train of thought
 But I feel hopeful
 Even if my sins echo around me

Inner monologue 5: I think of being in the spotlight. I had to teach myself to embrace the spotlight in the past. I started to like it because, I think, I started to like myself. There were still spaces inside my body that were hidden away but in case the spotlight hinted at something queer, I felt that I had the dialogue to navigate those revelations. Here I feel somewhat uncertain. But I do feel that I have the strength to step into the spotlight again. Perhaps it is because the need for approval is not as important as before. I think of the students, and I know this is not the case for most of them. To navigate this place, in this location, safely, within the lines that were carefully cemented over many years, must be very difficult for them.

2.1.2 Awkward queer moments and role models

Being a role model is the most powerful form of educating. — John Wooden²³

My role model didn't tell me, he showed me. — Anonymous²⁴

Questions about a role model

Can I be a role model?
 What do I have to do?
 Do I need to be a good person?

²³ *Awaken the Greatness Within* (n.d.)

²⁴ *Awaken the Greatness Within* (n.d.)

Do something great?
Can only a part of me be a role model?
Or is it the whole of me?
If it's only a part of me then am I not a fraud?
Who do I admire?
What do I admire?
Standing up for injustice?
At the risk of my own persecution?
That takes courage
I think it is courage
Can I be a queer role model?
Or should I just be a teacher role model?
Can the two be separated?
Do I have the courage to be both?

Inner monologue 6: I was excited to hear about the school's GSA group on the campus. I marvel at the bravery of these young people. Would I have had the courage to join this society if I were still at school? Do most of the boys that need it have the courage? Or is it just the brave select few? What would a space like that have meant for me? Are they not also putting themselves at risk? I asked to be invited to sit in on a meeting. I did not want to intrude so I just sat and listened. They all seemed so comfortable in this space. When I was asked to identify myself, it felt awkward. I have never been asked to identify myself in public. It is uncomfortable but also quite liberating. Some say that they are fine at school, that they are accepted in some way, as long as they are not too loud and proud, but they are more concerned about what their parents will say. They have so many ideas and plans. They used words and terms that were unfamiliar to me. I now felt like the student. They treated me like an equal and not as a teacher. I find this interesting. This is their space and they own it. This is their closet, and they are decorating it with all sorts of fabulousness.

I was taken aback when one of the students suggested that they need more queer teacher role models. I had never thought of my own queerness being looked at in that way. I have always been so consumed with making sense of my own strangeness. How do I even come out as a queer role model? Do I announce it to the school at assembly? Do I slip it in during one of my lessons in class? But in my heart I know that it is about living and teaching authentically. I have to find the authentic me. That is all I can do. When I walk around, along the passageways, surrounded by what seems to be a tense masculinity, I worry that the GSA posters advertising a space of safety are spotlighting "otherness". The colours radiate like a beacon in an otherwise

muted palette. It is brave. The hands that designed these posters, and lovingly and hopefully stapled them to the notice boards, perform acts of courage that inspire me. Their world, at this point in time, is so much more threatened than mine. Despite daily heteronormative shackles, they actively search for ways to unshackle and to unburden. These are true acts of courage, of defiance, and of authenticity. I envy them that and feel ashamed of my passiveness at times.

When a student is found removing one of these posters, with onlookers around, and ceremoniously dumping it into the dustbin, I am both appalled and not surprised. I have always come to expect the worst. This is also an act of defiance. I have seen this kind of thing before, and I wonder what statement is being made here. Is it insecurity? Why does that poster, in this space, affect you to such an extent that your body feels the need to perform hate? Will it not be easier to walk by and to mind your own business? I consider the boys standing around cheering in support. Why do they not walk to the front to confront? Do they not have the courage to speak up against injustice or did they not have the courage, in the first place, to perpetrate the same act of hate? Groups are strange creatures. They make us act in ways we can never anticipate. And I think of that boy, who in that one moment is perhaps silenced forever and whose life is now profoundly affected for many years to come. That boy is/was me. But there are rules and codes of conduct which are there to (supposedly) protect us all.

Rules make a straight line

I never liked rules
The idea of a rule makes me question rules
I think of the rule-makers and the rule-breakers
Rules are like boys' haircuts
Short back and sides
Rules are like boys' uniforms
Neat, unassuming and careful
Rules do not like change
Rules are binary
It is right or it is wrong
Rules are unaccommodating
Rules never anticipate
Rules are never strange
Rules are safe
But I think
Rules beg to be broken
Let rules go

And order will be restored
Because there is only one rule
Humanity

Inner monologue 7: Today I am thinking of my outfit for work. I wear jeans and sneakers, a T-shirt and a sweater with a hoodie. I wear a cap because I am going bald and I like the way it looks. It makes me feel comfortable. Who decided that boys and men must have short hair, wear no earrings, fashion a tie and don a suit? Who decided to call this a uniform? When did a uniform equate to academic success or teaching excellence? Is this the standard of masculinity? From experience, I have always found that the students who thrive in the classroom are the ones who have a clear sense of self and their own purpose. If their sense of self and purpose are in line with heteronormative practices then they are certainly advantaged. Students who are restricted from expressing their authentic selves are disorientated. They can never thrive because that which works for the majority does not work for them. We are letting down our students, and our teachers, if we continue to find ways to suppress their voices of creativity and uniqueness. I do not wear a tie and I do not wear a suit. It makes me feel different. There must be a balance. Uniformity, achieved through short hair and a uniform, is also meant to foster a sense of belonging to a family that looks and sounds the same. It might work for some but there is always someone who feels awkward. Like me. In this here and now. I persist. And create my own normativity. Maybe it starts with me.

2.1.3 War games and the absence of warmth

The smell of competition

There is no I in team
It is a collective we
Together
Working as one
More pressure
Winning at all costs
A brotherhood
A thousand eyes on you
Cheering, shouting, jeering and support
Songs of war, songs of power
Don't drop the ball
And just don't fuck it up
Own up

Be a man
No fear
No pain, no gain
Heroes are made
The vanquished shall fall
Sweat
Blood
Cuts and bruises
Head trauma and broken bones
You took one for the team
Thank you
Come back next year

Inner monologue 8: Men have always gone to war. They fight for their honour. They sacrifice their bodies for a sniff at victory. They defend the virtues of their community. There is nothing better than that. To fail is not an option. Pride is at stake. I admire the commitment. And I see boys still yearn for stories of war: brave warriors, feats of courage, and taking all the spoils on the sports field. The boys put on war paint; they are warriors. They scream and shout. They intimidate and they threaten, the war paint on their faces smudged and their eyes full of fire. They love supporting their team. It is compulsory to play sports but not to participate in cultural activities. This worries me. Yes, sports activities are important, but it is through culture that we learn about ourselves, the bodies we interact with and about society as a whole. The more masculine the body in sport, the more successful a student is deemed to be. I get the sense that boys must be tougher and stronger. There is no room for failure. Instead of a culture in which the human spirit is celebrated, I sense a culture of the strong versus the weak. Boys who play field hockey are called “*mof stokke*” (“fag sticks”). Support (spectatorship) is compulsory for rugby too. But only for rugby. It holds up that the other less “masculine” sports are considered less important, less worthy of support. The rugby battlefield, with bloodied and injured bodies, is hero-worshipped. War, or the idea of war, is glorified. The “weak” are casualties and it is the survival of the fittest, on and off the field.

A boy talks

Why do I have to play rugby?
It is so violent
I don't mind fitness
But rugby makes me scared
I am smaller than the other guys
And I don't want to get hurt
So, why don't you play another sport?
Because my dad says it is good for me
It will make me a man

Inner monologue 9: I have no right as a teacher to tell a parent how to raise their child. Here my hands are tied. I wish I could tell those parents how scared their little boy is. How scared I was. That playing rugby did not make me a better man but rather a boy who felt different, who was afraid of telling others that he was scared and who was terrified of humiliation. It might be for some but it definitely was not for me. And definitely is not for this boy.

Hugs

Your hugs make me feel better
I hope that my hugs make you feel better
I hug because I mean it
I hug because I care
I hug because it is going to be ok
I hug because I am there
Nothing more and nothing less

Inner monologue 10: I sit in my office and I feel sad for this little boy. I feel his loneliness and I feel alone. How do I reach out? There is so much distance here. And then I look ahead, and anticipating the class I am about to teach always makes me nervous because I feel a sense of uncontrol. I realise that this feeling of uncontrol is present because I never know what to expect. I don't know what to expect because I wonder if I truly know my students. Before, it felt like I knew the boys and girls that I taught. There was closeness. I was always guaranteed at least one hug before class. A spontaneous hug. There is nothing better. It gives perspective. It feels like trust. Like goodness. Like kindness. Like we are in this thing together. It is not an us-and-them or a me-and-you. Back then I couldn't wait to go to class. But now, it is different. No one hugs me before class starts. I daren't hug anyone either because perhaps a hug is not

just a hug. I fear that for some boys, perhaps not even the boy that is being hugged, it might have an entirely different meaning. I worry about that. However, there is definitely respect here. The boys greet congenially, they follow most of the rules and they do what is expected. But there is still distance and I feel a sense of unease in my body. Why can I not trust it? Why does it, at times, feel insincere?

Parental guidance is advised

As a queer teacher, will my intent be misinterpreted?
Teaching authentically; questioning myself
Can I teach this?
Is it queer?
Can I teach that?
Is it lame?
A classroom has a context
A conversation outside of a classroom has none
What do parents want?
Reading, writing and arithmetic?
Easy
Pass with distinction
No questions asked
Social justice, transformation and human rights?
Empathy, kindness, emotional and social intelligence?
Very hard
Fail: Don't teach them about life
Don't make them question
What are you teaching my child?
Teach them what we were taught
Look at us
We turned out fine
Parental guidance is advised
...
Who is the teacher now?
Teach by numbers
Everything will be fine

Inner monologue 11: I reflect on whether a teacher can teach excellently if they do not teach authentically. I am second-guessing myself all the time. If one cannot speak truthfully, then what is the point? Do I still have a job to do here? What is my purpose if I teach content superficially? Do I bite the bullet and challenge them? Take them out of their zones of comfort?

Am I placing myself in the firing line then? I am worried that I will lose myself or, at the very least, lose my passion for teaching, for drama and for theatre.

The theatre in the closet

I have found my closet in the theatre
This is where I come to hide
This is where I come to reveal myself
I can speak honestly
I can speak with passion
I can move awkwardly
I can breathe completely
This is where I can sit comfortably in the audience
Move confidently on to the stage
Switch on the spotlight
And perform

Inner monologue 12: It is the best feeling in the world when, after years of practice, months of rehearsal and many moments of struggle, a student steps into the spotlight and performs a monologue/scene/poem with depth, honesty and truth. That moment when they just get it. That is the magic of teaching. That is the power of theatre. It comes with mutual respect and trust. This is where the deepest and the most valuable learning takes place; when one is able to surrender to the voice of the character. Walking in the shoes of another person teaches lessons for life. It teaches empathy. But boys who resist moments of vulnerability and fear failure hesitate to surrender themselves to the process. They play versions of themselves. It is superficial and very little learning takes place. There is an absence of truth. As a Dramatic Arts teacher, you want a student to embrace the challenge of speaking on behalf of those people who have no voice. But in this space, I am afraid to suggest. I am afraid to talk. Anything that is considered unmasculine, off-centre or provocative may be taken out of context. The power of theatre, and of education, is rendered impotent. Is this my job? To teach, not only students, but to school management, colleagues and parents? It is certainly something to think about.

2.1.3 Poetic reflections on fabulous queer conversations with colleagues

My gayness is private

I am gay but that is my business
Everyone knows but I don't talk about it
So, then how does everyone know?
If they ask me, I tell them
I am sure they talk among one another
But I don't volunteer
Only to my closest colleagues
And the students?
I definitely don't discuss it
But if they ask me, I will tell them
I am not ashamed
I just don't want to make things complicated
I don't want my sexuality to affect the way I teach
They way my teaching is perceived
I don't want there to be innuendo
That's even more ammunition for parents
But then you don't control the narrative
Is it not important that we are role models?
I don't want to be an advocate
I am tired
I have too many other things to think about, too much work to do
Gay is dangerous
Lesbian is less so
Non-binary, well who knows what that means?
Nice to meet you, do you have a wife and kids?
I feel accepted by staff and students
I don't feel accepted by staff and students
I advocate for queer rights but do so diplomatically
I am aware of microaggressions
I am affected by it every day
The students speculate
They assume
Theatre is queer
Culture is queer
At least there are safe spaces
Are there?
I don't really talk but when I do, I think I am heard
There is just too much noise
Too many other things to worry about
I just want to do my job

But there are just too many contradictions
I have said enough
I don't know what else to say
I am told I can speak truthfully
Will it be held against me?
I always feel like a troublemaker when I speak
Maybe I shouldn't have said anything
Can we not just be honest with one another and say what we mean?
Do we have to have another workshop on this?
How many times will we talk about the same thing?
We all respect one another, don't we?
Can we not just do?
Be a good example?
Follow the law?
Change the narrative
And stop making excuses
We should all be role models
Not just the queers
Make the syllabus inclusive
Queer the content
Curriculum transformation
What does that even mean?
So, are you gay?
It's none of your business!

Inner monologue 13: I have learnt, over the years, that it is less complicated to live truthfully than to live a lie. It is not always easy but it takes less work. The work is passed on to others. Living a lie is living in the shadows. And the world of lies and of shadows is open to interpretation, lays itself bare for innuendo, exposes itself to out-of-context equivocation and prostrates itself to gossip. Rumours fester. Gossip becomes infected. In between these nooks and crannies creep self-loathing, guilt and shame. But it is easier said than done when your job is at stake. It is a catch-22 and you are caught between a rock and a hard place.

A Queer Zeitgeist

The more you try and control
The less control you have
Take your power out of it
Just let it be
Your power is not wanted here
Your tolerance is not welcome at the table

There is difference everywhere
Why are you so selective with it?
No one is threatening you
No one wants to change you
Don't be an ally only in your words
Don't congratulate yourself for doing what is right
A basic human one at that
Don't signal your virtues
You only expose your own indifference
You make it uncomfortable for the rest of us
Change your language
But change all of it
Not just the words which you are comfortable to change
All of it
Because you speak one thing
But you write something different
Have courage, for goodness' sake
Change because it is the right thing to do
Not because you want to avoid the tabloids
Or confrontation
Doing the right thing is always the right way
Even when no one is looking
Don't be afraid to make mistakes
We are all just human
Bureaucracy is not
Money is not
Patriarchy is not
Heteronormativity is not
Religion is not
Actions speak loud
Your words create more silence
Silence is dangerous
There is pain
There is shame
There is unwantedness
Equal the playing field
This is the zeitgeist
Now is the time to make a difference

Inner monologue 14: My body feels uncomfortable when I hear a word like “tolerance” from a so-called ally. Or when it is displayed as an artwork for everyone to marvel at. I don't need anyone to tolerate me. It smacks of recognising that I am different in this place, and the implication is that it is okay and they will try their best to live with it. In this context, the act of

tolerating seems like such a burden. I imagine people grimacing uncomfortably when they see me. They hold their breath when I am around and nod as politely as their stiff necks can muster. I then imagine, as soon as I leave the room, there are sighs of relief and collective congratulatory high-fives. But sometimes, I walk down the passage and I receive a sincere, friendly smile. It is genuine because I can see it in the eyes. I always tell my students when they perform that the truth is in the eyes. There is no getting around it. However, allies can also be dangerous. It makes us complacent and feel that we have arrived. But we haven't and there is much more work to do, especially in the classroom.

2.1.4 Teaching queer theatre – A spoken-word journal

To teach is to learn twice over. – Joseph Joubert²⁵

I like a teacher who gives you something to take home to think about besides homework. – Lily Tomlin²⁶

One of the hardest things for boys to learn is that a teacher is human. One of the hardest things for a teacher to learn is not to try and tell them. – Alan Bennett²⁷

I decided to keep a “spoken-word” journal to record my teaching performance of a queer text, *Born Naked* by Hijinks Theatre and ZikkaZimba Productions, in my postmodern theatre course. Since it is one of the first queer plays prescribed in the syllabus, I thought it an opportunity to reflect on my own queer performance in the classroom.

Born Naked drew inspiration from the real-life murder of Thapelo Makutle, a drag queen and gay pageant winner who was murdered in a remote Northern Cape town in South Africa in 2012 (Conway-Smith, 2012). The play takes place in the present. The events are seen through the eyes and memories of Sechaba (Blaq Widow). We are transported into the past. The plot develops achronologically, interspersed with flashbacks. The characters relate stories from their time together. Sechaba recounts how he was introduced into the world of drag. He

²⁵ *Everyday Power* (2022)

²⁶ *Everyday Power* (2022)

²⁷ *Everyday Power* (2022)

remembers meeting Thapelo (Queen Bling), who became his drag mother. Finally, Sechaba relates how Thapelo was a victim of a hate crime and, ultimately, murdered. The audience is left reflecting on the ignorance, fear and discrimination that is still prevalent in our supposed Rainbow Nation. A loose episodic structure is employed (Sechaba's show; Sechaba's vision; the introduction of Queen Bling; Sechaba's introduction into the House of Bling; Competition; Thapelo's murder). The structure allows for a fast pace and introduces us to the characters. The play provides context for deconstruction of master narratives such as heteronormativity and to develop ideas around non-binary thinking. In addition, the text educates audiences on the world of drag as a performance art, using drag jargon, while showing the tragic consequences of homophobia and transphobia. It further celebrates the power that drag holds for escape, transformation and speaking truth to power. I was excited about the possibilities.

The course ran over a three-week period. My aim was to reflect, before and after each session with the students, my body's experience of this queer class performance. I thought it a wonderful opportunity to "learn twice over", about my own thinking about queerness in this all-boys' class and theatre environment. As always, being a Dramatic Arts teacher, I wanted to give the students "something to take home to think about" and not "to try and tell them" what to think about while, at the same time, giving myself "something to take home to think about". As a teacher, I understand that I have considerable power to shape the narrative in class and to influence thinking about ideas. And as researcher, and insofar my approach was a performative autoethnography, I was cognisant that my approach was never to exert my influence and to make observations of but rather reflect on my own responses and experiences within this here and now. Therefore, I decided to adhere strictly to the theatrical postmodern concepts required in the syllabus and then apply these to a queer text in contrast to modernist ways of thinking. I was excited to hear and see how the students could also apply postmodern thinking to their own realities. I wanted this discourse to occur organically and not to steer it in a particular direction. But I was nervous about the response of my students, not only to postmodernism as a style, which insists on breaking the rules through a queer approach, but also to the inevitable questions about gayness. How would they react when challenged about their own normative ways of thinking? In the back of my mind, although prescribed in the syllabus, I was also nervous about responses from parents and faculty.

Queer Lessons and Reflections – Scene 1
--

Testing the waters

The boys in my drama class love playing games. They are very competitive. But I think all students are. Their favourite game is musical chairs, believe it or not. I remember the excitement I felt when my younger self played the game. There is always an air of exhilarating tension. I can see it on their faces. I must say, I feel it too. I switched the game up a little. Instead of playing music, I asked a volunteer to stand with his back to the group, to sing a song and to stop whenever he felt like it. The student that fell out joined the singer and they sang together. In this way, even if you fell out, you still participated. The boys loved the singing, and they enjoyed the game. We played a few more games. I tried to assign, for myself, a meaning to each one. What did I learn from it? What do I think they learnt from it?

Questions and Answers

What do we all have in common?

In school, the same grade, boys, hopes and dreams

What are our differences?

Race, like different things, economically not the same, we all make mistakes

What makes you sad?

Can you think of a moment in a film which made you cry?

I never cry in movies

Maybe ... *The Lion King*?

What made you cry?

It was just sad

What is empathy?

Putting yourself in someone else's shoes

Has someone made you feel sad?

Yes, many times

How?

I was bullied and called names

What names were you called?

Different ones

Can you remember how it made you feel?

Angry and then I felt sad ...

Feelings

Take out your journals, please

Oohs and aahs

Can I do it on my laptop? On my phone?

Boys don't like writing

Write down a name you were called that hurt you

Reflect on the emotions that you felt

They write very little ... always

Do they not want to explore their own emotions

Even when it is only for themselves

How did it feel in your body?

Show us

Reluctant

Groups are easier

Alone ... not so much

I think of group work

I think of playfulness

Just being silly

Being ridiculous

Reflection or playing or both?

Summary

Play games ... competition?

Fun ... letting go?

Easier said than done?

Reflection is a challenge ... why?

In groups?

Stepping into the spotlight alone ... too much?

Queer Lessons and Reflections – Scene 2
--

Warm-up

Improvisation games
Situations and complications
We all have different points of view
We all have different tastes
Who is beautiful to you?
Your ideal partner?
Natural hair, caramel skin ...
And shorter than me
Blonde, blue eyes, a good figure ...
And shorter than me
Brunette, tanned skin ...
And shorter than me
etc., etc., etc., etc.
And shorter than me
Why do you want to be taller?
In charge?
What about personality?
Let's think about "other" ...
Who determines beauty?
Who makes the rules?

Rules

Some rules in the school ...
Who makes the rules?
Do we need rules?
Yes, otherwise there will be chaos
No discipline
Rules are safe
Do all the rules include everyone?

What if you do not feel included?
How does that make you feel?
Write it down
Oohs and aahs
Which rules make you feel excluded?
What ifs?
Examples ...
Boys only
Haircut
Uniform
Hierarchy
Master narratives: race, gender, sexuality, religion
versus
Mini narratives – Does your story fit?

(Group)logue spoken with one voice

We like rules because they make us feel like we belong to a brotherhood. If someone does not identify with this brotherhood, then they are welcome to go somewhere else. We have a say in the rules and we need to do what is right for the majority. When we call someone out for making a mistake it is because we respect them ... most of the time. We celebrate success just as much as we call out mistakes. Everyone understands that. We don't feel uncomfortable walking around in this space because we feel that we belong.

But does everyone really belong?

Thinking to myself ...

I feel uncomfortable with this conversation because I feel that I don't belong. How do I make students understand that, despite their insistence that everyone belongs, some students and staff members might be too uncomfortable to express that they don't feel the same way? There is a clear sense that a misstep is seen as failure. Are these the symptoms of heteronormativity?

Queer Lessons and Reflections – Scene 3
--

Swimming upstream and going against the grain

Truth is a creation of context
Social media and many opinions
There is power in other people's stories
Even in seclusion
Isolation breeds ignorance
Othering
Who has no voice?
Who is swimming upstream?
Who is going against the grain?
Breaking society's rules
Showing different perspectives
Think of someone that might feel othered
How are they swimming upstream?
How will they go against the grain?

Theatre Styles

Even theatre has/had rules
Let us break those rules
Realism speaks reality
But is it your reality?
Let us break the rules
Talk to the audience
Now the author is dead
Different perspectives of truth
Improvise and ask questions
And you can never predict the outcome
Create your own theatre with no rules
And action ...

What do you want to talk about?

What do you want to say which you cannot normally say?

Comedy

Laughter is important

Let's get satirical

Let's get provocative

Let's get irreverent

South Park, *Family Guy* and Trevor Noah

Taking a moment

My class responds to comedy. They understand it. Social media helps. It is clear. They enjoy breaking the rules on stage. But at the same time, they are confined to them. Often, it reins them in. It is a challenge to unlearn. On stage they are more at ease and so am I. It seems that mistakes are allowed here ... but only when the activity is unprepared. There is greater freedom here. But not everyone is willing to experiment and to let go. It is a slow process. There is a self-awareness but also a deep-rooted awareness of others. I know that feeling all too well, on this stage and the theatre out there. I feel frustrated by the pace at which we are moving but I keep reminding myself that it is okay to fail. What can I learn from this instead?

Queer Lessons and Reflections – Scene 4
--

Theatre for Social Justice

We watched half of the live production recording of *Born Naked* today. I wish we had time to watch the whole play. I have mixed feelings about it. I am not sure whether the students really liked it or not. Are they getting anything meaningful out of it? I try to point out some interesting theatrical techniques and performance styles as we watched. You know, to keep them engaged on a dramatic level as well. I remember when I watched the production live about two years ago, the audience was completely engaged, even singing along to the songs. As I watched them file out of class, I see there was chatter and I wondered whether that was a good sign or not. As I reflect, I realised that I really wanted them to like it. I wanted them to laugh at the funny bits, to respond and be as reflexive as a postmodern audience should be. I wanted them to

respond as gleefully to the magical world of drag as I did and still do. I wanted them to see the possibilities. At the very least, are they learning anything?

Myself

There is so much of myself in this play
I wish they can see that
I want them to understand
Really understand the painful journey of these characters
Of me
What it is like, every day, for queer people
Do they see it?
Do they want to see it?
But maybe it has nothing to do with anyone
Is it just easier to make others feel bad?
To turn a blind eye
To keep things personal
Out of sight and out of mind
Please, please, please
Just be kind
To you and others
And
“If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell can you love someone else?”

Queer Lessons and Reflections – Scene 5
--

Theatre of Healing

Today we watched the second part of the production. I laughed during the chaos of the drag show. I respond, yearningly, to the sense of family and belonging offered by the House of Bling. I felt emotional, again, at the murder of Thapelo. I am saddened, again, by the hate that is out there. I hoped that the students felt the same way. After the screening, I received mixed reactions. Some liked it and some not so much. One of the students suggested that perhaps he would have had a better experience of the show if he had watched it live. It is a very valid point.

I can see that the style of the production, interactive and reflexive, might be more effective when experienced live. I suppose it reminds me of the power of theatre. Its immediacy creates a deeper sense of empathy. We talk about transformation and healing. We talk about othering and specifically transphobia and homophobia. I am encouraged by the discussions.

Educating Boys

Gender is fluid but biology is not
But maybe it is
I am so confused
When you are declared boy, what does that mean?
Girl?
Let's think about stereotypes
Cis male, trans womxn, gay, straight
There are many different genders and sexualities
But that's not what the Bible says
Vocabulary is elementary
But we can learn together
What is DRAG?
Does it mean Dressed As A Girl?
Are all men who dress in drag gay?
I have never been to a drag show
I will never do drag
Why do people do drag?
Can drag be empowering?
Drag Kings and Drag Queens
Lip-syncing is breaking the rules
Very insightful
How about just be you?

Analysis

Over the next few days, we analysed the dramatic, technical and performance elements of *Born Naked*. The students always find the theory part, and especially the writing thereof, less exciting. They want to jump on the stage and play games every chance that they get. However, I was further encouraged by the discussion that we were having. Although moments of frustration and insecurity still crept in, there was a real sense of community during our reflections. They seemed to understand the postmodern elements at work and quoted freely from the production. However, in my own mind, I still worried whether deeper learning was taking place and that I was not merely just ticking boxes towards a later assessment. I wanted the experience, and learning, to be more meaningful and layered. But I was not entirely sure how to test the fundamental impact of this course. Maybe, as a teacher, that is not my job. Maybe, all I can do is show and hope for the best. It is strange that I felt like a first-year teacher again. Was I making a difference? On the third day of our analysis, I used my own gayness as an example. It just happened. I didn't mean to. In fact, I never use my private life as part of class discussions. Not that I was ashamed, but it was never part of my teaching style. It just happened ...

Revelation

I say I am gay
Not as a revelation
Not to make a statement but as an example
I feel there is a difference
Maybe, subconsciously, I wanted to say it
My body just did it
My body feels awkward
A momentary swell of emotions
And ...
Silence
No reaction
None whatsoever

Matter of fact
So, what
No explosion
Waiting for questions
Nothing
Relief?
Disappointment?
We move on ...

But of course ...

I peer back into my life ... the past ... and I try to think of the times, those moments, I revealed, not always said but showed, to an audience that I am queer. It is interesting that I have never had a negative reaction. Maybe those spaces were always safe? Maybe it was because they knew me? But saying it was always more awkward than the after-effects. This makes me wonder ...

Is homophobia easier from a distance? Is it just something we are supposed to do?

Queer Lessons and Reflections – Scene 8
--

Reactions

We had a fun class. I went into class expecting some kind of reaction to outing myself the day before. But nothing. We played, and while we played, we continued to ask questions. We queered. Funny, to queer still felt like an act of rebellion instead of a legitimate moment of deconstruction. It continued to feel dangerous. But we were getting used to it. I was getting used to it. In one of our exercises, I asked them to again write down one of the derogatory words they were called which we reflected on a few days before. This time I suggested that they write it down backwards. We had a few laughs as they attempted to pronounce it. I asked them to get used to it because that will be the name of a character they will create. I used an example from a previous exercise I did.

Faggot

=

Toggaf

We assigned different empowering personality traits to our new characters, for instance, confident, brave, eccentric, quirky, smart, interesting, handsome, and so forth.

Pop Stars

We become pop star groups, each with our own unique personality

Like the Spice Girls or Take That

We create colourful masks for our new characters

And then

We walk the red carpet one by one – silly and over the top

We all form a gaggle of paparazzi and cheer one another on

It feels awkward but we embrace the silliness

The ridiculousness of it all

We reveal our alter egos to the world

And now we lip-sync to “I am what I am”

Reflections

It felt weird

It felt awkward

Interesting

The masks helped a lot

I eventually got into it

It was cool, I guess ...

Queer Lessons and Reflections – Scenes 9 and 10

I think of the poem I wrote:

TOGGAF

Today I am fucking angry - I mean angry like only an actor can be... You know
the one ... the one waiting in the wings ... Today I want to disrupt,
unrehearsed
Today I want to tear apart boundaries and borders and walls and systems, and
lines, and words
That keep us out That make us invisible
Today I want to improvise and unstraight them
Today I want to climb up, climb over, climb inside
And see what I am missing - find what I was missing
Fuck it ...
Today I want to talk about it - talk them, scream them,
Unsyllable them, magnify them. Today I want to create a new identity - a new
faggot, a new moffie, a new fabulous, A new whatchamacallit
Today I unshackle invisibility
and today I stand waiting in the wings just like a fucking angry character ...
And I write him a new name because I own it ...
And I speak for him a new persona because I own it ...
And I step into the spotlight...because I own it
And I bellow his name ... because I own it
TOGGAF

Prepare for performance

1. Identify a well-known monologue from a film to which you can lip-sync. You must use the original sound but, on stage, you must present it in a different context. Create a different character and setting to the original.
2. Create an original character (using the name you wrote backwards) and write your own monologue in which you reflect on a situation in which the character is othered, seen as different, or discriminated against because of who they are.

Responses

Apprehension

It is difficult to write on behalf of someone else

How do I change the context?

Let's think of ideas

Can I perform in drag?

Perhaps but let us think of context

Celebrate rather than imitate

Understand rather than making a mockery

Have fun

Really think of the challenges of your character

How do they feel in the moment?

What is the truth?

Think out the box

Break the rules

Don't be afraid to make mistakes

Write and re-write

That is part of understanding ... of learning

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Queer Lessons and Reflections – Scenes 11 and 12

Lip-Sync – Spoken-Word Monologues

Monologue from *Gladiator* – in the gym

Monologue from *Braveheart* – online game

Monologue from *Peaky Blinders* – in school

Monologue from *Whiplash* – while cooking

Feedback

I had no idea how the boys would respond to a spoken-word lip-sync challenge but what I experienced today was one of the most eye-opening moments of my teaching career. Although there were a few boys who tackled the task literally and recreated the original moment from

their chosen film, it was the “bigness” of their performances that surprised. Boys who had been struggling with theatricality on stage, for the first time, performed out of their skin. Their performances were dynamic and vibrant. Perhaps it was the fact that the focus was on the body and interpreting the words, that they seem to grow in stature? It was like they were not as much in their own heads as usual. They seemed more relaxed and seemed as if they had a lot more fun. Some of the other work was nothing short of original, creative, and hysterically funny. We thoroughly enjoyed it and the feedback from the students was equally positive. Despite their initial apprehension, they truly embraced the challenge. They dragged up their performances in new and original ways. This was a totally new approach for me too and definitely something I would like to include in my lessons going forward.

I continue to marvel at the power of drag; how a sense of playfulness and being self-reflexive can empower and transform. It teaches us not to take ourselves too seriously, have more fun and, in so doing, allow others to do the same, even if it means we fail as we go along.

Original monologues – understanding others

Xenophobia – even when you are an Atlantean

Blindness – what is felt in the dark

Border jumpers – why we should let one another in

An amputee – I still have purpose

Trans – acceptance

Feedback

I was very emotional watching these performances. I think back on the pieces with sadness but in a good way. They were really touching. They were performed with honesty and sincerity. I was so proud of every single one of the students. Not only did they give voice, on paper, to those in society that have no voice, but they articulated the lives of their characters, physically and emotionally, on stage in front of an audience. In a way, we were all educated. Yes, the structure of some pieces needed some work but, overall, each piece was a culmination of a journey which was articulated to their peers. They, ultimately, in a meaningful way, walked in the shoes of someone other than themselves. In addition, the way that most students broke the rules and incorporated postmodern techniques into their performances was an assurance that

our lessons paid dividends. But, reflecting on our journey, I hope that it is the humanist lessons, more than anything else, that will remain with them long after our journey together comes to an end.

ACT V

DENOUEMENT – A THEATRE OF THE FABULOUS

Scene 1 - Queer reflections

Certainly, most homosexuals don't want to be relegated to that little table. We grew up at the big table: we're at home there. We want to stay there. (Bawer, 1984: 70)

My queer performative autoethnographic journey has informed my thinking about a Theatre of the Fabulous to the extent that, along my journey, I came to the realisation that I am not merely satisfied being relegated to the “little table” or to the wings of a darkened theatre. Spotlighting myself, a re-coming out, has me now demanding a place at the “big table” and to move around freely in the audience and onto the stage of any space that my body inhabits, even if it is occupied by bodies that are oriented towards heteronormativity. While reflecting on my journey, and reading over my findings, I was reminded of an article by Harvey Fierstein (2022), playwright of the queer anthology play, *The Torch Song Trilogy*. In the article, Fierstein reflects on a question asked to him by a late-night talk-show host some years back. She asked him, “What’s it like to be a homosexual?” He replied, “What’s it like to be a heterosexual? I’m just a person. I assume everyone is gay unless told otherwise.” He also went on to say that “love, commitment, and family are human words. They belong to all people”. Fierstein’s response reified my findings that, specifically in this here and now of an all-boys’ school, the problem of heteronormative master narratives is pervasive and entrenched, and needs to be dismantled, re-coloured and written with the fabulousness of a humanist pen. We need to re-write the stage directions for a new script that sets the table of inclusivity, on the stage of an all-boys’ school. This new script is called a Theatre of the Fabulous.

My research question asked to what extent my lived experience (the here and now and the then and there) could inform a Theatre of the Fabulous (a performative queer pedagogy), which could be used to make heteronormativity visible and ultimately raise queer awareness.

1.1 The queer of then and there and the queer of here and now calls for resistance

Re-remembering and re-learning the moments of being closeted and coming out as queer afforded me the knowing that there were many similarities in the then-and-there journey of my self-actualisation and the closeting and subsequent coming-out in these here-and-now moments. The holding up of these separate but overlapping roads on this map made evident that continued resistance, disruption and unruliness are necessary to restrain and mitigate the effects of a toxic masculine hegemony. Silence, however comfortable and “unmessy”, only strengthens the dominance of a patriarchy which becomes oppressive when left unchecked. Butler (1997: 21) explains that

heterosexual genders form themselves through the renunciation of the possibility of homosexuality, as a foreclosure which produces a field of heterosexual objects at the same time as it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love.

This “field of heterosexual objects”, and their effects, is what the Theatre of the Fabulous needs to interrogate. In doing so, it will go a long way to eradicate from the zeitgeist the idea that someone – a student, a parent or a staff member – is “impossible to love”. This justifies the Theatre of the Fabulous and the teacher thereof, which includes an acute sense of how the effects of heteronormativity and homonegativity sits in the body of those who are made to feel deviant.

1.2 Queer conditions of freedom under a queer spotlight

Remafedi (1994: 20) states that

lesbian and gay youth are the most invisible and outcast group of young people with whom you will come into contact. If open about who they are, they may feel some sense of security within themselves but face tremendous external conflicts with family and peers. If closed about who they are, they may be able to “pass” as “straight” in their communities while facing a tremendous internal struggle to understand and accept themselves. Many gay youth choose to maintain a façade and hide their true feelings and identity, leading a double life, rather than confront situations too painful for them. They live in constant fear of being found out and recognized as gay. The reasons for their silence are good ones.

I have found that there is possibility that the Theatre of the Fabulous can diminish fear, remove reasons for silence, and intentionally seek to create spaces at the table to decrease moments of “unfreedom”. It is “an orientation toward queer, a way to inhabit the world that gives ‘support’

to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place” (Ahmed, 2006: 570). To this end, a Theatre of the Fabulous will “unstraighten” the table and provide this type of support.

Walking the straight lines, and attempting to step outside of those same lines, I had a clear sense that the school was attempting to reconfigure its map, and its borders, and trying to make sense of the concrete lines of hetero-aggressive rules and regulations which now are becoming increasingly visible. There is a softening, however tentatively, of masculine practices, which opens up space for leakiness and messiness. Nonetheless, the unyielding competitiveness of the hyper-masculine endeavour still prevails and is encouraged by a rusty stubbornness towards “doing boy”, despite ongoing discourse.

My journey into my own past mirrored the emotional invulnerability and heterosexual dominance that persists in the here and now. The unmasculine is seen as failure, and the fear thereof manifests in unrelenting microaggressions that are used as weapons in defence. The “deviants” and their peers are therefore forced to disguise themselves in a Theatre of the Unfabulous entitled “Hyper-masculinity”. I have come to learn that words and phrases such as “faggot” and “that’s so gay” are often used to disguise insecurities and are used to gain social approval. That is why there should be support for the masculine as well as the unmasculine characters to create spaces in which no one feels threatened, no matter the way in which they identify.

Furthermore, we must prioritise redressing rules such as compulsory sport, which perpetuates binary concepts of toughness versus weakness and hyper-masculinity versus a fluid masculinity, as well as the silencing practices of limited choice. These ideas drown out the softer voices in these types of theatre. Generally, in this space, it is the narrow choices, or lack thereof, that afford one very little room to breathe. These findings suggest that a Theatre of the Fabulous will aid with giving volume to muted “deviant” voices and soften hyper-masculine practices. Otherwise, should the archaisms of colonial patriarchy persist, “the queer body becomes from this viewing point a failed orientation: the queer body [will] not extend into such space” (Ahmed, 2006: 560).

1.3 Queer change in the classroom will do you good

I have felt a distinct change in myself along this journey and no longer feel as threatened by the masculine as I used to. This is not to say that there are no more moments in which I feel uncontrol or nervousness, but I have come to recognise those moments as having not been granted a seat at the table, even though I received an invitation. In the absence of threat, and instead of retreating into my closet, I now have the power to uninvite myself or create space in this theatre, even if that means kicking and screaming in an undignified manner.

The work in class, performing our queer text, was valuable in that it revealed not only what is considered “deviant” but also writing on behalf of the perceived “normal” provided language from a different perspective for a Theatre of the Fabulous. Camping up the classroom will further assist in a change of perspective. My research has found that a Theatre of the Fabulous will work towards a reorientation of thinking about failure. As a method, it allows for un/learning to take place and further to see the world, ourselves, and others, through different lenses. Understanding the benefits of failure, through playfulness, experimentation with stylised campness, embracing the “ridiculous” through mask work, role play and group work in class, will empower and reveal who we truly are. It will go a long way to mitigate the daily stress of competitive masculinity and, instead, provide moments of safety, learning and eventual freedom.

In addition, the performance of writing on behalf of selves and others can become an effective method of queer learning. It means that students queer their own lived experience and ultimately become the teachers in a Theatre of the Fabulous. They will inform the vocabulary of discussion by describing “heteronormativity as a straightening device [and] reread the ‘slant’ of queer desire” (Ahmed, 2006: 562). This is cutting across the map and safely crossing once-restrictive lines and involves a change from a character that postures in a hyper-masculine fashion to one that is a bold posturing of fabulous empathy. The result is a “queer mess ... asserting the value and pleasure of formations of knowledge that sit outside long-standing institutional hierarchies” (Campbell & Farrier, 2015: 83). And it is important to make a mess because, as Sullivan (1995: 91) warns, “a politics which seeks only to show and not to persuade will only be as successful as its latest theatrical escapade and will be as susceptible to the fashions of audiences as any other fad”. The performance writing and speaking of the

participants of the Theatre of the Fabulous will be ongoing and relevant as the voices are personal mini-narratives in the here and now. They must and will be heard.

1.4 Authentic teachers and queer role models in the theatre

And *this* [I'm seeing a big physical gesture – extending the arm in a wide circle: "THIS!"] is why all stakeholders (parents, teachers, management and students) must attend the theatre. It is a mandatory invitation to speak and listen. All classrooms must become sites of the Theatre of the Fabulous. It will allow for all characters and audience members to freely and stubbornly stand in the spotlight as queer role models, no matter how they identify. The Theatre of the Fabulous will ensure a stage filled with performers who are active, rebellious allies. It will create a culture of authenticity which is critical for productive teaching and learning to take place. Performing queer has already moved me towards teaching more authentically. Insofar as Rincón-Gallardo (2019: 52) reminds us that “culture serves as an all encompassing matrix of meaning in and through which societal values and practises as well as relationships of power and authority are reproduced, but also challenged and transformed”, it is evident that a Theatre of the Fabulous will challenge and work towards a culture of transformation. Mathies and colleagues agree, in their article in *Journal of LGBT Youth*, in which they underscore that it is “equally important for development of a positive campus climate [when there] are supportive faculty who encourage and mentor students” (Mathies et al., 2019: 256). The Theatre of the Fabulous will, moreover, suggest to students that they are supported and hold up teachers as advocates of social justice. Furthermore, students become social activists themselves, and it is a discourse that can be taken home to parents. It is a broadening of discourse which advocates inclusion, rather than a binary resistance to change.

After my queer performative autoethnographic journey (the there and then and the here and now), which included the teaching of queer text and potential Theatre of the Fabulous elements, I found that the arguments in favour of boys' schools need to be re-evaluated. First of all, the assumption of a single gender, which assumes no fluidity, is a fallacy. Despite the idea that all-boys' schools advocate, through their single-sexness, that they foster a culture in which there is no gender stereotyping, the opposite is in fact true. In isolation, the hyper-masculine is revered and becomes the stereotype. The “absence of the feminine” is therefore further made strange and ultimately exacerbates gender stereotyping. Furthermore, all-boys' schools promote their campus cultures as spaces where boys are allowed to develop their own unique

characters away from the inhibiting gaze of the female student. I, however, found that this too is a distorted representation of the lived experience and development of students because the opposite is in fact true. All-boys' schools, instead, produce carbon copies of the "ideal boy", which is held up as the standard of success and results in further masculine stereotyping. A Theatre of the Fabulous will go a long way to re-shaping the culture and thinking around these arguments because it will serve to understand identity, as I did, by holding up the queer body in this space. The lived experiences of all will be more authentic if the invitation to this theatre is heeded.

Scene 2 - Queer reflexivity

I further present the findings of my lived experience as writing, which Giroux (2000: 134–135) describes as "the performative [which] becomes an act of doing, an act of resistance, a way of connecting the biographical, the pedagogical, and the political". I perceive it as my "view from ground level, [and] in the thick of things" (Conquergood, 1998: 146). To this end, and from my view, I see heteronormativity (represented by master narratives, institutions, discourses and role players) as a manipulator, a puppet master of soldier characters. It is the oppressive dictator that calls for war, literal and figurative, creating a world of competitive hyper-masculinity and queer aggressions towards success as a boy. In this way, I hope my writing "not only expresses the research, [and] in that expression becomes the research itself" (Haseman, 2007: 150).

2.1 Queer performance writing

What follows is an original one-act play that represents the collective results of my research investigation. It is an example of queer performance writing towards a Theatre of the Fabulous.

Toy Soldiers by S Kotze - 2022

“There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about”.

— Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Note: Moments in this play are inspired by an article that appeared in the Daily Mail (UK) on 23 September 2020.²⁸

²⁸ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8763273/Read-Sydneys-Shore-Schools-Muck-day-challenge-threatening-destroy-reputation.html>

Dramatis Personae

The Swinging Dicks - Ensemble

Dickens

Shaft

Rumple Foreskin

Piston

Schlong

Boner

Stiff

Pisser

Johnny Pistol

Setting: The present

Staging: Flexible

Music: "Forever Young" by Alphaville. Stage dark. Smoke on stage. Sound of a massive explosion. Air raid siren. Lighting simulates war. Sounds of war. Then chaos. Soldiers in shadow, everywhere. On stage. In the audience. Screaming. Shouting. Theatre of Cruelty. War scene continues for a few minutes. Green lighting. A hush. Smoke. A "soldier" to the front. Almost steampunk.

DICKENS

(*With a toy soldier*) Sometimes, when you become still, something calls you. It calls you down a path. You know you shouldn't go down there. But hey! Fuck it! It is the road less travelled and all that shit! You bite the bullet. Why the fuck not? What is the alternative? So, you go! You close your eyes. And it's dark. It's really fucking dark. Dark as sin. It's the underworld. It's like you take your everyday angst and your constant drowning depression and you stick that shit in an amplifier. And it becomes all-consuming. And it is even more fucking depressing. And you are scared shitless. Every molecule in your body warns you to just stay the fuck away. But your morbid curiosity kicks you in the back. Or kicks you in the nuts when you try to look away. So you look. Because that shit is painful. But what's the alternative? That shit is painful too. You want to see. Because you can handle it. You're a big boy now, right? A big fucking soldier. So you go. It's like that fucking moron chick walking up the stairs in every single fucking horror movie you have ever watched. And you know that she's gonna go there. They always fucking do! And every stupid idiot shouts: "Don't go there! Are you stupid?! I can't believe that she's actually going there. Why do they always go upstairs? Why don't they just run away?" And I always sit there and I think to myself: What the fuck did you expect? You know that it's gonna happen but you still expect a different outcome? People are fucking stupid. And I am a people too. And I am also fucking stupid because I go there. Shit! We all go there. Every single one of us. Right into the fucking war zone. And for some reason, in that darkness, in that nightmare, in that place of bombs and guns, and howling, and crying, and screaming, and fear, and shite, my brain fires on all cylinders. And that's when I see it clearly. Right there. And there is no sunlight. There are no shadows and no colours to hide. It's just you. Alone. And that's what fear looks like. In the spotlight. In the dark. And you look pathetic. Useless. A fuck-up. No redeemable qualities. Full of guilt. Full of shame. Full of pretence. Full of lies. Full of regret. And you see blood. And it is the colour of pain, anguish, despair, hate, anger, vengeance, lust, gluttony, pride, selfishness, jealousy, and you want to rip the skin off your flesh, so that you can drain the

blood from your body ... so you can let it out ... just let it all out. It's just your bare bones and ... you know what? You can start all over again.

PISTOL

The first and last words out of your mouth will be "Sir!".²⁹

ENSEMBLE

Sir, yes, Sir!

PISTOL *and the "soldiers" now mimic and adapt a scene from Full Metal Jacket (Kubrick, 1987).*

PISTOL

Remember this, boys, you are the lowest form of life on earth. You are not even human fucking beings. You are nothing but unorganised, grabastic pieces of amphibian shit. Because I am hard, you will not like me. But the more you hate me, the more you will learn. I am hard but I am fair. There is no bigotry here. I do not look down on nerds, kikes, wops, greasers or faggots here. Here you are all equally worthless.³⁰

ENSEMBLE

Sir, yes, Sir!

The ENSEMBLE enthusiastically ...

ENSEMBLE

This is my rifle,

This is my gun,

This one's for fighting,

This one's for fun ...

DICKENS *steps forward while the rest of the cast move to the back to reorganise the set.*

²⁹ Similar to the opening lines from *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick, 1987)

³⁰ A near-verbatim continuation of the opening lines by Gunnery Sergeant Hartman in *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick, 1987)

DICKENS

That's Johnny Pistol. Leader of the squad. Self-appointed. He likes to think of us as his cadets, some kinda army in a guerrilla war or some shite. A little psychotic, if you want my personal honest opinion.

PISTOL

Who said that? Who the fuck said that? Who is the slimy little common-as-shit twinkle-toes cocksucker down here who just signed his own death warrant? Nobody, huh? The fairy fucking godmother said it. Out-fucking-standing. I will fuck you up until you fucking die. Until your assholes are bleeding fucking buttermilk. Was it you, you scroungy little fuck? You little piece of shit. You look like a fucking worm. I bet it was you!

DICKENS

I said it.

PISTOL

Well, no shit. What have we got here? A fucking comedian. Private Joker. I admire your honesty. Hell, I like you. You can come over to my house and fuck my sister. You scumbag. I got your name. I got your ass. You will not laugh. You will not cry ... You had best unfuck yourself or I will unscrew your head and shit down your neck. It looks to me like the best part of you ran down the crack of your momma's ass and ended up as a brown stain on your momma's mattress. I think you've been cheated. Do you suck dicks? I bet you're the kinda guy that would fuck a person in the ass and not even have God damn common courtesy to give him the reach around. I bet you could suck a golf ball through a garden hose! Let me see your war face!

ENSEMBLE *looks confused.*

PISTOL

Aaaaahh! That's a war face! Now let me see your war face!

ENSEMBLE

Aaaahhhh!

PISTOL

You don't scare me! Work on it.

DICKENS

(Out with a smile) Over-compensating much? Everyone knows he is obsessed with war movies. Fuck, according to him ... everything is a war zone. Maybe it is? Anarchy. Rebellion. Defiance. Like the Sex Pistols. Maybe that's why he calls us the Swinging Dicks. His other obsession is the noble penis. He baptised each one of us with some phallic derivative he finds very amusing. Not with jizz or anything fucked-up like that.

JOHNNY PISTOL

My soldiers, my Year 11 masturbators – we are going to make them talk. Talk about us! Our legacy will permanently discolour these halls, these rooms, these traditions ... this school ... with our superiority. Our names will be whispered in hushed tones at first ... but when they shine that black light over this campus, the stains of our masculinity will blaze the way towards the future. It will be epic. It will be grand. It will be momentous. It will be extravagant. And my name, your name and your name and your name ... every single one of us, will be remembered. What zeitgeist? We are the fucking zeitgeist. To the Swinging Dicks.

ENSEMBLE

The Swinging Dicks!!

DICKENS

There must be some sub-conscious Freudian shite going on there somewhere. Authority complex? Daddy issues? Or maybe it's because he's Catholic? You know how they are! Others say that he is secretly a faggot, and he sees us all as prey. Like faggots do. I don't really care. As long as he leaves me alone. Anyway, I'm Dickens. And that's ...

*Perhaps, as each member introduces himself, they simulate some kind of military action.
Perhaps a sexual undertone?*

SHAFT

Shaft.

PISTON

Piston.

SCHLONG

Schlong.

BONER

Boner.

ROCKET

Rocket.

STIFF

Stiff.

PISSER

Pisser.

RUMPLE FORESKIN

Rumple Foreskin.

JOHNNY PISTOL

My Dicks!

FORESKIN *cracks up. They all look at him with mixed reactions. Disdain, amusement, etc.*

FORESKIN

That just cracks me up every time.

STIFF

For fuck's sakes, Skinhead, Forehead, whatever the fuck your name is ... grow up, bruv.

FORESKIN

What? Every time he says that I picture him with like nine dicks or something. Anyway, I was just wondering if this is a good idea?

SHAFT

Well, if you don't watch your queen of the south, you're gonna suck all nine dicks!

FORESKIN

My what?

PISTON

Your north and south.

BONER

Your gob trap.

PISTON

Your pie hole.

BONER

Your tooth guard.

PISSER

Anyway, continue, good sir!

PISTON

Jesus, Pisser, why don't you just lick his bottle and glass while you've got your tongue in it.

JOHNNY PISTOL

Maturity! Thy middle name is ... Bitch. You cocksuckers amuse me.

PISSER

How 'bout I introduce you to "fuck" and "off" and we get to know each other real good?

PISTON

Just tell me when and where, china plate! We can get nice and cosy under the covers, mate!

JOHNNY PISTOL

All right! Let's all relax our cocks for a moment. Now! My fellow Dicks! (*They all glare at FORESKIN, daring him to laugh*). It has been spoken about since we were wee lads. It has been whispered in these here hallways for decades past. It has been recorded on crapper doors and bathroom floors ... scratched amongst the dicks on tabletops and sandwich shops. We have all heard the stories. We have all heard the name. We have all secretly masturbated to the promise of our fame. Well, fellow Swingers, I am proud to announce that that day has finally arrived. It is *Immortal Kombat* time! (*Commotion*). And I have come to rally the troops!

The ENSEMBLE cheers. DICKENS smiles out to the audience.

In my hand, I hold the tournament manifesto, graciously passed down from generation to generation. And bestowed upon me like the Ten Commandments to Moses. (*Cheers*)

In this, our second last year in this Brad Pitt school, with Berkeley Hunt preachers, I present to you our future ... our legacy ... our *raison d'être*. This ... right here ... is how we will climb the ladder to the top and sit upon our rightful throne. This is how we will become rulers. This is how we become ... men!!

Bombastic cheers.

ENSEMBLE

Here's to the Swinging Dicks, with their potent pricks

Gentlemen of the world beware

Warn your dicky bird so hot

To watch her Jack and Danny ...

Her juicy little glue pot

The Swinging Dicks are out for a good old cattle truck!

DICKENS

I'm not sure about Moses and the Ten Commandments, but around here, that document was indeed a religious artefact. Every junior worth his Harry Holt dreams of taking part in this tournament. It is like a rite of passage. The winning group earns the right to run the school. And the leader ... becomes a god around here. He sits on the highest throne. Above even the teachers. Fuck, they scramble to hold his dick for a piss or a jizz. He is the alpha dog. The general. The shite. Everyone knows about it, but no one talks about it.

JOHNNY PISTOL

The rules are simple, Dicks. Complete all the prescribed tasks in seven hours. Video every one of your successes. Only share on our group Insta. Take no prisoners, boys!

Simulated celebratory combat with hockey sticks.

PISSER

Get your gear ...

PISTON

Take your weapon ...

FORESKIN

Your phone ...

SCHLONG

A tube of lube ...

SHAFT

A towel ...

BONER

Extra cash ...

STIFF

And don't forget your nang!

DICKENS

To "nang" is like smoking a fat one and then slamming your junk with a cocktail of speed and heroin. Like a painfully slow ascent up a rollercoaster and then ... once you reach that tipping point ... well let's just say the G-force rips your fucking face off ...!

SHAFT

Hold on! What if we run into Jackson's crew? You know they want this just as bad ...

ENSEMBLE

Fuck 'em up!

SHAFT

Thought so, bruv. Just checking!

PISSER

My good, sir. What are these tasks that we need to accomplish?

PISTOL

I thought you would never ask, lil' Pisser. Pretty straight-forward ...

SHAFT

Steal a school flag.

PISSER

Wax your armpits.

FORESKIN

Jump off a random bridge.

PISTON

Buy an item from a sex shop.

SCHLONG

Steal a street sign.

DICKENS

Naked group photo in front of a church.

BONER

Down a case in McDonald's.

STIFF

Get a hand job.

JOHNNY PISTOL

Smoke your mate's pubes.

ENSEMBLE

Twenty points each.

SHAFT

Turkey-slap your mate.

PISSER

Vape while a teacher is watching.

FORESKIN

Fuck a pillow till you climax.

PISTON

Sack-whack a stranger.

SCHLONG

Buy every brand of condom at a pharmacy.

DICKENS

Make your profile pic your dick for an hour.

BONER

Play porn loudly on your phone in the 7-Eleven queue.

STIFF

Snort a line.

JOHNNY PISTOL

Finger a lesbian.

ENSEMBLE

Fifty points each.

SHAFT

Surf on the roof of a bus.

PISSER

Shit on a car.

FORESKIN

Drink a cup of your mate's tacky vomit.

PISTON

Act gay and purchase women's underwear at a sex store and sniff it in front of the owner.

SCHLONG

Have a beer with a teacher.

DICKENS

Get a hug from a thug.

BONER

Send nudes to a family member.

STIFF

Slap a chick.

JOHNNY PISTOL

Skull twenty-four condom shots.

ENSEMBLE

A hundred points each.

SHAFT

Shove an egg up your arse then shit it out while making chicken noises.

PISSER

Lick a three-out-of-ten chick's fanny.

FORESKIN

Rip a pigeon's head off.

PISTON

Get arrested. Must go to the police station in cuffs.

SCHLONG

Roofie and then sandwich an Asian chick.

DICKENS

Butt-chug a cold one.

BONER

Shave your entire body.

STIFF

Do the whole night in your underwear.

JOHNNY PISTOL

Start a fight at a nightclub.

ENSEMBLE

Two hundred points each.

SHAFT

Nang again and then ...

PISSER

Trifecta spit ...

FORESKIN

Spit-roast a girl ...

PISTON

Spit on a homeless man ...

SCHLONG

Deface the Spit bridge ...

DICKENS

Trifecta bag ...

BONER

Bang a hag ...

STIFF

Rape a slag ...

JOHNNY PISTOL

Bone a fag ...

ENSEMBLE

Five hundred points.

ENSEMBLE

And for one thousand points, ... nang and fuck up a rival gang ... and that's how you reach immortality.

PISSER

What gang?

ENSEMBLE

Jesus Pisser! Jackson's gang. Fuck yeah! Challenge accepted. (*They ceremoniously take out their Nang and ingest*).

The mood changes. The pace slows down ... and then later will increase to a break-neck speed. Music: "Morning" from Peer Gynt Suite by Grieg.

The above needs to happen in a dream-state/ascend, and the sequence to follow needs to descend at lightning speed – tasks being completed. Projections and actions happen at the same time. At the end of the sequence, the set reflects the inner chaos of the cast. Police sirens in the sequence.

In the sequence: realistic images move to distorted surrealist nightmarish images of faces, porn, violence, misogyny, homophobia, racism, classism, hyper-masculinity, etc. The images as well as the action on stage must be Theatre of Cruelty. A purging of toxicity.

Action sequences on stage: rape, gang fight, graphic orientation ...

PISTOL

And that, my brethren ... is how we reach immortality!! Challenge completed!

DICKENS

A fucking trip!

SCHLONG

Fucked up!

SHAFT

Nuclear shit!

PISTON

Grab you by the balls kinda shit!

BONER

Fuuuuuuuck!

STIFF

For real?

PISSER

Shiiiiit!

FORESKIN

Jesus, Johnny. A dead guy?

PISTOL

Who gives a shit?

FORESKIN

I give a shit! We all give a shit. It's assault. Fuck! Possibly murder! What are you talking about?

SCHLONG

Hold on, mate. That's not what we signed up for.

FORESKIN

No shit, Sherlock. That's my fucking point. Fuck ... it makes me sick.

STIFF

Get your shit together, bruv.

FORESKIN

Don't tell me to get my shit together. Do you have any idea of the monumental pile of shit that's gonna hit the fan?

PISTOL

Listen to me very carefully. There is only one way this will go ...

Change of mood.

DICKENS

(Gives the impression that he is speaking to an invisible someone) Of course, I know what it means. Do I look stupid?

SHAFT

I don't know what you are talking about ...

PISSER

Why're you asking me?

PISTON

I've never heard of them ...

SCHLONG

When?

FORESKIN

Snitches get stitches ...

BONER

Today?

STIFF

I was at home the whole night ...

JOHNNY PISTOL

Piss off!

DICKENS

It's a free country ... I'm not saying anything!

FORESKIN

It doesn't matter ... I'm not saying anything!

SHAFT

What tournament? I'm not saying anything!

PISSER

I don't know her ... I'm not saying anything!

PISTON

That's got nothing to do with me ... I'm not saying anything!

SCHLONG

You have no right to ... I'm not saying anything!

BONER

I didn't know ... I'm not saying anything!

STIFF

I just tried it ... I'm not saying anything!

JOHNNY PISTOL

Do I need a lawyer?

FORESKIN

... but what about our suffering?

STIFF

My life is pretty fucking awful, mate. Is that what you want me to say? A fucking shit show!

DICKENS

Why don't you just let us be? You see, you forgot what it's like in the trenches ... now you tell us not to close ranks ... but remember ... not too long ago you decided to ...

Music: "Born Slippy" by Underworld. The next sequence is inspired by and adapted from Trainspotting (Boyle, 1996). The section after is updated for a contemporary society.

ENSEMBLE

Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose a

starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisurewear and matching luggage. Choose a three-piece suit on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked-up brats you spawned to replace yourselves. Choose your future. Choose life ...³¹ Sound familiar?

Now you choose an iPhone made in China by a woman who jumped out of a window and stuck it in the pocket of your jacket fresh from a South Asian Firetrap. You choose Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and a thousand other ways to spew your bile across people you've never met. You choose to update your profile, tell the world what you had for breakfast and hope that someone, somewhere cares. You choose looking up old flames, desperate to believe that you don't look as bad as they do. Live-blogging, from your first wank till your last breath; human interaction reduced to nothing more than data. You choose ten things you never knew about celebrities who've had surgery. You choose screaming about abortion. Choose rape jokes, slut-shaming, revenge porn and an endless tide of depressing misogyny. You choose a zero-hour contract and a two-hour journey to work. And then you sit back and smother the pain with prescription drugs made in some factory you imagine to be sterile. Like your life. You choose unfulfilled promises and wishing you'd done it all differently. Never learning from your own mistakes. You choose watching history repeat itself. The slow reconciliation towards what you can get, rather than what you always hoped for. You settle for less and keep a brave face on it. You choose disappointment and choose losing the ones you love, then as they fall from view, a piece of you dies with them until you can see that one day in the future, piece by piece, they will all be gone and there'll be nothing left of you to call alive or dead.

You started off with high hopes, then you bottled it. You realised that we're all going to die, without really finding out the big answers. You developed all those long-winded ideas which just interpret the reality of our lives in different ways, without really extending our body of worthwhile knowledge, about the big things, the real things. You fill up your lives with shit, things like careers and relationships to delude yourselves that it isn't all totally fucking

³¹ Lines uttered by Mark Renton in *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1986)

pointless. And now you suffer from a debilitating state of ephebiphobia. Now you are probably asking what the fuck that is? You fucking fear adolescence. You fear us.

And we know that you are onto us. You think we quote Irvine Welsh just to give the impression that we are conscious of our existential fucking nightmare and that we don't care because we are fucking spoilt little pricks and will never know how bad you have it or had it. That we do or don't understand that in this post-post-modern society, that everything is already deconstructed and fucked back together again and maybe nobody gives a shit whether you are a fucking hyper-masculine, cisgendered, heteronormative, socio-capitalist, who may or may not be interested in politics but also still harbours racist thoughts or, melanophobia, as you call it, and question the existence of God. Secretly of course. You don't want to tempt fate because who the fuck knows when everything will go to shit and then it is all your fucking fault and Jesus knows you don't want that on your impressively burdened shoulders as well. And that's all you can do because you are just trying to do the right thing ... because you never said fuck, or fucked, or watched porn or did drugs, or was anti-establishment and counterculture. You are just trying to do the best you can. You decided to choose life. You avoided sin your whole life, didn't you? At all costs? You still do. Just to be safe. And you want us to choose life too. Make no fuss and just get through this thing. Don't question too much. Don't experiment too much. Just lie low. Don't be too sinful. And if you do sin, pray to God that He will forgive you. Feel a little shame; feel a little guilt. And then just move on and be as normal as possible. Like you have dodged a bullet. It is all about control.

So, let's cut to the chase. The answer is simple! We choose not to choose life. We choose not to choose death. We choose immortality. A hyper reality! It is a minefield out there. A powder keg. But we tell you now, we will light that motherfucking fuse. Because there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.

PISTOL

Yeah! They will talk about us in reverence for generations to come. You will be celebrated because ...

SCHLONG

I fucked an Asian chick tonight. We didn't make love or anything lame like that. We just fucked. Or I fucked her. I slipped her a roofie and that was that. Easy as you like. And you know the best part? No protests. No bitching and moaning. No stress. Does she like me? Doesn't she like me? What will her friends say? Or any of that shit. No long conversations

afterwards. No worrying if I did it the right way or even if she enjoyed it. I filmed it. Something to jerk off to afterwards. I know my mates appreciated it. I am sure they are jerking off to it as we speak. Creating my own content. What can I say? At least I blurred out her face. No one knows who it is. So, she really has nothing to worry about.

Laughter. Celebration. Animal-like.

PISTON

I fingered a Lesbian tonight. She was gagging for it. Wet. She for sure enjoyed it. Hell, I even enjoyed it. It was my first time with a dyke. Easy as you like. And you know the best part? No protests. No bitching and moaning. No stress. Does she like me? Doesn't she like me? What will her friends say? Or any of that shit. No long conversations afterwards. No worrying if I did it the right way or even if she enjoyed it. I filmed it. Something to jerk off to afterwards. I know my mates appreciated it. I am sure they are jerking off to it as we speak. Creating my own content. What can I say? At least I blurred out her face. No one knows who it is. So, she really has nothing to worry about.

Laughter. Celebration. Animal-like.

STIFF

A faggot sucked me off today. It was good. I think he enjoyed it more than I did. Afterwards, I kicked his face in. He wants to be a girl, so I taught him a lesson. Easy as you like. And you know the best part? No protests. No bitching and moaning. No stress. Does she like me? Doesn't she like me? What will her friends say? Or any of that shit. No long conversations afterwards. No worrying if I did it the right way or even if she enjoyed it. I filmed it. Something to jerk off to afterwards. I know my mates appreciated it. I am sure they are jerking off to it as we speak. Creating my own content. What can I say? At least I blurred out her face. No one knows who it is. So, she really has nothing to worry about.

Laughter. Celebrations. Animal-like.

FORESKIN

Rape, assault, murder! You're right. They will talk about us. While we're behind bars! And you are fucking delusional if you think anyone will give a shit. They're gonna lock us up and throw away the key.

BONER

Not if you keep your mouth shut ...

STIFF

What happens in the foxhole stays in the foxhole ...

SCHLONG

Forget you were even there ...

SHAFT

There's no evidence of anything ...

PISSER

We'll delete it ...

PISTON

Remember the code ...

FORESKIN

What fucking code? Am I the only one that has watched any detective, lawyer, crime, fucking interrogation shit ever in my life? Someone always cracks ...

DICKENS

(Out) He's not wrong. One Dick turns and the floodgates open ...

FORESKIN

This is not some kind of war!

PISTOL

Of course it's a fucking war ... it's our time ... it's taking back what's ours! Be a soldier. Be a man. "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. Therefore, take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. He knew that there are times when a soldier or a warrior puts everything on the line for Christ. Do not show weakness and claim the dominion of this land". "Onward Christian soldiers..."

FORESKIN

You are fucking delusional. It's not a war. You're not a soldier. We are not soldiers. It's not a fantasy. It's not a movie and it certainly is not the fucking dark biblical ages. And your dick-swinging bravado is not gonna change that. This shit has got real consequences and we will go down big time. Because no one gives a shit about your imagined fucking trauma. Soldiers

fight because they are scared shitless. Someone makes them scared. And you are just a scared little boy with a big fucking mouth ... and when it's just you, and you alone, you react out of fear ...

Change of mood. Each shares their experiences.

SHAFT

She stands next to me. I'm nervous. Her hand brushes against mine. My heart jumps. I breathe faster. Her hand moves up my arm. I breathe even faster. She whispers in my ear. "Don't be nervous." But I am. And excited. She touches my chest. I am scared she feels my heart pounding like a hammer trying to escape my chest. But she takes off my shirt. I get aroused. But then I'm scared. And nervous and worried. She kisses me. I relax. She puts her hand down my pants. And it feels good. It feels really, really good ...

BONER

When he smiles at me, my body fills with sunlight. When he is happy, I know it is going to be a good day. I look at him from across the room, but not so that he notices. He is big. His presence fills the room. His eyes speak a language that is generous. His voice booming alacrity. I admire his confidence. I wish I could be that confident. When he pats me on the shoulder, my heart skips a beat. I feel the warmth of his hand as his fingers linger for just a moment. I feel so proud.

PISSER

I stare into my own eyes. I smile. But it's a lie. I never know what to say. But I never know how to say it. I hold back, of course. I know what the right thing is to do. That's what my heart tells me. But my brain knows the truth. I see the contours of my body. It jolts me. It always does. I look down to the safety of the tiles. Unobtrusive. Incognito. Invisible. But my body keeps telling the lie. Looking up is the hardest thing in the world to do. Maybe the effort will go unnoticed. Maybe no one will see ...

PISTOL

I feel him looking at me. I know that he sees me. He sees inside of me. Looks right through me. I feel naked. Nervous. I smile. But not at him. That's too dangerous. I allow myself a moment to remember. I breathe in the memory. Joy. Bliss. Silence. Peace. A kiss. And every kiss is a first kiss. Exhilarating. Passionate. Perfect. A touch radiates. A smile reassures. Conversations. So many conversations. And this is right. This is where truth lies. Right there, in the pauses, at the end of each inflection. In the crinkle of the eyes. In the effortless

laughter. In the anticipation. In the affirmation. Right there where I belong. Where I see me for the first time. I breathe out. The noise comes flooding back and bathes me in secrecy.

SHAFT

And I know when I tell my mates, they will say, “You dog”. And some will say, “Fuck off! You did not smash a teacher!” And I will say, “It was fucking awesome. The hottest teacher in school. The best I have ever had!” “And I didn’t even have to work for it.” “We screw all the time.” Even if I never had. And I will say, “Fuck off if you don’t believe me. She chose me and I feel sorry for you fuckers because you are screwing wee bunnies while I’m in the big leagues.” And I want to tell them. I need to tell them. Because it’s all about respect. But I don’t. Because I respect her. And because I didn’t like it. But sometimes I did like it. But mostly I don’t. There must be something wrong with me. How can I not like it? Just another pussy. And they will laugh at me. “Fuck you!” “She is the best screw I ever had.” “She keeps coming back for more.” And I am popular again.

BONER

But today my father does not smile at me. Today I was not good enough. No one is. His eyes, generous with disappointment. His confidence, intimidating. His voice, passionately booming insults. There’s loathing there. I get small again. I am a little a boy again. I cry again. My tears loosen his tongue and his bigness heightens and lengthens and expands. “You need to try harder. That wasn’t good enough. You need to make us proud. I am doing this for your own damn good! Who do you think is paying for all of this? Why are you crying?” I stop breathing because there is no space for both of us in this room. And every nerve in my body wants to power down. And my instinct kicks in. Programmed. I accept responsibility. I understand. It will never happen again. I did not try hard enough. And each attempt at placating splutters out of my throat in embarrassing high-pitched wails. And finally, when I dare to breathe, the warmth trickling down the inside of my leg makes me feel small. So damn small. So damn, fucking small.

PISSER

But they do see me. I am a pussy. Not man enough. Not muscular enough. Not fast enough. Not strong enough. And God forbid I have an opinion. It makes me so fucking mad. Their heckling. Their booing. Their eyes rolling and scowling. Their mouths smiling and judging. And I clench my own mouth shut. I feel my teeth gnashing from the effort and at any second they will break and smash into pieces. My hands become fists and my body flames up. I only

feel heat. And sweat. And I want to cry. Why me? What have I done? Why can you not just leave me alone? What have I done to you that you hate me so much? Why don't you hate him? Look at him. He fingered a lesbian. He ruffied and raped an Asian chick. He got sucked off by a faggot. He is just a fucking failure. And he fucked his teacher. He thinks no one knows but everybody knows. What the fuck is fucking going on?

PISTOL

But then it's not a secret anymore. And the fear paralyses me. And instinct kicks in. Here. Now. There is no flight. There is only fight. Put my head down. And attack. And my mind fucking explodes. (*Voices from the ensemble*) No! I am not a faggot! What the fuck are you talking about? I have a bird. You've seen us together. We fuck all the time. Ask her. I even showed you. You believe him? Fuck you! He has this obsession with me and then he goes around accusing me of laying my hands on him. But I will lay my hands on him. When I find that cock-sucking disgusting son of a bitch. I will kill him. I will fucking kill him. You mark my words. Do you hear me, you faggot!!

Back to present.

FORESKIN

And that is fear. You hurt yourself because you are scared. You hurt others because you are scared. We all do it. But we disguise it as courage, as being brave. We dominate before we get dominated. We exert our power before it controls us. Because being vulnerable, being truthful is being weak. You want to go out there and win this tournament. Why? So that you feel powerful? Popular? The Big Dick? But you leave behind what? A lifetime of scars and trauma while you lie to yourself and tell yourself you are a man. A real man. But if you were truly a real man, you would be honest with yourself and others. Tell the truth. That you are scared. That you don't always have the answers, that you are not always perfect, that it is okay to make a mistake, and to allow others to do the same, to fuck things up. That it is okay to say that you have been hurt, that you are being hurt and that you don't know what to do. That power is not dominance, that power is having the courage to treat her like she is your equal ... loving her despite your own insecurities and fears ... and that true power lies in allowing others to be who they are ... who they truly are ... even if that means ... being honest because you are right... and when you kissed me it was like a first kiss ... it was exhilarating, passionate and perfect. What do you say, Johnny? Right now, right here, we can

finally be honest. And put all of this toxic, masculine poison shit aside and recognise each other's humanity ... what do you say?

The ensemble listens carefully and responds. They seem to be placated and there is a moment ... almost as if they come to their senses. But they take their cue from PISTOL ... who is struggling to hold back his tears ...

But then PISTOL recovers and starts singing "Onward Christian Soldiers ...". FORESKIN realises the danger that he is in. PISTOL and the GROUP attack, while DICKENS walks to the front and takes out his toy soldier ... he watches the action almost uninterested ... brings out other toy soldiers ... The attack needs to be brutal and a manifestation and outpouring of angry masculinity. The Theatre of Cruelty here should be a literal manifestation of the war at the start. A game of ultra-violence. FORESKIN succumbs to the violence.

DICKENS takes out his soldiers.

Music: "Toy Soldiers" by Martika.

The following is adapted from the children's rhyme, "Ten Little Soldiers".

DICKENS

Nine little soldier boys had a very good mate; one overstepped himself and then there were eight.

Eight little soldier boys on their way to heaven; one said he'd play dead and then there were seven.

Seven little soldier boys playing with sticks; one cried wolf and then there were six.

Six little soldier boys very much alive; one was judged and tried and then there were five.

Five little soldier boys going through a door; one felt scared and then there were four.

Four little soldier boys swimming out at sea; sharks gathered around and then there were three.

Three little soldier boys feeling rather blue; the others didn't notice and then there were two.

Two little soldier boys sitting in the sun; they were best of friends and then there was one.

And one little soldier boy is left all alone ...

The End

ACT VI

CONCLUSION – A FABULOUS CURTAIN CALL

Scene 1 – Limitations

I realise that my research, a queer performative autoethnographic study, is deeply subjective and reflects my own personal reflections of this here-and-now space. I also recognise that my reflections in the here and now are inextricably linked to my past experiences. This research by no means aimed to represent the lived experiences of other bodies moving around on the school campus. There might be processes at work and decisions made to which I am not privy. The research is written from my own queer lens and also does not aim to represent other queer voices. As a queer Dramatic Arts teacher in the school, I also understand that the students I come into contact with on a daily basis, mostly those taught in my class, represent a small sample of the total student body. Moreover, this school is only one of many other all-boys' schools. Other schools may be further along in their journeys towards inclusive social justice education and others, in contrast, may have done very little work in this regard.

Despite these limitations, I hope that the writing, ideas, and findings show the importance of the work done towards a Theatre of the Fabulous.

Scene 2 - Next fabulous queer steps and thinking about a queering future

Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process. – bell hooks³²

I am excited, going forward, to continue to refine and expand on the Theatre of the Fabulous as an embodied queer pedagogy for the classroom. I am also encouraged to take a more playful approach in my own writing performances and expressions inside and outside of the classroom. There must be a move away from assessment-focused teaching and towards a more holistic

³² In hooks (1994: 21)

“un/structured” or organic approach. The focus must be on “engaged play” and become less teacher focused. In this here and now, it is important that students, in the classroom and beyond, are made to feel comfortable with the uncomfortable. I have found that deeper learning takes place in a “doing performance” as opposed to a “listening performance”. Our stories are ongoing, and I think that if we continue to perform our experiences, the Theatre of the Fabulous will disrupt heteronormative, patriarchal, and colonial thinking. I want it to create a culture of un/learning and further include all identities in the classroom. I also understand that if I want to build on this trajectory, I will have to continue to be reflective and reflexive about my own queer teaching and queer theatre making. There is possibility to shape the Theatre of the Fabulous into a “structured” queer pedagogy that focuses even more intentionally on these ideas.

In doing so, I hope to perform more authentically in the here and now. I am further eager to have continued discussions with colleagues and other stakeholders about the extent to which a Theatre of the Fabulous can be used in all classrooms, and beyond, to transform teaching and learning. This extended journey for me will also include thinking more deeply about teachers as queer role models and queer allies. I would like to engage more with the GSA and other societies/committees in the school, and perhaps in other schools, to learn about being more active in this regard. This will give me the opportunity to be more visible as a queer teacher, not just in the classroom but also on the outside. It will further broaden the scope and delivery of the Theatre of the Fabulous.

Furthermore, along my journey, I found sparse research and writing about the very specific phenomenon of queer-specific work in single-sex schools. Many queer pedagogies have been proposed to disrupt heteronormativity, but these are mostly situated in the co-educational school environment. There are also studies that focus on straightening and masculinising practices in traditional all-boys’ schools but hardly any viewed through a queer pedagogical lens. All-boys’ schools in the 21st century have a very real challenge to define their identity when placed under a spotlight of queer theory, and further interrogation is needed to establish exactly how they can reconcile ideas around non-binary thinking, gender fluidity and multiple sexualities. How do these schools become more safe, inclusive spaces when the sign at the door, from the get-go, advocates exclusion? This is a very real problem that needs urgent attention if we want to speak of inclusion in all aspects of the schooling experience.

Scene 3 – Final queer thoughts

I seem to have run in a great circle and met myself again on the starting line.

– Jeanette Winterson³³

This journey has been a deeply personal exploration of my lived experience in the past and the present. It was an invitation to my closeted theatre of fabulousness to which I am leaving the door ajar. I have shown how my own personal queer experience can inform a Theatre of the Fabulous. It might seem indulgent, but for me, it has brought many moments of clarity, knowledge previously unknown, unexplored roads and border crossings which introduced me to strangers both familiar and completely alien. It feels like I have indeed “run in a great circle” and found and met aspects of myself that I have kept hidden from public view. It has been a liberating re-introduction to me, all the way from being born naked all over again. I feel more empowered than ever before because this journey has brought me to a better understanding of the me in the here and now, and I hope that my new-found fabulousness can continue to shape a Theatre of the Fabulous through which to brighten the colours of this Rainbow Nation that hold so much promise for all.

In closing, I hold in my mind all of those queer trailblazers who have gone before and on whose shoulders I stand today. I also hold in my mind all those who have given their lives in this fight for queer equality.

And to all the young people:

I am so sorry

I am so sorry that you are made to feel (a)shame(d)
Of who you truly are
Of your unique, beautiful, wonderful self
I am so sorry that you are not made to feel fabulous every single day of your
life
And that you are a gift and that you have so much to say
I am so sorry that you are not listened to
Even though your voice is important and necessary

³³ In Winterson (1997: 129)

I am so sorry that you sometimes, or maybe all the time
 Feel small, feel threatened, feel scared
 That you do not belong
I am so sorry that you want to cry, that you feel pain,
 That you feel that nobody understands
 I am so very sorry
 That the people that are supposed to protect you
 Love you
 Care for you
 Nurture you
 Let you down
I am so sorry that we don't tell you how magnificent you are
 How powerful you are
 How exceptional you are
 I am so sorry that we don't tell you everyday
That every single thing that you feel is different about you
 Is every single thing that makes you uniquely you
 You need to let those qualities shine
 Because the problem is not you, it is them
 Just be you
 Celebrate you
 Love you
 Because you are the only you
 And you are extraordinary
I am so very sorry that you don't hear this everyday
 That you don't feel it
 I am so very sorry

The End.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sophocles (Stephen) Kotze is a high-school teacher who has taught Dramatic Arts and English for 20 years. He holds a degree in English from the University of South Africa. He is also a theatre-maker and playwright. He has written numerous plays for school students. He is passionate about providing opportunities for young people to express their lived experiences in a safe and creative space. Stephen is specifically interested in a theatre for social justice and healing where the stories of the marginalised and voiceless are interrogated and staged.

He readily acknowledges that his writing is inspired by the incredibly talented students that he has had the honour to collaborate with, teach, coach and direct over the years. The voices in his plays are ultimately words on paper and only through his students do these personal stories start to breathe with authenticity and truth.