

## Entering the Regional Scene with a Contemporary *Lysistrata*

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LYS: What's that babbling down there?  
Someone trying to penetrate our stronghold?<sup>1</sup>

How does an independent contemporary theatre maker enter a regional milieu dominated by repertory clubs, large-scale touring shows, and light opera? I found my answer in the form of a community production of *Lysistrata* grounded in a rigorous process that values collaboration and egalitarianism, embodied knowledge and improvisation. These qualities exemplify an everyday notion of 'resilience', the ability to rebound and recover. I directed and choreographed a contemporary adaptation of Aristophanes' Old Comedy that was presented at Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre's Cube Theatre in July 2015. This paper will address the application of my ongoing research enquiry into collaborative creative practice, which I call *Underscore Alchemy*, to a performance outcome. I will discuss resilience in the methodology employed, and of the people who participated in the work's creation.

Resilience: Revive, Restore, Reconnect, Australasian Association for Drama Theatre and Performance Studies (ADSA) 2016 Conference Proceedings, Volume 1, ed. Rebecca Scollen and Michael Smalley, Artsworx, 2016.

Underscore Alchemy adapts dancer Nancy Stark Smith's Underscore, a framework for researching and engaging in movement improvisation, with a focus on creative artists who are not trained as performers.<sup>2</sup> I will briefly reiterate the published findings of my phenomenological study that indicates participants benefit through structured attention to the experiential body.

### **Context: Theatre environment in Bunbury**

Bunbury, WA, is a city of 70,000 people, 179 kilometres south of Perth. In 2004, academic and community theatre practitioner Robyn McCarron completed her study *Performing arts and regional communities: the case of Bunbury, Western Australia*. This unpublished doctoral thesis offers excellent insight into the state of Bunbury's performing arts in the years 1994-2004<sup>3</sup>. McCarron includes case studies of particular organisations and projects, a theoretical context regarding regional community development, and appendices that list every touring show and local production in Bunbury between the years 1994-2004. From these data I can build a picture of Bunbury's performing arts scene, and extrapolate towards 2012, when I took up residence in the region.

McCarron's findings offer familiar accounts of the significance, and threats, facing community performing arts groups. These groups, with their volunteer workforces, offer many benefits to members and the community as significant providers of live entertainment, such as creating social networks and expressing creativity.<sup>4</sup> But they face several difficulties, including volunteer burn out, and a form of 'brain-drain' which sees talented and experienced people moving towards larger cities where they anticipate greater opportunities.<sup>5</sup> The research illuminates two other factors that can undermine community performing arts organisations; prohibitive venue costs and a lack of innovation. McCarron tracks the origin story of the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre (BREC), which opened in 1990; a community-run world-class theatre principally serving as a hirer venue for touring shows. Before the addition of the 242-seat Cube Theatre in 2014, local productions had to fill the 800-seat Stage One auditorium. For some well-established local organisations, this was a good fit. McCarron looks at the case of the South West Opera Company (SWOC), established in 1986, which had some

early success at BREC with popular productions such as *Les Misérables* (1995). However, SWOC found it difficult to sustain the interest of young performers. McCarron writes that SWOC's 'need to also fulfil their charter to perform choral or operatic works from the nineteenth century repertoire ... meant that audiences were smaller and younger performers tended to look for groups doing more recent musical theatre material'.<sup>6</sup>

The appeal of musicals and spectaculars at the expense of innovation is a theme running across McCarron's study. This does not undermine the value to the community of accessible theatre, but as she notes of her youth theatre case, an emphasis on drama as process where creative enquiry might lead to an innovative outcome, 'did not suit some young people who wanted to participate in major performances'.<sup>7</sup> In 1998 BREC added a co-production model to its hirer model for the use of its facilities, selected on a competitive basis, which 'resulted in some innovative proposals that are a departure from the tradition of musicals and light opera ... [judged] according to criteria such as innovation, involvement of young people, genre and budget'.<sup>8</sup>

The live entertainment environment in Bunbury today remains much the same, with large touring shows offering popular music, comedy and the classical canon. BREC still co-produces several shows a year, allowing some Perth-based independent theatre companies to have their work seen as part of a regional touring circuit. Some local performing arts organisations continue to thrive on their traditional repertoire designed for broad appeal, hiring BREC or, as in the case of the Bunbury Repertory Club that bought the former Eaton Hall, acquiring their own small venue in a satellite suburb. Locally-produced, innovative live performance falls into an exceptional space that was partially addressed, in 2015, by the new Cube Theatre. In 2014 my proposal for *Lysistrata* was picked up as a BREC co-production, which offered a small budget through a Community Access Grant, a marketing plan and some technical support.

### **Methodology: Underscore Alchemy**

I developed the research project Underscore Alchemy to investigate how artists from disciplines outside the performing arts might engage with Nancy Stark Smith's<sup>9</sup> improvisation

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model, the Underscore, in order to enhance their creative practices. In 2013 I invited creative artists with limited prior experience of somatic practices, many of whom were students, to participate in a series of research workshops based on Smith's Underscore. Over a period of weeks, the recruited participants were taught a 'score' (in the performing arts sense of an activity map over time) that built up to a three-hour practice, within an egalitarian workshop culture. Participants were offered somatic exercises based on everyday movements such as standing, walking and lying, but much of the time was unstructured (the 'Open Score' phase discussed in the Practice section below). From the first workshop it was apparent that artists tended to work in an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary way, regardless of their usual practice, creatively responding to the simple materials provided (paper, pastels, tape, exercise balls and yoga mats).

Underscore Alchemy was designed in response to a regional university context in which undergraduate creative artists from a variety of disciplines share classes. I lecture at the South West campus of Edith Cowan University (ECU), Western Australia, which offers a Bachelor of Arts with majors in Media, Visual Arts, and Writing and Literature. The course includes a number of core units taken by all students, which necessarily must identify and develop skills relevant to all the major disciplines. As well as traditional critical thinking assessment tasks such as essay writing, these units offer creative assessment opportunities, accompanied by the standard contextualising documents such as exegeses. In this context I have developed my research focus in creativity studies, its methodologies and pedagogies, and find that interdisciplinary work benefits students and researchers alike. Creating something new in response to a new situation can be considered an act of resilience in myself as artist-scholar.

The pedagogical situation that was the inspiration for Underscore Alchemy is reflected in the methodology's collaborative philosophy. This was in turn supported by the resilience of Smith's original model, about which there are as yet no absolute rules regarding its applications, Smith notes.<sup>10</sup> I have found that embodied knowledge, a phenomenology of the experiential body, is neglected in the educational experience of my non-performing arts students. As an academic and creative artist with a background in the performing arts as well as writing and literature, I wish to share with my students embodied knowledge that supports my creative endeavours: somatic practices including physical relaxation and attention to

sensation that enhances a sense of flow in creative production. The Underscore offers a framework for practicing and researching improvisation in a collaborative context, and so supports an understanding of the natural cycles of pleasure and struggle, engagement and boredom that accompany the creative process.

Applying Smith's Underscore to creative activity in non-performing arts disciplines to develop Underscore Alchemy allowed participants to engage with an unfamiliar process, see it through to the end, and record their experiences. This this they too displayed great resilience. Data collected and analysed in 2013 include collaborative works of art and participant responses provided in surveys and focus groups,<sup>11</sup> which indicate that creative artists with limited prior experience of somatic practices can be encouraged to participate in a process that gives attention to the experiential body (doing and sensing), and can consider their creative processes in a new way, individually and in concert with others. On the strength of this finding, and prompted by the participants' interests in maintaining the group into 2014, Underscore Alchemy was used as a monthly practice framework for participants to support their own creative work.

By the end of this two-year period we had a small team of creative artists who were familiar with the model and my way of working. We wanted to share our practice, and though none of the core creative team (aside from me) were performing artists, I felt a live performance was the best opportunity to draw in further participants, disciplinary practices, and audiences. For the 2015 project, data were collected via anonymous written surveys conducted two weeks after the performances, which gathered feedback from 60% of the 20 participants. Additionally, separate audience surveys were conducted by my partner-organisations Ausdance WA (of 480 audience members, 44 people were approached in the foyer for pre- and post-show responses) and BREC (26 people who purchased tickets online were emailed after the show), where both surveys recorded demographic and attitudinal information through multiple choice and open responses.<sup>12</sup> The results of these will be discussed in the Practice section below.

### **Practice: Making *Lysistrata***

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In 2015 I recruited emerging artists and community members to produce an adaptation of *Lysistrata* using the Underscore Alchemy model. I was able to further test my research findings, that Underscore Alchemy supports one's creative practice regardless of discipline, by using the model to generate material within the context of a group practice. The *Lysistrata* workshop model was mapped from Underscore Alchemy, with several key phases, starting with a somatic warm-up. We were fortunate that one of the core creative team had considerable experience in developing his own somatic practice, which he was happy to share as a 20-30 minute warm-up at the beginning of each session. Typically the warm-up was spent lying on the floor and experiencing a guided personal movement exploration. This takes its cue from Smith's Underscore, which 'guides dancers through a series of "changing states"', where the opening phases focus on 'solo deepening/releasing and sensitising to gravity and support.'<sup>13</sup> Rather than drawing from a particular tradition or discipline of movement awareness, the warm-up offered elements common across these diverse practices, as described by Martha Eddy in her brief history of somatic practices: 'people take time to breath, feel and "listen to the body," often by beginning with conscious relaxation on the floor ... [in a] gravity-reduced state'.<sup>14</sup>

This was outside the experience of the new recruits, though it was more familiar to the core creative team who had participated in previous research workshops. Nearly all the participants found it valuable. Of those eleven participants surveyed after the project, nine were positive without reservation, making comments such as, 'I liked it, came to look forward to it each workshop as a structure'.<sup>15</sup> Two had some reservations; these participants were at the extreme ends of a movement ability spectrum, where one found it too passive: 'I do quite a bit of exercise so I found these too easy';<sup>16</sup> and the other found it too difficult: 'For me it wasn't useful – my old joints require more support – probably water'.<sup>17</sup> The somatic warm-up connects untrained performers to their physical environment, supporting more efficient movement and attention during the remainder of the workshop.

Like Smith's Underscore, Underscore Alchemy moves towards the Open Score, an open improvisation where participating artists 'do as they will' with the other participants in the space, the space itself, and any materials in the space. This sustained focus on creative play prompts anxieties for some, and social lubricants such as small talk are limited to a meeting

phase at the beginning and a sharing phase at the end. With backgrounds in visual arts or creative writing, some participants in the 2013 workshops interpreted the focus on embodied awareness as a kind of unrehearsed performance, requiring an outcome that was unfamiliar to them. However, by the end of that series, within an increasingly familiar framework that focuses on doing and sensing, the practice was recognised as one that might support creative outcomes in any form. One participant reported: ‘Rather than a performance [...] what we were doing was creating space, creating worlds’.<sup>18</sup> The recasting of the Open Score as ‘world-building’ was a useful concept for me that I carried over into the *Lysistrata* practice.

After the warm-up, the *Lysistrata* workshops moved into some structured theatre exercises selected to ‘seed’ ideas into the open improvisation to follow, and to develop into scene material at a later date. As the performance outcome was explicit there was no resistance to theatre exercises, though some participants lacked skills. By practicing open improvisations and world-building weeks before picking up scripts, the untrained participants developed embodied comfort in the world of the play, experiencing their own and other characters with free hands and no lines. Almost two thirds of the surveyed participants were positive about the Open Score: ‘Play time was an interesting opportunity to discover/explore space and motion – a more relaxed use of the body in space’.<sup>19</sup> The remainder expressed initial hesitation, which relaxed into appreciation: ‘At first these were terrifying! But once I realised that nobody was actually watching and judging, it was nice to slip into a space where we could just play’.<sup>20</sup> Where the growing familiarity of the workshop model allowed participants to confront and overcome fears, Underscore Alchemy promoted resilience.

### **Resilience in collaboration**

Theatre is, of course, a collaborative art form, but several aspects distinguish this process from other devised and community theatre productions I’ve been involved with. As with other devised productions, scene material was generated out of workshop tasks and then shaped by me. This was particularly important in the *Lysistrata* project because of the diversity of the participants, who ranged in age from eighteen to seventy-six; in gender and sexuality; in background and physical ability (it should be noted that the participants were uniformly

ethnically Caucasian). So, when choreography was created from gestural elements generated by the cast it was easy to learn and embody, supporting cohesive relationships on stage and off.

The regional context, where resources and expertise can be scarcer than in a capital city, offers opportunities for people to play multiple roles. The diverse creative arts backgrounds of many of the participants (especially those who had been involved in *Underscore Alchemy* for several years), meant that design roles were embraced with enthusiasm. With the guidance of one skilled participant who adapted the traditional chiton, cast members were responsible for their own costumes, helping them to build their characters. All roles, on stage and off, were framed as creative, with everyone participating in workshops. I surveyed participants' perceptions of the collaborative aspects of the project; 80% were positive without reservation: 'Loved it – I liked the slow build up to doing the scenes and being able to have a certain amount of say in the production, eg. costumes, dances'.<sup>21</sup> The remainder noted the challenge but weren't entirely negative: 'Challenging, but a process which invites participation and innovation – a sense of agency'.<sup>22</sup>

For me as an academic and creative artist, collaboration allows me to work simultaneously on multiple research projects, provides opportunities for community engagement, and offers teaching and learning outcomes that foster and facilitate creativity. I was able to recruit several students by finding ways to match their creative arts research aspirations to the project. For example, two students in the interdisciplinary unit Pre Modernism worked with me to develop an original stage design, applying their contextual learning around ancient Greek theatre to a real-life show. Another student, as part of her Honours course, designed the production's sound by remixing ambient sounds generated in workshops; an innovative adaptation of *Underscore Alchemy's* attention to embodiment and collaboration.

Two other collaborations, with Ausdance WA and BREC, were important to this work for their practical support, but additionally because both organisations produced their own audience surveys which assisted me in evaluating the project's impact on the Bunbury community. The surveys asked similar questions, with a focus on attitudes towards 'community' theatre. Of 480 audience members, Ausdance approached 44 people in the foyer for pre- and post-show responses and found that 25% of respondents didn't know *Lysistrata* was a community



production. Of the 26 people who purchased tickets online and were emailed by BREC after the show, 16% didn't know *Lysistrata* was a community production. Ausdance found that 13% came to the show because of the marketing material and 87% because they had a connection with one or more of the performers; BREC posed the question the other way and found that 64% came to the show because they had a connection with one or more of the performers. Ausdance's pre- and post-show survey found that 29% positively changed their perception of community arts because of the show; only one person offered a negative evaluation. 77% of BREC's responders said that after viewing the show they would attend another community production supported by BREC even if they didn't know anyone in the show. Differences in findings may reflect the small sample sizes as well as the possibility that online responders have a stronger relationship with BREC that translates to greater knowledge of their community productions, and greater trust in BREC's selections. I will not engage here with the thorny issue of 'community' versus 'professional' theatre implied in the line of questioning, but suggest that, taken alongside positive reviews in the local press, the surveys offer support for the high-quality outcomes produced through the creative methodology.

The project would not have been possible without the support of BREC as co-producers. In consultation with the theatre manager we developed a production plan that minimised financial risk to BREC. This meant a two-performance season, with both shows occurring on the same night, and a tight technical rehearsal schedule. Both shows sold out, making the theatre a modest profit, and establishing my professional standing with the organisation. This is significant in the regional environment where innovative performance is unusual. The project also allowed BREC to demonstrate the success of their Community Access Grant at a significant time, as the City of Bunbury, which provides some financial support to the theatre, cut their funding. Community Access Grants have not been offered in 2016, sharpening the need for independent theatre practitioners to be resilient.

Underscore Alchemy does not merely offer a pragmatic response to a challenging situation but in doing so it has a positive impact on the participants. The project's successes include the opportunity for the cast and crew of emerging artists and community members to enjoy a unique and enriching creative process, where for many of the emerging artists, access to BREC's professional equipment and personnel was vital professional development.

Participants brought family and friends who had not previously been part of the existing live performance milieu to BREC, helping me to achieve my aim of building new audiences for contemporary theatre in Bunbury. Both audience surveys in general offered positive responses and excitement that such work might come out of the city.

Building on Underscore Alchemy's model for creative practice, *Lysistrata* offers a template for resilient contemporary theatre making in a regional context. Though the choice of text was strategic – this ancient story is resilient enough to withstand adaptation, well-known and accessible enough to attract both the small audience of traditional theatre goers and the larger audience of those without an interest in theatre per se, but not averse to live entertainment – I propose that the model can be applied to any devised text or adaptation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sholto Spradbury, *Lysistrata* [original adaptation from Aristophanes, trans. B. B. Rogers, 1924], unpublished manuscript. Spradbury is a member of the Underscore Alchemy core creative team with a longstanding interest in Greek theatre. Our collaboration on the text pre-existed the performance project and was fundamental to its success, but that is not the theme of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> This methodology and analytic framework are fully explored in Vahri McKenzie, 'Underscore Alchemy: Extending the Underscore for creative artists', *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* 6.2 (2014a): 159-173.

<sup>3</sup> Robyn McCarron, *Performing arts and regional communities: the case of Bunbury, Western Australia* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Perth: Murdoch University, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* 227.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* 132.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* 217.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* 125.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* 216.

<sup>9</sup> David Koteen and Nancy Stark Smith, *Caught Falling: The confluence of contact improvisation, Nancy Stark Smith, and other moving ideas* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Contact Editions, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* 97.

<sup>11</sup> Examples are discussed in McKenzie, (2014a), with further examples in Vahri McKenzie, 'Extending Underscore Alchemy', *Brolga: An Australian journal about dance* 39 (2014b): 35-42.

<sup>12</sup> See the Appendices for a list of survey questions asked of the 2015 participants and audiences.

<sup>13</sup> Koteen and Smith, *Caught Falling*, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Martha Eddy, 'A brief history of somatic practices and dance: historical developments of the field of somatic education and its relationship to dance', *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* 6.2 (2009): 6.

<sup>15</sup> Unpublished post-production written participant survey.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> McKenzie, 'Underscore Alchemy', 170.

<sup>19</sup> Unpublished post-production written participant survey.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* Other responses in this category all followed the 'at first... but...' form.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*