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Sex Worker's Opera:

Community musical theatre as artistic
activism

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PhD Thesis

Guildhall School of Music & Drama

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Abstract

This PhD research unpacks the conditions that enable community musical theatre to constitute a form of artistic activism, encompassing organisational dynamics, creative processes, and features of live performance.

Bringing together theory from the fields of community music, applied theatre and political performance, the research presents a case study of Sex Worker's Opera (SWO). SWO is a sex worker-led community musical theatre project that aims to tackle misrepresentations of sex workers, challenge stigma and advocate for the decriminalisation of sex work through the collaboratively-made performance, *Sex Worker's Opera*. The candidate draws on performance analysis, participant observation and interview data gathered through music elicitation sessions with directors and members of SWO to explore three main research questions. Firstly, how did *Sex Worker's Opera* provide a platform for marginalised artists (SWO's members and directors) to engage with and advance the activist goals of the sex work community? Secondly, what were the structures and practices required to support the process of making *Sex Worker's Opera*? And, thirdly and more generally, what are the social impacts of SWO?

The research shows that, within community musical theatre performance, songs provide a platform for marginalised groups who may not otherwise be heard to communicate pertinent political messages. Furthermore, dramaturgy can support the formation of emotional connections between performers and audiences, instilling a sense of moral and political responsibility that encourages allyship. It also demonstrates the necessity of prioritising values associated with cultural democracy and care ethics in creative and organisational practice, showing that artistic activism encompasses personal benefits when these are in place. Overall, it highlights the inextricability of affects and effects in assessments of the social impact of community musical theatre projects, and socially-engaged performance more broadly, and challenges assumptions about who is impacted by this work.

As one of very few studies into community musical theatre, this thesis offers a valuable point of reference for future interdisciplinary research. Moreover, it demonstrates the need to conceive of 'social impact' as something that might be seen in subtle affects, as well as quantifiable effects. In all, the thesis suggests that more should be made of the political potential of community musical theatre as a vehicle for community-led advocacy, calling for greater attention to the sustainable model of activism that grassroots community arts projects could provide and the ways in which they might complement other forms of political action.

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A Note on Thesis Length

This thesis unpacks the potential of community musical theatre as artistic activism through a case study of *Sex Worker's Opera*—a grassroots project created and performed by and for sex workers. While this thesis is a theoretical and analytical venture, submitted in line with the formal requirements of Guildhall School of Music & Drama's doctoral programme, the thesis also has archival value. As such, questions of how best to document and preserve the work of an under-resourced, marginalised-led, grassroots activist musical theatre project within the constraints of the typical PhD thesis format have guided many of my methodological and analytical decisions, as will become clear throughout.

One of the key challenges of working towards an academic thesis that would also sufficiently represent *Sex Worker's Opera*—and not solely through my own analytical lens—has been fitting everything there is to say within the 80,000-word limit. This challenge was felt particularly acutely due to the impossibility of sharing video or audio recordings of performances with readers (more on this in Chapter 2), which led me to construct detailed scene descriptions (found in Chapters 4, 5 and 6), providing an impression of the performance that would also support a better understanding of the arguments presented. Another factor that added considerably to the overall wordcount was the inclusion of interview data, intended to bring the voices of those involved in making and performing *Sex Worker's Opera* into the research.

Having sought and received approval from Guildhall School of Music & Drama for an extension to the wordcount, I am generally satisfied that this thesis does the work of furthering critical discussions in the academic fields related to socially-engaged performance *and* documenting the processes and performances that members of the group invested so much of their time and creative energy into, and generously granted me access to. It was my hope that members of *Sex Worker's Opera* could read this thesis and see themselves and their work represented in it. Though there is still much to be desired in terms of the

accessibility of this academic work, I am pleased to have been able to include sections on every song created and performed by the group, as well as reflections on these songs from members and directors themselves. Not only has this indiscriminate inclusion helped me to avoid implicitly ranking certain sex workers' stories, perspectives, or artistic contributions as more or less important, but it has also ensured a holistic representation of Sex Worker's Opera as artistic activism.

Acronyms

ACE – Arts Council England

AGI – African Gender Institute

BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation

BDSM – Bondage, Domination, Submission & Masochism

C4AA – The Centre for Artistic Activism

COSWAS – Collective of Sex Workers and Supporters

CTDPS – Centre for Theatre, Dance & Performance Studies, University of Cape Town

CEO – Chief Executive Officer

DIY – Do It Yourself

ECP – English Collective of Prostitutes

FOSTA-SESTA – Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act/Stop Enabling Sex Trafficking Act

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

GlobalGRACE – Global Gender and Cultures of Equality

HIV/AIDS – Human Immunodeficiency Viruses/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

ITV – Independent Television

LGBTQIA+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and inclusive of all non-normative sexualities and gender identities

NHS – National Health Service

NSWP – Global Network of Sex Work Projects

OSF – Open Society Foundations

PTSD – Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

PVC – Polyvinyl Chloride

RiDE – Research in Drama Education

SIMM – Social Impact of Making Music

SWO – Sex Worker’s Opera

TGEU – Transgender Europe

TMM – Trans Murder Monitoring

XX – Experimental Experience

1) Introduction and Contextual Framing

This research unpacks the conditions that enable community musical theatre to constitute a form of artistic activism, encompassing organisational dynamics, creative processes, and features of live performance. In this thesis, I suggest that more could be made of the political potential of community musical theatre as a form of artistic activism: a vehicle for community-led advocacy and the concurrent amplification of marginalised voices in the cultural sphere. In doing so, it presents an alternative perspective to that which characterises the vast majority of academic writing on socially-engaged performance, whereby the primary concern is the social impact *on* community participants. Focussing instead on the connections between socially-engaged performance and *artistic activism* allows for a broader appreciation of what ‘social impact’ might mean in this context. In this way, it is possible to move beyond limited conceptions of targeted programmes aimed at improving the lives of select groups of people, and toward an imagination of community-driven performances that have the power to spark cultural shifts and structural changes, uprooting the foundations of prejudice and inequality. Additionally, attention to the artistic activism of socially-engaged performance projects prompts an expansion of notions of ‘social impact’ to include *affects*—linked to ‘bodily responses, sensations and aesthetic pleasure’ (Thompson, 2009:7)—as well as *effects*. By questioning what is *affective* as well as what is *effective* about community musical theatre, I demonstrate the necessary and inevitable entanglement of feelings and actions in considerations of social impact.

At the centre of this investigation is a grassroots community musical theatre project called Sex Worker’s Opera (SWO), founded by Siobhán Knox, Alex Etchart and members of the Experimental Experience Collective in 2013. Established, led, created, performed, and directed by queer sex worker activists and allies¹ in the LGBTQIA+ community, SWO is a grassroots musical theatre project reacting against

¹ Allies are friends of sex workers who support the political goals of the community and work to defend sex workers’ rights.

the cultural and political tendency to speak over, or for, sex workers (see Bell, 1994; Mac and Smith, 2018). The project has 20-25 members,² some who have been involved for the entirety of the project's lifespan, and some who came in later or have since left. As a project, SWO comprises 50% sex workers and 50% allies, although audiences do not necessarily know who sits in which category. Importantly, this balance extends across *all* those involved in the project: the directorial team, production roles, singers, actors and musicians. Allies, specifically, are prohibited from publicly revealing that they are *not* sex workers, avoiding a situation whereby audiences can deduce who *is* a sex worker through a process of elimination. This ensures that sex workers in the project can participate relatively safely, lessening the risk of being publicly 'outed', which—due to the stigma attached to sex work—can have serious implications for employability, child custody, financial security, and the risks of harassment and violence. Simultaneously, the balance between sex workers and allies is preserved to ensure the project is consistently sex worker-led.

Together, the group devised a performance called *Sex Worker's Opera*,³ which they first performed in 2014 and then developed annually for further runs until 2018. The show was performed in London, Cambridge, Sheffield, Weston-Super-Mare, and Amsterdam, and excerpts of the show have been shown at conferences and events around the world, from Glasgow to Kathmandu. By 2018, *Sex Worker's Opera* was popular enough to consistently fill a 500-person capacity theatre across a two-week stretch. *Sex Worker's Opera* reclaims space for sex workers to tell their stories on their own terms and to share experiences and perspectives that are frequently sidelined in mainstream culture. With its cabaret-style structure, the performance lends itself to the exploration of a wide range of artistic forms, lived experiences and

² 'Members' is the term used by those involved in SWO to refer to those in the group. It is equivalent to the more commonly-used label of 'participants' in socially-engaged arts projects and refers to everyone in the project except for the directors, regardless of whether they are performers, musicians, technicians, production team, sex workers or allies.

³ For the most part, I will abbreviate *Sex Worker's Opera* to SWO when writing about the project and I will always use the italicised *Sex Worker's Opera* when referring to the performance.

political issues, presenting stories contributed by sex workers within and beyond the project.

Musically, the *Opera* in its most developed form comprised fourteen key compositions performed live, eleven of which were sung. Most scenes included music, although unaccompanied dialogue was often used to thread the narrative together. From 2017 onwards, there were four instrumentalists: a pianist, a cellist, a violinist and a clarinettist. Configurations sometimes changed but, for the most part, five of the songs were solo numbers, three featured multiple solo singers, and three were sung as an ensemble. Instrumental compositions included a dramatic overture, a comical re-working of Kurt Weill's 'Mac the Knife' and an improvised clarinet solo with live electronic effects.

The rest of this chapter provides context for my study of Sex Worker's Opera, expanding upon the research questions that guided the investigation, the disciplinary and theoretical positioning of the research. I begin by laying out my understandings of the terms 'community musical theatre' and 'artistic activism', reviewing the relevant literature and unpacking debates around 'social impact' as I go. I end this section by proposing that using artistic activism as a framework offers alternative ways of conceptualising social impact in relation to socially-engaged artistic practice. Zooming out, I elaborate on the influence that affect theory has had on this research, identifying particularly relevant concepts and grounding this study in the context of applied theatre's 'affective turn'. This flows into a section on feminist and queer theories, in which I explain the significance of various concepts from these critical frameworks to this research. I show that various elements of both feminist and queer theoretical frameworks have enabled me to conceptualise SWO as a community musical theatre project that exists as a form of artistic activism, in the ways it operates as an organisation, and in the ways *Sex Worker's Opera* functions as a performance. At the end of the Chapter, readers will find an overview of the thesis, detailing the key arguments explored in each of the chapters going forward.

Research questions

This research explores three main questions. Firstly, how did *Sex Worker's Opera* provide a platform for marginalised artists (SWO's members and directors) to engage with and advance the activist goals of the sex work community? Secondly, what were the structures and practices required to support the process of making *Sex Worker's Opera*? And thirdly and more generally, what are the social impacts of SWO?

Contextualising the research: Definitions and frameworks

Panning out from this thesis' otherwise intimate focus on SWO, this section will provide context for this study. Elaborating on definitions of 'community musical theatre' and 'artistic activism', and grounding them in theory and practice, I interrogate the significance of these labels in relation to my navigation of multiple disciplines, and analyse common and competing notions of change and social impact across these disciplines. Moving on, I introduce affect theory and feminist and queer frameworks as means to conceptualise SWO, considering in particular the possibility of combining affect and effect to enhance understandings of social impact. Though this is nothing new in some of the disciplines I draw from, these theoretical framings are conspicuously absent from research into the social impact of making music. The interdisciplinarity of this work therefore enables me to signpost important avenues of inquiry and understanding in this area, highlighting conceptual opportunities and commenting on critical shortcomings.

Community musical theatre

Like many terms that fall under the 'socially-engaged arts' umbrella, there is no real consensus on what community musical theatre actually is. When I first came to SWO, and subsequently this research, I was not aware of the term 'community musical theatre'. It is not a label applied explicitly by SWO's directors or members

and, equally, it is not a strand of practice that appears with much frequency in the literature. Furthermore, where there are examples of writing on community musical theatre (see Beng, 2018; Bracken, 2015), they do not necessarily refer to a shared definition. Rather than spending too much time quibbling over minute differences in definitions that, as Rowe and Reason warn, are often unnoticeable outside the discipline and only serve to decrease the visibility of the field overall (Rowe & Reason, 2017:3), I will characterise community musical theatre based on its manifestation in SWO, acknowledging the limitations of this strategy while defending its non-prescriptive approach.

‘Community musical theatre’, then, implies a certain type of creative practice and a particular form of performance. It is aligned with the community arts movement and its legacy in the UK, and it involves a combination of spoken and sung text. I will go into great detail regarding the make-up of community musical theatre in this context throughout the thesis, exploring SWO’s driving values, the group’s creative process, and the construction of *Sex Worker’s Opera* itself. For now, however, it is important to note that, while the term ‘community musical theatre’ might evoke West End-style shows with dramatic plots, *Sex Worker’s Opera* is more of a cabaret-style collection of sex workers’ stories. These stories are threaded together with the narrative of a sex worker coming out to a family member, and the performance was created by a group of sex workers and allies with varying levels of artistic experience, including none. To clarify what I mean when I refer to ‘community musical theatre’ in this thesis, four simple questions guide this section: What? Who? How? And why?

What?

In SWO, community musical theatre enables a range of expressive art forms to coexist within a single cohesive performance. The flexibility offered by the combination of music and theatre makes room for dance, spoken word, and visual art, alongside a wide range of musical and dramatic styles. Community musical theatre, then, is not so much a style as a form. For SWO, live performance to an audience (*Sex Worker’s Opera*) is an integral part of the work; therefore this is also a

significant part of my conceptualisation of community musical theatre. Much like Cowan's conception of cabaret, my use of the identifier *community musical theatre* indicates 'the variety, or varied, show, usually featuring multiple genres, often in a satirical and provocative mode, which tackles current and historical politics through a blend of affects, styles and performer/audience dynamics' (Cowan, 2016:158).

Who?

As above, SWO's membership consists of a mix of 50% sex workers and 50% allies. This mix extends throughout the project, encompassing the directorial and production teams, the musicians and the cast. Thus, in this model of community musical theatre, there is a focus on representation for a marginalised community, an element of community leadership, and a wider project of breaking down the distinction between professional artists and community members. I return to these points in more detail toward the end of Chapter 3.

How?

SWO's version of community musical theatre appears as a combination of practices drawn from community music, applied theatre and political performance. Throughout this thesis, I place attention on various practices that supported the creation of *Sex Worker's Opera*, including working with stories and testimonies, collaborative songwriting, musical and dramatic improvisation, theatrical devising, choreography, and performance art. As these practices are typically discussed and analysed across the three disciplines named above—as well as the umbrella discipline of performance studies—this research provides an interdisciplinary analysis of both SWO as a project and *Sex Worker's Opera* as a performance. As such, the research makes a contribution to each of these areas independently as well as to understandings of the hybrid practice of community musical theatre itself. At this point, I will take a moment to position the study in relation to these overlapping disciplines, highlighting the theoretical foundations that I build upon throughout the thesis.

Disciplinary positioning: Community music, applied theatre and political performance

First, it is worth noting that this PhD was carried out with support from SIMM (Social Impact of Making Music),⁴ an independent international scholarly association prompting researchers and practitioners to investigate the potential social impacts of learning and playing music, and to share findings and reflections that will contribute to a better understanding and stronger critiques of the practices involved in this work. While this background informs my research approach, and though I consistently centred music in the research, the study was not limited to an investigation of the social impact of making *music*.

Research at the intersection of community music and applied theatre is particularly valuable because, despite a wealth of practice that combines the two disciplines, literature about combinations of music and theatre in community, participatory, applied or socially-engaged creative contexts is scarce. In light of this gap, my analysis of SWO is both provocative and instructive, encouraging more research activity in the space where community music and applied theatre overlap and offering transferable insights to this kind of multi-arts practice.

In general, community music is an important discipline in relation to SIMM. Indeed, research that is included under the umbrella of ‘SIMM research’ is unified by a critical approach to the social impacts that learning and creating music might have, sharing many of the porous borders with other disciplines that community music does. These are exemplified in *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music* (Bartleet & Higgins eds, 2018), which gives space to the ‘intersections’ with community music therapy (Wood & Ansdell, 2018), wellbeing and public health (Lee et al, 2018), ethnomusicology (Cottrell & Impey, 2018) and education (Baker & Green, 2018).

⁴ <https://www.simm-platform.eu/> [Accessed 7th April 2022]

Equally important to this research is the discipline of applied theatre. Encompassing myriad forms and approaches, 'applied theatre' is best understood as a 'useful umbrella term [...] for finding links and connections for all of us committed to the power of theatre in making a difference in the human life span' (Taylor, 2006:93). In the past decade, the body of literature attached to applied theatre practice has expanded to incorporate a wider range of case studies in diverse contexts (including different countries, communities and institutional settings) and an array of critical reflections on the discipline (Hughes & Nicholson, 2016; Nicholson, 2014; Shaughnessy, 2012; Thompson, 2012).

Throughout this thesis, I employ theories from community music, applied theatre and participatory arts scholarship more broadly to guide my understanding of the structures at work in SWO as a community musical theatre project, and to interpret and critique the practices involved in making *Sex Worker's Opera*. For instance, accounts of these artistic traditions' roots in forms of social activism (Higgins, 2012:25; Matarasso, 2011:217; Prentki & Preston, 2009:13), their emphases on dismantling hierarchies between facilitators and participants (Higgins, 2012:153-4; Nicholson, 2014:169) and their focus on responding to participants' needs (Higgins, 2012:24; Kandil, 2016:203; Webster, 1997:69) represent foundational components of my analysis of SWO and my understanding of community musical theatre. Furthermore, many of the social issues that community music and applied theatre projects respond to resonate with problems commonly faced by sex workers, including criminalisation and incarceration (Cohen & Henley, 2018; McAvinchey, 2020; Tett et al, 2012), social exclusion (Garrett, 2010; Massó-Guijarro et al, 2021; Matarasso, 2007; Silverman, 2009) and stigma (Low, 2021; Rodgers, 2017; Twardzicki, 2008). These bodies of research therefore inform my conceptions of certain practices and their impacts with regards to SWO.

Political performance is the focus of a distinct body of literature, although it might be harder to disentangle from community and applied arts in practice. The discipline encompasses multiple art forms, accommodating projects like SWO, whose work can be understood across disciplinary borders. Research in this area commonly

addresses the ways performance intersects with race (Beausoleil, 2013; Shefer, 2019), gender (Aston, 2016; Diamond et al, 2017) and sexuality (Conrad & Shotwell, 2018; Shepard, 2011; Tacconelli, 2013), and the role performance plays in social justice movements. There is also a small body of political performance research focussed on sex work, which overlaps with queer and feminist topics. Researchers in this area have documented the long history of sex worker performances that have counteracted the invisibilising effects of stigma (Bell, 1994), and, more recently, demonstrated the abundance of sex worker performance within HIV activism (Jeffreys & Fawkes, 2018). Notably, the field of political performance also accounts for the study of performative elements of political activity, including parliamentary rituals and public protests (Lavender, 2019; Rai et al, 2021). The International Federation of Theatre Research has birthed various working groups, including the Feminist Working Group and the Political Performances Working Group, which have published useful anthologies (Diamond et al, 2017; Haedicke et al, 2009), while *The Drama Review* and *RiDE* frequently feature articles about political performance.

It is through combining the critical perspectives present in each of these disciplines that I have arrived at my own way of thinking of social impact in relation to SWO, and to my own conception of community musical theatre as artistic activism.

Why?

As well as providing different frameworks for understanding the practices of community musical theatre, work in the fields of community music, applied theatre and political performance has also informed my thinking about the reasons for doing this kind of practice in the first place. Rowe and Reason highlight the difficulty of identifying clear aims across participatory arts projects, because of the strong links between intended outcomes and the specific contexts of individual projects (Rowe & Reason, 2017:17). Nevertheless, they go on to list a number of aims that commonly drive arts projects with communities, like SWO, including: ‘access’ to opportunities to make art; ‘participation’ in myriad arts activities, counting spectatorship among them; ‘education’ to support the development of skills; ‘ownership’ seen through

people having control over both the process and the product; and ‘story and voice’ whereby the arts provide a platform for untold stories and silenced voices (Ibid.). Adding to this list, Snyder-Young (2013) suggests visibility and—in the same vein—audibility are significant drivers for community and participatory arts work, particularly where projects involve a public performance. This is significant for those who participate in arts projects because ‘when onstage, they know they have the audience’s attention [...] and many people have few public contexts outside of the theatre in which they feel ‘seen’ and ‘heard’” (Snyder-Young, 2013:11).

Problematising ‘Social impact’

When considering the *intended* outcomes of community musical theatre projects, one very quickly arrives at the question of how to determine whether they have been achieved. Indeed, in participatory and community arts discourse, the question of ‘impact’, and particularly ‘social impact’ is prolific. As community musical theatre extends across a number of forms and approaches to socially-engaged performance, it follows that a more holistic representation of the social impacts of SWO—which I set out to explore through this research—should engage with discourses and developments across multiple fields, embracing not only perspectives from community music, applied theatre, and political performance but also, more broadly, cultural policy.

Increasing ambivalence toward the measurement—or even the notion—of ‘social impact’ has characterised much work in each of these disciplines over the past two decades. A great deal of criticism stems from, and is directed towards, the instrumentalisation of the arts for social and societal benefits. By focussing on ‘the impact of the [artistic] experience on health, wellbeing, social cohesion, social justice, education and so forth’ (Rowe & Reason, 2017:41) from a utilitarian perspective, critics have argued that we run the risk of neglecting both the intrinsic aesthetic qualities of the arts (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008:7; Bishop, 2006; Rowe & Reason, 2017:46-7) and the affective ‘byproducts’ of artistic activity, that might be

just as—if not *more*—impactful than any predetermined interventionist goals (Low, 2020:223; Snyder-Young, 2013:7-8; Thompson, 2009:116).

Part of the frustration directed towards instrumentalist approaches focusses on the notion of evidence itself, and what makes the cut when it comes to providing ‘proof’ that the arts have a social impact, and are therefore worthwhile. Summarising this, Rowe and Reason acknowledge ‘a tension between a drive for impartial, objective, authoritative evidence on the one hand and the validation of invested, subjective and partial lived experience on the other’ (Rowe & Reason, 2017:6). Similarly, Belfiore and Bennett have targeted the ‘cult of the measurable’ that favours ‘proof’ of impacts over genuine understanding of why certain things might have happened (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007:137), and called for ‘more rigorous arts impacts evaluation methods’ (Ibid., 148). In evaluations of community or participatory music programmes, Lonie argues that findings often ‘fail to represent the diversity and complexity of musical interactions and their effects, and oversimplify ‘effects’ by applying a quantitative ‘cause and effect’ rubric’ (Lonie, 2018:295). Later in this Chapter, through the sections on Artistic Activism and Affect Theory, I will explore some of the push-back to the instrumental approach in greater detail, highlighting alternative ways of looking at the social impact of the arts.

Another critique of social impact research in the arts is that it frequently involves over-statements of transformation. As the demand to demonstrate the social impact of the arts has increased in order to secure funding (Bishop, 2006), many researchers have busied themselves with what Belfiore and Bennett call ‘advocacy disguised as research’ (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007:138): instead of ‘questioning whether or not the arts actually do have the economic and social impacts claimed for them, researchers have directed their efforts to coming up with evidence that they do’ (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008:6-7). In applied theatre, Balfour has called for practice to be recognised as a ‘theatre of little changes’, rather than spectacular transformations (Balfour, 2009:347-359). For Baker, it is necessary to completely reconstruct the narratives surrounding music and social change, in relation to ‘social action through music’ and—though to a lesser extent—community music. He encourages a shift

‘from grandiosity to ambivalence’ (Baker, 2021:353) that makes space for critical reflections and realistic assessments of impact. Baker has openly criticised senior researchers for perpetuating narratives about ‘the power of music’ (Hallam & Himonides, 2022) with problematically biased ‘advocacy in disguise’.⁵

Most relevant to this study and to my thinking about social impact, however, is the critique that social impact discourses are often profoundly influenced by, and work to reinforce, what Freebody et al call a ‘deficit perspective’ (Freebody et al, 2018:6). This ‘deficit perspective’ takes hold when unthinking applications of ‘social impact’ discourse, and attempts to measure outcomes accordingly, take for granted that there is ‘a problem’ in need of ‘fixing’ (Ibid.). This issue is perhaps a hangover from evaluation processes that have been used since the 1990s to provide tangible evidence of positive transformation in order to secure funding for socially-engaged arts projects. While evaluation in itself is integral to the development of socially-engaged creative practices, the ‘evaluation regime’, Matarasso states, ‘transformed the central relationship of participatory art by making the professionals implicitly responsible for how the people they worked with would be changed by the experience. And by changed, what was really meant was improved’ (Matarasso, 2019:163). Social impact research, though often more open to negative or ambivalent outcomes, might appear to continue this legacy of investigating the potential for ‘improving’ people through participation in the arts.

Reflecting on instrumentalist notions of impact in applied theatre research and practice, Low asks the pertinent question: ‘who decides what is ‘good’ and what should be changed?’ (Low, 2020:227). In many respects, it is problematic for scholars and practitioners, particularly if they themselves do not share the lived realities and marginalisations of participants, to undertake to interpret the ways that music and performance projects could change, or have changed, participants themselves and their lives. As Low argues, ‘such an approach falls into a neoliberal push to impose

⁵ <https://geoffbakermusic.co.uk/2022/09/30/the-power-of-music-advocacy-in-disguise/> [Accessed 3rd November 2022]

pre-determined outcomes on a particular group of participants' (Low, 2020:14-15). This approach risks an unethical imposition of totalising standards of how people should be and what their lives should look like, based on social norms that are attached to notions of 'ideal' citizenship; norms that, for various reasons, marginalised people may not adhere to. This imposition did not begin with neoliberalism; it has always been central to the brutalities of colonialism, racism and classism (Pihama, 2019). That said, the way it has seeped into the foundations of the socially-engaged arts sector in the current neoliberal climate should be cause for fresh concern. Additionally, clear statements about the changes incurred by an arts project—whether intended or measured—might impact how the identity and the role of participants is perceived, potentially reinforcing the stigma of certain identities (Rowe & Reason, 2017:18-19). Naturally, this is particularly troublesome in work with marginalised communities who already face significant levels of stigma, such as sex workers (Tastrom, 2019; Treloar et al., 2021).

Rather than nurturing agendas of democracy or diversity, social impact discourses in the arts might, then, actually function to cement inequalities. Consider, for example, the widely celebrated outcome of 'empowerment', which itself suggests 'that participants lack power' prior to their participation in an activity or programme (Low, 2020:227). Likewise, that external practitioners are presumed to have something to offer to communities—in the form of 'voice, control, agency or power'—'places these 'traits' as outside the participants themselves and gives outsiders the right to allocate them' (Freebody et al, 2018:72). In short, 'a problem' is conceived of as something that those experiencing it (or embodying it) cannot solve on their own. Instead, it is implicit that something must be 'done to the participants so that they are then able to function optimally, having been shown how to speak and what to do to resolve their problems or issues' (Low, 2020:227). As well as being patronising, this approach glosses over the existence of structures and norms that silence particular voices and remove particular choices from people's lives. After the arts practitioner has done their job of imparting these 'traits', the responsibility for changes in circumstances lands on individual, often marginalised, people, with little to no acknowledgment of the need for systemic change.

Within this research, the issue of ‘social impact’ was raised in an interview with a SWO member, who expressed her own experiences with, and reactions to, the concept:

‘This question: ‘What is the social impact?’ Think about the word ‘impact’, think how aggressive it is, that word. And, if on top of that, you’re calling my community a... a ‘target population’, well don’t! ‘Hello! We’re not your target!’” (SWO member)

Indeed, as these words express, the notion of social impact in research connotes an imposition and a certain degree of force, without providing room for agency or nuance. In short, drawing on Matarasso, it risks suggesting that participants need to be ‘improved’ (Matarasso, 2019:163). However it is not just a matter of wording, despite the specific connotations of the word ‘impact’ that this member pulled out here. As is evident from her problematising of thinking about ‘target populations’—not something I had mentioned—it is also about the *direction* of this impact. This interview led me to consider a secondary question with regards to the social impact of SWO: Impact on whom?

This question articulates the distinction between this research and other community music research with sex workers, specifically. Based in ‘remand’ or ‘rehabilitation’ homes, the programmes that have been documented in community music literature are designed for women and girls who have been ‘rescued from brothels during police raids’ (De Quadros & Dorstewitz, 2011:65; Venkit et al, 2016). They employ musical activities such as group drumming and songwriting with the stated intention of improving participants’ psychological wellbeing and incurring behavioural change (Venkit et al, 2016:326-7; De Quadros & Dorstewitz, 2011:67). While the provision of musical activities is unlikely to be especially problematic in itself, the framing of these projects through the lens of ‘rescue’ raises questions. Personally, I am sceptical of the notion that music projects might be capable of engendering sufficient ‘personal transformation’ and ‘community wellness’ to help ‘sex workers and their

children [...] to escape from oppressive lived realities' (De Quadros & Dorstewitz, 2011:67), even temporarily, unless those projects are also substantively altering those 'oppressive lived realities'. Though I agree that hope can be a powerful affective outcome of this type of work, I do not think it is enough to aim for, and rely on, hope and hope alone. Hope will not fill the pockets of the woman who needs to feed her children. Interestingly, applied theatre studies that document projects with sex workers tend to outline the potential personal impacts for participating sex workers *as well as* the possibility of shifting audiences' perceptions through performance (Middleton-Lee, 2013; Rødal, 2017; Wang, 2016), thereby aligning more closely with what I set out to do here.

One of the benefits of studying SWO as a community musical theatre project from an interdisciplinary perspective is that I am able to draw on distinct understandings of social impact and its direction. For instance, writing in a way that could be translated across into community music, Snyder-Young asserts that '[a]ppplied theatre work often looks first to impact its participants', whereas, '[p]olitical theatre performance looks first to impact its spectators – its audiences – using theatre as a method for changing social processes, discourses, and norms' (Snyder-Young, 2013:79). Indeed, within political performance research, the concept of social impact mostly refers to the effects of performances on ideas and actions (Aston, 2016; Beausoleil, 2013; Chou & Bleiker, 2013; Inthorn & Street, 2013; Love & Mattern, 2013; Schlossman, 2002; Shefer, 2019; Vogel & Jackson, 2016), rather than the effects on participating individuals and groups, who may or may not have lived experiences of marginalisation. As such, the study of political performance offers useful reference points for my analysis of community musical theatre as artistic activism, complementing those provided by community music and applied theatre scholarship with regard to social impact.

In relation to SWO, it seemed clear that a line of inquiry primarily aimed at measuring the ways SWO had changed members or their lives would be inappropriate. The project itself was not designed to achieve 'social rescue' (Baker, 2021:220)—and in fact distances itself from that logic—but instead to engage sex

workers in creative advocacy, or ‘artistic activism’, with a view to amplifying marginalised voices and enhancing the reach of the sex worker community’s demands. As will become clearer in Chapter 3, SWO was not really about changing those who participated in it, it was about changing the world, however subtly. With all this in mind, I approach terms like ‘impact’ and ‘target’ with some trepidation, in order to avoid imposing intentions, assuming the focus of change, and over-simplifying participants’ experiences.

Artistic Activism

In this thesis, I am suggesting that the concept of artistic activism offers an alternative way of considering social impact within socially-engaged arts projects. As an alternative to measuring the social impact of arts projects in communities as if they are isolated entities, I propose to view them through the lens of artistic activism, as integral contributions to social justice movements. Responding to the above critiques of ‘social impact’ discourse, this approach to research in the arts acknowledges that the power of impact should be in the hands of those who are otherwise silenced, to be wielded as they see fit, and not as something that is done to them.

My understanding of artistic activism is influenced by the work carried out at the Centre for Artistic Activism (C4AA) in New York, and the writing of one of its directors, Stephen Duncombe,⁶ as well as the philosopher, Chantal Mouffe. It is worth noting that their theories, and my own work, are grounded in particular contexts, and findings or philosophies may not apply universally, given the differing concerns of citizens in various countries. For Duncombe, activism itself is ‘the activity of challenging and changing power relations’ (Duncombe, 2016:117). Meanwhile, for Mouffe, artistic activism should be seen as ‘counter-hegemonic interventions whose

⁶ Stephen Duncombe is involved in producing work around artistic activism at the Centre for Artistic Activism (C4AA) in New York, USA. <https://c4aa.org/> [Accessed 3rd March 2022]

objective is to occupy the public space in order to disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to the fore its repressive character' (Mouffe, 2007:5). Artistic activism does not take any one particular form—it is not bound by aesthetics or artistic disciplines—and nor is it simply 'political art'. Indeed, following Mouffe, there is no such thing as a distinction between 'political art' and 'non-political art', because *all* art plays a political role in either maintaining or challenging the status quo (Ibid., 4). Instead, then, artistic activism can be seen to continue the traditions of protest art, whereby 'performers lend their skills to local resistance actions, their bodies in performance generating affects, images, slogans, and joyous energy in defiant rejection of the antidemocratic policies, earth-destroying consumerism, and social repression that underpin neoliberal governance' (Diamond et al, 2017:4). In short, artistic activism is about 'challenging and changing power relations' (Duncombe, 2016:117), and the norms of neoliberal consumerism and repression, through art.

While this might be the overall aim of artistic activism, there are a number of intermediary goals that nonetheless can be significantly impactful for society and for its members. For Duncombe, these include: fostering dialogue; building community; making a place 'where discussions happen and communities meet, and where novel ways of thinking, being and creating can be explored, tested, or lived'; turning 'watchers into doers'; revealing reality; altering perceptions; creating disruption; inspiring dreaming; and political expression (Ibid., 121-3). Many of these aims are common to activism more generally; however, the artistic element creates the 'conditions for making the message heard' that might otherwise be lacking (Adsit et al, 2015:35).

As will become clear throughout the thesis, a number of these intentions apply in the work of SWO's members and directors. In fact, it is noticeable just how many of these aims might also crop up in applied, community or participatory arts contexts more broadly (see Kester, [2004]2013; Matarasso, 1997), as well as arts education geared towards social justice (Benedict et al, 2015). Snyder-Young goes so far as to 'include professional theatre projects with overtly political goals as a form of applied

theatre' (Snyder-Young, 2013:4). Perhaps because of the aforementioned emphasis on changing *participants*, though, it is rare that it goes the other way—that work created and/or performed in community or 'applied' contexts is framed as activism. Instead of an investment in understanding the impacts of these projects on power relations, and their potential to unsettle inequalities, focus is usually placed on the impact for how marginalised groups *cope* with these inequalities. In their critique of this limited perspective in applied theatre research, O'Connor and Anderson 'believe that these performances of people's lives must be more than a celebration of their struggles. They must also reveal the manner in which political power has shaped and misshaped these lives [...] These performances must also move beyond the present and provide space for hope for the future' (O'Connor & Anderson, 2015:28). As a framework for understanding practice, artistic activism does just this: it shifts the focus to the potential of community and participatory arts projects to challenge and change power relations, providing an alternative to problematic narratives of individual improvements in the face of systemic dysfunction.

The wider context of sex worker activism

SWO was intended to complement the work of sex worker activists around the world, who have been fighting on the frontlines for many years against criminalisation, a lack of protection from violence, and state oppression (Chateauvert, 2013:2-5). Therefore, an understanding of this wider activism is necessary to appreciate the context in which SWO exists and the contemporary issues the group respond to in *Sex Worker's Opera*.

The term 'sex work' was coined by Carol Leigh, a North American sex worker activist and performer, in 1978, marking the shift towards an understanding of sex work as work (Sanders, 2017a:11). This shift included a strategic departure from the stigmatised labelling of 'prostitutes', a term which implies 'a state of being' rather than a 'form of labour' and is therefore responsible for the oversimplification of complex lives and identities (Grant, 2014:13). Emphasising the *work* of sex work was also a way of aligning sex workers with the labour rights movement, making

demands for rights and protection more likely to be successful (Chateauvert, 2013:15-16). Finally, as an alternative to 'prostitution', 'sex work' is more inclusive. 'Sex workers are escorts, exotic dancers, porn stars, peep-show workers, professional dominants, rent boys, phone-sex operators, strippers, webcam performers, erotic priestesses, prostitutes, and providers of a vast array of niche adult services' (Ibid., 2). Reclaiming the title of 'prostitute' has been a powerful tool for sex worker activists such as English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) and the authors of *Revolting Prostitutes: The fight for sex workers' rights* (Mac & Smith, 2018). In general, however, I will refer to 'sex work' and 'sex workers', unless quoting from sources that use 'prostitution' and 'prostitutes'.

Accurate data on sex work are notoriously difficult to gather, as many sex workers prefer to stay under the radar. However, in 2016 the UK Home Affairs Committee collated contributions from 250 people who were either involved in the sex industry, academics, activists, service providers or relevant charities, and published an inquiry (Home Affairs Committee, 2016:5). At the time of publication, it was estimated that there were 72,800 sex workers in the UK, but this likely omitted large numbers of indoor and internet-based sex workers, as well as male and trans workers (Sanders et al., 2017b; Pitcher, 2015; Whowell, 2010). Although figures are difficult to calculate accurately, research suggests that 88% of sex workers in the UK are female, 6% male and 4% trans (Brooks-Gordon et al, 2015).

Sex work changes quickly, and this information is likely to look different now, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis in the UK. There are, however, a few consistent defining characteristics. One, sex work is highly gendered and is by far most commonly performed by women (Ibid.). Two, marginalised groups—such as migrants, LGBTQIA+ people, people of colour and disabled people—are over-represented in sex work demographics (Mac & Smith, 2018:49-50). And three, sex work is primarily a way for people to meet their economic needs (Ibid., 48-9). As such, sex work happens at the intersection of patriarchy, classism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and capitalism.

Sex work policy and legislation differs around the world and, even within the UK, there are variations. For the most part, though, the model here is one of partial criminalisation, whereby it is legal to sell sex but a number of associated practices are illegal, making it difficult to work without breaking the law (Sanders et al, 2017a:159). For example, under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and the Policing and Crime Act 2009, it is illegal to solicit or to loiter in a public place with the intention of offering or paying for sexual services; it is also illegal to keep a brothel or assist in the running of one (Ibid., 160).⁷ These laws make it harder for sex workers to keep themselves safe, as street-based workers are forced to solicit in less populated areas and indoor workers have to work alone. Under this model, sex workers are also less likely to report violence for fear of being prosecuted themselves (Pitcher & Wijers, 2014:551-557).

In recent years, there have been calls to introduce a more explicit model of criminalisation to the UK.⁸ Alternatively called the Nordic/Swedish model or the ‘sex buyer law’, proponents of this legislation aim to eradicate sex work by criminalising clients, claiming the Nordic model will do so without harming sex workers (see Bindel, 2017). In reality, though, criminalisation drives the industry underground, making sex workers’ jobs more dangerous (Medicins Du Monde, 2018; Levy & Jakobson, 2014; Wagenaar & Altink, 2012).

The Nordic Model is often pitched as a solution to human trafficking in the sex industry. Similarly, brothel raids—such as those carried out by police in London’s Soho in 2013 (ECP, 2014)—and the removal of online advertising platforms that occurred under the FOSTA-SESTA bill passed in the US in 2018 (Holland, 2019) are examples of measures that claim to protect victims of trafficking. However, as noted by several authorities, they exemplify misguided and ineffective attempts to tackle

⁷ Legally speaking, a brothel is simply defined as a place where multiple sex workers work, regardless of whether or not they share the space at the same time.

⁸ MPs Sarah Champion (Rotherham) and Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) have both attempted to push the Nordic Model through in Parliament.

exploitative labour, with raids, in particular, often resulting in the racialised incarceration and deportation of migrant sex workers (Mac & Smith, 2018:78-80). These measures also have a profoundly negative impact on sex workers more broadly, compromising income and safety (Blunt & Wolf, 2020:117).

Understanding the potential harm of anti-trafficking measures, sex workers are sometimes quick to emphasise the distinction: 'sex work is not trafficking' (Mac & Smith, 2018:84). Yet, this attempt to distance consensual sex work from coercive sex work elides the complexity of 'the conditions of migration and the impact of immigration enforcement on the labour rights and safety of migrants' (Ibid). Sex work and human trafficking are connected, yet criminalising sex work will not stop trafficking; in fact, by compromising the labour and human rights of sex workers, criminalisation heightens possibilities for exploitation (Kenway, 2021:94). Instead, sex working feminists propose 'taking power *away* from the police and giving it to migrants and to workers' (Mac & Smith, 2018:84).

On this note, overwhelmingly and internationally, sex worker-led groups are campaigning for the decriminalisation of sex work, supported by international organisations such as Amnesty International, World Health Organisation, UNAIDS and Human Rights Watch. In New Zealand, where sex work is decriminalised, sex workers are able to defend their labour rights more effectively against abusive clients or managers (Abel, 2014:584-6) and have better relations with the police, making it easier to report violence and seek protection (Ibid., 587). Furthermore, those who are in exploitative situations can better seek help without fear of prosecution or deportation (Kenway, 2021:99). Though it is not a prerequisite of participation, SWO is an example of a sex worker-led project advocating for decriminalisation to be enacted, saying a firm 'No!' to the Nordic Model and critiquing the conditions of criminalisation, migration and poverty that exacerbate the risk of exploitation within the sex industry.

Sex worker-led artistic activism

‘When we came along with Sex Worker’s Opera, was at a time when there was a movement slowly starting, I think—and we were part of starting that as well—a resurgence of sex worker-led art and projects and voice. It’s still got a long way to go but there seems to be a lot more people coming forward wanting to make sex worker art, having more of a platform, feeling freer to do that, which is really cool’.
(Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

As Knox expresses here, SWO has been part of an explosion of artistic activism by and for sex workers. This is work that utilises the allure of beauty, mystery, skill and taboo to amplify sex workers’ voices, while educating audiences on the impacts of stigma, health and economic inequality, and harmful legal models. In the UK, sex worker-led performances about sex work have most commonly been staged in small or fringe venues and festivals. In line with trajectories of feminist and queer performance, they frequently rely on autobiographical material, with performers telling their own stories to confront the common dehumanisation of sex workers, inciting audiences to challenge their misconceptions and, ideally, propelling them into action in the fight for decriminalisation and improved workers’ rights. Work such as *Fuck You Pay Me* by Joana Nastari (2017), *Sister* by Amy and Rosana Cade (2015), *Making it Rain* by Nicole Henriksen (2016) and *Traumboy/Traumgirl* by Daniel Hellman and Anne Welenc (2019) are examples of this. Interestingly, *Traumboy/Traumgirl* and *Ask a Stripper* by Gypsy Charms and Stacey Clare (2019) feature open Q&A sessions as a central pillar of the performances, encouraging audiences to overcome their own sense of taboo while demystifying sex workers’ lived experiences.

Jeffreys & Fawkes (2019) write about the sex worker groups who have used performance as a strategy in their HIV/AIDS advocacy, citing in particular the work of Empower Foundation in Thailand and the Debby Doesn’t Do It For Free collective in Australia. To the authors: ‘Performance, at work, in activism or as play, is part of the way we, as sex workers, communicate with each other, and the world’ (Ibid., 87). In South Africa, the activist organisation SWEAT recently birthed a Sex Worker Theatre

Group—with whom SWO is partnered—which has already produced multiple performances exploring stigma, motherhood, poverty and sex workers’ rights. In the UK, groups such as East London Strippers Collective and, more recently, Sexquisite, have organised performances and events that provide a space for sex workers to celebrate their community and help the public to see sex workers as multifaceted people capable of artistic expression and deserving of rights.⁹

‘I think since SWO started I’ve seen other things follow suit. So, Sexquisite events is a thing run by sex workers and allies, I can’t help thinking that East London Strippers Collective events and parties have also contributed to that thing of like ‘Fuck it, this is us in charge now. We’re gonna be in charge of our own narratives, in charge of our own work spaces. We don’t wanna just keep being used as plot devices and totty’’. (SWO member)

Complicating the notion of ‘impact’ in relation to artistic activism

A key reason for using artistic activism as a framework for analysing SWO is the chance it provides to experiment with alternative notions of ‘impact’ to those typically found in community and participatory arts discourses. However, these are not themselves uncomplicated. Duncombe is ‘struck by the recurring inadequacy of the conceptualization of the relationship between activist art and social change’ (Duncombe, 2016:115). The question, ‘does it work?’ ‘haunts, or ought to haunt, the entire practice’ (ibid.). In this context, the problems with discussing impact stem not from the perpetuation and recreation of social categorisations and perceptions of ‘deficit’, but rather from the inherent difficulties of identifying and understanding change. In relation to artistic activism, looking for change is not epistemologically problematic—as we are no longer seeking to identify the ways in which marginalised people have been ‘improved’ through their participation—so much as it is methodologically complex. Two significant questions that arise in relation to the

⁹ <https://www.sexquisiteevents.com/> [Accessed 6th March 2022]

impact of artistic activism are: What constitutes meaningful change? And what makes meaningful change happen?

In response to the first question, Duncombe identifies a challenge in marrying the clashing conceptualisations of change that appear in relation to activism and art. In activism, he argues, 'the common element is an activity targeted toward a discernible end: change a policy, create an institution, mobilize a population, overthrow a dictator. Simply, the goal of activism is action to generate an effect' (Duncombe, 2016:118). On the other hand, art 'tends not to have such a clear target. Its value often rests in showing us new perspectives and new ways to see our world, its impact is often subtle and hard to measure, and confusing or contradictory messages can be layered into the work. Its goal, if we can even use that word, is to stimulate a feeling, move us emotionally, or alter our perception. Art is an expression that generates affect' (Ibid.). Though such a clear line cannot always be drawn between activism as effective and art as affective—and more on this shortly—this does not contradict Duncombe's argument that considerations of meaningful change in relation to artistic activism must acknowledge both effects and affects. In light of concerns that practices like community music and applied theatre might '*feel* like interventions, mobilization, and action but, in reality, provide more catharsis for those participating than *actual change in the real world*' (Snyder-Young, 2013:135, emphasis original), an in-built awareness of the importance of *effect* goes some way toward assuaging concerns of art's superfluity in the face of societal crises.

Having said that, I worry that Duncombe's characterisation of the combined impacts of activism and art risks overstating the potential of artistic activism to achieve the discernible ends that would count as effects, by his definition. Neither I as a researcher nor SWO's directors and members believe that artistic activism can work alone in changing the world. It seems Duncombe himself might have qualms about artistic activism's capacity to create tangible change, as he suggests that 'cultural and material change are often linked: one needs to persuade people to think differently in order to build the public support that can pressure changes in policy'

(Duncombe, 2016:125). This sentiment is extended by Mouffe, as she argues that 'for the 'war of position' to be successful, linkage with traditional forms of political intervention like parties and trade-unions cannot be avoided. It would be a serious mistake to believe that artistic activism could, on its own, bring about the end of neo-liberal hegemony' (Mouffe, 2007:4).

As flagged above, I would also query any suggestion that activist effects and artistic affects can be segmented as neatly as Duncombe's description seems to suggest. In fact, the approach I adopt deliberately emphasises the difficulties of separating and distinguishing between activism and art, affect and effect. Considering the question of what makes change, it may be more useful to blur the boundaries between rational thought and emotion, effect and affect, than to reinforce them. Like Snyder-Young, I am sceptical of the idea that 'distance creates critical intellectual engagement' (Snyder-Young, 2013:85) and believe emotion, too, has a significant role to play in prompting serious and tangible engagement, possibly even action. This is something that reappears periodically throughout the following sections on affect theory and feminist and queer theories.

Overall, looking at SWO as artistic activism has offered me a refreshed perspective on social impact, one that takes into account both effects and affects, and that focusses on the change that performances can invoke in the public sphere, rather than over-focussing on personal transformations. That said, my perspective on artistic activism and notions of its impact are informed by critical shifts in social impact discourse within the fields of community and participatory arts. Notably, I am guided by calls for greater 'ambivalence' (Baker, 2021) and an appreciation of 'little changes' (Balfour, 2009) in understandings of the social impact of SWO as an example of artistic activism. Much of this crystallises in my attention to affect, to which I now turn.

Affect Theory

The word ‘affect’ has been dotted throughout this chapter already, marking it out as having an important role in my own and others’ conceptualisations of participatory arts, artistic activism, and social impact. Though there is extensive work on affect and emotion in the discipline of psychology—including specific scholarship in music psychology—my use of ‘affect’ is framed by the lineages of feminist and queer theories and more recent developments within the field delineated as ‘affect theory’. Described variously as resembling ‘a flow of resonances’ (Åhäll, 2018:39), a ‘force or forces of encounter’ (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010:2, emphasis original) and ‘skin-level intensities’ (Diamond, 2017:259), affect in these disciplines is frequently placed in a binary relationship with effect. This section will trace the lines of my understanding of affect and its significance within this research.

Seigworth and Gregg write that ‘there is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, (and thankfully) there never will be’ (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010:3). Affect is, by its nature, a slippery phenomenon, evading consistent definitions or uses. However, in recent decades an increased interest in understanding affect as an integral component of the human (and non-human) experience has led to the emergence of ‘affect studies’ (Ahmed, 2014:207) as a distinct interdisciplinary area of study. A desire to more fully comprehend affect has engendered developments across the arts and humanities that have now, collectively, been labelled ‘The Affective Turn’ (Clough, 2007). Yet, as Seigworth and Gregg suggest, this turn is not particularly synchronised, and there are many lively disagreements within the ‘affect studies’ community. Perhaps the most foundational is the question of whether affects should be understood as ‘prepersonal and nonconscious’ (Åhäll, 2018:40), ‘irreducibly bodily and autonomic’ (Massumi, 1995:89)—as proposed by Tomkins ([1962-92]2008)—or whether they are more social than this theorisation would suggest. As much of my thinking on affect is influenced by the notion of relationality—and, perhaps unsurprisingly, as I am working in the field of *socially-engaged* performance—I follow Clough (2007) in rejecting the characterisation of affect as pre-social. I will pick this up again later.

Distinctions: Mind and body, reason and passion, affect and emotion

Further disagreements are triggered by the two distinctions between mind and body, rational thought and passion that are central to Spinoza's writings, back to which the origins of affect theory can be traced (Hardt, 2007:x-xi). Rather than maintaining these distinctions, however, some now see paying attention to affect as a way of focussing 'on the problematic correspondences that extend across its two primary divides—between the mind and body, and between reason and the passions' (ibid., xii). Ahmed, for one, suggests 'we need to contest this understanding of emotion as 'the unthought', just as we need to contest the assumption that 'rational thought' is unemotional, or that it does not involve being moved by others' (Ahmed, 2014:170). Crossing these divides reveals a 'new ontology of the human' with 'direct implications for politics' (Hardt, 2007:xii). In short, a focus on affect enables a perspective on the human experience, in relation to politics, that connects mind, body, reason and passion.

More recently, the distinction between affect and emotion has become a source of tension. Carlson outlines the differences by defining affect as 'the felt intensity that circulates between individuals and their environment', and emotion as 'that which is conceptualized, named, performed, and thus interpreted by others' (Carlson, 2017:133-4). Similarly, Massumi defines emotion as 'the expression of affect in gesture and language, its conventional or coded expression' (Massumi, 2015:32). Massumi's definition suggests that, where affect is the raw embodiment of feeling, emotion is the mediated expression of it, working to frame affect in ways that are socially recognised. In her second edition of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed, [2003]2014)—which was itself a pivotal text in the 'affective turn'—Ahmed looks rather bemusedly back at the cementing of 'affect studies' and critiques the privileging of 'affect over emotion as its object'. Ahmed's critique is inspired by the lineage of feminist and queer theorists in which she, as a philosopher, is embedded.

Affect has been integral to the development of feminist and queer theories, but that is not to say that affect theory and feminist and queer theory have an entirely

harmonious relationship. I will return to critiques of the distinction between affect and emotion in the following section on feminist and queer theoretical frameworks, but for now it is worth stating that I am not particularly interested, here at least, in working through the distinctions between affect and emotion. Instead, I see both affect and emotion as part of the affective realm in thinking about social impact. Resisting the academic urge to over-define, my positioning of the affective realm at the centre of this research is significant in contrast to the emphasis on measurement of tangible effects that often dominates in social impact discourses.

Relationality and Individuality

As mentioned above, relationality is central to my understanding of affect and its relevance to this study of SWO. I see relationality as a critical link in theorising the social impact of live performance as artistic activism, given that this environment brings people together into a shared space, with a shared focus, and—for many, though not all—a shared sense of meaning. Within this space, it follows that ‘the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another’, contributing to the creation of an ‘affective atmosphere’ (Brennan, 2004:3). This is not a passive thing, as the image of the affected audience might suggest, but one that has potential to transform into action. As Ahmed writes, ‘attending to emotions might show us how all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others’ (Ahmed, 2014:4).

At the same time, it is important to note that the relationality of affect does not guarantee identical affective responses to a given stimulus. There is an underlying degree of individuality in operation here in that ‘what we will receive as an impression will depend on our affective situation’ (Ibid., 36). The same relational encounter will be experienced differently by each of the individuals involved. As highlighted by Ahmed, this is dependent on their ‘affective situation’, which is not limited to a current emotional state but takes into account histories and possible futures. While ‘bodies in encounter are both completely absorbed [...] they are

differently absorbed, coming at it asymmetrically, from different angles, living a different complexion of affecting-being-affected, transitioning through the encounter to different outcomes, perhaps structured into different roles' (Massumi, 2015:95). Models of 'emotional contagion', such as Tomkins', therefore risk oversimplifying the relationality of affect (Ahmed, 2014:10), presuming that 'social feeling' equates to 'shared feeling' (Ibid., 218), which may not always be the case. This has implications for the claims it is possible to make about the affective impact of performance.

Certainly, the difficulty of generalising affective experiences and transitions poses a methodological challenge to the inclusion of affect in considerations of social impact, making it harder to generalise certain outcomes or transformations beyond the individual level. As will be unpacked in Chapter 2 on methodology, this is a tension I have had to grapple with. Though it has undoubtedly made my research less simple, I have found that the restricted universality of affective outcomes serves as a useful reminder of the limited nuance that is common to certain social impact research approaches. Though I have not been entirely consistent in this, where possible, I have attempted to focus on individual experiences and interpretations of these, rather than making claims about community, or public, transformations.

Applying affect theory to artistic activism and sex work

As a phenomenon and a theoretical framework, affect's relevance to both artistic activism and sex work has been well explored, though they have never, to my knowledge, been brought together. Echoing Mouffe's understanding of art, Massumi states that affect is inherently political, 'not a discipline of study of which the politics of affect would be a subdiscipline. It is a dimension of life [...] which directly carries a political valence' (Massumi, 2015:vii). Earlier, I was able to introduce affect through my discussion of 'artistic activism', where its centrality—alongside effect—to Duncombe's conceptualisation of social change was unavoidable. As Duncombe expresses, 'activist art that doesn't move us leaves us standing still' (Duncombe, 2016:131). Affective impact—that is, moving someone—is integral to art that aims

to make people act differently. That said, Duncombe recognises the individuality of artistic activism's impact and, by extension, that of affect, as discussed above. Using his term 'æffect' to represent the combination of affect and effect, Duncombe likens artistic activism to a prism. 'The artists shines a light *in* – what we might call intent – but what comes out is a spectrum of æffect, and this is something the artist cannot entirely control for' (Duncombe, 2016:128).

The political significance of affect is touted widely by those in the field of performance studies, such as Dolan, who sees the potential of 'felt resonance' within performance contexts to provoke 'affective rehearsals for revolution' (Dolan, 2005:7). Similarly, Campbell and Farrier propose that 'theatre and live performances can, if they are powerful, *move* an audience—to emotion, to thought, even (on rare occasions) to action' (Campbell & Farrier, 2016:1). Furthermore, Diamond, Varney and Amich suggest that 'moments of affective encounter can bind and strengthen performers and participants alike. They can sharpen our perspectives and stiffen our resolve' (Diamond et al, 2017:10). Evidently, those invested in performance having a political impact see the potential role of affect in engendering social change.

Equally (if not, perhaps, more) striking is affect theorist Massumi's commitment to art as a vessel for affective communication. He writes: 'It seems to me that alternative political action does not have to fight against the idea that power has become affective, but rather has to learn to function itself on that same level—meet affective modulation with affective modulation. That requires, in some ways, a performative, theatrical or aesthetic approach to politics. For example, it is not possible for a dispossessed group to adequately communicate its needs and desires through the usual channels. It just doesn't happen' (Massumi, 2015:34). Highlighting art as a platform for affective communication that can be used by dispossessed groups who do not have access to the 'usual channels', platforms and privileges, Massumi implicitly supports community-based projects geared towards artistic activism. Not only is Massumi suggesting that artistic activism, with affect at its core, is essential to making political change, but he is also specifically identifying the potential of 'dispossessed groups' to take 'performative, theatrical or aesthetic'

approaches to politics in order to challenge or change the status quo. This is central to SWO's aims and the ways in which I see the project as a site of affect, artistic activism and social impact.

Using affect as a framework to study SWO is not only useful because the project is an example of artistic activism, but also because of the project's focus on sex work, and the lived experiences of sex work that influence its members and its creative direction. Ditmore has written about sex workers as 'affect laborers' and claimed that 'the world's oldest profession is also the world's oldest form of affective labour' (Ditmore, 2007:170). Though it is not made explicit, with her definition of 'affective labour', Ditmore makes the connection between sex work and performance, in that 'affective labour can be understood as the work that aims to evoke specific behaviours or sentiments in others as well as oneself, rather than it being merely about the production of a consumable product' (Ibid., 171). Both sex work and performance, then, will affect, move, impact clients/audiences, as well as sex workers/performers.

Another overlap here is an emphasis on aesthetics: sex work and performance as aesthetic labour. Referring to the ways in which sex workers present themselves, Ditmore suggests that 'many such images are a carefully constructed as those of other kinds of affect laborers' (Ibid., 172). I return to this connection between sex work and performance periodically throughout the thesis, highlighting the slipperiness of the distinctions and the destigmatising potential that a recognition of this slipperiness itself carries. For now, though, it is sufficient to acknowledge that sex work's connections to both affect and aesthetics make SWO a particularly interesting subject of study in thinking about artistic activism and social impact. In fact, it was these links that initially alerted me to a disjoint between the ways that participatory arts and social impact were discussed elsewhere and my experiences of SWO, and prompted me to seek an alternative perspective, which I found in applied theatre's 'affective turn'.

Applied Theatre's affective turn

Responding to various aspects of the tension surrounding the measurement impact that I explored earlier, applied theatre research has quite readily adopted the notion of *affect* alongside its own conceptions of 'social impact'. In this context, affect emerges as a softer, less tangible alternative to effect. This shift—applied theatre's 'affective turn'—'is a demand for an engagement with programmes that neither reduce complex experiences to indicators of effect nor read performances as simplistic diagnoses of the problems faced in people's lives' (Thompson, 2009:118). This turn to affect, Thompson explains, is 'an argument for a method that questions the 'mastery' that can be present in attempts to interpret and challenges the ease with which an investigator who 'digs for truth' can become the proponent of certain problematic narratives and discourses' (Ibid.). Thus, an appreciation of affect is seen not only as a way of expanding the range of programmes and activities researchers give their focus to, but also as unsettling the power imbalance that enables researchers to go unchallenged as they state the impacts that programmes have had on members of marginalised communities, potentially perpetuating stigma, victim narratives, and an image of social transformation that rests on rescue rather than structural change. Equally, using affect theory in reflections on practice, 'provides the applied theatre practitioners with a way of resisting the trend towards empowering or impactful outcomes' (Low, 2020:230).

Interestingly, the notion of affect is still largely absent from academic discourse in community music (with a few exceptions, e.g. Abdel-Malek Neil, 2022), and related fields, though it has a firm place in music psychology (see Hallam, 2010) and even musicology (see Hesmondhalgh, 2013). This is not to say that affect is entirely absent from community music and impact-focussed *practices*—in fact, affect is typically abundant in these contexts—but that research in this area has yet to undergo its own 'affective turn'.

Considering how the impact of participatory arts is assessed, Rowe and Reason challenge the emphasis on the physical or social elements that go alongside the act

of making art, rather than the act of making art itself. They suggest that ‘while the groupness and physicality of community music making are absolutely beneficial, and are absolutely intrinsic to musicking, it is experience of these through the heightened, intensifying, decentring act of making art that provides drive to the experience and the power for radical change’ (Rowe & Reason, 2017:47). My point here is not that components such as ‘groupness and physicality’ are unimportant, but that their impact cannot be measured in isolation from the intensely affective and aesthetic experiences of making art. These experiences, with all their ‘heightened, intensifying, decentring’ potential, give rise to the ‘*affective register of participatory arts*’, including ‘joy, fun, pleasure or beauty’ (Thompson, 2009:116, emphasis original). Fielding concerns that attention to this affective register might compromise the efficacy of applied theatre work, Snyder-Young states that she does ‘not believe that *efficacy* and *affect* are opposites. In many contexts, the ‘unarticulated’ byproducts of participation in theatrical events are *actually* the very things meeting a project’s interventionist goals’ (Snyder-Young, 2013:7-8, emphasis original). Along these lines, and in tandem with the affective turn in applied theatre, participatory arts research has renewed its commitment to the aesthetic value of community-based practice (Rowe & Reason, 2017:41; White, 2015). As Rowe and Reason argue, ‘if change – personal or social – is the fundamental objective in participatory arts, then beauty can provide the energy, the drive, for change’ (Rowe & Reason, 2017:44-5).

While I am interested in the personal and social changes—the effects—that can be traced back to SWO, I prefer to foreground the affective, aesthetic elements of the project and performance. Through this research, I consider how moments of beauty, joy and pleasure, as well as those of sadness and rage, are created, shared, and experienced through art and the acts of making and performing it. It is in the combination of this ‘affective register’ and more tangible effects that I see the potential for impactful artistic activism through community musical theatre.

Notions of change: Balancing effects and affects

Though I initially read this affective, aesthetic turn in participatory arts as a rejection of social impact and all that seeks to interpret or demonstrate effect, I understand it now as another, complementary, strand of social impact research. My initial readings of affect theory, through the lens of Thompson (2009), Harris and Holman-Jones (2020), and Shaughnessy (2012), led me to see affect as antithetical to impact: soft where impact is hard, ephemeral where impact is lasting, positively aimless where impact was geared toward transformation. This is perhaps a reaction—in both myself and the authors mentioned here—against the neoliberal compulsion for change, improvement and proof in participatory arts research and evaluation I critiqued earlier. However, later engagements with affect theory prompted me to re-examine my understanding.

This re-examination revealed a different side to affect, one that did not shy away from causality, impact or transformation, but instead recognised these occurrences as inevitable and thus reframed them as neutral. ‘Affects require us to enter the world of causality, but they offer a complex view of causality because the affects belong simultaneously to both sides of the causal relationship. They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers’ (Hardt, 2007:ix). In this way, affect creates possibilities to escape the aforementioned problematic power dynamics manifested in social impact research’s focus on effect, recognising that change is multi-directional; that the affected will also affect, and vice versa. Looking at affect does not mean shunning the notion of change; instead, it provides new ways of thinking about it.

In this research, I advocate for a balance of effect and affect in assessing outcomes, a research approach that encompasses both: acknowledging the tangible and the intangible, the measurable and the immeasurable. The two are not fundamentally incompatible, and the idea of ‘social impact’ contains sufficient space for them to coexist. Within artistic activism, Duncombe argues that ‘when it comes to stimulating social change, affect and effect are not discrete ends but are all up in each other’s business’ (Duncombe, 2016:119). Instead of measuring either effect or

affect, Duncombe suggests a focus on ‘æffect’ might be more appropriate, thereby acknowledging the necessary combination of the two if social change is to occur. Though I have concerns that this conceptualisation of impact as ‘æffect’ does not allow for affect to exist on its own as an impactful element of artistic activism, thereby perpetuating the privileging of *effect* over *affect* in analysis of artistic activism’s impact, I do understand Duncombe’s desire to link affects to tangible effects in order to harness the unique potential of art to engender real social change. As he theorises it, ‘If there is a causal relationship, it is this: Affect => Effect. That is to say: before we act in the world, we must be moved to act’ (Ibid.).

Certainly, my approach to the affective in this study is not as pure as that of, for example, Thompson (2009), Shaughnessy (2012) or Harris and Holman-Jones (2020). Such scholars wish to more fully ‘unplug from ideas about applied theatre and performance as an instrument of impact—events that create a desired effect—so that we can plug into performance’s affects’ (Harris & Holman-Jones, 2020:322). I align more closely with Duncombe in that I do consider effective social transformation *beyond the performance* to be an important component of SWO. SWO was intended as an activist project, and therefore it is only right that I assess it on those grounds. In part, that involves exploring the extent to which SWO has or has not contributed to social change.

While I place great value on the affective qualities of the project and the performance in my analysis, both for members and audiences—indeed, these affects are a significant part of what makes SWO an activist project—I am also cognisant of the limits of affect in this context. Snyder-Young makes the case that an over-focus on affect could lead to stagnation in social progress. ‘If in making a utopian world within the theatre we feel we have taken action, and therefore do not take action in the real world, we are wasting our impulse to make change’ (Snyder-Young, 2013:138). She goes on to critique Balfour’s call for recognition of ‘little changes’ (Balfour, 2009:347-359) over significant impacts, writing: ‘If the goal of a project is ‘social change’, those goals are not met by a relatively small group of people having a moment of magical connection that does not result in action in the real world [...]

These ‘little changes’, when experienced on a small scale, do not appear to impact culture on a large scale’ (Snyder-Young, 2013:139). Crucially, this is as much an acknowledgement of theatre’s limits as it is of affect’s, suggesting the importance of connecting participatory arts projects and works of artistic activism to the—perhaps more *effective*—activist work happening in the world outside the theatre, concert hall or gallery.

Another limitation of affect is that it cannot be wielded—nor, by extension, measured—in the same way as effect. ‘There are no ultimate or final guarantees—political, ethical, aesthetical, pedagogic, and otherwise—that capacities to affect and to be affected will yield an actualized next or new that is somehow better than “now”’ (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010:9-10). Seigworth and Gregg go on to warn of affect’s stubborn neutrality, preventing it from being directed in the same way as effect. ‘As much as we sometimes might want to believe that affect is highly *invested* in us and with somehow magically providing for a better tomorrow [...] affect instead bears an intense and thoroughly immanent neutrality’ (Ibid., 10, emphasis original).

Though neutral, affect has a latent political potential. As Massumi suggests, ‘the concept of affect is politically oriented from the get go’ (Massumi, 2015:viii). However, it is ‘proto-political’ in that ‘it concerns the first stirrings of the political, flush with the felt intensities of life. Its politics must be brought out’ (Ibid., ix). The way I see it, affective politics are brought out through SWO in the way affects orient people towards or away from certain individuals and groups. As Ahmed writes, ‘emotions involve different movements towards and away from others, such that they shape the contours of social as well as bodily space’ (Ahmed, 2014:209). Adsit et al corroborate this view, with their suggestion that ‘emotions may themselves be a primary means of effective persuasion and collective action because they are always-already shaping our allegiances and ways of being’ (Adsit et al, 2015:34). This is the foundation of my argument in Chapter 5, on the ‘affective arc’ of *Sex Worker’s Opera*. Drawing together the writings of Descartes, Locke and Spinoza—the ‘founding fathers’ of affect theory—Ahmed finds that ‘however much they offer contrasting models, they all describe how a judgement of something can be a matter

of how we are affected by that thing. Something might be judged as good if it affects us in a good way' (Ahmed, 2014:208). In orienting people either towards or away from others, the politics of affect can therefore be brought out to transform perceptions, and therein lies one of affect's key roles in SWO, a project designed to address the stigma directed toward and experienced by sex workers.

Feminism and Queer Theory: Linking sex work, performance studies, and affect theory

My engagement with affect theory has angled me toward a certain way of thinking about artistic activism and social impact, as presented in this research. Before that, however, it was feminist and queer theories that gave me a better understanding of SWO itself and the radical impact it could be seen to have had. As a whole, then, this research brings together affect, feminist and queer theories to better conceptualise the social impact of SWO. Taken together, they go some way toward addressing the aforementioned tensions surrounding social impact research. First, by posing a challenge to 'knowledge as objective, particularly through a focus on the importance of *being as a mode of knowing*' (Åhäll, 2018:41, emphasis original). And, second, by addressing the disjoint between research and practice, where 'research and evaluation need to be based on clearly stated aims' despite the fact that 'this will be inadequate to the task of satisfactorily capturing the experience of participants' (Rowe & Reason, 2017:23).

Both feminist and queer theoretical frameworks have rich and complex lineages. Though they share certain assumptions, agenda, and historical entanglements, there are many ways in which they are distinct. In this research, though, I am not focussed on unpacking the lineages of feminist and queer theories that have informed my thinking, but rather in showing how feminist and queer theories can help us understand projects like SWO, that bring together participatory arts and artistic activism. As such—and though I draw on individual concepts from each—I frequently refer to them together as part of my framework for conceiving of SWO as an anti-

normative project. I acknowledge that this tandem treatment of feminist and queer theories obscures the nuances of their different orientations, but bringing them together offers a broader perspective on the political potential of anti-normativity in this kind of artistic work that is not necessarily limited to specific gendered and sexual identities. Though SWO does explicitly push against some of the key gendered and sexual norms that many feminist and queer theorists and activists have fought against, there are other elements of the practice that it makes sense to consider through a feminist and queer lens, as laid out below. On a theoretical and a methodological level, I also draw support from feminist and queer ideologies in my conceptualisation of SWO, the ways in which I have conducted this research, and the challenges I pose to the norms of social impact discourse through this research.

Applied in this way, I find feminist and queer theories are most useful in forming questions around the ways in which things are *done*. Deepwell interrogates the distinction between feminism as a political identification and as a way of being and doing things when she asks, ‘Does declaring oneself or one’s actions, artworks or protests as feminist signal just a “political identification” or does it mean that one is really “doing feminism”, enacting social and political change or engaging in the struggle to do so[...]?’ (Deepwell, 2020:15). Throughout this thesis, I explore the ways in which SWO *did* feminism: in the feminist politics it propagated through performance—highlighted in Chapters 4 and 5; in its creative practice—linked to the notion of cultural democracy (Jeffers & Moriarty, 2017) discussed in Chapter 7; *and* in the practices of care that were embedded within the creative and organisational structures—as explored in Chapter 8. Similarly, my applications of queer theories are guided by Ahmed’s statement that ‘queer’ should not be seen ‘only as anti-heteronormative, but as anti-normative’ (Ahmed, 2014:149). As such, queer theory helps me to unpack the ways in which SWO functions anti-normatively—again, in its political, creative, and organisational practice—and to determine the impact of the challenges it poses to the status quo.

Feminist and queer theory also make sense as critical frameworks in this research due to the demographics involved in the study. For one, sex work itself is a heavily

gendered form of labour, with the vast majority of sex workers identifying as cisgender women (Brooks-Gordon et al, 2015). Like other feminised workforces, such as those providing domestic and care labour (Himmelweit & Plomien, 2014), sex work is therefore unsurprising territory for feminist analysis. Likewise, the over-representation of trans people and gay men in the proportion of sex workers who are *not* cisgender women opens sex work up to analysis through a queer lens (Laing et al, 2015). In addition, SWO's own micro-demographic encourages feminist and queer perspectives. The majority of those who have been involved across the lifespan of the project are either cisgender women, trans women or non-binary people, with very few exceptions, and anti-normative perspectives on gender, sexuality and labour are widely held among the group.

As well as their relevance to the sex work focus of this research, feminist and queer theories are a natural fit here because of the firm place they hold in performance studies—a field I draw on in my analysis of SWO as artistic activism. As a fundamental contribution of feminist art is that it makes the personal political (Deepwell, 2020:9), SWO's use of personal stories—either sent in by sex workers around the world or offered by members of the project themselves—exemplifies an approach to feminist storytelling that connects individual experiences to larger-scale structures of injustice. Performance serves as a form of knowledge production, an alternative space through which marginalised perspectives and experiences can become known.

According to Campbell and Farrier—with strong echoes of Dolan's notion of 'utopian performatives' (2005)—queer performance facilitates a 'suspension of regular rules of sociality', enabling performers and audiences to 'contemplate other ways of being in the world, play out non-normative identities and imagine, rehearse and form new ways of expressing an experience of the world' (Campbell & Farrier, 2016:3). Yet, the instances of 'worldmaking' that can happen in queer performances, particularly those of queer performers of colour, are not 'simply views or perspectives' (Muñoz, 1999:195). As Muñoz points out, these performances further 'oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of "truth" that subjugate

minoritarian people' (Ibid.). As such—and touching on a theoretical term I will unpack further imminently—'disidentificatory performance offers a utopian blueprint for a possible future while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present' (Ibid., 200).

It is important to my analysis of SWO as artistic activism that the means of production and the performance are considered together. It is in this way that queer performance theory can complement a disciplinary framework of community and participatory arts. Indeed, Campbell and Farrier tout this connection in order to pinpoint what it is that makes performances queer: 'While they are, of course, about aesthetic composition and the narrative content of the work, they are also intricately bound up with the identity of the maker/s (self-identifying as queer), the making processes and the context in which they are seen; taken together these are the elements that render these dramaturgies as 'queer', rather than what we might call 'gay'" (Campbell & Farrier, 2016:13). Going beyond addressing queer themes through performance, then, queer performances get their queerness from a holistic anti-normativity, linked to the performers' identities, the creative processes used and the performance contexts.

A queer performance concept I return to throughout the thesis is Muñoz's term 'disidentification', which refers to the 'survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere' (Muñoz, 1999:4). Disidentification connects the identities of performers with their creative processes and performance contexts to appreciate the radical potential of queer performance. It is particularly pertinent in relation to SWO—a project that offers space for sex workers to reclaim opera and its harmful portrayals of their community—as it includes the recycling of 'damaged stereotypes [...] as powerful and seductive sites of self-creation' (Muñoz, 1999:4). In Chapter 7, I return to disidentification as a powerful theory, which both challenges and strengthens the application of prominent theories from the community and participatory arts literature in my analysis of SWO.

Feminist and queer theories also influence the selective ways in which I engage with affect theory. While affect is very much embedded within feminist and queer theories, the philosophical realm of affect theory has sometimes threatened to marginalise its theoretical predecessors. In his foreword to *The Affective Turn* (Clough, 2007), Hardt writes that ‘the two primary precursors to the affective turn [...] are the focus on the body, which has been most extensively advanced in feminist theory, and the exploration of emotions, conducted predominantly in queer theory’ (Hardt, 2007:ix). This framing has been criticised by Ahmed, who contests Hardt’s implication that a ‘turn to affect’ was necessary ‘in order to show how mind is implicated in body; reason in passion’, arguing that ‘feminist work on bodies and emotions *challenged from the outset* mind-body dualisms, as well as the distinction between reason and passion’ (Ahmed, 2014:206).

Ahmed’s primary concern is that ‘when the affective turn becomes a turn to affect, feminism and queer work are no longer positioned as part of that turn’ (Ibid.). In consigning feminist and queer theories to affect theory’s past, proponents of ‘the affective turn’ as a historical moment risk belittling the centrality of affect to these pre-existent and ever-evolving critical frameworks, and their particular ways of doing affect theory. In short, the consolidation of affect theory as a distinct field threatens to subjugate the voices of the women and queer academics writing on affect, thereby replicating wider structures of dismissal surrounding emotion. As Åhäll outlines, “‘emotion’ is a term that has long been associated with the personal, the body, the feminine. As the constitutive other of “reason” (as well as the objective, the mind, the masculine) in Western, binary modes of thinking, “emotion” has been (and still is) a political strategy keeping women and the feminine out of politics and political spheres (Åhäll, 2018:37). Indeed, Adsit et al see ‘countering the tendency to hide or dismiss emotion’ (Adsit et al, 2015:33) as integral to feminism’s project, and Åhäll goes on to state, emphatically, that ‘there is no feminism without affect’ (Åhäll, 2018:38).

As it stands, feminist and queer perspectives on affect offer a number of productive challenges to the ways that affect appears in contemporary philosophy. One such

way—implicit in the previous paragraph and significant to my use of affect theory in this research—is the distinction between affect and emotion. As outlined earlier in the section on ‘Distinctions’ in affect theory, Ahmed, in particular, has taken issue with affect theorists’ push to distinguish affect from emotion, with arguments that the former constitutes an unmediated, pre-social and pre-discursive version of the latter. Ahmed’s contention is that ‘by prioritizing affect over emotion, a feminized “personal” epistemology is rejected. The insistence on affect as something different from emotion in this way risks reinforcing a binary, gendered logic between a mobile, impersonal, masculinized affect and a contained, feminized, personal emotion’ (Åhäll, 2018:39-40). Building on my comments above, there is a risk that affect theory becomes a playground for masculine perspectives, excluding the work of ‘others’, in whose epistemologies emotion may be more readily foregrounded. With this critique in mind, I am particularly reluctant to distinguish between affect and emotion in this work.

My arguments in Chapter 8 revolve around the notion of an ‘ethic of care’ and its applications in SWO—an area of significant overlap between feminist theorists and scholars in the fields of socially-engaged and participatory arts. Attention to care ethics connects this research back to feminist ways of *doing*, not only in the lens it provides for my appraisal of the creative and organisational practices central to SWO, but also in laying out the guiding principles that I myself have followed, as a researcher navigating the sensitivities of work with a marginalised community.

Feminist scholars have been developing frameworks for an ethic of care since the 1980s. Reacting against moral frameworks that rely on abstract principles of justice, care ethicists emphasise relationality (Noddings, 1984; Tronto, [1993] 2009; Held, 2006). While there are notable differences between their theoretical approaches, scholars agree on certain defining features of caring relations. For example, Held states that ‘the values of trust, solidarity, mutual concern, [and] empathetic responsiveness have priority’ (Held, 2006:15). Held’s notion of ‘empathetic responsiveness’ in particular signifies overlap with Tronto’s understanding of care as comprising ‘attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness’ ([1993]

2009:127). Meanwhile, Noddings highlights the need for carers to be both ‘attentive’ and ‘receptive’, investing in an understanding of the ‘expressed needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed’ (Noddings, 2012:772). Taken together, these definitions offer a critical lens through which to consider care as a moral issue, the often-unequal distribution of power within caring relations and society more broadly, and the possibility of interdependence as a source of mutual and collective good.

There is also consensus among those writing on this topic that ‘care’ is used in the sense of ‘caring for’ (an active engagement) rather than ‘caring about’—a preference or a disposition (Held, 2006:30). Held contends that ‘in practices of care, relationships are cultivated, needs are responded to, and sensitivity is demonstrated’ (Ibid., 15-16). The care in question is therefore evidenced in practice, rather than feelings; it is this link to practice that bolsters the applicability of care ethics within the field of socially-engaged performance. Accordingly, the past decade has seen a surge in the number of scholars and practitioners looking to care ethics in order to better reflect on the caring relations and the quality of care present within the creative and organisational work that occurs between ‘facilitators’, ‘participants’ and audience members (Hallewas, 2022; Stuart-Fisher & Thompson, 2020; Thompson, 2015).

When each are done well, recent work in this area encourages readers to see care as performance and performance as care (Stuart-Fisher, 2020:4). This connection is decidedly political: for example, Thompson states that ‘care practices need attention to their aesthetics, and community-based arts programmes need an understanding of care, if either is to make claims to be contributing to social justice’ (Thompson, 2020:215). Thinking of care-full performance practice with marginalised communities, it is clear that the political need for certain stories to be heard should not take precedence over the needs of those who have lived them.

Crucially, Stuart-Fisher raises a red flag around socially-engaged ‘performance practices that are *uncaring* [...] practices that instrumentalise participation or that

inadvertently predetermine or enforce certain narratives of change and transformation upon unsuspecting communities' (Stuart-Fisher, 2020:3, emphasis original). Demands for attentiveness and responsiveness to participants' expressed needs present a challenge to the problematic practice of imposing social development agendas onto marginalised communities without meaningful consultation, participatory planning or contextual understanding, touting the inflated assumption that art will improve either the people or their situation. This approach is encapsulated by the metaphor of 'parachuting in' which, as Hope illustrates, frequently perpetuates, rather than alleviates, the social problems that these communities face (Hope, 2017:219).

McAvinchey offers a brighter picture of socially-engaged arts practice that foregrounds care and, by extension, makes a genuine contribution to struggles for social justice. She uncovers the caring practices central to Clean Break—the theatre company for women with experience of, or who are at risk of entering, the criminal justice system—and highlights the ways in which these practices support the group's 'commitment to equality and justice' (McAvinchey, 2020:123). McAvinchey suggests that when an ethic of care permeates socially-engaged arts practice there is scope for raising critical awareness of intersecting oppressions while, through 'responsive and interconnected practices', compensating for the 'care deficit in society' (Ibid.). 'For Clean Break, theatre is both the medium to address social injustices experienced by criminalised women and the means to make a direct intervention in the individual lives of women they work with' (Ibid., 133). As McAvinchey describes it, the two-fold nature of Clean Break's ethical and political agenda is similar to that which permeates SWO, connecting internal caring practices with performances that outwardly critique harmful policies, state violence and intersecting oppressions. These facets of practice operate in tandem, and, as Thompson argues, only when care is present in the interior workings of the group can the performance itself constitute a genuine contribution to social justice. My motivation for employing care ethics as part of my feminist framework is therefore grounded in an understanding that the radical potential of artistic activism is inextricably linked to the contexts in which—and the processes through which—the art is made.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is designed in such a way that readers will become familiar with the performance of *Sex Worker's Opera* through the analysis presented in Chapters 3 through to 6. These chapters emphasise components of the performance that correspond to the activist agendas held by the sex work community. Chapters 7 and 8 elaborate upon the structures and practices that supported the process of making the performance, offering an analysis informed by community arts and socially-engaged performance theory and practice. Subsequently, in Chapter 9, the thesis returns to the overarching question of the 'social impact' of SWO.

Chapter 2 is a short chapter on methodology. Here, I continue the focus on feminist and queer ideologies as I demonstrate the ways in which these have influenced my way of doing research, including my choice of methods and my approach to ethical considerations.

In Chapter 3, I tell 'the SWO story', which establishes the perceived need for, and the intentions behind, SWO. Presenting a narrative herstory of the project's origins, explaining the development of *Sex Worker's Opera* and outlining other facets of SWO's work—including the reference to 'opera'—I position SWO as a sex worker-led artistic activism project. In this chapter, I begin unpacking how SWO's brand of artistic activism provided marginalised individuals with an opportunity to contribute to the wider struggle for sex worker rights, while cushioning them within a supportive and inclusive environment.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of the political messages that are transmitted through the music of the *Opera*, underlining the ways in which the group aligned themselves with ideas that are central to the sex worker rights movement through song. Here, I demonstrate the potential of songs to connect sex worker rights to other activist causes, to enhance the visibility of marginalised identities, and to

educate audiences through artistic representations of sex work experiences, as well the space they provide for ‘disidentification’ (Muñoz, 1999) and ‘utopian performatives’ (Dolan, 2005).

Chapter 5 follows on from this but zooms out to encompass the structure of the performance as a whole. Through my analysis of the strategic placement of scenes, I suggest that the emotional journey—from ‘light’ to ‘shadow’ and back to ‘light’—that audiences are taken on is part of what makes the *Opera* politically affective. I show how the affective arc of the performance works to build relational bonds between those on and off stage, fostering emotional investment in the performers and, by extension, the sex work community that carries the potential to move people to action (Campbell & Farrier, 2016:1).

Chapter 6 narrows the focus on the performance to spotlight two autobiographical pieces that represent painful experiences—‘Strip for the Dead’ and ‘Monkey in a Circus’—exploring the ways in which they were made, the significance of the performances themselves, and the experiences of the members who performed them. I emphasise the importance of individualised processes and performances in this context and propose that, when done well, performances of pain can create space for personal processing and activism based in empathy.

Chapter 7 then examines the creative practice behind the performance of *Sex Worker’s Opera*, foregrounding the community arts mechanisms that supported the co-creation of songs and the script, and highlighting the coexistence of chaos and structure. In it, I argue that the concepts of cultural democracy (Jeffers & Moriarty, 2017) and disidentification (Muñoz, 1999) are integral to community musical theatre as artistic activism, as they make space for marginalised voices to reclaim their narratives on their own terms. I show that, by toying with the norms of conventional artistic forms—including the hierarchies and standards associated with various artistic practices—the group generated self-representations that not only overturned stereotypes but also challenged the ways in which sex workers are typically silenced within the cultural sphere.

Taking into account organisational and creative practices, Chapter 8 unpacks the ethic of care that was central to SWO, articulating the ways in which care was extended to members and audience members and critiquing the limited extent to which it was available to the directors. I argue that care must be prioritised within both organisational and creative practices in order for socially-engaged performance to stand up as an ethical, sustainable and politically-viable form of artistic activism.

Finally, Chapter 9 interrogates the notion of 'social impact' with regards to SWO, identifying the affects and the effects of the project and blurring the lines between the personal and the political, feelings and actions. In particular, it highlights the role of community musical theatre in sustaining activist motivation and enhancing public education on the issues affecting marginalised communities.

As a whole, this thesis suggests that the nature of community musical theatre establishes it as both an affective and an effective vehicle for artistic activism. It calls for greater attention to the variety of ways in which this form might represent a way forward for artistic activism, combining the amplification of marginalised voices and the transmission of crucial political messages with a range of affective intensities. When taken together, I propose that these affects and effects carry the potential to move performers and audiences to action.

2) Methodology

Unpacking the methodological decisions I have made throughout this research, this chapter illuminates key considerations in research into socially-engaged arts projects, and community-based activist research more broadly. I provide explanations of my focus for this research, the research methods I have used, the analytical processes applied, my positionality as a researcher within SWO, and the ethical issues encountered. I also acknowledge that decisions I have made, as well as unavoidable circumstances, have incurred certain limitations at various points, and I suggest ways in which these might be overcome in future research. Overall, the chapter indicates the ways in which my approach to the research has been shaped by SWO itself and the theoretical frameworks that have helped me to understand it as a form of artistic activism.

Certainly, the position of this research within the mesh of disciplines discussed in Chapter 1 has methodological implications. Studying SWO provides insight into the grassroots application of practices from varied artistic traditions, supporting interdisciplinary theorising across these boundaries. It also encourages the useful application of feminist and queer theories, expanding understandings of the structures and processes at play in both participatory arts and artistic activism. Moreover, focussing on a project with such explicit political goals has prompted me to take a political stand with this research itself. As O'Connor and Anderson argue, research is 'a political activity. It is a process and means of confronting, challenging and disturbing the status quo that marginalizes, dispossesses and imprisons millions to the advantage of the few' (O'Connor & Anderson, 2015:6). Though I am realistic about the fact that far fewer people will ever read this thesis than have already seen SWO, I use my research into SWO to provide insight into the injustices affecting sex workers around the world, highlighting misrepresentation and silencing as significant issues—with knock-on effects—that the cultural industries must take some responsibility for if we are to see widespread improvements in attitudes and policies.

Though SWO shares characteristics with many other initiatives, it is also a unique example of a project of its scale for sex workers. This influenced my methodological decision to focus on SWO as a single case study, rather than as part of a comparative study. Studying SWO in depth provided opportunities to fully interrogate the complex combination of factors that led to its unprecedented growth and longevity as a project and a performance, all the time placing these in the context of the issues affecting a specific marginalised group. Working with a single case study, this research has greater potential to inform theory and practice with regards to projects that are in some way similar, revealing valuable learning gathered from experiences of almost a decade's work organising, creating and performing.

As a methodology, case studies are widely used in qualitative research to understand specific behaviours or events within their unique contexts (Schwandt & Gates, 2017). Indeed, the case study model is applied liberally in community music, applied theatre and political performance research, as well as arts funding and evaluation programmes,¹⁰ as researchers attempt to document specific examples of practice in distinctive contexts. As variables are not engineered, case studies are seen to increase internal validity while limiting external validity, reducing the extent to which the findings presented here are generalisable and making it difficult to say with certainty that the same processes would render equivalent outcomes in different settings (Given, 2008:68-9). However, the depth of insight they offer can be used 'for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units' (Gerring, 2004:342). Though it focusses on the social impact of SWO, its relation to sex worker activism, and the mechanisms that enabled the project to work as it did, this research therefore facilitates a broader perspective on the social impacts of community musical theatre as a form of artistic activism made by marginalised communities.

In addition to the key concern of generalisability, Simons (2014) identifies further relatable concerns with regard to case study methodology. She highlights the

¹⁰ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/news-and-jobs/case-studies-0> [Accessed 7th March 2022]

potential difficulties of “telling the truth” when the narrow focus might make it possible to identify the people involved, something that has certainly been central to my ethical considerations in this research. Simons also acknowledges the challenge of balancing personal involvement with critical data gathering (Simons, 2014:7), another issue I have contended with as I have navigated personal relationships, social settings, and my own formative experiences as part of my research with SWO. On this note, responding to the common dismissal of case studies as ‘subjective’, Simons calls for recognition of subjectivity as a positive feature within research: ‘Rather than see it as bias or something to counter, it is an intelligence that is essential to understanding and interpreting the experience of participants and stakeholders’ (Ibid.).

SWO ceased its annual performances in 2018, just as I commenced the PhD. The retrospective nature of this research therefore posed an additional methodological challenge, increasing my reliance on interviewees’ memories, which may not have always been accurate or complete. The memory-triggering properties of the music elicitation interview method presented below somewhat compensated for this, but the research would have benefitted from consistent documentation and analysis from SWO’s inception. Enabling real-time audience research, this would also have enriched my analysis of the extent to which *Sex Worker’s Opera* did, in fact, impact upon public perceptions of sex work—one of SWO’s activist aims. On the other hand, the retrospective methodology did facilitate an investigation into the lasting impacts of SWO for directors and members. The value of this is emphasised by O’Connor & Anderson, who warn that, while ‘the initial buzz after the euphoria of performance can provide very positive outcomes for an evaluator’, it ‘does not constitute the whole picture’ (O’Connor & Anderson, 2015:46). This research therefore provides an important perspective on the long-term social impacts—or lack thereof—of community musical theatre projects with activist goals.

Central to my ability to understand and document the processes at play within SWO, and members’ and directors’ experiences of these, was the development of a research methodology that would work to amplify marginalised voices. Influenced by

the context in which SWO exists, this PhD sits within the traditions of feminist research and is also influenced by queer methodological approaches. Feminist research ‘is grounded in the set of theoretical traditions that privilege women’s issues, voices, and lived experiences’ (Hesse-Biber, 2013:3), and these values can be extended to serve the LGBTQIA+ community (within which SWO is embedded), where queerness is the understanding of subjects and subjectivities as ‘fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming’ (Browne & Nash, 2010:1). It is noteworthy that these frameworks do not easily accommodate an approach to measuring ‘social impact’ that relies on change being linear and directly attached to a causal force. A methodological framework that maintains the essence of queerness needs to make room for multiple subjectivities and complex constructions of experience (Ibid., 18-19), meanwhile challenging the division between researcher and researched and instead creating a ‘community through research that does not stand outside of that which it studies/creates’ (Ibid., 20).

Though feminist and queer frameworks might be at odds with positivistic perspectives on social impact research in the arts, this does not mean they are incompatible with alternative approaches to social impact research. For example, instead of taking a positivistic approach, Reason proposes that—in order to account for both instrumental and intrinsic values of participation in the arts—we must use ‘qualitative methodologies and assert the existence of research traditions that *do* engage in the felt, the experiential and the sensual’ (Reason, 2017:47). Furthermore, Reason spotlights the way in which ‘such research takes subjectivity not only as its starting point but also its founding epistemology, recognizing that in domains such as the individual aesthetic experience the concept of objective knowledge is oddly illogical’ (Ibid.). Similarly challenging academic suppression of emotion and subjectivity, Leavy suggests that arts-based research opens a space ‘within the research community where passion and rigor boldly intersect *out in the open*’ (Leavy, 2020:3). Though my research fuses an arts-based approach with a more conventional social science methodology, my choice of methods reflects my commitment to maintaining the centrality of art, embracing subjectivity, passion, and aesthetic experience within this research.

Research methods: Music elicitation interviews

Indeed, I have worked to mirror components of SWO's practice in my own research design, in alignment with the feminist principle that 'the personal is political'. This stance 'means that feminist research agendas are often turned in to stories, experiences, and representations of people/individuals/bodies' (Åhäll, 2018:41). Foregrounding sex workers' voices in this research was a priority insofar as it is part of the ubiquitous feminist project to foreground the stories and that have typically been obfuscated in research by the dominance of white male perspectives. Within feminist research, this project 'was essential because of a basic discontinuity: women's perspectives were not absent simply as a result of oversight but had been suppressed, trivialized, ignored, or reduced to the status of gossip and folk wisdom by dominant research traditions' (Anderson et al, 2004:225-6). Interviews and oral histories are integral to more fully understanding the experiences of women and 'others' whose knowledge systems have been subjugated, because they allow people 'to talk about their feelings as well as their activities' (Ibid. 229). 'Oral history can tell us not only how people preserved meat but whether the process was fun or drudgery, whether it was accompanied by a sense of pride or failure' (Ibid. 227).

Reinharz states that 'interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher' (Reinharz, 1992:19), and is therefore a particularly important tool in research with groups that have historically been spoken for or over, as sex workers have. Nevertheless, there is a profound need for reflexivity in this, as 'the personality and biases of the researcher clearly enter into the process to affect the outcome' (Anderson et al, 2004:231). It is necessary to ask, 'is the researcher structuring the interview so that the subject tells a story that conforms to the researcher's orientation?' (Ibid.). Certainly—as I was still mindful of an early-draft research proposal and processing my own experiences of the project when I carried out these interviews—I may well have been guilty of trying to manoeuvre the conversation in certain ways, though I did have the foresight to design the interviews to mitigate for my own biases.

Openness to hearing about affective, subjective experiences—alongside more tangible occurrences and their effects—has been foundational to understanding SWO more holistically. Using interviews as a tool to generate primary data that centred the voices of those who had been involved in SWO, this research collates individual experiences of, and perspectives on, SWO’s creative processes, social and organisational norms, and political messages. Just as storytelling was integral to the dramaturgy of *Sex Worker’s Opera*, it was also central to my research design, supporting SWO members and directors to carve out their own personal and collective narratives around the project, the creative process, and the performance itself. As seen through publications such as *Reading, Writing & Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Bell, 1994), *Hustling Verse: An anthology of sex workers’ poetry* (Dawn & Ducharme, 2019), and *Wanting You to Want Me: Stories from the secret world of strip clubs* (Parker-Rhodes & Dinslade, 2022), there is a long tradition of sex workers using performance and various forms of written text as platforms for sharing stories from lived experience. I wanted these research interviews to serve as another platform for sex workers’ stories. However, instead of foregrounding stories about sex work per se the interviews were intended to highlight the varied experiences and perspectives of sex worker and ally artists working together to create an activist performance. Rather than me imposing a narrative of how the project worked and the ways in which different people experienced it, the interviews were designed to elicit the stories of members and directors, which would then be brought together to create a representative impression of SWO.

In 2019, I interviewed the directors, individually and together, to understand the role that SWO had played in their lives and the story of how the project had come into being. These interviews were structured, but there was room for the conversations to stray, going deeper into certain topics than I had expected or completely changing direction. A full list of interview questions is included in the Appendices (Appendix 1).

Those were the only conventionally structured interviews I carried out for this research. Otherwise, I designed a method of music elicitation, whereby the interviews would be structured around the music that interviewees themselves had created and performed, rather than a list of pre-determined questions. While planning, I found very limited examples of music elicitation being used as a qualitative research method through which information, not just about music but also about other elements of experience, could emerge. Music elicitation is either understood as the creation of music to help represent and comprehend an experience (Dos Santos & Wagner, 2018)—corresponding with other arts-based research rationales (Leavy, 2020)—or as ‘the integration of the music listening experience into research interviews to draw out or trigger memory, affective experience and descriptive in-depth discussion’ (Allett, 2010:3). Within my research, the method of music elicitation takes the latter of these two approaches, using music as a ‘technology of memory’ (Ibid., 6), where playing recordings of music prompts discussions of the artistic process as well as other aspects of members’ experiences, either within SWO or more broadly. This was particularly useful given my reliance on interviewees’ memories of SWO. To my knowledge, this study is a unique example of music elicitation in which interviewees are discussing music they themselves have created, performed and recorded. These interviews provided space for interviewees to reflect on the overall impact of SWO on their lives, the connections between the show and sex worker activism more broadly, and the processes and practices at the heart of SWO.

I trialled the music elicitation method with SWO’s three directors in 2019; in these sessions they discussed all of the music from the *Opera* and unpacked the intentions behind the pieces and songs.¹¹ The following year, I sent a call-out to members; the thirteen members who opted to take part in the research were then asked to select three to four songs or pieces of music from *Sex Worker’s Opera* that they would like to discuss and to indicate whether they would be happy doing a group interview. Based on these preferences, I organised members into groups, coordinating the

¹¹ These interviews resulted in 9.5 hours of interview data

music choices so that everyone was able to discuss at least two of their choices and all the music in the show was accounted for. Overall, with members, I carried out four individual interviews and four group interviews of two or three people, totalling 20 hours of interviews. These all took place online during the first year of the pandemic, mostly using Zoom.

In each interview, we listened to recordings of the music and discussed each piece immediately after it was played. I provided general prompts to encourage interviewees to talk about any memories or feelings they associated with that particular piece, its creation or performances of it. I also asked members to consider why they had chosen that piece out of all the music in the *Opera*. Other than that, the discussions were often free and wide-ranging, with interviewees in the groups feeding off each other.

One weakness of this study is that the mixture of group and individual interviews created a certain inequality amongst interviewees. Noticeably, solo interviewees were more prone to speaking about themselves and the impact the project had on their lives; whereas, those in group interviews mostly stayed focussed on discussing the performance and its general relevance to the issues facing the sex work community and sex worker activism. Indeed, two of the nine members interviewed in groups contacted me afterwards to add insights they had not felt comfortable sharing in the group setting. It may have been ideal to hold both types of session with each interviewee, as I did with the directors. In this way, it would have been possible to prompt lively group discussions about the performance itself and more personal individual reflections from members.

Complementing the data generated in these interviews, I had a certain amount of ethnographic and autoethnographic data gathered during my time in the project (explained below) before beginning this PhD research. I also had access to video recordings and photographs of the performances from different years, archival material—reviews, posters, a small amount of rehearsal footage—and a video of

audience interviews gathered for promotional purposes in 2016.¹² I draw on all of these materials within this thesis, as well as my own memories of performances and occurrences within the project. Taken together, these multiple strands of data have helped me to tackle the challenge of carrying out retrospective research.

Another obstacle is that, due to safety and ownership concerns specific to the SWO group, I am not able to share clips of the performance with readers. Hence, in lieu of footage, I provide detailed descriptions of the pieces discussed and occasional photographs to give an impression of the artistic work that directors and members produced.

Working with thematic analysis

Though the bulk of the analytical work for this research was located in interpreting the interviews with directors and members, my analysis brings together data from these with audience interviews, my own ethnographic field notes, and details of the performance of *Sex Worker's Opera*. I chose to use thematic analysis—as an analytical method that could be applied to each of these sets of qualitative data—and took an inductive, semantic and descriptive approach (Clarke et al, 2015:225-6). In this way, I privileged the voices of interviewees, allowing the data (rather than pre-determined theories or concepts) to guide the analysis, taking interviewees' words at face value (rather than trying to draw out subconscious or unspoken meanings), and highlighting the patterns that emerged through the data as findings themselves (Ibid.).

Braun and Clarke highlight a number of potential disadvantages of thematic analysis, warning qualitative researchers away from common pitfalls. Most basically, they cite a lack of actual analysis as a significant issue (Braun and Clarke, 2006:94), whereby data is presented as if it *is* the analysis, without sufficient commentary or framing.

¹² These collated audience interviews are available to watch at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5FPMGuSnfg&t=168s&ab_channel=SexWorker%27sOpera

[Accessed 26th August 2021]

Equally, they warn against thematic analysis that relies on incoherent, and therefore unconvincing, themes, which weakens the overall impression of having a strong argument or meaningful findings (Ibid., 94-5). Further criticism falls on researchers who make analytic claims that do not match the data, thus failing to back up their arguments (Ibid., 95), and those whose use of theory does not align with their analytic claims (Ibid.).

Most relevant here is Braun and Clarke's admission that thematic analysis fails to provide continuity across an individual account, instead providing fragmented extracts of a data set, grouped according to themes rather than as part of an original narrative (Ibid., 97). This was a tension in my own research, as I grappled with the challenge of including as many voices as possible while valuing the individuality of each one. Thematic analysis allowed me to draw out the most meaningful findings with regard to SWO and community musical theatre as artistic activism, but it may not have provided the most holistic representation of individual experiences.

Reflecting on my own practice of thematic analysis, I also find much to criticise in the inevitable privileging of certain voices over others that occurs through thematic analysis, perhaps particularly when working with a group of marginalised individuals, a mix of those with English as their first and second language, covering a range of educational capital. Faced with multiple quotes that illuminated the same theme or analytical point, I had to decide whether to use the most concise—or sometimes the most poetic—quote, or whether to attempt a degree of equality in how many quotes were used from each interviewee's data set. For the most part, I chose the former option, resulting in a certain degree of inequality between interviewees.

For the purpose of analysing the interviews with SWO directors and members, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006:86-93) six phases of thematic analysis.

Transcribing the audio recordings helped me to become familiar with the data before I coded each transcript, extracting the main points from each sentence or paragraph, even where they did not directly relate to the research questions.

Following that, I identified themes that would help to group the long list of codes I had collated, categorising data and registering trends and tensions between

different interviews. I then reviewed these themes, refining or discarding those that did not unify the coded data assigned to them, as well as those that did not seem relevant to the already-broad purview of the research questions. Finally, I checked that each of the themes said something distinct without encompassing too much, inserting sub-themes in cases where themes appeared too expansive.

These refined themes have since guided my writing and the organisation of the chapters contained herein, making clear the distinctions between different areas of analytical focus, such as the performance itself, members' experiences, audience impact, approaches to activism, and the creative process. Data extracts are threaded throughout the thesis, illustrating points, provoking questions and frequently providing poetry. As such, this analysis provides a holistic impression of SWO, the ways in which it engages with sex worker activism, the structures and practices behind the community musical theatre performance of *Sex Worker's Opera*, and its social impacts, as defined by those who experienced the project first hand. Some of the themes that emerged were unexpected and some of them created significant ethical challenges within the analysis and writing stages. The most marked example of this was the theme of the sex-worker-director.

Director X: The sex-worker-director

In accordance with the 50% policy, the directors have never been required to reveal their statuses as either sex workers or allies to the public, and it was vital that this research did not jeopardise this protective ambiguity. However, throughout the interviews and listening sessions with them it was difficult for the directors to talk freely and honestly about their experiences of the project without revealing these statuses.

'It's very murky, and sometimes I feel that if I'm not speaking with these experiences of myself as a sex worker, it diminishes the role that I played in the whole thing'. (Director X)

We agreed that one viable strategy would be to create a semi-fictionalised 'Director X' character, to whom quotes that are explicitly from the perspective of a sex-worker-director are attributed. Director X's experiences are never spoken of with reference to specifics, such as gender, directorial role or parts of the show. Director X (pronouns: they/them/theirs) therefore acts as an innovative methodological solution enabling exploration of both the perks and challenges of facilitating an activist arts project like SWO as an insider to the community.

Positionality: The external insider

This is just one of the many theses that could be written about SWO. Though I have not engineered SWO itself and I have tried to let the directors and members shape the investigation as much as possible, the majority of the decisions I have taken in putting together this research project have been solely my own. It is therefore important for me to be transparent about my positionality in relation to SWO and this research.

I first got involved in SWO in 2017, while researching for my Masters dissertation. I contacted the directors, asking for their consent to research the project, and they generously invited me to the Sex Worker Festival of Resistance in Glasgow, where the group was performing an excerpt of *Sex Worker's Opera*. Later that year, I was asked to accompany the project on a UK tour as a social media volunteer, but one of the performers became unavailable at the last minute and someone was needed to fill their part so I became an impromptu performer. My experiences of SWO since 2017 have been less unexpected but similarly intense, often involving multiple-week periods of living and travelling together.

In this research, I am therefore somewhere between an outsider and an insider. In his research on racism and prejudice, Banks (1998) identified two dimensions of insider/outsider status, accounting for the relationship to the group forming the focus of the study with the binary 'Indigenous/External', and the position as a researcher with 'Insider/Outsider' (Acker, 2000:5). By this definition, my positionality

is one of an *external insider*. Although it breaks the project's practice of secrecy surrounding the 50/50 model of sex workers and allies, the directors and I have agreed that it would be disingenuous *not* to be upfront about my 'external' status as an ally. I state this here not because I want to distance myself from a stigmatised identity, but because it is important to acknowledge the limits of my experience and expertise, and to identify this as an area that requires constant reflexive critique and deserves external scrutiny. While there are overlaps between my lived experience and the lives of many SWO members, my privilege is undeniable: I am white, British, middle class and over-educated. Therefore, there are limits as to what I can speak to. On the other hand, I have become an 'insider' over a long period of time, forming friendships, gradually gaining the trust of the group and demonstrating a commitment to representing SWO, the group's experiences of it—and (to a limited extent) directors and members themselves—accurately and fairly. Still, Kester's warning to researchers rings true: 'discursive violence occurs whenever one individual speaks for another, no matter how firmly he or she is anchored within a given collective' (Kester, [2004]2013:130).

My insider positionality has not always been an easy line to walk, requiring a high level of sensitivity to distinguish between what is 'on the record' and what is firmly off it when conversations that could inform the research happen in casual settings (Taylor, 2011:8). Whether an insider or an outsider, as a researcher I am in a position of power whereby my interpretation of data can skew impressions of research participants and experiences (Taylor, 2011:3; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Contrasting with research focussed on immensely powerful people or organisations—for instance, Baker's critical investigation into the Venezuelan music organisation El Sistema (Baker, 2014)—research on SWO requires a great deal of political and personal care to avoid inflicting harm on a relatively precarious project and the people who have invested significant chunks of their lives and resources into it. Accordingly, critiques presented within this thesis are aimed to be constructive, rather than combative.

Though, as an insider, my objectivity is arguably compromised, I do not believe that another researcher who was less invested in the project would have been able to do

'better' research than I have. Revisiting my discussion around the role of emotion in feminist theory and feminism itself, I recognise that my personal and emotional investment in SWO and its members has played a significant part in how I *do* feminism and that this, in turn, has shaped my conceptualisation of SWO and what SWO does, as well as my research practice. As Ahmed prompts: 'One can reflect on the role of emotions in the politicisation of subjects [...] I can rewrite my coming into being as a feminist subject in terms of different emotions, or in terms of how my emotions have involved particular readings of the worlds I have inhabited' (Ahmed, 2014:171). Without the same degree of involvement, resulting in an emotional, objectivity-clouding 'insiderness', I would not have been able to gather analytical insights into the project and its members' experiences as deep as the ones I present in this thesis. It is true that my experience of researching SWO has been distinctly subjective, which is why—as stated at the top of this chapter—this PhD is only one of many that could have been written about this project. However, the research itself was carefully designed to be participant-led, defending against a situation in which my inclinations or impulses could dominate the inquiry.

Notes about interviewees

In terms of sampling, it is noteworthy that I only received replies to my member call-out from people who had been involved in productions of *Sex Worker's Opera* at the same time as me—that is, between 2017 and 2018. This suggests both the importance of a personal connection between the researcher and research participants, and the likelihood that interviewees were more invested in SWO at the time of the research. Among members who left the project earlier, some had had negative experiences of SWO and/or caused negative experiences for other members. The absence of these voices is a limitation of the research, reducing the critical perspectives contained herein, though their inclusion may have added complex ethical considerations.

Members who did participate were provided with an expenses payment of £75. Although paying research informants is something of a controversial topic amid

concerns of coercion via incentives (Head, 2009:342), it is increasingly common in qualitative research as a way of providing compensation and beginning to neutralise the power imbalance between researcher and researched (ibid, 337). In this case, it felt important to recognise the indispensable contribution members were making to knowledge production, both through the performance and within the research interviews. Equally, it felt unethical to carry out research within a marginalised community and *not* offer a contribution, particularly as this research is already more likely to benefit me than them (uncomfortable though that is to admit).

Everyone who has been involved in this research has had the chance to review the thesis and their individual quotations ahead of submission. For directors, this involved reading through the first draft to fact-check and to ensure there were no risks to members' or their own—particularly Director X's—anonymity or confidentiality. This kind of member-checking is 'useful in terms of dealing with concerns around informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, exposure and insider blindness in the challenging and at times, rather confronting, ethical contexts of 'intimate insider' research' (Taylor, 2011:10). There are, however, limitations to this approach when the text itself is of an academic nature, often making it inaccessible to those with less educational capital or less familiarity with English. Reflecting on the effective exclusion of certain people from this process in this research project, more accessible means of member-checking will be a priority for me in future research.

As a default, all quotes and interviewees are anonymised, apart from where people have specifically requested to be named to receive credit for their work as artists. Selective crediting, particularly when it comes to the directors, has been a collaborative process that has enabled a balance to be struck between protecting people's identities and crediting their artistry.¹³ It is an imperfect, inconsistent

¹³ Readers will notice that I switch between attributing quotations to named directors, anonymised directors, and Director X. This is part of the delicate balance between protecting people's identities and giving marginalised artists credit for their work.

process—in that the people who are credited are not credited everywhere, and this option was not explicit to those who did not directly request it—but, taken together, these strategies represent additional ways in which I have worked to address the power imbalances between members, directors and myself.

Similarly, the photographs included throughout the thesis have been used with permission of the directors and those featured, and were already publicly available on the SWO website. The risk posed to the anonymity of members through the inclusion of these photos is minimal compared to the sharing of these photos on social media platforms, and therefore does not constitute an additional possibility of harm. Again, there is a balance to be struck here between protecting identities and representing artistic achievements. At a certain point, the over-protection of identities risks more harm than the care-full and selective sharing of images and information. While ethical caution is my default, it would be wrong to assume that I have a better understanding of the risks of sharing personal data than those whose data is being shared, particularly as many of them have extensive experience of protecting their identities over long periods of their professional lives. Mutual trust and respect for agency therefore characterises my thinking around the inclusion of visual data in this thesis.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the importance of epistemological and ethical considerations in my methodological decision-making, articulating the interconnectedness of the research topic and the research approach. Along with Chapter 1, it provides a backdrop to the analysis threaded throughout the following chapters, beginning with the story of SWO as a project.

3) 'A tumble through audacity': The story of Sex Worker's Opera

This chapter tells the story of Sex Worker's Opera (SWO), spanning a decade from the early 2010s to the beginning of the 2020s. It immerses the reader in the origins, intentions, developments and multiple limbs of SWO, revealing its influences as well as some of the successes and challenges it has faced. Drawing primarily on interviews carried out with the directors, SWO's herstory not only documents the work of an innovative grassroots activist organisation, but also provides context for the analyses of performance features and creative processes in subsequent chapters. It demonstrates the centrality of activism to the directors' artistic backgrounds, outlining the impact this had on their approach to SWO; foregrounds community research and involvement, suggesting that this resulted in enhanced representation and helped SWO to gain the trust of the sex work community; and highlights the advantages of SWO's status as an arts project, flagging the project's ability to dodge political criticism, and the use of 'opera' as a means of critiquing misrepresentations and communicating via music. These defining features of SWO and the story of how it came to be are integral to an understanding of the project as a form of artistic activism in itself, emphasising the political values that permeate the project and the myriad forms that political action can take.

Building on the description of the project provided in Chapter 1, I begin by giving an account of SWO's origin story. This focusses particularly on the directors' motivations for establishing the project; the skills, opportunities and connections that enabled them to do so as they did; and the foundational principles and aims they held for it. In particular, I highlight the significance of SWO as a meeting point for the values of socially-engaged artistic practice and those of artistic activism, resulting in a project with dual functionality: to support individual members of the sex work community—including sex worker activists—and to advocate for improvements in the ways sex workers are treated. The next section gives details of the performances between 2014-2018, and includes information about the

organisation's other activities. At this point, I elaborate upon the question: 'Why Sex Worker's *Opera*?', emphasising the cultural violence enacted through misrepresentation in mainstream opera and exploring the potential of the genre as a site of 'disidentification' (Muñoz, 1999). Finally, I connect SWO to other, related community performance projects, making links and highlighting contrasts with other organisations and projects, meanwhile situating SWO as part of an ongoing surge in sex worker political performances.

Background to SWO: People, places and spaces

As elucidated in Chapter 1, SWO is a grassroots activist community musical theatre project, bringing sex workers and allies together to make a performance that is as much *for* sex workers as it is *by* sex workers. In this initial section, I detail the events and trajectories that birthed SWO as well as the aims and values that have been foundational to the project from its inception. In some places, my writing is deliberately vague to obscure any identifying information that would aid a curious reader in their quest to figure out who among the directors might be a sex worker, or 'Director X', as they were introduced in Chapter 2.

Activist roots and artistic foundations

The three directors of SWO—Alex Etchart, Siobhán Knox and Clare Quinn—met in the early 2010s through their involvements in political activism and artistic projects. Together, they had backgrounds and training in community music, applied theatre and political performance. Prior to their work on SWO, the directors each fought for various activist causes, with long involvements in environmental, feminist, anti-racist and anti-austerity struggles. Within their activism, they had employed different strategies of political action, gaining experience of 'anarchist direct action, shutting down corporations, big buildings, power stations' as well as 'blocking off roads' and going on multiple protest marches, in which they frequently felt they were doing the bidding of the police as they obediently walked down the allotted sides of the

allotted streets at the allotted times. Increasingly, a sense of disillusionment tainted their activist lives, as they saw little to no change in the policy or culture that influenced how society operated or how power was distributed. The methods, too, were cause for dissatisfaction, with one of the directors describing them as ‘simplistic’ and ‘angry’, with little scope for involving people who might not automatically feel compelled to take political action.

‘I was getting a bit disillusioned with it... there had been so many big protests that we’d all been a part of that seemingly hadn’t led to anything, or had just been a fun distraction for a while, and they were never reported on properly in the news’. (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

Independently seeking new ways of participating in impactful political action, Knox and Etchart met through a training course run by the rebel clown movement, in which members with typically left-wing, anti-authoritarian politics engage in playful acts of non-violent disruption and civil disobedience. Their methodology is one ‘that transforms and sustains the inner emotional life of the activists as well as being an effective technique for taking direct action’ (Routledge, 2004:113). This balance of care, joy, sustainability and efficacy would go on to become central to SWO’s ethos.

In the UK, the most prolific branch of the movement is the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (est. 2003), which its founder, Jay Jordan, describes as: ‘a cocktail of camouflage and pink fluff, a bizarre bastard born between the discipline of an army and the chaos of tricksters, a queer chimera of disobedient rage entangled with the unconditional love of the clown’¹⁴. For these SWO directors—as for many other frustrated activists—the rebel clown movement offered a way of nurturing themselves while exposing the holes in the status quo, countering the well-documented phenomenon of activist ‘burnout’ (Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Pines, 1994).

¹⁴ <http://www.surge.scot/rebel-clown-army-recruitment/> [Accessed 24 January 2022]

'It was all about awakening your inner child... Every single person who came to that training was hungry to experience life in a different way, to experience activism in a different way, to bring some of the magic and creativity that we all must have inherently known about'. (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

Key to the clown methodology is the concept of ridicule, which both undermines the authority of state actors and works to diffuse tensions that frequently arise in protest contexts (Routledge, 2004:117-8).

'We would dress up as police officers and wear police hats, and stand amongst the police lines to make the police look more ridiculous, and more fool than they are. So it's kind of this soft power, but it's real power, because you're not speaking in a language that they know how to interact with'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

In contrast to previous experiences of protesting (particularly marches) where the environment had felt disappointingly controlled, being part of the rebel clown army allowed the directors to explore the possibility of participating in direct action in ways that the authorities would not expect and, therefore, would not be equipped to block.

'You're suddenly in this position where you feel like no rules apply to you, and that is incredibly freeing. When we would go on the protests as clowns, we would suddenly just go into this space. Anything could be anything because everything was a game. It was amazing because you lose your fear'. (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

The directors agreed that this experience combining clowning methods with direct action was a pivotal moment in the narrative of SWO's origination, which laid the foundations for the project's principles, both creative and political.

'For us, it was a real... nascence, a renaissance. It was the birth into a new belief and hope in activism, that was underpinned by creativity and direct action'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

In 2013, this 'new belief and hope' led Knox and Etchart to form the theatre company Experimental Experience (XX),¹⁵ which is 'dedicated to amplifying the voices of marginalised groups and curating spaces for transformative experiences through multi arts interventions'.¹⁶ Around this time, Clare Quinn—the third director of SWO—became a member of XX. 'The XX methodology' was influenced by the rebel clowns, blending components of street theatre and audience participation with interactive and improvisatory music-making. Furthermore, the notion that involvement in activism should be beneficial to activists themselves as well as to the cause they are fighting for carried through. It prompted the directors to see the personal and the political as inextricable from each other, the inter-personal and the outer-personal as inherently connected.

'With XX, it was always the journey of the inter-personal and the outer-personal stuff, and really not being ashamed or not feeling like you're not allowed to tell your story of pain, or your story of joy, or whatever it is. But also, showing a story of someone completely different as well and knowing how to relate to that story'. (SWO director)

This approach of sharing and relating to personal experience through creativity was felt by all three of the directors to sustain individuals, build stronger groups and foster wider solidarity, and it remained foundational to their practice within SWO. For example, manifestations of this will be seen later in the chapter in my discussion of SWO's Global Voice initiative and the use of different sex workers' stories in the performance of *Sex Worker's Opera*.

¹⁵ Since 2018, Knox and Etchart have continued their marginalised-led multi-arts work through the umbrella organisation Sibling Arts C.I.C.

¹⁶ <http://experimentalexperience.com/coming-soon.html> [Accessed 24 January 2022].

The idea for SWO

The name for the project came out of a conversation between one of the directors and a person called Cameron Haberberg, a queer London-based writer and musician. From their background in opera, Cameron had observed the tendency for sex worker characters to be unfairly represented, cast as either tragic victims or evil temptresses. They expressed their desire to repair some of this damage by making a ‘sex workers’ opera’ but worried that they did not have sufficient connections to the community to facilitate this. In contrast, the director they spoke to about this was already immersed in a community of queer sex workers and allies in London. They saw it as the ideal next project for XX and set up a meeting with local sex workers, anarchist activists, Haberberg and an academic who had been working with the Collective of Sex Workers and Supporters (COSWAS) in Taiwan. In this meeting, the bare-bones aim of the project was clarified. As one member later encapsulated it:

‘One of the biggest drives of the show was to have something that’s by sex workers and allies for sex workers’. (SWO member)

After an encouraging turn-out and level of participation at this initial meeting signalled enthusiasm amongst the sex work community and adjacent activist groups for a sex workers’ opera project, the directors began to look for ways to move it forward. To this end, one of them attended a course run by Royal Opera House, titled ‘Write an Opera’, for which they had obtained a bursary. This SWO director was initially concerned that the facilitators of the 25-person course—which was predominantly populated by school teachers and theatre directors and focussed on working with school children—might not be open to a community arts project with sex workers, but they were welcomed onto the week-long course. This course provided tools for collaborative writing, composing, and stage design and had a significant influence on the methods used to create SWO.

'How can you get a group of four year-olds, eight year-olds, twenty year-olds, any year-olds, and get them to write their own opera together, from beginning to end? And one of the key things was that your participant group take on every role... the musical director could even be one of the kids, the lighting operator and designer should be the kids, the producer should be the kids, the stage manager should be the kids'. (SWO director)

The 'Write an Opera' course enabled the directors to envisage a musical theatre project in which sex workers would have input at every stage of the process, curating a performance that was made and performed by community members and their allies. This was essential to the project and its political intention of amplifying sex worker voices.

[Research: Understanding community spaces and finding an international network](#)

The next step was to begin a long process of intensive research between September 2013 and May 2014, narrowing down the project's priorities. As part of the original idea for SWO, the directors decided that they wanted to base *Sex Worker's Opera* on the real stories of multiple sex workers from around the world, drawing on the experiences of those who were performing in the show as well as those who, for example, lived in another country or did not wish to perform. Although SWO had sex worker-leadership, it was still vital that the directors sought to understand the issues affecting other sex workers in the community. The research period was therefore an opportunity to gain a better understanding of these issues and to establish SWO as a project that aimed to improve the representation of sex workers in the public sphere. For the directors, including Director X, this involved observation of spaces where sex workers would meet to discuss activist strategies or to provide mutual support, communication with a huge number of organisations and individuals, and absorption of contemporary political debates within the community and the public sphere. However, they were not starting from zero.

Before the project was conceived of, Director X was integrated within social and political circles that meant they were continually, organically and experientially developing an awareness of the types of things that were important to the sex work community. Access to sex worker-only spaces such as sex worker breakfasts, attendance at community events like the Sex Worker Film Festival at Rio Cinema in Dalston, East London, and interactions with sex worker friends strengthened knowledge of the sex work scene and connections within the community, all of which would eventually feed into and bolster SWO.

From personal experience, Director X could see that there was an important distinction between sex worker spaces that were explicitly political—such as activist meetings—and spaces that were seemingly apolitical—such as weekly breakfasts organised by sex workers. At the latter, workers meet to eat, talk, share skills, and pick up free supplies, such as condoms, pregnancy tests and menstrual products. Unlike activist meetings, where people might use somewhat academic language, these spaces were highly accessible and did not require active participation, the development of any particular critical discourse, or even a commitment to organising.

‘There was a lot of talk at the time of, ‘Okay, why aren’t people coming to these activist meetings that we really want to get more diverse groups of people coming to, but so many people are coming to sex worker breakfast, for example?’ And the key is, it’s sex worker breakfast. There is no demand on you, you come and have breakfast and meet people. We found out that sometimes people are more likely to come to a space that doesn’t label itself a political meeting, and those spaces actually are sometimes the most political. Ironically, so much of Sex Worker’s Opera ended up being born out of there by members meeting each other and discussing things’. (Director X)

Here, Director X highlights the political significance of spaces that do not demand explicit political engagement. Simply providing a context in which sex workers can

access resources, meet others, and talk about the issues affecting them becomes its own form of resistance, in that it goes against the norms of isolation and stigma and works to strengthen community.

Equally important is the fact that, because they are more accessible, spaces such as sex worker breakfasts foster interactions between contrasting factions of the sex work community, representing more of a realistic cross-section and creating opportunities for dialogue, thus building solidarity.

‘It was a really important space to witness and see. This is real activism; this is the presence of the people who are most affected by this stigma, violence, laws, exclusion, isolation’. (Director X)

For Director X, the notion of ‘real activism’ refers to the combined presence of marginalised people. These are sex workers who—despite the possibility that they might not have common ground other than their job, might not be of the same political persuasion, or might not share other oppressed identities—face the same issues: stigma, violence, exclusion and isolation. Here, a *real* activist space is one that welcomes all of these people, weaving solidarity in amongst the potential for discord and creating an opportunity for marginalised voices to be heard regardless of their socioeconomic status or educational capital, their race, their gender, or their migration status. It does not seem to matter so much at this level that this activity takes place within a sex worker-only space, rather than engaging with those whose minds could be changed about sex workers or who might be capable of influencing policy. In the context of sex worker breakfasts, the defining activist feature is the act of building an accessible and appealing social movement that serves those who are part of it while they participate.

Looking beyond local level activity, Director X found that the same solidarity they had witnessed at sex worker breakfasts was present in the international sex work community, expressed through online forums.

‘It was really cool because I was like, ‘Look, there are other people

doing this. This is exciting! We're all talking... Oh my god, other people who understand me. This is so exciting'. I remember thinking it was an amazing political solidarity tool. And it hadn't been meant to be that, it was just a place for people to share experiences really'. (Director X)

The idea that something as simple as 'a space for people to share experiences' constitutes a 'political solidarity tool' influenced the directors' activist practice within SWO, highlighting the significance of sharing experiences and stories. Director X's memory of surprise at finding other people who understood them online is also demonstrative of the isolation affecting many sex workers. For a group that is so stigmatised and excluded, carving out a space that encourages exchange and communication without fear of rejection or judgement, is, in itself, a form of activism.

Taken together, Director X's insights to community spaces for sex workers, locally and online, fed directly into the directors' activist priorities for SWO, as they set out to create a project that would welcome myriad sex worker perspectives and identities, build solidarity within the sex work community, and provide support for the individuals who participated in the forms of friendship, care, and creative opportunities.

'That was my first knowledge of sex worker activism and the cool aspect of sex worker spaces and community. And that definitely has reflected in the Opera. That was a big part of what I wanted to create in the show'. (Director X)

There was a drive to create something that mirrored both the plurality and the solidarity they had witnessed. They would go on to work with the other directors to weave this ethos into their community arts practice, facilitating a space where sex workers and allies could build connections and gather collective strength, before displaying this combination of solidarity and plurality on stage.

'That's the dream of this space, is to hold a group of diverse sex

workers together, and friends of sex workers and allies, who may not have even thought they supported sex work'. (Director X)

Director X's interpretation of sex worker spaces as 'accessible' but potentially 'disparate' carried through into SWO. Members of the project came from different factions of the community; some were affiliated with activist groups (such as English Collective of Prostitutes and East London Strippers Collective) and every person brought their own experiences and opinions, which sometimes sparked disagreements about representation. Through collaborating on SWO they entered into a dialogue with each other, finding ways of communicating and building solidarity around, not in spite of, their plurality.

Another central part of the research phase for SWO involved fostering relationships with sex worker activist groups, both locally and internationally. These relationships were integral to establishing SWO as a trustworthy project, both in terms of what the show was publicising about sex work and the way it was protecting individual members (or contributors) from harm. Positioning SWO within a pre-existing network of sex workers and sex worker activism also supported the creative process of eliciting stories from sex workers around the world, which was designed to enhance the representation of experiences within the performance.

'Well it was very key to us that from the beginning we wanted to, through on the-ground research, make relationships with local sex worker activist groups. But we also wanted to ensure that there was Global South representation from the beginning'. (SWO director)

Sending emails to activist groups around the world and attending events hosted by local organisations, SWO's directors began to make themselves and their intentions for the project known. They sought advice and direction from these groups with questions such as: What would you like to see represented on stage? What stories are important for you now? Nonetheless, and as expected given the vast history of misrepresentation and cultural exploitation by artists—a response to which would

eventually constitute much of *Sex Worker's Opera*—some groups were distrustful of the project at first. Even the aspect of sex worker leadership provided by Director X only went some way to assuaging concerns.

'Obviously the community had reason to be cautious. Just because you're a sex worker doesn't mean you speak for all sex workers, or hold the best interests of the community at heart. There's a legacy of individual sex workers taking TV time to make universal statements which can push more marginalised sex workers under the bus'. (Director X)

Though sex worker leadership did not guarantee community support, for the reason articulated above, the directors did feel it simplified interactions with individual sex workers. Many of these interactions occurred online, on the forums that had helped Director X to feel part of a community and which were now a key tool for advertising SWO to sex workers who might want to be involved in the project, either by participating in-person—as a performer, musician or crew member—or by sending a story. In this respect, the insider status and knowledge held by Director X was immensely valuable.

'It wasn't like we were making online accounts randomly to invite people to take part or share their stories. I was already active on escort and webcam sites and forums. So I could just message people from there and people didn't feel this scary thing of, 'Who am I even sending this story to?'' (Director X)

Using Director X's pre-existing sex work profiles to contact individual sex workers online likely worked to eliminate some of the anxiety and distrust that recipients of these invitations might otherwise have felt revealing personal information to a 'stranger'. I am unable to quantify the difference it made to recruitment numbers, but in distinguishing Director X from a generic 'artist'—someone who might not be personally invested in accurately or ethically representing sex work—this strategy

enabled potential members or contributors to see that SWO was sex worker-led. Given the wariness that surrounds 'outsider' representations of the community, this most probably increased the likelihood of participation.

'To avoid being perceived as a voyeuristic artist, I was always open about being a sex worker on all of the platforms that we contacted sex workers through. All the early blurbs say, 'I am a sex worker''. (Director X)

Over the years, the sex work community, including activist groups, have become increasingly supportive of SWO but, at this point in the story, the directors had limited ways of demonstrating their commitment to handling sex workers' stories sensitively to the wider community, or of showing that the group's work would make a positive contribution to the community. This changed once the group created the performance of *Sex Worker's Opera*, enabling other sex workers to see SWO's politics in practice. The response of one member who joined the project in 2017 after seeing *Sex Worker's Opera* is indicative of the successful navigation of the representational perils that might have befallen a group of outsiders to the community.

'I just cried throughout the whole fucking show, I just cried... It was very empowering for me to see sex workers on the stage telling their stories in such a touching manner, and seeing the crowd connecting with our side of the story in a non-judgemental way, seeing us as humans, not just as victims or as has been discussed before. So, to me that was pretty powerful'. (SWO member)

Developing SWO: Key aspects of the project's herstory

To get to the point where its handling of sex worker representation could be approved by the community, and to then maintain its reputation as a positive force

within sex worker activism, SWO gradually built up its membership and fan-base through a series of workshops and annual performances, consistently prioritising the wellbeing of project members and sex workers who came to see the performance.

2014

The directors initially conceived of a series of weekly workshops running for eight consecutive weeks, followed by a two-week intensive rehearsal plan. This would allow time for members to get to know each other, to work on creating and developing material based on their own stories and those sent into the project by other sex workers, and to get these pieces performance-ready. While still in the first phase of the weekly workshops, the directors were finding it difficult to sustain a consistent group of workshop attendees. On the one hand, this meant the workshops were often vibrant, with different sex workers and allies coming and contributing new content weekly. On the other hand, the lack of continuity meant it was challenging to provide a sense of ownership for participants: in an attempt to gradually construct an entire performance, groups might end up working on something a completely different group had created the previous week.

'It was always different people so you were always having to start from scratch. Now, this was amazing in terms of coming up with themes, stories, ideas, different experiences, and visioning together with lots of different people. But it did mean that our idea of having this weekly thing that was growing and then going into two solid weeks was looking less and less likely'. (SWO director)

Numbers were equally unpredictable, dipping as low as two people in one week. Recognising that it was not due to a lack of interest but rather an incompatibility of the workshop schedule (which one director described as 'so un-sexworkerish') with lives that involved last-minute client bookings and irregular working hours, the directors decided to re-evaluate their model.

Inspired by the format of a performance project that two of them had previously been involved in, the directors began to explore the possibility of hosting a more intensive block of workshops over the course of three consecutive days, imagining that a three-day commitment would be more feasible than the two entire weeks they had planned. Under this model, there would be performances at the end of the third day and again the following night.

'Three days is a legitimate amount of time that you can ask people to work for free in London. So many of the people I spoke to were like, 'I can't do two weeks, it's not gonna work. I can't come down'. As a precarious person myself, I was already worried about the idea of doing two weeks solidly and not being able to do other work... I got on the phone and talked to all the people who'd cancelled and more people and said, "How do you feel about three days?" and so many of them were like, "That would be so much better!"' (SWO director)

By the time that the three-day workshop period began, some of the material for the show had already been created, including a song written by the musical director and a dominatrix, another song written by a sex worker member and a collection of 20 stories sent in online by sex workers who could not participate in-person. While the creative process is the subject of detailed discussion in Chapter 7, it is worth noting here the combination of creative structure and freedom that the directors provided, placing artistic anchors while encouraging members' agency.

'We had to provide these things but then we had to leave gaps for people to bring their own stories'. (SWO director)

Beginning the three-day process in the rehearsal rooms at The Rag Factory in East London was an anxious moment, with no guarantee that anyone would come, despite people's enthusiasm on the phone. The relief when members did start trickling through the door was immense:

'After such a terrible, disappointing, crushing experience when people dropped out of the two-week process and we thought we were gonna have to cancel the whole thing—because you literally can't do it if no one's there—it was the most heartening and validating and beautiful experience to suddenly have this huge amount of people come through the door, and know that—because it was a short process—it was probably going to happen this time'. (SWO director)

Having braced themselves for the worst-case scenario of no attendees and a directors-only performance of the stories they had received, the fact that over twenty people arrived—a combination of sex workers and allies that aligned with the 50/50 policy—was deeply encouraging. In addition, with the new three-day model, it seemed that these people would become members, consistently participating in the whole process, from creation to performance. For some, there was already a sense that the project would not end here.

'She [a member] took some photos and then she looked at me and she went, "Wow. We're making history"'. (SWO director)

The final rehearsals were carried out in a pub neighbouring the performance venue, as planning had not accounted for the fact that the performers would not be able to use the stage while it was being set up. This was where the show was put together for the first time. Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into depth on this, it is worth noting that a significant part of SWO's ethic of care has been directed toward ensuring members were proud of the artistic quality of the work they were creating and performing. The tensions between the drive for artistic quality, the ethical considerations of caring for a group of marginalised individuals, and the realities of time constraints are explored in greater detail in Chapter 8. In SWO's first year, with such a short period for devising and rehearsal, the directors were concerned of the group's ability to execute the performance as planned, a worry that came with real ethical concerns about whether they had set a group of

marginalised people up for public artistic failure. Here, however, the performative nature of much sex work came into play.

'You know that everyone's bonded, but that bond is only so strong, and if you throw people into a really damning environment in front of a hundred people and go, 'Good luck!' most humans would crumble under the pressure. However, not sex workers. Because sex workers deal with annoying, weird, strange clients with sudden fantasies last minute, for no reason, no expectation, no communication, in the moment right away. Strippers deal with going on stage and just blagging it all the time'. (SWO director)

For the most part, the directors' anxieties were not mirrored by members, which perhaps says something about the nature of the self-selecting group, who were likely enthusiastic about performing.

In 2014, the performances were held at The Courtyard Theatre on 28th-29th May. Partly due to a Kickstarter campaign, through which the directors had sold tickets in advance to fund the workshops, the performances were sold out, with many people attempting to get last-minute tickets.

'We were about to go on stage and I went to the door and there were just thirty people queuing, trying to get into the actual venue'. (SWO director)

At these two performances, the group experienced how audiences might react to the same show in different ways. Both audiences had a significant contingent of sex workers, but the first night's audience laughed easily throughout whereas the second's were much quieter, to the point where the group thought they hated it. One of the many lessons they had to learn was that a less jovial audience is not necessarily a less appreciative audience.

'We did our second show and the audience weren't laughing at nearly anything. It was absolutely the inverse. And at the end they applauded like no one else, standing ovation. So we really had to learn that people just interpret things completely differently'. (SWO director)

Later performances

Buoyed up on the success of the first run and, in particular, the support they had since received from the sex work community, the group looked to develop the show and perform it again in subsequent years. The directors repeatedly invited members to contribute ideas or material for the show ahead of the rehearsals but these invitations were largely ignored. As a result, the format of the creative process remained largely the same as in 2014, with an intense period of creative development and rehearsing that immediately preceded the performance dates.

In 2015, performances of *Sex Worker's Opera* took place at the Arcola Theatre in Dalston, East London, from 23rd-26th January. This time, there were double the performances, and the show itself was also significantly longer, running at around two hours, as opposed to its earlier running time of one hour and fifteen minutes. Between the first and second runs, the group also gained a few members, including from outside the UK, and enacted a number of creative developments. Many of these are discussed in detail in the following chapters about the songs themselves and the structure of *Sex Worker's Opera* but, as a general point, the 2015 show made room for greater political complexity as well as a stronger narrative thread, contrasting with the cabaret-like structure of the 2014 iteration. Perhaps the most significant change was the inclusion of two characters, a sex worker and her second wave prohibitionist feminist mother, who would reappear throughout the performance engaging in debates that signposted specific issues pertaining to sex work and feminism more broadly. Their dialogue linked the previously detached scenes together, creating greater narrative coherence. In 2015, the group also had a week to rehearse, as opposed to the three days they had to create and rehearse the show in 2014. In theory, this would allow performers to feel more confident in their

roles; however, the addition of new members and the creation of new material meant that this process was still rushed.

In 2016, the show was developed further; members indicated in interviews that this year represented a significant shift in the artistic quality of the performance. *Sex Worker's Opera* was performed at The Pleasance Theatre in Islington, London, from 17th-29th May. Now that the group was better-rehearsed, familiar with the process of working together and used to performing in front of large audiences, they were more able to tackle complicated choreographies or challenging harmonies. The inclusion of the 'Maître'D' narrator also helped to tie the performance together, signposting the key issues and themes at the beginning of the performance and ahead of certain scenes. Furthermore, the group was better able to handle sensitive political issues with care. Most notably, 2016 saw the group grappling with human trafficking and modern slavery discourse. Aside from being a painful topic to consider, it is also a thorny one to handle from a sex worker rights perspective. Because many sex workers have historically been concerned with arguing that sex work is a choice, there has been a tendency to firmly distinguish sex work from human trafficking with no room for nuance. In fact, this approach risks harming migrant sex workers, whose journey may not be as simple to characterise as the choice/force dichotomy implies, and who therefore are frequently excluded from sex worker advocacy and the supposed benefits of legalisation or decriminalisation (Mac & Smith, 2018:84-5).

By this point, in 2016, the group had demonstrated their ability to represent sex workers and the issues that affect them accurately and sensitively. This helped them to earn the trust of the sex work community and, from there, they were able to tackle more contentious topics that painted sex work in a less positive light, such as trafficking and drug dependency. Simultaneously, the discourse was developing in the sex worker rights movement, going beyond binaries and stereotypes of freedom and force that reinforce hierarchies, and developing partnerships and frameworks that could serve people with different experiences of sex work, migration, choice and coercion (see Yingwana et al, 2019). Working sensitively, SWO members were

able to talk about these issues in *Sex Worker's Opera* by incorporating some of the stories sent by sex workers around the world, balancing out the sex-positive, empowerment angle that had characterised much of the 2014 production.

'You also have to find ways to involve stories which are not so comfortable, to involve realities that are not so comfortable, but not in this way where you say, 'Look, we showed the story of the poor, poor person and we are the good ones because we are helping them and presenting them'. No, that is not the way that it worked out with the Sex Worker's Opera. It had been more, 'Yeah, sure we are going to tell the stories and we do have privileges and we speak about it, but there is also involvement of other stories in it''. (SWO member)

Concurrently, the same conversations were happening in the wider sphere of sex worker activism, where there certainly seemed to be increasing openness to more complex, somewhat ambivalent, perspectives on the sex industry. Instead of arguing that sex work is an empowering choice—as they had needed to in order to combat the second wave feminist and religious discourses that all sex workers need to be rescued—many advocates in the mid-2010s foregrounded the argument that sex work is simply the most feasible economic choice (e.g. Niki Adams of ECP & Dudu Dlamini of SWEAT, quoted in Mac & Smith, 2018:49-54). Likewise, instead of arguing that victims of human trafficking are distinct from sex workers based on a polarised assessment of agency, plenty began to suggest that borders and racist immigration policies facilitate the coercion of migrants into sex work, making them more susceptible to trafficking, and that the threat of deportation cloaked as 'rescue' is not the answer. SWO was therefore both taking its lead from, and feeding into, the increasing nuance in these debates.

'It was trying to keep the show updated, keep it really relevant to what was going on politically at the time so that the show never felt like a dead artefact, but it felt like a responsive development'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

In 2017, the first year I was involved in the project, the group performed around the UK in a month-long tour from November 4th – December 2nd. *Sex Worker's Opera* was performed at the Mumford Theatre in Cambridge, Theatre Delicatessen in Sheffield, Theatre Tropicana in Weston-super-Mare, and Ovalhouse (now Brixton House), in London. At this point, the mother and daughter relationship that had become a pillar of the performance transitioned to represent the relationship between two sisters instead, a sex working feminist and her prohibitionist feminist sister. Though this was initially the result of a change in casting that meant the generational gap was suddenly unbelievable, rather than an intentional shift, it was an effective way of updating the debates and demonstrating the tension that exists between contemporary feminisms. The dialogue still served the same purpose of linking the scenes together and flagging pertinent issues. These sections became known as 'Sister Act'.

In 2018, the project went international, booking a run in Amsterdam at the Theater Compagnie from July 21st – 2nd August to coincide with the International AIDS Conference, which was being held in the city that year. With a number of attendees at the Conference already interested in sex worker issues, not least the sex worker activist groups in attendance, the show was popular evening entertainment for delegates, tourists and locals alike.

Audience engagement and critical reception

From 2014 onwards, SWO members and directors have featured on high-profile television programmes, such as ITV's *This Morning*, BBC World Service and BBC's *The Cultural Frontline*. Writers for *The Independent*, *Classic FM*, *The Guardian*, *Vice*, *TimeOut*, *Diva Magazine*, and *the Big Issue* have also featured the project. According to the project's official sales data, the performance has reached 15,000 in live audiences between 2014-18 and fifteen million people have heard about the project online, on television or on the radio. Ticket sales have consistently been high, reaching 97% overall, which is perhaps unusual given that many of the performers

did not have prior training or stage experience. Reviews have typically been positive, with many reviewers explicitly forgiving moments that might not make the professional cut and praising, instead, the representation of different sex work narratives, the improvisatory humour, and the emotional impact of feeling like performers were telling their own stories.

‘So many articles said, ‘This is what theatre should be, this is what opera should be. Now I believe in theatre again’’. (SWO director)

Asked about their experiences of interacting with the media, the directors admitted that it was an area of their work that they were particularly proud of. Having prepared meticulously for interviews by watching other sex worker activists respond to difficult questions and practising their own responses in aggressive questioning role-plays, they were generally pleased with the way they had handled the pressure of speaking to journalists and said the same about members who had been interviewed regarding the project.

Part of their success, they suspected, was due to the fact that SWO was not deemed to be a *political* organisation, but rather an *arts* project. As they were not explicitly lobbying for legal change or directly challenging politicians, they did not appear as a threat and could therefore often rely on a more sympathetic angle from journalists than frontline sex worker activists. In fact, it is this exact quality that makes SWO such an important political contribution to sex worker activism: it serves as a Trojan Horse for radical perspectives and marginalised voices that would otherwise often be silenced in the mainstream media.

‘We didn’t get the same vitriol or pressure that other activists who’ve done these interviews have. Never. Because we were an arts project’.
(SWO director)

Having said that, this flags one of the limitations of artistic activism, as compared to more traditional, front-line activism. While the ‘Trojan Horse’

approach may grant access to certain platforms and audiences, it also risks softening or concealing the radical perspectives and marginalised voices it aims to amplify. Throughout this thesis, I evidence the inclusion of direct and challenging political messages within *Sex Worker's Opera*. However, it is possible that—within relatively brief media appearances at least—the main takeaway for viewers, readers or listeners was not, ‘Wow, sex workers face so many different types of discrimination; I need to listen to them, challenge stigma where I see it and start advocating for decriminalisation’, but rather, ‘What the hell? Sex workers making opera? That’s pretty cool/weird’. Arguably, the Trojan Horse approach to media coverage engages more people in considering the impact of cultural misrepresentation on sex workers and might appeal to a number of them to do further research and potentially offer support. At the same time, the pressure to make politics palatable might lessen the impact it is possible to have when granted access to public platforms.

Extending the reach of the performance, SWO directors and members also facilitate outreach workshops to educate related activist groups about the issues that affect sex workers and how they can practise allyship in their work.

Funding

From a financial perspective, SWO has undergone a massive transformation over the years it has been active. In 2014, on a characteristically tight budget for a grassroots arts project, the directors worked with a £700 community music grant from Goldsmiths, University of London music department and £2000 worth of donations they received from a Kickstarter campaign. By contributing to the Kickstarter campaign, donors were able to buy a ticket in advance. This meant that, before the performance was even created, half of the theatre seats had already been filled, a fact that both enabled and added pressure to the creative process.

‘We had a lot of support. What we didn’t have was any guarantee that anyone would turn up to the workshops’. (SWO director)

In following years, the pay that members received for participation went up consistently—constituting an artist’s fee, rather than expenses—rehearsal periods lasted for longer, the performance venues grew and performance runs were extended. This growth was reflected in the budget as the project went from raising £2,700 through fundraising events in 2014 to an Arts Council England (ACE) grant of £15,000 and a second Kickstarter campaign of just over £11,000 in 2016, and combined funding of £79,000 from ACE and Open Society Foundations (OSF) in 2017. In 2018—the final year *Sex Worker’s Opera* was performed—the project received £112,000 from OSF, £9,000 from Performing Rights Society to develop the music, £6,750 from the Feminist Review Trust, and just over £12,000 in total from the international women’s fund Mamacash, the HIV/AIDS fund Broadway Cares, and the American Jewish World Service.

Though Experimental Experience’s fundraising was relatively successful, it is worth noting that the directors worked for free until 2017, and that members were also paid very little in the first three years. Even in 2018, the company barely broke even after the run of shows in Amsterdam. Since 2018, XX—now Sibling Arts C.I.C.—has gained some financial security, receiving core funding from Arts Council England, Open Society Foundations and Mamacash, which has helped the directors to continue working throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and made it possible to begin visioning for the next project of making a SWO feature film. Only at the end of 2021 did the directors hire a professional development manager; before that, they did all their fundraising themselves, a complex process that would likely be a barrier for many marginalised people organising arts projects. The issue of access to funding is therefore political, raising questions around the viability and sustainability of projects started by community members themselves. The pressure this inevitably places on individuals is explored in greater depth in Chapter 8.

Global Voice

SWO's 'Global Voice' initiative encompasses all the ways in which SWO has included stories from people who were not able to participate in-person, due to geography, personal circumstances, or simply the risk of stigma that comes with being attached to a project for sex workers. It includes the elicitation of typed stories from sex workers through online advertising platforms and partnerships with international sex worker organisations that work with their members individually to gather their stories through recorded interviews. If they arrive in audio form, these stories are then transcribed so they are more accessible and more easily integrated within the performance. Stories often appear in monologue form within the performance and some can be seen on SWO's website.¹⁷ The Global Voice aspect of SWO was particularly important in ensuring the performance had representation of experiences of sex workers in the Global South, who were less likely to be able to travel to London to participate than their Europe- or UK-based counterparts.

'The story call-out was so important because we knew that we didn't just want it to be themes from particular people who could come to a London meeting. We didn't want those to be the only stories that were presented when there's so little narrative around sex worker stories anyway. And it's so, so important to not just present one narrative if you're calling it the Sex Worker's Opera'. (SWO director)

As seen here, the Global Voice facet of SWO responded to the perceived need to pluralise sex worker narratives, as a key strategy for moving beyond both pre-existing and new stereotypes that might be created when one 'type' of sex worker is the only voice that gets to be heard. Global Voice enabled the integration of 'other' narratives into performances of *Sex Worker's Opera* from the beginning of the project.

¹⁷ <https://sexworkersopera.com/learning/stories> [Accessed 22nd March 2022]

Early networking and calls for participation resulted in twenty contributions ahead of the first show, including from Taiwan, Brazil and Argentina. Etchart's Uruguayan heritage and fluency in Spanish have supported connections with sex workers and sex worker groups in South American countries, but stories have been continually elicited through partnerships with sex worker groups around the world. To date, SWO has an archive of over 100 stories from seventeen different countries across six continents.

The Global Voice initiative has also become a solidarity-building tool, fostering dialogue between SWO members and international sex worker organisations. Through group video calls, SWO has established relationships with Dominican migrant workers based in Chile through Fundación Margen,¹⁸ members of Project X in Singapore,¹⁹ and members of SWEAT, the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce in South Africa.²⁰ Members of SWEAT also sent a collection of stories in 2018, many of which were about their experiences as sex workers living with HIV. This relationship remains strong and future creative collaborations are planned, including on a feature film project the SWO group is undertaking. Overall, these partnerships demonstrate a commitment to amplifying the voices of marginalised sex workers internationally, and provide an opportunity for members of each organisation to learn about the experiences of sex workers in other contexts.

'We've always been very clear that it's a mutual relationship, that whatever they want to get out of it is as important as whatever we're doing; that we've got a show to put on but there's no expectation that their stories are gonna go in the show if they don't want them to. We just want to genuinely learn from each other and connect. And maybe all we get out of the Skype call is we ask them the question, 'What would you like us to tell audiences in the UK?' When you're approaching

¹⁸ <https://www.fundacionmargen.cl/> [Accessed 2nd April 2022]

¹⁹ <https://theprojectx.org/> [Accessed 2nd April 2022]

²⁰ <http://www.sweat.org.za/> [Accessed 2nd April 2022]

it like that then people know that there's a care and a trust there'. (SWO director)

SWO has also involved sex workers in the project through inreach workshops, which tend to be attached to performances. For example, during the 2017 tour SWO members and directors gave workshops with groups in each city the show visited, writing collective songs with each group. These were then played during the interval of the performance of *Sex Worker's Opera* as a nod to the local community.

Why Sex Worker's Opera?

"Why is this an opera?..." We had practised all our press blurbs and they were always like, 'Well, opera has misrepresented sex workers for centuries' and people would be like, 'Oh yeah... click'". (SWO director)

As I flagged in my definition of community musical theatre in Chapter 1, and as will become increasingly clear throughout the discussion of the performance itself in the following chapters, *Sex Worker's Opera* is not an opera in the traditional sense. The reference to the genre is therefore symbolic, rather than technical. It responds to the fact that, in operatic representations, male writers have tended to vilify sex workers 'as the femmes fatales who lured men into sexual temptation only to destroy them' (Hutcheon & Hutcheon, 1996:79). In roles such as Violetta (*La Traviata*), Manon (*Manon Lescaut*) Carmen (*Carmen*) and Mimi (*La Boheme*), sex workers are portrayed in extremes: as temptresses, victims, or both. The feminist literature critic, Catherine Clément, famously mourned the demises of women, more generally, in opera (1988), with Susan McClary suggesting that Clément was writing in anticipation of 'the emergence of women who (like Carmen) can enjoy their erotic energy... but who (unlike Carmen) are permitted to survive—women who form a sisterhood that can sing freely and who cannot, will not, be driven underground' (1988; xvii).

SWO fills the representational gap identified by Clément and McClary, celebrating and advocating for sexual rights and freedoms beyond those prescribed within patriarchal, or operatic, norms. In performances of *Sex Worker's Opera*, members clearly 'enjoy their erotic energy', and they certainly 'form a sisterhood that can sing freely'. SWO therefore provides a contrast to the isolation normally imposed on women's—and specifically sex workers'—characters in opera (Hadlock, 2004:286), extending solidarity across feminist, queer and sex worker communities. Simultaneously, SWO undermines the privileged notions of white male composers and librettists in opera by enabling sex workers to project their voices in their own words. They will not be driven underground.

The directors' perception of opera as 'the most respected, best-funded and highest art form in the Classical canon' (SWO director) made it ideal territory for reclamation, with the hope that tackling misrepresentation at the top of the cultural hierarchy would encourage critical reflection on misrepresentation in popular and contemporary forms as well. Other features of the genre, too, could be used to SWO's advantage, without constraining the group or the artistic direction of the performance.

'It's such a political statement to take a format that's been really so oppressive over the years and reclaim it and say 'Well, this is what we want to say about the opera'. Getting some elements from the Opera—like the length of the show, or using the theatre as a medium for expression—but also breaking with a lot of stereotypes from the opera, like having hip-hopera or having nudity, having poetry mixed up with music and so on. And then also the costumes were Do It Yourself as well, which is quite different from the requirements and needs of a proper opera'. (SWO member)

The freedom to break from technical operatic norms—stylistically and organisationally—gave SWO members an opportunity to repurpose the genre. In

practising 'disidentification' (Muñoz, 1999), members transformed opera from a purveyor of harmful stereotypes to a site of playful self-expression, incisive critique, and poignant advocacy. Not only did members disidentify with the genre of opera itself, by adding certain features or breaking with traditions—as the member quoted above states; they also disidentified with particular forms *within* the opera, notably the aria. The significance of this is further explored in relation to specific examples in Chapter 4.

In interviews, both directors and members asserted that SWO gave them a way of countering pervasive exploitation and misrepresentation of sex workers in the cultural sphere. For members, other experiences of participating in cultural productions where sex workers were not in control had often resulted in two-dimensional portrayals, particularly for one member who had been part of the documentary series *Love For Sale* (Crombie & Evans, 2014) that was presented by Rupert Everett. Though the mini-series claimed to go 'behind the stereotypes',²¹ she felt she had been 'classified as the Happy Hooker', reinforcing the binary of sex workers as either 'very happy or very tragic' (SWO member). Making the *Opera* provided an opportunity to *truly* go beyond the stereotypes, in a way that is perhaps only possible when the artists are, themselves, members of the community.

'The amount of sex worker-made poetry, pictures is just so incredible and so moving as well. I really think that it's important now to make a statement to the established art world and say, 'You are in debt to us because you have been representing us in your own terms for so long and you have never asked us how we feel about the way you are portraying us'. It's the same with women's bodies: they are in debt to women, the museums. How many naked women do we see in the

²¹ <https://www.radiotimes.com/programme/b-z750do/love-for-sale-with-rupert-everett-season-1/>

[Accessed 10th February 2022]

museums, but how much art made by women do we see?’ (SWO member)

That opera is a musical genre is also key, given the channel of communication that music can help to establish (Hesmondhalgh, 2013:146). Speaking to the persuasive powers of affect, one member argued that ‘music is more effective than any discourse’ because it ‘touches your soul on a different level’ (SWO member). Meanwhile, another member saw music as a political Trojan Horse, suggesting that ‘putting anything to music automatically makes it not like an argument, or not preachy; it automatically becomes this fun thing that’s saying a lot more than you think it will’ (SWO member). Similarly, members agreed with suggestions that music can be a valuable tool for learning and memorisation (Schulkind, 2009:220), claiming that ‘It’s a bit of a leveller in a lot of ways. The style and the catchiness of it puts people at more of an intellectual level playing field... it doesn’t need to be super complex with the language in order for people to understand’ (SWO member).

The answer to the question ‘why opera?’ is multifaceted. It must account for the symbolic significance of attacking the art form with the greatest status in the cultural hierarchy, the potential for potent disidentification that this particular genre offers, and the perceived impacts of communicating through music that an attachment to ‘opera’ facilitates. All three of these broad themes run through my analysis of SWO and community musical theatre as artistic activism, informing my understanding of the project’s outcomes. Furthermore, in the scoping exercise of closely related socially-engaged arts projects that follows, the relevance of this question beyond SWO is apparent.

[SWO: Community arts organisation or sex worker-political performance?](#)

Positioned somewhere between a socially-engaged arts project and sex worker performance activism—such as the examples given in Chapter 1—SWO poses a

generative challenge to contemporary participatory arts practice. In particular, analysis in this context illuminates the importance of community leadership in activist community performance, for the sex worker rights movement and marginalised-led activism more broadly.

Repeatedly, reviewers of the show have written about the cast of *Sex Worker's Opera* as a mix of sex workers and professional actors (Gardner, 2017). This incorrect distinction obfuscates the fact that, within its membership of 50% sex workers and 50% allies, SWO does not distinguish between professional artists and sex workers, as many community arts projects might distinguish between artists and participants. Instead, fighting against the implicit assumption that sex workers cannot also be artists—which is, in itself, a subtle symptom of stigma—all members are classified as artists, regardless of their status as sex workers or allies, first-time or seasoned performers, cast or crew. This is perhaps what distinguishes SWO from other contemporary community arts projects, in which the line between 'professionals' and 'communities' is typically quite marked.

Take Streetwise Opera, for example, which is perhaps one of the closest UK-based relations to SWO. Streetwise Opera has been running for over twenty years as a community arts project for people who have experienced various forms of homelessness, and now has branches in London, Manchester, Nottingham, Newcastle and Teesside. The organisation's key social impact aims are to improve wellbeing and build social inclusion for those who participate,²² both of which are transferable to SWO's intentions. Streetwise Opera is a much larger operation than SWO, but otherwise they look similar from the outside. For example, they both work to reclaim opera as a space that can be inhabited by those who are socially excluded and channel the potential of music to communicate to audiences who might not otherwise listen. However, the role that professional artists play in productions marks a fundamental difference between the two projects.

²² <https://streetwiseopera.org/impact/> [Accessed 10th February 2022]

Whereas in SWO, the community group itself is a mix of people with professional experience working as artists and those who are newer to this type of work, in Streetwise Opera, the community group—consisting entirely of those with experience of homelessness—collaborates with high-profile professional artists or ensembles for specific projects. There are pros and cons to the latter approach, which forges opportunities for prestigious performances, gains positive publicity and has the potential to destigmatise and empower people with experience of homelessness by association. However, this approach also has the potential to emphasise the them/us divide, exacerbating the distinction between ‘artist’ and ‘community’, rather than championing community members *as* artists. Alternatively, in refusing to distinguish between the two groups, SWO 1) protects sex worker members from being identified, and 2) reduces hierarchies attached to levels of skill and experience that might result in some voices being taken more seriously than others.

Another related organisation is Clean Break, ‘A women’s theatre company changing lives and changing minds – on stage, in prison and in the community’.²³ Founded in 1979, Clean Break has helped to amplify the voices of women who have experience of, or are at risk of entering, the criminal justice system. Like SWO, Clean Break has dual functionality, both supporting the wellbeing of its members and educating the public on the issues that affect women who have experienced the criminal justice system. As illuminated in Chapter 1, analysis of Clean Break supports the argument that care and politics are inextricable within organisations making artistic activism with marginalised communities (McAvinchey, 2020). However, one fundamental difference is that, though Clean Break was established by two women serving sentences in prison, the organisation has since evolved to orbit around collaborations with leading professional scriptwriters who do not have this lived experience. As with Streetwise Opera’s involvement of ‘professional artists’, this is not necessarily a shortcoming, but it is valuable to make the distinction with SWO’s

²³ <https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/> [Accessed 10th February 2022]

model of community-based artistic leadership—both in terms of Director X and the collaborative creative process, which is explored in Chapter 7.

In my experience talking about SWO to artists and academics in the UK with awareness of the socially-engaged arts sector, Streetwise Opera and Clean Break are frequently offered as comparisons. I offer the above clarification of some of the key contrasts not to criticise Streetwise Opera or Clean Break, but simply to highlight the fact that SWO operates in a slightly unusual way for a socially-engaged arts project. Despite existing for almost a decade and growing considerably during this time, the project has maintained a number of grassroots characteristics. Specifically, the blurring of the distinction between ‘professional artists’ and ‘community members’ has enabled the project to channel the activist slogan, ‘Nothing about us without us’, that was first coined by disability activists (Charlton, 2000) and has since found a home in the sex worker rights movement.

As an example of community musical theatre as artistic activism, SWO brings the ethical and political principles of participatory arts together with the grassroots, community-led drive for justice foregrounded in the sex worker performances that form such a crucial part of sex worker activism, including but not limited to those discussed in Chapter 1. The project’s atypical organisational structure has enabled the provision of care and support for members with diverse identities, experiences and needs to be combined with a deep-rooted sense of solidarity and a mutual investment in working together to create change. It is perhaps this mutuality—this firm refusal to draw a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’—that has maintained SWO’s status as an example of artistic activism that is as committed to advancing social justice behind the scenes as it is on the stage.

Returning to the notion of ‘real activism’ that Director X identified at sex worker breakfasts, SWO’s practice of artistic activism is not only identifiable in the project’s creative work and its public-facing advocacy, but also in the ways the project works to amplify the most marginalised sex worker voices throughout the process, to build community across the divisions that exist among sex workers, and to provide a safer

space for sex workers to speak out about the issues that affect them without suffering as a result. While these things might not directly influence policy change, they are foundational to a strong and representative sex worker-led movement that has sustainability and solidarity at its core.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid the foundations for readers to understand SWO as a project and a performance throughout the chapters that follow, identifying features that bolster its artistic activism work. Exploring the original motivations for the project, it is pertinent that SWO emerged from a desire to cultivate a form of activism that could both nurture activists and challenge cultural and social norms. Rather than being a musical theatre project that has an activist bent, SWO has always been an activist project first and foremost. While the distinction has perhaps become blurrier as the show, *Sex Worker's Opera*, has been polished and become more established as a piece of art in the cultural sphere, it is interesting to consider the impact that starting from this position has had on the project and its reception as it has moved forward. In its early stages, I suggest that SWO represented a form of DIY—somewhat anarchist—opportunism, a knack for identifying space that could be convincingly reassigned to marginalised voices with a little creative flair, and an eagerness to mould performance into a shape that would fit these voices, instead of vice versa.

Importantly, the activism of SWO is not solely evident in what is said through the performance—although this is the focus of the following chapter—but in the origins of the project itself, in the ways in which sex workers have been involved and made space for throughout and at every level, and in the symbolic disruption of cultural hierarchies—within the opera world *and* between ‘artists’ and ‘participants’ in community arts projects—to ensure that sex worker voices are given a platform. As has consistently been emphasised in SWO’s publicity, it is ‘a show *by* sex workers *for*

sex workers'. An analysis of SWO as artistic activism must therefore account for the local and the global, the sex work community and the general public, the affective and the effective, and the cultural and the political in order to fully comprehend the ways in which this project has touched people, changing their lives, hearts and minds.

The next three chapters focus on the performance of *Sex Worker's Opera*, specifically the political messages in the songs, the affective arc of the overall structure and performances of pain. With frequent references to the political context of issues affecting individual sex workers and the sex worker rights movement, these chapters highlight the accountability, responsiveness and reflexivity that characterise the artistic practice at the core of SWO. Through this, activist values and traits are also illuminated, the outcome being that *Sex Worker's Opera* is depicted as a valuable example of community musical theatre as artistic activism, from which much can be learnt about the potential of community art, grassroots performance practice more generally, and sex worker rights.

4) 'A Shout of Liberation': Performing Politics

In this chapter, I explore the music of *Sex Worker's Opera* as a central component of the artistic activism of SWO, highlighting the politics that are expressed through the songs of the show and the relevance of these to the sex worker rights movement. This chapter foregrounds the things that members wanted to say, depict and imagine through the songs. In this, I follow Söderman, who describes the community musical *No Borders* as 'a space for creating knowledge', whereby experiences are shared and imaginations for alternative realities played out (Söderman, 2019:89). Accordingly, through my analysis of *Sex Worker's Opera* as artistic activism, I demonstrate that the music is a valuable site of knowledge creation.²⁴

²⁴ It is worth noting the alignment here with participatory action research and arts-based research in the social sciences, which aims to include 'participants' in knowledge creation (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019; Leavy, 2019; O'Neill, 2017).

Throughout this chapter, I expose readers not only to the range of political issues addressed within the performance, but also to the multiple ways that 'politics' are expressed. In doing so, I elucidate the myriad political functions served by the songs in *Sex Worker's Opera*, showing that the scope of *Sex Worker's Opera* as a musical theatre performance permits a range of artistic forms that match the political intentions behind individual songs. When I write about 'politics' or 'political messaging', I am therefore including both the explicit statements about discrimination and sex workers' rights that are made within song lyrics, *and* the more metaphorical, aesthetic elements of these songs and their performances that work to advance SWO's political aims. Alongside analysis of the intellectual impact of these songs, I also demonstrate their affective impact. I reveal that they operate as meeting points for members and non-sex worker audience members, where enjoyment and appreciation cushion the blows landed by some of the harder-hitting political messages, and affective intensity gives weight to the gentler, more invitational political messages.

Here, I unpack the use of music to connect sex work to other issues and activist causes, to visibilise marginalised identities, to represent experiences in order to educate audiences, to 'mirror' audiences' prejudices back onto them, to perform 'disidentification' (Muñoz, 1999), and to present 'utopian performatives' (Dolan, 2005). All of these functions, I argue, contribute to the activist work of *Sex Worker's Opera*, educating audiences, improving representation, combatting stigma, and manifesting a better world for sex workers. Though the political messaging of the show is largely directed toward non-sex worker audiences, these songs have value for sex worker audiences too: seeing oneself and one's own experiences represented on stage has political significance. As such, I suggest that, overall, the transmission of politics through song promises sustainability for members and engagement for audiences, resulting in a persuasive means of activist communication that is complementary to front-line activist work.

Guided by interviews with SWO members, much of this analysis focusses on the lyrics of the songs. This tendency toward discussion of lyrics is not surprising, given that most members²⁵ contributed far more to their writing than to that of the accompanying music.²⁶ Neither is it unexpected that the political messages in these songs are often explicit, in light of the wariness prompted by the historical misinterpretation—whether wilful or unfortunate—of sex workers’ words and experiences. That members’ feelings of anxiety or ambivalence are noted in relation to songs with less direct or forceful political messaging is indicative of this concern. Having said that, I make a point of identifying the political weight that particular aesthetic features of the music and the performances might carry, and stating the role of performance itself, and specifically singing, as a vehicle that enables the transmission of the messages in these songs.

‘Our show isn’t very abstract... but that’s because it can’t be’. (SWO director)

My analysis is primarily informed by SWO members’ reflections and *their perceptions* of reception, rather than direct audience research. As such, it is rare that I seek to demonstrate the tangible impacts these songs had on audience members. What I am more interested in here are the possibilities that songs provided for members to express their lived experiences and political alignments, as well as to communicate with audiences in novel ways. While the hope that the combination of reason and emotion would linger with audiences and potentially lead to action was ever-present, it is equally important that these songs gave members a way of escaping the sense that they were ‘screaming at a brick wall’ (SWO member). Indeed, as a perpetually silenced group, the very fact of sex workers singing on stage is

²⁵ The roles and experiences of musicians within the project is unpacked in more detail in Chapter 6.

²⁶ As explored further in Chapter 6, this was a distinct regret of the musical director, expressed to me after workshops with the sex worker theatre group in Cape Town, in which participants were able to determine musical elements as well as the lyrics.

profoundly political, and performance settings offered an unusual opportunity to feel heard.

One of my intentions with this chapter is to provide a sense of the ambitious scope of SWO's political messaging and it is therefore not entirely incidental that this and the next read like a whistle-stop tour of political arguments and representational battles. I have opted for breadth in my decision to include almost every instance of words set to music, making only a couple of exceptions for pieces that receive more focussed attention in Chapters 5 and 6. I move through the ten pieces of music in order of their appearance in the performance, first describing them²⁷ and then exploring their meanings, features and significances. Together with Chapter 5, reading about the songs in this order will help readers acquire a sense of the shape of the performance as a whole, as will the attached scene list (Appendix 2).

'Freedom Song'

A deliberate cough interrupts the rant of a prohibitionist feminist plant, one member's 'sister', who has stormed the stage to condemn Sex Worker's Opera for its exploitation of women. Members enter gradually to a dramatic tango-style accompaniment with a slippery clarinet melody and tremolo violin until the full cast is present on stage. Once assembled, they begin to sing and dance in unison, a chorus of women and trans people insisting that they will not be 'rescued' from sex work. Moving to the marching beat of the orchestra, the performers break into two groups and pick up banners to represent warring feminist factions—sex worker feminists and prohibitionist feminists. A protest scene is recreated, with chants being hurled back and forth until the music becomes smoother, softer, and the two sides are drawn together, harmonising over a shared belief: 'Whatever we wear, wherever we go, yes

²⁷ The descriptions in this chapter are my creative summaries of the performances of these songs based on footage from the 2018 show in Amsterdam, unless stated otherwise.

means yes and no means no'. As a last point of tension, however, the focus turns outwards, with the cast facing into the theatre, pointing fingers and demanding to know who the audience are to judge. The song ends on a high with the unified instruction, "Don't be a misogynist", highlighting the root of the problem with the arguments voiced by the prohibitionist feminist character as well as the oppression of sex workers more generally.

'Freedom Song' was the first song to be collaboratively written and performed by members at the start of the project in 2014 and, while the creative process will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, it is important to note the collective authorship of this song in order to comprehend the essence of the political message. Pooling their experiences of relating to contemporary prohibitionist feminists and being affected by societal judgements, members worked with directors to come up with 'Freedom Song', which represents the breadth of the issues they have bumped up against in activist and personal contexts.

*"Freedom Song' talks about claiming your own voice, it talks about the saviour mentality, it talks about their own community—whether that be feminists or sex workers—who are dictating what each other can and cannot do, it talks about solidarity as opposed to in-fighting, it talks about pride in oneself, and it talks about deciding what you will and will not do with your own body. That's a lot of things to cover in one song'.
(SWO director)*



Performers re-enacting a protest as sex worker feminists in 'Freedom Song' at The Pleasance in 2016.

Photo by Julio Etchart.

'Freedom Song' responds to the over-simplified narrative that certain forms of sexual freedom are incompatible with feminism, asserting that sex work is a choice and that sex workers should be free to make that choice without being considered to be in need of rescue. Prohibitionist feminists,²⁸ in contrast, argue that sex work is inherently exploitative and violent, and that the industry should therefore be eliminated entirely. Their approach to ending the marginalisation of and violence against sex workers is at odds with the struggles sex work activists are currently embroiled in for 'labour rights, migrant rights, decriminalization and self-determination' (Maynard, 2012:28). The argument in 'Freedom Song' is that, by positioning sex workers as victims without agency, prohibitionist feminists are in fact demonstrating a misogynistic outlook themselves, speaking over 'other' women to

²⁸ Prohibitionist feminists sometimes refer to themselves as 'abolitionist feminists', though this characterisation is considered offensive, particularly to sex workers of colour, because of its association with the abolition of slavery.

construct a narrative that bolsters their prohibitionist agenda. By finishing with the line “Don’t be a misogynist”, members make this point while also revealing the common ground between the two factions, who both ostensibly have at their core a concern for women’s rights, safety and agency. With ‘Freedom Song’, members created an opportunity to give their side of the argument uninterrupted.

‘It’s a shouting to very problematic narratives around sex work, and normally we only hear the other side. When sex workers speak back they get questioned or they get silenced or they get put in a corner. Normally the biggest questions come from the abolitionist side, but I like this song because it’s a big shout to all the stigma that we’ve been having for years. So it’s like a shout of liberation’. (SWO member)

Connecting sex work to feminism

While ‘Freedom Song’ first took form with a strong, sex-positive slant, adaptations and additions since 2014 have made the song more politically complex. Primarily, this has been achieved through the integration of slogans inspired by the sex worker rights movement and the feminist movement more broadly, shifting the emphasis away from sexual freedom and toward rights and safety, while familiarising the audience with key concepts for sex worker activism in a concise and distinctly memorable way. The inclusion of these slogans was designed to anchor sex worker rights discourse within the wider context of feminism; they therefore constitute an important aspect of the political messaging in this piece.

The first, ‘Rights, not rescue’ firmly pushes back against the prohibitionist narrative that sex workers need to be rescued, stressing instead the need for workplace security and associated labour rights, which is applicable regardless of whether sex work is seen as the ultimate sexual freedom or simply a way of surviving. It is particularly pertinent in light of the recent spread of criminalisation or ‘the Nordic model’, which makes it a criminal offence to purchase sex (Mac & Smith, 2018:142). In discouraging demand, this type of criminalisation is seen by some as a solution to

the exploitation of women in the sex industry. On the contrary, evidence shows that, while the underlying need for income is still present, sex workers are in fact put at far greater risk by the criminalisation of clients, forced to compromise their safety checks and to take clients they would normally refuse (Phipps, 2020:145; Sex Workers Alliance Ireland, 2021). Chanting 'Rights, not rescue' is a way of demanding that the state and other feminists provide better protection, rather than preventing sex workers from working.

'Some people love their job, some people hate it, but we all deserve working rights. I really like that "Rights not rescue", because I don't want to be rescued, I just want a job that I can feel safe in'. (SWO member)

The second, 'Whatever we wear, wherever we go, yes means yes and no means no' cements consent as a key factor in determining whether sexual activity should occur. This multi-purpose chant both unifies sex workers with widespread feminist demands for safety *and* rejects the dehumanising prohibitionist characterisation of sex work as 'paid rape' by second-wave feminists (Grant, 2014:91; Phipps, 2020:43; Olufemi, 2020:100).

'We hear so many times that sex work is violence and it's rape, and that we don't have agency and we don't understand what rape is, and we don't understand what is fulfilling sexual relationships. So it's like saying, 'We understand it. Yes means yes and no means no, it's actually that simple''. (SWO member)

This moment in 'Freedom Song' is marked by a single performer slipping between the two banner-holding groups and walking to the front of the stage. Initially singing this chant alone as the orchestra ceases its march-style accompaniment, the performer cuts through the noise of the protest scene, shifting the energy of the song. This moment stood out in members' recollections of audience reactions to *Sex Worker's Opera*. Particularly when performed to majority sex worker audiences,

‘everyone loses their shit... we get a big audience reaction and it’s such a beautiful moment... because you can see that it resonates with everyone’ (SWO member).

The simplicity of this statement enabled members to begin the performance by asserting the bare minimum requirement that sex workers are safe while working. Although ‘consent’, as it appears in liberal feminist discourse, requires complicating in order to account for the power differentials that might sometimes prevent yes from really meaning yes (Olufemi, 2020:98), the use of this slogan in ‘Freedom Song’ concisely makes the statement that sex workers should not be excluded from feminists’ push for sexual safety because their jobs involve sexual labour. When wielded by sex workers, this slogan acquires new power and provides a decidedly less controversial baseline from which the show’s politics can unfurl than ‘sex work is a choice’. Overall, the inclusion of slogans from the sex worker rights movement, some of which are also used within mainstream feminism, serves to anchor the show in feminist critique from the beginning, hinting at the structures of oppression that impact sex workers and highlighting the relevance of sex workers’ issues to those of women and other marginalised groups more broadly.

‘Over the years there’s been sections added in, like the “Rights not rescue” and the “Power to the women” and the “Whatever we wear, wherever we go”, and I think those extra layers have made it so much more as a song as well. There’s a little hint that there’s a bit more to the story than ‘We love this and we have the right to do it’, and I think that’s really important’. (SWO member)

Visibility

My final point on ‘Freedom Song’ pertains to the cultural politics of visibility. That *Sex Worker’s Opera* begins with a whole-cast number is significant, as it allows for a presentation of bodies on stage that are often *in*-visibilised, simultaneously indicating a reclamation of the narrative around sex work and a convergence with the women’s and LGBTQIA+ rights movements. For one director,

'That really confronted the audience with the queerness of the show, with the presence of women, the presence of trans people... You just know that something quite extraordinary is about to happen'. (SWO director)

What is 'extraordinary' about this assemblage is the reoccupation of space it reflects and the solidarity it displays. Visibility is an important activist component of the performance. It works to normalise sex workers', women's and trans people's bodies being shown on their own terms, while countering the easy cries of 'objectification' that often surround sex workers, as they appear dressed in outfits that range from lingerie, to fetish gear, to activist t-shirts, to onesies. The visibility achieved through performance also contributes to members' sense of feeling listened to. It is much harder to silence a group of sex workers and allies who are singing and dancing confidently than it is to dismiss the voice of a single sex worker asking for a seat at the table; therefore, the collective visibility of 'Freedom Song' offered members a new, sometimes moving, opportunity to be heard.

'It felt really powerful... But I think a little bit emotional as well, because there's an audience listening to what you're saying, and it's a different context. Because you can say whatever you want in that context and they have to listen, they're just sitting there... you might not have that power elsewhere in the world to say certain sorts of stuff to that large group of people'. (SWO member)

The experience of being protected from interruption by the norms of performance and the prescribed roles of performers and audience members enabled members to communicate points that they might not otherwise have been able to make. This was consistent throughout the performance, but 'Freedom Song' is significant in being members' and audiences' first experience of this dynamic within *Sex Worker's Opera*.

Although audiences of *Sex Worker's Opera* were self-selecting and therefore perhaps more likely to be sympathetic to the politics of the sex worker rights movement than an average population sample, there was never any guarantee of understanding or political alignment and, on the whole, the performance context should not be belittled as 'preaching to the choir'. Even in my own interactions with audiences of *Sex Worker's Opera* I have noted a wide variety of positions on the political spectrum and approaches to feminism, some certainly crossing into problematic territory.

Overall, then, 'Freedom Song' does what is required for the opening number of a show that demands audiences to listen to sex workers – it unequivocally states that sex workers will not be spoken for or over. In order to do this, it sets a strong sex-positive tone, combatting the prohibitionist feminists' silencing tactic of claiming that sex workers are unilaterally exploited and cannot speak for themselves.

Although it might not be an entirely representative reflection of sex worker experiences, in setting out the argument that sex work is a choice, 'Freedom Song' lays the groundwork for more nuanced ideas to emerge on sex workers' terms in later songs.

'Domme Song'

"Get out of my way" shouts the Dominatrix as she enters the stage, tailed by two secondary dommes. The orchestra plays a jaunty introduction and the Domme begins to sing a cabaret-style tune in a strong, deep voice, giving commands as she struts across the stage: "Stand up, sit down, boy, you'll do as I say". Soon, a group of male clients crawling like 'puppies' surround her, wearing white shirts and bushy moustaches. Parodying 'Old MacDonald', she sings, "With a whip whip here, and a whip whip there, here a spank, there a spank, pinch them while they wank wank", assisted in lovingly doing these things to the puppies by the secondary dommes. The clarinettist, who appears on stage and seems to be caught in the same state of rapture as the puppies, mimics their exaggerated orgasms with trills and squeaks

until shooed away. A short alternating duet between the less privileged secondary dommes reveals a rather more ambivalent experience of domming work. However, the Domme, standing on top of a podium singing “Power is mine” as the puppies gather around her feet, rectifies this to conclude the song on an indisputably positive note.²⁹

Politically, ‘Domme Song’ has a lot in common with ‘Freedom Song’ but, instead of being a collective statement, it was designed to be an individual characterisation of the sex-positive angle. Representing the extreme of sex positivity within sex work discourse, the Domme leaves the audience with the message: ‘I love this, and I enjoy this, and I’m free’ (SWO director). As the first representation of an individual sex worker in the performance, ‘Domme Song’ was created to turn audience preconceptions of sex work on their heads by subverting mainstream expectations of victimhood. Following on from ‘Freedom Song’, the Domme refutes the idea that sex workers are exploited and lacking in agency or humanity.

It is important to analyse ‘Domme Song’ in context, not only of the show (as I do in the next chapter) but also of cultural understandings of BDSM. In 2014, when ‘Domme Song’ was first performed as part of *Sex Worker’s Opera*, the *50 Shades of Grey* series had recently launched and gained unprecedented popularity (Aviles, 2019). Although this could be thought of as a cultural moment contributing to sexual awakenings or the rupturing of taboos, the depiction of this Dominant/submissive relationship between a man and a woman in fact glamourised a very problematic stereotype of domming, whereby a man controls and forces pain on an apparently

²⁹ ‘Domme Song’ is the only song from the *Opera* that has been made publicly available as an audio recording. It was recorded and released as a single in 2016 to aid the promotion of the project. It can be found on Spotify at the following link:

<https://open.spotify.com/track/0rJ9H3H3NSE05QkmG68paB?si=b63f0f89449e4c73> [Accessed 25th March 2022]

reluctant woman, and has largely been condemned by the BDSM community (Stevens, 2014:226).

‘Domme Song’, in contrast, depicts female sexual power and control over men who are comically eager to submit. At the time, ‘Domme Song’ was extremely unusual in representing this dynamic, and therefore radical in terms of BDSM and sex work representation in cultural productions. Since 2014, artistic representations of female dominance and professional dominatrixes have become more common, with several successful Fringe shows in the past few years and a Netflix series dramatising the life of a dominatrix.³⁰ These have received varying degrees of support from the sex work community (Turchiano, 2021).

Hearing the original version of ‘Domme Song’ now, it can be critiqued on similar grounds to ‘Freedom Song’—that it only amplifies the perspective of a privileged sex worker who enjoys her job and that this is not representative of the majority of sex workers. At the time, however, representations of female domination were so rare that there was no room for nuance in SWO’s portrayal of this character. Since then, the group has responded to this critique, which was aired by members themselves, adapting ‘Domme Song’ to include the two less enthusiastic domme characters from the description above. These characters complicate the narratives of dominance as power and sex work as pleasure by reminding the audience that they are doing a job that they do not necessarily love. This sows the seeds for presentations of capitalism as the driver for sex work that crop up again later in the show.

*Secondary Domme 1: “Sometimes I feel like I’m in control,
Sometimes I rake it in, on a roll”*

*Secondary Domme 2: “Sometimes I’m having a shitty week,
Can’t pay the rent so I’m feeling meek”*

³⁰ Examples include Mistress Venita’s *A Beginner’s Guide to Bondage* (2018), Desiree Burch’s *Unf*ckable* (2017), and the Netflix series *Bonding* (Doyle et al, 2019-21).

Together: *“Sometimes I’m trying to figure it out,
Who’s in control? Well, I’m just full of doubt”*

‘Worker-Client Duet’

The lights come up on a couple sleeping entwined, just as one of them is attempting to extricate themselves.³¹ About to leave, they are stopped by the other, who has woken up and sings plaintively, “Are you leaving so soon? We’ve only just begun”. The violin, cello and clarinet play sustained notes, creating shimmery major second harmonies, while the piano solemnly accompanies the exchange between the pair, who turn out to be a sex worker and a client. To the sex worker’s dismay, the client is convinced they have a special relationship and tries to push the worker to stay for longer. As the clarinet, violin and cello join in, playing a pretty, lilting melody, a group of ‘cherubs’ enter the stage wearing angel wings and dancing in a circle around the pair. Swiftly, in a dreamscape, the set is transformed into a restaurant, with the cherubs acting as waiting staff, holding menus. Sitting at a table, the worker begins to explain to the client that they are overstepping professional boundaries. They use the analogy of expecting food at all times and for free from a favourite chef to elucidate the inappropriateness of expecting untapped time, emotional and sexual labour for free. The harmony darkens as the client protests that they are lonely, leading to the song’s climax as the cherubs turn their menus around to face the audience, revealing mirrors on the inside, while dramatically repeating: “Oh so many lonely people”. After a moment of stark silence, the soft instrumental melody of the beginning returns, and the lush orchestration and the cherubs combine to give the duet a romantic feel, despite the firmness in the lyrics. The conflict of expectations

³¹ I use gender-neutral pronouns in this section because different people with different gender identities have performed ‘Worker-Client Duet’. However, the gender presentation of the performers and characters is not irrelevant, as it does alter the perception of the relationship dynamic represented in the song. This is discussed below in the sub-section titled ‘Queerness’.

has been resolved and the money changing hands signifies a happy ending to the song.

‘Worker-Client Duet’ provides a depiction of a sex work session and a representation of the relationship between a worker and a client. Based on their personal experience, the lyrics were written by a member to reflect the sometimes complex negotiations surrounding the exchange of money for intimacy, and to give a more holistic account of what a sex work session might look like, beyond the act of penetration that people might imagine. The song emphasises the distinction between the work of performing love and affection and the reality of being in love, while also challenging the misunderstanding that sex workers bodies are ‘sold’. Instead, it highlights the skilled services sex workers provide and the need for appropriate compensation.

‘I tried to come up with a gentle, accessible analogy for how you’re renting services, not selling objects. The original name of the song was ‘Young Master Chef’ and the reason for that was, everyone sees a chef in a nice restaurant as a talented person providing exquisite services... but you wouldn’t, you know, complement the chef a few times and then believe you could rock up to the restaurant and expect food for free’.
(SWO member)

‘Worker-Client Duet’ is the only time that clients are given a musical voice in *Sex Worker’s Opera*. In the same way that sex worker activists are explicitly *not* interested in joining forces with clients (Mac & Smith, 2018:3), SWO members did not feel the need to include clients’ perspectives in their show. Although clients might experience some stigma for their role in the sex industry, they do not bear the brunt of it as sex workers do, and typically occupy far more privileged positions to begin with, both in the sex industry and in society at large. Generally, audiences seem to have understood that *Sex Worker’s Opera* is a rare space where sex workers

can speak out, and accepted that a focus on clients would detract from this. The one vocalised exception—an audience member expressing to a director that they thought there should be more opportunities for clients' voices to be heard in the *Opera*—was met with the reply: “You are very welcome to go and make a *Client's Opera*”.

Representing experiences to educate audiences

The unusual representation of the worker-client relationship and the analogy of the chef lend an educational impetus to the song. For members, it was important that ‘Worker-Client Duet’ gave audiences an insight into ‘some of the beautiful experiences you can have’ (SWO member), and the romance that can be present despite the transactional nature of the relationship. While this should not detract from the demand for fair pay and respect for professional boundaries, it works to inform audiences of the emotional and intellectual labour involved in many sex work relationships, which evoke less moral anxiety than sexual labour. Although I, and many others, hope that society will move beyond these judgments soon, more holistic accounts that demonstrate the multitude of skills and the management of complex inter-personal relationships required might serve to destigmatise sex work in the meantime.

“It’s not just about sex. That’s actually the smallest part of the job. You’re a psychologist, you’re a therapist, you’re a masseuse, you’re a listener. So it actually talks about that and that’s super interesting, because everybody thinks I’m just getting paid for a fuck or a strip or something. It’s like, no, actually there’s a lot going on in that time spent with a client” (SWO member)

Allies within the project, who do not have personal experience of sex work, agreed that ‘Worker-Client Duet’ ‘was very helpful for getting a picture of this relationship’ (SWO member), suggesting the song would have a similar effect for non-sex worker audience members.

But as well as educating people who have no experience of the worker-client relationship, 'Worker-Client Duet' was likely also responsible for educating clients. Perhaps the most tangible example of the audience impact of this song came from one member's client, who had been invited to see *Sex Worker's Opera*. When this member ceased their in-person work during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, their client continued to send instalments of money, writing in an email that he wanted to support their business "like a restaurant".

"He said to me "I know that you still have your work premises and all this equipment and you still have to pay rent for it, and who knows when you're next going to be able to make any of that money back. And I would really like to be able to see you at the end of this all, so can I help you out?"" (SWO member)

This member was near certain that their client had been inspired by the chef analogy in 'Worker-Client Duet', and that—following this logic—the client had realised that he could not take their services for granted, particularly during a public health crisis when sex workers were falling through the cracks of government support (Lam, 2020). Other members also noted clients' reactions to this song, which ranged from un-ironic enjoyment ("this is the most beautiful song ever"), to anxiety ("am I too needy?" "Is this what you really think of us?"), to reflection ("it made me cringe a little bit because... that's me").³² On the whole, it seems that the representation of this relationship from a sex worker perspective made it possible for *most* clients to see beyond the girlfriend or boyfriend fantasy that the sex worker skilfully constructs in sessions and learn to appreciate workers' needs and boundaries.

³² These quotes came from the SWO directors, citing some of the emails members had received from clients after seeing the performance.

Representing queerness

Over the years, different people have performed ‘Worker-Client Duet’ and, reflecting the diversity of the cast, changes to the gender presentations of the characters have altered the perceived sexual orientation of the relationship. It is noteworthy that the song was based on an experience of queer sex work, which might entail a greater degree of identification between sex worker and client. For example, a young queer worker might be more likely to feel some degree of solidarity with an older gay client who has faced discrimination for their sexuality, than a young female worker might feel toward an older straight male client, who has probably consistently occupied a more privileged position than she has. Although displaying this solidarity was not the primary political intention of the song, LGBTQIA+ advocacy was an important component of the original concept. The danger lies in the slipperiness of the line between solidarity and empathy, and femme-presenting members have often been unsure of how to perform the song without risking over-stating their care toward the client and accidentally romanticising the relationship.

This is already a hazard, given the aesthetic baggage of the duet form, the cherubs and the gentle accompaniment. At times, it has been performed satirically, but the romance of the song is undeniable, even if the lyrics do paint a more complicated picture and the eventual handing-over of money is reassuringly transactional. In fact, many of these aesthetic decisions were made with Disney in mind, as discussed by the musical director:

“Disney has been normative in so many ways. Queers want to reclaim Disney, because we have to reconcile within ourselves the fact that we grew up with these... very high production value, very emotive cultural products that we loved and yet hated, that were both a thing that we aspired to and yet that crushed us, because we could never have that heteronormativity. But we still loved the animation, and we still loved the colours, and we still loved the songs. So to reclaim that, to create a sex worker Disney song was like this ultimate playful reclamation” (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

As the musical director intended, 'Worker-Client Duet' provides queers in the group and in audiences with a Disney-style song without requiring them to subscribe to the heteronormativity of actual Disney narratives. This could be seen as a form of 'disidentification', as defined by Muñoz (1999), whereby minority groups inhabit exclusionary cultural forms and thus transform them to serve the purposes of the excluded. It is 'a survival strategy that is employed by a minority spectator... to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification' (Ibid., 28). Alternatively, the application of a Disney aesthetic could be read as a nod to the 'Disneyization' (Bryman, 2004) of the worker-client relationship itself. 'Disneyization' accounts for the 'performative labour' inherent to sex work—as accentuated in 'Worker-Client Duet'—whereby 'the deliberate display of a certain mood is seen as part of the labour involved in service work' (Bryman, 2004:2). The Disney aesthetic serves to highlight the fantasy being maintained by the worker, and the labour that this maintenance entails.

Mirroring

'Mirroring', as a theme, reappears in a number of the songs in *Sex Worker's Opera* and I return to it periodically within this chapter. It manifests in very literal ways—like the mirrored menus being turned on the audience in 'Worker-Client Duet'—and more subtle ways, such as demonstrations of hypocrisy, and is designed to confront the audience with their preconceptions and their own baggage. At various points in *Sex Worker's Opera*, the device of mirroring prompts audiences to ask themselves, 'What am I bringing to this performance that affects the ways in which I think about sex work and the people who do it?' As well as this, it is a way of bringing audiences into the performance, and thus a dialogue. Mirroring accentuates the porousness of the line between audience and performers, and allies and sex workers, encouraging an appreciation of similarity and, ideally, nurturing solidarity.

“Putting the focus on the audience is really important... always going back to the audience and going, “This is about your preconceptions you’re bringing into this, no matter who you are”” (SWO director)

Nowhere in *Sex Worker’s Opera* is mirroring freer from the constraints of subtlety than in ‘Worker-Client Duet’, where the cherubs literally hold mirrors up to the audience while singing, “Oh so many lonely people”. This dramatic device places the audience in the same category as the Client, demystifying the motivations for purchasing sex and suggesting that anyone in the audience could one day be involved in the exchange of money for intimacy.

“The thing of the menu introduced as a mirror pointed at the audience, and things like that are the climax, conceptually, of the song. Maybe the show” (SWO member)

In this case, mirroring has the effect of destigmatising the *purchase* of sex, rather than sex work *per se*; as such, it certainly does not mark the political end-goal of SWO or the sex worker rights movement. Yet, by sanitising the needs of the client – loneliness is far more relatable and less disturbing to most than a foot fetish would be, for example – it begins the project of destigmatising sex work overall and, within that, sex workers themselves.

‘Hollywood Clichés’

The stage becomes a dance floor as the whole cast appears for a party and the orchestra begin to play a waltz as the performers partner up to dance along. One by one, three characters break away from the partnered dance and come to the front of the stage. Each is introduced and then sings a repeated line that represents their character. The first, a ‘Pretty woman’ asking to be rescued:

*“I cannot stand anymore,
My life as a whore,
Won’t someone save me?”*

The second, a repentant nun begging forgiveness from God with the simple line, “God, please forgive me”. Third is a sickly young performer who coughs up blood before wailing, “Pain, pain, pain, pain” in a chromatically descending soprano. Eventually, these three lines interweave, creating chromatic harmony and a dense texture. Periodic bellows of “Whoooooore!” coming from the orchestra, the pianist’s heavy chords and the violinist’s descending lines all add to the melodrama.

The three characters in ‘Hollywood Clichés’ represent the generic sex worker characters that appear in popular culture. The first is inspired by Vivian from *Pretty Woman* (Marshall, 1990), the second by the eponymous character in Jules Massenet’s opera *Thaïs* (1894), and the third equally by Satine in *Moulin Rouge!* (Luhmann, 2001), Fantine in *Les Misérables* (Hugo, 1862) and Violetta in *La Traviata* (Verdi, 1853). In ‘Hollywood Clichés’, these characters are parodied, emphasising the misrepresentation that sex workers suffer at the hands of mainstream media and high art culture. That they are only granted one line each to repeat encapsulates the reductionism of these representations.

‘It’s mainly just to stand for the fact that the only representations you see in films of women who are sex workers are a woman who falls in love with a client, a woman who was a sex worker but is now a ‘good person’... or a woman who dies, and that’s it, that’s all you see’. (SWO director)

Anxiety about the risk of misinterpretation

Whereas the majority of *Sex Worker's Opera* 'isn't very abstract' (SWO director), 'Hollywood Clichés' relies on indirect messaging, communicating through parody and drawing on references that audiences might not share, rather than explicit statements or clear, accessible metaphors. While members and directors recognised the political potential of parody and often enjoyed performing in this scene, the potential for a greater degree of misinterpretation was also a source of anxiety.

'I think there was a lot of uncertainty within the cast of how singing these lines, "I cannot stand anymore, this life as a whore, won't someone save me?" was gonna be interpreted'. (SWO director)

The worry was that, if members performed these stereotypes without it being clear to audiences that they were ridiculing their characters, the song would in fact reinforce these clichés. This anxiety was particularly acute in relation to Vivian's use of the highly offensive term 'whore', and to Satine's dramatic death from tuberculosis. Interestingly, only one member opted to talk about 'Hollywood Clichés' in the interviews I conducted. Anxiety about misinterpretation is one possible reason for members not choosing to talk about it. Otherwise, I suspect that the lack of enthusiasm for discussing the song (not to be conflated with a lack of enthusiasm for the song itself) might be due to the critique being focussed on cultural institutions rather than policy or direct experiences of stigma. Although cultural misrepresentation does affect sex workers, it might feel like a less immediate concern than these other issues, and therefore less central to the politics of the *Opera* from an insider perspective.

'Capitalist Blues'

Traffic noise plays as performers, including musicians, walk briskly onto the stage, weaving around each other in their rush. The performers move purposefully but

erratically across the stage until two abrupt chords on the piano stop them in their tracks, forcing them into robotic movements. Performers are still for a count of eight and then the chords are heard again, forcing the performers into their next position. The other instruments join in and the blues begins, with performers assembled in a tight unit while one comes to the front of the stage and begins to sing.

*“When I was a waitress you said child don't you know,
You weren't born to serve how can you sink so low?
Running and fetching and carrying all day,
Slavin' for strangers, what would your mother say?*

*When I worked in an office said you must be so blue,
Is it a habit? Is that what's getting you through?
Wasting your youth can't you see you're being used,
Getting trashed on Friday to forget you're being abused”*

The three verses take the audience through various jobs—cab driver, singer, banker, stripper—and the critiques that people could, in theory, project onto them but typically do not, including risks to safety, exploitation, corruption and greed. The verses are linked by the chorus:

*“Seems to me no matter what we do,
We've all got a case of the Capitalist Blues”*

A projection in the background shows cogs whirring and the performers are a choreographed machine, going through the motions of production. After the third verse, the orchestra starts to lose the predictable rhythm and familiar blues harmony, becoming distorted and noisy. The dancers react, their movements slipping out of sync, limbs flailing awkwardly until they collapse. Distorted electronic noise is all that is left by the end, once the capitalist machine has broken down.

In a show that argues consistently along the sex worker rights movement's line, 'sex work is work'—so that sex workers might be granted equivalent protections to other workers—'Capitalist Blues' adds nuance by critiquing work as a concept. It reveals the exploitation that pervades capitalist society and critiques the notion that sex work is somehow worse than other jobs on this front, articulating this perception ironically: "It's the symptom, not the system that should leave you outraged". 'Capitalist Blues' complicates the sex-positive, sex-work-as-choice discourse first presented in 'Freedom Song' by underscoring the reality that, under capitalism, 'choice' is a murky concept. Do people really make a 'choice' to work? Does everyone have the full range of 'choice' when they decide what work they will do? To what extent is the 'choice' to leave or change jobs readily available to people? In prompting audiences to reflect on these questions, 'Capitalist Blues' situates sex workers within wider workers' rights struggles.

Mirroring

By implicitly comparing sex work to other jobs and, crucially, talking about other jobs in the same way that sex work is spoken of, 'Capitalist Blues' makes a rational case for destigmatising sex work, explaining that sex work should not be thought of any differently to other work. The mirroring, first seen in 'Worker-Client Duet', returns here, though it acquires a less explicit form than the reflective menus. Instead, the lyrics of 'Capitalist Blues' reflect the attacks that are consistently directed towards sex work onto other jobs. Arguments that sex work involves danger, addiction, exploitation, moral corruption and "selling yourself" are all levelled at other jobs. In 'Capitalist Blues', it is dangerous to work as a taxi driver on one's own; office workers must be reliant on drugs to get through the week; bankers are setting a bad example for "impressionable children"; a singer has "sold" her voice.

'Most people in the audience have got a job of some form and I think it's challenging them to think about their own lives, no matter how normal

– “normal” – their lives are. It’s making them question their own relationship to work and to money’. (SWO member)

Here, mirroring works to close the gap between sex workers and non-sex workers. including those in the audience, by breaking down the perceived distinctions between sex work and other jobs. Accordingly, risk and exploitation are positioned as staples of capitalism, not as things that individual workers should be held accountable for, nor as things that they could easily avoid in jobs other than sex work (Holt, 2015:105).

‘By linking it to other jobs it really normalises it in a whole new way. It talks about risk at work and that there are jobs that are solitary, or that there are jobs that are morally compromising in different ways, and yet people just take all of those for granted as being normal and acceptable... It feels quite destigmatising as well, because we’re just comparing it to all these other things and then making it very clear that this is no different’. (SWO member)

As well as picking out the problematic elements of jobs other than sex work, members felt that ‘Capitalist Blues’ was helpful in illuminating the hidden labour involved in sex work, such as ‘the bureaucracy and admin and paperwork’ (SWO member), with the choreography putting the repetitive movements of sex side by side with the repetitive motions of filing papers and driving a vehicle.

Connecting sex work to anti-capitalism

Although elements of the song were co-written, ‘Capitalist Blues’ was originally written by an ally within the project. The song reflected their process of trying to conceptualise the sex worker rights movement through an anarcho-communist lens, making space for radical left-wing politics that are not specifically about, but highly relevant to, sex work. Perhaps due to their outsider perspective, they were able to synthesise the implicit arguments made in *Sex Worker’s Opera* into this song, which

has become a favourite among both sex workers and allies in the group. In particular, other members with similar political leanings appreciated the inclusion of this angle and found it to resolve some of the tension between advocating for sex work to be seen as work and critiquing work as a concept.

'We are continuously saying, for five years or whatever, "Sex work is work and I want my right to work". So it's conflicting for me and probably for others who don't want the right to work, in a sense, who don't want to be in a world where work determines life basically. So this song is very important in that sense, for me and for others for sure. But it brings out that criticism that is really fundamental'. (SWO member)

'Family Song'

The curtains slide open to reveal an idyllic 'family portrait', a young woman in the middle surrounded by her mother, her friend and her partner. Intentionally cheesily, the musical director counts the musicians and singers in: "A one, a two, a one, two, three, four". A simple four-chord progression accompanies the loop of "um-sha-la-la"s, sounding a lot like the Beat Boppers' children's song, 'I Like the Flowers'. The first verse is pretty, all the instruments play in harmony, unobtrusively, as each family member takes it in turns to tell the woman in the middle, a sex worker, how much they value her. The next verse, following another bout of "um-sha-la-la"s, is less harmonious, featuring occasional out-of-tune notes and expressions of disapproval or concern from the mother, friend and partner: her mother thinks she could do better, her friend wants to find her another job, her partner is jealous. In the third and final verse, the characters hurl judgments at the sex worker, their faces distorting as they do and the instruments playing deliberate 'wrong' notes and clashing harmonies. They have all lost contact with her and she walks away alone.

'Family Song', like 'Freedom Song', was written collaboratively by the group to reflect their collective experiences of sustaining personal relationships as sex workers. Overall, the song indicates that the stigma that comes from family members and the people who are supposed to form sex workers' support network is, in fact, more damaging and alienating than the job itself. It is not sex work that drives wedges between sex workers and their loved ones, but the ignorance and judgment that people treat sex workers with because of their work.

Representing experiences to educate audiences

Members I spoke to about 'Family Song' found it very easy to relate to the song, based on both its key message and individual lines. This is likely a testament to the ability of the collaborative writing process to cultivate representativeness. Again, this process will be described in more detail in Chapter 7. In particular, members recognised the misguided attempts to 'help' that loved ones make, evident in phrases such as "you're worth so much more" and "we're concerned for your health" in 'Family Song'.

'People say that they want the best for us, but their 'best for us' may not be the best that we want. And I think that this song gives that knowledge, that 'Okay, you may be thinking that you're doing this right but look what you're actually doing to me''. (SWO member)

Through 'Family Song', this member felt that the group was able to express the issues with the ways in which people in their lives have related to them and their work. For SWO members who have had family, friends and partners come to see *Sex Worker's Opera*, or for audience members who have sex workers in their lives, 'Family Song' has a certain educational value, prompting people to catch themselves in their rescue attempts and question whether their intentions are truly good or whether they are actually loaded with stigma.

One member connected the song to her own experiences of romantic relationships. She responded to the lyrics sung by the partner character in the final verse: “She wouldn’t stop seeing people from work and I just couldn’t handle the strain. Always demeaning herself, she smelled different, now all I’m left with is shame”.

‘I remember very well the “she smells different”, and that’s something that has been such a thing in my life. Even with queer people, even with dating a sex worker it still is... It’s hard to date. It’s hard to date as a sex worker. The job is always going to interfere a little bit, you know’. (SWO member)

In addition to exhibiting to audiences how *not* to act in relationships with sex workers, ‘Family Song’ demonstrates the isolating effect that the stigma from loved ones has on sex workers themselves, representing some of members’ painful experiences of rejection and judgment and the impact these experiences have had on their lives. In this sense, one of the significant functions of ‘Family Song’ is to evoke empathy in audiences that will be continuously built upon throughout the second half of the performance.

‘Utopian performative’

It would be easy to focus on the damage that ‘Family Song’ shows and the difficulty of maintaining healthy personal relationships as a sex worker, but it would also be a mistake to discount the importance of the first verse when the interactions between the sex worker character and her loved ones are positive and supportive. The feeling created in this verse can be conceived of as what Dolan calls a ‘utopian performative’ (Dolan, 2005), making ‘palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better, were the goals of social justice achieved’ (Dolan, 2006:165). This utopia of acceptance is, as Dolan suggests, ‘only partially grasped, as it disappears before us around the corners of narrative and social experience’ (Ibid.). But the brief, elusive, sense that all might be well in this song, that it might retain the childlike

playfulness that the initial “um-sha-la-la”s suggest, is enough for audiences to hold onto.

‘I remember a bunch of people said, “Oh God, I just wanted the beginning bit where everything was great to go on for longer”, because it’s so nice to actually see families and partners portrayed who are completely fine with what their kids are doing’. (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

Here, the ‘bunch of people’ the director is referring to were sex workers in the audience. Their attachment to the first verse indicates the importance of representing positive possibilities as well as difficult realities, offering a sense of hope for ‘what could be’ as well as ‘what is’ (Madison, 2011:1-5). That this imaginary ideal is not at all unrealistic or unattainable is noteworthy too; however, the representational bias, which means we rarely hear of ‘functional’ families including sex workers and far more often see sex workers cast out of families in a cloud of shame, reinforces the notion that sex workers’ families cannot possibly be supportive. By representing happy, supportive relationships, however transient this representation might be, *Sex Worker’s Opera* plants the seeds of new norms, shifting the perceptions of possibility for all audience members.

‘The Trans Lament’

The lights go down on the previous scene and the piano starts to play a simple scalic melody with chords underneath, like the introduction to a power ballad or, in this case, an aria. A spotlight illuminates a single performer, a trans woman of colour, standing on top of the podium. She is wearing a long, translucent dress embroidered with a penis and breasts, plus a cream faux-fur shrug draped around her shoulders. The sequins on her dress catch the spotlight, making her shimmer. The pianist circles

around the introduction again, the singer looking out into the audience, before she begins to sing:

*“I’m not here to trick you or question ideas of gender,
I just want to suck your dick in exchange for legal tender”.*

The audience laughs, but quickly the song takes a more urgent tone, with the piano accompaniment becoming less melodic, based instead on repeated chords, while the singer barely pauses for breath between lines: “Hands on my dick, you calling me a chick, this is all consensual; Then you come, it seems we’re done and to you I’m now dispensable”. The singer looks down and the pianist plays the introduction theme. As she looks up again, she sings matter-of-factly, “I don’t want to die, but it seems it’s written in my path”. The accompaniment has regained its momentum and it pushes the song through into the dramatic climax, a repeated falsetto plea: “Please, please don’t kill me”. The gentle introduction returns and the singer drops her gaze, unfastens the shrug and lets it fall to the floor. The lights go down.

‘The Trans Lament’ painfully elucidates the disproportionate levels of violence experienced by trans sex workers of colour. It was written in direct response to the continued use of the ‘trans panic defense’ in cases of violence against trans people in the United States. Using the ‘trans panic defense’, legal defendants can claim that they hurt or even killed someone because they were confused by the gender identity of that person, or that they did so in self-defence while protecting themselves against non-violent sexual advances (Lee, 2020:1430). Appallingly, the gay/trans panic defense can still be used in many US states and, while it does not necessarily let perpetrators walk free, it certainly contributes to less severe sentencing, for example from first to second degree murder (Holden, 2020).

‘That song was in response to, you know, constantly reading in the media about... trans sex workers of colour who constantly get killed...

It would be all very well me being like, “Yes, positive, great, trans people are amazing”, but it would be also important to talk about the struggle, the anger, the pain. So I think that’s why I like the trajectory of it, because it brings you in and spits you back out’. (SWO member)

Trans sex workers of colour exist at the intersection of transphobia, whorephobia and racism, all of which make them more likely to be subject to violence based on varying degrees of criminalisation, global prejudices, and systemic discrimination (NSWP, 2014:2-3). Applying Crenshaw’s concept of ‘intersectionality’, this means that they are subject to multiple systems and forms of oppression based on different features of their identity (Crenshaw, 1989). Data published on Trans Day of Remembrance 2020 by the Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) project shows that 62% of trans people murdered globally were sex workers, and that, in the United States, people of colour constitute 79% of the murders that took place in the past year (TGEU, 2020). The importance of talking about ‘the struggle’ is self-evident in light of these statistics and, here, the performer takes the negative affect surrounding this struggle as a starting point. This is perhaps similar to the ‘despair’ that Gould writes of in relation to ACT UP’s fight against AIDS but—whereas Gould claims that despair was the death of ACT UP, resulting in the withdrawal of activists from the movement (Gould, 2009:395)—‘The Trans Lament’ harnesses it to amplify and make more space for trans voices. Notably, this was not something the directors felt they could have asked members to do. In fact, they expressed they had actively avoided including despair in SWO, but realised it was important to make space for it when it came voluntarily from members.

Visibility

In addition to the importance of educating audiences about the levels of extreme discrimination and violence that trans sex workers of colour face, the member who wrote ‘The Trans Lament’ felt that it was important to claim this spotlight moment to increase the visibility of a marginalised identity.

'We had a lot of perspectives in the show, and I felt that as one of the trans folk in the cast who did have a strong voice, I thought it was important that I made sure that I made space, for myself and for my trans siblings as well'. (SWO member)

Writing a song that is explicitly sung from a trans sex worker perspective, and visibly embodying the identity of a trans person of colour in her performance, this member used 'The Trans Lament' to foreground a perspective that has typically been sidelined by opera and in mainstream artistic representations of sex workers. Other members noted the importance of centering this perspective too; they felt that it was essential to represent different groups within the sex work community with unique experiences, so that the audience might better understand the complexity of the industry.

'Disidentification'

To more fully comprehend the politics of 'The Trans Lament', I return to Muñoz's theory of disidentification (1999). The significance of filling the space of an aria with the perspective of a trans sex worker of colour should not be underestimated. Typically, the aria is a form that reinforces the privileging of certain voices and certain narratives – white cisgendered opera divas singing stories written by white cisgendered male composers and librettists, assumed to be universal. In contrast, 'The Trans Lament' takes the aria and puts it to use as a vessel for the agendas of marginalised sex workers.

'There was no way to escape hearing the narrative, no? Because there's that spotlight and it's like, 'Now you, the audience, are gonna hear this'. (SWO member)

It is the epitome of a spotlight moment, as the performer dazzles the audience, commanding the room, showcasing her voice, and amplifying the struggles of trans sex workers of colour who bear the intersectional brunt of systemic violence. In

Muñoz's terms, 'The Trans Lament' proceeds to use 'the code of the majority... as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by dominant culture' (Muñoz, 1999:31). In its alignment with the aesthetic norms and standards of an opera aria, 'The Trans Lament' cements the singer's voice as one that must be heard.

'Sub Song'

A spotlight beams down on a woman kneeling centre-stage, a lace blindfold over her eyes. An imposing figure comes up behind her, takes the flogger in their hand and runs it over her exposed thighs and breasts. The 'slap' they place on her arm resounds as she sings in a strong falsetto, "He's hitting me; he's hurting me". The clarinet imitates her melody amongst ascending flourishes on the violin and piano. Her discomfort evaporates as she repeats the line, "This is my shameful secret", responding warmly to the impact of the flogger. The whole orchestra plays syncopated major chords, accompanying the sub's admission of her guilty pleasure. She reaches a melodic climax at the end of the line, "These are all of the things I've been taught not to be" and the orchestra lands on a striking minor chord.

Someone yells "Cut!", the lights come up, the orchestra stops playing and the performers relax. A 'director', a 'makeup artist' and an 'assistant' enter to offer the performers touch-ups, hydration and the well-received suggestion that they should continue in "doggy position". After a mutual check-in and verbal consent to "Hit me harder, that's fine", the director shouts "Action!" and the submission scene resumes until the next melodic climax. Following the director's second interruption, there are three people hitting the sub as she sings in an arresting soprano voice:

"Powerful, strong and free!

Now it feels just like a dream at night,

*When all is standing still,
Looking down over my body,
Feeling subject to their will,
All eyes around the world on me,
The power lies with me.*

Prohibitionists! Now, don't you cry for me.

With a big ball-gag stuffed in my mouth, I'm where I want to be".

With said ball-gag in her mouth she is suddenly unable to sing and the violin takes over the melody while the accompaniment winds down. The piano is left to end with a virtuosic sequence of ascending scales, tinkling as the sub is surrounded by the other performers who envelope her in a demonstration of aftercare.³³

'Sub Song' is the political counter to 'Domme Song', depicting the potential agency and power in the role of the female professional submissive. Within BDSM more broadly, the submissive role can involve varying degrees and forms of pain, control, humiliation and pleasure, inflicted by a trusted dominant partner. Unlike the dominatrix, this is a role that has not gained a place in popular culture in the last decade and is still widely misunderstood, even within the sex work community (Holt, 2015:103). It is helpful to return to the comparison with the representation of BDSM that *50 Shades of Grey* catapulted into the mainstream. Unlike the main character there, who reluctantly participates in sexual activity as a submissive out of fear that she will otherwise lose her relationship, 'Sub Song' was written to show that a woman might choose to be, and enjoy being, submissive.

³³ Aftercare refers to the practice of tending to the physical and psychological needs of a partner after participation in BDSM activity. It might involve offering physical intimacy, wound care, opportunities to debrief, and snacks, for example.

Given its underrepresentation, it is particularly important to show safe and ethical submission. The inclusion of this perspective in *Sex Worker's Opera* takes the exploration of consent, first embarked upon in 'Freedom Song', to its logical extreme, by showing that people can consent to participate in violent activities, while emphasising that this consent does not mean the submissive is forfeiting their rights. 'Sub Song' makes it clear that submissives still deserve protection—like all sex workers—if they want it, but that 'rescue' attempts are not welcome.

'Submission was really important because we had domination in there, so that was a really important under-represented community. Also, because pro subbing was stigmatised and still is so much, including in the sex work community. It is talked about, but people are like, 'Oh god, I wouldn't do that, that's really dangerous', which is also a very slippery slope to the victim blaming of, 'If anything bad happens to you, you're asking for it, because you put yourself in that dangerous position''.
(SWO director)

It is likely that this perspective has not been embraced by the feminist mainstream because it presents something of a challenge to the vision of equality women today are supposed to be striving toward (Ritchie & Barker, 2005; Rubin, 2011; Williams, 1989:210). However, many BDSM advocates have made convincing cases to the contrary, outlining the ways in which female submission can, in fact, signify advancements to feminism in relation to sex, through robust practices of consent, communication of desires and pleasure equality (Rubin, 2011; Scott, 2012; Stevens, 2014:257). Importantly, neither these advocates nor 'Sub Song' imply that all women should be submissives, but rather that it should not be disparaged as a preference or fantasy.

'Disidentification'

Like 'The Trans Lament', 'Sub Song' takes the form of the aria and puts it through a process of disidentification; in this case, rather than immediately warming to the

performer and her story, the audience are made to feel uncomfortable as the sub unsettles conceptions of sex, feminism and sex work itself. Still, the combination of drama, vocal skill and beauty secures the Sub's position at the centre of the audience's attention, from which she is able to control the narrative. Concurrently, the aria form and its associated prestige prepare space for a subversion of audience expectations, both political and aesthetic. For example—and despite the ambiguity around members' status as sex workers—the consistent surprise that performers could be both sex workers and *also* talented singers certainly exposes deeply embedded stigma. Thus, the virtuosity of both arias serves to tackle limited notions of who sex workers are and what they do.

Visibility

The framing of 'Sub Song' as part of a porn film adds an interesting layer too, visibilising the many forms that sex work can take and the performativity of much of it. That the Sub can break out of the climax of the song when interrupted by the Director and begin a matter-of-fact conversation about the lighting and her makeup is a nod to the behind-the-scenes work of porn productions and the performance that is required of porn workers. The labour of performance is evident, by extension, in relation to the theatrical context of *Sex Worker's Opera*, shattering mimetic illusions and highlighting the 'performer-as-labourer' (Campbell & Farrier, 2016:15).

The shift in tone also provides the audience with a break from the intensity of the submission scene, demystifying it to some extent while reassuring them that the pain experienced by the Sub is tolerable and that she has consented to it.

'I like that it shows different parts of the sex industry... this code-switching business, but amongst that is like the empowerment, the choice, the consent, the sub being in control, and the job element of it as well. So there's like a lot of layers to it'. (SWO member)

Connecting sex work to kink

Not only does 'Sub Song' destigmatise submissive sex work and porn, but it also works to destigmatise BDSM submission as a whole, aligning with a community that the sex workers' rights movement significantly overlaps with. The song serves to advocate for better understandings of BDSM practices, not as subjugation but as expressions of complex sexualities that, when explored properly, are treated with care and sensitivity (Barker & Langdrige, 2007). Allies within the group with experience of the queer and kink communities noted how relatable 'Sub Song' was to them, focussing on the sense of stigma and shame around their own non-sex worker sexual identities. This suggests that 'Sub Song' has potential as a bridge-building song, extending the push for destigmatisation beyond sex work, to encompass all anti-normative sexual activity. In this way, 'Sub Song' also serves to further a particular brand of sex-positive feminism that embraces the matrix of queer experience.

'Mosaic'

*"She sat in front of me and told me I'd sold myself.
I confusedly answered, "But I'm still here".
She just ignored me, as though I wasn't".*

This is how 'Mosaic' begins. From then on it is a poetic statement of plurality, vitality and humanity, an ode to the beauty of being multifaceted. Members collectively recite the poem, taking turns to say lines, accompanied by a violin melody and steady, arpeggiated chords played on the clarinet.

*"It seems like sex is all you see,
Well then I think you see me in 2-D,
Because the actual reality,
Is a mosaic blur, a tapestry".*

Some enter as they speak and gradually all the performers are gathered, spread across the stage, seated on the podiums or standing. The affective tug grows stronger as the clarinet switches to playing long, mid-range notes, the violin plays an ascending scalar sequence and the cello anchors the harmony with repeated bass notes. As the instruments return to the initial texture, the poem approaches its end, finishing with the offering: “Radical notion: listen to me”.³⁴

Universality

‘Mosaic’ was described as an ‘everything poem’ in interviews with members and directors. It takes as a prompt the experience of being told by a loved one, perhaps a close friend or a family member, “You’ve sold yourself”, and spins outward to portray a rich multi-dimensionality that pushes back against the idea that a sex worker is somehow no longer a person once they have sold sex. Avoiding specifics, ‘Mosaic’ makes the universal statement that sex workers should be seen for “more than sex”.

‘Why did I write the poem? Because I wanted to encapsulate... like everything that I had learnt about sex work, everything that I felt about sex work... the constant narrative of trying to explain yourself to people who are really viewing you in such a two-dimensional way and don’t get it... It was supposed to just be like, “Look how many parts of me there are that isn’t just the act of sex, which is all you can actually think of when you think of sex work’. (SWO member)

³⁴ The full poem can be heard at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTVh1ocmM64&ab_channel=SexWorker%27sOpera [Accessed 24th March 2022]

In many ways, the message of 'Mosaic' takes the audience full-circle, back to one of the key ideas in the lyrics of 'Freedom Song': "Don't put me in a box and close the lid". 'Mosaic', in the same way, is a reaction against the impulse to make assumptions about and speak over sex workers when they express their needs, their desires or even their personhood. It follows on from 'Family Song' by emphasising that stigma often comes from those who claim to care about sex workers, challenging people's inability to see beyond the job. This refusal to acknowledge the many other facets of sex workers' lives is often heavy with misogyny, cloaking the grim implication that 'You're just this person who lies there and lets this thing happen to you' (SWO member).

'Mosaic' has been performed in each iteration of *Sex Worker's Opera* but it underwent a transformation in 2017 from being performed by one person to being shared among the group. In 2017 and 2018, when 'Mosaic' was performed in its ensemble form, performers selected the lines that felt most true to their experience and these were then divided among performers so that they all (aside from musicians) contributed to its delivery. That members could share this poem is demonstrative of its relatability for sex workers with differing backgrounds and experiences.

'You can really tell that it comes from a moment when the writer has felt rejected by someone. But then, because this is something that we have all been through at one time or another, if you've been out as a sex worker, it's possible to make it your own. And that's why that piece is very powerful, because everyone was taking ownership of what each of us was saying. It has all these mini messages that we can all relate to, and we all made those tiny messages our own, and that's why it's just so beautiful and it is delicate and it's fierce at the same time. It's fierce'. (SWO member)

Despite not having written the lines they ended up performing, members reported feeling ownership of their segment, while also relating to other bits of the poem. The

member quoted above expressed that sharing 'Mosaic' among the cast contributed to both the beauty and fierceness of the piece. That multiple voices come together to perform 'Mosaic' is constitutive of its theme and 'Mosaic' ultimately became a space for both solidarity and plurality, challenging dehumanisation on a universal level and amplifying the voices of individual sex workers who state their existence beyond society's boxes, stereotypes and norms.

Representing experiences to educate audiences

Although the poem does not give specifics about sex work, it lays the groundwork for an approach to understanding sex workers and sex worker issues that prioritises listening to those with lived experience above all else. As a tool for educating audiences, 'Mosaic' has also been shared beyond the theatre space, in academic and activist settings.

'I have shared it maybe a couple of times on a radio programme and others when I've done a workshop on sex worker rights. I did it once in a university for gender studies. I thought that was perfect.... It closes with, "you need to listen with us", and that was very important, I think, for those students to understand that before they make up their mind I think they need to talk or to read about what sex workers say'. (SWO member)

In settings like universities or conferences, where information tends to be transmitted through statistics or research articles, pieces like 'Mosaic' disturb the rhythm of learning, creating space for voices that might otherwise be flattened in 'the data' or excluded by academic jargon. Art by sex workers, therefore, has the potential to shift the focus of sex work discussions to the voices of sex workers and the expertise gained through lived experience. It is only fitting that the song that follows 'Mosaic' is called 'Listen to Me'.

'Listen to Me'

As the cast disperse from the stage around to the sides of the audience, surrounding them, they gently hum a simple tune: three repeated notes followed by one a tone below. On stage, the two sisters reconcile, the 'radical' feminist who interrupted the beginning of the performance agreeing to accept and support her sex worker sister as the humming continues beneath the dialogue. Next the tune acquires lyrics, "Listen to me", and, while this chant continues, two other parts emerge, the same lyrics sung to a descending, melismatic melody in overlapping alternation. This forms the core loop of the song, which continues as one group sings, "I am so many things you cannot see", and another adds, "Mother and brother and daughter and lover".

The orchestra begins to play, harmonising to the same chant-like tune, as the singers, silent now, begin to move through the audience, selecting an audience member to bring up onto the stage. Once they arrive, the cast form a semi-circle, holding hands with each other and the audience members who have accompanied them. The singing resumes, "Listen to me, listen to me", performers directing the words outwards or sharing the moment with the audience member they are next to, holding eye contact. Semi-improvised harmonies build and the overall pitch ascends as performers repeat the chant. It finishes up high, performers and audience members hug, the crowd applauds.

'Listen to Me' crystallises the messages that have been shared throughout *Sex Worker's Opera* into their purest form and, through simplicity and repetition, makes this near impossible to ignore.

'I mean, that is the main message of the whole show, is "Listen to me", right?' (SWO director)

Like 'Mosaic', 'Listen to Me' does not attempt to educate audiences about specific sex work issues or policies; instead it is intended to stress the notion that sex workers should be able to speak for themselves on these issues, and subsequently be heard. Politically, it is an invitation to allyship, calling on audience members to listen to the sex workers in the cast and then to retain that ethos beyond the context of the performance, continuing to seek out sex workers' voices and to support them. The act of bringing someone onto the stage strengthens the connection between performers and audiences, implicating the viewer in the struggle, rather than confronting them with it.

'Sometimes it's great just shouting at them but I think you get a lot more impact by inviting someone into that space, as opposed to forcing them into it. That's why I like 'Listen to Me', because it's an invitation, it's not a tribal cry'. (SWO member)

Sharing the song with audience members in this way is a form of mirroring, particularly through the physical breakdown of space between performer and spectator, or sex worker and non-sex worker/ally. The vulnerability of being on stage and the reality of holding hands with or hugging someone who might be a sex worker combine to pierce through any residual reluctance to support sex workers and, ideally, instil a sense of accountability to members, and sex workers more broadly.

[Ambivalence about the political message](#)

Speaking six years after it was first performed, some members felt frustrated by or ambivalent toward 'Listen to Me', particularly as the closing song of *Sex Worker's Opera*. While the song was 'melancholic' for some, owing to the fact that 'after eighteen years in the industry people are still not listening' (SWO member), other members who felt that political advancements *had* been made since 2014 thought that 'Listen to Me' could have better reflected this.

'In 2014... what was relevant was just like "Hey! This is a choice! Capitalism sucks, you need to listen to us!" And even if people understood only those three messages and nothing else then I'd be like, "Well done"... Some of that original material kind of carried through, and its simplicity is still really powerful but, at the same time, it feels like now in 2020 that we should be saying more than that'. (SWO member)

Given its position as the closing number, the same member also felt that the song was perhaps unambitious in its message:

'I feel like, in a way, we've already got people to sit here in this 2-2.5 hour long endurance theatrical experience. I'd like to think that they should be willing to listen to us by the fact that they've bought a ticket and sat their ass on a seat... If we're asking them to be an ally then listening is only like the first thing they should be doing'. (SWO member)

Concerns that the invitation to allyship was not enough to incite action in *Sex Worker's Opera* spectators, whose attendance (and endurance) already signify a willingness to listen, are valid and, in this sense, 'Listen to Me' could be seen as a very soft—or, indeed, an ineffective—form of activism.

['Utopian performative'](#)

Whether or not more could be made of this moment is open to debate, but one should nonetheless acknowledge the role it played in closing the show, and 'Listen to Me' did typically have an intense affective charge. Members are often visibly moved while performing the song; audience members frequently cry, whether on stage or not; performers might bring family, friends or partners up onto the stage with them, making the real need for this sentiment within both personal and political relationships immediately tangible. This duality was evident in one member's description of 'Listen to Me' as "a dirge, slightly" and her subsequent comment, "it never failed to move me to tears".

'Pretty much every night, whenever we would go and get someone from the audience, I would just be like, 'Oh yeah, okay, this means something''. (SWO member)

Although the explicit political message might not be as hard-core or radical as that of 'Capitalist Blues' or 'The Trans Lament', I suggest that 'Listen to Me' should be seen as a 'utopian performative', in which 'intensity of *feeling* is politics enough' (Dolan, 2005:20). Accordingly, while 'Listen to Me' might not change the world, it might very well change the people who feel it (Ibid., 19). The hope is that 'Listen to Me', as an experience and an ethos, 'might ripple out into other forms of social relations' (Ibid., 34).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a detailed review of the political messages conveyed in the music of *Sex Worker's Opera* and analysed the ways in which these messages are presented and the purposes they serve. Standing up as a show-reel of issues addressed within the sex worker rights movement, these songs signal SWO's use of community musical theatre performance as a platform to advance sex worker activism, and indicate the potential of this format as a tool for enhanced education, representation, and imagination. The analysis presented here simultaneously reflects the complexity of the issues addressed within sex work politics and the simplicity of the fundamental demands that sex workers are making, and therefore posits that songs provide a means of understanding, both intellectually and affectively, sex workers' struggles for respect, rights and safety.

Some of these songs explicitly channel political discourse—such as the slogans in 'Freedom Song'—whereas others rely more heavily on symbolism, like the

breakdown of the capitalist machine in ‘Capitalist Blues’. Combined, the musical aesthetics, the staging and the lyrics evoke laughter, tears, discomfort and a range of other feelings that cannot be nailed down and might change depending on who is in the audience and what their relationship is to the performers and to the issues illuminated within the songs of *Sex Worker’s Opera*. While it is difficult for me to concretely assert the political impact that these songs had in terms of educating audiences and destigmatising sex work, these songs create space for affects that are ‘bursting with potential’ (Gould et al, 2019:96). These affects, when tuned into—when audiences allow themselves to be affected—have the capacity to move people beyond their immediate realities and to connect them, instead, to sex workers’ realities and *their* imaginations for a more just world.

The next chapter zooms out to illuminate the ways in which the arc of the performance was constructed to affect audiences and the potential for politics to take shape within this structure. Familiarity with the songs described and discussed in this chapter and their order in the performance will be helpful, enabling the reader, in conjunction with the analyses of the next chapter, to build a more comprehensive understanding of the performance. This understanding will allow for a greater appreciation of the ways in which community musical theatre can advance social justice movements through artistic activism.

5) 'A Crescendo of Stigma': Order affects

This chapter continues with the focus on *Sex Worker's Opera* as a live performance, exploring the events that unfolded in the theatre space, between and within performers and audiences. Whereas I largely examined the *content* in Chapter 4, here, I turn to analysis of the *form*, accepting that the distinction between the two might be somewhat blurry. Throughout this chapter, I map the dramaturgy of the performance itself, paying attention to the affective trajectory it creates and the relationality this fosters, the lines and features that envelope both the audience and the performers, moving them in certain ways and nudging them toward a sense of togetherness that might constitute a 'felt resonance' (Allinson, 2020:378). In doing so, I am interested in setting out the ways in which the arc of *Sex Worker's Opera* might engender 'possibilities of transformative connections within and between bodies, as well as the systems that they are part of' (Ibid.). My analysis draws on the work of some of the affect theorists cited in Chapter 1, revisiting and applying a number of the arguments and concepts first raised there.

Key concepts: Order affects and the affective arc of *Sex Worker's Opera*

This chapter was prompted by a recurrent question from members when listening to particular songs in interview: 'Where was this in the show?' A widespread interest in contextualising and connecting the individual songs—that I, through my facilitation of listening sessions, had inadvertently fragmented from one another—prompted me to reflect on the political significance of dramatic structure. Attention to the structure of *Sex Worker's Opera* illuminates the directors' dramaturgical 'Light-Shadow-Light methodology': their use of an emotional arc to guide the ordering of different scenes in *Sex Worker's Opera*, even though there was no narrative to connect them. My analysis of *Sex Worker's Opera's* structure is not a scene-by-scene or song-by-song project like the previous chapter, but a bigger-picture perspective on the 'political feeling' that both fed into and emanated from the performance.

The phrase 'order affects' is an affect theory-inspired play on the term 'order effects' in experimental research design, whereby researchers must consider the possibility that participants' behaviours or ideas will be influenced by the order in which they are presented with materials (Salkind, 2010). The affective equivalent of 'order effects' — 'order affects' — suggests that the order in which material is presented might engender different affects, impacting on the way audiences and performers alike *feel* in response to certain scenes, songs or, indeed, people. There is, however, a key difference: order *effects* are usually only an influencing factor, which need to be noted to avoid invalidating the results of a scientific study. In contrast, order *affects* in and of themselves can be profoundly useful to artistic activism projects that aim—as SWO does—to *move* people to action (Campbell & Farrier, 2016:1; Diamond et al, 2017:10; Duncombe, 2016:131).

Among other things, *Sex Worker's Opera* is a space where creating feeling is a political tactic, wielded to reinforce a sense of political enthusiasm, empathy or responsibility. This political feeling is woven throughout the affective arc that encourages audiences to stay seated for the full length of the 2-3 hour performance, despite it not always being entirely smooth-running. In this chapter I show that, as they are guided through the emotional journey of the show, the 'programming' sets to work on audience's hearts, minds and bodies, building a sense of connection to the performers, to the issues discussed and to each other.

In Chapter 1, I cited Ahmed (2014:36) and Massumi (2015:95), who have critiqued the notion of affective contagion, warning against assumptions that multiple people will be affected by a situation or event in the same way. Bearing this in mind, I do not seek to demonstrate the exact affects experienced by audience members or performers in response to each scene or song. Instead, my focus on order affects prioritises the analysis of the dramaturgy, the intended 'affective atmosphere' (Brennan, 2004:3), created over the course of the performance of *Sex Worker's Opera* through its 'affective arc'.

The notion of an 'affective trajectory' or 'arc' might, in itself, seem counterintuitive. How can something such as affect, ephemeral and visceral, be theorised as linear? Rather than suggesting that the affect of this arc is continuous or consistent, I draw from interviews and my own experience of being an audience member and a performer to define the trajectory and the affective atmosphere as cumulative, the aggregate of multiple affects that are triggered in different places by different things, becoming part of the process of the performance. Like Harris and Holman-Jones (2020), I ask whether the 'performance's after-affects' linger in 'tone, emotional residue and traces of movement', and gradually transform, as they dissipate, into 'knowing' (Harris & Holman-Jones, 2020:325), thus bridging the mind and body, reason and passion divides. As Ahmed emphasises, '*We need to remember the 'press' in an impression.* It allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace' (Ahmed, 2014:6, emphasis original). The layering of marks and traces left by affects throughout the performance are the justification for thinking about order affects in the context of *Sex Worker's Opera*. In this sense, the 'after-affects' (Harris & Holman-Jones, 2020:325) of different moments in *Sex Worker's Opera*, transient as they may initially be, can be thought to contribute gradually to an overarching sense of connectedness—to both people and ideas—that has the potential to develop, at best into allyship and at the very least into greater understanding.

The concept of relationality is key to this chapter. Throughout, I propose that one significant way in which order affects function is to cultivate, and then capitalise on, bonds between the audience and performers. These bonds are forged through the intentional transmission of certain affects, which, as Ahmed (2014:209) and Adsit et al (2015:34) state, have the power to orient people either to or away from others, 'shaping our allegiances and ways of being' (Adsit et al, 2015:34). As a whole, I understand the dramaturgy of *Sex Worker's Opera* as '*a form of relation*', drawing the concept from Seigworth and Gregg, for whom this emerges when 'a rhythm, a fold, a timing, a habit, a contour, or a shape comes to mark the passages of intensities (whether dimming or accentuating) in body-to-body/world-body mutual

imbrication' (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010:13). As such, this chapter is not so much an examination of explicit political messages as it is an inquiry into the ways in which the dramaturgy, or 'programming', of *Sex Worker's Opera* brings into being a relationality between audiences and performers, creating 'affectual bloom-spaces' (ibid., 14).

Dolan's interpretation of the theatre as a space where 'well-delineated moving pictures of social relations become not only intellectually clear but felt and lived by spectators as well as actors' is relevant here, as I acknowledge the potential within performance settings to 'provoke affective rehearsals for revolution' (Dolan, 2005:7). Unlike the individual songs or scenes, the affective arc of *Sex Worker's Opera* does not steer audiences toward a particular thought or action; instead, it carves out a space, or multiple spaces, of potentiality. It is in these spaces that audiences can fleetingly live in a world in which sex workers are not sidelined for the risks they pose to heteronormative, patriarchal, religious and otherwise discriminatory agendas. It is a rehearsal for the revolution that will make this—felt resonance with sex workers—the new normal.

Returning to the warning against generalisations put forward by Ahmed and Massumi and cited above, I acknowledge that there is no guarantee every audience member had the desired affective response to the performance, or was affected deeply enough to form these relational bonds. However, across the duration of *Sex Worker's Opera*, the cumulative impact of the intentionally ordered affects put forward through the performance leaves an impression—one that oriented audience members toward performers and sex workers more generally, thus forming a vital affective element of SWO's artistic activism.

The conceptualisation of the aggregate affective arc as it is presented here mirrors the structure of *Sex Worker's Opera* with its surreal cabaret-like format, in which the scenes are often seemingly disjointed or only tangentially linked by an introduction from the ringmaster-style Maître'D or related dialogue between the two sisters that is threaded throughout the performance. Without providing the comfort of narrative

context, this structure demands total immersion in each individual tableau. Audiences are bombarded with images, words, sounds and feelings via multiple mediums to the extent that ‘relentless’ became ‘the famous word to describe the show’ (SWO Director). And yet, somehow this relentlessness rarely resulted in negative reactions. Quite the opposite, in fact: performances that did *not* receive standing ovations were anomalous, a victory that the directors largely attributed to the programming.

‘The show’s too long, it’s got some moments that drag, it was too hot in Amsterdam, but people have always given us standing ovations pretty consistently across five years. And I think it’s because of all this programming that we’re doing with people, and it’s the journey, the arc. And I cannot tell you how much we debated where each scene was at every stage of every year of every show’. (SWO director)

Hence, in addition to setting out the arc, this chapter also identifies the dramaturgical features that constitute this programming and make it so ‘successful’ or ‘affective’. What happens in the ‘affective encounter’ of the performance that prompts, or justifies, this consistent display of appreciation? To explore this question, I hover over moments that emerged as significant structural points of political feeling for members and audiences;³⁵ that is, moments of affective intensity that can be framed as ‘rehearsals for revolution’. As I do so, I unpack the felt resonances of these moments, ‘both on the move and moving’ (Harris & Holman-Jones, 2020:321), demonstrating that they have the potential—as part of the ‘affective encounter’ of the performance (Ibid., 320)—to inspire greater understanding of, and engagement with, sex workers and the issues they face.

³⁵ Interviews with SWO members formed the basis of my primary research, but I also use audience feedback gathered in interviews during the run of *Sex Worker’s Opera* at London’s Pleasance Theatre in 2016. Available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5FPMGuSnfg&t=168s&ab_channel=SexWorker%27sOpera

[Accessed 26th August 2021]

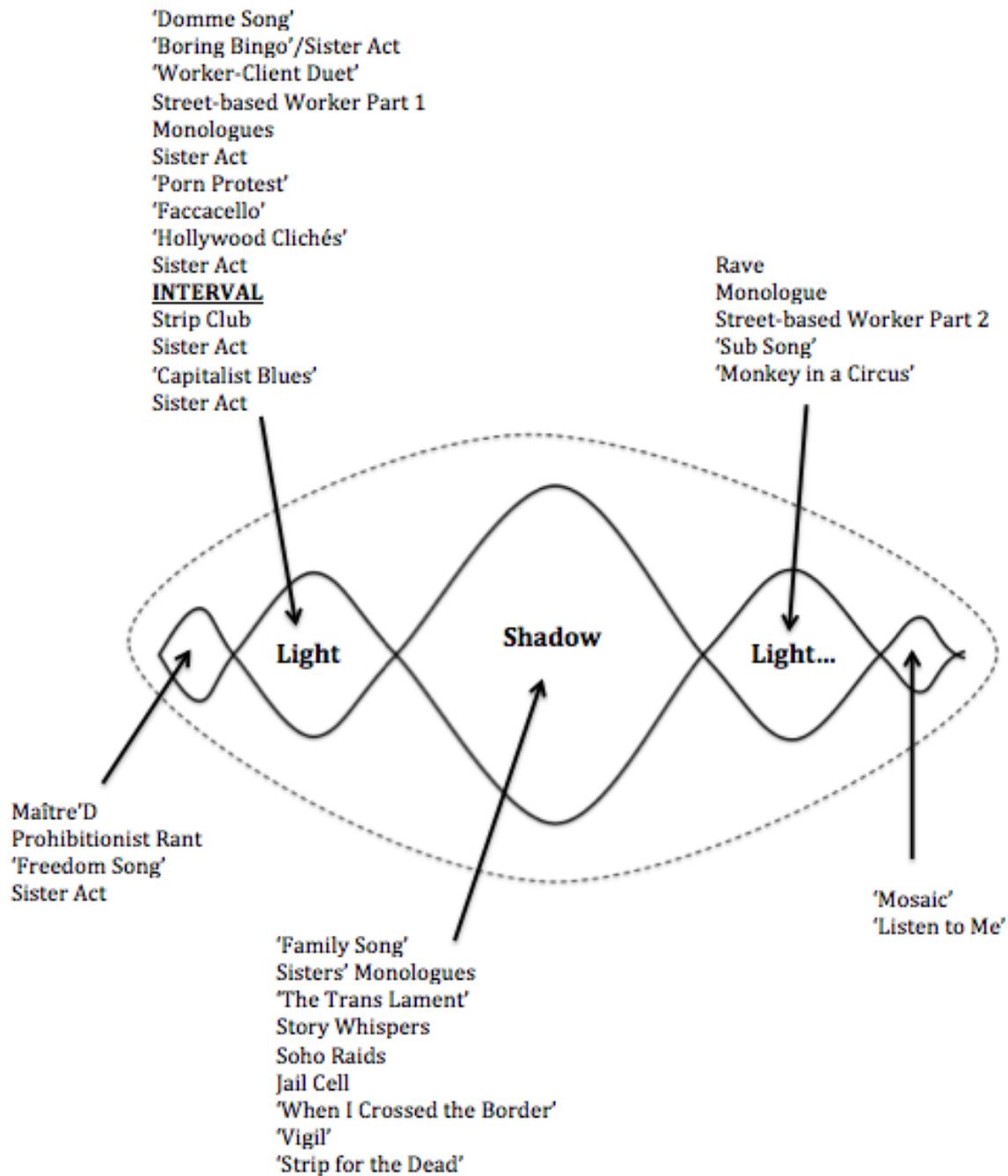
In line with the directors' explanation of their dramaturgical practice, I divide the performance into three sections—light, shadow, and light—and analyse the ways in which the structure of *Sex Worker's Opera* contributes to the activist aims of the project. I suggest that the careful composition of the performance as a whole was integral to the affects that watching the show had for audiences and performing it had for members. I propose that these affects, the order in which they occur, and the ways in which they linger, are foundational to the artistic activism of SWO.

The 'Light-Shadow-Light' method

The affective arc of *Sex Worker's Opera* follows a dramaturgical method that the directors have termed 'Light-Shadow-Light'. As seen in the figure below, this method provides a form that flows from light to shadow, and back to light again, with light and shadow corresponding—generally speaking—with positive and negative affects, respectively. Considering the intentional order affects of the performance, I will show that this structure was designed with relationality in mind. On the one hand, positive affects orient bodies toward each other, initiating an allegiance between the audience and performers. On the other, negative affects orient bodies away from 'others'—in this case, not sex workers, but state forces and perpetrators. The 'Light-Shadow-Light' method, then, is built upon the foundational belief that there is political potential in both positive and negative affects, given that both have the capacity to impact upon our orientations.

To help explain this structure and the diagram that represents it, a few notes are worth foregrounding. Firstly, the smaller, self-contained sections at the very beginning and the very end are attached to the adjacent larger 'light' sections and can also be characterised as 'light', but they serve distinct purposes in opening and closing the show. Secondly, the sections are not necessarily equal or proportionate in weight: as shown in the diagram, the initial 'light' section contains the entirety of Act One and the beginning of Act Two, whereas the second 'light' section is relatively short. Thirdly, though the cabaret structure permits the coexistence of multiple self-

contained narratives, each scene is carefully positioned to contribute to the overall flow of the performance, across the boundaries of the 'light-shadow-light' structure. While scenes do not come together to build one particular storyline, they do combine to construct a coordinated sequence of affective peaks and troughs. Fourthly, 'light' does not mean the same thing in both instances. The first 'light' section is playful and fun, introducing the audience to characters and concepts in a light-hearted and entertaining way. On the other hand, the second 'light' section is dedicated to landing. The distinction between the two will become apparent throughout the analysis presented here.



This diagram was drawn by the directors for this research to provide a visual representation of the arc of *Sex Worker's Opera*. It is labelled with the scenes and songs that fit into each section, listed in the order that they occur in the performance.

The Beginning: Light

As detailed in the previous chapter, the political tone of the earlier songs in *Sex Worker's Opera* is unremittingly positive, portraying sex work as a choice and a demonstration of sexual agency, even a form of empowerment. The positioning of songs such as 'Freedom Song' and 'Domme Song' at the beginning of the performance is deliberate in this sense; along with much of Act One, they constitute the first 'light' part of the 'light-shadow-light' structure that governs the affective arc. While the political ideas expressed through these songs are not uncontroversial, and surely could be contested from various angles, the songs themselves are deliberately entertaining. They are upbeat, funny and sexy, and the performers demonstrate impressive artistic skill, executing complex choreographies and showcasing the musicianship within the orchestra. Even if audience members do not immediately agree with the songs' sentiments, it is unlikely they will be completely unaffected by the immense energy of the show's opening. Despite the potential for discomfort with what is being represented on stage, the prevailing impression is one of celebration—aesthetically, affectively and politically. This reclamatory, celebratory feel launches audiences and performers alike into the rest of the show, quieting various hesitations until the decision to address the more complex arguments is made, on members' terms, later in the arc.

As the first encounter between audience and performers, the beginning of the show is vital in establishing a relation of trust. This goes both ways: audiences need to trust that performers are going to put on a 'good show', and performers need to trust that audiences are going to listen and respect their performance and their authority on matters pertaining to sex work.

'You've got 'Freedom Song', which everyone's worked on so much so it's polished-ish, and then 'Domme Song', which is super polished, so it sets people up to think 'Oh, this is going to be a good show''. (SWO director)

The notion of a ‘good show’ can, of course, be interpreted in various ways and this judgment is not necessarily bound to any normative notion of aesthetic quality, particularly in community performance; yet, the directors felt it was important, for both performers and audiences, that the first songs in the performance were polished. Accordingly, the two songs referenced above, ‘Freedom Song’ and ‘Domme Song’, were upbeat, well-rehearsed numbers that featured solos from some of the strongest voices in the group alongside well-developed orchestration. This early focus on aesthetic quality was seen as a way of nurturing the confidence of members, who had to continue performing, and the comfort of audiences, who needed to be able to relax into the show. The audience’s response to these songs, almost always highly enthusiastic, indicated their willingness to embark on the journey that *Sex Worker’s Opera* would take them on. Once the audience responded positively to the performance—perhaps, although many would not have admitted it, a little surprised by how ‘good’ it was—the first seeds of relationality had been sown.

‘If you want to talk about the emotional journey of our members while they’re performing, they go out and do the ‘Freedom Song’ and then the rest just doesn’t matter... Of course the rest matters but people know they’ve done something fucking amazing. The audience have given you a huge reaction and it’s just lifting you up at the beginning of your show’. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

This sentiment was validated by members, who independently recalled feeling like the boost they got from the quality of their performance at the beginning carried them through the whole show. One member likened performing ‘Domme Song’ to a group of men huddling in a changing room before a rugby match, psyching each other up.

‘When I used to come off the stage from doing that song, that was it, that made the rest of my night. I was like, ‘Right, I’m charged now, let’s go’’. (SWO member)

The metaphor of the pre-match changing room is helpful in understanding the affective moment of the beginning of the performance, and adds nuance to the celebratory atmosphere. There is the sense of anxious anticipation that looms heavy; the static of excitement and fear that fires across the constructed line between the stage and the auditorium, the field and the stands; and, what I find most compelling here, the implication of opposition. If we are to see 'Freedom Song' and 'Domme Song' as pre-match changing room moments for the performers, does this imply that they are intending to face down the audience?

The simple answer is, yes. Familiar as sex workers are with being silenced, the opening of *Sex Worker's Opera* was an opportunity to confront stigma head-on,³⁶ and, naturally, this confrontation is fuelled, in part, by an entirely reasonable degree of anger. Though this anger is draped in playfulness in 'Freedom Song', it is still a powerful force.

'I think that's the best thing of the show, the show is not naïve even when it's playing around. And it's raw but it's not naïve, and I love that. And I think this song does exactly that. It's fun, it's playful, but it's also slapping you in the face. With kindness, but still slapping you in the face. I like that'. (SWO member)

The crucial function of the opening was to plug the gaps in the audiences' affinity for sex workers through which doubts about the arguments being presented might seep. It needed to disarm the audience, to be both forceful and appealing to the extent that spectators would be shocked but not repelled. It needed to reel them in without pandering to them; to slap them in the face, but with kindness. Audience feedback and my own experiences within the audience suggest that this balance was

³⁶ This was the general stimulus for the group's co-writing exercise through which 'Freedom Song' was created. The process will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

achieved and that the overall affect of *Sex Worker's Opera's* beginning was positive despite its directness.

*'I think it is quite shocking in a really refreshing way. Because it's just so honest and very quickly you get used to these images that you don't see. And what I really like about it is the humour and the intelligence and the unexpected moments. The pacing is really, really good'.
(Audience member)*

I suggest that this combination of honesty and humour, shock and intelligence, helps to establish the relation of trust between performers and audiences. While the artistic skill of the performance helps everyone to relax into the show, the somewhat confrontational quality of the songs being performed—the images, the messages, the sounds—serves to test the commitment of the audience to the act of listening and their willingness to follow the line of argument being set out by the performers. This is particularly true of 'Freedom Song', which one member described as 'the contents page of the show', declaring, 'this is who we are, this is what we do, this is what we already face, you need to be aware of this' (SWO member). Although the opening of *Sex Worker's Opera* is entertaining and fun, corresponding with its position in the 'light' portion of the show, it is also an opportunity to 'establish a basic premise upon which you're agreeing to continue to see this show together' (SWO director). Part of its work is to connect performers with audiences on their own terms, therefore setting the tone for the relationship that will continue to develop over the course of the performance.

The role of humour

In the first 'light' section, humour plays a vital role in strengthening the bonds between performers and audiences, increasing the investment audiences feel in the performance and the performers as the show progresses. After the force of the initial songs, *Sex Worker's Opera* settles into a steadily entertaining rhythm, with many of the songs and scenes built around humour, parody and clowning. This was

an important extension of the lightness of the opening, building on the relationship between performers and audiences and leaning into the potential for enjoyment and fun, once the 'basic premise' has been set and a certain degree of trust has been established. The songs that come later in Act One still feature images and ideas that might be shocking—the parodic death of the 'consumptive courtesan' (Gardner, 2017) in 'Hollywood Clichés' being one noteworthy example—and anger is still a driving force beneath the surface, but there is a sense that the audience are now in on the joke. The performers have already secured their attention and reassured them that, not only is it going to be a 'good show', but also that it is not going to be a tragedy, thereby unsettling some of the expectations audiences might bring to a show about sex work.

'Once the cherubs come out you're going, 'Look guys, we all know this is silly'. And we're being vulnerable and silly, and we're not taking ourselves too seriously, and then the characters aren't taking themselves too seriously, and I think you really feel that in the audience. I think I always felt the first real sigh of relief of commitment from the audience of, 'I'm here and I'm gonna try and listen' after 'Worker-Client Duet''. (SWO director)

One member spoke of humour in the first half of *Sex Worker's Opera* as a means to create a 'safe space' before the heaviness (or the 'shadow') of Act Two, suggesting that it bolstered the connection between performers and audiences, and that this connection then helped them to move through the more challenging content together.

'The second half of the show was a lot more heavy... So it was good to kind of prep people, or sort of lure them into a false sense of security. But it also creates that safe space, a space where we can all laugh together: this is what we're doing, it is theatre'. (SWO member)

The reassurance that 'it is theatre' does indeed provide a 'sense of security' ahead of the heavier second half, where members tell painful stories more naturalistically, as if they are their own. That this member considers this sense of security to be 'false' speaks to the fact that some of these stories actually do belong to the members telling them, thereby blurring the line between theatre and reality, and that some of the scenes in Act 2 feature disturbing and immersive reenactments of very real State violence. In contrast, Act One is deliberately fantastical, with cherubs, Hollywood characters and even certain sex acts being given a comic spin, exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness.

As an aspect of the programming, humour is in part designed to make audiences more receptive to the seriousness of the 'shadow', softening them so that they are more susceptible to the blows it deals—a point I expanded upon later. However, this humour exists for itself too, creating spaces 'where we can all laugh together'. Such moments carry the potential for what Rousell and Diddams, writing about affective intensity in comedy, call 'the fielding of hilarity' (Rousell & Diddams, 2020:426). They create feeling that 'is socially contagious but largely nonconscious, capable of improvising new forms and modes of collective life' (Ibid., 422). The suggestion that this hilarity only results in laughter once it has reached 'the level of the transindividual' (Ibid., 426) implies that laughter, particularly in a performance context, is the embodiment of a social connection. Extending in multiple directions between and among performers and audiences, this connection is key to the artistic activism of *Sex Worker's Opera*.

Not only does the 'light-shadow-light' format govern the structure of the performance as a whole, but it is also used as a template for certain individual scenes. Due to the way it keeps the shadow contained, preventing it from spreading, this structure enabled the group to explore challenging topics within the context of the 'light' sections of the show without clouding the overall mood. One scene called 'Porn Protest' is a good example of how 'light-shadow-light' exists as a fractal. In this scene, playing for laughs is a means to connect audiences to the issue being presented, engaging them in critique of a particular piece of legislation without

alienating them. Here, humour is also a way of forging connections between performers and audience members, whose laughter strengthens the affective bonds that make *Sex Worker's Opera*, as a whole, more likely to move people to action. As such, analysis of 'Porn Protest' elucidates the ways in which even sections categorised as 'light' can pull serious political weight.

'Porn Protest': Creating affective bonds through laughter

It is nearing the end of Act One and dotted around the stage are four mini 'scenes'. One, a woman dressed as a 'schoolgirl', responding to the voice of an unseen man telling her to bend over and "squeeze those titties", which she does unenthusiastically. Another, a lesbian couple—Bella and Donna—dressed in coordinated purple and black latex, who have a unique take on the game 'rock, paper, scissors' that helps them to decide which sexual acts to film themselves doing. They are making porn to save up for a house. Also, two Dommies and a CEO—Donald—who spends "all day crunching numbers and crushing dreams" but gets to have his masochistic fantasies fulfilled on camera. And lastly, Flossie, the housewife who deals in filmed 'vegetable insertions', ranging from predictably phallic courgettes to more extravagant items, such as a string of anal beads fashioned from brussels sprouts. Another character, 'the politician', announces the Audiovisual Media Services Regulations 2014 and proceeds to enter the audience to scrutinise their behaviour and belongings for evidence of violations, fabricating vulgar discoveries. Meanwhile, Kurt Weill's 'Mack the Knife' theme from Threepenny Opera (Brecht & Weill, 1928) is played joltily by the violin and piano with a pizzicato walking bass line in the cello.

This becomes the soundtrack to a cycle of exaggerated sexual activity, as each of the scenes are silently enacted with repetitive clown-style movements—spanking, fisting, scissoring. Once the music stops, the scenes become more realistic and the characters can be heard making exclamations of pleasure or engaging in dirty talk. The performers loop around this cycle of clowning and realism three times, exhibiting an array of positions and acts, before the government official disrupts the fun,

banning the acts being performed in the scenes one by one. In the process, he interrupts Flossie's orgasmic call of "It's 100% organiiiiic", gets covered in liquid that seems to have shot out of Donna (courtesy of a well-concealed water pistol) and is told to "get in line" by the Domme who wrongly assumes the politician holds the same inclination as Donald. His ubiquitous response is to condemn these activities, stating that they are now "BANNED!" with a decisive foot-stamp. In between each banning, the chaos of the 'Mack the Knife' clown sex ensues for the surviving scenes, but eventually it is only the schoolgirl left. Curiously, he permits her to continue, asking, "Did I say stop...?" and then moves to the back of the stage and transforms into the man from the initial schoolgirl scene. He encourages her performance of oral sex, despite her gagging and appearing uncomfortable. After further demands to spread her legs wider than physically possible, she appeals to Flossie for help sourcing a weapon and flings a baguette toward him at the back of the stage, upsetting the heteronormative schoolgirl fantasy and scrambling the male pornographic gaze as he is heard squealing and fleeing.

As the performers exit the stage and the applause fades, a video clip is projected onto the screen. It is an extract from a news interview with sex worker activist Pandora Blake, arguing against the Audiovisual Media Services Regulations 2014. Blake says: "I want young girls and boys to grow up in a world where the erotic media that they consume—and you're right that they will consume it—has a healthy balance of female and male sexual pleasure. This legislation disproportionately targets acts of female orgasm, female sexual dominance and female agency, and I don't think that they should be banned".

The Audiovisual Media Services Regulations 2014 was designed to control the production and consumption of video-on-demand pornography deemed to surpass the British Board of Film Classification's R-18 category (Haley, 2015:500). It banned acts such as spanking, caning, fisting, female ejaculation (if the liquid touched someone or was consumed), urination (likewise), face-sitting and a number of other

acts linked to the sex more often had within LGBTQIA+ and BDSM communities. At the time the legislation was passed, it was criticised as a targeted attack on these marginalised communities, who are ‘engaged in non-heteronormative sexualities’ (Ibid., 496). ‘Porn Protest’ makes very clear the perceived distinction between “nefarious” sex, that is, anything that centres female pleasure or dominance, and “normal sexuality” (the words of the ‘politician’), which is built around male pleasure and dominance. As such, it chimes with critiques that suggest ‘the manner in which the laws are written and enforced has the effect of banning and stigmatizing the depiction of sexual practices outside the scope of traditional, phallocentric, heterosexual pornography’ (Ibid., 496).



A still from near the end of ‘Porn Protest’, when all the sex acts have been banned apart from Britney’s performance of oral sex. Here, she is seen furiously mocking the demand for her to ‘spread wider’.
Photo by Julio Etchart.

The Audiovisual Media Services Regulations 2014 is not fun; in many ways, it is anti-fun, making it an intriguing choice for the basis of a scene designed to make audiences hoot with laughter.

'There was a lot of information in the porn laws that were happening and it was hard to get that across. And so to do it in a way that you had these characters who were doing these real acts and then going into absolute parody, ridicule and clownesque vibes was a good way of kind of getting the audience to laugh along with how ridiculous this whole situation was'. (SWO member)

On the one hand, humour is used to engage audiences with the legislative material without boring them or using inaccessible language, therefore making it easier for them to understand the subject of the critique. On the other, humour is attached to the critique itself, undermining the regulatory authority of the government figure by turning him into someone who is deeply threatened by clown sex and, by extension, exposing the law as 'ridiculous'.

The affective structure of 'Porn Protest' demonstrates the 'light-shadow-light' method on a miniature scale, representing a fractal of the performance as a whole. The initial 'light' encompasses the comical introduction of the various porn performers and the clown-style performances of their chosen sexual acts accompanied by 'Mack the Knife'. The 'shadow' creeps in as the acts begin getting banned, one by one, and all that is left is the schoolgirl giving oral sex, with her visible displeasure making this highly uncomfortable to watch. Finally, the 'light' returns as Flossie offers her a baguette and she flings it at the man who has been ordering her around, forcing him to flee off-stage as the audience cheer and laugh with relief. The projection of Pandora Blake then clarifies the political message of the scene, providing a landing space not dissimilar to that offered by 'Mosaic' and 'Listen to Me', as will be discussed later.

This condensed arc helps to convey the politics surrounding porn legislation and to bring the audience onto the side of sex workers. Humour plays a significant role but it is actually in the moments when the laughter stops that the affective bond created through laughter is most tangible. Situated in the audience, regardless of how we might feel about porn censorship, we cannot help but dislike both the politician for

endorsing this ending to the scene—looking down on the woman choking and saying, “Carry on”—and the man who exhibits his unfettered sexual entitlement. As we in the audience stop laughing during the ‘shadow’ section, these characters have killed *our* joy as well as that of the characters practising alternative sexualities, and we resent these figures of power for that, despite knowing it is part of the performance.

‘That eleven minutes says so much about, not just what porn might look like or could look like, but also what the people in power are actually doing, and who those people are and how they treat porn performers like puppets, or treat everything else like puppets to their desire’. (SWO member)

In contrast, our laughter signals an investment in the other performers and their exaggerated characters, an endorsement in some sense and a willingness to follow them through taboos, even if we are shocked by them or would not participate in them ourselves. This laughter—this reminder that ‘it is theatre’—and the connection it nurtures between and among performers and audiences is a necessary primer for what happens in the second half of *Sex Worker’s Opera*. Subconsciously, as a miniature ‘light-shadow-light’, ‘Porn Protest’ reassures both performers and audiences that there will be light at the end of the longer shadow of Act Two.

The Middle: Shadow

After the fun of Act One, where even serious messages received comic treatment, the second half is a space of increased complexity and gravity. The switch from ‘light’ to ‘shadow’ is gradual, occurring slightly after the interval, which is still encompassed by the ‘light’ section. The content of the songs in the ‘shadow’ section—for example, ‘Family Song’ and ‘The Trans Lament’—is heavier, angrier and sadder. Chapter 6, on performances of pain in *Sex Worker’s Opera*, focusses on two personal pieces not yet

discussed—‘Strip for the Dead’ and ‘Monkey in a Circus’. These pieces are based on difficult experiences of stigma, violence and discrimination and are both performed in Act Two. Overall, there is no question that the tone of the second Act of *Sex Worker’s Opera* is radically different from the first, as is exemplified in the discussion of ‘Vigil’ below. In this section, I explore three significant components of the ‘shadow’ part of the performance and their role in the affective arc of the show: the addition of nuance to the political arguments, the ‘crescendo of stigma’, and the use of affective contrasts within the arc.

Added nuance: Complicating discourse

The introduction of greater nuance to the sex work discourse that is platformed within *Sex Worker’s Opera* is vital to the overall political agenda of the project. As detailed in the previous chapter, songs such as ‘Capitalist Blues’ complicate the unambiguous pro-sex work discourse presented near the beginning of the performance. This is not to say that that initial discourse is not ‘real’—for some sex workers it is—but in Act Two the gritty realities of life are introduced. The audience is confronted with the necessity of earning money, the difficulties of living in a body that is systematically marginalised, and the lack of options available to undocumented migrants. Real life, as opposed to cherubs and clowns, can be brutal, and sex work is positioned within this context. In this way, it is possible for performers to voice dangers or dissatisfactions around sex work without compromising the fight for sex workers’ rights.

Negative affect, in the context of the second Act, is not attached to sex work per se but to the conditions in which it takes place. Referring to negative affects such as anger, disappointment and even despair, Gould suggests there is ‘a lot of political potential in those bad feelings’, which can be activated to a movement’s advantage (Gould, 2019:103-4). She laments that feelings such as despair are frequently pushed out of leftist movements, which tend to rely on the political force of anger and hope. ‘To harness our despair would require acknowledging it and trying to see its political sources, and then trying to lasso it’ (Ibid., 107). In its foregrounding of the political

sources that lead to despair in the context of sex worker activism, the argument attached to negative affect in *Sex Worker's Opera* is not anti-sex work, but anti-capitalism, anti-racism and anti-patriarchy, attempting to activate resistance to these forces.

To avoid misinterpretation when introducing this more nuanced discourse, the performers rely on the trust that has been established between them and the audience in Act Two. In the case of 'Capitalist Blues', the use of metaphors and irony prevent it from feeling too heavy, making it an ideal song to aid the transition from 'light' to 'shadow'. Without the pre-existing relationship between performers and audiences, however, performers might have had a hard time believing that audiences would not jump to the conclusion that sex work is the problem. Correspondingly, without earlier programming, some audience members might have had trouble believing that sex work was not the problem. Members certainly felt this way about the point at which the arguments presented in 'Capitalist Blues' would work in the performance.

'It arrives at a point in the show where we're able to say, 'We don't always love doing sex work but it's the best choice available of limited choices, and sometimes it's grim but it's still the best option'. And that's something that's very hard to say back at a time when you're doing 'Freedom Song', so it's a really powerful stage in the show where we're able to'. (SWO member)

The addition of nuance is not only about complicating the discourse but also ensuring that representation is diverse and balanced. For example, members saw 'Sub Song' as being a fundamental part of Act Two in order to balance the focus on domination in 'Domme Song' at the beginning of Act One. As a BDSM dynamic that is more controversial in feminist debates, female submission could not have been presented near the beginning of *Sex Worker's Opera*, when audiences may still have strong doubts about the agency of sex workers in general. Where it sits toward the end of Act Two, however, the audience have already been tested and are better

primed to digest images and themes that could potentially be controversial or uncomfortable.

The 'crescendo of stigma': Representing danger and harm

After the transitional addition of nuance that 'Capitalist Blues' provides, the principal component of the 'shadow' section of *Sex Worker's Opera* is a string of scenes that one member astutely referred to as a 'crescendo of stigma'. In this section of the performance, negative affects are compounded to emphasise the damage of stigma and repression, working viscerally on the audience with the intention of making them see the roots of the problems facing sex workers. These scenes are not all explicitly linked but there is a momentum that carries from one to the next, resulting in a build-up of affective tension. This section has an impetus that was absent from Act One and the beginning of Act Two, due to the frequent interjections of the sister characters there.

The crescendo begins with 'Family Song', which acts as a time-lapse of a sex worker's failing relationships with her mother, friend and partner. As discussed in the previous chapter, it moves from imagining supportive relationships to revealing the insidious stigma that, in reality, often taints personal relationships for sex workers. Next, there are monologues from the two sisters, whose conversations form the central plotline of *Sex Worker's Opera*, and then 'The Trans Lament'.

After that—and this is where the crescendo really begins to build—the audience hears a string of monologues. One at a time, performers speak from the top of the podium before moving into the audience, continuing to tell their story to a smaller section of the auditorium as another performer begins telling theirs. The effect is a build-up, an overlap of voices and stories that represent an array of experiences and perspectives. This scene, 'Story Whispers', is followed by a depiction of a police raid of a brothel, with the police officers entering the audience and dragging out performers who are pleading for protection from the audience members they have just been confiding in. The next scene is a projection of a news interview with a

police officer during the Soho Raids of December 2013, during which police forcefully entered brothels in riot gear and with dogs, confiscated money from safes, took women into the street without letting them put clothes on, invited the media to take photos, threatened to expose them to their families, and put some at risk of deportation, all in the name of keeping vulnerable women safe (ECP, 2014). In the video clip, the police officer is heard saying that they “want to take the danger out of Soho”, implying that sex workers and sex work are inherently dangerous.

The lights come up on a jail cell, where two women who have had their rent money taken away and been left unable to arrange childcare are sitting together. They have both been arrested in the Soho raids.

‘I think that part of the show works really well, like the crescendo of stigma that starts, right? From ‘Family Song’ we have the ‘Whispers’, and then we have the ‘Raids’, and then the ‘Jail’ scene. And it’s just like things getting really heavy just in there. Basically, sometimes I feel that the sex worker who ends up in the ‘Jail’ scene is the sex worker from the ‘Family Song’. So it’s exactly the same person, someone who was vilified, someone who was ostracised by family and friends, and therefore ends up in a place where she doesn’t have any support and ends up in jail’. (SWO member)

Despite the lack of an explicit continuous plotline throughout all of these scenes, it is noteworthy that the same member played the sex worker character in ‘Family Song’ and one of the sex workers in the ‘Jail Cell’ scene, likely connoting continuity for the member quoted above and for the audience. The phrase ‘crescendo of stigma’ perfectly describes this point in the affective arc of *Sex Worker’s Opera*, as the tangible effects of the stigma around sex work are laid bare. Audiences see the ‘crescendo’ from tensions in personal relationships to justifications for state violence, linked by the notion that sex workers need ‘saving’.

'Here it is on the small scale, within this microcosm of this family, and here's what that really means in terms of huge state violence and raids. You know, those things are not actually separable, those experiences of individual sex workers'. (SWO director)

It is painful to bear witness to the overwhelming sense that this sex worker's family and the state, entangled as they are, have turned against her. The lack of understanding isolates her from loved ones and makes her unable to trust the police to protect her. Within the affective arc of the performance—at a point when affective bonds have been established between the audience and the performers these injustices are happening to—this pain not only becomes a trigger to orient viewers against those who have caused it, but also to prompt them to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviours.

Because the stories in *Sex Worker's Opera* are being told from sex workers' perspectives, they are able to control the narrative and to communicate the sense that sex work is, in fact, *made* dangerous by stigma and prejudice, rather than being inherently dangerous itself. Furthermore, the intentional positioning of danger and violence throughout Act Two, and the strategic connection between small-scale interpersonal microaggressions and large-scale state violence, presents audiences with an opportunity to disrupt the cycle through their own behaviour. It lends weight to the huge potential and appealing feasibility of transformations in the way that people generally relate to sex workers.

'It uncovers all your prejudices. Each one you're thinking, 'Oh god, I've probably said that or done that'. And the message is so simple: to listen and open your heart and your ears'. (Audience member)

Beyond the disturbing outcomes of criminalisation and misplaced 'rescue' attempts portrayed through the 'Family Song', 'Soho Raids' and 'Jail Cell' scenes, Act Two does in fact expose the audience to the existence of danger within sex work itself. This was a sensitive but necessary issue to address within *Sex Worker's Opera*, and one

that required a great deal of thought and care, as I detail in Chapter 8. Rather than depicting client violence in as explicit a way or with the same sense of drama as they did state violence, members agreed that they would mark the lives of sex workers who have been killed through a minute of silence. This became a scene called ‘Vigil’.

‘Vigil’: Space and silence

Humming a simple descending tune in unison, the cast and the musicians enter the stage and form a semi-circle, joining hands and facing out into the audience. The stage is dimly lit and they are all dressed in black. One performer is set apart, further forward and in the centre of the stage. Another two break out of the formation to fix up a web of rope at the back, marking the mid-point of the semi-circle where a gap has been left in the formation. Two-by-two, one from each side of the semi-circle, performers go up to the web and tie on a colourful ribbon. The humming continues on a loop as the performer in the centre begins to read from a card: “The seventeenth of December is the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers”. There is a long pause as she gathers herself before continuing, shakily.

She brings the audience in on the sex work community’s practices for marking this day, the rituals and services that they hold. Still reading from a card as two other performers come forward to stand on either side of her, she details the impacts of criminalisation—the risks, the arrests, the violence—and the disproportionate burden that falls on trans sex workers of colour. As she struggles to finish reading, she turns around to put her own ribbon on the web. The performer to her right then states the impacts of the FOSTA-SESTA laws,³⁷ and the performer to her left illuminates the benefits of decriminalisation and the necessity of making space for remembrance.

³⁷ FOSTA-SESTA is a US anti-trafficking bill that was passed in 2018. It was designed to help identify trafficking victims on websites such as Backpage.com, but resulted in a generalised crackdown on advertising that made selling sex, whether coerced or consensual, on the internet much harder. In pushing advertising underground the legislation has made it more difficult to catch traffickers, more difficult to identify trafficking victims, and more dangerous for sex workers to work. There are many reports of sex workers becoming reliant on pimps or having to move to street-based work, which is known to be more dangerous (Mac & Smith, 2018:124)

They end with an invitation “to join the cast and crew of Sex Worker’s Opera in a minute’s silence to honour and remember the lives lost among the sex work community” and peel back off into the semi-circle, closing the gap and holding vigil with their fellow performers, community-members, and the audience.

The affect of this moment of silence amidst the noise of *Sex Worker’s Opera*³⁸—a disruption to the so-called ‘rhythm of chaos’ (SWO member) that governed the performance and a contrast to the ‘crescendo of stigma’ that comes before it—is an important point of exploration. In the context of *Sex Worker’s Opera*’s affective arc, I posit that this disruption enabled both a moment of introspection and a space for social bonds to form, joining performers and audiences, sex workers or not, in an easily recognisable act of remembrance for sex workers who have been killed. Brown’s work exploring the commemorative minute’s silence *as* performance is relevant here, especially his conceptualisation of the minute’s silence as a ‘modern ritualised practice of cultural remembrance’ (Brown, 2009:203). It is interesting though that, in ‘Vigil’, the minute’s silence occurs not so much as a moment of performance within the cultural life of a community, as Brown theorises it, but as a moment of a community’s cultural life within a performance. As is explained in the performance itself, the minute’s silence in ‘Vigil’ is based on the cultural practices of the sex work community on the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, December 17th (more on this in Chapter 8). In this way, audience participation in the minute’s silence of ‘Vigil’ forges a connection between audience members and the wider sex work community; they become participants in a community event without leaving their seats in the auditorium.

Commemorative minutes of silence, Brown suggests, connect ‘the inner selves of participants [...] to the external environment’ (Ibid.). ‘Participants’, in this context,

³⁸ In order to maintain this focus, I leave discussion of the making of the ‘Vigil’ scene, and the huge amount of care and sensitivity it required, to Chapter 7.

are all those observing the minute's silence; so, in the theatre context, performers and audiences are suddenly in the same role, participating in something real, live and potentially uncomfortable. Brown maps the journey of the 'theatrical energy' in prolonged moments of theatrical silence, as its focus 'seems to move out from the playing area, hover in the auditorium, and then, as the silence prolongs further, invade the throat and the chest, until the audience's own body becomes the epicentre of the theatrical energy' (Ibid., 215). With this shift in focus from the stage to a body's interior, Brown theorises that 'one's own subjective discomfort becomes the theatre, until the performance resumes' (Ibid.). It is true that all semblance of entertainment is cut away in this moment of *Sex Worker's Opera*, making the impact of death and grief a stark and strongly felt reality, for both performers and audiences, rather than something that can be brushed off as make-believe. It is a moment of striking vulnerability, in which audiences are made acutely aware that they are not simply passive observers. The silence forces 'participants' to be attuned to their own discomfort, to attend to it in the same way they have been attending to the on-stage action. In doing so, in relocating 'the epicentre of the theatrical energy' so drastically, the silence cuts through the noise of the show thus far and protects space to honour death, grief and memory.

'At this stage, the show's been a lot of comedy. Some conflict but very little honouring of any violence and pain... And so it was the only real scrutinising holding form that really allowed that space. (SWO director)

It is significant that the minute's silence follows a speech made by three performers about the pain suffered by the sex work community and the power that harmful laws give perpetrators of violence and exploitation. Through their collaborative creative process (discussed with specific regard to this scene in Chapter 8) members of SWO determined how best to reflect this pain without giving yet more power to those perpetrators. The options of explicitly representing violence or portraying abusive individuals were rejected in favour of a moment of community commemoration, which held space for the victims and the mourning community rather than those who inflicted the violence. This approach should be placed in

contrast to the sensationalism surrounding violence against sex workers that is evident in the prevalence of films or television crime show episodes that feature a variation on the phrase 'a prostitute is found dead' in their plot summaries, as well as in the tourist industry built around the horrific crimes of East London serial killer, 'Jack the Ripper'. These nods to violence against the sex work community either glamourise or trivialise the suffering experienced by the victims, often perpetuating a discourse and imagery of dehumanisation that had no place in *Sex Worker's Opera*.

In opposition, 'Vigil' highlighted the plight of sex workers working in dangerous conditions, often without state protection, and then left space for the audience to internalise this reality. More than understanding what the performers had been saying, the audience *felt* the significance of their words.

'I wanted to talk about 'Vigil' because of the clear moment that everyone stops and takes. In all the scenes of the show people can kind of laugh out the politics, I don't think they can on this one. So whoever's not tuned with the message up to this point, now it's unavoidable to politicise the show'. (SWO member)

Both of the interviewees quoted here have noted the distinction between 'Vigil' and the comedy that otherwise dominated *Sex Worker's Opera* up until this point. This coordinated silence, and with it the sense that the distinction between performers and audiences has softened, enables affective participation in this moment of remembrance. It makes space for both the politics and the feelings of 'Vigil', each of which amplifies the impact of the other, to land and reverberate.

Affective contrasts: Humour and pain

Out of this discussion of 'Vigil' emerge a number of juxtapositions dotted throughout the arc of *Sex Worker's Opera*. For instance, both of the above quotations compare the honouring of violence in 'Vigil' to the comedy in earlier parts of the show, highlighting the contrast between humour and pain. Similarly, the contrast between

noise and silence, movement and stillness and, on a broader scale, light and shadow have coloured my analysis in this chapter. Here, however, I hone in on the relationship between humour and pain, suggesting that the ordered coexistence of the two generates a tension that heightens the affective activism of *Sex Worker's Opera* as a whole.

'Humour fleshes you out as a human. And that was also the whole point of Sex Worker's Opera, was to humanise us. You know, we are three-dimensional people, five-dimensional people, with thoughts, feelings, concepts'. (SWO member)

Accordingly, humour's role in Act One was to help audiences see sex workers as likeable, smart, funny people. Though perhaps a low bar, the dehumanisation of sex workers runs deep and it could not be assumed that audiences would already appreciate that sex workers are real, multi-dimensional people. Again, humour and pain work in tandem; the connection formed through the humour of Act One is an essential building block in moving audiences and prompting empathy in Act Two. The surge of empathetic feeling in Act Two is not so much a response to the material itself as it is to the people on the stage, with whom the audience have by now built relationships based on trust and enjoyment of each other's company. In short, the humour of the first half contributes to the development of a fondness for both the characters and the performers. Consequently, the pain that these characters, and performers, express and experience in the second half affects audiences more profoundly.

'We realised that genuinely the audience falls in love with the actors, the characters, the people who are being presented to them in the first half, and that's so key to then bringing them through the pain, because then you're seeing these horrible things happen to the characters that you've already fallen in love with, and that makes it all the more poignant, I think'. (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

The difficulty audiences have in distinguishing between what is real and what is not, which stories belong to the performers and which have been sent in by other sex workers, is a staple of the artistic activism of *Sex Worker's Opera*. Functioning within the arc of the show, this ambiguity prompts a suspension of disbelief, whereby it is reasonable to assume that everything performers say or every scene they perform comes from their own lived experience. As with the 'crescendo of stigma' from 'Family Song' to the 'Jail Cell' scene, this might mean that audiences see the people on stage—each an ambiguous blend of character and performer—in a succession of scenes or roles that seem connected due to the continuity of the performer. Although, in reality, these might be different people's stories, this perceived continuity helps audience members to become attached to individual performers and their 'stories'. They experience the transition from comedy to tragedy through watching character-performers that they associate with light-heartedness and joy go through terrible crises.

Asked to specify something they had found challenging about the performance, one audience member responded:

'I guess when you heard little bits about people's experiences and people were sharing hard times they'd had. That was affecting because it's that thing about seeing that they were genuine stories'. (Audience member)

Whether or not this audience member believed that *all* members were performing their own stories, the implication here is that it was the sharing of personal pain that was most challenging to witness because it was felt to be genuine. Once performers have assuaged any confusion and established themselves as incontrovertibly human, creating an affective bond through the strategic placement of humour in Act One, they are able to utilise the character-performer ambiguity to bring audiences through their own and others' pain. While doing so, they know that audiences will be doubly affected than if they had heard these stories *without* a pre-existing human-to-human connection. The gut-wrench response that this pain engenders in

Act Two is integral to the affective arc of *Sex Worker's Opera* and significantly bolsters the capacity of the performance to move audiences to action. That being said, the demand for quantifiable action is less significant than the demand for feeling and connection. This was evident previously with 'Listen to Me' and will be returned to briefly now, in an appraisal of the ending.

The Ending: Light

In the second 'light' section of *Sex Worker's Opera*, the intention was to create 'landing space' (SWO director). Within SWO, landing is understood as bringing the audience down safely from the heightened intensity of the 'crescendo of stigma' and representations of harm, bringing narrative threads together, and ending on a hopeful note. The directors determined landing to be a crucial aspect of the structure of *Sex Worker's Opera* for both intellectual and emotional reasons, and explained that it extends from the end of 'Strip for the Dead' to the end of 'Listen to Me'. Although pieces in this section deal with serious issues and exhibit vulnerability, sadness and pain, the lasting impression is one of strength and unity. For example, 'Sub Song' and 'Monkey in a Circus' (discussed in Chapter 6) both end with other performers hugging the singer, lightening the tone to complete these songs' own 'light-shadow-light' journeys, thereby maintaining the overall lightness of this section. Together, right at the end of the show, 'Mosaic' and 'Listen to Me' provide rich landing space in which performers and audience members come together as a group. These pieces tie the threads of the multiple narratives together, emphasise the simplest overarching message from the show ('Listen to me'), and create a connection between audiences and performers through the hugs and hand-holding that are built into the performance of 'Listen to Me'.

Intellectually, landing is important because it largely eliminates the possibility of misinterpretation, working instead to ensure that the audience is provided with all the information the group wants them to have to be able to develop more informed

opinions about sex work. The sombre repetitiveness of 'Listen to Me', in particular, cements this as the key message of the whole show, making it a 'mantra', as members described it. With this simplification of the political message, the ending provides the audience with something manageable to digest while other, perhaps overwhelming, aspects of the performance linger and gradually filter through.

'Some artists think to make good art is to leave people hanging, to leave it ambiguous and let people figure it out themselves. Unfortunately marginalised artists who are fighting against a dominant narrative and who are so often spoken for and misinterpreted don't have that luxury; therefore, we hold people's hands and actively take them on a journey. We very rarely leave people hanging; we usually create a landing space, with answers' (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

Emotionally, landing prevents audiences and performers staying caught in the affects of the shadowy parts of the show, lifting them up at the end so that they can leave the theatre feeling hopeful and inspired, rather than defeated and sad. The coming together of all the performers, especially the two fighting sisters, and the intimacy that is evident in performers' exchanges with audience members on stage during 'Listen to Me' gives a sense of ending *together*, overcoming differences within the sex work community and including audiences as part of a community of sex workers and allies.

'It's a great responsibility when people open themselves up and agree to go on a journey with you. They're making themselves vulnerable and we believe we have a duty to bring them back in one piece feeling inspired, and empowered... not to shock, or numb and disempower and leave someone in a nightmare'. (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

Crucially, landing is not synonymous with closure. While the ending of *Sex Worker's Opera* anchors the audience intellectually and emotionally, it is also an ellipsis, refusing to grant a sense of closure and instead giving the sense that the audience's

experience watching *Sex Worker's Opera* is just the beginning of their role as a sex worker ally; that they must now continue down the path they have been set upon, listening to and advocating for sex workers more proactively. The show ends on an invitational note: to do the work of allyship and to attune to the multitude of stories that were *not* included in the performance, as well as those that were. The affective tone of the music is significant in this regard, as the song is deliberately heavy—one member went so far as to call it ‘a bit of a dirge’ (SWO member). In 2017, there was a debate as to whether ‘Listen to Me’ should be adapted into a calypso style. Opinions are still split but, at the time, the members’ vote indicated a resounding ‘no’, suggesting an affinity for the solemn direction in which ‘Listen to Me’ takes the ending.

‘I don’t want it—in a way—to end too fun, because people shouldn’t come out of it going ‘Woo, I got entertained by some sex workers and now I’m really woke, yay!’ It’s fine if they’re uncomfortable at the end, but how can you do it justice? How can you really say everything you want to say?’ (SWO member)

The ending is neither celebratory, unlike the end of most musical theatre productions, nor tragic, unlike the end of most opera productions involving sex workers. It is somewhere in between, in an ambiguous space between entertainment and an appeal, performance and reality. It serves as a full stop, unifying the many components of *Sex Worker's Opera*, while also indicating that the problem is not ‘fixed’. It makes clear that there is still work to do; that the baton has now been passed onto the audience to expand on the work of the show with their own work as allies and activists beyond the theatre walls. This combination of unification and expansion presents the fundamentals of allyship in an easily computable form while simultaneously challenging the audience not to be complacent. It gives them something they can grasp and tells them to do something with it, that there will be no cause for celebration until they join the fight for sex workers’ rights. Building on the trust established in Act One, which has carried both

performers and audiences through Act Two, the ending invokes a relationship of responsibility.

Conclusion

*'It was relentless really. I found it relentless and I just didn't want it to end. I couldn't believe that it was going on and it was building and I was getting more and more moved. I've never so naturally stood up at the end of a show for a standing ovation. I felt like they'd been out there with us, to-ing and fro-ing and kind of playing with our emotions in lots of different ways. So I felt really connected to them, it was wonderful'.
(Audience member)*

The relentlessness of *Sex Worker's Opera*, I suggest, is inextricable from the concept, introduced at the beginning of this chapter, of an aggregate affective arc. The number of different scenes and songs, the stark contrasts and the threads running between them, the explicit political messages and the implicit political feelings, the involvement of the audience at various points—both playful (the politician scolding audience members for having naughty things in their handbags during 'Porn Protest') and disturbing (a worker begging audience members to hide her beneath their coats in the 'Soho Raids')—all trigger distinct reactions. While seemingly disparate, they each contribute to the overarching audience experience of 'getting more and more moved'.

The 'relentless' consistency with which audiences are engaged with something new means that they do not really have time to make sense of their subjective responses during the performance. Instead, they are hit with feeling after feeling after feeling, strategically ordered in such a way as to cultivate an affective bond between performers and audiences that inspires trust, pleasure, empathy and, ultimately, responsibility. The sense of connection this audience member speaks of is both the

foundation and the end-goal of the affective activism of *Sex Worker's Opera*, securing audience engagement with the issues presented during the performance and enhancing the possibility of an acquired sense of human-to-human responsibility that lingers beyond the curtain call as audiences step out into the light.

The following chapter continues the work of this and the previous chapter, providing analysis of the performance of *Sex Worker's Opera* itself. Focussing on two particular pieces, characterised as 'performances of pain', I explore the possibility of transforming painful stories into sources of beauty, power and love, and the political potential of doing so as part of SWO's artistic activism.

6) 'We pooled each other's blood and turned it into song':

Performances of pain

As mapped out in Chapter 5, *Sex Worker's Opera* merged a disjointed cabaret-style structure with a carefully constructed affective arc, taking audiences on a journey from light into the shadows, and back into the light again. In this chapter, we linger in the darkest shadows of the show—performances of personal pain and artistic representations of systemic violence that elucidate the brutal real-life implications of sex work stigma. I focus on two points of the show that foreground the experiences and expressions of individual members, Emy Fem and Rosa Espinosa:³⁹ the first, 'Strip for the Dead', is a commemorative striptease performed by a trans woman for sex workers who have been killed, combining burlesque, rope bondage and an improvised clarinet accompaniment with live electronic effects. The second, 'Monkey in a Circus', is a multimedia autobiographical piece, sung with violin accompaniment and projected self-portraits, in which the performer tells her story of dancing, familial rejection, an abusive relationship, stigma in the health service and miscarriage.

I discuss each of the pieces separately, drawing out some of the more generalised themes—both positive and challenging—that arose around these pieces, and their relevance to community arts practice more broadly, as I go. With regard to each piece, I provide a description of the performance, an account of how and why the piece was made, and an analysis of the performance and its social impacts.

Throughout this chapter, I uncover the creative processes within SWO that enabled members to perform their pain on their own terms, and the reasons that these performances were so significant, for members and audiences. Making clear the extent to which both processes and performances were individualised according to

³⁹ These are performer names selected by these members and are not linked to their legal identities.

the member performing, I highlight the necessity of creative agency in performances of pain and emphasise the beauty that can emerge as a result of this. Overall, I suggest that, handled with care, performances of pain carry the potential for emotional vindication and activism that is based on empathy.

Having witnessed numerous performances of these pieces and observed various audiences' reactions to these performers, their testimonies and representations, I hold them as strikingly beautiful and particularly affective moments in the show. As an audience member myself, I have felt the impulse to hold my breath, to sit completely still, to be a witness. I have also felt the impossibility of silently choking back tears, the sense that I am participating in collective grief rituals that rip apart in order to heal, involving audiences in the performer's pain so that they too might be moved to act. Notably, these pieces have also made me smile and feel a great deal of warmth toward the performers, a gratitude toward them for the generous act of sharing themselves. They are not only performances of pain, but also celebrations of survival.

In *Trauma-Tragedy* (2012), Duggan demonstrates the logic that legitimises the stage (alongside the therapy room) as an ideal site for responding to, processing and ultimately 'fixing' trauma. He claims that 'trauma must have witnesses [...] the survivor-sufferer must be borne witness to, their experience must be validated and shared in order for it to be processed and diminished so that they can begin to heal' (Ibid., 93). Many would argue that, through music too, trauma can be witnessed, relived, validated and consequently healed, and this topic has been the subject of much research across the fields of music therapy (Sutton, 2002; Landis-Shack et al, 2017; Porges & Rossetti, 2018), music psychology (Garrido et al, 2015; McFerran et al, 2020), community music and community musical theatre (Howell, 2018; Palidofsky, 2010; Balfour, 2018), and composition and performance (Cizmic, 2012).

Often, research in performance and trauma—and the practice it investigates—is prompted by large-scale events, such as wars, conflict or natural disasters. It is in the wake of these horrors that music might be seen to offer a way of comprehending, or

moving on from, trauma. In *Performance Affects* (2009), Thompson convincingly discourages unthinking applications of trauma theory within applied theatre, making the case for an alternative to the curative link between ‘the ‘people are traumatised’ cause to the ‘they must tell their story’ solution’ (Thompson, 2009:65), which he calls the ‘imperative to tell’ (Ibid., 56). Instead, he highlights the concept of ‘remembrance as a difficult return’ (Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert, 2000:5) and situates ‘the struggle to deal with the appalling as an important occurrence rather than a moment to be elided’ (Thompson, 2009:76). Rather than looking for a cure, Thompson suggests people might instead want that struggle, as well as the difficulty of the events they have experienced, to be *validated*. Manning might see the process as a way of giving ‘voice to those moments of messy survival’ (Manning, 2019:12).

Although a number of projects have used musical theatre (Palidofsky, 2010) or songwriting (Balfour, 2018), participants of music programmes are perhaps less likely, on the whole, to experience the ‘imperative to tell’ than those involved in theatre projects, given music’s relative independence from words. However, the emphasis on healing, outside of clinical contexts, and the application of trauma theory in global contexts that differ from the Western, 20th-century context in which it was born (Visser, 2018) should be approached with some trepidation across disciplines in order to avoid the adoption of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ mind-set in socially-engaged arts practice.

While I draw on the work of scholars from multiple disciplines in this chapter, Thompson’s influence on my approach is evident in my avoidance of the term ‘trauma’, unless named by members themselves. This chapter’s focus on ‘pain’ is more generalised, less based on culturally-specific medical diagnoses, and leaves space for a blurring of ‘the binary of speech or silence’ (Thompson, 2009:76). It accounts for both sensory and emotional pain and remains focussed on the experiences of those performing—those which inspired the performances and those of performing these pieces.

However, rather than solely documenting an ‘aesthetics of injury’ (Ibid., 139), whereby ‘violation and violence’ (Salverson, 2001:119) would be seen as the defining characteristics, I highlight the presence of beauty and care in these performances. Equally, I work to avoid the trap of ‘trauma porn’ (Johnson, 2020)—the emphasis of a group’s trauma and pain for entertainment purposes—within the research itself by focussing on the stories of these pieces; not the stories *in* them, but the stories *of* them. The stories of these pieces are integral to understanding the facet of SWO directed toward the ‘difficult return’ for individual sex workers, distinct from the collective agendas that drove the bulk of the project.

Connecting performances of pain back to the project’s intentions discussed in Chapter 3, they should be seen as evidence of how SWO aimed to provide a nurturing space for community members as a backdrop to the difficult work of self-advocacy and cultural transformation. Accordingly, I look at these pieces, not solely as examples of aesthetically and affectively impactful performance practice, but to examine the ways in which members took space for themselves within *Sex Worker’s Opera*—and were supported in doing so—navigating performances of pain in highly individualised ways in order to cater to their own specific needs.

As two pieces, their differences make them all the more important to look at together—on stage, they become a showcase of the aesthetic possibilities for performances of pain. Crucially, these pieces reflect possibilities beyond the automatic privileging of storytelling that Thompson criticises, representing practices that ‘simultaneously contain silences, speech, movements and stillness: that could express a desire to forget through dance as much as grieve through song’ (Thompson, 2009:76). This diversity, in itself, is a rich topic for exploration and finds company in the work of performance studies scholars (see Duggan, 2012; Heddon, 2007; Schneider, 1997).

More than that, however, I argue that this aesthetic variety is demonstrative of the prioritisation of members’ needs in SWO and an aliveness to the complexities surrounding deeply personal performances. In line with Baim’s work on staging

personal stories, this practice should be approached with caution and requires a 'pragmatic and well-theorized framework for safe, ethical, flexible and intentional practice' (Baim, 2020:8). Through these pieces, I explore what it means to prioritise performers' needs in community arts practice, the aesthetic and affective potential that is nourished when they are prioritised, and the possibilities for emotional validation and activism that result. Within this analysis, and extending into Chapter 8, I also critique the limitations of the framework available for performances of pain in SWO. Considering a care-full approach to performances of pain in terms of 'safe, ethical, flexible and intentional practice' (Ibid.), I pay particular attention to the challenges of navigating a certain pressure to perform pain.

Throughout this chapter, I propose that affect is central to the artistic activism of these pieces, as the audience is brought into the inner worlds of these two performers and experience the connection, or relationality, that this vulnerability engenders. 'Emotion is a circuit, not an endpoint' write Harris and Holman-Jones (2019:563). Their notion of 'activist affect' relies on the concept that emotion travels, carrying the potential for a snowball effect that could turn an individual act into collective action (Ibid., 564). It constitutes 'a gathering of emotion that eventuates inevitably into a cathartic public event' (Ibid., 563). The 'activist affect', or the 'affective activism' (Adsit et al, 2015), of the pieces discussed fosters a sense of social responsibility, for performers and audiences, based in empathy, as a 'response of the whole physical person' (Shepherd, 2006:9). Empathy is central to the relationality underpinning the notion of affective activism, which depends on the affects that 'pass body to body' (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010:1).

Rather than uncritically corroborating Duggan's formula for healing through performance, I identify factors that affected members' and audiences' experiences of these pieces as sites of struggle *and* beauty, and what the reverberations of these experiences might do for those performing and for those witnessing. I suggest that the presence of beauty in these performances of pain helps to establish a stronger relation between audience and performer, fostering empathy, which—in turn—serves as a gateway to advocacy. At the same time, I acknowledge the risk here that

the political impact of these performances is, in fact, softened by the inclusion of beauty. Though beauty may make the performers more relatable, it might also make it seem like everything is okay, that there are not appalling injustices still to fight on individual and systemic levels.

On that note, I am mindful of Snyder-Young's warning that these performances might '*feel* like interventions, mobilization, and action but, in reality, provide more catharsis for those participating than *actual change in the real world*' (Snyder-Young, 2013:135, emphasis original), where 'those participating' includes audience members. However, as will be clear throughout my discussions of both pieces, the personal is highly political; therefore this appeal to empathy does not preclude 'the ethical imperative toward social transformation' (Berlant, 2008:41), but, in de-interiorising emotion, 'makes affect available as a site for change' (Adsit et al, 2015:32). In this context, it would therefore be limiting, from an activist perspective, to see these pieces as isolated works of art; instead, it is the context of performance, with the live interactions it entails, that enables audiences to empathise with the person telling her story, to *feel* her pain, to be *affected*. I maintain my hope that, through performance, people will be *moved*—'to emotion, to thought, even (on rare occasions) to action' (Campbell & Farrier, 2016:1).

[A note on research methods](#)

I carried out individual interviews with Emy and Rosa, whose stories form the pillars of this chapter. Due to scheduling difficulties, this contrasted with the method of group listening sessions that I had initially intended to use with all members but, in hindsight, it seems ideal that I was able to talk with these members privately and focus on their pieces without the pressure of evenly distributing attention and time across a group. Although these interviews represented a divergence from my methodological map, I think it unlikely that we would have spoken in such depth or with so much reflectiveness about these pieces and the processes of making them had there been others 'in the room'.

Given that a significant portion of these interviews were focussed on discussing the processes of creating these particular personal pieces for *Sex Worker's Opera*, there was a risk that Emy or Rosa would experience emotional discomfort or distress. Additionally, as these interviews were individual, there was no one else to act as a buffer or to provide peer support. There was also a risk that these interviews would open these members up to painful memories they had not revisited since the final performance of *Sex Worker's Opera* in 2018. I was sensitive to these risks prior to beginning the interviews. In both instances, I allowed the conversation to be led by the interviewee, avoiding asking questions that might push them to talk about things they did not want to talk about and ensuring they did not feel rushed. I made sure to check in with both Emy and Rosa at regular intervals during the interviews to see how they were doing and to ask whether they were comfortable continuing. After the interview, I messaged each of them to ask whether they felt okay about what had been said in the interview and to reiterate the possibility of continuing the conversation, either on or off the record, if there was more they felt they needed to process.

'Strip for the Dead'

Emerging silently from the back of the stage, slipping through the semicircle of members holding hands, holding vigil, Emy moves into centre stage; the soft light that has settled on all the other members during the 'Vigil' scene is replaced by a single spotlight. The silence that has unified performers and audience members in remembrance wanes, giving way to the eerie sound of breath passing through a clarinet. Standing with her arms crossed over her chest, Emy begins to sway, caressing herself and soon removing the black top she has been wearing. As other members break out of the semi-circle and begin to leave the stage, Emy's movements become more expressive and the first notes played by the clarinettist are heard, heavily altered by the sound engineer's electronic effects that cause the sound to resonate around the theatre. Emy continues to sway, using her arms to stroke her

upper body, moving her hands across her upper arms and breasts, before beginning to untie her long, black skirt.

Her skirt falls to the ground as the scalic melody gathers momentum. With her back to the audience, Emy stands naked before folding herself down to the floor and turning around to face out, accompanied by a sustained clarinet tone and the soft footsteps of two members joining her on the stage. They come bearing ropes and, crouched on either side of her, they begin to work as riggers, binding her arms, legs and torso. The lights are dimmed and the smoothness of the improvised clarinet melody is set against a gently thudding beat as the frequencies are distorted and vibrato exaggerated. Another two members come onto the stage and assist with the rope work, holding Emy's head and stroking her neck and face. Emy basks in the apparent warmth of the intimate contact, smiling and still swaying subtly as the ties become increasingly intricate.

The mood changes quickly as the four riggers move away from Emy and stand up, accompanied by a shift to more accented, staccato playing by the clarinettist and a greater density of noise coming from the distortion. She becomes panicked, angry, and attempts to pull loose from the knots but she is stuck, as the others who have turned on her hold the ends of the ropes. There is a frantic struggle as Emy battles against the forces that bind her and, one limb at a time, manages to free herself. Gripping a bundle of ropes in her hands, their ends still held by the other performers, she rises and brings the ropes down, vanquishing those who kept her bound. The lighting immediately brightens, the clarinettist stops playing, the noise fades to an almost undetectable buzz and, as her four co-performers lie sprawled on the floor, Emy is seen standing tall in the middle. She declares: "Prostitution gives me power. We honour the dead by celebrating life".

'Strip for the Dead' follows on from the 'Vigil' held by members to commemorate sex workers who have lost their lives due to criminalisation and stigma. In a Monday

morning rehearsal in 2015, members discussed the 'Vigil' and debated what would be the most sensitive way to hold this space for remembrance. Suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder that was linked to experiences of violence and the deaths of friends and colleagues in the sex work community, Emy began to conceptualise her own contribution. She felt unable to participate in the proposed minute of silence alongside other members but wanted to find another way to pay her respects.

'We spoke about how to put attention, how to honour people who got killed, sex workers who got killed. And I realised, 'Oh, that's a hard topic for me. That's a really, really hard topic for me'. I basically had only my way for dealing with it and I had ways where I'd figured out it's not possible for me to do it. So we had a discussion and they said, "Hey, is there another way for you to deal with this topic stage-wise?" And I said, "Yeah, let me think". And I came up with my performance, and this had been my solution'. (Emy Fem)



This photo was taken during a performance at The Pleasance in 2016 by photographer, Julio Etchart. It depicts an early moment in 'Strip for the Dead', during which the performer is cared for and loved by her community.

Emy created her performance art piece as her way of honouring sex workers who have been killed. It was informed by her embodied experience as a trans sex worker, her immersion in sex worker communities in Turkey and the prevalence of violence against trans sex workers, combined with her love for shibari, the art of Japanese rope bondage.⁴⁰ Once she asserted that it was not emotionally possible for her to be

⁴⁰ Literally translating as "to tie" in Japanese, shibari is a practice that combines art and eroticism. Rope is used to carefully tie someone up, with the knots creating intricate patterns that appear as decorative as well as signifying a form of the Dominant/submissive relationship.

on stage for 'Vigil', the directors supported her in creating an alternative solution. In the end, 'Strip for the Dead' enabled Emy to be part of the grief ritual of 'Vigil' without pushing past her boundaries, while also providing a sensitive and aesthetically satisfying way out of the minute's silence. This was, in part, due to the gradual crescendo and texture of the music played by the clarinettist (and musical director), who recounted the process of putting 'Strip for the Dead' performance together:

'She proposed that there be some improvised music. She asked, "Can there be some improvised music from the orchestra? Because that would really inspire me and I'd be able to work with that", and then from that moment she mentioned shibari because she was really into ropes. So she came up with the initial concept of what ingredients could make a performance art piece'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

Representing pain, taking control of violence

As described above, the piece moves from depicting a tender eroticism through Emy's strip and the love she receives from the other performers, to signifying violence through the tightening of the ropes and Emy's frantic struggle to break free, before ending more triumphantly as Emy regains control. 'Strip for the Dead' flows into the 'Rave' scene, in which members storm the stage to loud drum and bass music played through the speakers, dancing around and yelling slogans from the sex worker rights movement in a call and response that begins with a repetition of Emy's declaration: "We honour the dead by celebrating life!" Interestingly, this structure is consistent with the affective arc of *Sex Worker's Opera* as a whole—as discussed in the previous chapter—moving from light to shadow and back to light again. Crucially, 'Strip for the Dead' provided a way of representing violence that differed from stereotypical and deeply triggering depictions of client violence, with Emy's ropes instead symbolising intimate connections of romance and friendship within the community, switching to represent the harmful forces of stigma and violence, and then becoming a means to reclaiming power.

- *'She wanted it to be like her sisters having solidarity with her and having this beautiful sensual experience with her and then they could turn into these forces'. (SWO director)*
- *'She didn't want to misrepresent BDSM and her relationship to it and simplify her body to a violence body'. (SWO director)*

The performance created a space where Emy was in control of the way her pain was represented, a space that could hold the nuances of her lived experiences and her knowledge of the community, accounting for beauty and pleasure alongside violence and struggle.

Though it ends on a reclamatory note, 'Strip for the Dead' did not shy away from depicting brutality; yet, doing so through a symbolic framework—rather than one of literal representation that would likely have been triggering for performers and audience members—protected Emy's artistic and emotional agency as she explored the theme of violence. The 'light' at the end of 'Strip for the Dead', when Emy establishes her power, does not overwrite the struggle we have just witnessed; instead, it emphasises the possibilities of living through and beyond pain, thus closing the piece by foregrounding strength rather than violence or victimhood. As an audience member, it is much easier to express appreciation—through clapping, whooping, *et cetera*—in response to a statement of strength than to depictions of violence. Ending the piece in this way therefore increases the likelihood of audiences giving something back to Emy, establishing a relationality that does not rest on pity but instead on respect. Though it assuages the audience's discomfort, the 'light' at the end does not undermine efforts to engender a sense of activist responsibility in audience members in response to this piece. Instead, it sets the tone for the ways in which allies might support sex workers: advocacy must be built on respect rather than an othering sense of pity.

Speaking of respect, 'Strip for the Dead' was also an opportunity for Emy to showcase her rope work, a skill she draws on in her personal life and in her business, highlighting the artistry of aspects of sex work. Her decision to be naked did not signify an essentialising of her trans body, but rather a rejection of the stigma and the oppressive normativity that often surrounds bodies like hers, particularly when their owners also sell sex.

'I thought 'You know, fuck it, I don't want to hide my body or pretend to be cis[gender] or whatever'. People should see me in the way I am without any cover which changes anything, to see me as the person I am, out as a sex worker and doing this striptease to really get in touch with the dead people in this moment. And that's really the intention of this one'. (Emy Fem)

In her interview, Emy told me that when she performed this piece the bright lights meant she was unable to see the audience, and that she imagined instead that the audience was full of the sex workers who had been killed, those that the 'Vigil' was devised to honour. 'Strip for the Dead' was therefore a way of connecting to and honouring that alternative audience, some of whom had been her friends. With this in mind, the intimacy of the piece is enhanced. Rather than objects that represent restriction, the bondage ropes can be seen as 'collectors and holders of energy', as Emy put it. Further, the other people on stage are not aggressors, but 'sisters' and 'colleagues', who she has selected and actively consented to do this performance with, echoing the affective language of BDSM practitioners and scholars (Barker, 2013; Martin, 2018). Finally, the clarinet improvisation helped Emy to do her improvised dance and 'the chemistry had been perfect', highlighting the importance of the collaboration between musician and dancer, and the musical togetherness that helped Emy feel supported in her performance.

Despite the constant challenge of finding rehearsal time, Emy's vision for the piece was given space to take form and grow, supported by other members. Her presence on stage is captivating and the scene is firmly centred around her, yet Emy was not

alone in the performance. From the four performers who spent hours learning how to tie the ropes properly, to the two sound technicians who controlled the electronic effects, and the lighting technician who responded to the changes in mood throughout the scene, members worked extremely hard and creatively to make the piece as slick as possible, to honour Emy's vision and her needs. In addition, the clarinettist matched their improvisation to Emy's movements, taking care to resist aesthetics that could be laden with exoticising baggage, such as harmonic minor scales and chromatic harmony. Taking into account the legacy of Western Classical music, particularly the association between an augmented second interval and the Orientalist image of a femme fatale in *Carmen* (McClary, 1992:57), these musical features might have risked essentialising Emy as an 'other'. This aesthetic consideration demonstrates a political investment in supporting Emy to perform her pain without further marginalising her.

'Putting your body on stage, you know, maybe it's powerful, maybe it's destigmatising, maybe it challenges stereotypes, or whatever. But, fundamentally, that's our show for a night and then her body for the rest of time'. (SWO director)

I suggest that in every component of this piece, in each person's role within it, it is evident there is a deep commitment to support the person who is putting her story and her body on stage, to honour her pain, her struggle to live with it and her profound strength. As the overwhelming wordlessness of this piece preserves space for the symbolic and the affective qualities to emerge, this piece also deviates from the 'imperative to tell' that Thompson identifies in the spaces where trauma theory and applied theatre collide, aligning more closely with the tradition of performance art (see Abramović, 2010). Looking beyond the 'communicative model of art—the focus on the impact, message or precise revelation', this analysis of 'Strip for the Dead' instead posits 'that the stimulation of affect'—in place of an explicit message about systemic violence against trans sex workers—'is what compels the participant to thought and to be engaged *at every level*' (Thompson, 2009:125). Silence, as

opposed to testimony, constitutes a 'different mode of risk-taking, communication and transformation' (Heddon & Howells, 2011:4).

This results in a level of intimacy within the performance that highlights the vulnerability and trust that are nurtured by the project's overall dedication to respecting and valuing sex workers and their stories through artistic practice. Free from pressure to communicate an explicit message, Emy was able to form affective bonds with the audience (real and imagined) and her co-performers, with the rope, the sound and the lighting. Through this, Emy could get what she wanted out of the performance – space to grieve and honour the dead—and she was able to do this *beautifully*. She was able to say what she wanted to say and, pointedly, *not* say anything else.

'I'd been working in the industry for a while during this time, but not for so long, it had been kind of a fresh impression for me to say, 'Hey I'm a sex worker. What does it mean to be a sex worker, what does it mean to be trans and a sex worker?' All that shit had been new in my life, and in combination with, 'Hey, my friends get killed because of it', it had been really a thing where I had to search for possibilities to deal with it. For sure, I talked to friends and my lovers and stuff, but it wasn't enough. At some point, I realised I can put it into stage-work. I can do stage-work around it and that's my way'. (Emy Fem)

The various commitments of others to support this piece, and Emy's ability to create the complex feelings she wanted to reflect, made it possible for her to see performance as a space that could hold her struggle to balance beauty with pain, friendship with loss, and life with death.

The affective impacts of 'Strip for the Dead'

Countering the generalised privileging of testimony in performances of pain, I experienced the intensity of feeling that 'Strip for the Dead' created in audiences as well as on stage. The audience's reaction was also observed by one director:

'I remember the emotion of every audience somewhere inside me, it's always landed. It doesn't really matter where the clarinet piece went, or whether I could even hear the way it was being warped by our resident sound artists, it always communicated and it was always remembered by audiences'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

The notion that 'it always communicated' is interesting here, as 'it' refers to a performance that is non-verbal until right at the end. So what is it that is communicated, and what is it that is landing? What is it that results in affect reverberating through the audience, and lingering in their feedback after the show? These questions are particularly interesting if, as the above quotation suggests, the emotion of audiences was not dependent on the music always being exactly the same. I suggest that, through Emy's intentions to honour the dead (implicit in her piece's imbrication with the 'Vigil'), the vulnerability of her nudity combined with embodied representations of bondage as both love and violence, and the care towards her that is visibilised in the performance, audiences witness something profoundly human that they can understand and relate to, despite not being privy to the full scale of the pain that fuelled the performance.

'Really more arresting than practically any image I've seen on stage was when the trans woman took off all her clothes and just... you just loved her. You just loved her. It took me to a place I've never been'. (Audience member)

Fundamentally, the affective weight of this performance meant that text was not required for audiences to understand that, even by simply witnessing 'Strip for the Dead' and feeling Emy's emotions, they were implicated in her struggle to hold onto

the beauty amidst the pain, and to continue trusting people—her co-performers and audience members—in spite of the violence of others, to “honour the dead by celebrating life”.

‘I realised it’s something where I can share my emotions and it’s a good project where I can make a good connection between sex work activism, stage work and publicity’. (Emy Fem)

Through this performance, Emy was able to share her emotions, have her experiences validated within a supportive environment, and fulfil an activist project to humanise trans sex workers. Furthermore, the performance setting, in which audiences have elected to listen to and watch performers, provided an opportunity for ‘publicity’ regarding the issue of violence against trans sex workers. Overall, love and reclamation dominate the piece, turning this performance of pain into a demonstration of individual and community strength that inspires a combination of empathy and respect in audiences. The foregrounding of Emy’s strength contributes to the formation of an affective bond between her and the audience, as they recognise in her the very human capacity to maintain hope and to cultivate beauty despite pain and suffering. This relationality shrinks the ‘us/them’ division that audiences may have brought into the theatre, and deepens the investment they feel in Emy as well as the cause of ending violence against sex workers. In this way, ‘Strip for the Dead’ carries the potential to fuel advocacy.

‘Monkey in a Circus’

The violinist gets up from their chair in the orchestra and walks onto the stage playing a lilting melody while Rosa readies herself, moving into the middle of the stage to stand in front of a cluster of members who are perched on the podium. At the end of the violin theme there is a brief pause before Rosa begins to sing to the audience, mostly a cappella with pizzicato notes at the ends of phrases:

*“When I’m in a bad place, I end up taking pictures,
And this has helped me out because my pictures don’t make
judgements.*

*This is my story, in music, words and photos,
So open up your eyes and ears, your heart and your soul...”*

A photographed self-portrait is projected onto a screen, confirming that Rosa is speaking from her own perspective here, telling her own story. The photos on the screen change occasionally throughout the piece, illustrating the variety of her life and sharing her way of seeing things with the audience. Playfully commanding the audience’s attention, she begins to dance, holding her skirt and swaying from side to side, moving to the violin theme.

*“I’m just a girl who likes dancing,
I work in a peep show at night.
In a red light district called Soho,
For me to dance naked’s alright”*

Singing, she tells of her love for life, photography and travel. She ends with the repeated lyric, “Perfect future”, echoed by the chorus stationed on the podium, gazing out into the audience. But then, speaking, Rosa recounts the conversation she had with her father after he found out she had been working in a peep show. A male voice booms out of the PA:

*“The worst part is not that you’re a monkey in a circus,
The worst part is that you like what you do”*

She moves across the stage, continuing to recite the poem of her life, documenting the following five years as she travelled around Europe, working, taking photos and falling in love with “a man with a kid”. She tells the audience that her life together with this man became more complicated when his ex demanded custody for the child

and he lost his job. Rosa stoically recalls being unconcerned, determined that she could support the family with her “love and high heels”, even as he became more dependent on alcohol and more violent.

Snapping out of this remembrance of abuse, Rosa begins to sway again, singing with the violin:

*“I’m just a girl who likes dancing,
I work in a strip club at night.
In the Diamond area of Antwerp,
For me to dance naked’s just fine”*

Returning to speaking, Rosa tells the audience that things got worse when she became pregnant, but that—without money—she had no way of leaving the relationship. So she went “back to the peep show, dancing thirteen hours a day”.

The violin returns with sustained double stopping in claustrophobic harmony as Rosa walks to lean against the pole that stands on the right of the stage. There, she begins to tell of her stress and isolation, and the resultant problems with her pregnancy, before returning to her refrain, this time still and solemn, accompanied by tremolo strings.

*“I’m just a girl who likes dancing,
I work in a strip club at night.
In the red light district of Antwerp,
For me to dance pregnant was not alright”*

A silent pause before the most painful part of the story: a partner who said, “You’re alone in this”, and nurses who found out where she worked and changed their perception of her, neglecting their duty of care. Rosa turns away from the audience and walks around the back of the podium, as the chorus sing:

“It miscarried, it miscarried, it miscarried”

Another pause before Rosa rejoins the violinist from the other side of the stage. She addresses the audience, asking them whether despising her would make them feel better about themselves. She and the violinist then start to sing together, their arms touching as they move in sync, swaying side to side:

*“Death and rejection only made me stronger,
And I can say I’m happy here singing a sad song”*

The joy of the opening returns with the original violin theme and Rosa swishes her skirt for one final chorus:

*“Now I’m a woman who likes dancing,
And my dancing is naked sometimes.
In a red light district, club, or theatre,
For me to dance naked’s just fine.*

*Now I have my umbrella to protect me,
Like my ex and the nurses didn’t do.
When it makes you feel better to reject me,
Is it because you fear the naked beast in you?”*

Rosa finishes her piece at the front of the stage, standing next to the violinist and holding a red umbrella, a symbol of the sex worker rights movement. The members who have sat on the podium come forward to growl at the audience as Rosa leaves the stage, mimicking the naked beasts that are repressed within so many of us.

The first year that I was involved with SWO, 2017, Rosa had moved away and was unable to take part. Before I saw her piece, I heard people talking about it, and

about how much they missed it (and her); it seemed to have acquired an almost mythical status in the project's herstory. There is something beautiful about this—one member's story becoming so iconic—and, in many ways, it is a mark of the successful amplification of sex worker voices within SWO. Yet, as detailed below and further explored in Chapter 8, it gives rise to a tension, a certain pressure to perform pain that could, in less careful hands, become exploitative.

'In some ways it encapsulates the whole show, and it was this gaping hole in our show in 2017... And there's something uncomfortable about that, because should you rely on someone bearing their traumatic experience on stage every night with the violin for the show to be fully what it is?' (SWO director)

Thanks to the reflections of Rosa and others, the story of this piece can serve as an invaluable learning opportunity, bringing to light the finely-tuned balance of care and control required for performing pain to be a healing process. The tension between the two is unpacked in greater depth in Chapter 8, though I outline the ways in which care manifested around this piece below. More than two years after the last performance of *Sex Worker's Opera*—when I interviewed her—Rosa was still glad she had shared her story, and felt happy with the form the performance eventually took; however, her account of the process was also rich with constructive criticism worth exploring in depth.

[Making 'Monkey in a Circus': An unexpected story](#)

In 2014, the violinist playing in SWO was someone who also practised as a music therapist. Though he was not involved in any official therapeutic capacity, he had offered each member the opportunity to work with him to develop a song. As they had recently discovered they were neighbours, Rosa went to see him and hearing that he was disappointed no one had taken him up on his offer, she said:

“I have a story that could be shared. It’s definitely a story. But I don’t know if you’ll like it because it’s very sad”. (Rosa Espinosa)

They worked together all day to shape ‘Monkey in a Circus’, finding the words and rhythms that would fit this story. After this initial session, they met again to continue working on this piece and he also gave Rosa three music therapy sessions, which she described as ‘life-changing’. She was unable to talk about this song without crediting his work, skill and generosity.

Having crafted this piece, Rosa took it to the directors ahead of the debut performance of SWO. At this point, they were hugely stretched, with only three days to coordinate members and to co-create the show. Rosa remembered handing a stack of papers with her lyrics on them to a flustered director, asking them to take a look and being asked incredulously, “Now?!” She acknowledged that it was bad timing, but was grateful that one of the other directors took a moment to look at it ‘with a little bit more care’ and agreed to work with Rosa to stage it. ‘But ‘work’... working was like half an hour between scenes’ (Rosa Espinosa). Despite the lack of time for rehearsal before the first performance of ‘Monkey in a Circus’, it was clear from the outset that it held a special place in the show as a whole, and that it represented a vital component of what the directors had initially set out to do but could not realistically facilitate for each member within the allotted time. The panic of the over-worked director gave way to a deep humility, as Rosa recalled:

‘When they realised, you know, what this story was about and everything, they came to me and they said, “Listen, that’s what the Opera is for. I have to apologise and say that if we cannot make the space for pieces like this the Opera doesn’t make sense”, and that’s how slowly, slowly I started to feel more confident’. (Rosa Espinosa)

That this piece was an unexpected, last-minute addition to the show is one aspect of its story, but another, perhaps more striking, element is the degree to which it continued to shake the project from within. As these shock waves echoed, it became

apparent just how much care this piece—lovingly referred to as a ‘mini-bomb’—required, and how this care did, or did not, materialise in the handling of Rosa’s performance.

‘This was like a little bomb that no one knew how to deal with. I opened my Pandora’s box and no one knew what was going to happen’. (Rosa Espinosa)

Considering care as a practice whereby ‘relationships are cultivated, needs are responded to, and sensitivity is demonstrated’ (Held, 2006:15-16), analysis of both the creation and the performance of ‘Monkey in a Circus’ reveals the existence of an ethic of care in SWO. The fact that sex workers and allies founded SWO, not a ‘professional artist’ with little attachment to or prior investment in the community, indicates a sharp departure from the phenomenon of the parachutist-practitioner, revealing instead a model of community leadership grounded in mutual concern and trust. . Care in relation to this piece is the subject of a detailed discussion in Chapter 8, but for now it is useful to flag the significance of care as a concept in discussions of performances of pain, particularly in socially-engaged performance projects.

Seeing ‘Monkey in a Circus’ as an example of a sensitive piece that required a great deal of care, it is important to note that this manifested in a number of ways. Though there was a very slight delay in their availability, the directorial team’s ‘attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness’ (Tronto, [1993]2009:127) to Rosa’s needs around performing this piece marked ‘Monkey in a Circus’ as a site of care. Meanwhile, the presence of other members of the group—specifically the violinist and the chorus that supports Rosa from the podium—turns ‘Monkey in a Circus’ into a ‘performance of care’ (Stuart-Fisher & Thompson, 2020), modelling solidarity on the stage. Not only is care essential to the sustainability and political integrity of performances of pain such as ‘Monkey in a Circus’ for the sake of those performing, but it also has the potential to present an alternative way of *doing* allyship and advocacy for those watching: one that starts with interpersonal

relations and expands outward into wider scale advances in social justice. I return to, and elaborate upon, these arguments in Chapter 8.

Social impacts: Making the personal political

Here, I focus on exploring the ways in which ‘Monkey in a Circus’ itself—rather than the ways it was navigated by the group—can be considered to support SWO’s artistic activism. This section looks at the lasting effects and affects of this piece: firstly, the ways in which the piece has been important in Rosa’s life, outside of the performance context itself; and secondly, the ways in which Rosa’s story has acquired a life of its own, beyond Rosa, exemplifying the activist potential of ‘the personal’. In my interview with Rosa, she was curious as to what she could do with ‘Monkey in a Circus’ now, imagining new ways of keeping it, and by extension her story, alive in the public eye.

‘The stories were born and they grew and now I think they are strong political messages’. (Rosa Espinosa)

When we spoke, Rosa did not see the piece as something that was in the past now that she had been able to share her story, as if it had served its purpose. Instead, she saw the piece as a vehicle through which she could continue to share her story more widely, now that she felt more empowered to do so. I hope to avoid an oversimplification of Rosa’s experience here by implying that this piece provided total ‘closure’ or ‘healing’ for her. Rather, I suggest that, through this piece, she was able to integrate her pain with beauty, the sense of which has encouraged her to continue sharing her story in activist settings, giving her a way of merging the personal with the political.

As with ‘Strip for the Dead’, the presence of beauty does not negate the impact of the performance of pain in ‘Monkey in a Circus’; that the performance ends on an affective up-turn did not eliminate the impression that Rosa sharing her difficult experiences made on audience members. Beauty operates in two ways here. On the

one hand, it endears Rosa to the audience, prompting their investment in her happiness. This is an effective strategy for cultivating relational bonds through performance that may make audience members more likely to support sex workers beyond the theatre walls; though, where beauty is required to function in this way it could be argued to be problematic, insofar as it places a demand on marginalised people to make their stories palatable in order to garner support. On the other hand, the role of beauty for Rosa herself was fundamental to her comfort performing this piece, both placing some distance between her and her pain and enabling her to create something she was proud of as a piece of art in its own right.

Using similar processes, others might also find performing their pain to be a positive experience and one that can contribute to activism that is based in empathy.

'Before I... before I performed this song... it wasn't a secret, but it was not something that I would feel comfortable talking about. And, again, that's the power of music, right? I wasn't very able to talk about it, but I could sing it in the song... And this song had some personal evolution as well as I went along with my trauma. The first year I was very vulnerable. I was very vulnerable when I was performing it, and slowly, slowly I kind of got empowered'. (Rosa Espinosa)

'Monkey in a Circus' provided Rosa with an outlet for sharing her experience, which she had previously found difficult to talk about. To a certain extent, then, the process did follow a therapeutic paradigm, providing an opportunity for Rosa to integrate this story into her present life by narrativising it.

In this case, combining elements of therapeutic practice with the wider practical framework of devising appears to have made it possible for Rosa to bring her story to the attention of the group. It is worth considering the benefits of the individual focus of a therapeutic relationship that is typically lacking in more collective, participatory arts settings. Certainly, in the first year of SWO there was no time within the workshop plan for every single member to go through an equivalent

process to Rosa's. Without over-simplifying the distinction between therapy and community musical theatre as individual vs. collective—particularly given the existence of community music therapy as an established field of practice (Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2004)—this contrast may be an indication of the potential of a combined approach. Combining opportunities to engage in therapeutic activities with the chance to work collaboratively to develop narratives, songs and scenes may provide greater support for individuals who do want to delve deeper into their own personal experiences and share them in a way that is unique to them within the context of a broader collective creative process.

Combined approaches would bring their own ethical imperatives, such as designing a framework to support the transition from a one-on-one private setting for sharing experiences and creative expressions into a group and potentially a performance setting. It would require a particularly care-full, intersectional and trauma-informed practice, as well as continuity of personnel in both settings. Further research in this area is required before making more robust practical suggestions.

Referring back to her account of how this piece was made, it is salient that Rosa did not automatically come forward with the intention of telling this story, but instead told it in response to the violinist feeling disappointed that no one had wanted to work with him to create a song. It seems that the violinist subtly encouraged Rosa to share something, but that she was in control of what she decided to share. Thus, the practice avoided the 'imperative to tell', while providing an opportunity to make something beautiful. Equally noteworthy is the fact that, 'technically', Rosa did not see herself as the 'best singer of the group' and that, despite insecurities about her voice, she was able to see singing as a viable channel for revisiting and performing her pain. She was "happy here singing a sad song".

Without undermining the strength and determination Rosa needed to tell her story, these examples of reticence could be used to imply that her experiences of gradual empowerment through performing her pain are not so exceptional. The affective power of the performance is undeniable and, to everyone I spoke with about it, the

piece is exceptionally beautiful. However, the story of 'Monkey in a Circus' suggests that, using similar processes and with the desired degree of control—and, of course, with the option of staying silent and an awareness that one size certainly does *not* fit all (Thompson, 2009:68-71)—others with difficult stories might also find putting them into performance to be a source of healing and empowerment. As Rosa put it:

'I really think that the Opera can offer a healing space for some sex workers, by either sending their story and seeing it represented by someone else, or in my journey being able to sing to my sorrows'. (Rosa Espinosa)

It is worth emphasising that, for Rosa, the offer of this 'healing space' was neither initially present in SWO, nor part of her explicit justification for taking part. That the opportunity to sing to her sorrows was offered by someone outside the directorial team and took place outside the workshop plan for devising *Sex Worker's Opera* is indicative of a general need for greater time, resources and perhaps training, in order to cater to individual needs within a collective creative context.

A significant part of SWO was intended to support sex workers to challenge their own internalised stigma, or whorephobia. In 'Monkey in a Circus', returning to a painful autobiographical story allowed Rosa to publicly reject the feelings of shame imposed on her by the prejudices of others, instead creating something beautiful. As Heddon writes, 'performing stories about ourselves might enable us to imagine different selves, to determine different scripts than the other ones that seem to trap us' (Heddon, 2007:157). The experience of creating and performing 'Monkey in a Circus' gave Rosa space to share her story, self-defining through the process and thus reimagining her own narrative on her own terms.

As well as continuing to move within Rosa, the impact of 'Monkey in a Circus' travelled outwards into audiences, connecting them to her story and advancing the *Opera's* overall project of humanising sex workers. The activism of this piece is twofold. On the one hand, as with the other songs explored in Chapter 4, 'Monkey in

a Circus' has a powerful and explicit political message. It focusses on the insidious presence of stigma throughout society—in families, romantic relationships, workplaces and healthcare—and the isolation and vulnerability this incurs. Coming from Rosa, her piece is an empowering refusal to internalise the blame for the way people mistreated her and the way the system failed her. This refusal counters widespread whorephobia that could be used to justify people criticising pregnant strippers for working long hours, rather than judging bosses for failing to provide a secure income and maternity leave, or punishing healthcare providers for failing to give correct advice and sufficient care. Pieces like this have the potential to challenge unconscious bias and prejudice, campaigning for sex workers to be treated as humans, with respect.

'It's so empowering saying, 'I still think I did nothing wrong, you are the ones who have the issue' (laughs). It was very effective for me to put a message out that's saying, 'I don't need you to forgive me. In any case, it's society, the nurses that treated me bad in there, it's the whole system'. (Rosa Espinosa)

On the other hand, 'Monkey in a Circus' has a less explicit activist agenda: to draw attention to the nuances of sex workers' lives, and the lives of women in a patriarchal society. The relatability of the piece makes it good company for other autobiographical performances, aligning with actor Lisa Kron's statement that 'the goal of autobiographical work should not be to tell stories about yourself, but, instead, to use the details of your own life to illuminate or explore something more universal' (Kron, 2001:xi, in Heddon, 2007:5). 'Monkey in a Circus' is a deeply personal piece that has the capacity to confront audiences, and other members of SWO, with aspects of their own lived experience. Audiences are invited to dwell in and feel, on a personal level, the connections between the mistreatment of sex workers and misogyny more broadly, the universality of inequality and injustice in women's lives, particularly those who are additionally marginalised.

'It's just a really beautiful, personal story that speaks volumes to so much of womanhood, sexuality, abusive relationships... Family stigma, workplace stigma, healthcare stigma'. (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

Furthermore, in this illumination of one woman's experience, it is implicit that other members, and other sex workers, also have stories to tell. This is a foundational component of the subtle activist work of SWO: to encourage audiences to see sex workers as multi-dimensional human beings with unique lives and experiences. In hearing from sex workers directly we begin to move away from tired tropes based in ignorance that serve no one and continue to reify stigma and therefore harm the community. Although this is an individual story, the implication is that every sex worker has a story worth listening to, and that we should listen to them rather than unquestioningly swallowing what we are fed by the mainstream media.

'My piece is really like... It's got dates, it's got – you know – it's got specific facts. It's really one story but the idea is, in the context of the Opera—that's why it's important as well—to say each of us has a significant story to tell. This was my story and I think it's important that I still... use it because these days we are saying to make the personal political, and that's how people are going to empathise with you'. (Rosa Espinosa)

While it is hard to definitively trace the tangible social impacts of this piece, it is possible to 'prove' that this piece consistently moved people. The recording I played of 'Monkey in a Circus' in the listening sessions featured over a minute of applause from the audience, which was not unusual for this piece; in every interview in which this piece was discussed someone cried; and one member requested that we did not listen to the recording before we spoke about it, saying 'I just actually don't want to cry tonight'.

'I mean, you heard the clapping. It broke every audience we ever had. People remember it always, it's in all the audience feedback consistently'. (SWO director)

The reason the affective impact of 'Monkey in a Circus' is so profound is likely because, despite telling a heart-breaking story, it is ultimately an uplifting piece. Like 'Strip for the Dead', it goes through a light, shadow, light structure, matching the emotional arc of the entire show at a micro-level. Instead of simply telling her story and leaving the audience with the heaviness of her experiences, Rosa re-routes the affective trajectory, demonstrating an ability to live happily with pain, to be shaped but not defined by it. What the audience sees, rather than someone who is traumatised and disempowered, is someone who has walked a difficult path and found strength, beauty and love along the way. As opposed to presentations of trauma, these pieces—'Strip for the Dead' and 'Monkey in a Circus'—become articulations of agency and power. The positive endings of these pieces not only make audiences far more comfortable clapping for them, but also make it easier for audiences to relate to the performers, to empathise with the struggle of living a joyful life while carrying painful experiences. The relationality established through the audience's responses to these performances carries with it a certain respect—both for the bravery of performing pain and vulnerability, and for the skill required to make these performances beautiful. While there is no guarantee that this respect will convert into active allyship, it demonstrates recognition of—and some degree of investment in—the struggles and triumphs shared on stage, instilling a sense of social responsibility toward those performing that could go on to fuel advocacy work.

Ethical considerations in performances of pain

These pieces illuminate complex ethical issues within the context of community musical theatre as artistic activism, which have implications for socially-engaged

performance practice more broadly. Other members described Emy and Rosa as ‘generous’, ‘selfless’ and ‘brave’ for doing these performances, words that honour their work but perhaps risk framing their performances as sacrifices. For the most part, this negative interpretation does not align with the experiences of either Emy or Rosa, yet the tendency to see these performances as something for other people, prioritising external impact at the expense of internal peace, runs counter to the activist aims of SWO, which include supporting sex workers to find ways of expressing themselves that give them strength.

As well as supporting them in developing their pieces according to their individual aesthetic preferences and artistic skills, one of the ways in which the directors avoided imposing an ‘imperative to tell’ was by explicitly giving Emy and Rosa the option to remove their pieces from the performance at any time. Indeed, they were always prepared to adapt the show at the last minute to accommodate these changes.⁴¹ I worry, however, that this option might not have felt graspable to the performers themselves, as there is a tension between the supposed freedom these performers had to *not* perform their pain and the weight that their pieces pulled within the affective arc of the show. Knowing how powerfully these pieces affected audiences, how central this affect was to the political pathos of the *Opera* as a whole, and how over-worked the directors were, I am not convinced that anyone would be able to prioritise self-care in those moments, rather than gritting their teeth and ploughing through another performance even if it hurts more than it heals. It is necessary to ask whether there might be ways of resolving this tension so that there is genuinely no pressure to perform pain.

On this note, I close the chapter by foregrounding the question: who are these performances of pain for? Is it for the performer, her catharsis and her healing? Is it for the group as a whole, the sense of community that sharing a story like this and

⁴¹ In fact, this was true for every part of the *Opera*. If somebody did not feel able to perform a certain piece on a particular night, it could (in theory) be pulled from the show. The cabaret-style structure meant that later scenes would be unaffected and, for scenes of a less personal nature, somebody was often able to fill in.

working together to craft it into a performance might foster? Is it for the audience, their educational and emotional journey across the arc of the show? Throughout, I have demonstrated the existence of different affects and effects for all of these stakeholders, some more tangible than others. However, I suggest that, though these pieces *can* be for all of these people, a careful balancing act is required to ensure the scales are not tipped away from the priority of supporting the member who has consented to bring her vulnerability into the project. The concept of care within artistic practice is therefore fundamental if we are to avoid making martyrs out of people performing their pain, instead enabling processes and forms that privilege the experiences and emotions of the performer. It is in this way, with empathy, that performances of pain might simultaneously act as validation for the performer and to prompt advocacy in audiences.

Conclusion

The contrasts between the pieces discussed here—the ways they were made and their aesthetic characteristics—evidence a flexible, individualised creative approach. This respect for Emy's and Rosa's creative agency manifested in creative processes where they had control over how their stories were shared and resulted in artful performances of pain that were experienced by those performing as empowering rather than exploitative, and perceived by those witnessing as beautiful rather than ugly. Emy and Rosa created '*beautiful, radiant things*' (Thompson, 2009:11)—celebrations of survival amidst, or in spite of, the pain of stigma and violence, and the feelings of these performances continue to reverberate. The somewhat visceral perception that 'Monkey in a Circus' 'broke' people, along with the directors' statements that these pieces were consistently remembered by audiences, indicates the power with which they affected people, while suggesting that these affects lingered, at least beyond the end of the performance and most likely longer.

Within a project that aims to humanise sex workers, displays of emotion, alongside the aesthetic skill demonstrated in these performances, make it harder for audiences to dismiss the demands for safety and acceptance that these performers are making, however implicitly. In short, the creative processes and the affective qualities of these performances subtly worked to support the performers' difficult returns as well as their own, and SWO's, activist agendas. When this is the case, performances of pain can be seen to strengthen the artistic activism of community musical theatre projects like SWO, and socially-engaged performance projects more broadly.

In the following chapter, I expand upon the exploration of creative processes and the notion of creative agency presented here, focussing in particular on the theory of cultural democracy and its centrality to understandings of the space that community musical theatre can make for self-advocacy within marginalised communities.

7) 'Working with the fact that it's an imperfect machine':

Chaos in the making

This chapter reviews the processes used in SWO to create both the music and the theatrical content for the performance of *Sex Worker's Opera*, benefitting from an interdisciplinary analysis of 'imperfection' and 'chaos' in both community music and applied theatre practice. Dwelling on sites of imperfection and chaos in this example of community musical theatre practice, I suggest that an openness to both gives rise to the potential for more genuine participation, cultivating inclusive processes, a sense of ownership, more authentic representations and, ultimately, a more robust form of artistic activism.

The quotation in this chapter's title came from a member as they spoke about the choreography for the song 'Capitalist Blues'. In its original context, the notion of an 'imperfect machine' directly referred to the choreographed capitalist 'machine' written about in Chapter 4, but it has broader applicability to the creative approach taken within SWO. The idea of 'working with the fact that it's an imperfect machine' runs counter to a quest for aesthetic perfection, total synchronicity, and unilateral ability, which are mainstays of numerous disciplines in the professional art world. In SWO— as in most community performances—these goals were unrealistic. Instead, this member advocated for an approach to the choreography that accounted for—embraced, even—differing capacities, working *with* rather than *against* so-called 'imperfections'. Extending beyond the original discussion of choreography, from which the title came, I show that the idea that imperfections should be valued rather than quashed runs through the core of SWO's creative practice. In this chapter, I fuse themes of imperfection and chaos, both of which emerged strongly in the interview data, and strikingly often in positive lights.

Drawing on theory and practice from community arts, this chapter demonstrates that SWO's creative practice reflects the ideals of cultural democracy (Jeffers &

Moriarty, 2017), and that this was central to the success of the project's artistic activism. In doing so, I identify SWO's deviation from traditional artistic hierarchies and highlight the ways in which members were not only encouraged to perform but also to *create* within the project, thereby fostering members' 'access to the means of cultural production' (Bennett, 2017:175) rather than simply access to culture.

Enabling wider participation in the world of art-making, cultural democracy upsets the binary of 'Great Art' and 'access' while redefining the notion of 'excellence' (64 Million Artists & Arts Council England, 2018:6). Importantly, though, cultural democracy also goes beyond this. As Kelly argues in a podcast episode titled, 'What might we mean by cultural democracy?' (Kelly, 2022), the ultimate goal here is not challenging the norms of cultural and artistic value, as reinforced by arts funding bodies. Instead, he draws on Dubois (1943) and Graves (2010) to make the case that cultural democracy should be seen as part of a triad alongside economic and political democracy, and thus vital to the wide-scale project of challenging societal inequities. 'We need a revolution. Cultural democracy holds the promise to be a potent force in shaping the direction of this emergent, global realignment' (Graves, 2010:200).

Proponents of cultural democracy aim to refocus attention toward art and culture that might not conform to hegemonic ideals of professional (or 'valuable') art, advocating for a plural alternative to the lauded figure of the individual genius (Kelly, 2017:230). Khatibu's proposal that 'cultural democracy is the ability of a people to define their existence, regardless of the dominant culture whose norms and values are institutionally accepted and expected' (Ricks, 2013:2) is pertinent here, as it emphasises the significance of cultural democracy to struggles for self-representation, one of the foundational aims of SWO.

That said, I would query the notion that cultural democracy always entails the self-definition of one's existence *regardless* of hegemonic cultural forces. Employing Muñoz's concept of 'disidentification', I suggest that one way in which this self-definition can be enacted is actually *in relation to* the norms and values of the dominant culture, taking them as a starting point and then 'decoding' them 'from

the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a cultural hierarchy' (Muñoz, 1999:25). As Muñoz writes, 'The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications' (Ibid. 31). Though it most explicitly takes opera as its starting point for disidentification, SWO's decoding of dominant culture ranges from 'high art' through to contemporary, popular forms and references. The prevalence of disempowering representation for sex workers creates a huge range of possible sites for disidentificatory performances. Rather than hindering sex workers' self-definition, as they usually do, the forms and references that SWO members and directors chose to mess with became potent spaces of reclamation and cultural agency, offering a springboard for the cultivation of new ways for people to tell and hear sex workers' stories, and therefore furthering the cultural democracy agenda.

Considering community musical theatre as a point from which seeds of cultural democracy might be sown requires attention to the processes through which the art itself is created. It is not only through, or in, performance that strategies like disidentification are practised: 'Disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production' (Muñoz, 1999:25). As Campbell and Farrier propose in their theorisation of 'queer dramaturgies', 'the making processes' are just as important in rendering a dramaturgy 'queer' as the 'aesthetic composition and the narrative content of the work' (Campbell & Farrier, 2016:13). Accordingly, this chapter's project of unpacking the creative processes used in the making of *Sex Worker's Opera* sheds light on the structures and practices used to make *Sex Worker's Opera*, the ways in which these deviated from traditional conceptions of both 'professional' and 'participatory' practice, and the importance of this deviation in supporting community musical theatre—the process and the performance—to serve as a form of artistic activism.

Only through a creative process that channelled the values of cultural democracy could the multiple voices of sex workers and allies in the SWO cast and crew be

heard on their own terms, asserting their right to tell their own stories. As Higgins contends, the community arts workshop is a '*democratic event*', based on the understanding 'that the ownership is not vested in a single individual (the workshop facilitator) but lies with everybody' (Higgins, 2012:153). Within community arts contexts, this democratic approach mitigates the risk of simply creating new hierarchies—or familiarly narrow portrayals of marginalised groups—and instead enables more representative stories to be told in more authentic ways.

In this chapter, I focus on five central features of SWO's creative practice: collaborative songwriting, the orchestra, devising the script, the role of directors, and access to art. Throughout, I demonstrate the significance of the community arts context within which SWO's creative practice occurs, highlighting additional challenges faced by members and directors. These include limited time, personal marginalisations, mixed creative abilities, and the pressure of performing to an audience. Beginning with a discussion of collaborative songwriting, I unpack the directors' contrasting approaches in workshops with the SWO group in 2014 and the Sex Worker Theatre group in Cape Town in 2018. Though the processes with each group engendered a strong sense of ownership, I show that differences in the degree to which workshop attendees are encouraged to create the music, as well as the lyrics, has implications for the extent to which collaborative songwriting represents the ideals of cultural democracy. Focussing next on the orchestra as a dynamic site of community arts practice, I elucidate the many ways in which this group of musicians messed with conventions, unsettling the implicit hierarchies of classical music.

I then go on to explore the collaboratively devised script (or lack thereof), drawing attention to the use of improvisation as a way of tapping into members' pre-existent performance abilities, bolstering confidence and their enjoyment of performing on stage. Subsequently, and stepping back from the immediate context of the creative process, I depict the role of SWO's directors as particularly messy, detailing the myriad responsibilities and navigations of power required to sensitively manoeuvre the group toward a finished performance. This messiness, I suggest, is in fact integral

to the cultivation of cultural democracy, signalling the challenging process of pluralising authorial power. Finally, I look at the ways in which SWO offered members access to artistic opportunities they would not otherwise have had, illuminating changes in their own perspectives about what art is and who artists are. It emerges that, within SWO, art is not something that needs to be 'right', and nor should it only be the 'right' people doing it. As they are welcomed in each of the five areas of SWO's practice discussed here, I propose that a celebration of imperfection and chaos might be the first step toward a radical redistribution of cultural authority, making sex workers—and other marginalised people—the artists of their own stories.

Collaborative songwriting

Collaborative songwriting is a process whereby the singular role of the composer or lyricist is replaced by a practice of authorial plurality, resulting in a shift away from control and toward access. As a method, collaborative songwriting invites what I, in this chapter, conceptualise as chaos: contradictory creative ideas demanding a place in the final product; a range of voices clamouring to be heard; words, phrases and rhythms that do not easily slot together. Perhaps because of the challenges it poses to normative order, this process is a staple in community music practice (Higgins & Bartleet, 2018:283; Mullen & Deane, 2018:187). Indeed, Higgins understands the workshop in which collaborative songwriting occurs as a 'deterritorialized space', one that has the potential to become a '*democratic space*' 'through which diversity, freedom, and tolerance might flow' (Original emphasis, Higgins, 2012:144-5). Moreover, in her analysis of a collaborative songwriting project with youth in midtown Detroit, Hess argues that this form of creativity enabled members of the project to assert 'the strengths of their identities and communities through music', while providing 'profound counternarratives to dominant deficit discourses' (Hess, 2018:7). As a creative method, collaborative songwriting opens the door to artistic

expression for people who might not usually have access to such a platform, often providing a means of being heard, within and beyond the workshop setting.

Collaborative songwriting has been a pillar of SWO's creative practice. As a method, it has enabled members to participate in the creation of music that is then included in the performance of *Sex Worker's Opera*, regardless of prior musical experience. The accessibility of this mode of songwriting has also established it as a platform where differing perspectives can meet, with members bringing their own experiences and ideas to the creative process, instigating discussions and enhancing understanding among the group. As Higgins defines facilitation in community arts contexts, 'exploration of diverse assumptions and options are often some of the significant aims' (Higgins, 2012:147).

Crucially, the finished products of the collaborative songwriting processes foreground sex workers' voices, presenting audiences with the realities of sex worker experiences, challenging misrepresentations and dominant discourses. Similar to Hess's (2018) findings, the provision of counter-narratives is integral to the activism of *Sex Worker's Opera* and these can certainly be identified in the finished songs. Additionally, the collaborative nature of this method generates a more representative impression of sex workers' perspectives on the issues being addressed. That these songs contain a multitude of voices is of particular significance in the context of sex worker arts activism, where it is vital that not only the most privileged sex worker perspectives are heard.

In making *Sex Worker's Opera*, the directors facilitated various modes of collaborative songwriting, using what they term 'holding forms'. A holding form is essentially a template for anything—songs, scenes, rituals—that offer the beginning of an idea, a structure or certain creative components, while also leaving space for individual and collective input. In the directors' own words, a holding form:

'... gives a space for people to then put their own lyrics or value onto, but it holds the song together. It ensures that there will be a journey; there will be a beginning, middle and end'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

The combination of structure and freedom that is integral to these holding forms provides what Higgins calls 'safety without safety', whereby 'boundaries are marked to provide enough structural energy for the workshop to begin, but care is then taken to ensure that not too many restraints are employed that might delimit the flow or the becoming of any music making' (Higgins, 2012:150). There is a delicate balance to be struck between inspiring participants' creativity with a prompt and allowing the group to take the lead. The holding forms in SWO worked in different ways to achieve this equilibrium:

'So, with 'Freedom Song' it was the opening lines, which stimulate the rest of the continued conversation... In 'Family Song', it will have been having the refrain, "Everyone wants to be loved, everyone wants to love", something you come back to that kind of anchors the song'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

To facilitate collaborative songwriting processes, the directors brought their preconceived holding forms to the group and then worked together to fill in the blanks. Though, in theory, a holding form could provide very little, leaving many of the song's integral features to the group to create, the holding forms used in SWO tended to come with pre-written chord progressions and melodies. While this afforded members the scope to shape the lyrics, choreography and theatrical elements of the songs (such as the characterisations in 'Hollywood Clichés') the musical director had mixed feelings about the extent to which this practice represented an ideal collaboration. This tension is explored in greater depth later in this chapter.

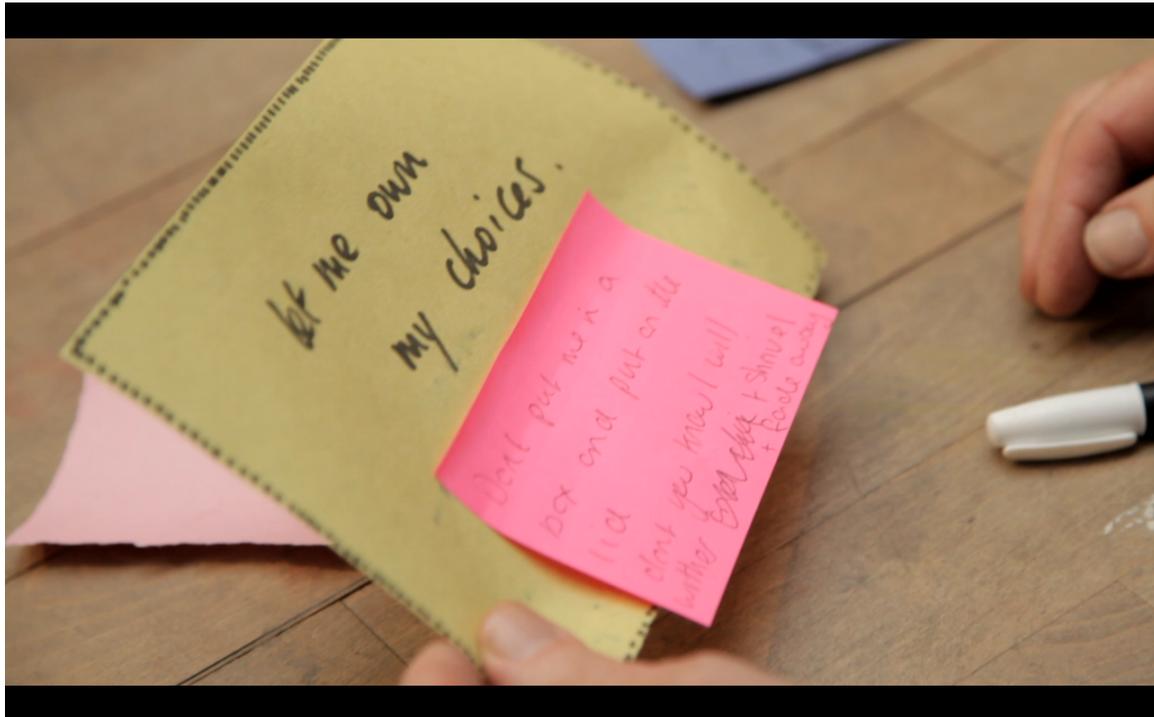
Collaborative songwriting in practice: 'Freedom Song'

'Freedom Song'—the first song that the group worked on together during SWO's original phase in 2014—provides one illustration of the holding form and collaborative songwriting method. When 'Freedom Song' was written, the group had very little time for fine-tuning or even rehearsing so, instead of striving for an abstract—and entirely unrealistic, given the circumstances—standard of aesthetic perfection, the directors focussed on unlocking the creativity of those who had come to participate, sex workers and allies alike. Collaborative songwriting was one of the ways in which they did this.

As seen previously, 'Freedom Song' was written in response to the prejudices against sex workers and the abusive rant of a prohibitionist feminist character planted in the audience, who was to interrupt the beginning of *Sex Worker's Opera* to make the argument that sex work necessarily equates to exploitation. The holding form for 'Freedom Song' was a musical accompaniment, a melody and the opening lines:

*"My friend, you know I sympathise.
But how can you call it freedom,
Telling me what to do with my thighs?"*

The group of around fifteen people—including performers and the production team—wrote the rest of the lyrics collaboratively, writing ideas for the lyrical content down on a post-it note before passing the paper onto someone else. Inspired by what had already been written, this person then added their ideas and passed it on for the step to be repeated. At the end of the exercise, the group had a large stack of post-it notes featuring ideas from everyone who took part, which they then worked through together, pulling out the images, rhymes and metaphors that could be used as poetry for the song lyrics.



An example of the post-it notes from the 'Freedom Song' workshop. The larger post-it reads 'Let me own my choices'. Added to that is a smaller, pink post-it that reads, 'Don't put me in a box and put down the lid. Don't you know I will wither and shrivel and fade away'. This fed into the lyric, "Don't put me in a box and close the lid, be open and discuss why you're offended".

'It was done in a very inclusive way. We were broken up in small groups and then we kind of brought up some messaging and then the messaging that was standing out from each mini-group was then used to create a message that also had rhymes'. (SWO member)

After the first day of the three-day devising and rehearsal process in 2014, the directors spent the night tightening the rhyme scheme and ensuring the lyrics fit with the march-like rhythm of the pre-written music. They took it back to the group the following day and it has since become something of an anthem, described in interviews as 'the song of the show' (SWO director), 'a resumé of the show' (SWO member), and the best choice for a SWO karaoke (SWO member).

'The way in which it was written, you know, it was one of the collective processes that was probably the most... equally collaborative... You

really heard so many different voices within that song come together in this one collective, which I thought was pretty cool'. (SWO director)

Fostering ownership through songwriting

The importance of this song to members of SWO indicates a strong sense of collective ownership, which would arguably be absent, or severely lessened, had the song been entirely pre-written by the directors or a single composer. I suggest that an emerging sense of ownership indicates a prioritisation of cultural democracy.

'I think that one of the reasons people feel so attached to 'Freedom Song' is because they feel such ownership over it. They feel like they know which exact line they wrote. Even if they don't know anymore, they're still like, 'That's the one that resonates with me''. (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

Ownership, in this case, is the result of a process of cultural expression that 'allows individuals and groups to define themselves and their beliefs, and not only be defined by others' (Matarasso, 2007:457). As I have repeatedly emphasised, it is particularly vital for sex workers to self-define and self-represent in order to cut through the swathes of cultural misrepresentation and prejudice that fuel harmful policies and discriminatory treatment. A sense of ownership is far from a trivial outcome when one considers the difficulties for sex workers attempting to surpass dominant cultural narratives around sex work. Greater ownership likely correlates with more authentic representations, making the sense of ownership that SWO members got from collaborative songwriting an important outcome of the project as a whole, both for individuals and the collective. For individual members, Higgins might say that 'the self-worth that comes from being "enabled" to invent is powerfully affirming' (Higgins, 2012:147). For SWO members, the ability to offer sex worker representations that are both accurate and suitably complex satisfies a firm political agenda.

Interestingly, members and directors reported a sense of ownership emerging as a response to multiple different forms of collaborative songwriting. This is cause for optimism because the process of collectively writing the lyrics from scratch, as for ‘Freedom Song’, is incredibly time-consuming and therefore, within the context of rushed rehearsal schedules, often impracticable. While analysing accounts of the creative process offered in interviews, however, it became apparent that differing degrees of collaboration could still lead to a similar degree of ownership.

‘Just by tweaking a couple of lyrics and putting a completely different context of the characters, that is essentially group writing as well even though it wasn’t a group written song’. (SWO director)

As an example, ‘Domme Song’ was written by a single composer in 2014 and consistently performed by one member who had not been involved in writing the song. In 2016, ‘Domme Song’ was updated and two additional characters—the Domme’s ambivalent co-workers, affectionately referred to as ‘sub-dommes’—were given lines to sing during an interlude. These were written collectively to reflect a more common, mundane perspective on professional domination work than that provided by the enthusiastic lead character. For one member, though she had performed the eponymous role in ‘Domme Song’ the entire time—to the point where others described her and the song as ‘inseparable’—the sense of ownership she had over the song was strengthened once she had contributed to the writing, regardless of the fact her part was not at all changed:

‘Having a piece of paper with all the words on is great, but then when you go in and do the development... We never really had that until we got the secondary dommes. So I think being able to give to the words of the secondary dommes, despite me performing it, has given me the opportunity to feel part of it’. (SWO member)

This member’s experiences of ownership in relation to ‘Domme Song’ are elucidated through her only feeling ‘part of it’ as a result of contributing to the writing, rather

than through performing someone else's composition. This has significant implications for practice that aims to nurture creativity and, on a more general level, to uphold the values of cultural democracy. It seems that access to, and participation in, the writing process itself is fundamental to the development of a sense of ownership, which should be an integral outcome to any artistic project working to amplify mis- or under-represented voices.

At this point, readers will have noticed that my discussion of the creative process, and collaborative songwriting more specifically, has been solely focused on lyrical aspects of the music. Limitations on the time that the group had to work together meant that the pressure of preparing a completed performance was omnipresent; for this reason, primarily, it was not possible to develop the musical skills required to compose a song in its entirety among members. Though this could be read, and experienced, as a failure by community music standards—and this will be explored further soon—it is relevant that SWO is not solely a musical project; it is also a theatrical and a choreographic production requiring a distribution of time and creative capacity across an array of practices. That being said, there is value in comparing the process used for 'Freedom Song' with another collaborative songwriting process, in which participants were encouraged to have more genuine *musical* input. Facilitating a comparative assessment of the implications different forms and degrees of creative participation have on the outcome of cultural democracy, the next section examines a songwriting workshop the directors facilitated in Cape Town, South Africa.

[A holistic approach to collaborative songwriting: Sex Worker Theatre](#)

In March of 2019, the directors of SWO were invited to attend the launch event for the Sex Worker Theatre in Cape Town. I was able to accompany them and document the launch and surrounding activities as a participant observer, taking notes and filming the panel the directors spoke on. The Sex Worker Theatre was initiated as part of an umbrella project called GlobalGRACE⁴² as a collaboration between the Sex

⁴² <https://www.globalgrace.net/> [Accessed 10th December 2021]

Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT)—a prominent sex worker organisation in South Africa, with whom SWO has forged close ties—the African Gender Institute (AGI) and the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies (CTDPS) at the University of Cape Town. It involved sex workers, activists and academics working together to investigate ‘gender positive approaches to wellbeing through the use of participatory theatre and performance’, examining the ways in which sex workers ‘produce equality’ and enhancing ‘empowering decision-making in their lives’ (AGI).⁴³

While in Cape Town, the directors held multiple workshops with the Sex Worker Theatre group. Of these, the songwriting workshop is of particular interest here. This took place one morning in a drama studio at the University of Cape Town. It started out with the same goals as for ‘Freedom Song’: to respond to prejudiced critiques of sex work and sex workers. The lyrics were developed in much the same way as detailed above, with post-it notes being passed around, accumulating different people’s ideas, before being pooled. The group then worked collectively to pull out striking images, rhymes and messages from the writing on the post-it notes. Aside from some gentle facilitation, participants directed this process, taking the lyrics into their own hands by bringing in localised references to life in the townships that SWO’s directors—as cultural outsiders—could not possibly have anticipated or offered. Furthermore, the resultant lyric sheets blended three different languages: English, Xhosa and Afrikaans. This exemplified the ownership participants claimed over the song, grounding it in local context and making it relevant to them as the people who were expressing their perspectives and experiences. Although the song was, aesthetically, very different to ‘Freedom Song’, it had a similarly forceful energy and the creative writing process appeared to engender an equivalent degree of ownership, evident in the joy with which participants were singing it after the workshop and well into the night.

⁴³ <http://www.agi.ac.za/agi/projects/globalgrace> [Accessed 10th December]

There were, however, myriad differences between this process and that of creating 'Freedom Song'. Having only joined SWO in 2017, I had not been involved in the composition of 'Freedom Song' and therefore did not immediately identify these contrasts. It was only later, while interviewing the directors in the summer of 2019, that—through their reflections and self-critiques—I appreciated the extent and perceived impact of the differences. For example, going into the workshop in Cape Town with the Sex Worker Theatre group, the directors did not have the same type of holding form as they had had for 'Freedom Song'. This meant that it was up to the group to create the chord progressions, the melodies and the rhythms used in their song. In the workshop, time was allocated to demystifying these musical elements and making them accessible even to people with limited musical experience.

'The fact that we were there to give them a longer-term tool meant that we went deeper than we ever did with our members. I say this with... I guess some sadness in my heart. We did the chord-writing activity, the melody-writing activity, and the rhythm-writing activity that we never had the time for with our members'. (SWO director)

As stated here, the songwriting workshop with the Sex Worker Theatre group had a different purpose to those held with SWO members. In Cape Town, the directors were working to prepare SWEAT and the Sex Worker Theatre group to sustain their own creative projects. As such, they wanted to share the tools that had enabled them to create collaboratively with the SWO group in London, thus lessening the requirement for external musical leadership.

When 'Freedom Song' was written, the group were due to perform imminently, within two days. The added pressure of needing to present a final product affected the process, which entailed refining, negotiating and, to a certain extent, limiting members' inputs. Given the restricted time in which to prepare, there was not scope to go through the same process with the music itself. In contrast, the Sex Worker Theatre group were not working toward an upcoming performance when they participated in the songwriting workshop; therefore, the process did not need to be

geared toward the final product to the same degree. Instead of honing the lyrics, participants were putting chords together on the piano for the first time, developing skills that could serve them if they wanted to hold similar workshops in the future without an external music facilitator.

'SWO members only had realm over the lyrics. There was no question that they had realm over the music. And that was a limitation... That's the thing I have sadness in my heart about'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

The differing priorities of these workshops seem to be connected to varied orientations toward short-, mid- and long-term goals. For instance, though the musical director expressed great disappointment that SWO members had not had the same opportunity to develop musical skills beyond the realm of lyric-writing, they also acknowledged the immediate gratification that members experienced as a result of having a fully-formed instrumental backing for the song they had just written:

'I think that there's a different form of empowerment that comes from it sounding immediately amazing because you've got a pre-written accordion, piano, flute, cello, violin part. Like, having someone play an epic live beautiful instrumental karaoke track to your song is a different joyous feeling... You get to be your own musical. You know, you can come to me and you can sing me a song and I'll play you the chords and you sound great, right? That's one form of empowerment. Politically, personally, my longer-term aims are... I would use the word 'deeper', but maybe they're slower and maybe they won't make a fab West End musical-style sound within a day'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

As the musical director implies here, it may not be possible to compare the two approaches to collaborative songwriting and say which is *better*. What is clear is that the directors facilitated workshops that would serve the specific needs of each

group, working within the constraints of time, musical ability and group dynamics, and that each of these approaches have their own merits, as well as limitations. The approach to writing 'Freedom Song' was, by necessity, oriented toward the shorter-term goal of the upcoming performance, and yet it offered powerful experiences for members who were able to perform something they had literally just created at a level of musical skill that it would never have been possible to cultivate collaboratively in two days.

'I think that was one of the sort of sacrifices that we had to make when we sat there working out exactly how this three-day model would work... It was like, 'Which are the things that we can actually do?''
(SWO director)

On the other hand, the songwriting workshop with the Sex Worker Theatre group in Cape Town was oriented toward the longer-term goal of offering tools and developing skills that would enable the process to be repeated with full ownership by the group. The song that resulted was not as polished as 'Freedom Song', and there was certainly room for musical development and structural editing of the lyrics, but it gave the group the sense that it was easy to write a song, that they could do it themselves. As one of the group exclaimed: 'It's magic!' The instilment of this belief is political in itself when one considers normative barriers to musical access.

'I think that the act of being able to write chords in the moment is an instant myth-buster, dispeller of the idea that classical music is a tyrannical force over your life that you'll never have access to. And that for me is a very deep thing'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

Both approaches have value, at individual and group levels. And both, in their own way, enhance access to art and enact cultural democracy, supporting the amplification of sex worker voices through creative expression. Making space for imperfection and chaos within the process was fundamental in both contexts, with

the facilitators relinquishing authorial control and enabling myriad modes (and degrees) of participation to limit the possibility of excluding anyone. Though the process of writing songs collaboratively is time-consuming, requiring attention to aesthetic detail as well as to social and artistic dynamics, the inclusivity of this practice has powerful implications for the sense of ownership that sex workers might have over representations of their lives and their community. As such, it is particularly important that collaborative songwriting processes are facilitated in the way that best supports the needs and intentions of the group. I suggest that, where cultural democracy is the aim, a flexible—not always ‘ideal’—approach to workshop facilitation might be essential in supporting marginalised communities to claim cultural space as often and with as much impact as possible.

The Orchestra

As discussed in Chapter 3, SWO differs from comparable projects in the sense that it is not a collaboration between community members and professional artists, but a collection of sex workers and allies working together to support each other, to create a performance, and to advance sex worker rights. Earlier, I framed collaborative songwriting as a means of handing the pen to those who have long been silenced and written *about* by those with greater cultural authority. Here, I propose that SWO’s orchestra should be considered similarly: as a site where cultural authority was redistributed, making space both for sex workers—who, as discussed, are typically objectified within opera—and untrained musicians, who are conventionally excluded from participating in the Classical tradition. As I reveal, participation in the ‘orchestra’ did not demand adherence to pre-existing Classical norms or standards. Instead, it provided musicians with opportunities for musical expression, artistic development and cultural reimaginings that contributed to the overall furthering of cultural democracy within and through SWO.

A number of musicians, often multi-instrumentalists, have been involved in the performance of *Sex Worker's Opera* alongside the musical director—one of the three directors who was responsible for facilitating the musical side of songwriting workshops, making arrangements, recruiting other musicians and, often, leading the ensemble. The original ensemble featured a violin, piano, flute and accordion. In later years of the project, the performance featured a well-established 'orchestra', comprising a violinist, a clarinetist, a pianist and a cellist. Among these players, there was generally a relatively high degree of musical proficiency, although there was no requirement for professional standards and only one of the musicians had received performance training to conservatoire level. Likewise, the assemblage of instruments was not determined by the musical director, but rather based on what the people who wanted to be involved could offer.

Calling this group of instrumentalists an 'orchestra' conjures an image of control and organisation associated with hierarchical formations in the European classical music tradition (Bull, 2019) that, to some extent, the SWO orchestra subverted. Continuing to tug on the threads of imperfection and chaos, this section explores the workings of the orchestra and demonstrates how this group of musicians went against conventions of classical and musical theatre composition and performance. I suggest that a willingness to embrace imperfection and chaos, in this context, expanded the aesthetic possibilities for the musicians and led to a more dynamic practice whereby they were not simply seen as accompanists to the on-stage performers but as creative agents in their own right. Because the 50/50 balance of sex workers and allies extends into the orchestra, this should also be seen as an integral component of SWO's project to include sex workers in their own representation, enabling more meaningful participation in the art-making and building solidarity across different factions of the cast and crew. The musical director recalled:

'I was working with new musicians, some of whom I didn't know at all and didn't know their skills or comfort levels. And I didn't know how rapidly they'd be able to adapt to the context of the project, how much they'd be able to get with the very immediate, very improvisatory

nature the project required. So a lot of the work I did with them in advance of the rehearsals and then during the rehearsals was on... improvising together as a group, to find that group bonding and group power, and also to encourage especially the less experienced musical members to feel more capable really'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

As explained here, improvisation was both a necessity and an opportunity for members of the orchestra. On the one hand, the musicians were required to work quickly to create new music for the show, often without time to prepare scores or learn parts by heart, making some degree of improvisation a requirement. Occasionally, improvisation was also a stylistic decision, such as for the blues-inspired instrumental sections in 'Capitalist Blues' or the clarinet solo with electronic effects in 'Strip for the Dead'. On the other hand, musicians were encouraged to explore improvisation as a way of expanding their musical vocabulary, giving them the confidence attached to versatility. The effects of this varied depending on the musician, notably whether they were classically trained or not, but were unilaterally positive. For musicians who were not classically trained, and perhaps did not have as much playing experience, improvisation gave them the opportunity 'to feel more capable'. For those who were classically trained, improvisation represented a new skill that they had not previously been comfortable with. The violinist expressed this as a challenge and spoke about the journey they had been on to become more comfortable with improvisation.

*'It was a bit hard sometimes because of this whole thing of classical musicians needing to improvise, of melodic instruments not being so used to harmonies, to go free on them and stuff. So it took me a while to be able to let go a bit more, and then on a few it was just great'.
(SWO member)*

Improvisation, therefore, provided a form of playing together that could level out differences in musical ability among members of the orchestra, supporting Turino's suggestion that improvisation offers a frame wherein 'advanced performers can

continue to challenge themselves while maintaining a musical or dance style that has easy points of entry for neophytes' (Turino, 2009:110). As a way of neutralising the distinctions between classically-trained and less-experienced musicians, improvisation is a valuable feature of creative practice that aims to eradicate hierarchies between 'professional artists' and 'community members' and, instead, foster cultural democracy.

Related to the inclusion of improvisation in the musical practice of SWO is the fact that much of the music was worked out by the orchestra in the rehearsal room with very limited time (and often space) once lyrics had been written and learnt. While the basic structures and key musical components might have been composed ahead of the rehearsal process, the musical director indicated that 'the orchestration was always done in the workshops' (SWO director). This reality made it almost impossible for musicians to rehearse their parts in advance and made it difficult to rely on scores once they were in the workshops. As the pianist recalled:

'When I got the sheet music it was just like a half-written chord sheet in a different key and then a recording of someone playing it in a completely different key, so I was like 'I have no idea what I'm doing'... I had to kind of figure out how it was meant to be played. I had no idea. And then I had to memorise it all as well... I felt like I was just thrown into the musical director's head for a day and then had to figure out what I was doing. But we got there. We did get there in the end, but that was quite difficult'. (SWO member)

This account of learning the music for *Sex Worker's Opera* gives a somewhat chaotic impression of the creative process, highlighting the absence of clear musical instructions, an acute sense of personal responsibility, and the multiple skills that musicians—perhaps particularly the pianist—were required to possess. It is a distinct example of the adaptability required of the orchestra, as the pianist above spoke about learning 'Worker-Client Duet', a song that was transposed multiple times to

suit the specific vocal ranges of the different singers who performed it over the years.

Despite the understanding that the orchestra were part of the same community as the cast, in my observations it was clear that the orchestra often fell into a supporting role, catering to the needs of the on-stage performers. Signalling a hierarchy within the group, between singers and instrumentalists, this suggests that these two groups might have had very different experiences within the same creative process. This would not be problematic if the orchestra consisted entirely of ‘professional’ musicians supporting the community arts performance of *Sex Worker’s Opera*—as is typical for Streetwise Opera’s productions, for example. Yet, the inclusion of the orchestra within the project’s 50% model of sex workers and allies means that one cannot assume that the issues presented within the performance did not personally affect musicians too. Though this inclusion is ultimately an asset of SWO’s practice, as a group of marginalised artists themselves, the possibility that the orchestra members were positioned on a lower rung of the project’s ladder than the singers compromises the extent to which the structures of SWO can be seen to have allowed marginalised artists to reach their full potential. Further investigation is required to ascertain the ways in which this dynamic could be mitigated in community arts settings.

With respect to the orchestra’s role in unsettling norms of musical practice, the clarinet warrants special mention to highlight the integration of unpredictability. This clarinet—rather than the clarinettist, who was also the musical director—exemplifies the notion that imperfection and chaos can, in fact, generate interesting aesthetic outcomes.

‘I had a clarinet which was half the time having huge problems and keys were breaking and had to get repaired multiple times. I had these amazing squeaks that were available to me, not necessarily through choice, which I would then use to try and err... manipulate the sound field and sound like I knew what I was doing’. (SWO director)

That the clarinet was rather unreliable may have been the source of considerable anxiety, but it also bolstered the experimental aesthetic of the music for 'Strip for the Dead'. Similarly, the unexpected squeaks and slips worked to symbolise the break-downs of both the capitalist machine and the family unit in 'Capitalist Blues' and 'Family Song', respectively. Thus, something that would ordinarily be perceived as imperfect—to put it generously—and therefore unacceptable in a conventional ensemble context became a valuable contribution to the overall sound of the *Opera*, lending an alternative, DIY-type aesthetic.

Similarly, one particular scene from *Sex Worker's Opera* elucidates the orchestra's contribution to a uniquely subversive kind of chaos based on the disruption of cultural norms, both society-wide and performance-specific. Toward the end of Act One, *Sex Worker's Opera* features a performance art piece called 'Faccacello', spotlighting the cellist. The piece uses Pachelbel's Canon in D as a backing track, perhaps best known for its common use in traditional Western wedding proceedings and its repetitive 8-note cello part. Growing visibly bored, the cellist leaves their seat in the orchestra, abandoning their fellow musicians who are dutifully mime-playing along to the recording. The cellist takes to the stage, dancing with their cello, swaying, twirling and gliding. Especially given the matrimonial connotations of Pachelbel's Canon, it evokes a romantic feel. The conventions of romance are stretched, however, when the cellist takes out a tassel whip and begins flogging the back of the cello. Spinning the cello around for the audience to see, the cellist reveals the dildo strapped to the back of it, hinting toward a queer interpretation of heteronormative wedding rituals and earning the performance its name: 'Faccacello', a baroque-inspired sex pun. Moreover, the conventions of musical theatre, opera and instrumental accompaniment are stretched, as an instrumentalist takes the lead and their colleagues mime along to a backing track.

Overall, 'Faccacello' and the other features of the orchestral practice discussed above contribute to *SWO's* agenda of unsettling the authority of classical music—and opera more specifically—by wreaking havoc on conventional meanings and

modes of instrumental performance. In doing so, the orchestra presents an alternative: one that encourages agency rather than obedience, playfulness rather than order, and freedom rather than control. Though the orchestra did not always provide space for these things, for the most part the musicians I interviewed⁴⁴ were happy with the opportunities they had within the context of the orchestra and in their independent collaborations with singers (see 'The Trans Lament' and 'Monkey in a Circus'). As such, SWO is a positive example of community musical theatre practice that does not distinguish between 'professionals' and 'community members' when it comes to instrumentalists, but instead intends to support marginalised artists across the full range of creative roles, enabling wider participation and contributing to a multi-arts cultural democracy.

The Script

Sex Worker's Opera is a devised performance, meaning that it was developed collaboratively by the group of sex workers and allies working together, rather than as an interpretation or reproduction of a pre-written script (Oddey, 2013:1). In this section, I unpack how the process of devising bolstered SWO's joint intentions of providing a nurturing space for sex workers and advocating for sex worker rights. I show how devising supported members to feel like artists in control of their own representations, encouraging creativity and fun through an openness to chaos and imperfection.

Within the discipline of applied theatre, Shaughnessy understands devising as 'a collaborative methodology, underpinning the processes involved' (Shaughnessy, 2012:10). Applied theatre practitioners frequently use devising techniques to dissolve hierarchies within their practice by removing the authority otherwise granted to the text and the director's interpretation of it (Govan, Nicholson & Normington, 2007:32; Harries, 2020:278; Heddon & Milling, 2006:4-5). This loss of

⁴⁴ I interviewed three out of the four musicians, including the musical director, Alex Etchart.

hierarchy, or singular authorship, does not equate to a loss of internal artistic logic, however, as Harries argues in a rare example of community opera scholarship: 'Devising favours a plurality of voices in the creative process to the single voice of the 'author', yet aims to produce a piece of work that has a consistent 'logic''. This logic is spontaneously discovered through improvisation (Harries, 2020:280) and does not necessarily feed into a script; indeed, applied theatre performance often 'takes the form of a polished improvisation' (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009:7).

Certainly, this was the approach taken by SWO for a number of years, though these 'polished improvisations' did eventually form the basis of a script. The script proved useful for documentation purposes and for rehearsals, particularly when new members joined, but it did not entirely replace the improvisatory practice of the earlier performances. In this section, I examine the processes through which the *Sex Worker's Opera* script was created, the space that this script preserved for distinctly *unscripted* moments, and the vibrant potential of a coexistence between fixity and improvisation.

The process of devising a script for *Sex Worker's Opera* is inseparable from the organisational practice of inviting stories from sex workers around the world ahead of the first iteration of the show in 2014 and ever since. These stories would go on to form the foundations of much of the script, taking various forms: for example, monologues, dramatised scenes, audio clips and projected videos. One story sent in from Argentina was made into two scenes, creating continuity between Act One and Two and cultivating greater familiarity with these 'characters'. Two Spanish-speaking members of the group begin by performing the scene in Spanish—a nod to the story's South American origins—before breaking out of character, acknowledging the primarily-English-speaking audience's inability to understand, and dramatically resetting the scene in order to repeat it in English.

Devising also inevitably connects the production to events pertaining to sex work activism in the outside world. Oddey states that 'a group cannot devise in a vacuum' (Oddey, 2013:2); accordingly, protests, new laws, campaigns, and instances of police

brutality or violence against sex workers have all found their way into the show, with sections added throughout the project's lifespan to respond to contemporary issues affecting the sex work community. 'Porn Protest' is an example of this, as is a scene depicting the Soho Raids that took place in London in 2013, and an explanation of the FOSTA-SESTA laws in the US that prohibited online advertising in 2018. The devising process has allowed members to continually address the issues that are important to them and their community at the time of each performance.

While stories and current affairs provide rich prompts for devising, they do not immediately translate into scenes or sections of script. To generate material for the performance, the directors facilitated improvisatory workshops and group discussions to ensure that the dramatisations captured the aspects of the stories or events that were deemed to be the most important.

'We wanted to have a communal writing process with our members that became a script. Our members very much resist scripts. Not completely, but as a general rule it's not a home place for everyone. We've never worked from scripts as a project... At most we've worked from a story that our members have improvised into a script'. (SWO director)

In place of a 'communal writing process' that involved collectively putting words onto a page, improvisation emerged as a way of bypassing members' resistance to scripts and nurturing the plurality of authorship in the show, as performers effectively devised their own lines, and thus their own representations of different sex worker perspectives.

In interview, the centrality of performance, and specifically improvisation, to sex work itself was a recurring topic. Multiple members commented that they were drawing on skills they had developed and exercised in sex work without setting foot on a stage. For some, these came from explicitly performative work, such as acting out role plays, stripping for audiences, or featuring in pornographic films; but these

skills were also rooted in more everyday performative labour, such as responding quickly and convincingly to clients—often while staying in some form of character—and sustaining a particular atmosphere within sessions.

‘I hadn’t really done any performance before and now I love doing performance... I was like ‘Well, I have been doing that my whole life, just with an audience of one’’. (SWO member)

Between 2014 and 2018, performances of *Sex Worker’s Opera* increasingly adhered to a script, yet this script more often existed as documentation of what was already happening than as a set of instructions for performers to follow. Certainly, it was rare for members to learn lines in a conventional sense from this script and far more common that they would improvise a scene, and that this improvisation would then become the script—the script was there to document these ‘polished improvisations’ and often transcribed by one of the directors from the recording of the performance. In this sense, the devising process was very much focussed on *doing*, rather than writing.

‘It was just that everyone naturally knew what to say, and everyone knew their characters and said it without any sort of time or prep, and that sort of just became what was forever used’’. (SWO member)

This emphasis on improvisation and the lack of an editing process encouraged members to trust their own creative instincts. Even once scenes were effectively scripted, improvisation had a place within the performance itself. This was not always welcomed by the directors, who were keenly aware that the show was pushing at the bounds of the theatres’ allocated running time and also sensitive to the needs of other performers who might be thrown off by unexpected events on stage. Alternatively, a couple of members wished there had been *more* space for spontaneity. On the whole, however, the presence of improvisation within *Sex Worker’s Opera* was seen to make the performance experience more enjoyable for

all, including the tech team who, as this member reminds us, can also become over-familiar with the performance.

'The performers quite enjoyed to play around and to improvise a little bit. I mean, I enjoyed the different iterations... those little moments of satire keep you on your toes and keep you listening when you've seen the show many times before'. (SWO member)

The devising process, much like the music workshops, can be seen to provide 'safety without safety' (Higgins, 2012:150), offering inspiration, structure and tools while allowing members to lead the creative process and maintaining some degree of spontaneity right through into the performance. Again, the favouring of agency and playfulness over control and predictability is apparent in this process, resulting in a performance that conveyed the artistic capabilities of the group and key political messages while preserving the fun of performing for members themselves. In this way, it worked toward SWO's original goals of nurturing sex worker activists while continuing the fight for sex worker rights. When members feel both that their creative input is valued and that the performance is not only *by* them but also *for* them, the seeds of a cultural democracy that prioritises the voices and experiences of sex workers are sown.

'I think everyone who is a sex worker is an artist, to a degree anyway. You know, there is an art to sex work in its myriad forms, and I can attest that probably everyone else felt like an artist, or felt valued as an artist, with Sex Worker's Opera'. (SWO member)

Messing with Roles: 'The job of directing'

This section echoes elements of my conceptualisation of the SWO orchestra as a site of generative imperfection and chaos, when contrasted with the image of perfection

and control that 'the orchestra' typically signifies. Here, I show how the group's needs shaped the roles and processes of the directors, and unpack how this represents a departure from the singular creative authority often assigned to directors. Certainly, this approach creates fresh challenges for practice, requiring a great deal of responsiveness, but overall I suggest it offers possibilities for a collaborative creative process grounded in trust and a sense of being heard.

'The job of directing in this project... Half of the time you're coming up with holding forms and trying to predict what might work, and trying to research and respond to the community and the world, and get input that then creates a holding form; half of the time you're just reacting to what your members offer and their own inspiration, and trying to do the best justice to that possible, in the lack of time and resources that you've got'. (Alex Etchart, SWO director)

In this section, I investigate the dynamics of leadership in SWO's creative process, the extent to which it was possible for artistic decisions to be made collectively, and the ambiguous balance of facilitation and direction that was required. I illuminate the skill, sensitivity, trust and responsiveness required to navigate the complexities of this role, suggesting that these characteristics allow for dual outcomes. One, members have the opportunity to feel like artists, as expressed above, which is a fundamental affective component of the artistic activism of the project; two, there is simultaneously sufficient leadership such that decisions can be made quickly when necessary and someone is consistently paying attention to the bigger picture of the entire show, the rehearsal schedule, and any notable material constraints.

'I remember... Coming from a much more traditional theatre background, being totally freaked out because I was like, 'Sorry, what?! There's a song somebody's been working on with someone else and they're gonna put it on? We've not even worked on it, we've not seen it, what are we gonna do? Oh, and somebody's gonna do something with a cello that we've not seen''. (SWO director)

As a project, SWO is somewhat difficult to categorise. It slips between community arts, professional musical theatre and feminist or queer performance, deliberately challenging the distinctions and drawing on the assets of each. This slipperiness has significant ramifications for practice, particularly regarding the role that the facilitator/director plays. Distinguishing between controlling and facilitating in community music, Higgins suggest that control entails a preconceived idea of beginning, middle and end, whereas facilitating entails an openness to uncertainty (Higgins, 2012:148). Rather than seeing control and facilitation as polar opposites, I argue that—in the context of SWO—they sit on a spectrum, with the directors sliding into different positions depending on situational factors.

‘It was never a dictatorship, it never felt like ‘It’s the directors’ show and it’s the directors’ way’’. (SWO member)

According to Higgins and Willingham, community music ‘leadership roles are semi-mediated, rather than autocratically-directed’ (Higgins & Willingham, 2017:13). With this definition, they distinguish the role of the community arts facilitator from the typical, more executive role of the artistic director, musical director or theatre director in ‘professional’ performance contexts, highlighting the importance of collective input within community music settings. Along similar lines, Camlin emphasises the importance of dialogue within community music spaces, seeing the potential both for pedagogical developments in community music and the incorporation of multiple voices (Camlin, 2015:235). A ‘dialogical space’, as Camlin understands it, is fostered when people with different perspectives and positions—such as participants and facilitators—work together (Ibid., 237-41). Therefore, dialogical spaces pose a challenge to the traditional dichotomies of process versus product and access versus excellence, creating the possibility for all of those things to coexist (Ibid., 245-6).

‘There was definitely space for input, or like there were more voices in the room from the cast and everything. I mean, different from other

productions, definitely. So you would allow yourself to have ideas that you think would benefit others, but then it was just an interesting web of how to actually interact and bring this up'. (SWO member)

This member's account of the project depicts SWO as a 'dialogical space', acknowledging the presence of 'more voices' in the room and the feeling that members were able to have their own ideas. However, this account simultaneously raises the question of how realistic it is for these ideas to impact on decision-making, specifically highlighting the difficulty of making suggestions to the group or the directors within the rehearsal setting. While plenty of effort was made to ensure members in all factions of the project (cast, tech and orchestra) felt empowered to have their own ideas—to feel like artists—the realities of hectic rehearsal schedules and limited capacity for lengthy discussion may have meant that these ideas were not always given the platform they deserved. It seems that encouraging creativity is only one half of 'the job', and that a huge amount of facilitation and attentiveness is then required to respond to members' inspiration in a way that makes them feel heard.

'I loved that the directors... it was their own journey as well, but I think they came out with the formula of 'We are going to ask everyone's opinions but at the end, someone needs to make the final decision', because otherwise we could have been trapped in some kind of 'yes, no, yes, no'. But in the end, the way they did it, you really felt invited to say what you thought, and if that was going to work it was going to be taken into account. And I loved that'. (SWO member)

Other members identified the tension between collaboration and control, but acknowledged the value of having directors who were able to make executive decisions while taking into account multiple perspectives. Again, Higgins' phrase 'safety without safety' (Higgins, 2012:150) provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of leadership within SWO's creative process, demonstrating the need for freedom and structure to coexist. Though some members may have felt

creatively limited by the constraints of the rehearsal schedule or the sense that the directors were too overloaded to take their suggestions into consideration, these same members (and others) expressed a deep trust in the directors' decision-making abilities. Instead of feeling that this executive position amounted to dictatorial control over the creative direction, they trusted that the directors were working with members' ideas while keeping one eye on the clock and the other on the final performance.

'This is the problem if you're doing community theatre. You want to value everyone's place in the project but also you literally can't please everyone. And so, what you don't want to risk doing is just having the most diluted, simple message because that's the only thing everyone will agree on, because then it's just something really simple and boring. So it's like, how do you make it representative, so people feel seen and heard, but with something we can actually all agree on? It's a tricky one but I do feel like they were able to navigate that well'. (SWO member)

Complicating the already complicated relationship between social inclusion and artistic quality, this member introduces the issue of political effectiveness into discussions about the community arts creative process. The above quotation raises important questions about how community arts facilitators developing political performances can ensure they include myriad perspectives without dulling the desired political incisiveness. In the case of SWO, the question is: how might the directors tend to the imperative for social inclusion and cultural democracy while maintaining a strong activist slant that furthers the agendas of the sex worker rights movement? This is one of the many challenges of facilitation and collaboration in community musical theatre projects that are designed to serve as artistic activism.

Relatedly, there is also a tension between the ideals of collaboration and the extent to which members actually took up the space that the project offered. The sense that they did not contribute as much as they could have, in theory, was sometimes a source of frustration for directors and the group. For example, in between runs of

the show, the directors would often put out a call for members to develop pieces or scenes, or to indicate topics they would like to see explored further within the performance. Neither members nor directors were paid for their work during this time, but the door for input was perpetually open. Perhaps due to the lack of financial reimbursement, the directors never received anything from members until they reached the rehearsal periods, by which point integrating anything new into the scene list was much harder.

We asked everyone for input and then no one gave us input and then we sat there and worked out what the holding forms and scene ideas should be'. (SWO director')

Though it is beyond the scope of this current research, it would be worth more fully interrogating the extent to which members felt they genuinely had space to contribute within the structures proposed by the directors—the limitations of cultural democracy in SWO. Here, however, I am interested in the challenges this absence of engagement presented for the directors. For instance, it was not uncommon that the work the directors had done developing the show in these interim periods, in lieu of guidance from members and without payment themselves, became the subject of harsh criticism or even ridicule. I am referring in particular to a calypso version of 'Listen to Me' put forward by the musical director, and the waltz choreography for 'Hollywood Clichés' that was incorporated in 2017. Almost unanimously, the group immediately blocked the calypso version of 'Listen to Me'; the waltz made it into the show but the backstage commentary surrounding that scene was far from favourable.

'This is a thing that I know now about facilitation that takes a long time: when people are anxious, inexperienced performers particularly, they will express that anxiety through critique and that won't necessarily be a reflective critique. It doesn't mean their critique's not valid, their critique's ultimately valid and we are ultimately accountable to our members. It's our members' show and it's their decisions. But you kind

of have to try various avenues and left-field things to test the ingredients'. (SWO director)

While considering the power dynamics in the relationships between directors and members in SWO, it would be natural to assume that it was the directors who held more power. On the whole, this was the case, but the directors' explicit openness to members' inputs, the dismantling of hierarchies they had attempted to do, and the high stakes of representation also made them vulnerable to attack. In future research, it would be interesting to explore the conditions under which accountability is a productive force in community arts settings, and the conditions or circumstances in which it is less beneficial, both to individuals and to projects.

That said, the trust members had in the directors, in general, enabled the group to work through any controversies, knowing that any executive decisions were being made with the best interests of the community as the priority. No doubt, it helped that the directors were themselves integrated in the sex work community, either as a sex worker (i.e. Director X) or an ally, and therefore demonstrably invested in the activist outcomes of the project and in the wellbeing of its members. Even in the moments when they slid further toward the controlling end of the control-facilitation spectrum, directors upheld the values that sparked the project, of amplifying sex worker voices through creative expression and advocating for sex workers' rights.

Access to art

A marker of community arts and cultural democracy is the understanding that people are entitled to opportunities to create regardless of prior experience or official artistic training. On these grounds, community arts are distinguished from so-called 'professional arts', and it is therefore put forward that the two should not be assessed on the same terms (Matarasso, 2019:92-5). This is another area in which

SWO is a slippery project, as many members did in fact have extensive performance experience and training. As I explained earlier, sex work itself often constitutes performance work, in more or less explicit forms. In fact, it is perhaps a form of sex work stigma that neither the general public nor people in the arts world typically see this as ‘professional’ performance, despite it often being highly-skilled and labour-intensive work.

In conjunction, the distinction between ‘professional artist’ and ‘community member’ within community and participatory arts discourses problematically implies a separation that does not necessarily exist. This distinction validates the misguided approach of ‘parachuting in’ that has been so heavily criticised, whereby artists are temporarily stationed on projects in ‘deprived’ areas to bring art to the people with little to no knowledge of local, community-level context (Braden, 1978; Hope, 2017:219). With these critiques in mind, this section is decidedly *not* a celebration of the directors for bringing art to the sex worker masses, as would be the logic behind the democratisation of culture. Instead, it is an analysis of the ways in which SWO affected members’ experiences of, and feelings about, art-making—whether *Sex Worker’s Opera* was one performance of many in their careers or their first time stepping onto a stage.

‘For me it has been an experiment where I learnt a lot, you know? I got theatre skills on various levels, which have improved from doing my performance work in the Opera and the work in general... In the end, it had been great to see, ‘Hey, I’m able to make something to go into a big show’, and what it means for people with my background to have this opportunity’. (SWO member)

SWO has provided a platform for people from underrepresented backgrounds and with marginalised identities to share their experiences and develop their artistic identities and skills. While this is not necessarily something that would appeal to everyone, for those who made the decision to participate in SWO it was a significant motivation. The member quoted above spoke particularly about her experience

coming into the project as a working class trans sex worker dealing with PTSD symptoms, acknowledging how rare it is that such a platform would be available to someone with her background. Similarly, other members found that SWO made room for people with marginalised identities to participate in ways that might not otherwise be available and, by extension, to gain valuable experience and opportunities to develop their artistic capabilities. While other performance projects might occasionally enable marginalised people to take part, they rarely provide the level of creative freedom that would allow members to develop further as artists.

'It's hard enough as a brown trans person, or gender non-conforming at the time, to get even a foot in the door, any roles. But then finding things that are risk-taking and are exciting, or being provided space for that, it's hard to come by'. (SWO member)

Certain members with relatively extensive performance experience, both in sex work contexts and in more traditional performing arts settings, reported that being part of SWO challenged their priorities.

'What I learned was that the emphasis was always on community, not theatre. You know, it was like this term community theatre, but community in capital letters'. (SWO member)

Although this perceived imbalance was occasionally a source of frustration for performers who were more concerned with aesthetic quality, the collaboration with less-experienced performers forced them to recalibrate their expectations. Judgments about the quality of specific processes or pieces in *Sex Worker's Opera* gave way to a realisation that what was most important in this context was that sex workers were taking the opportunity to speak out and share their stories.

'I got really annoyed about it theatrically because I thought it was like a GCSE piece, but it was in that moment that I was like, 'That's not what this is about'. That's not what Sex Worker's Opera is about. It's not

about theatre or what it looks like, this is real fucking stories'. (SWO member)

And yet, the result is not a string of stories told inelegantly with little attention to artistic detail, but rather a reconfiguration of what audiences might perceive as aesthetic quality. It is not only within SWO's creative process that normative artistic hierarchies are challenged; within the performance itself there are numerous examples of moments that challenge conventional understandings of skill, structure, form and the professional art versus community art dichotomy. One of the directors used the piece 'Monkey in a Circus' to elaborate upon this:

'There's something profoundly community art about that piece. She is clearly performing incredibly, anchored by her own professional photographs. She's not necessarily a singer in the classical sense, she is giving everything on stage beautified by the violin, movement and community on stage. Somehow... it smashes through those barriers of what is professional art and what is community art. Because it's blatantly community and blatantly highly-skilled and blatantly beautiful'. (SWO director)

Beauty emerges as a vital component of SWO's practice. Tied to the rawness of sharing personal experiences and the act of collaborating artfully to perform them, it defies categorisation as a trademark of either 'professional' or 'community' art. Beauty therefore opened up possibilities for new affective ways of communicating with audiences, for moving them. Furthermore, the beauty found in this 'imperfect' or 'chaotic' way of doing performance unsettles the authority of conventional forms, particularly within the Classical tradition. These are the same forms that people have been using to misrepresent sex workers and other marginalised groups for centuries, the forms that have—in themselves—come to signify a form of epistemological violence.

'The Opera had a beautiful rhythm, even if it was against all conventions around rhythm. It is completely chaotic, the rhythm, I still find joy in that rhythm of chaos... It is totally wild. And that's why I like it, because it breaks all the standard forms. And yeah, they say the first part should be longer than the second one, and we just come with this super [long second part]... And fuck it, you know? That's the power of art as well, to break some standards and to be able to stand by yourself. The Opera stands by its own, it's got its own rhythm, it's got its own journey, and it's not predictable'. (SWO member)

This member's ability to see beauty and experience joy in *Sex Worker's Opera's* 'rhythm of chaos' is striking. For others too, the opportunity to break artistic moulds within SWO was appealing, a source of playfulness and cause for celebration.

'It was funny because we were like, 'This has to be really tight, it's the end of the first Act', and it ended up being the messiest thing and I loved it, it turned out to be my favourite. And I know that the audience loved it as well. We just celebrated how messy it was'. (SWO member)

Conclusion

Spanning practices of collaborative songwriting, musical and dramatic improvisation, and devising, I have presented an analysis of the creative processes involved in making *Sex Worker's Opera* and demonstrated how they fostered the values of cultural democracy, amplifying the voices of marginalised artists. Furthermore, I explored the complexities of facilitation, elaborating upon the role of the director and the tension between control and collaboration that is likely to arise within the constraints of a performance project. Finally, I highlighted the ways in which SWO provided marginalised people with access to art and opportunities for artistic development, in order that they could create and share their own narratives with an

audience. Throughout, I have foregrounded ways in which SWO departs from artistic norms, demarcating the opportunities these departures create for cultural democracy to take shape.

Adjectives such as ‘imperfect’, ‘chaotic’, ‘messy’ are thus reframed as part of SWO’s political strategy and its appeal to performers and audiences alike. In line with the notion of ‘disidentification’, *making a mess* of the practices, forms and representations that have been complicit in the misrepresentation of sex workers—providing justification for discrimination and mistreatment—is itself a part of SWO’s artistic activism. Meanwhile, taking the pressure off members to create something that adhered to pre-ordained structures or standards, and relieving performers of the anxiety of imitating those with years of professional training, an ability to see and nurture beauty and brilliance in whatever members brought to the project was foundational to SWO’s creative practice. This approach not only enabled wider participation—as higher value was placed on the personal and political significance of stories than on adherence to exclusive notions of aesthetic propriety—but also engendered numerous creative innovations, made possible by the freedom to disregard norms and arbitrary standards.

Having said that, my delineation of the directors’ facilitation methods hints toward the meticulous planning they did to support each element of the creative process. Contradicting the negative impression of pure chaos, their workshop plans and holding forms deliberately anchored members so that they would, somewhat ironically, have more freedom to be chaotic. Though, for members, the performance itself and the experience of performing may have felt chaotic, from the directors’ perspective, it was carefully engineered to provide ‘safety without safety’. The creative processes therefore forged space for play, mess and imperfection while ensuring that members would feel proud of the performance and that it would still communicate to audiences.

SWO’s creative process demonstrates both affective and effective elements of artistic activism, respectively: Firstly, it made members *feel* like artists, a

characteristic of cultural democracy that may, for some, have been absent before they became involved with SWO and that lingered long beyond the end of the project. This feeling opened up new opportunities and made it possible for members to imagine new ways of changing the narrative around sex work. Secondly, it subtly challenged audience's perceptions of who artists are, interrogating the binary of professional and community art, and destabilising the authority of those who have historically been in charge of representing sex workers' stories along with their ways of doing so. If a group of sex workers and allies (predominantly without professional artistic training) are capable of collaboratively making an entire opera—which, sure, might be 'chaotic', 'wild' and 'unusual', but still stands up independently as a beautiful and powerful performance—then the 'professionals' have been made redundant. Once it is clear that there is no *wrong* way for sex workers to tell their own stories, there is no longer an excuse not to listen to sex workers.

In Chapter 8, I continue my exploration of the guiding principles behind SWO's practice. Building on the analysis of cultural democracy in SWO, I uncover the centrality of an ethic of care within the project and demonstrate the necessity of caring inter-personal relations that extend to all those involved in socially-engaged performance projects concerned with artistic activism.

8) “We don’t care about the show; we care about you”: Ethics of care⁴⁵

In this chapter, I position SWO as an example of practice underpinned by a foundational ethic of care that is composed of attentiveness, solidarity, and responsiveness. As the focus moves from SWO’s members, to the directors, to the audiences, and I revisit the theory that was introduced in Chapter 1 as part of my feminist research framework, I explore the ways in which caring relations enable the cultivation of an ethically- and politically-sound artistic practice that is both creatively-innovative *and* radically-inclusive. Furthermore, I posit that this practice has the potential to extend outward beyond SWO, with small-scale interrelational practices of care morphing into wider-scale activism that is built on empathy. Through this chapter, I demonstrate how an ethic of care is foundational to the artistic activism of SWO.

First, I focus on the caring practices angled toward SWO’s members as the ‘cared-for’ (Noddings, 2012:772) group, illuminating the numerous ways that care manifests within the organisation, the creative process and the performance itself. Second, I analyse the experiences of the directors from an ethic of care perspective, highlighting the labour of care and interrogating the extent to which the caring relationship between directors and members can in fact be mutual, and exploring the barriers to the directors being cared for within SWO. Thirdly, I examine SWO’s approach to caring for audiences through *Sex Worker’s Opera*, detailing aspects of the performance that demonstrate an ethic of care and suggesting that caring

⁴⁵ This chapter expands upon an article published in *Platform* (Spring 2022) as ‘Caring for Limits: Organisational and creative practices in *Sex Worker’s Opera*’. In this article, I apply an ethics of care framework to analyse organisational and creative practices in SWO. Unlike this chapter, however, the article only focusses on caring practices toward members; hence, my reworking of this material constitutes a relatively minor proportion of what is written here.

practices can foster solidarity, positioning SWO as a project that serves the sex work community more broadly.



'The hug'. Photograph by Manu Valcarce.

Caring for members

Sitting at the intersection of community arts and political performance, there has always been a risk that the outcome of SWO—that is, the performance and its artistic and political legacy—would be privileged over the needs of those involved in the process. Nonetheless, it would seem this risk has been skilfully mitigated to ensure that care for (and between) members was consistently central to the practice. In interview, one member summarised her interpretation of the directors'

approach with the line, 'We don't care about the show; we care about you' (SWO member). Another member expressed a similar sentiment, saying, 'It was like this term community theatre, but community in capital letters' (SWO member). For some, this gave rise to frustrations about the perceived quality of the artistic work, but the prioritisation of care for members' wellbeing over concerns about the show signifies a rejection of the 'means-justify-ends logic in theatre making', and an embrace of the idea that 'in applied theatre or community-based performance, means and ends are indistinguishable' (Thompson 2020b:225). The goal, then, is not simply to create a 'perfect' show, but to support members in telling their stories on their own terms, personally or collectively. In this practice, for a show to be 'perfect' it is essential that 'relationships are cultivated, needs are responded to, and sensitivity is demonstrated' (Held 2006:15).

'That's the real job [of the director]... To be friends and care allies of our members'. (SWO director)

At a general level, SWO's foundational practices, such as the 50/50 model, the spectrum of self-representation and the norm of paying members, indicate the presence of an ethic of care. Each of these practices enables sex workers to participate in the project without forfeiting their safety, whether that comes from anonymity, personal remove or financial security. As these practices enable self-representation and the involvement of a more representative group of sex workers, they demonstrate a dual commitment, both to caring for members and to foregrounding sex worker voices in cultural representations and advocacy work more broadly.

Applying a framework of care ethics to creative practice, self-representation is an area that requires attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, trust, and solidarity (Tronto, [1993] 2009:127; Held, 2006:15). While 'caring about' (Held, 2006:30) the ramifications of sex worker misrepresentation goes some way toward tackling stigma, self-representation also demands a great deal of 'caring for' (Ibid.). Because of the real-life implications of sex work stigma, it is essential that SWO is attentive

and responsive to the unique needs of each individual member when it comes to privacy. Taken together, the 50/50 model and the various degrees of self-representation enable sex workers to tell their stories and those of other sex workers under a protective veil of ambiguity, with audiences not knowing who is a sex worker and who is an ally, nor who is telling their own story and who is telling the story of someone else. Caring for members by limiting the risk that they will be identified as sex workers against their wishes is an essential component of a project that intends to amplify sex worker voices while advancing the struggle for sex worker rights.

Similarly, navigating members' access needs has required a great deal of attentiveness and sensitivity, but has arguably led to a more sustainable, representative practice. The care taken to ensure access needs are met—particularly when they present challenges—not only enables less privileged sex workers to participate but also demonstrates a genuine commitment to tackling social injustices. In SWO, this has involved providing accommodation for members travelling away from home, paying members for their time, and accounting for differences in capacity, for example as a result of disabilities, illnesses and language barriers.

'The directors would often be working their arse off to give me the chance to work on the same quality level of other performers, who didn't need so much effort, language, organising, listening—stuff which is just normal for other people. There had been solutions for me to be part of it'. (SWO member)

Insofar as they enable safer self-representation and enhance access to participation, the practices flagged here signal the centrality of an ethic of care to SWO as a project. As the directors accept responsibility and respond to the unique needs of sex workers—as a community and on an individual level—they simultaneously offer protection from being 'outed' and foster a creative environment whereby the most marginalised sex workers can participate. SWO's prioritisation of 'the care factor'

made members feel safe and valued while nurturing social cohesion within the group.

'It's family. I think Sex Worker's Opera was probably the first time I've actually felt a family within theatre, because the care factor was first and foremost'. (SWO member)

In the next section, I return to one of the case studies from Chapter 6 on performances of pain in *Sex Worker's Opera*: 'Monkey in a Circus'. Examining care in the context of 'Monkey in a Circus' and, in particular, the experiences of Rosa—the member performing her personal story within the piece—I illuminate some of the ways that care can manifest in community musical theatre performance, as well as providing a critical perspective on the tension between care and control.

'Monkey in a Circus'

Over the years from 2014-18, it became apparent just how much care 'Monkey in a Circus' required, and how this care did, or did not, materialise in the handling of its performance. The journey that this piece, and those performing it, went on during these years makes it a valuable case study and reveals how care can be learnt, and caring practices developed, in response to new, sometimes challenging needs.

First, I want to suggest that, in 'Monkey in a Circus', the music itself and the act of people making music together constructs a site of care and solidarity. At first, the piece was performed *a cappella*, with a violin accompaniment being added a couple of years later. This was after the violinist who helped Rosa create the piece had left the project, so Rosa would perform her piece with a different violinist, who was also interviewed for this research. During my online interview with Rosa, she showed a photograph she has on her wall of this violinist playing her violin, which Rosa had taken some years earlier. Both independently reported feeling a very strong bond with the other, which they largely attributed to having worked together on this performance.

As described in the previous chapter, the two women stand together on the stage to perform the piece. While Rosa sings her story of working as a stripper, familial rejection, an abusive relationship and miscarriage, the audience is exposed to an 'aesthetics of care' (Thompson, 2015). This is 'both a set of values and a practice' (ibid., 437) whereby 'aesthetic value is located in-between people in moments of collaborative creation, conjoined effort and intimate exchange' (ibid., 438). Standing next to the singer, dancing with her while playing an accompaniment, is the violinist, and behind her is a small chorus of three or four other singers, seated on a podium. There is no narrative reason for the violinist to be stood next to her, making eye contact, or for the chorus to be behind her, yet these creative decisions were described by one director as:

'Putting what we believe on stage. It just beautifully showed that this person is telling this story, we want her to have someone there with her, and that doesn't need any justification really'. (SWO director)

Positing that 'the aesthetic successes and failures of [a] show are not located solely in what takes place on the stage, but in the sensations of mutual reliance and concern between audience and performers, and between performers and their creative support teams' (Thompson, 2020:225-6), Thompson's concept of an aesthetics of care accounts for this melding of care with performance.

In 'Monkey in a Circus', the violinist and the chorus serve as both technical and emotional support, the aesthetic of care created by their presence on stage contrasting strikingly with the isolation and stigma this member is telling of. Certainly, the support of the chorus in this piece enhanced both the provision and the impression of care toward Rosa throughout her performance, as these singers take on the responsibility of carrying certain parts of the story that were often too painful for Rosa to sing.

‘Other people learnt it and then started singing along with it [...] Keyly the bit where we say, ‘It miscarried, it miscarried’, because she never wanted to sing that, then became this very beautiful moment of sisterhood and solidarity. I think there’s something very beautiful about a group of sisters and siblings singing that [...] Holding that space because she couldn’t’. (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

The chorus echoes poignant lyrics—“perfect future” and “it miscarried”, for example—and serves two purposes. On the one hand, they emphasise pivotal moments in the narrative of the piece, the highs and lows of Rosa’s story. On the other hand, they give Rosa space not to sing those words if she is unable to, and to gather herself before continuing with the song.

The musical and embodied support, or ‘affective solidarity’ (Thompson, 2020:225), seen in the relations with both the violinist and the chorus therefore enable this member to perform her piece with a community of people caring for her. This support also fulfils the need following a traumatic event, as Duggan states it, ‘for a latent or belated witness, such as the therapist or, perhaps, the theatre (artist/audience member)’ (2012:98). I use Thompson’s term ‘affective solidarity’ because the dependence here equals *mutual* support, not subjugation, as all those on stage collaborate to share this story. The violinist, for instance, also experienced this song as a difficult one to perform, on both technical and emotional levels, and described the mutuality that was integral to this performance:

‘We were really trying to collaborate all the time but she still had the space, the attention, to connect with me, look at me, and she was really there. It really felt like we were a pillar for each other, a support for each other, we really needed these two legs to try and walk through the song’. (SWO violinist)

Nurturing and celebrating the strength of the sex work community is part of the activist work of SWO. The foregrounding of caring relations in the performance—

through acts of embodied care, such as hugs, eye contact, or a chorus filling in for the performer to sing the otherwise unsayable—signifies what Stuart-Fisher terms the ‘ethical and political dimension’ of care, ‘disclosing values that determine how we should act in the world and within the limited resources we might have available to us’ (6). On-stage manifestations of care are profoundly humanising, depicting the love of a fierce community cushioning performers against the struggle of living with painful experiences. Therefore, performances of care in *Sex Worker’s Opera* not only envision a more caring way of relating to sex workers for would-be-allies in audiences, but also highlight the pre-existence of caring relations of solidarity within the sex work community itself, portraying an aspect of sex work that is frequently omitted from mainstream narratives.

Zooming out to consider organisational practices, care was also apparent in the directors’ understanding that Rosa might pull her piece from the show at any time, and that that was entirely her prerogative.

‘She always said each time that she didn’t know whether she was gonna do it so that was something that we had to keep in our minds the entire time, that at any point she might not be able to do it and that’s okay’.

(Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

At the end of Chapter 6, I queried the extent to which members would have felt the option to pull their pieces was truly available to them, and this still warrants consideration. However, the fact that this was an explicit possibility, as expressed by Rosa herself, and something that the directors would have been receptive to, demonstrates an ethic of care within the project. It is illustrative of creative and organisational practice that sees members’ wellbeing as the priority, rather than the final product of the show or guarding against the chaos that might result from making last-minute changes to it. This could also be seen as a further divergence from practice that involves the ‘imperative to tell’ (Thompson, 2009:56), the phrase Thompson uses to critique applied theatre practice that relies on people who have experienced trauma sharing their stories.

Despite best intentions and attempts within the project to care for the member telling her story, events surrounding 'Monkey in a Circus' also highlight the challenges involved in staging personal pieces. These events underline the importance of prioritising an ethic of care and ensuring it permeates every element of socially-engaged arts practice, particularly when the stories being told are so deeply personal. One of the specific ways in which Rosa felt 'Monkey in a Circus' could have been better handled involved the degree of control she had over the staging of the piece.

In the Amsterdam run of the show, Rosa was particularly concerned with the connotations of having a pink light on her as she was speaking about miscarriage, but felt that her discomfort was dismissed. There was a tension between her desire for alternative lighting and the directorial worry that, were the lights as dim as Rosa wanted them, she would not be seen. The lighting remained pink for the majority of the Amsterdam shows and Rosa reported feeling uncomfortable performing the piece.

'I felt really uncomfortable singing it for some nights and it should have not happened. This is something that should have not happened, if you're doing a piece, a personal piece like mine, we need to have total control over that piece'. (Rosa Espinosa)

Thinking about telling personal stories, lighting might be perceived as a relatively minor factor, compared to components like the lyrics at least; but this disagreement and the effect it had on Rosa imply that every single aspect of the way in which a personal story is being represented needs to be accounted for and approved by the person telling their story in order for it to be considered best ethical practice. At the very least, more time needed to be dedicated to working through this issue and coming up with a compromise that would have ensured she could still be seen. This is perhaps one of the extremely rare moments when the directors appeared to prioritise the aesthetic output of the show at the expense of one of their members'

experiences, taking the executive decision to override Rosa's concerns. Even then, I believe—and, based on our conversation, so does Rosa—that this decision was made with the overarching priority of supporting members to tell their stories and to be heard (and seen).

Importantly, this conflict did not signal the destruction of the caring relation. As Noddings states, it is not uncommon for carers to be unable to meet the expressed need of the cared-for, either due to a lack of resources, and due to disapproval of the need itself. Though, 'in the latter case, it is especially important to find a mode of response that will keep the door of communication open' (2012:772). In moments such as these, 'the carer's objective is to maintain the caring relation' rather than meeting the expressed need (Ibid.). Thus, there is space for disagreement within caring relations. The question is how far conflict can push at the bounds of the carer/cared-for relationship before integral components such as trust, mutual concern, responsiveness and competence become less apparent. It may be necessary for both parties to be aware of their own limitations and exercise some imagination to understand the reasoning of the other.

It is no revelation that performing such a personal and painful story would leave nerve endings exposed, perhaps requiring more care than was initially imagined, and certainly more than was available in the context of a rushed and stressful tech run. This raises questions about the extent to which an ethic of care is even compatible with the production pressure of theatre shows and suggests that sizeable changes would need to be made to the process of getting a performance onto the stage in order to maintain the prioritisation of individuals' needs—including those of the lighting and sound designers and, indeed, the rest of the production team.

Perhaps, in this case and others, to care for a piece and a performer might mean leaving them alone, entrusting the powers of direction to the performer themselves, despite time pressures or aesthetic doubts. Of course, others might have been in Rosa's position and not cared about the lighting, in which case there would not have been a problem; but, because Rosa *did* care about the lights, she needed to have

control over them, as one element of how she was representing herself and her story. Upon reflection, it appears risky to give someone the opportunity to share their story without the time and attention to ensure it can be performed exactly how they want it. If not, the performer might feel uncomfortable and the experience of performing could, in bad cases, become associated with a sense of disempowerment. Hence, the trust that is integral to understandings of care ethics must be mutual; not only does the cared-for need to trust the carer, but the carer must also trust the cared-for, their intuition and their lived experience.

As shown in this account, there is a fine but distinct line between caring-for and controlling, or care and subjugation. Indeed, writing on dependency, Judith Butler asserts that, while it is ‘not the same as a condition of subjugation, [it] can easily become one’ (Butler, 2015: 21) and, similarly, scholars in the field of disability studies have raised the issue of caring practices that are oppressive, coercive and controlling (Fritsch, 2010:3; Stuart-Fisher, 2020:9-10). Analysis of the events surrounding ‘Monkey in a Circus’—though never so extreme as to constitute subjugation, oppression or coercion—certainly offers insight into the ways in which care might fail within performance projects and how this could be avoided. More specifically, this section explores the importance of agency for the cared-for, suggesting that carers may need to relinquish control when their perceptions of what is required do not align with the expressed needs and desires of the cared-for. In this way, an ethic of care has the potential to disrupt the implicit hierarchy in the relationship between director and performer, which was still operational in SWO, despite it being less hierarchical than typical musical theatre productions.

Significantly, the critiques Rosa aired about the handling of ‘Monkey in a Circus’ were mirrored by the directors in their interviews, demonstrating a reflective and responsible approach to creative practice. To them, the issue with the lighting of ‘Monkey in a Circus’ in Amsterdam was an oversight amidst the panic of getting the show onto the stage, serving as a reminder to prioritise members’ needs throughout the process:

'We can never lose sight of the fact that people are putting their vulnerabilities on stage, and that will happen when you're putting on a show and you have to put the finished thing out in some way. And it's like having to... keep coming back to how to make people feel... that those stories are being respected'. (SWO director)

That said, Rosa did not blame the directors for anything that had happened: all acknowledged that they had not been prepared for the amount of care this piece would require, even five years into the project. This seemed to be one of the key learnings from the process of working on 'Monkey in a Circus' over multiple years. Rosa likened her piece, and other personal pieces in the show, to 'a baby', which you have to learn to take care of as it grows. You can have stellar intentions to care for and nurture but still put a nappy on back-to-front. Graciously, she was able to see her piece as a learning opportunity for the project and, crucially, was both happy she had gone through the process and proud of the result.

'I felt that if I wasn't supported, it was more because no one knew how to take care of this, no one was ready for this kind of mini-bomb, including myself. But we all learned how to do it, and I think if it ever happened again it would be handled in a different way because we know now how these things have to be handled'. (Rosa Espinosa)

In light of this generous reflection, the story of 'Monkey in a Circus' is in fact an optimistic one, shedding light on the potential for caring practices to be developed—learned, even—providing those doing the caring have the right motives. As Held contends, '[o]ne becomes a better participant in a better practice of caring, the more the practice employs the most knowledgeable insights available and the better the participant understands these' (2006:54). Thus, for both directors and members, SWO has been a site of exploration, a space where it is acknowledged that, even with the best intentions, people will make mistakes and things will go wrong. These experiences, though they have been challenging and have demanded great trust and

resilience, have resulted in ‘knowledgeable insights’ that will bolster SWO’s practice as the project moves forward.

In the following section, I turn to the directors’ experiences, elaborating upon the caring labour involved in directing SWO and questioning the sustainability of imbalanced caring relations within socially-engaged performance projects.

The Directors: Sustainable caring practices

Within this chapter, I have predominantly portrayed SWO’s directors as carers working to provide individualised and sensitive care in response to the needs of members. Regrettably, this chapter’s attention to myriad forms and examples of care within SWO necessitates an admission of one significant failing of the project thus far: that the directors have often been unable to care for themselves. This is not in itself unusual, as elucidated by Belfiore in her analysis of the ‘hidden costs’ to practitioners working in the field of socially-engaged arts practice (Belfiore, 2022). In contrast, identifying the disproportionate caring responsibilities of practitioners in socially-engaged arts projects, Belfiore sees the ‘personal, psychological costs and ethical dilemmas artists face’ as the fault of cultural institutions and funding bodies (Belfiore, 2022:62). She argues that their inadequate support leads individuals to develop unsustainable working practices in their drive to complete projects they care about with people they care for (Ibid.). Belfiore brands this as a ‘moral failure’ that is evident in ‘the systematic and embedded exploitation of socially-engaged practitioners within the very fabric of the public infrastructure designed to support socially-engaged practice with disadvantaged populations’ (Ibid.).

Belfiore reminds us that caring relations between practitioner-as-carer and participant-as-cared-for only constitute one part of the necessary network of interdependence. Hence, in this section I argue that care for the directors should be as foundational to SWO’s practice as care for members, if the radical potential of an

ethic of care is to be fully realised within the project. Perhaps, for those facilitating, the combination of wanting to serve a community *and* wanting to contribute to an activist cause through community-based political performance is dangerous. The pressure to go above and beyond was certainly persistent for directors and resulted in working practices that came at great personal cost—emotionally, psychologically and financially. Ironically, the directors pushing past the limits of their capacity may have impacted negatively on members too: to use Marissa Silverman’s metaphor, on a crashing plane the first rule of caring is to put your own oxygen mask on first; we are no good to anyone else if we do not look after ourselves (2021). Therefore, it is essential to develop sustainable caring practices that not only support members but also protect the directors, in order that they can continue to work without inadvertently harming either themselves or members.

Caring responsibilities: The hidden labour of directing

Throughout this section, an important figure is that of Director X, the semi-fictionalised sex worker director employed in this research to represent the experience of directing SWO as a sex worker without revealing which—or how many—of the directors have lived experience of sex work. Director X’s experiences are of particular interest here because of the implications they have for the project’s aims of supporting members of the sex work community. However, many of these experiences are also relevant to the more generalised role of SWO director. For example, all three directors could testify that the job of directing was rarely limited to directing in its typical artistic sense. Instead, my data analysis showed that the care the directors were consistently required to enact made them feel as though they had taken on extra-artistic roles, becoming custodians, therapists and parent-like figures as well as friends to members.

‘There’s a very natural tendency in the group to lean back on directors and perceive us as these kind of parent-like figures, and... I didn’t sign up for that. I’m not surprised by it... but I didn’t sign up to that and I find it frustrating’. (SWO director)

Sometimes the directors were pushed into roles with more practical responsibility than they might have wanted, seen particularly plainly in their flustered attempts to shepherd fifteen of us through an airport without losing anyone to the temptations of Duty Free. Certainly, I experienced a group-wide tendency towards over-reliance first-hand, and it was not limited to the logistics of travel arrangements. It is hard to say exactly where the tendency comes from, but I believe it is testament to the directors' creation of a space that felt safe for members, the deep and attentive care they provide, as well as their arts activism methodology, which involves accessing the inner-child. With this potent combination, it is perhaps unsurprising that the directors felt that aspects of their relationships with members were 'frustrating' or unequal.

On top of this, the directors have frequently found themselves providing pastoral care, in a way that evokes the role of a therapist or counsellor. While an ideal community arts project might have an external therapist or mediator on-hand to help work through any interpersonal or emotional issues that emerge throughout the creative process, there is also value to a more integrated approach. The directors acknowledged the coexistence of a desire for more external support with the knowledge that SWO would not have been possible, or would at least have been very different, without the same huge degree of personal and emotional involvement from the directors. The directors felt that taking on these interpersonal responsibilities was a difficult but necessary component of maintaining the close relationships that made 'the show and the process and the project what it is' (SWO director). Yet, particularly for Director X, there were distinct complications involved in simultaneously processing their own trauma and complex feelings while holding space for other members. Indeed, there was a sense that Director X may have paid for members' emotional wellbeing with their own.

'I do think something that made the show so beautiful was that it was sex worker-led. But then that is a really interesting question when you are part of the community, that then who's holding you?' (Director X)

The question 'who's holding you?' stood out to me during this interview as highlighting one of the key challenges for Director X and other marginalised people facilitating community projects. This question connects to issues that exist in the wider activist sphere, specifically the concept of 'safe spaces'. Citing the ideas of a sex worker activist they had spoken to a few years before and relating them to their own experiences, the directors expressed scepticism regarding the extent to which 'safe spaces' can truly be safe, particularly for facilitators who share the experience of marginalisation.

'They said, "I don't know if I believe in safe spaces. Even in the process of me doing that, because of my own sex work, I'm being triggered... There's a hierarchy there that I have to swallow my own triggeredness in order to support others and in order to be a facilitator. And therefore what is safety?"' (Director X)

Contrary to the idea that Director X would automatically be higher up in the hierarchy of the project, this quotation suggests that they actually lose power when they have to deprioritise their own boundaries, swallowing their 'triggeredness', in order to hold space for others.

'It's very hard actually to be one of the key facilitators of something and holding all the space for everyone else as well, while also processing your own quite intense shit around... around everything'. (Director X)

Underlining the relevance of the idea that safe spaces do not extend to facilitators if they have their own experiences of oppression, Director X talked about the difficulties of simultaneously processing trauma and complex feelings while holding the space for other members. This is what happens when it is not possible to 'swallow triggeredness', and a facilitator is consistently processing their own trauma while caring for others. While Director X felt that the integration of participants and

facilitators gave rise to much beauty, that it can also create such precarity is something that warrants caution.

On a more positive note, the directors embraced the friendships they formed through the project; something (discussed further in the next chapter) that Director X expressed as one of the key personal benefits from their involvement.

'It's based on friendships, fundamentally. And that's political for me... We're all learning from each other. It decentres you and that is the ultimate position of camaraderie'. (SWO director)

This director saw their role as one centred on friendship and mutual learning rather than directorship and control, contrasting with the imbalanced power dynamics implicit in the interpretation of the directors as parents or therapists. But, despite the positive outcomes, the blurriness of their position as friend-cum-leader still produced additional strains:

'They treat you as a friend while simultaneously asking very executive things from you. They ask very parent-like or leader-like things from you, in the same sentence or same space as they ask for support'. (SWO director)

Instances in which directors will find themselves simultaneously being treated as a friend and a parent or leader seem to be more frequent in social situations, often preventing them from fully relaxing.

'You go to the bar with people afterwards or you go to someone's house for an after-party and people will go, 'Oh, I'm really worried I did this scene badly'. Now, your answer in that moment is not the answer of a friend, it is a sacred space you are holding in which whatever you say is gonna make that person reflect on their own performance, because

you're a director... and therefore whatever you say is going to have a huge impact on them and their self-perception'. (SWO director)

Before the final performance of the show in 2017, there was a group discussion about where to have the after-party that night. During this planning, I recall the directors making a plea that members refrained from talking to them about anything to do with the show that night to avoid being dragged into evaluative discussions about its effectiveness. Paired with the above quotation, this moment serves to highlight the effort that all the directors, but particularly Director X, must have exerted to be constantly primed to reassure, assist, or discuss the show with members, impinging on their ability to disconnect or relax in the company of people who are, supposedly, friends and—for Director X—fellow community members.

[The hidden costs of caring: Emotional, psychological, financial and political](#)

Here, I examine a number of the ways in which responsibility fell to the directors, highlighting some of the difficulties experienced in leadership roles within grassroots projects like SWO and focussing on the implications of these leadership positions being filled by marginalised people. While this is perhaps most noteworthy in the case of Director X, it is relevant to the experiences of all three directors, multiply-marginalised as they are. Accounting for both the 'psychological and emotional' as well as the 'financial' (Belfiore, 2022:66), Belfiore's categorisations of hidden costs to practitioners in socially-engaged arts projects were encapsulated in the directors' reflections on the impact SWO has had on their lives. All three directors were able to identify ways in which the project had come at the expense of their personal wellbeing.

According to Belfiore, this is a wide-spread and increasingly-documented problem among artists working with marginalised communities within the subsidised arts sector or in grassroots projects, given the disparity between the amount of work facilitators are required to do and the resources they officially have available to them (Belfiore, 2022). Congruently, every year of SWO brought funding concerns.

Though the directors always seemed to find a way out, via crowdfunding in the early days and successful bids to funding bodies in later years, the cost of putting on a production the size and scale of *Sex Worker's Opera* repeatedly put the directors in dangerous financial positions, as they were liable for the repayment of significant bank loans. While this was a source of continual anxiety for the directors, other members were often unaware of the pressure they were under.

*'We are part of the community, we're queer, not that well-off. The danger that we put ourselves in... very fucked up. Having the potential to be in that much debt, fifty grand debt, taking out loans, shit like that. That is the stuff that gives you a heart attack. It really is and I felt that'.
(Director X)*

Mapping out some of the intersecting marginalisations that affect the directors, and particularly Director X—being queer, being relatively poor, being a sex worker—elucidates pre-existing social and economic precarity that had the potential to be exacerbated through the financial risk associated with SWO. In order to persevere with the project without the privileges of financial or social capital, the directors had to take on personal risk, knowing that this had the potential to marginalise them even further. This is the most literal example of the personal cost the project had for the directors and an example of the additional barriers facing marginalised artists facilitating grassroots projects. Other costs are less quantifiable, but no less significant:

*'The heinous amount of work the directors did and, kind of, turning our lives off and turning off our senses and... I mean, I hid under a rock for a few years and destroyed my health, social life and financial safety'.
(SWO director)*

The specific concern here is that, if the directors themselves are already marginalised—and at least one is part of the sex work community that SWO is supposed to benefit—then the effects of this over-working actually undermine the

intentions of the project. Adding 'health and social life' to financial safety, as things Director X sacrificed to facilitate the project is particularly worrisome given the prevalence of long-standing health conditions and social isolation among sex workers, resulting from stigma (Tastrom, 2019; Treloar et al., 2021). That directing SWO was akin to hiding under a rock and necessitated the directors pressing pause on their own lives indicates an unhealthy work-life balance, especially for Director X, who, as a sex worker, should theoretically have benefitted from their involvement.

'I hated seeing what it was doing to us, to be honest. It was very uncool, and I think that any project that I do in the future has to have an immense safeguard against stuff like that happening, because otherwise I just don't think it's radical really'. (Director X)

Here, Director X connects care with politics, acknowledging that the radical nature of the project was compromised by the situation it put the directors in, while simultaneously highlighting the value of the project as a learning experience. Though it remains to be seen exactly what 'an immense safeguard' against self-exploitative working practices might look like, it would appear from the new, more measured way the directors have been working since 2018, that it involves taking more time and securing more money for projects in advance. For example, the employment of a development officer and a wellbeing worker ahead of the screenwriting residencies for the SWO film project in 2022 indicates a desire to step away from the financial and pastoral responsibilities that have previously formed much of the directors' workload. This signifies movement toward a more sustainable working practice that maintains the level of care directed toward members while easing the load of the directors, thus caring for them too.

I agree with Belfiore, then, that 'responsibilities of 'caring for' both those that deliver and those that are at the receiving end' must be centred in order to move beyond 'today's morally compromised cultural policies and arts funding practices' (2021:14). Going one step further, however, I see the centering of these responsibilities as an important step in avoiding a subsidised arts sector that is *politically* compromised.

Current norms of *not* caring for those that deliver socially-engaged arts projects serve to deter more marginalised artists from leading projects, or effectively penalise them for doing so. If a community arts project for sex workers further marginalises a sex worker-director, compromising their health, their access to support networks, and their financial security, then I fully agree with the judgement made by one of the directors: ‘I just don’t think it’s radical really’.

With an appreciation of the immense benefits that come from creative and activist leadership that is based in lived experience, particularly for a community that is rightly wary of being spoken over, there is a political obligation to care for community members who are facilitating these projects, to bolster the sustainability of community-based activist arts projects and to protect the extent to which they are, in fact, radical. Next, in the final section of this chapter, I include audiences in my analysis of an ethic of care in SWO.

Caring for Audiences

Highlighting deliberate attempts to foster a caring environment throughout the performance, I turn my attention to the relationships between the SWO group and audiences of *Sex Worker’s Opera*. Touted as a show *by* sex workers, *for* sex workers, it follows that the project has a responsibility to sex workers who come to see the show as well as those participating in it. However, given that there is often minimal opportunity to engage with audiences prior to performances, it might be trickier to care for sex workers in the audience than for sex worker members; certainly, the caring relation will not be of the same depth and, although research and community involvement offer insight, it will be near impossible to ascertain individual ‘expressed needs’, rather than collective ‘assumed needs’ (Lines 2018:392). Nonetheless, I draw out moments of *Sex Worker’s Opera* where an ethic of care has extended outwards, nurturing activist solidarity—especially among the sex worker contingent of the audience—thereby exemplifying the political potential of caring practices.

Just as caring relations played a part in ensuring that sex workers who contributed stories did not feel their trust had been abused, it was essential that sex workers in the audience did not feel their community was being misrepresented, exploited or otherwise harmed. Unlike the majority of mainstream representations of sex work, *Sex Worker's Opera* does not feature depictions of client violence toward sex workers. It does, however, portray state violence, through the criminalisation, over-policing, and racist immigration policies that also pose a significant threat to sex workers' safety. This was a strategic political decision, made with knowledge of the ways in which the discourse that clients are inherently dangerous is manipulated to justify further criminalisation, ostensibly to keep sex workers safe but in reality making them more vulnerable (Mac & Smith, 2018:145-8). SWO members aligned themselves with the wider community by choosing to show the violence perpetrated by institutions many sex worker rights groups actively critique, demonstrating political solidarity that helped to gradually garner trust.

Regardless of political alignment, portraying any form of harm against the sex work community requires care, which is often distinctly lacking in cultural representations of sex work, particularly those that deal with death and violence. One way in which a more caring approach has been realised in *Sex Worker's Opera* is through the integration of trigger warnings within the performance. Trigger warnings are defined as 'written or verbal statements that alert consumers to traumatic media content' (Knox, 2017; ix). They are meant to help people make informed decisions about the potential 'triggers' they are exposed to; that is, any sensory experiences that might catapult them back into a trauma response, causing them to relive traumatic events (Colbert, 2017:3).

In the foyer, ahead of the performance, audience members were given a brief explanation of what the trigger warnings were for—re-enactments of state violence and mention of violence against sex workers—and told that a bell would be rung in Act 2 before the cluster of scenes centred on these themes began, giving audience members a chance to leave if they did not want to watch that potentially triggering

segment of the performance. A member of staff notified people who left in this part when it was safe for them to return to the auditorium. The ringing of the bell, which occurs just before the monologues that lead into the Soho Raids scene, is a manifestation of an aesthetics of care, sounding a gentle but firm warning and giving audience members the agency to decide whether they want to be exposed to potentially triggering content or not. Though SWO's directors and members could not know the specific needs of audience members, they were able to carefully anticipate what they might be based on their understanding of the sex work community and their audience demographics. This enabled them to respond appropriately, mitigating the risk of harm to audience members.

Notably, assessments of 'harm' were focussed on associations between the performance and traumatic events that sex workers are disproportionately likely to have experienced, either directly or vicariously. The trigger warning in Act 2 was used to protect audiences from genuine psychological harm, not to prevent them being offended. It serves a distinctly different purpose than the warning given in the introduction of *Sex Worker's Opera*, when the Maître'D declares:

*"I am obliged to inform you that contained herein,
are scenes of state repression and light spanking,
nudity (of course), bondage and queer philosophy.
If any of these things concern you, you may at any time leave".*

The last line is said disapprovingly, losing all the playfulness of the previous sentence. As such, this section reads not as a warning that the show will contain triggers, but as a signal that the content is unapologetically taboo and that there is no space for discomfort with the project's disruption of sexual norms or its critique of the state. Although it does flag some of the same content as Act Two's trigger warning, this is more a marking of territory than a gesture of care.

In contrast, the Act Two trigger warning made it possible for SWO members to address more sensitive topics within the performance, where doing so would

otherwise have been unethical. While *Sex Worker's Opera* specifically avoided graphic depictions or reenactments of client violence, members agreed it was important to find a way to honour sex workers who have been killed by clients or other perpetrators, including through the scene 'Vigil'. As previously discussed in Chapter 5, performers and audiences gather in a minute's silence to honour the dead, blurring the boundaries between theatre and reality. Initially, the directors intended to recreate a ritual they had witnessed at a community memorial on the annual International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, 17th December, by reading out the names of sex workers who had passed away in the last year and then holding a minute's silence. However, some members were uncomfortable with this form, critiquing the extent to which audiences were consenting to being reminded of violent experiences or potentially hearing the names of friends who had been killed. LaFrance has voiced similar concerns in the field of experimental theatre, whereby 'audience members, unlike performers, have generally not had the opportunity to train for this type of emotional experience, and because they have little advance knowledge of the show's content, they may be unprepared for the emotions that the experience might trigger' (LaFrance, 2013:569). Members' concerns included:

'Where is this line between doing a show but also wanting to honour people who've passed? Do it in a real way that affects the audience but also be careful, be mindful of who's in that audience...? I felt... not just me, that reading names out was too personal. You could have had anyone in the audience who knew a sex worker who'd passed away that year, a family member or a friend, or one of the cast'. (SWO member)

In the end, members prioritised making the theatre space safer for sex workers over an activist impulse to shock or profoundly affect other audience members in an attempt to move them to allyship. In this, there is also an awareness of the rawness of this scene for certain members, and the care required to ensure that the act of performing is sustainable.

Instead of reading out sex workers' names, members give a short speech before the minute's silence, which focusses on the various marginalisations sex workers face and the role that criminalisation plays in reinforcing those. Through this, they were able to make an explicit statement about the disproportionate impact of violence on sex workers who are already multiply-marginalised, specifically trans women of colour. Thompson suggests that, 'Caring for an audience means thinking hard about their experience and needs... an event should model a caring insight into the different conditions of engagement' (Thompson, 2020a:46). In this case, while it would have been poignant to replicate the community rituals of 17 December and the idea was undoubtedly well-intended, the group recognised that sex worker audiences were not entering with the same expectations. There are very different 'conditions of engagement' involved in going to a memorial and going to the theatre, and there is only so much that content warnings can do to mitigate the risk of alienating or triggering audiences, particularly when these are likely to include marginalised people. Re-thinking 'Vigil' for the purpose of respecting audience limits is therefore demonstrative of a commitment to making theatre *for*, not only *by*, sex workers.

'The point was that names of dead people shouldn't be read out at a show where people don't know that's gonna happen in advance... Because someone might know someone who was there and didn't necessarily consent to come into a space in which that was gonna happen. If they went to a vigil they would know, and that's a dedicated space. And yeah, I think the years have shown that that was a really important point actually'. (SWO director)

This is not to say that the scene was unchallenging for audience members, particularly if they had been personally affected by the issues raised through the performance. Audience interviews from the 2016 performance at the Pleasance Theatre captured the experience of one audience member who remained in the audience after the trigger warning. Responding to the question of what they had found to be the most challenging moment in the performance, they answered:

'The most challenging moment was the minute's silence around trans sex workers who have died because I know some of them. I've got friends who have died from that and have committed suicide over it, so I was actually in tears and offered a tissue by a guy in the audience'.
(Audience member)

Clearly, even with sufficient warning and creative sensitivity, this content can still be extremely upsetting, emphasising the importance of a harm reduction approach. Interestingly, it is possible that the framing of this scene as one that might be difficult for some audience members—notably through the ringing of the bell—would prepare other audience members for the care that those affected might require. For any would-be allies in the audience, this scene could provide an opportunity to establish caring relationships with members of the community and their allies, prompting empathetic awareness of the struggles sex workers face. The passing of a tissue might seem insignificant, but it is a symbol of the caring environment created within performances of *Sex Worker's Opera* and the potential of this to spread through the audience.

As the fourth wall was broken, 'Vigil' also provided an opportunity for mutuality to emerge in the caring relationship between performers and audiences. In 2018, *Sex Worker's Opera* was performed in Amsterdam, coinciding with the International AIDS Conference, at which a number of international sex worker activist groups were present. The opening night was free for sex workers and the theatre was full. I was perched on a stool at the end of a row near the back and had put my head down and closed my eyes during the minute's silence. As I became aware of a gradual rumble of movement spreading through the space, I was gripped by the project's collective fear that 'Vigil' might still transgress the boundaries of what sex workers had consented to witness. I panicked that people might be leaving but, looking up, saw that the entire audience was standing. Instead of walking out they were facing the stage, holding the space with the performers as they participated in this collective grief ritual. In that moment, the relationship between members and audiences

shifted, making space for this profound act of ‘affective solidarity’ (Thompson 2020b:229) in which care was mutual and everyone in the room became active and equal participants in a community event, including the tech team at the back of the auditorium.

‘One of the most powerful moments, for me, with the scene was in Amsterdam doing the show there and during the moment of silence the entire audience stood up with us... they stood standing for the entire piece and we got emotional goosebumps. We couldn’t see because we were at the back, that was where our booths were, and we could barely see over the audience’s heads to the stage... it was an incredible moment of solidarity. I’ve never known anything really like it’. (SWO member)

This account of ‘Vigil’ indicates the solidarity that can be nurtured when an ethic of care is engrained in the ways that those creating the performance relate to their audiences. Whether this solidarity is apparent across the performer-audience divide or within the audience itself, it positions *Sex Worker’s Opera* as an all-too-rare cultural production that is sensitive to the specific emotional needs of sex worker audiences, responsive to the need for more holistic, favourable representations of the community, and able to create an environment in which mutual care can thrive.

Conclusion

Drawing together this analysis of care in relation to members, directors and audiences, I suggest that socially-engaged performance practice centred on an ethic of care has the capacity to uphold ethical and political ideals, prioritising meeting the needs of those attached to a project—participants, facilitators and audiences—as well as the external need for activist critiques and advocacy. Shedding light on organisational and creative practices that either evidence care or demonstrate a lack

thereof, I have offered concrete examples of the ways in which the needs of various groups are, or could be, met. It appears that responsiveness to needs might in fact carry the potential to unlock an ethical and political practice that nurtures solidarity, trust and respect within and beyond individual projects. Rather than being perceived as inconvenient obstacles, needs—and a commitment to meeting them—present a starting point for socially-engaged performance practice that is as equally committed to social justice within the rehearsal room and in the stalls as on the stage, connecting the small-scale ‘care factor’ with larger-scale activist visions for a more just future.

The next chapter examines the outcomes of *SWO* and *Sex Worker’s Opera*, highlighting the coexistence of affects and effects in its exploration of the project’s social impact, and the implications of these for *SWO*’s artistic activism.

9) 'It was like being swept up in a whirlwind': Outcomes

Following on from accounts and analyses of various aspects of SWO provided within this thesis thus far, this chapter dives deeper in providing an account of the social impacts of the project. Throughout this analysis, I am mindful of the critiques surrounding 'social impact' that I laid out in Chapter 1. In particular, the themes identified in this chapter illuminate my commitment to foregrounding affect in considerations of social impact, and my understanding of SWO as an artistic activism project designed to change the conversation around sex workers, *not* to change sex workers themselves.

In discussing the outcomes of SWO—*affective* and *effective*—it is important to remember the intentions behind the project. These were to provide a space for sex workers to share their experiences, and to turn these experiences into art that would reach people who might not otherwise listen to sex workers. *Sex Worker's Opera* was to be *for* and *by* sex workers: the experience of participating in the project was supposed to be joyful, healing and solidarity-building, and the show itself was designed to be entertaining, moving and educational. Against these baseline intentions, this chapter presents what could be considered as 'the outcomes' of SWO, encompassing affects and effects without privileging either.

As I first laid out in Chapter 1, my understanding of community musical theatre as artistic activism is informed by critiques of utilitarian approaches to art, and particularly socially-engaged or participatory art. These critiques have been put forward by those who reject the norm of assigning disproportionate value to demonstrable 'social impacts', at the expense of attention to intrinsic, aesthetic, and affective qualities (see Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Low, 2020; Rowe & Reason, 2017; Snyder-Young, 2013). Though I am driven to ask Duncombe's question, 'does it work?', both of SWO specifically and of community musical theatre as artistic

activism more broadly, I do not see this as a question that necessarily precludes recognition of these qualities.

To avoid falling into a utilitarian trap, rather than asking outright, 'What are the social impacts of SWO?', I ask, 'What does the project/performance provide space for?' This allows for exploration of affects and effects, and refuses the task of measuring transformation in an explicit way or over-stating any changes incurred, as warned against by Baker (2021:353), Balfour (2009:347-359), and Belfiore & Bennett (2007:138). Furthermore, I have sought to avoid problematic victim or saviour narratives, which might be fuelled by a 'deficit perspective' (Freebody et al, 2018:6), such as that 'participants lack power' (Low, 2020:227), or that they need to be 'improved' (Matarasso, 2019:163).

As the well-known sex worker activist slogan goes: 'Rights, not rescue!' By emphasising that all of the outcomes discussed here contribute in some way, however ephemerally, to SWO's activist agenda, I illuminate the significance of affect to SWO and community musical theatre as artistic activism in general, particularly for those involved in creating it. In this context, outcomes that support marginalised people to self-advocate are of the utmost importance. Accordingly, I highlight affects such as hope and feeling listened to, as well as effects such as community building, suggesting that they may provide the necessary energy to continue fighting back against oppression in a sustainable way.

Starting with a review of the affects that SWO and *Sex Worker's Opera* has provided space for, I unpack the ways in which fun and humour, empowerment, a sense of ownership, pride, being moved, feeling listened to, and hope constitute social impacts, shaping members' experiences of artistic activism with implications for their continued investment in both art and activism. In the next, noticeably shorter, section on the effects the project and performance had, I discuss self-actualisation for sex worker-artists, community building and public education, highlighting the importance of each in relation to the activist aims of SWO. Overall, this chapter

demonstrates the inextricability of affects from effects in considerations of social impact with regard to community musical theatre as artistic activism.

Affects: What does the project/performance provide space for?

Fun and Humour

Thompson describes qualities such as ‘joy, fun, pleasure or beauty’ as ‘the vital *affective register* of participatory arts’ and argues that these should be ‘central to the purpose and thinking about the work so that [...] what has reached us through the senses becomes foundational to the practice and crucially *politics* of applied theatre’ (Thompson, 2009:116). Likewise, Snyder-Young argues that, ‘in many contexts, the ‘unarticulated’ byproducts of participation in theatrical events are *actually* the very things meeting a project’s interventionist goals’ (Snyder-Young, 2013:7-8, emphasis original). Accordingly, fun and humour can be recognised as an integral component of SWO’s artistic activism, primarily in their importance for performers, but also for the impact they have on audiences. As shown below, fun and humour helped to make the experience of participating in a political performance enjoyable, and provided members with an opportunity to process certain sex work experiences and present them in a way of their choosing for a wider audience.

For instance, some members discussed the freedom of *not* having to be sexy on stage, of deliberately performing un-sexiness, as a welcome counter to the demanding performativity of their sex work. Reflecting on their experience of performing in the ‘Porn Protest’ scene, whereby sexual acts were given the clown treatment, one member commented:

‘I think because it’s so ridiculous, it’s a really freeing way to perform sexuality, because you’re making it funny. I think that’s really validating as a worker when you’re so sick of having to make everything sexy. I

think sex should be funny, it should be more funny, but we're not really allowed to present that at work, so it just feels really good to perform silliness in a sexual way'. (SWO member)

That the opportunity for silliness and humour 'Porn Protest' provided space for was experienced as 'freeing' and 'validating' attests to the capacity of affects such as joy and hilarity to transform, even fleetingly, potentially gruelling experiences of both performing sexuality and sex worker activism.

Another way that members experienced humour and fun in the performance was through performing the role of clients—a role that will be discussed in various capacities throughout this chapter. In her study of humour in the sex industry, Sanders found that 'the most frequently observed form of humour [...] was jokes told in private that mocked the client' and that these jokes 'make fun of clients' physiological features, sexual performance and fantasies', aiming 'to ridicule the client behind their back' (Sanders, 2004:277). Representations of clients are scarce within *Sex Worker's Opera* but when they do appear they are often the butts of the joke. In 'Domme Song', for example, a litter of 'clients' are depicted with bushy moustaches, wearing only white button-up shirts and underpants, and crawling around on the floor like 'puppies'. They are integral to the affective climax of the song, as they simultaneously reach an exaggerated orgasm.

'I loved the wanking part; I think it's really funny. As a puppy, it's my favourite part of doing it because I can just look at the faces in my head that I see all of the clients doing, because they really do fucking shit faces (Laughing). So it's fun to project that to the audience'. (SWO member)

Again, it is fun to have the space to play with something that, in a work setting, sex workers generally have to at least pretend to take seriously. Wanking is funny, orgasm faces are funny, and animalising clients into puppies is funny. Turning the person that you are otherwise expected to please into an object of ridicule and

drawing on reality for inspiration as you embody that creates an opportunity to laugh at sex work. For performers and audience members with sex work experience, this might be cathartic, and for audience members with no experience of sex work, this use of humour poses an immediate challenge to victim narratives. Conversations with people who have just seen *Sex Worker's Opera* frequently feature a variation on the phrase, 'I didn't expect it to be so funny'. Humour and fun therefore play a foundational role in the creation and performance of *Sex Worker's Opera*, providing an outlet for sex workers within the project and in the audience, and subtly unsettling audience expectations from the beginning of the performance, challenging victim narratives from the outset.

Empowerment

Matarasso warns that, 'the term empowerment is used to express, or mask, such a wide range of attitudes that it is in danger of completely losing its meaning' (Matarasso, 1997:37). Moreover, there is a risk that the term could also be perceived as a suitably hazy and problematic catch-all synonym for 'they were saved'. Perhaps demonstrating their own wariness of the infamous saviour complex, SWO's directors were careful not to ascribe empowerment to anyone else's experiences of the project in interviews, wishing to avoid speaking for or patronising members. Nonetheless, members used the term uncomplicatedly, strongly indicating that the project and performance carved out space for particular acts that were empowering on a personal level, even if only momentarily.

With respect to representing clients in the *Opera*, one member found it empowering to embody the relative privilege that clients often hold while playing the character of Donald (or sometimes Rupert, depending on who was performing) in the 'Porn Protest' scene.

'That's my favourite character to play. For the first time I get to play a rich, white man! I could say anything I wanted, could wear whatever I wanted. I was literally just wearing a t-shirt, boxers, a wig. Everyone

else took so long to get ready for that bit, I'm like: 'I'm ready'. I think that's why it was fun to be Donald or Rupert, because I was being the other person. So it was also empowering to be the douche bag'. (SWO member)

As is apparent from this example, performance enables one to temporarily trade in a lived reality of marginalisation—particularly for this performer as a trans person of colour—for fantasy reality, in which one's physical and financial characteristics align to ensure easy movement within a discriminatory world. The playful imaginaries that performance makes possible meant that this performer could briefly enjoy the privileges afforded to the powerful. Though it might not seem that significant, the experience of not having to spend a long time getting ready could be massively relieving, removing the labour involved in presenting attractiveness. Within the microcosm of a theatre changing room, for the time surrounding this scene, they could feel the power of having the freedom to do as they pleased.

In the above experience, empowerment was instantaneous, but it might also emerge incrementally, as it did for the performer of the autobiographical piece 'Monkey in a Circus':

'This song had some personal evolution as well as I went along with my trauma. The first year I was very vulnerable. I was very vulnerable when I was performing it, and slowly, slowly I kind of got empowered'. (SWO member)

Importantly, in this quotation this member does not explicitly assert that it was performing her song, or even being part of SWO, that enabled her to work through her trauma. Instead, she makes subtle links between her changing emotional state and her performance of the song in various iterations of *Sex Worker's Opera*. As I emphasised in Chapter 6, performing painful stories is not necessarily a quick or ethically-straightforward fix, but over a number of years this member was able to move from a place of vulnerability to one of empowerment with regards to this

story. Her experience suggests that longer-term projects, such as SWO, carry considerable benefits; namely, the possibility that the experience of performing the same story repeatedly across a number of years can change the way one relates to it, and that, over time, the affects associated with a particular piece might lend themselves more naturally to personal healing and artistic activism.

Reflecting Matarasso's concerns, the evidence I have provided of empowerment as an outcome is somewhat ambiguous. There is a thread, however, in that both members quoted above describe moments or processes of owning experiences or identities that might otherwise be challenging. In this context, then, empowerment is attached to the feeling of possibility in performance, of not being limited by the constraints and struggles of reality. It provides a sense of freedom.

A Sense of Ownership

In recognition of the importance of sex workers reclaiming narratives and taking up space in the cultural sphere, as well as the opportunity to exercise individual and collective creativity, it would perhaps be predictable to see ownership as a positive outcome. In reality, it was scarcely mentioned as a benefit of members' involvement by members themselves, with a much greater focus on the ways in which ownership can actually be the source of tension and conflict than the ways in which it might be politically empowering. The seeds of concern about ownership were sown in Chapter 7, where I elaborated upon the creative process and critiqued the extent to which it was, in fact, non-hierarchical and collective. At the time, when those processes were happening, the concern was that members might not have *enough* ownership. As a result, great efforts were made by the directors to encourage individual contributions, as well as participation in group activities, and members certainly did feel a sense of ownership over the aspects of the performance they worked on.

Where this ownership becomes complicated, however, is the point at which it is challenged. Because of the cabaret-style structure of the performance, individual scenes each had their own very distinct flavour, created in large part by the

performers who initially worked on them. Perhaps because of this uniqueness, scenes and songs often became 'synonymous' with individual members. Even if those members had not written the piece, they often developed strong personal attachments to it.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the fundamental difficulty surrounding ownership generally lay in its incompatibility with inconsistent membership. In short, the same members were not always able to participate every year, leading to changes in who performed certain scenes or songs, which created ownership tensions and conflicts.

A clear example of this was provided by one of the members who performed in 'Worker-Client Duet' over many years with a number of different duet partners. Returning to perform in SWO after a year away from the project, she found that her co-performer—who had performed the song for the first time in this interim year—had very different ideas about how the song should be performed. With generous reflexivity, she described the creative power struggle that ensued:

'Because I was the original cast member, I was like, 'I have a bit more claim to this', whereas none of us really have any claim, it was written by someone else. But then it came into play of our position in the group as well. It was weird for me coming in because I'd created this work as well... I'm not claiming all of it, but I felt a lot of ownership of it and it was like, 'Well, you [the duet partner] came in secondary to this'. It was all silly and it was all in my head and I was battling with my ego with that. Yeah, I could see that the piece couldn't grow as much as it could have done because of the ego, which was a shame'. (SWO member)

In the same year, another member experienced the difficulty of returning to the project after a period of absence, only to find that a song she had felt significant

⁴⁶ This also goes some way toward explaining the magnitude of the challenge that was cutting the show so that it did not run over the allotted run-time, much to the dismay of multiple theatre managers.

ownership over—and had written lyrics for from a personal perspective—had been transformed from a solo to a trio with a chorus singing a newly added refrain.

‘The year that I was away that song got developed without me around so, by the fifth year, I then got thrown back into a version of the song that I was just like, ‘I guess I don’t have any ownership over this now, so I’d best just go along with what the group has decided to do’’. (SWO member)

The initial conflict around this situation was resolved with a compromise: she would sing the song as a solo, but the chorus refrain would still feature. However, this only went some way toward addressing the discomfort that arose from the fact that edits had been made without the agreement of someone who felt personally attached to the song, and that this violated her sense of ownership.

On the other hand, songs or pieces where there was a greater sense of *collective* ownership were rarely the source of tension or conflict. Among the group, the directors perceived a link between ownership and collaborative writing methods used to create ‘Freedom Song’ and ‘Family Song’ because ‘they feel like they know which exact line they wrote’ (SWO director). But, for at least one member, the collaborative process actually lessened the intensity of the sense of ownership, allowing for a feeling of equality to emerge in place of hierarchy and helping to avoid conflict. Speaking on ‘Family Song’, they said:

‘I think that was one of the bits of the Opera that really just worked for me and felt like a collaboration. I mean, it felt like in the performance of it that we were all relative equals and there didn’t seem to be much tension around... ownership or clashing expectations or hidden attachments, or anything like that’. (SWO member)

Possibly owing to the fact that it was difficult to identify exactly which bit came from whom, the sense of ownership connected to this collaboratively written song was

relatively uncomplicated. It seemed that everyone was equally invested in the song, but that any changes made to it were also easier to bear because it did not feel like a personal affront.

Though a sense of ownership can undoubtedly be a good thing, from a personal and a political perspective, it is also useful to reflect on the challenges it presents. Compared with individual ownership, collective ownership achieved via collaborative methods appears likely to be less complicated, presenting fewer opportunities for misunderstanding or conflicting attachments. There is of course great value in both, but this analysis serves to highlight the higher stakes and the intensity of demands associated with nurturing and preserving individual ownership.

Pride

Relatedly, pride emerged as a strong theme in my analysis of the outcomes of SWO, suggesting a positive awareness of the many achievements made within the project and the performance and indicating the deep investment of those who have participated. The objects of pride discussed in this section are varied, flagging the importance of aesthetic quality, political relevance, personal development and resilience.

On the whole, multiple members expressed pride in the quality of the performance itself. This was felt especially strongly given the community arts context, whereby not everyone is trained to a 'professional' standard. The fact that the group was capable of putting something like *Sex Worker's Opera* together was seen as something to celebrate:

'I think the show is so fucking well done, I'm so proud to be part of it... The way that everything sticks together, it's just amazing. I think the show is so perfect in so many ways, and being done by people who are actually not theatre people—some people are but some people aren't—it's just incredible how we did this'. (SWO member)

Aside from the aesthetic quality of the performance, members also underscored the achievement of the project existing as it did. In particular, one member commended the directors for their work in managing the group dynamics and pushing the show forward so that it had the large reach it had.

'I think it is actually an incredible achievement, given the number of people involved, given how much that potential tension can be there, the fact that it did as well as it did and went as far as it went is really impressive. They did really well. I will always say that about the directors: that, for people with so few resources and being quite young, it's just impressive'. (SWO member)

On a similar note, some members expressed pride in other people's development over the years of doing the show, identifying improvements not only in technical capabilities, such as singing in tune and listening to the orchestra, but also in terms of confidence and the space people were comfortable taking within the performance:

'I was really excited when she had more things in the new show, it was such a glorious moment I think I even shed a little tear... She's always been super quiet but I've always known that she's so dry. I didn't have much to do with her journey really but I felt so proud to have been somewhere on that journey with her'. (SWO member)

It is not always comfortable for people to talk about their own personal achievements, so I was glad when a number of people did draw attention to the things they were proud of themselves for in interview. One such example came from the musical director, as they talked about writing 'Hollywood Clichés':

'The line I'm actually proudest of is "Pain, pain, pain, pain." We were writing and we were like, "Why do we have to go complex?" It's the

point of a stereotype... It was the silenced sex worker, the character-less, personality-less sex worker... "Pain, pain, pain, pain"'. (SWO director)

Within a community arts context, it might be unusual for a facilitator to express pride in an element of the work that came from them, but it is also refreshing to have an indication of the personal artistic investment that went into the work of musical directing for SWO. Not only is this line, "Pain, pain, pain, pain", musically deft—adding a level of uncomfortable chromaticism that should not work in the contrapuntal texture of the 'Hollywood Clichés' chorus but somehow does—but it is also politically effective, encapsulating the reductionism that taints sex worker representation in popular culture.

Certain members also expressed a sense of pride with regard to the individual contributions they made to the performance. The person who wrote and performed 'The Trans Lament', for instance, expressed her love for, and pride in, the work she did on that song, linking her affinity for the song to its political significance.

'I fucking love it and I'm really proud of it, and I think that's the biggest take-home for me. I will stand by that song forever because it's still relevant today'. (SWO member)

Although pride, unlike ownership, was generally uncomplicated for members (or at least from what they told me), one of the directors signalled a tension between pride and what might be seen as care:

'I think the tension is that of course putting people first also means us getting to a place where they feel happy and proud with what we're putting on stage, and sometimes that takes working through difficult stuff. There is a tension'. (SWO director)

From a facilitation perspective, 'putting people first' is not only about protecting them within the process, but also ensuring they are satisfied with, or proud of, the performance they make. However, helping people to feel happy on stage might entail stints of discomfort, notably when people are telling personal stories. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask how much 'working through difficult stuff' is justifiable. Pride, in itself, might not be a source of much tension, but there are certainly tensions involved in creating a performance that people will be proud of, especially if they have high expectations of themselves or are working with difficult content. The push and pull between aesthetic quality and accessibility, wellbeing and care is something that will be familiar to community artists working in many different settings.

Pride might sometimes have a price, but overall it was associated with a sense of personal and collective achievement, as well as fondness toward specific aspects of the performance. Unlike ownership, pride was never attached to conflict, perhaps because it is further removed from creative practicalities and a concurrent sense of finitude. Whereas the realities of putting together a performance place implicit limitations on the ownership that people can feel or enact, there are no limits on how many people can feel proud of a piece, or how proud they can feel of it. Pride, then, might actually be the outcome that I thought ownership would be, as it appears to correlate with what SWO has been able to accomplish, as a project and a performance. In pride, I see recognition of the part that every single person involved has played in reclaiming space for sex worker representation in the cultural sphere, and a celebration of the ways in which they have done so.

Being Moved

Reading Duncombe's statement 'activist art that doesn't move us leaves us standing still' (Duncombe, 2016:131), one might reasonably assume that it is the audience—the one still to be convinced—who should be moved by activist art. Alternatively, this section examines the ways in which SWO members experienced being moved within the performance setting, the ways in which affective intensity might have

reinforced their motivation for participating in SWO and connected with the politics of the performance they wished to convey to audiences. Here, I am not all that concerned with the specific political messages associated with instances of members being moved, but rather the political *feeling* that might be evident in these moments. In this approach, I take inspiration from Massumi, who describes affect as ‘proto-political’, concerning ‘the first stirrings of the political, flush with the felt intensities of life’ but claims that ‘its politics must be brought out’ (Massumi, 2015:viii-ix).

Different members found different parts of the performance more or less moving, but there were a few segments that seemed to act as affective peaks. In order of appearance, these were ‘Vigil’, the ‘Rave’ scene that follows ‘Strip for the Dead’, ‘Monkey in a Circus’ and ‘Listen to Me’. Each was loaded with different meanings and triggered various responses, which themselves contained meanings. I explore some of these here.

For a member of the tech team, the ‘Vigil’ was a particularly difficult moment of the show, but one that made space for a combination of good and bad feelings:

‘It was really hard every night to do that scene and to watch the people... our friends on stage because people would always get emotional and I would always get emotional. And to have that moment of reflection and respect and appreciation and gratitude and everything for what we have, and the people that we have here, and the sadness for those that we’ve lost as well is certainly an emotional rollercoaster to have in the show’. (SWO member)

As previously discussed, ‘Vigil’ is heavy with real-life significance for sex workers and allies. The silent ‘grief ritual’, as it has been described, makes space for affect to become nameable emotions that, as this member identifies, are complex, contradictory and extraordinarily deep for many people, and will likely be realised differently among them (Ahmed, 2014:218). This member’s experience of being

moved so consistently by this scene, and being in the same state as their friends who were visibly feeling moved on stage, marks 'Vigil' as a moment that demonstrates the affective connection between members, on stage and off. Here, as the line between reality and performance is blurred, the ritual itself takes on many of the characteristics of art identified by Rowe and Reason, serving as a 'heightened, intensifying, decentring act [...] that provides drive to the experience and the power for radical change' (Rowe & Reason, 2017:47).

Although it stands in direct contrast to 'Vigil', the 'Rave' scene is similarly affective, transmitting the spirit of resistance and solidarity through noise rather than silence in a way that moves others within the project.

'The end of that scene where everyone's just screaming and cheering, that always gives me goosebumps because it is just amazing, it's just a bunch of people saying, "We will not be silenced", which is just so powerful'. (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

The words, 'We will not be silenced', are shouted in a call-and-response during this scene, alongside other slogans from the sex worker rights movement. That this phrase stands out in the memory of the director and their explanation for the goosebumps they experienced is interesting because it encapsulates the entirety of the scene, which was constructed around the concept of partying as protest. This includes non-verbal elements such as loud rave music, jumping around, screaming and cheering, all of which signify a taking up of space and a refusal to disappear or be silenced. In the context of the *Opera*, which is intellectually about refusing to be silenced, there is something moving about seeing what that might actually look like in action, feeling the force of resistance and the energy of those behind it. To borrow from Thompson: 'Social change needs dancing now, and the dancing will not end once it has been achieved [...] Dancing, and other forms of aesthetic expression, might be places of respite, but the argument here suggests something more radical—they are also integral and necessary parts of change itself. In a world of

inequality, social injustice and endemic violence, they could be acts of resistance *and* redistribution, made in an intimate and sensory key' (Thompson, 2009:11).

Turning back to the affective realm of pain, 'Monkey in a Circus' had a consistently powerful impact, to the extent that one interviewee requested *not* to listen to this piece in their interview, stating: 'I'm happy to talk about it, I just actually don't want to cry tonight' (SWO member). Elaborating on the reason for being so moved by listening to it, another member explained:

'When an amount of pain or injustice like that comes, it's very hard for me to channel it. And because it's her [the performer of 'Monkey in a Circus'], and it's someone I love and care about, I just get really sad and really angry. It would make me cry if it wasn't her, but then it is her too so that is what makes me cry even more'. (SWO member)

While the story on its own is likely to trigger intense feelings, for this member these were exacerbated by the personal connection they had with the performer of 'Monkey in a Circus'. Once love is brought into the mix, it is no longer solely a matter of systemic injustice but also a personal affront. And yet, this intense affective experience was not necessarily limited to those who knew the performer personally. Audience members, who have come to love many of the performers throughout the show—as presented in Chapters 5 and 6—also had profound responses to this scene. Perhaps most strikingly, one audience member who had recently become a parent, and was enjoying a trip to the theatre on their first night without the baby, spoke to the totality of their emotional reaction in exclaiming, "I couldn't stop crying! And my tits were crying too!"

As well as in response to expressions of pain and emotional vulnerability, members were moved by 'events of contact' (Berlant & Stewart, 2019:101). As Berlant and Stewart write, these events 'take place as color, shape, the gesture of an aspiration, a repetition of touch. Hands hesitate, or they venture out like emissaries. The eyes speculate. Reactions ring out like the chorus of a song. Here we are. This is it' (Ibid.).

During ‘Listen to Me’, the finale of the performance, members go into the audience and bring someone up with them onto the stage. Often, audience members would join in the chant, ‘Listen to me, listen to me’. Standing there, holding hands in a semi-circle, the division between audience and performer is spectacularly blurred, as is the distinction between sex worker and non-sex worker. ‘Listen to Me’ is an ‘event of contact’ in a very literal sense and—although audience members who ascend to the stage are not necessarily making a proclamation of allyship—this moment of togetherness has a strong affective impact.

‘It never failed to move me to tears, that song. Pretty much every night, whenever we would go and get someone from the audience, I would just be like, ‘Oh yeah, okay, this means something’’. (SWO member)

Members’ myriad experiences of being moved within the performance could be extrapolated to theorise similar affects for audience members, which I explore below in my discussion of SWO’s educational capacity. Maintaining my focus on members for now though, these examples of the ways in which the performance, and the experience of performing, moved members themselves prompts reflection on the reasons for making activist art. I suggest that the affective intensity of being part of the performance of *Sex Worker’s Opera*, either on stage or off, provided the sense of meaning that would reinforce members’ commitment to SWO and, by extension, to the fight for sex workers’ rights. Massumi writes: ‘With intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life—a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places’ (Massumi, 2015:6). Echoing Rowe and Reason (2017:47), community musical theatre as artistic activism could be seen as a political motivator for those making it as well as for those spectating, with its capacity to move them making them feel more connected to the group and to their shared purpose.

Feeling Listened To

Perhaps one of the reasons that 'Listen to Me' is so moving for members to perform is because it triggers a feeling of being listened to, though this might actually have more to do with 'Listen to Me' being an 'event of contact' than the lyrics, which (as above) make the repeated demand to be listened to. As an outcome, 'feeling listened to' is affective rather than effective in the sense that it is about how it makes members feel more than the tangible impact of audiences listening. It was also beyond the scope of this research to ascertain the extent to which audiences actually listened to, internalised and acted in accordance with the messages presented in *Sex Worker's Opera*. However, building on the previous section, I suggest that members' experiences of feeling listened to have been vital to the sustainability of SWO as an activist project, renewing motivations for involvement.

In general, members found that performing in *Sex Worker's Opera* differed from their other experiences of activism, creating new opportunities to bring important issues to public attention in a way that felt less frustrating. Being both 'live and public', Snyder-Young proposes that theatre offers a setting where performers 'know they have an audience's attention', acknowledging that 'many people have few public contexts outside of the theatre in which they feel 'seen' and 'heard'' (Snyder-Young, 2013:11). As opposed to 'screaming at a brick wall', members found the performance offered space for communication that felt more likely to be welcomed.

'I'd done so much activism in my life where I had just been screaming at a brick wall half the time being like, "No one's listening, no one's listening to us!" I realised that probably there's a better way of communicating these things. You know, it's my responsibility as an orator, as a storyteller, as a communicator to find the best way to communicate these things to people'. (SWO member)

That members had a greater sense of being listened to in the performance context is not surprising when one considers Peggy Phelan's statement that 'the face-to-face encounter is the most crucial arena in which the ethical bond we share becomes

manifest' (Phelan, 2004:577). Creating a space for such a 'face-to-face encounter', the performance setting makes apparent the connection between performers and audience members, across the divide of sex workers and non-sex workers, bringing this 'ethical bond' into the foreground. Moreover, the performance setting brings with it conventions that foster engagement beyond the brief and ignorable face-to-face encounter that might occur, for example, as someone walked by a protest. The consensual captivity that the theatre enables more or less guarantees sustained attention, which—for people and activists who are used to being silenced—can be profound.

'It's a little bit emotional as well, because there's an audience listening to what you're saying, and it's a different context. Because you can say whatever you want in that context and they have to listen, they're just sitting there... you might not have that power elsewhere in the world to say certain sorts of stuff to that large group of people'. (SWO member)

The prolonged contact between members and audiences that *Sex Worker's Opera* facilitates, and the opportunity for individual members to share stories from their own lives and those of sex workers around the world, creates a far stronger connection between the two groups than a protest on the street would be likely to. I suggest that it is this inter-personal connection that creates the feeling of being listened to, rather than simply being heard. This connection could also be described as 'felt resonance', which Allinson suggests 'leads to possibilities of transformative connections within and between bodies, as well as the systems that they are part of' (Allinson, 2020:378).

One member acknowledged that *Sex Worker's Opera* 'isn't really about singing in tune', highlighting instead the 'space being held for whoever to bring whatever they've got' (SWO member). The performance setting in itself, plus the way that the performance was created and the things it included, ensured that space was held for members to say what they wanted to say in the way they wanted to say it. In this context, the affective experience of feeling listened to was particularly strong

because of the political implications of sex workers being allowed to take up space in the cultural sphere.

Thinking more specifically about the performance elements that strengthened the feeling of being listened to, audience interaction emerges as a significant feature. Audience interaction might usually be considered as a way of bringing the audience into closer contact with the performers, but in this case it also served to bring the performers into closer contact with audience members. This allowed for a more immediate sense of the 'felt resonance' as performers escaped the glare of the spotlights and were able to see the emotional impact their performance was having on those in the auditorium.

- *'You get to see a lot of people cry... In those moments you know that you've really connected with people and made them really moved by it'. (SWO member)*

- *'Spoken like a true Domme'. (SWO member)*

Although these members joked about the fact that they saw audience tears as an achievement, it was clearly memorable to see visual evidence of emotion within the audience. Tears indicated to performers that they had succeeded in connecting audiences to the stories being told and had done so in a way that moved them.

Returning to the thinking first presented in Chapter 1, *Sex Worker's Opera* can be seen to create an 'affective atmosphere' (Brennan, 2004:3), in which both performers and audience members are immersed. In this context, 'the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another' (Ibid.), resulting in a sense of 'social feeling', if not 'shared feeling' (Ahmed, 2014:218). This 'social feeling', and the associated experience of felt resonance, is significant in that 'emotions may themselves be a primary means of effective persuasion and collective action because they are always-already shaping our allegiances and ways of being' (Adsit et al, 2015:34). Social and shared

feelings help to forge allegiances and orient people either towards or away from others, therefore acting as powerful forces in activist contexts. Similarly, Snyder-Young proposes that ‘empathy encourages audience members to care about a distanced circumstance’ (Snyder-Young, 2013:94). The right emotional reactions among audience members—visibly demonstrating their immersion in the affective atmosphere of the performance—can therefore be read as a sign that they have connected to the performers and the characters’ stories enough to care about them, and perhaps the issues affecting sex workers more broadly. Thus, this experience of affective relationality is essential to members’ sense of being listened to within the performance setting, and their subsequent feeling that they, through *Sex Worker’s Opera*, are doing something to advance sex worker activism.

Providing a perspective that is slightly more removed from the ‘felt resonance’ of the performance setting, the directors were able to speak to the feeling of being listened to in a broader, institutional context. Early on, support from Royal Opera House played a significant role in giving the directors the tools to facilitate SWO and, later on, funding from Arts Council England supported the project’s UK tour. This institutional support served to validate the efforts the directors were making in trying to carve out space for sex workers’ voices in the cultural sphere.

‘Getting support from official institutions is fucking incredible for this kind of stuff. It’s quite hard to do considering it’s difficult to even have a conversation in the pub about it. It’s like, what’re the chances that Arts Council England are gonna fund it twice?’ (Siobhán Knox, SWO director)

That Arts Council England *did* fund the project twice in its theatrical form⁴⁷ goes some way towards undoing the culture of silencing that sex workers live in, and the ways in which their very existence is often the subject of scrutiny for people who know nothing about the work they do. For the directors, institutional funding not

⁴⁷ Arts Council England have also funded SWO throughout the pandemic, through the Culture Recovery Fund. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/CRFgrants> [Accessed 3rd March 2022]

only enabled the project to continue but also lessened the feeling of shouting into a void, giving them hope for the gradual cultural change that might eventually make it easier to have these conversations in the pub.

On the other hand, some members were cynical as to whether attention and support in the cultural sector translated into action or had real-world applicability in the sex industry. As a result, the experience of performing 'Listen to Me' was sometimes tainted by a strong sense of *not* feeling listened to, making it harder to trust the emotional impact on audiences in the moment.

'I just find it quite melancholic because are we really being listened to? I'm not sure. We have this imperative message of 'Please listen to us, this is what we want to say', but I feel like after 18 years in the industry people are still not listening. So it has these mixed feelings, right? You see the crowd feeling a little bit connected to it, but I don't know if we're actually being listened to'. (SWO member)

All of this comes together to imply that a feeling of being listened to, similar to being moved, provides motivation for marginalised artists to continue self-advocating through artistic activism. Feeling listened to provided a sense of progress, a counter to experiences within the industry or in sex worker activism, where—as the member quoted above complained—sex workers are generally not listened to. Granted, it might not have led to sex workers' voices being prioritised in every policy discussion or even evidence that audiences took the messages of the show seriously and acted in support—and Snyder-Young is right to prompt theatre practitioners to ask whether 'alternate methods might produce more effective results' in the quest for social change (Snyder-Young, 2013:139). That said, it is significant that *Sex Worker's Opera* made space for sex workers to experience the feeling of being listened to, giving a sense of the way things could be. This leads into the next section.

Hope

As the last affective outcome to be presented in this chapter, hope begins to bridge the gap between affect and effect, nodding toward the more objective outcomes that will be explored in the following section. Hope is particularly apparent as an affective component of performance in the work of Dolan, who posits that performance makes ‘palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better’ (Dolan, 2005:6). For Thompson, too, the ‘ridiculously optimistic view that performance can be about changing the world’ (Thompson, 2009:xii) is fundamental to the concept of ‘performance affects’. Garnering the feeling of something better than the way things are, performance has the capacity to make people—audiences and performers—reimagine what the world could be. For Duncombe, a fundamental ingredient in artistic activism is the ability to ‘inspire dreaming’ (Duncombe, 2016:122), and Shaughnessy sees the potential to experience ‘a form of ‘utopia’’ that engages us ‘cognitively, imaginatively, sensually and physically in new forms of embodied understanding which enable us to perceive differently’ (Shaughnessy, 2012:187).

When a performance like *Sex Worker’s Opera* engenders a sense of hope for those involved in making it, and potentially for those participating as audience members, this is significant. Certainly, the experience of performing, feeling listened to, or seeing oneself represented on-stage may prompt people to feel hopeful for something specific and tangible—policy change, a reduction in stigma, future artistic opportunities, for example. However, hope in and of itself is also a potent force for change, as it carries with it an imagination of how things could be better, and allows one to consider the possibility that improvements might be within reach. As Low suggests in regard to moments of hope in applied theatre, ‘[d]efying, even temporarily, a dominating situation can result in feelings of autonomy and dignity which, even if they are not permanent, remain important sensations to experience, as they are examples of different ways of being in a particular environment’ (Low, 2020:242). The experience of sensations such as fun, pride and feeling listened to—though these affects may not transform SWO members’ experiences of work and society beyond the theatre—is significant in illuminating utopian possibilities, and it

should not be considered a failure that these do not last. Indeed, Dolan acknowledges that '[t]he utopian performative, by its very nature, can't translate into a programme for social action, because it's most effective as a *feeling*' (Dolan, 2006:170, emphasis original). Providing space for different ways of being, which are cause for hope even if they are short-lived, is a vital component of community musical theatre as artistic activism, reinforcing commitments to the possibility of change.

Taking a broader perspective, for SWO's directors, hope was not linked explicitly to the performance event, but to the space created by the project as a whole for beautiful, political things to emerge. For Director X, in particular, the project offered a renewed hope in art itself:

'My own belief in art has returned. I think it's vital to be artists, and to say, 'I'm an artist', and to fight for the importance of art, but real art and politically-charged art, and to redefine what that is... own that space'. (Director X)

For Director X, claiming the identity of 'an artist' was deemed essential to counter the idea that the 'artist' identity is a privileged one, held only by the cultural elite. This in itself—the act of claiming labels and space—becomes a form of activism, demonstrative of the hope that art could not only be 'real' and 'politically-charged', but also accessible. Additionally, the feeling that they had been able to create a piece of art that was 'real' and 'politically-charged' in *Sex Worker's Opera* reinforced the hope they had for the art of the future:

'This Opera has been a bit of a tumble through audacity, which has resulted in something more beautiful that I could ever have imagined, and in opportunities for us, for our members... Hope for what theatre is and can and should do, that only really happens when you are part of a fire, that sudden, unexpected fire'. (Director X)

Here, Director X suggests that what theatre 'can and should do' is to respond to an urgent need for change in the world. In the case of *Sex Worker's Opera*, that might have been the growing conversation around sex workers' rights in the UK over the past ten years, the centuries-long history of the cultural misrepresentation of sex workers, a specific event in the sex work community, or simply the need for more beautiful things in the world. Director X expressed the hope the project has given them 'as a person', 'a director', and 'an artist' for the ways in which nuanced political topics might be presented to 'bring people in', ultimately strengthening support for the sex worker rights movement. *Sex Worker's Opera* has become a symbol of hope for the capacity of theatre to be relevant and to play a significant role in social change, while nurturing the communities it represents.

Effects: What does the project/performance provide space for?

Self-realisation for sex worker-artists

Previously, in Chapter 7, I elaborated on what the project offered members in terms of access to art or opportunities to showcase artistic skills that they had developed as part of their sex work. This point is worth returning in order to highlight the impact that the project had for Director X in terms of their own self-realisation as a sex worker-artist. Director X's experiences differ somewhat from other members, as their primary role was to facilitate. It is fair to say that they were not always supported in their artistic development to the same extent as members, because their attentions, and those of the other directors, were focussed elsewhere. Still, artistic self-realisation was a strong theme in the interviews with Director X, as seen above in the statement that SWO had prompted them to identify with the label of 'artist'. Perhaps more tangibly, though, working on SWO gave Director X an opportunity to correct their experiences of art and arts institutions being inaccessible.

'As a poor, broke, queer artist, who had always felt like art was this incredibly natural thing but very inaccessible, it was such a powerful thing to somehow turn all of that on its head and end up facilitating and performing. And, not only that, but creating a space for others in which they also could be a part of it and it would be accessible and not this thing that everyone had to pay loads of money to access. For me, that was a really healing process'. (Director X)

Positioning themselves at the intersection of multiple marginalisations, Director X speaks of the healing power of overturning the feeling that art was inaccessible to them and their community. It is important to note that, while Director X talks about this lack of access as 'felt', it is in fact a material reality that certain kinds of art-making are less accessible to those with fewer resources. People are often required to 'pay loads of money' to receive training that might result in opportunities to perform or facilitate, or to repeatedly perform for free for 'exposure' before they are actually paid for their work. In this case, it was not only beneficial for Director X to have their artistic abilities validated, but also beneficial for them to be in a position where they could make art more accessible to others within the community, who may have struggled with an equivalent lack of access.

The access granted by SWO extended further than simply creating the opportunity to facilitate and perform; it also meant that Director X was able to tell the stories they were invested in telling. This signifies increased access not only to opportunities to work and gain skills, but also to opportunities to shape narratives and create art that aligned with their personal values.

'I got to make a musical which I never believed I would get resources, space, time, context to do. And I not only got to make a musical at all, but I got to make one that I believed in, that aligned with all my politics in every way, that was not only unique and powerful but it was necessary'. (Director X)

Director X's idea that the art made by the SWO group was 'unique', 'powerful' and 'necessary' indicates their sense of accomplishment, as well as the values they ascribe to art, which may differ from those belonging to others in directorial positions outside of community contexts. Clearly, the political element of the production was of the utmost importance to Director X, and this quotation demonstrates their awareness that, without the opportunities SWO gave rise to, they would not have been able to make work that was so true to their personal experiences and political agendas.

'The show is about being a sex worker, rejecting stigma and exposing whorephobia. It is about sex workers coming out to family, about isolation and violence, but, above all, about community. I was dealing with all these things, plus dealing with my own internal whorephobia, which we all have, at the same time as facilitating this project. It was really challenging, but the show was part of me coming to terms and working through it all'. (Director X)

The opportunity to make work about their own identity and lived experience provided a space in which Director X could confront their internalised whorephobia, the name given to 'the negative stereotypes, stigma, and marginalization sex workers face, which stems from a pervasive fear and hatred of sex workers' (Tempest, 2019). As 'the archetypal first sex worker of the project', that Director X was able to do this through their involvement was an early indication of a positive impact that, as I showed in Chapter 7, eventually spread throughout members, increasing their access to art and, consequently, the potential for them to experience self-realisation as sex worker-artists.

Community building

In his early study of participatory arts, Matarasso found that participation in the arts could be shown to 'contribute to social cohesion by developing networks and understanding, and building local capacity for organisations and self-determination'

(Matarasso, 1997:v). Since then, much has been made of the potential for social cohesion and community building as outcomes of community and participatory arts projects (see Moser, 2018:215). For Duncombe, to 'build community' is also an aim of artistic activism (Duncombe, 2016:121), suggesting the greater capacity to enact social change that stronger communities are perceived to hold. For members of SWO, the project provided an opportunity to overcome the isolation often experienced by sex workers who are unable to disclose their worker status to others in their lives due to the stigma that still surrounds it (Koken, 2012). In this section, I explore members' experiences of community within SWO, identifying the multiple forms that 'community building' took within the project, and suggesting the various impacts of these.

With its publicised model of 50% sex workers and 50% allies, SWO stood out as a community project for sex workers that did not require them to publicly out themselves. Even within the project's membership, nobody was compelled to share information about their own sex work, although the directors kept tabs on the number of sex workers and allies in the project to ensure it was consistently sex worker-led. Although some members had already been involved in sex worker collectives and other sex worker spaces, SWO was the first context in which some members had met other sex workers. Even for those who had been involved in activism around specific segments of the sex industry before, SWO helped them to feel networked within sex worker activism more generally. Not only did the project promise a space for people to meet other workers for the first time, but it also established connections across different facets of the industry and helped to build relationships that would go on to support members through significant life changes.

'I'd received years of mental health support through the NHS but I was too afraid to talk openly about my life and, amazingly, none of the doctors, nurses, therapists or counsellors spotted any of the telltale signs of an abusive situation. It was only through the Opera and finding a community, and talking about work, that I was able to realise I was in an unsafe, coercive situation and that I deserved better. With people

from the project and the community being there for me if I needed it, I was able to get out and move on to working and living independently'. (SWO member).

Meeting other sex workers in a context that encouraged (though never necessitated) storytelling based on personal experiences gave members an opportunity to share the difficulties of their working lives, providing opportunities to seek support—as in the case of the member cited above. Often, too, this storytelling made space for members to find pleasure in drawing out the comedic elements of their work stories while learning about others' realities. To this day, storytelling is a fundamental part of SWO gatherings, and members often have many, frequently hilarious, tales to tell about their work. Maybe owing to this intimate sharing culture, a number of close friendships have formed among the group over the years, including members, directors, sex workers and allies, which have generally weathered temporary conflicts and tensions. The unique quality of these relationships was emphasised by one member who recounted the experience of sharing a poorly-ventilated hostel room with five other members for a month in Amsterdam during a heatwave:

'I would not do that with any other group of people, from any other show ever. I mean, I barely survived us... But I would still go back two years later'. (SWO member)

Director X, too, spoke about the impact the Opera has had on their personal life and the formation of relationships it enabled, suggesting that the intensity of the experience augmented the bonds they shared with others in the project.

'It's given me some of the best friends of my life. I don't know whether I would have met them. I definitely wouldn't have the same experiences, because what we all went through was a very unique experience. They're really beautiful, good friends, I'm so happy. They're literally my family'. (Director X)

Contrastingly, some members did not find they were as bonded with the group as others seemed to be, and felt that the project did not foster the right conditions for developing strong relationships.

'The thing that I think the whole project relied so hard on was that everyone would just bond if we all just hung out enough, and it would all just be fine. I guess, for me, actually I needed to bond over different things. I actually did really need to bond over the work, you know what I mean? That's what I was there for'. (SWO member)

Therefore, it appears necessary to acknowledge and cater to different approaches to community building, supporting the formation of relationships with different foci. Though the directors did facilitate numerous creative bonding exercises as part of the workshops, it is true that there was rarely space or time for in-depth creative collaboration that may have nurtured the kind of creative bonds this member was seeking.

Relatedly, it would be a mistake to paint a utopian picture of the SWO group and the social dynamics therein; as with any large group of people working together under intense circumstances, conflict is almost inevitable. One member acknowledged this without judgment, positing that it should not be the goal of a community arts project for everyone to like each other all the time. Although friendship is clearly an element of community building, perhaps community can be formed through practical networks rather than intimate personal bonds. It would be wrong to assume that those who were not necessarily friends with everyone else in the project feel any less part of a community than those who developed and sustained personal relationships with other members of SWO.

Along these lines, SWO generated a number of international connections that were not always based on personal relationships but rather a sense of sex worker solidarity. In the first year of the project, the directors included four webcam models in the show via pre-recorded performances featuring poetry, ventriloquism, dance

and storytelling. These performers were also recorded singing 'Listen to Me' so that their voices could be part of the finale. This use of media to connect people across time and place has the potential to 'generate opportunities to share realities of inequality or oppression that may be neglected or build solidarity from one isolated or remote timespace to another' (Myers, 2020:376).⁴⁸ In workshops, too, members' experiences of listening to or reading the stories sent in by sex workers around the world served to remind them of the global scale of the work they were doing and to connect them to other sex workers' experiences, despite contextual contrasts.

'The whole thing is bigger than any one of us. The whole project and the whole kind of intention behind it is bigger than any one person in that room'. (SWO member)

Direct contact between members and other sex worker organisations around the world was typically limited to a single Skype call during the rehearsal process. Director X, on the other hand, had the opportunity to engage more closely with other sex workers internationally throughout the research process that was part of their preparation for the project:

'This period of doing loads of research of all of the sex worker activist groups that were currently in London and globally was a huge education. To see the work that was already happening, there was so much I didn't know when we first started'. (Director X)

Aside from learning about the community, Director X also spoke of being greatly validated through exchanges with other groups of sex workers. This was most apparent in the shows that were free for sex workers and therefore had a higher

⁴⁸ Ideally, this research would have included the perspectives of sex workers who participated remotely, either by sending a video or a story to the project. Unfortunately, I was unable to make these connections, in part because many stories were sent anonymously and because of the retrospective nature of the research, but greater inclusion will be an essential feature of future research.

proportion of sex workers in the audience, particularly in Amsterdam when the audience stood up during 'Vigil'.

'It's this incredible feeling of being seen by your community and acknowledged, and also seeing them as well. We did some free shows for sex workers and in those shows there was such an immense feeling of magic, actual magic. Connected, musical, community, synergy magic, that I don't know how to describe because it's just so felt'. (Director X)

While Director X struggled to find the words to describe the connection they had with audience members during these performances, the 'synergy magic' they experienced reflects the feeling of simultaneously being seen by and seeing one's community. Although somewhat intangible by virtue of being 'just so felt', I interpret this description as an affective experience of solidarity and support that has the effect of community building, with Director X—and, by extension, other members of the cast and crew—knowing that their community is in favour of what they are doing in SWO, and that the performance reflects something relatable back to sex workers watching. Additionally, seeing an audience made up entirely of sex workers is a reminder of the urgent need for a project like SWO, and the responsibility of doing justice to the community, to continue building on what has been started.

Public education

Influenced by matters of timing and practicality, it was beyond the scope of this research to look directly at the experiences of audience members. Nonetheless, the impacts that *Sex Worker's Opera* had on those who came to see it should not be neglected. Many of these impacts were likely affective, with audiences being guided through a series of scenes, each of which are intended to move them in a distinct way. Although I detailed the emotional journey audiences were led on in Chapter 5 and have occasionally cited the promotional audience interviews carried out in 2016 and the ways in which the performance affected me as an audience member, these impacts are hard to capture without a more directed investigation. Beyond affective

impacts, SWO has more tangibly impacted audience members through effective education. This has occurred in various ways, and can be connected to previously discussed data that speak to the idea of community musical theatre as a tool for activist education.

Considering the role that SWO has played in the sex worker rights movement more broadly, one member stated:

'I do think that Sex Worker's Opera has probably been one of the most significant projects that has pushed the conversation on in the UK in the last five years, that has probably generated more dialogue about sex workers' rights than, say, a Guardian article'. (SWO member)

The comparison to 'a Guardian article' is noteworthy because there was likely a significant demographic overlap between the people who came to see the performance and the people who generally read *The Guardian*: a group of largely middle-class, liberal, cultural consumers. Although plenty of articles in *The Guardian* have a greater reach over less time than *Sex Worker's Opera*, this member suggests that SWO managed to advance the conversation around sex work more effectively.⁴⁹ While SWO's impacts on the development of discourse and widening public engagement with sex worker issues—in a cause-and-effect sense at least—is difficult to measure, it is probable that individual people who saw the *Opera* would be more likely to go on to participate in sex worker advocacy than those who read an article on the same topic, even if both take the same angle. Part of this is due to the self-selecting nature of theatre-goers: it takes five minutes and limited commitment to read an opinion piece for free online, whereas the performance lasts over two hours, you have to buy a ticket *and* you have to leave your house. But another factor is

⁴⁹ It is worth noting, too, that *The Guardian* has regularly come under fire from sex workers and allies in the past few years for consistently giving a platform to harmful 'radical' feminist voices advocating for criminalisation. See, for example, this Twitter thread:

<https://twitter.com/katerhardy/status/1462443301777424388> [Accessed 3rd March 2022]

encompassed by this quotation from the audience interviews carried out at The Pleasance in 2016:

'This is incredible; this has been a learning opportunity [...] I think it was more and more shaping my own opinions. So it has the power to be a sledgehammer shaping the opinions of people. I learnt a lot and I realised how little I knew what I didn't know about'. (Audience member)

The image of a sledgehammer brings us full-circle back to the concern that impact is a somewhat aggressive term, except here this aggression is effective rather than problematic. Here, it works to make an impression on a more privileged audience's understandings and opinions of sex work, rather than on marginalised subjects. One of the earliest reviews of *Sex Worker's Opera* supports this assessment with the phrase: the show 'slaps [tropes] round the face with a PVC glove' (Bouteba, 2016). Again, this playfully violent imagery reveals something about the force of the show, its way of communicating that is undoubtedly more engaging on a full body/heart/mind level than a standard *Guardian* column.

By presenting a cast of 50/50 sex workers and allies, SWO also worked to humanise and destigmatise people who do sex work. It is a subtle form of education, but it is significant that audiences should have the opportunity to comprehend that sex workers could, like everyone else, be multifaceted people not entirely defined by their jobs. Part of this work is enacted through the level of artistic skill that members display in the performance, which unsettles stigma-fuelled notions of sex workers as unskilled. This did not always work, however, and some audience members were slow to check their own assumptions about sex workers' capabilities, as evident in this account of a post-show conversation:

'So at The Pleasance, there was this person who came to me and she was being really flirty and then she was just like, "So, what do you do?" I was like, "I'm a sex worker" and she was just genuinely like, "Oh my god! I could never tell!" You know, like... Did you see the show...? It was

so fucking weird. She was like, "Ah, I'm sorry, it's just because you are such a good actor. I thought you were a professional actor". And I was like, "I wish I could take that compliment because that is something I would actually love to hear, but with all the things that you already said it's just not a compliment anymore. I can't even take that fucking compliment!" (SWO member)

Though the show is not a quick fix for misconceptions and deep-held whorephobia, one has to hope that this audience member went away and thought about why she said what she said afterwards. While it should never be on sex workers to educate people at the expense of their own wellbeing, interactions like this, with amazing actors who also happen to be sex workers, serve as their own form of sledgehammer, shattering the core whorephobic beliefs that many people unfortunately hold and that frequently go unchallenged. Thankfully, not all audience members took so long to grasp the concept of the artistically talented sex worker, and instead expressed pleasant surprise on a more general level that a community musical theatre project would be of such high quality:

'Everyone's so talented! Everyone is so talented. Which isn't to say that I didn't expect people to be talented, but there are people who have skills that I had no idea they had, so that's been a very pleasant surprise'.
(Audience member)

Specific pieces from *Sex Worker's Opera* were particularly effective. Earlier on, in Chapter 4, I discussed the ways in which clients took on board the teachings of 'Worker-Client Duet', through which they were prompted to recognise sex work as work in a more practical sense. For example, one member thought that this song had directly led to a client continuing to send money over the pandemic, despite not being able to attend a session, as he acknowledged the business costs that still needed to be covered and drew a comparison with the restaurant analogy presented in the song. This analogy also helped the worker who initially wrote the song, when a year later they were able to use it to establish firmer working boundaries with a

client. These instances provide tangible evidence that creative methods of communication work to educate people on the realities and needs of sex workers, in a way that a standard conversation might simply not.

Similarly, 'Mosaic' has been used beyond the project to educate audiences in workshops on sex worker rights, university lectures and radio programmes. Pieces like 'Mosaic' are effective resources for those thinking or talking about sex worker rights and issues, because they place a sex worker voice right at the centre of the debate. In fact, 'Mosaic' halts the most common debate entirely, moving beyond the question, 'Should sex work exist?' and toward discussions of what sex workers want, how working conditions could be made better, and how sex workers should be included in policy decisions.

The educational work of SWO, therefore, can be seen as both the subtle swaying of hearts and minds and the literal distribution of activist messages. Further audience research might have allowed me to explore the question 'which works *better*?' but ultimately they are thoroughly intertwined in the work of educating people about sex work. When it comes to the impact *Sex Worker's Opera* had on audiences, the lines between emotional and intellectual, aesthetic and political are blurred. Possibly because of this multi-pronged approach, its impact has been enough to ensure the consistent growth of the project over almost a decade, reaching those who might not otherwise have engaged with sex work politics. Even if the educational work of SWO has only made audiences *think* or *feel* differently about sex workers, then it has been profoundly effective.

Conclusion

Drawing on the seven that have come before it, this chapter crystallises the outcomes of SWO, calling attention to the coexistence of, and interplay between, affect and effect in artistic activism. Looking beyond what is measurable and

tangible, I have accounted for both affective and effective outcomes that emerged in interviews, demonstrating that each of them constitutes an important part of SWO's particular form of artistic activism. In this case, it is striking that the majority of the outcomes perceived by SWO's directors and members were affective, indicating the importance of investigating how socially-engaged performance projects make people feel as well as what they do in order to gain a holistic impression of their social impact. Providing space for fun and humour, empowerment, a sense of ownership, pride, being moved, feeling listened to, hope, self-realisation for sex worker-artists, community building and public education, SWO and *Sex Worker's Opera* have played an important role in sex worker activism, reifying directors' and members' commitments to self-advocacy and contributing to a gradual shift in public perceptions of sex work.

10) Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of SWO and *Sex Worker's Opera*, this research has elucidated the means by which community musical theatre might constitute artistic activism. In unpacking the context, intentions, processes, affects and effects central to the project and the performance, I have outlined the ways in which SWO provided a platform for marginalised artists to engage with and advance the activist goals of the sex work community, described the structures and practices required to support the process of making *Sex Worker's Opera*, and demonstrated the social impacts the project has had. Highlighting the potential of community musical theatre as a platform for marginalised groups to engage in self-advocacy, the ways in which practitioners can support this outcome, and the significance of affect in this context, this interdisciplinary research makes an original contribution to understandings of social impact and socially-engaged performance that can help carry forward projects in these areas.

Findings

An overarching finding of this research was that, as a community musical theatre project, SWO in fact provided access to activism. Though the directors and many members were seasoned activists to begin with, a number of interviewees expressed the frustration they experienced toward more conventional forms of political action. As captured in Chapter 3, the limitations and potentials of these forms were seen to instruct the development of SWO, which offered an alternative, more sustainable form of self-advocacy for marginalised people.

Exploring the ways in which *Sex Worker's Opera* provided a platform for marginalised artists to engage with and advance the activist goals of the sex work

community, the analysis presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 illustrated the capacity of performance to disrupt the norm of sex workers being spoken over or ignored (Bell, 1994; Mac & Smith, 2018). In Chapter 4, I unpacked the significance of songs as vessels for political messages, conveying the myriad topics covered by the songs and the range of stylistic characteristics included in the music of the *Opera*. As well as giving members opportunities to take control of their narrative, I suggested that these songs worked to make information easier to connect with and understand, communicating complex ideas and experiences to audiences in engaging and accessible ways. In Chapter 5, my analysis of the affective arc running across *Sex Worker's Opera* explained the dramaturgical strategy of 'light-shadow-light', suggesting that the emotional journey this took both performers and audiences on enhanced the connection between the two groups, forging a relational bond. In particular, the formation of affective bonds through humour and the subsequent 'crescendo of stigma' were portrayed as complementary components, designed to increase the audience's empathetic response to depictions of violence against, and oppression of, sex workers. As a whole, the connection was integral to the social impact outcome of 'feeling listened to' for performers, and foundational to the sense of responsibility that SWO intended to instil in audiences.

With its zoomed-in focus on two specific pieces, Chapter 6 continued to expose the potential of performance to foster a sense of responsibility in audiences. My analysis of 'Strip for the Dead' and 'Monkey in a Circus' showed how members combined displays of vulnerability with declarations of strength and power, suggesting that this enhanced the empathy audiences felt for the members performing while challenging mainstream victim narratives. These pieces were also sites of emotional processing and healing for these members, who were able to share their experiences on their own terms and make something beautiful from them. In all of the ways explored in Chapters 4, 5 and 6—through individual songs, the construction of a longer emotional journey, and personal performances of pain and the individualised approach to making these—*Sex Worker's Opera* offered a space in which sex workers could speak out about the issues affecting them and their community and take control of their narrative, tackling misrepresentations directly.

Probing the structures and practices that were required to support the making of *Sex Worker's Opera*, I revealed cultural democracy and care as central tenets of both the organisation itself and the creative process. The sex worker-leadership that was integral to the ethos and the formation of SWO is just one example of sex workers having the power to shape the project and the performance throughout, bolstering the notion of the project as a space for self-advocacy. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 7, the notion of 'chaos' was fundamental to the realisation of cultural democracy within SWO, representing a pluralisation of authorship and an openness to unorthodox ways of constructing and telling stories that facilitated a redistribution of cultural authority, aided by the strategy of disidentification (Muñoz, 1999). The notion of 'safety without safety' (Higgins, 2012:150) was shown to articulate the contradictions between structure and freedom within the creative process, encapsulating the delicate balancing act of facilitation, particularly when working towards a public performance.

The focus on care in Chapter 8 elucidated the myriad ways in which an ethic of care manifested within SWO's organisational and creative practice, portraying it as an essential aspect of socially-engaged performance with and about marginalised groups. Going further than other research in this area (see Belfiore, 2022; Stuart-Fisher & Thompson, 2020), the analysis presented here emphasised the negative implications of imbalanced caring relations for Director X, issuing a warning that a lack of care for marginalised facilitators will compromise the political integrity of projects that otherwise model ethical—or radical, even—organisational and creative practice.

Over the course of this thesis, I have shown that consideration of both affects and effects are essential to holistic analyses of socially-engaged performance projects. In its acknowledgment that the two are inextricable within community musical theatre as artistic activism, this research represents a novel interdisciplinary application of the theoretical framework of affect theory—a perspective that, while prevalent in applied theatre and political performance scholarship, is only nascent in community

music research. As discussed in Chapter 9, social impact in this context therefore encompasses transient and less easily measured affects (such as ‘fun/humour’ or ‘feeling listened to’), palpable effects on members’ and directors’ lives (such as ‘community building’ and ‘access to art’), *and* potential advances for sex worker activism more broadly (through ‘public education’—as seen in Chapters 4 and 9—as well as positive media attention (Chapter 3)). Attention to affect has been essential to my cultivation of an approach to social impact research that challenges the instrumentalisation of artistic activities to ‘improve’ people and the implied passivity of the marginalised people being ‘impacted’, both of which I critiqued in Chapter 1. This approach has been bolstered by my focus on artistic activism, through which I located *the capacity to impact* in the hands of SWO members themselves.

In all, this research revealed how SWO became a space for activism that prioritised the wellbeing of marginalised artists and did not see politics as antithetical to pleasure. The wide range of ways that members were encouraged to engage with sex worker activism, the bespoke creative and organisational strategies that supported them in doing so, and the varied impacts identified through this study mirrors the multi-faceted nature of community musical theatre practice and signals its ‘æfficacy’ (Duncombe, 2016:120)—its combined affectiveness and effectiveness—as a form of activism that enacts cultural transformation while benefitting those involved.

Implications for practice

Though focussed on SWO, this research has distinct implications for community musical theatre and socially-engaged artistic practice more broadly. Of course, projects and practitioners must be responsive to the unique circumstances of the communities in which they are working—this thesis demonstrated a variety of ways in which this was essential. Nonetheless, these findings offer wider lessons about the ways in which community musical theatre might provide a platform for marginalised

communities to self-advocate, and the structures and practices required to support groups of marginalised artists through the process of making community musical theatre.

Primarily, it is imperative that practitioners recognise community musical theatre as a potential form of artistic activism aimed at cultural and social change—one that can enable marginalised artists to sustainably engage in effective self-advocacy and open channels between those typically silenced and the general public. Accordingly, facilitators and project coordinators might prioritise opportunities for participants to explore and engage with the activist agendas of their communities. These opportunities could include solidarity-building partnerships with community-led advocacy groups, creative methods that prompt responses to injustices or imaginations for better futures, and the organisation of public performances and arts-based outreach workshops—where appropriate—to maximise the potential for community musical theatre projects to transform public perceptions of marginalised groups.

On an artistic level, community musical theatre—as a multi-arts form—creates routes for different people to communicate in individualised ways, and a diversity of options for self-advocacy through performance should be embraced. Consider, for example, the contrasts between the two performances of pain presented in Chapter 6: how one was predominantly non-verbal while the other relied on narrative, how one featured experimental sound art while the other foregrounded an acoustic violin and *a cappella* singing, and how each performer chose to showcase artistic skills that were specific—and deeply personal—to them. Equally, this flexibility means that political messages can be communicated in more or less direct ways, depending on the group members' needs and desires, both individual and collective. For example, groups can explicitly communicate their demands through song (as in 'Freedom Song' or 'The Trans Lament' (Chapter 4)) or create more 'abstract' pieces that act as subtler, more playful critiques of cultural marginalisation (like 'Porn Protest' (Chapter 5) or 'Faccacello' (Chapter 7)).

That said, facilitators must work to balance control and chaos, providing sufficient structure so that participants feel secure and therefore empowered to create and perform, without imposing too many limitations on their freedom of artistic expression. According to the values of cultural democracy, there must be room for different forms of expression—genres, practices, and performance styles that might not fit certain narrow and highly-loaded pre-conceptions of what constitutes ‘musical theatre’, or even ‘music’ and ‘theatre’. Through the creative process, implicit hierarchies should be addressed and attempts made to horizontalise power structures. For example, collaborative songwriting workshops should ideally include opportunities to develop compositional skills and to contribute to the music as well as the lyrics, lessening the authority of a primary composer and increasing access to art through community musical theatre.

Space should also be protected for marginalised artists to participate as instrumental musicians, further softening the line between ‘professional artists’ and ‘community members’. Yet, in order to avoid a problematic hierarchy between vocalists and instrumentalists, they cannot then be seen as mere ‘accompanists’, but must be deliberately integrated into the creative process and encouraged to make individual artistic contributions to the performance. The same point could be made about members of technical teams—a valuable role for community members so long as they, too, gain something from it and feel their contributions are valued.

Within the organisation of community musical theatre projects, leadership from within that community should be a priority, particularly in communities at risk of, and wary of, being spoken for. Community leadership is integral to projects that intend to nurture self-advocacy among community members and potentially also beneficial for the facilitator themselves, as involvement in SWO was for Director X, overall. For this to be the case, however, the responsibilities and personal needs of those in leadership roles must be continually reassessed, and additional support measures provided where necessary.

Indeed, within both organisational and creative practice, projects should be guided by an ethic of care, with caring practices extending toward facilitators, participants and audiences. These practices must be developed in response to the specific needs of the cared-for groups, and thus require sensitivity to the issues likely to affect those in each of these categories. An ethic of care is particularly important where participants are bringing personal vulnerabilities to the project or performances, and should be realised through aesthetic decisions, emotional attentiveness, and more practical provisions.

Implications and directions for future research

Beyond its own findings, this thesis provides directions for future research into social impact and socially-engaged performance, community musical theatre as artistic activism, and SWO itself. It does so both by revealing lessons for *how* research is conducted within such fields as well as by highlighting the value of new research into particular substantive questions or issues.

With respect to the former, it is worth reflecting on the fact that a number of the performance features and social impacts presented, including those in Chapter 9, are not those that would have obviously been recognised as ‘activism’ or even ‘social impacts’. Instead, they arose—and became appreciated as such—because directors and members themselves highlighted their political significance. Certainly, one lens of ‘social impact’ research may well have approached SWO as a rescue project seeking to improve its participants, even while, as should now be clear, SWO represents an activist project first and foremost, with community musical theatre as the selected vessel for said activism. This contrast emphasises the necessity of avoiding imposing a preconceived lens onto the data, of engaging in reflexive critique of the very notion of ‘social impact’, and of allowing research informants to provide their own meaning—and direction—to the term. The insights offered by those interviewed within this thesis hint at the value of doing so.

More generally, the novel methodological approaches taken within this thesis may also inform strategies for carrying out interdisciplinary research, including by combining theories from the disciplines of community music, applied theatre and political performance. More notably, the music elicitation method employed within interviews offers an innovative means of exploring participants' memories, feelings, and perceptions associated with particular performances and their creation, doing so by centring work they themselves created, rather than a researcher's own framework. The thesis therefore invites further use of, and reflection on, this method.

Of course, the contributions of this thesis also suggest the value of exploring related questions in other, similar projects. At present, there are very few available studies of community musical theatre, and further research into community musical theatre projects with activist agendas offers an opportunity to develop knowledge in an under-researched area generally while facilitating productive dialogue with the findings of this study specifically. Future work in this area might therefore compare the means of providing platforms for marginalised artists to engage with and advance the activist goals of their communities, the use of certain structures and practices to support groups of marginalised artists through the process of making community musical theatre performances, and the social impacts that these platforms and this support give rise to. This can help develop understanding around particular issues—for instance, trauma and care in community-based artistic activism—as well as move forward thinking about the possibilities for these projects more generally. Beyond community musical theatre, this work prompts further exploration of topics with more general relevance to the umbrella discipline of community arts, including insider-leadership, the realisation of intersectional feminist practices, and trends and distinctions among sex worker-led community arts projects.

Future research may explore other projects, but may also continue pursuing lessons with SWO itself. Siobhán Knox and Alex Etchart are continuing their marginalised-led

multi-arts work through the umbrella organisation Sibling Arts C.I.C. and embarking on a collaborative writing process for a related feature film, with members of the SWO group and the Sex Worker Theatre group in Cape Town. Film certainly offers a different kind of platform for marginalised artists to engage with their community's activist agendas—one with greater reach and more longevity than theatre, as well as its own unique challenges. It is therefore an important site for community arts research with regards to social impact and artistic activism, more specifically (Malik et al, 2017:5). This project, in particular, is a worthwhile subject of study within the emerging field of community filmmaking, uncovering the organisational and creative complexities of collaborative writing and making a marginalised artist-led feature film. Moreover, the transition from community musical theatre to community film promises to be a fascinating process, which is as yet undocumented elsewhere.

In all, whether with respect to SWO, similar projects, or methods through which researchers can better engage with community-led initiatives, this thesis demonstrates the value of undertaking research to better understand the potential of community musical theatre—and socially-engaged performance more generally—as artistic activism.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Schedules

Individual interviews with directors: 2-3 hours with a break

- What other experiences of involvement in sex worker activism have you had, and how do these compare to your experiences in *Sex Worker's Opera*?
- Can you tell me about your experiences in the performing arts over the course of your life so far, including participation in *Sex Worker's Opera*?
- Can you describe a time, or a way in which, you felt *Sex Worker's Opera* tangibly worked to amplify the voices of sex workers?
- How has your life changed over the course of your work with *Sex Worker's Opera*?
- How would you describe the kinds of relationships you have with other members of *Sex Worker's Opera*?
- If you had to describe one thing about, or one time during, your involvement with *Sex Worker's Opera* that you have felt or feel disappointed by, what would it be?
- If you had to describe one thing about, or one time during, your involvement with *Sex Worker's Opera* that you were or are particularly proud of, what would it be?

Joint interview with directors: 3-4 hours with a break

Formation:

- Can you tell me about what made you two come to work together on *Sex Worker's Opera*?
- Can you describe what was involved in the process before you even got to the first workshop?
- Can you tell me about that first 3-day workshop period in 2014? What do you remember thinking and feeling, and what happened?

Performances:

- What do you think the impact of using performance to transmit sex worker activism has been, rather than more conventional methods?
- Can you talk me through any significant developments that were made to the show over the years?
- Speaking from your experiences as the co-founders and directors of the project, can you give examples and describe what made certain performances of *Sex Worker's Opera* better than others?

Current Stage:

- Can you describe the activities of *Sex Worker's Opera* since the final run of performances in Amsterdam last year?

- How have you navigated connections with other sex worker activists and groups around the world?
- Can you talk about the recent song-writing workshop with the Sex Worker Theatre in Cape Town, describing the process and comparing it to the initial collaborative song-writing workshop with *Sex Worker's Opera* in London?
- Now that *Sex Worker's Opera* has entered a new phase, can you talk about any changes made to the aims of the project?
- If you had to highlight some of the most significant impacts of *Sex Worker's Opera*, either among members, the sex work community and/or wider society, what would you say they were?

Listening sessions with directors and members: 2-4 hours each with a break

Play recordings of selected songs and instrumental pieces from the performance and discuss:

- Purpose
- Details of how it was created
- Memories of performing this material
- Memories of audience responses
- Feelings that listening to it brings up

Appendix 2: Sex Worker's Opera Scene List – 2018

ACT ONE

Maître'D

Speaking in rhyme and wearing a red top hat and matching ringmaster jacket, the Maître'D welcomes the audience and introduces the themes that will be explored in the performance. They are deliberately provocative, inviting those who are uncomfortable with bondage, queer philosophy and light spanking to leave. Equally, an ethic of care is apparent in the flagging of potential triggers and the explanation of the warnings that will be given throughout the performance so people can temporarily leave if they need to. Through their introduction, the Maître'D calls audience expectations into question and highlights important features of the performance. For example, they explain that 50% of the cast are sex workers, and suggest that there are likely sex workers in the audience with the line, 'Am I a sex worker? Are you one too? The person sitting next to you?' They also flag that the stories represented have been sent in from all around the world, with some cast members performing their own stories and some performing the stories of other sex workers. The Maître'D goes on to probe the audience's motivations for attending the performance, asking whether they are here to judge, to save, or perhaps to be charitable.

They are accompanied by two scantily-clad 'girls' who react dramatically to everything they say, and the orchestra provides accompaniment for the latter part of the introduction, as it morphs into a song. Playing into the uncomfortable stereotype of the 'pimp' figure, the Maître'D's introduction intentionally foregrounds the notion that sex workers are controlled, giving the prohibitionist in the following scene something to react explosively to.

Prohibitionist Rant

A performer who has been planted in the audience leaps onto the stage to interrupt the end of the Maître'D's introduction. She is shouting prohibitionist feminist arguments and is convinced that Sex Worker's Opera is promoting exploitation. She attempts to stop the orchestra from playing their introduction to 'Freedom Song'.

Freedom Song (Song)

The rant is interrupted by a deliberate cough, as one cast member enters the stage via a podium. Thus begins a full-cast song stating that sex work is a choice that ought to be respected by anyone claiming to hold feminist values. (See Chapter 4)

Sister Act

It is revealed that the prohibitionist feminist, called Natalie, has a sister in the cast, Simone. Simone, with help from the Maître'D and other performers, tries to convince Natalie to leave but she will not listen.

Domme Song (Song)

Eventually, a Dominatrix shoves Natalie to the side and launches into her solo, with the support of her two assistants and a litter of submissive clients acting like puppies. (See Chapter 4)

Sister Act – Boring Bingo

Natalie re-enters the stage to challenge the representativeness of 'Domme Song', arguing that the Dominatrix is an anomaly amongst a majority of sex workers who think they've chosen to do sex work but have actually been brainwashed, not to mention those who have been trafficked. A blaring siren goes off and the Maître'D enters in gameshow host-style, welcoming the audience to 'Boring Bingo: Bullshit that

sex workers hear all the time'. Simone and Natalie ascend to stand on two separate podiums, facing out to the audience. As Natalie continues to hurl commonly-held, ill-informed beliefs about sex work at Simone, the Maître'D hands out placards to their two assistants, extracting the core assumptions behind Natalie's statements – 'But you're so brainy' becomes 'Sex workers are stupid', for example – and thereby highlighting the prejudicial roots of Natalie's concerns. After Natalie gets a Boring Bingo 'full house', Simone addresses the impact of throwing around terms like 'trafficking' without fully understanding what they mean, explaining the dangers of measures such as FOSTA-SESTA in the US, which claim to tackle trafficking, but in fact make sex work more dangerous and create further opportunities for exploitation. The Maître'D closes the scene by inviting Natalie to take a seat and listen to the stories, including the next one from Argentina.

Street-based Worker Part 1

The scene begins with a tango-style soundtrack and a conversation in Spanish between three street-based sex workers. One of them joins a client who has pulled up in a car and they begin to set the terms for their session. Realising that the audience might not understand, they reset the scene and begin again in English. The worker and her client go to a restaurant, where he unpacks his marriage troubles and laments his wife's lack of affection. The worker advises that he compliments his wife more often, takes her on a holiday, and – most importantly – that he learns how to give her oral sex. They part ways amicably – the worker with money in her purse, and the client with a set of tips to save his marriage.

Worker-Client Duet (Song)

This duet between a worker and their client explores the complexities of navigating intimate relationships and managing expectations within sex work. The song, with its (sometimes ironically) romantic aesthetic, reveals the emotional labour required of sex workers, shining a light on a side to the job that is often disregarded in favour of a focus on the act of sex itself. (See Chapter 4)

Monologues

A group of performers arrange themselves across the stage and, one by one, tell individual stories. One speaks about having an invisible disability and her struggle to find employment. She outlines how sex work has helped her to find sustainable income and how she finds fulfilment in working with disabled clients. Another performer speaks about performing different gender identities through sex work, as well as experiencing racial fetishisation, and expresses the wish that there was a market for genderqueer escorts. A third contrasts the splendid diverse gender identities and sexual practices of her lovers with the annoyance of the men she sees for work, differentiating between sex for pleasure and sex for money. Another tells a story of interactions with social services, and the risk to sex workers of having their children taken away from them. The final story takes the analogy of a fisherman to explain the harms of the Nordic Model. It shows that the promised new lake, without the usual, navigable risks of waves and occasional storms, actually has no fish. Instead, there are only sharks – clients who are prepared to break the law and may in fact pose a greater threat to sex workers' safety.

Metje Blaak (pre-recorded video monologue)

A subtitled video is projected of sex worker activist Metje Blaak speaking about how she came to sex work through her job as a student nurse, when she gave an old, dying man a 'happy ending'. She was fired from the nursing job immediately, but subsequently found that sex work was, in fact, her calling.

Sister Act

The conversation between Simone and her sister, Natalie, continues, with Natalie making the argument that porn is responsible for the normalisation of misogyny. The Maître'D interrupts to introduce 'Porn Protest' but is cut short by another performer, who steals the Maître'D's hat and takes on the role herself, preparing the audience

for the political nature of the next scene and warning Natalie that she may not want to watch her sister...

Porn Protest

This scene was inspired by, and loosely based on, the face-sitting protests against censorship that took place outside Parliament in 2014. A collection of porn performers appear on stage, introduce themselves and act out different scenes and sexual acts in clown style. The 'politician' gradually censors the porn performers, with the only exception being the young woman performing oral sex on a man, who is directing the scene. (See Chapter 5)

Faccacello

Set to a recording of Pachelbel's Canon in D, this is a performance art piece by the cellist, who escapes the monotony of their part in the orchestra and begins to dance with their cello. Playing on the music's cultural connotations of matrimonial love, the cellist seduces the cello and proceeds to hit it with a tassel whip, revealing a dildo strapped to its back. In some performances, the cellist would have sex with the cello before returning to the orchestra to innocently continue playing their part. (See Chapter 7)

Hollywood Clichés (Song)

Beginning with a choreographed waltz, characters gradually emerge from a party scene and introduce themselves. They are parodies of stereotypes, or clichés, put forward in the mainstream media. The scene ends with another interjection from Natalie, who appreciates the ridiculousness of these stereotypes, but still can't understand that her own views on sex work are prejudicial. To strengthen her point about sex work being a viable financial option, Simone reveals that she actually supported Natalie through university education using her own income from sex work. The sisters storm off the stage (See Chapter 4)

---- INTERVAL ----

ACT TWO

Strip Club

A display of sensuality, skill and strength, as a number of dancers take to the stage, bathed in pink lighting and accompanied by a soundtrack of ethereal electronic music. They dance on the pole, the floor, a chair and, eventually, the audience. The audience witness an interaction between a dancer and a client, gaining an impression of the performative and emotional labour required of dancers working in strip clubs.

Sister Act

Another conversation between Simone and Natalie, where they argue about the nature of work. Simone takes the Maître'D hat and poetically introduces 'Capitalist Blues'.

Capitalist Blues (Song)

Performers rush around the stage in conventional work clothes, before settling into their mechanical choreography. This forms the backdrop for this song applying typical critiques of sex work to other jobs, and revealing the inherently exploitative nature of work under capitalism. (See Chapter 4)

Sister Act

Simone tells Natalie she wants to come out to their family and asks for support with it. Natalie refuses.

Family Song (Song)

In this depiction of a 'happy family' scene turned sour, some of the different approaches to sex work are explored, warning of the isolation that sex workers can experience as a result of judgements from family members, friends and partners. Across three verses, the audience witnesses the correlation between stigma, isolation and the exclusion of sex workers from family and community support. (See Chapter 4)

Sisters' Monologues

The sisters take turns in the spotlight, talking about their difficult relationships with their mum, their close relationship, and their sadness about this rift. Simone provides a backdrop to her decision to start doing sex work – unemployment, benefit cuts, precarious housing – explaining that, while it may not have solved all her problems, it is better than the alternative.

The Trans Lament (Song)

A comedic-turned-dramatic solo performed by a trans woman of colour about the systemic violence against trans sex workers of colour. (See Chapter 4)

Story Whispers

A string of monologues from different sex workers' experiences, covering topics including coming out and HIV. These are performed by actors who take turns to stand on top of the podium before moving into the audience to continue whispering their story to a smaller group of people. The noise of the whispers continues to build as more performers enter the audience, and they are accompanied by tape recorders playing additional stories sent in by sex workers from around the world.

Soho Raids

This scene is based on testimonials collected by the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP). Police enter the audience, running up the stairs of the auditorium and shining flashlights around in search of sex workers. This is a depiction of the Soho raids in 2013, when police forces stormed the red light district in Soho, London, and forcibly removed a number of sex workers from their working premises in a bid to 'rescue' victims of trafficking. Despite performers begging audience members to hide them from the police, they are all eventually extricated and brought up onto the stage where they are held while the police give a media statement.

Jail Cell

Two sex workers who have been arrested in the Soho raids are together in a dark jail cell. One of them regrets how much trouble sex work has got her into recently; the other shares how sex work enabled her to escape from an abusive relationship. They agree that the problem in both cases is men, and it emerges that they are both queer. Shouting in Spanish is heard from the next cell, and the two women talk about the abuse they saw at the hands of the police during the raids. The scene ends with one of them getting called to make a phonecall, and the focus moves to two police officers discussing the deportation of the sex worker who had been shouting in her cell.

When I Crossed the Border (Members' pre-recorded version of the poem by Alilí (2019))

A recording of this poem by Alilí is played out over the PA, with three performers reciting lines in alternation and later layering them. They speak about experiences of crossing the border, compromises, and the violence of immigration control.

Vigil

The cast gather on stage to hold a ritual in honour of sex workers who have lost their lives as the result of violence. (See Chapter 5)

Strip for the Dead

A striptease incorporating a form of bondage called shibari and experimental clarinet accompaniment. This tender bondage honours siblings and sisters who have lost their lives, showing aftercare, sensuality and solidarity. It then turns into a dance of the oppressive forces trying to control the performer, before ending with the performer standing naked and declaring, 'Prostitution gives me power. I honour the dead by celebrating life'. (See Chapter 6)

Rave

Pounding electronic dance music plays through the speakers and the performers rush onto stage to echo the statement of the performer in 'Strip for the Dead': 'We honour the dead by celebrating life!' They dance around doing a call-and-response of other sex worker activist slogans: 'Abolish poverty, not prostitution', 'Save us from saviours', and 'We will not be silenced'.

Monologue (pre-recorded by a South African sex worker)

A pre-recorded monologue sent in by a sex worker in South Africa through SWO's partnership with SWEAT is played. The speaker describes the difficulty of being accepted in the church as a homosexual and a sex worker, but explains that sex work gives her a way of providing for her family. She is satisfied that her relationship with God is good.

Street-based Worker Part 2

We return to the three Argentinian street-based workers chatting amongst themselves (in English this time) as the same client pulls up. There is a brief awkwardness when the worker does not remember him, but they eventually head to the same restaurant together. He updates her on his improved marriage, saying he

now compliments his wife's cooking frequently, has recently taken her on holiday, and performs oral sex on her every single day. The client tips the worker generously, explaining that she saved his marriage.

Sub Song (Song)

A dramatic solo sung by a submissive while she is being hit. The song covers various aspects of submission as a facet of BDSM, and calls for greater recognition of submission as both a valid sexual preference and a legitimate form of sex work. It also gives a behind-the-scenes perspective on porn, demystifying the process of making films and highlighting the potential for caring practices on set. (See Chapter 4)

Monkey in a Circus (Song)

An autobiographical piece created by one of the performers to tell her story. She performs alongside a violinist and a small chorus, who sing certain words and phrases to emphasise parts of the story and to support the performer. This song takes the audience on a journey, exploring stigma, isolation, loss, beauty and power. (See Chapter 6)

Mosaic

The cast gather to perform a poem with instrumental accompaniment. (See Chapter 4)

Listen to Me (Song)

The sisters meet in the middle of the stage and Simone asks again for Natalie's support in telling their family about her sex work. This time, Natalie is supportive. The chant of 'listen to me' starts up, with the cast dotted around the auditorium, and the song unfolds into a round before closing on the final statement: 'Listen to me'. (See Chapter 4)

