

A woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a gold sequined dress and a gold necklace, is holding a white cloth with bloodstains. She is looking down at the cloth with a somber expression. The background is blurred, showing other people in a dimly lit setting.

A DIRECTOR'S PROCESS FOR
STAGING ANCIENT GREEK
TRAGEDY IN AN ERA OF
CRISIS—FRAGILITY,
RESILIENCE, RESONANCE.

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A Director's Process for Staging Ancient
Greek Tragedy in an Era of Crisis—*Fragility,*
Resilience, Resonance.

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This thesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the
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Abstract

This creative practice doctoral research explores how staging Ancient Greek Tragedy in contemporary contexts might inform our current lived experiences in an era of crisis. I, as researcher and director, reflect on my own body of work directed for the purposes of this research—two productions, staged in a contemporary manner in non-theatre sites: Euripides’ *Women of Troy*¹ and Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*.² These productions, along with a post-production reflective drama workshop with the actors, served as testing sites of iterative discovery for the research. In 2020, I created my own theatre company, *Corvus Theatre Co.*, which has enabled me to stage my productions through an exploratory research mode and professional theatrical setting.

Undertaken during a time marked by local, national, and global turbulence—from pandemics to economic uncertainty, institutional and cultural reckonings, conflicts, and political instabilities—making theatre under such conditions was neither easy nor straightforward. Crisis, I argue, is our *zeitgeist*—the spirit of our age. Despite this turbulence, I positioned my research to see crisis as something to embrace, embody, and employ rather than merely a storm to weather—engaging with and utilising crisis as an opportunity to navigate, re-imagine, and make sense of our era through theatre. Staging ancient Greek tragedy in contemporary contexts, I highlight the enduring power and relevance of these plays to resonate with and provoke reflection on themes concerning war, women, power, trauma, survival, and resilience. How do we make sense of ourselves and our theatre practice in these chaotic and turbulent times of crisis?

Staging my productions by necessity in unconventional non-theatre spaces—spaces designed without the intention of theatrical performances, but which I adapted for performance—I discuss how we might utilise and employ *found* spaces and come to recognise them as sites of theatrical possibility and potential during this era. I explore how crisis fosters opportunities for resilience, while simultaneously revealing the fragilities within our practice. I consider whether, as artists, we should wait for a crisis to be a catalyst for change, or if we have an obligation to prepare ourselves and our practice for the next *once-in-a-lifetime* crisis?

As a critical storytelling device, I use the myth of Pandora’s Jar—recontextualised by Natalie Haynes³—to symbolically convey this era as a moment of fragility and resilience. Significantly, in a moment of *peripeteia*, my production of *Agamemnon* was cancelled

¹ *Euripides’ Women of Troy*, produced by Corvus Theatre Co, translated by Don Taylor, directed by Holly Charlotte Luton (Sir Paul Reeves Building, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, 2023), Theatre Performance.

² *Euripides’ Women of Troy*, produced by Corvus Theatre Co, translated by Ted Hughes, directed by Holly Charlotte Luton (Sir Paul Reeves Building, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, 2024), Theatre Performance.

³ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora’s Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021).

after the first full dress rehearsal due to health and internal human resource crises—situations which fundamentally challenged my assumptions underpinning my methodology. This disruption prompted *anagnorisis*, a deeper reflection from me about the limitations of seeing crisis as an opportunity—revealing that some crises cannot always be harnessed, redirected, or made generative. The collapse of *Agamemnon* became a critical point in my journey—a site that exposed the fragility of both theatre practice and practitioner, acknowledging that resilience has its limits.

My final creative practice component for examination, *An Exhibition of a Director's Process: Staging Tragedy in an Era of Crisis*, demonstrated the processes involved in producing, directing, designing, rehearsing, and performing the two productions for a public audience. The exhibition consisted of artefacts, resources, properties, costumes, and set pieces and includes photographs, videos, commentary, and written artefacts that document the process and challenges of staging the two productions. The exhibition invited attendees to contribute their own moments of fragility and resilience in making and participating in theatre in an era of crisis—placing our moments of chaos and our hopeful expectations into Pandora's Jar.

Keywords

Crisis

Ancient Greek Tragedy

Theatre

Directing

Dramaturgy

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

January 14, 2026

All graphics were designed and created by Holly, using a full Canva subscription. Rehearsal videos and photographs were taken by Holly Luton and Jane Isobel Luton. All photographs and videos of the dress rehearsals and performances of Women of Troy and Agamemnon and the creative practice exhibition are used with permission from photographers and videographers Chrisna Swart-Browne, Lesley Ung, and Michael Ung. Figure 96, "Shocking Images of Drowned Syrian Boy Show Tragic Plight of Refugees", was included for examination but redacted for publication. At the time of examination submission, this thesis adhered to the Chicago Manual of Style, 18th Edition, with each reference in full footnotes for the sake of research accessibility.

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Finally, to my mum, Jane—thank you for being my guiding light throughout this journey, and for walking beside me as mother and daughter, as actor and director, and as fellow research colleague. Getting to walk beside you during your creative practice PhD journey, and having you by my side through mine, I recognise as a rare and precious gift that I will forever cherish. Thank you for your guidance, humour, and love.

With peace and love.

Chapter One

An Introduction to the Research

The Research Question, Rationale, and Objectives

In this creative practice doctoral research, entitled *A Director's Process for Staging Ancient Greek Tragedy in an Era of Crisis—Fragility, Resilience, Resonance*, I ask, how might staging ancient Greek tragedy in contemporary contexts inform our current lived experiences of crisis? With this question, I, as researcher and director, reflect on my own body of work created for the purposes of this research, to explore how, as theatre-makers, actor/director/designer/dramaturg, we might [embrace](#), [embody](#), and [employ](#) crises as an impetus for making theatre. In staging productions in non-theatre spaces—spaces designed without the intention of theatrical performances, but which I adapted for performance—both by necessity and serendipitously, I also ask how we might utilise and employ *unusual* spaces and come to recognise them as sites of theatrical possibility and potential during the current times of crisis. In this creative practice research project, I explore the challenges and [resilience](#) of making theatre during times of crisis using the theatrical form of [ancient Greek tragedy](#), staged in a contemporary manner.

Sociologist Sylvia Walby suggests [crisis](#) is a time of heightened danger or risk when difficult decisions must be made.⁴ Some have described these times in which we live as a [permacrisis](#).⁵ It was selected by Collins Dictionary as the *word of the year* in 2022, a portmanteau of the words *permanent* and *crisis*. Permacrisis is not a convergence of independent events which happen to occur simultaneously, but rather is a phenomenon of incessant crises, interconnected by causation and consequence of each other. David Shariatmadari describes permacrisis as a word that “perfectly embodies the dizzying sense of lurching from one unprecedented event to another, as we wonder bleakly what new horrors might be around the corner”.⁶ As a director and theatre practitioner, I believe crisis is the [zeitgeist](#), the spirit of our age.

While I extensively discuss some of the challenges and crises I faced in making my own theatre practice, my intention is not to evoke a sense of pessimism. Rather, I propose a realistic position, recognising and preparing for a crisis and optimistically utilising crisis as a tool for theatre-making. Dramatist Heiner Müller suggests that “theatre is synonymous with crisis”.⁷ The history of theatre is a history of crisis, and its early

⁴ Sylvia Walby, ‘Crisis and Society: Developing the Theory of Crisis in the Context of COVID-19’, *Global Discourse* 12, nos. 3–4 (2022): 498–516, <https://doi.org/0.1332/204378921X16348228772103>, p. 3.

⁵ Adam Lent, ‘Permacrisis or Polycrisis? It Matters.’, *Medium*, 24 November 2022, <https://medium.com/@adamjlent/permacrisis-or-polycrisis-it-matters-642391bc7304>.

⁶ David Shariatmadari, ‘A Year of “Permacrisis”’, Collins Dictionary Language Lovers Blog, 1 November 2022, <https://blog.collinsdictionary.com/language-lovers/a-year-of-permacrisis/>.

⁷ Tony Fisher and Christopher Balme, eds., *Theatre Institutions in Crisis: European Perspectives* (Routledge, 2021), p. 1.

inception emerged during an epoch of crisis and chronicled stories of crisis through thematic and dramatic texts. We should, therefore, as theatre practitioners, be accustomed to the idea of crisis existing within our theatre practice and embodying our practice in crisis.

As a director and researcher, I chose to stage [ancient Greek tragedy](#) because, as the first recognised conceptualised performance in the annals of theatre, it was itself born from a period of instability and flourished amid its own turbulent times.⁸ The term *Theatre* originates from the Greek *Theatron*, meaning a spectacle, a place for watching. Exploring these plays, juxtaposed against the contexts of our modern world, the thematic and archetypal reflections resonate: Themes including revenge, justice, love, war and its consequences, refugees, class systems, slavery, plague, political power, family relationships, and religious relationships fill the stage. The core human myths and experiences of the plays evoke emotional resonances and questions about how we make sense of ourselves and the chaotic times in which we live.

For the purposes of my Masters research, in 2020, I created my own theatre company, *Corvus Theatre Co.*, which enables me to stage my productions through an exploratory research mode and professional theatrical setting. I assume the role of [director](#), [dramaturg](#), and designer in the company and created a website and social media platforms to house the information about my productions.⁹ Through my company, I have staged three Greek tragedies in non-theatre locations. This mode of performance has shaped my directorial approach and stylistic practice, operating as a means of challenging the hierarchies and conventions of the Eurocentric, proscenium-arch theatre. As Mike Pearson suggests, challenging the traditional site of performance in “the hushed and darkened rows of the auditorium” can bring about the “development of a ‘new, vibrant and distinctive theatre tradition’”.¹⁰ The proscenium arch space often carries assumptions about authority, spatial control, and audience-performer relationships through “the rules of decorum and prudence”.¹¹ Performing in non-theatre locations aims to unsettle these hierarchies, creating conditions for relational, embodied, and context-responsive theatre. Where the “auditorium is dark and quiet”, our *theatre* was ever-interrupted by students and staff hurrying from classes to exams, and awash with artificial fluorescence and the sun and moon through a skylight. Where the “auditorium is located in one place”, our *theatre* was fluid, multiple, and vast in location. Where the “audience [is] purposefully assembled”, our actors were observed from static, arranged seating and unexpectedly by visitors who surveyed from the balconies and mezzanines above and around. Where in the “auditorium this sort of thing has happened

⁸ Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 18.

⁹ Holly Charlotte Luton, ‘Corvus Theatre Co’, Corvus Theatre Co, 1 January 2021, <https://corvustheatrecowordpress.com/>.

¹⁰ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4.

¹¹ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4.

before”, we were the *first* and *only* theatre performances to take place in the engineering laboratory, grand staircase, and atrium.¹²

As a dual citizen of the United Kingdom and Aotearoa, New Zealand, and having spent most of my life in Aotearoa, I have become increasingly aware of Indigenous Māori knowledge systems, values, and cultural contexts: Mātauranga and Tikanga Māori. This awareness has sharpened my understanding of Eurocentric theatre traditions and its limitations, particularly in spatial proxemics, performer authority, and the actor-director dynamic. It has also shaped my directorial lens as a Pākehā female director, attuning me to voices and perspectives often marginalised within classical texts and their performances, including the colonial themes embedded in the Trojan War mythos, and how these narratives might be reframed and resonate within the local cultural and social landscape.

As the director, dramaturg, and designer of Corvus Theatre Co, my Master’s research project was a staging of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, translated by Don Taylor,¹³ which was performed inside a Perspex box in an Engineering Laboratory, to explore the possibility of staging live performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. During my doctoral research, I staged two productions, which served as testing sites of iterative discovery for the research. The posters for both productions were designed by me and used as promotional material.

¹² Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 16-17.

¹³ *Sophocles’ Antigone*, produced by Corvus Theatre Co, translated by Don Taylor, directed by Holly Charlotte Luton (WZ Engineering Building, Auckland University of Technology, 2021), Theatre Performance.

Production One:

Euripides' *Women of Troy*, translated by Don Taylor. Directed and Designed by Holly Charlotte Luton.¹⁴ Staged on the concrete grand staircase of the Sir Paul Reeves Building at Auckland University of Technology, City Campus, 11th-13th April 2023.



Figure 1. *Posters and Trailer, designed and created by Holly Luton for Women of Troy, 2023*

¹⁴ Euripides' *Women of Troy*, produced by Corvus Theatre Co, directed by Holly Charlotte Luton (Sir Paul Reeves Building, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, 2024), Theatre Performance.

Production Two:

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, translated by Ted Hughes. Directed and Designed by Holly Charlotte Luton, staged to the first dress rehearsal on 19th October, 2024.¹⁵ Staged in the vaulted atrium of the Sir Paul Reeves Building, Auckland University of Technology, City Campus.



Figure 2. Poster designed by Holly Luton for *Agamemnon*, 2024

¹⁵ Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, produced by Corvus Theatre Co, directed by Holly Charlotte Luton (Sir Paul Reeves Building, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, 2023), Theatre Performance.

As a pragmatic response to crisis, my performances occurred outside of a [proscenium-arch theatre](#) space, and thus outside of current Eurocentric rituals and rules of theatre. This was serendipitous. I reflect on the staging of my two productions in two non-theatre spaces in Chapter Three. I draw on my own embodied experience as the [director](#) and [dramaturg](#) and as an [actor](#) in the *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon* to inform the subsequent theatre-making processes, rehearsal, and performance of the second production in Chapter Four. I examine several challenges, some unforeseen, that arose as a result of making theatre in a time of crisis in Chapter Five.

Pre-Production Drama Workshop:

As the director and researcher, as part of my creative practice, I ran three [drama workshops](#) during my process. Two pre-production workshops—once before *Women of Troy* and once before *Agamemnon*—aimed to generate interest in the forthcoming productions and were created as an opportunity for Auckland actors to encounter and explore some of my directorial methodologies and objectives, and ancient Greek plays—a theatre form not widely explored in New Zealand contexts. A post-production drama workshop [PPDW] undertaken with some of the *Women of Troy* actors served as a contemplation and reflection of the creative practice work.

Post-Production Drama Workshop:

I created and facilitated a PPDW, approved by the AUT Ethics Committee [AUTEC], undertaken with some of the *Women of Troy* actors as research participants. The workshop provided an opportunity for the actors to revisit the production and served as a contemplation and reflection of the methods, practices, processes, parallels, and resonances that emerged in undertaking the production during an era of crisis. The five-hour workshop—inclusive of a catered lunch and afternoon tea, provided by me—was analogous of the rehearsal process we had undertaken as actors, and was approached similarly with a [collaborative](#) and supportive nature, taking the form of workshop tasks, games, and discussions. The PPDW coincidentally took place on November 11th, coinciding with Armistice Day, as recognised in the Commonwealth. War was unsurprisingly a topic of conversation given the play's themes, as we discussed current events, global conflicts,¹⁶ and the Trojan War of the play.

The PPDW was video and audio recorded to document the process using two static cameras to capture wide angles of the drama space and group activities, and a body camera worn by me as the researcher to capture close-up data as I walked around the space and spoke with actors one-on-one. The PPDW videos were transcribed by me, and I later replaced the actors' names with a letter of the Greek alphabet, as a pseudonym, with the aim of making any sensitive, explicit, or personally descriptive data anonymous. In some cases, I revert to the name of the character the actor played as a mode of confidentiality. The rich anecdotal data that was generated by them was then used to inform the subsequent production of *Agamemnon* and offered critical insights that

¹⁶ Comfort Ero and Richard Attwood, '10 Conflicts to Watch in 2024', International Crisis Group, 1 January 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2024>.

deepened my understanding of both the strengths and limitations of my practice. After the transcription process, I analysed and processed the data, searching for key themes that emerged throughout the discussion and tasks I facilitated about our rehearsal and production processes. Some of these included wars, refugees, women suffering, resilience, politics, and humour.

Throughout this written exegesis, brief passages from the PPDW transcription manifest as captured images of script, in *size 11, Courier New* font, along with actions, gestures, and emotional expressions of the actors as though imitating a play script and stage directions. The voices of the actors strengthen the positioning of the writing, and their voices are especially significant in the discussions of and reflections on my own practice. This was a key aspect within the theatre-making processes, where the actors contributed to and reflected on their artistic practices, methods, and processes alongside key academic literature, theory, and contexts. This is discussed further in later chapters.

Emerging Questions:

The aim of this research was to view the potential of crisis as a method of resilient theatre-making, and through my practice, reflect on the challenges, fragilities, and resonances that emerged while staging the ancient art form of Greek tragedy in our own lived era of crisis. Throughout these productions and workshops, my research questions began to emerge:

- ❧ How might we as theatre-makers (actor/director/designer/dramaturg) embrace, embody, and employ crises as an impetus for making theatre?
- ❧ What resonances emerge in staging ancient Greek tragedy in our contemporary turbulent times, and how might staging these plays help us to make sense of these times of crisis?
- ❧ How might crisis foster resilience, while simultaneously revealing the fragilities within our practice?
- ❧ As artists, do we wait for a crisis to be a catalyst for change, or do we have an obligation to ready ourselves and our practice for the next *once-in-a-lifetime* crisis?

I write this exegesis through the experiences of my own creative practice as a director, dramaturg, designer, and actor working in Aotearoa between the years of 2021 and 2025. This time was marked by local, national, and global turbulence, from pandemics to economic uncertainty, institutional and cultural reckonings, conflicts,¹⁷ and political instabilities. This was an era of crisis. Making theatre under such conditions was neither easy nor straightforward. Every decision regarding what to stage, where to perform, and how to make theatre was amplified in its significance. But despite this turbulence, I positioned my research to see crisis not merely as a storm to weather, but as something to embrace, embody, and employ—to engage with and to be utilised as an opportunity to

¹⁷ Comfort Ero and Richard Attwood, '10 Conflicts to Watch in 2025', International Crisis Group, 1 January 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2025>.

navigate, reimagine, and make sense of our era of crisis through theatre. This became a tenet of both my research and practice methodology. My research explores the intersection of Greek tragedy and crisis, drawing on the insights of key philosophers, cultural historians, and theatre makers engaging with crisis and the ancient Greek theatre form and context.

Theatre scholars Tony Fisher and Christopher Balme note that the Mandarin word for “crisis” combines characters meaning both “danger” and “opportunity.”¹⁸ Charles Dickens captured a similar paradox in his tragic novel about the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities*, describing an age that was both “the best of times [and] the worst of times [...] It was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope”.¹⁹ Likewise, William Strauss and Neil Howe propose a meta-historical generational theory that human history unfolds in recurring generational cycles or *turnings*—with each culminating in a *Crisis* era led by those regarded as *Heroes*, followed by an artist renaissance, a triumphant *High*, led by a generation of *Artists*.²⁰ On my desk sits a framed print of an American bison, beneath the words “Be the buffalo.” Known for charging into storms rather than fleeing them, the buffalo reminds me that crisis can be a call to action, a prompt to face adversity directly. Similarly, the ancient Greek myth of Pandora’s Box, recontextualised by Natalie Haynes as *Pandora’s Jar*,²¹ from which all evils escaped into the world, leaves behind one final *thing*—*Elpis*, *hope*. This image has become a guiding metaphor for my research, the *fragility* and instability of a jar in times of crisis, but framed not as an ending, but as a charged and necessary space for transformation.

Through this framework, I highlight the enduring power, relevance, and resonances of ancient Greek tragedy in contemporary contexts to provoke reflections on tragic themes concerning war, women, power, trauma, survival, and resilience, and how we make sense of ourselves and our theatre practice in these chaotic and turbulent times of crisis. I seek to articulate the director’s role as an active facilitator and participant, working alongside our actors to navigate and respond to these urgent themes. I actively engage with Brad Haseman’s *Performative Research*, the “third paradigm”²² of research, to generate and discover knowledge through a directorial and embodied practice. In exploring the director’s role through *Performative Research*, my work brings a fresh perspective to the existing body of knowledge about the staging of ancient Greek tragedy through non-theatre site performances, historical and theoretical examination of crises, and set within an Aotearoa theatre context.

¹⁸ Tony Fisher and Christopher Balme, eds., *Theatre Institutions in Crisis: European Perspectives* (Routledge, 2021), p. 1.

¹⁹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Signet Classics, 2007), p. 7.

²⁰ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy—What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America’s Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (Broadway Books, 1997), p. 19.

²¹ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora’s Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021).

²² Brad Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, Theme Issue ‘Practice-Led Research’* 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 1.

AUT Creative Practice Pathway

This doctoral research was undertaken through Auckland University of Technology [AUT] Creative Practice Pathway, “Practice-Oriented Research”²³—placing creative practice at the heart of the research. The pathway comprises two key components:

- 🎭 A substantial creative practice component or artefact, such as a performance, artwork, or exhibition.
- 📝 A written exegesis usually between 40-50,000 words.²⁴

The creative practice component is often submitted first, with in-person attendance by two external examiners viewing the creative practice artefact. This model recognises the creative artefact as central to the research, with the writing serving to articulate its methodologies, frameworks, and contributions.

My final creative practice component, *An Exhibition of a Director's Process in an Era of Crisis*, was presented for examination in October 2025. This exhibition demonstrated the processes involved in producing, directing, designing, rehearsing, and performing the two productions, *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon*, which were used as a testing site for the research, performed for public audiences. The exhibition consisted of artefacts, properties [props], costumes, and set pieces from both productions. The exhibition included a documentation of the processes behind the production through photographs, videos, and written artefacts.

My written exegesis sits alongside and complements the creative practice component, offering contextual, theoretical, and reflective insights into the process and includes references to the PPDW of the *Women of Troy*.

My research is shaped by my lived experience as researcher, director, dramaturg, designer, and actor. Therefore, as a crucial mode of reflective writing about my practice, I employ personal pronouns of *I* and *me*, and in discussion of the [collaborative](#) processes in rehearsals, I occasionally use *we* and *us*. This situates me as the primary researcher and maker and foregrounds the critical, reflective, and dialogic nature of this work in conversation with practitioners and theorists who have come before me. Reflection, in this context, is not retrospective but generative; it is a method of making sense, of making meaning, and of making theatre. As part of my documentation of process and practice and to convey my research in vibrant and performative ways, I weave photographs and hyperlinks of audio and videos from the rehearsals and performances and recreate tables as graphic designs throughout the written exegesis. Photographs of the *Women of Troy* dress rehearsals and performances were taken by Chrisna Swart-Browne, with videography by Lesley Ung and Michael Ung. Photographs of the *Agamemnon* dress rehearsal were also taken by Lesley Ung and Michael Ung. All photographers and

²³ Auckland University of Technology. *Auckland University Of Technology Postgraduate Handbook 2025*. Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University of Technology, 2025, p. 120

²⁴ Auckland University of Technology. *Auckland University Of Technology Postgraduate Handbook 2025*. Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University of Technology, 2025, p. 101.

videographers were professionally engaged and granted permission to use their work. They are credited accordingly. Rehearsal documentation of both productions was captured either by Jane Luton or me.

Chapter Content of the Exegesis

The exegesis contains six chapters that collectively explore the conceptual foundations, methodological positioning, and practical processes of staging ancient Greek tragedy in a contemporary Aotearoa context.

[Chapter One](#) is made up of three subsections. *The Introduction* establishes the foundation of my thesis by positioning myself as the researcher and my research context. I introduce my thesis statement, research questions, and key objectives. In [Positioning the Researcher](#), I reflect on my perspective as a director and how my personal, cultural, and professional experiences have shaped my approach to directing. I discuss my positionality as a British-New Zealander and highlight the influence of key female theatre practitioners, including Joan Littlewood, Polly Findlay, Marianne Elliott, Rebecca Frecknall, Katie Mitchell, Alexandra McKellar, and Jane Luton—particularly the formative impact of observing my mother’s directing practice. In [Positioning and Framing the Research](#), I establish the methodological framework of the thesis, with a focus on Brad Haseman’s “third paradigm” of *Performative Research*.²⁵ I justify this approach as one that aligns with my creative process and dual role as director and performer within the research. The section situates my work within broader scholarly discussions of practice-based research and articulates how my creative process and reflections contribute to theatre knowledge.

[Chapter Two, Contextual Review](#), provides the contextual and theoretical foundations for my research, consisting of two interrelated sections that explore the role of crisis—both historically and conceptually—in relation to theatre practice and [dramaturgy](#). [The Birth of Crisis: When Pandora’s Jar Fell Over](#) introduces Natalie Haynes’ recontextualization of the ancient Greek myth of Pandora’s Jar,²⁶ using it as a metaphorical framework for understanding how crisis manifests, functions, and shapes my creative practice. Drawing a symbolic parallel between Pandora’s jar and the COVID-19 pandemic, I consider the revelation of the jar’s contents as emblematic of the complex, catalytic, and cascading nature of crisis and its far-reaching consequences. I engage with key theorists, including Sylvia Walby, Avra Sidiropoulou, Christopher Balme, Tony Fisher, William Strauss, and Neil Howe, to examine contemporary conceptions of crisis, particularly the notion of [permacrisis](#). I also consider how crisis operates dramaturgically: as dramatic structure, as theme, and as a historical and aesthetic force in theatre. The section concludes by positioning crisis as an opportune, generative moment—one that can be embraced, embodied, and employed as an impetus for theatre-making. [Theatre in Era of Crisis](#) explores the specific historical contexts of theatre during times of crisis, illuminating how

²⁵ Brad Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, Theme Issue ‘Practice-Led Research’* 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 1.

²⁶ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora’s Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021).

these histories have informed the resilience of my own practice. I examine the origins of [ancient Greek drama](#) as emerging from a period of civic crisis, and how Greek tragedy thematises crisis to reflect the sociopolitical tensions of its time. I consider more recent examples, particularly the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on theatre industries, institutions, and artists. Through this lens, I reflect on the pandemic's disruptions as both challenges and provocations that have shaped contemporary theatre practice, including my own.

[Chapter Three, *The Research Design, Methods and Methodology*](#), explores the methodological framework of my practice as a director. This includes my dramatic intentions, methods, games, and strategies and how I operate and frame my practice through a research framework, with explorations of crisis, ancient Greek tragedy, and non-theatre sites of performance. I explore how my ethos and principles inform my creative processes as a director. This chapter discusses how these dramatic methods and strategies were implemented in the creation of the two productions, *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon*, and the *Women of Troy* PPDW.

[Chapter Four, *A Director at Work, Creating the World of the Play: Critical Ideas Underpinning the Practice*](#), explores the critical ideas and thematic concerns that shaped my directorial approach and decision-making throughout the creative process. It discusses the theoretical and practical application of key elements in the staging of *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon*, including choice of text, location of the work, casting, rehearsing, textual exploration with the actors, and staging processes, and the design choices of setting, costume, props. The chapter reflects on how these elements were developed and how they contributed to the creation of each play's unique world. I unpack the core concepts underpinning my practice: crisis, [fragility](#), [resilience](#), and [resonance](#). I analyse how these ideas informed the thematic direction of my productions, shaped the rehearsal process, and guided key creative decisions. I explore the political parallels embedded in the plays and how contemporary crises—both societal and personal—were consciously embraced as dramaturgical forces in the making of the work.

[Chapter Five, *Considering Fragility, Resilience, and Resonances in an Era of Crisis: A Reflection on my Practice*](#), offers a critical and reflective account of the creative process behind my two productions, and the challenges, disruptions, pressures, and insights that emerged during the casting, rehearsal, and staging processes. This chapter examines my evolving role as the director and dramaturg navigating the complex processes of collaboration, crisis, and creative decision-making. I explore the [collaborative](#) nature of [ensemble](#) work, the dynamics between director and actor, and the influence of crisis, both personal and global, as a creative framework. I discuss the collapse of the production of *Agamemnon*, due to my own personal health scare and the interpersonal dynamics that materialised. To deepen the reflective inquiry, I incorporate an imagined scripted dialogue between myself and four influential female directors—Judith Weston, Anne Bogart, Avra Sidiropoulou, and Katie Mitchell. Framed as a theatrical conversation, this device allows me to engage candidly and emotionally with the realities of directing under pressure, drawing out shared beliefs, values, and challenges in a dramaturgically

resonant way. I address central reflective questions that emerged in the research and production processes: What worked? What did not? How did unexpected moments challenge or transform my process? I examine how these experiences shaped my approach to theatre-making and shifted my understanding of myself as both a director and a researcher. Finally, I interrogate the ethical complexities of *Performative Research* and directing theatre for the purposes of research. I explore challenges that surfaced in my productions, particularly the blurring of boundaries between actor and research participant. What are the expectations of each role? Where do they overlap? And what happens when those boundaries break down? I critically reflect on the tensions that emerged and the implications for directing ethically within a research framework and in an era of crisis.

In this chapter, [I conclude by discussing the key findings and what I discovered during my research.](#) I discuss how my work has expanded theatre knowledge in directing, *Performative Research*, and exploration of theatre *in*, *of*, and *about* crisis. I discuss how this research will inform my future processes and practice. I close with a final reflection on my artistic and intellectual journey and how I believe the role of theatre in times of instability can contribute to the wider conversation of making sense of crisis. I finally explore the last object that remained in Pandora's Jar—*hope*. I use this idea to demonstrate how crisis can be both disruptive and necessary for artistic creation. I reinforce that my research is not just about the fragility of crisis but how to navigate it and the transformative possibilities, resilience, and artistic renewal that can emerge in these turbulent times.

Positioning the Researcher: Why I do what I do

Because this research is embedded in my own practice, it necessarily begins with a discussion of who I am and those who have influenced my practice. I was born in England, where I lived and went to school. At the age of five, my family and I immigrated to Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa—Auckland, New Zealand. I now hold a dual citizenship of both countries and experience the world through both cultural lenses. I am a cisgender woman,²⁷ with passionate interests in the interconnected web of arts, humanities, and sciences disciplines—of drama and theatre, classical studies and ancient history, theology and mythology, social and world history, anthropology, archaeology, and astronomy, music, food, and culture, politics, philosophy, and physics. While these interests might appear to reside outside of and separate from theatre, I argue they *are* interconnected and help me to situate my worldview. Raised in a family that nurtured creativity and curiosity, I am eclectic by nature with a love for interdisciplinary thinking and exploration. My mother is a drama teacher, and my father is an engineer.

For as long as I can remember, my parents took my brother and me to zoos, museums, art galleries, historical sites, travelled to many different countries, and saw an extraordinary amount of theatre and performing arts. They encouraged us to create,

²⁷ With identifying pronouns, she/her.

explore, and ask questions. Throughout my upbringing, I was supported to remain curious and inquisitive. History and Drama became my passion subjects, offering me ways of seeing the world through historical, philosophical, scientific, theatrical, and dramaturgical lenses.

From a young age, I was present in drama classrooms and theatre spaces as my mother directed school productions and assessed student performances. I can recall nearly every production I have seen, from large-scale professional shows to amateur and community theatre. I have acted and sung in numerous musical theatre productions both at secondary school, in community theatre, and professional productions.²⁸ Theatre means the world to me because it is how I grew up understanding the world. If you were to put me under a microscope, you might find theatre encoded in my DNA. I live and breathe it. It is my world, stimulating my curiosity and shaping who I am.

My Love for Greek Tragedy



Figure 3. Statue of Euripides at Auckland Museum's Exhibition: Ancient Greeks: Athletes, Warriors and Heroes

My affinity for the ancient Greeks runs deep. I first encountered Greek tragedy watching my mother direct a secondary school production of *Medea*, complete with a real sailing dinghy on stage. I was awed by this unfamiliar but fascinating form. But it was watching a

²⁸ Some highlights in my acting career have included Barry Manilow's *Copacabana*, Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and Ragni, Rado, and McDermott's *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*, and Benjamin Henson's *Rhinoceros* and *Bed* performed with Auckland Theatre Company.

production of *Antigone*, directed by Polly Findlay at the National Theatre in London,²⁹ when I was fifteen, that really ignited my passion for [ancient Greek theatre](#). In that moment, sitting in the dark—watching a woman defy authority in the name of justice—I felt emboldened as I watched Christopher Eccleston as Creon and Jodie Whittaker as Antigone, debate the laws of man and the gods, and who had power and authority over people in a time of crisis. Watching Eurydice’s dead body unveiled behind a glass screen—blood smeared across the stage—gave me chills. I did not have the words to describe what I was seeing at the time, but I knew that this play mattered in the then-current events of the world through young eyes. Since then, I have been an avid fan of all things ancient Greek, reading the book series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*.³⁰ I studied Classics and Drama at secondary school and University, visiting Greek exhibitions across the world,³¹ and performing Greek tragedies at school. As a theatre-goer, I have seen productions from the National Theatre Live recordings of *Medea*,³² and live performances of Auckland Theatre Company’s *Lysistrata*,³³ a Korean-language production of *Oedipus*,³⁴ a reinterpretation of *Medea*,³⁵ produced by Silo Theatre in Auckland, an adaptation of *Antigone*,³⁶ at Regents Park Open Air Theatre, London,³⁷ and Punchdrunk’s *The Burnt City*,³⁸ an immersive adaptation of the Trojan War plays Euripides’ *Hecuba* and Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. A highlight included visiting the National Theatre Archive in Waterloo, London, in 2022 to watch a recording of Katie Mitchell’s 2007 production of *Women of Troy*, analysing her director’s script and notes.

I believe Greek tragedy endures because it is alive, and it excites me. The plays are dramatic, political, visceral, inspirational, challenging, critical, urgent, and otherworldly, and yet they speak to our own experiences and are existentially human. Avra Sidiropoulos

²⁹ *Antigone*, produced by The Royal National Theatre, translated by Don Taylor, directed by Polly Findlay (Olivier Theatre, 2012), Theatre Performance.

³⁰ Rick Riordan, *The Lightning Thief*, *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* (Miramax Books, 2005).

³¹ I attended the international touring exhibition of The British Museum’s *The Greeks: Athletes, Warriors, Heroes*, at the Auckland War Memorial Museum in 2022, multiple times, and visited the British Museum’s Ancient Greek Galleries in the United Kingdom in 2022.

³² *Medea*, produced by The Royal National Theatre, translated by Ben Power, directed by Carrie Cracknell (Olivier Theatre, 2014), Theatre Performance.

³³ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, produced by Auckland Theatre Company, adapted and directed by Michael Hurst (Rangitira, Q Theatre, 2015), Theatre Performance.

³⁴ Sophocles, *The Chorus: Oedipus*, produced by LG Arts Centre and Juk-dal, directed by Seo Jae-Hyung, with Choe Uzong (Rangitira, Q Theatre, 2016), Theatre Performance.

³⁵ *Medea*, produced by Silo Theatre, directed by Rachel House (Herald Theatre, 2016), Theatre Performance.

³⁶ Excitedly, I recognised Inua Ellams, the playwright in the audience the night I attended, and nervously approached him after the play for an autograph of my purchased script. Having not yet seen a published copy of his script, he was extremely gracious and eager to sign my copy.

³⁷ Inua Ellams, *Antigone*, directed by Max Webster (Regents Park Open Air Theatre, 2022), Theatre Performance.

³⁸ *The Burnt City*, produced by Punchdrunk, directed by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle (One Cartridge Place, Woolwich, 2022), Immersive Theatre Performance.

emphasises that “ideally, the encounter of [ancient Greek] text and performance should be fuelled by excitement, passion, and surprise”.³⁹

As a historian, I am excited and revel in the historical and political contexts of the playwright and translators and the potential to explore the parallels that resonate with our modern world. Theodore Grammatas et al. suggests that the relevance of Greek drama is no “mere theoretical discourse”.⁴⁰ He and his colleagues gathered empirical data and testimonies from various theatre stakeholders, which included directors. Their findings suggested “that the values of ancient Greek drama continue to hold full relevance today.”⁴¹ These are the very reasons that I chose to stage the Greeks—as a confrontation, contemplation, and a resonance between the past and the now.

Becoming a director and researcher, I found these plays to be widely accessible—practically, thematically, and aesthetically. Translations and adaptations of the original texts that do survive are widely available for performance, many of which adopt contemporary, vernacular language that rejects the archaic lexicon of a bygone era. While the myths themselves may seem strange or unfamiliar, their core themes and resonances feel deeply familiar, inviting reinterpretation. Living in Aotearoa, and lecturing students in a collaborative-practice paper on Māori mythology and history at AUT, I have found striking parallels between Māori and Greek myths, their Heroes, cosmologies, and the societal values and moral questions they pose.⁴² Classical scholars and dramaturgs widely acknowledge that little documentation, fixed specifications, or organic materials survive from the original performances of ancient Greek tragedy. Apart from the dramatic texts themselves, the stone remains of theatre structures, and limited primary sources—including Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy⁴³ or pottery iconography⁴⁴—there are no surviving costumes, masks, props, sets, or stage directions. As Oliver Taplin suggests, “we have, to all intents and purposes, no evidence besides the text for what happens in the action of the plays [...] There are virtually no marginal stage-directions in the transmitted texts and there is no reason to think that there ever were.”⁴⁵ Therefore, as directors, we rely largely on inferences from the text’s language, broader historical contexts, and the performance conventions of tragedy to make dramatic interpretations when adapting or

³⁹ Avra Sidiropoulou, ‘Adaptation as a Love Affair: The Ethics of Directing the Greeks’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, by Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 132.

⁴⁰ Theodore Grammatas et al., ‘The Values of Ancient Greek Drama and Theatre in Space and Time: The Present of the Values’, Research Gate, November 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375642369_The_values_of_Ancient_Greek_Drama_and_Theatre_in_Space_and_Time_The_Present_of_the_values.

⁴¹ Theodore Grammatas et al., *The Values of Ancient Greek Drama and Theatre in Space and Time: The Present of the Values* (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens Press, 2023), p. 51.

⁴² Simon Perris et al., eds., *Athens to Aotearoa: Greece and Rome in New Zealand Literature and Society* (Victoria University Press, 2017).

⁴³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁴ Perhaps the most famous reference is the depiction of a theatre ‘afterparty’ on the Pronomos Vase, 400BCE. Pronomos Painter, *Pronomos Vase*, 400 BCE, Attic Red Figure Volute-Crater Vase, <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/resources/Introduction-to-Greek-Pottery/Keypieces/redfigure/pronomos>.

⁴⁵ Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Routledge, 2002), p. 12.

staging the form. The plays thus remain open and alive aesthetically and creatively unbound for the director. There is nothing definitive to compare our work to, no original blueprint to recreate. Everything resides within the text and in the imagination of the contemporary direction.

As a female director, there is an added tension and resonance in staging these works—written, performed, and watched only by men—because, in a sense, our direction of these plays is a reclamation of female stories that were not afforded to women in ancient times. Emotionally, intellectually, and artistically, the plays demand everything of us. They ask us to look at ourselves and our world. In doing so, they offer a rare kind of *hope*. As Grammatas et al. emphasise, Greek tragedy “arms us with the theoretical wisdom of recognizing our limits, along with the painful self-evident truth that surpassing human magnitude leads to destruction [...] tragedy pushes us to contemplate on our own place in society and to reconcile with our mortality”.⁴⁶

My Directorial Influences: Female Directors and the Female Gaze

In the following section, I consider the female theatre directors whose work has distinctly resonated with my own creative practice. I begin by introducing each director, followed by a brief discussion of how their work has shaped and influenced my own approach to directing—whether through directly experiencing their productions or, in some cases, recognising, in retrospect, the parallels with my own principles, methods, strategies, and theatrical aesthetics.

Although I have been raised in Aotearoa, I experience a joyful and visceral reaction to UK-based work and UK theatre directors that I cannot always explain. This may be the result of the deep cultural imprint left by both my early childhood there, holidays, and my return as an adult, when I lived and studied in London for a year. Although I have family and friends in the UK, each time I visit, I plan my entire trip around seeing theatre.

I consider why I respond so strongly to work by women, and why I am so compelled by the female gaze. As a ciswoman, I inherently engage with literature and media through the lens of my own gendered experience. I am interested in how these experiences shape both the creation and reception of theatre. Female directors often offer perspectives that feel particularly compelling to me—their storytelling choices, character work, and framing resonate on a deeper level. I am especially drawn to how stories unfold when viewed through a female lens.

As a historian, I am concerned with social history and the stories of those who have been forgotten or omitted from the historical narrative. As an actor, I have been directed by five female directors and taught by two female Drama teachers, all of whom have had a profound impact on my practice. It is of great interest to me as to why, then, as a female theatre practitioner, I am drawn to Greek tragedy—this patriarchally dominant form,

⁴⁶ Theodore Grammatas et al., *The Values of Ancient Greek Drama and Theatre in Space and Time: The Present of the Values* (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens Press, 2023), p. 33.

written, performed, and seen only by men in ancient times, appears focused, and even perhaps obsessed, with the *female experience*.⁴⁷

Of the following female directors, I have either worked alongside them, seen their work live, researched their practices and productions, or encountered them serendipitously as I created my own.

Joan Littlewood: Using Research, The Ensemble, and Satire.

My initial exposure to Joan Littlewood's work occurred during my secondary school education; this early encounter developed into a deeper academic engagement during my university studies. Influenced by the work of Bertolt Brecht, Littlewood's directorial methods included actors undertaking their own contextual research and her utilisation of the collective [ensemble](#)—two methods that are fundamental to my own practice. I consider her purposeful use of satire and irony to portray historical events in her theatre company's production of *Oh What a Lovely War*⁴⁸—an important method used to highlight a tragedy rather than exploit it for the detriment of those who have lived the event. Rather than setting her play to rousing, patriotic music throughout,⁴⁹ Littlewood deliberately selected satirical songs sung by British soldiers or juxtaposed tragic scenes of the First World War with popular music. She did not want to “adopt the nostalgic mood and sentimental atmosphere that pervaded”⁵⁰ early depictions of the Great War in media, instead using music as “bitter commentary, gallows humour and ironic critique”.⁵¹ For example, we see British Generals dancing along to the title song, while images of the brutal battlefields and the number of young men who have died are projected behind them.⁵² As I will discuss later, this use of a rousing tune juxtaposed with tragedy influenced my own directorial approach, when in *Agamemnon*, I incorporated punk rock music during Agamemnon's murder to ironically underscore the scene's dramatic violence.

Polly Findlay: Spectacle and Subtext

Polly Findlay's directorial approach to capitalise on and command space has strongly influenced my own practice. I draw on her ability to harness the spectacle or subtlety of a space to intensify a play's subtext and meaning. Regardless of a space's size, she argues that a play must be visually captivating, drawing in the audience, whether by sheer spectacle or scale or through subtlety of text and gesture. “When you are directing a big production [...] part of your toolkit in terms of communicating the story to the audience is

⁴⁷ Of the three Greek tragedies I have directed, *Women of Troy* is the only original play text which passes the Bechdel test, with two women, and specifically named characters, having a conversation about something other than a man—the Chorus Women and Hecuba, Cassandra and Hecuba, and Andromache and Hecuba all converse about Helen.

⁴⁸ *Oh What a Lovely War*, produced by Theatre Workshop, directed by Joan Littlewood (Theatre Royal Stratford East, 1963).

⁴⁹ Some songs such as ‘Land of Hope and Glory’ appear in instrumental arrangements throughout the play.

⁵⁰ Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood*, Routledge Performance Practitioners (Routledge, 2006), p. 89.

⁵¹ Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood*, Routledge Performance Practitioners (Routledge, 2006), p. 89.

⁵² Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood*, Routledge Performance Practitioners (Routledge, 2006), p. 81

your use of spectacle”.⁵³ But in a smaller space, Findlay draws on subtext, as directors, “we’re asking ourselves all the time, ‘what’s the scene underneath the scene? What are the things happening under the line?’”⁵⁴ Her work is thus often set in either *all* or *nothing* contexts, with action and gesture wide and dramatic or contained and subtle. Performed in the Olivier, at the National Theatre in London, her 2012 production of *Antigone* was set in a large underground concrete bunker, straddling the width of the stage with concrete walls and glass office cubicles.⁵⁵ Watching this production live, in-person, I experienced the palpability of such spectacle, with the expansive set requiring a tennis-like viewership from the audience, glancing from stage left to right, as we watched Antigone argue with her sister Ismene over the burial rights of their treacherous brother.

Marianne Elliott: Theatre Magic and Workshopping

In 2012, I attended a performance of Marianne Elliott’s production of *War Horse*, performed at the New London Theatre⁵⁶ and again on a tour to Aotearoa in 2019, and later watched the live recording of her 2013 production, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. I then attended in person her 2017 production of *Angels in America*, performed at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, London. If Findlay is *spectacle*, Elliott, I believe, is *magic*. Her productions have been among the most memorable that I have seen. Her capacity to create moments of wonder has galvanised me as a director to harness the theatrical. In *War Horse* she transformed a frame of wood, chiffon-like fabric, and bicycle brakes into a *horse*, and in *Angels in America*, a frame of metal, wire, and feathers into an *angel*—both brought alive and living by the puppeteers and actors. When I contemplate these moments, I am still left speechless and can feel the frisson.

⁵³ Polly Findlay, Masterclass NSDF 21 | Polly Findlay in conversation with Peter Bradley, interview by Peter Bradley, Video Interview, 30 March 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/NSDFest/videos/2852074125066051>.

⁵⁴ Polly Findlay, Masterclass NSDF 21 | Polly Findlay in conversation with Peter Bradley, interview by Peter Bradley, Video Interview, 30 March 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/NSDFest/videos/2852074125066051>.

⁵⁵ Soutra Gilmour, ‘Soutra Gilmour: Antigone’, Soutra Gilmour: Design for Performance, Set & Costume, n.d., <https://www.soutragilmour.com/theatre/antigone>.

⁵⁶ Now the Gillian Lynne Theatre.

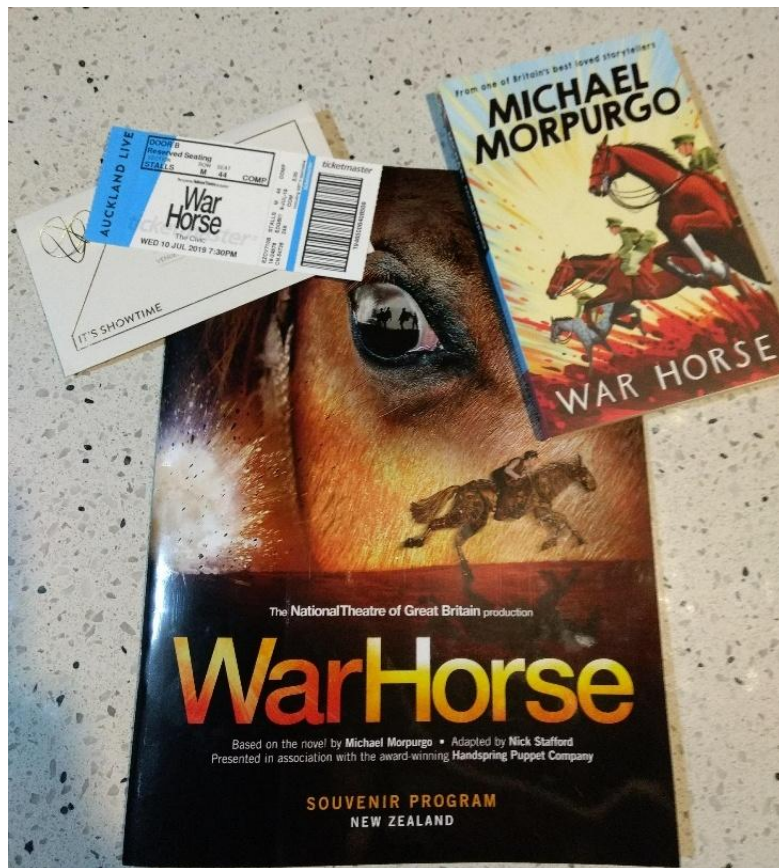


Figure 4. Theatre ticket and programme from War Horse Tour in Aotearoa, July 2019.

It is a challenging undertaking for a director to take inanimate objects and convincingly transform them into living, breathing creatures. The stakes are especially high to fully suspend an audience's disbelief, or rather their agreement to believe in the depiction of mythical creatures such as angels or gods. Absolute confidence is required from an actor who convinces the audience of their belief in the *life* of an object. Puppeteer, Toby Olié, affirms that Joey the Horse is alive, "this thing is alive, this thing is alive, this thing is alive [...] You are the soul and life force of a puppet, and you're using a suspension of disbelief to animate. So, when the puppeteer lets go, that's the moment of death."⁵⁷ As I will discuss later, this influenced my choices in portraying the death of the young child Astyanax in the climax of *Women of Troy*.

One of my directorial methods includes undertaking a pre-production workshop with actors who might be interested in being a part of my productions. As an ensemble company, the aim of the workshop is to explore some of the themes of the play text, whether the actors can demonstrate critical and reflective responses to the text in their creative tasks, and their ability to work with strangers in an unfamiliar setting.

⁵⁷ Kate Wyver, 'Strung out: The Afterlife of War Horse's Joey and Other Puppet Stars', Stage, *The Guardian*, 4 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/sep/04/weird-afterlife-puppets-theatre-war-horse-joey>.

Part of Elliott's practice involves the undertaking of drama workshops with actors prior to rehearsals. There is a sense that despite Elliott's renowned success as a director,⁵⁸ her workshops are also a means of validating her creative aims and processes.⁵⁹ These feelings similarly resonate with me. Although I initially developed my own workshops independently, I later recognised that my process paralleled Elliott's. Like her, I use workshops to explore ideas in a collaborative setting before formal rehearsals begin. I, too collect data—through photographs and video recordings—which I refer back to throughout the rehearsal process to inform and refine my directorial decisions.

Rebecca Frecknall: Subtlety and Seriousness

Rebecca Frecknall's use of subtlety in her direction captivates me. In 2022, I saw Frecknall's revival of the Ebb and Kander musical, *Cabaret*, performed at the Playhouse Theatre on London's Embankment,⁶⁰ which has been transformed into an immersive setting of the Kit Kat Club. I have always gravitated toward political theatre—work that confronts and challenges the present moment with urgency and purpose. Its ability to provoke, unsettle, and illuminate has long compelled me. Frecknall's, influenced by Littlewood's practices, emphasises ensemble collaboration, physicality, and the breaking of traditional boundaries. Frecknall revitalises classic texts to make them feel urgent and relevant to contemporary audiences.

⁵⁸ Marianne Elliott is a four-time Tony Awards winner, five-time Laurence Olivier Award winner, and in 2018, was appointed [Officer of the Order of the British Empire](#) (OBE) for services to Theatre.

⁵⁹ In an aim to persuade Stephen Sondheim, creator of the musical *Company*, Elliott staged and filmed a week-long workshop for her revival production with the actors, to test the viability of a gender-swapped protagonist of Bobbi, reimagined as a woman. Rachel Cooke, 'Marianne Elliott: 'I've Had Some Healthy Debates with Sondheim, but He Also Said I Need to Guide Him'', Stage, *The Observer*, 16 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/sep/16/marianne-elliott-interview-company-sondheim>.

⁶⁰ *Cabaret*, book by Joe Masteroff, music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb, directed by Rebecca Frecknall (Kit Kat Club, Playhouse Theatre, London, 2022), Theatre Performance.



Figure 5. Holly outside the Kit Kat Club Theatre, *Cabaret*, in London 2022.

Cabaret is one of my favourite musicals for this reason, set in a pre-war Berlin nightclub in the intervening years between the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi rise to power. Frecknall's *Cabaret* is one of those rare productions that left me feeling euphoric, and in my short visit to London, saw twice.

Frecknall's directorial choices are subtle. Historical hindsight enhances the dramatic irony of the play, and we as the audience, can recognise that many of the characters will die in the Holocaust as the Nazi's targeting minority groups through their ideologies of racism, antisemitism, homophobia, anti-socialism, and anti-intellectualism. In *Cabaret*, Frecknall forces the audience to sit in moments of great silence, highlighting the dramatic irony, and allowing them to reflect and decipher the symbolic imagery. She manipulates the audience's anticipation for shocking effect, paralleling the celebratory joy in the *breaking of the glass* ceremony in traditional Jewish weddings with *Kristallnacht*, the *night of broken glass*—a coordinated raid and violent destruction of Jewish homes,

businesses, and synagogues across Nazi Germany in 1938. As a director, Frecknall's use of stillness and silence has resonated with me. I use these [drama conventions](#) in my productions to create tension and provoke thought from the audience. Like Littlewood and Elliott, these moments can be especially unsettling when juxtaposing comedic elements with the tragedy.

Frecknall's work is so powerful because her productions bring urgent relevance to our modern world, contextualising the play through costumes and settings that feel either anachronistic or strikingly modern, while reflecting the content of the mid-20th-century rise in fascism. By juxtaposing seemingly outdated ideas or histories with our contemporary concerns, Frecknall demands of us, as the audience, to confront the enduring and urgent resonance of these themes—dismantling any illusion of detachment from the worrying possibility that fascism or authoritarianism could occur again, or that a genocide could unfold right under our noses. As Matt Wolf suggests, Frecknall "treats the often overly familiar play as if it were entirely fresh, and the result is astonishing."⁶¹ In Chapter Three, I will discuss in detail some of the influences when staging Greek tragedy and the parallel political urgency of our contemporary crises and society.

Katie Mitchell: Directing Greek Tragedies

Mitchell is well-versed in the Greeks, having directed several productions with the National Theatre—The Oresteia Trilogy: *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*, 1999, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 2004, and *Women of Troy*, 2007. Influenced by the practices of Konstantin Stanislavski, her directorial style is precise. Breaking from the burdens of the heavy text, she focuses her directorial attention on the subject material, themes, and deeper subtext and psychological questions of the play.

Returning to the UK in 2022, I requested to view Katie Mitchell's artefacts, video, and photographs of her 2007 production of *Women of Troy*, at the National Theatre Archive in London. Having staged my first Greek production of Sophocles' *Antigone* and then immersed in my second rehearsals for *Women of Troy*, with the key scenes having been refined with my cast, I sought out Mitchell's work as a means of reflecting on my own artistic practices. From the archives, Mitchell's director's notes give us an insight into the extensive work on characterisation that she undertakes with her actors. Aside from the few named characters that exist outside of the plays in ancient myths—for example, Hecuba and Cassandra—the play text offers little extensive character analysis that a modern author in a post-Psychoanalytic era might include in stage directions or character profiles. Because of this, one of Mitchell's methods includes working through the motivations and psychologies of each character—both named and [Chorus](#)—considering why they behave the way they do, where they have come from before the onstage action, and where they are going after the onstage action. Her actors detail their

⁶¹ Wolf, Matt. 'Review: In London, a "Romeo and Juliet" That Feels Startlingly New'. *The New York Times*, 16 June 2023, sec. Theater. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/16/theater/romeo-and-juliet-toheeb-jimoh.html>.

individual character's lives, explaining their age, name, family, career, hobbies, and relationships. Mitchell's motivation for this is *precision*, arguing that actors who are "immersed in a situation to play a character in a real time, in a real place, [allows] an audience [to] believe that the action was really happening."⁶² It is this precision that makes Mitchell's work accessible to a modern audience bringing ancient Greek texts alive. Similarly, I, too, task the actors with creating extensive backgrounds and their relationships with other characters in the play which I will later discuss in relation to the interactive games and strategies I play with my actors.

Using Stanislavski's acting techniques can bring an [ancient Greek drama](#) to life as though the text were a 21st-century conversation. However, one of the key issues that I have come to recognise is the vastly significant changes to the world 17 years on from Mitchell's last staging at the National Theatre. Asking actors to channel situations can become complicated in this era of crisis. As a generation of social media users, violence and brutality are no longer sanitised and confined to the hour-long television news cycle—violence is ubiquitous, immediate, and conveniently accessible. Anyone can report the news and deliver uncensored images of our era of crisis.⁶³ Therefore, I prompt the actors to channel the *emotional resonance* that they felt *about* a situation rather than exploiting the original *emotion* or *memory* of the situation—I want them to portray sadness, but not actually be upset. This separation allows the actor to step away from the very real experience they live or see in their everyday lives, from the illustrative depictions within the play, while still reflecting on the parallels between the two worlds.

Jane Luton: Watching from the Wings

My directorial methods and approaches have been shaped by watching my mother's work as a Secondary school Drama teacher. Like Elliott watching her own parents direct as a young child, I fondly recall my school holidays and weekends sitting in the back of theatre auditoriums or peering through the velvet curtains from the wings, watching my mother direct school productions. I reflect on the many trips we took together to the theatre, and the extensive lesson planning for assessment she would create for her students. We share a love of political theatre and have a telepathic-like communication in the many years of seeing theatre together.

A key method of Luton's practice is her use of the ensemble. Supported by an ethos of inclusion, Jane regards that every actor plays a fundamental role in the work. Because of her education background working with young people, she is aware that a student's schoolwork often goes unseen by their parents, relatives, or friends when presented in assessment contexts, such as an essay, science project, or practical task. Productions provide an opportunity for a student's hard work to be seen in a public setting, help them to learn the soft skills of communication and teamwork by working with new people,

⁶² Charlotte Higgins, 'The Cutting Edge', Stage, *The Guardian*, 24 November 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/24/theatre.stage>.

⁶³ Dan Milmo, 'Meta Apologises over Flood of Gore, Violence and Dead Bodies on Instagram', Technology, *The Guardian*, 28 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/feb/28/meta-apologises-over-flood-of-gore-violence-and-dead-bodies-on-instagram>.

enhance their sense of contribution through ensemble work, and feel that they are an integral part of the performance. She therefore ensures that all students are seen on stage as much as possible, have the opportunity to develop their character, and deliver lines of dialogue. She does this by splitting roles or creating new characters. A student's visibility on stage provides their family and friends the chance to witness their hard work and achievements while developing their own skills. In 2014, we performed together in her creative practice doctoral performance.⁶⁴

In staging my own work, I have employed these strategies when dealing with the [Chorus](#) roles in Greek tragedy, which I will discuss in further detail later in this exegesis. Channelling Jane's ethos, which I now embrace, in all three of my productions, I deliberately ensured that the ensemble was on stage as much as possible, through pre-show devised scenes, and making the final bows as a collective act of gratitude rather than as individual *lead* and *Chorus* actors bowing separately.

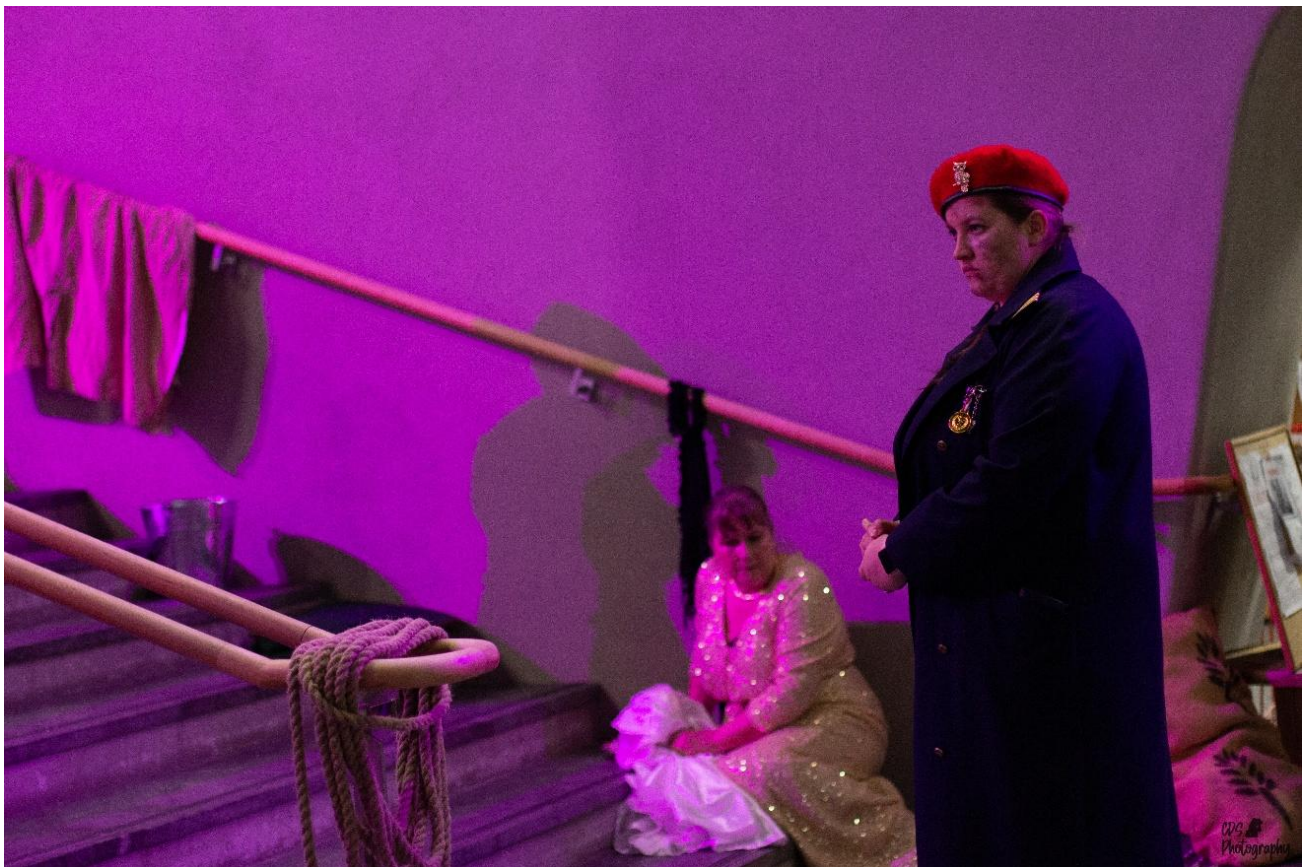


Figure 6. Jane as Hecuba, and Holly as Talthybius, together in *Women of Troy*

⁶⁴ *Battles and Barricades: A Drama about Drama Education*, directed by Jane Isobel Luton, performed by Jane Isobel Luton and Holly Charlotte Luton (Musgrove Studio, Maidment Theatre, 2014), Theatre Performance.

Alexandra McKellar: Finding my Tribe—Te Iwi Toa.



Figure 7. *Holly in Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*, Northshore Music Theatre, in the role of Marjorie, as John Wilkes Booth. Photograph by Chrisna Swart-Browne.

In 2016, I was part of the ensemble cast in Alexandra McKellar's production of *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*⁶⁵ at North Shore Music Theatre in Auckland.⁶⁶ This production played a formative role in my early performance career and has deeply influenced both my artistic practice and personal convictions. *Hair* is a rock musical about the hippie counterculture movement and anti-Vietnam War protests in the 1960s in the United States, based on the lived experiences of the creators. The musical captures the spirit of rebellion, peace, and social change demanded of young people in an era of crisis. Crucially, the musical is an ensemble piece—an ethos reflected in both the creative process and the rehearsal room culture of McKellar's production. From the very beginning, McKellar engaged us as the ensemble in theatre games and exercises designed to cultivate an environment of emotional and physical safety, trust, support, and [whanaungatanga](#)—the strength of familial bonds created over time. The naming of our *Tribe*—a tradition carried through in each staging of *Hair*—strengthened this bond as we called ourselves *Te Iwi Toa*, The Brave Tribe. There was no shouting or ego-driven direction in McKellar's work—only laughter, play, generosity, care, and focus—a fundamental factor in approaching the vulnerable themes of the show, such as the depiction of sex and drug use, and the nudity required of us as the ensemble at the end of Act One. This rich environment of care and focus thrived because of the intuitive and

⁶⁵ Galt MacDermot et al., *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (Tams-Witmark Music Library, 1967).

⁶⁶ *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*, produced by North Shore Music Theatre, directed by Alexandra McKellar (Pumphouse Theatre, Auckland, New Zealand, 2016), Theatre Performance.

well-informed foundational casting process undertaken by McKellar as director. McKellar's approach to directing made a lasting impression on me. Her ability to create a truly safe and collaborative space empowered and emboldened my confidence and sense of self as a young actor and shaped my understanding of what an ensemble can be in my practice.

Positioning and Framing the Research

Performative Research, The Third Paradigm

The dramaturgical nature of this project is supported by the research paradigm of *Performative Research*, as first proposed by Brad Haseman in his *Manifesto for Performative Research* in 2006, and reemphasised in 2015.⁶⁷ Haseman, a secondary school and tertiary drama educator based in Australia, observed that traditional knowledge acquisition using *quantitative* or *qualitative* data gathering is limiting for scholars whose research is based in the arts, design, media, and performance. Concerned that these traditional categories often neglect the personal and philosophical processes of arts-based research⁶⁸ or practice-led inquiry,⁶⁹ particularly in the discipline of drama and theatre, he suggested that research through performative means might offer a new way to “formulate methodologies sympathetic to their fundamental beliefs about the nature and value of research”.⁷⁰ He proposed that artist-researchers should embrace a “third paradigm best understood as Performative Research”.⁷¹

I visualise the Quantitative Researcher, dressed in formal attire, suit and tie—crisp lines, restrained greys and blues. The Qualitative Researcher wears colour-blocked 90s pastels—with a slight nostalgia. The Performative Researcher bursts into the room in full vibrant colour and symbolic excess—sequins, feathers, rhinestones—a spectacle of divine chaos and performance. As a theatre-maker in a research setting, *Performative Research* allows me to engage with knowledge in ways that are active, experimental, experiential, embodied, and emotional—approaches that are difficult to or cannot be captured in traditional research settings.

⁶⁷ Peter O'Connor and Michael Anderson, *Applied Theatre: Research: Radical Departures* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁶⁸ Peter O'Connor and Michael Anderson, *Applied Theatre: Research: Radical Departures* (Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 26.

⁶⁹ Welby Ings, 'The Authored Voice: Emerging Approaches to Exegesis Design in Creative Practice PhDs', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47, no. 12 (2015): 1277–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2014.974017>, p. 1279.

⁷⁰ Brad Haseman, 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, Theme Issue 'Practice-Led Research'* 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 1.

⁷¹ Brad Haseman, 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, Theme Issue 'Practice-Led Research'* 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 1.



Figure 8. Holly as researcher, director, dramaturg, and actor, dressing the set for performance, organising the crew, and ready in character costume, Women of Troy, 2023.

Using *Performative Research*, we seek not to “represent the world, but engage with it, producing new insight and situated knowledge”.⁷² Notably, as I explore crisis through *Performative Research*, O’Connor and Anderson

[champion] the idea that knowledge of the world cannot and should not be reduced into words and numbers alone. [...] In a post-normal world, the arts are uniquely positioned to capture the flux and fluidity of a globe teetering on the edge of multiple extinctions.⁷³

There was no singular moment nor deliberate selection to undertake Haseman’s *Performative Research*. Instead, Haseman’s paradigm emerged as an organic extension of how I already understood and engaged with the world through drama, theatre, and performance. Having been surrounded by theatre practice throughout my life, and particularly, through my active involvement in my mother’s own creative practice doctoral journey as an actor in her *data-drama*,⁷⁴ this lens and mode of inquiry existed as knowledge that was tacit, embodied, and enacted rather than consciously selected. In this way, *Performative Research* did not feel imposed, but a natural and almost inevitable paradigm for my research.

Performative Research: The Appropriate Paradigm for the *Artist-Researcher*

For the creative practitioner, the most appropriate and effective approach to undertake research is through our practice—not just to perform it, but to embody it. The traditional emphasis on data collection, written outcomes, or solution-based, problem-solving, and conflict resolution has left arts-based researchers feeling restricted by these binary knowledge acquisitions. *Performative Research* paves the way “to not only place practice within the research process but to *lead* research through practice”.⁷⁵ These methods are tried and true among arts-based researchers and their subsequent creative communities, and manifest in the scholarly forms of “creative practice as research, performance as research, research through practice, studio research, practice as research or practice-led research”.⁷⁶

⁷² Tone Pernille Østern et al., ‘A Performative Paradigm for Post-Qualitative Inquiry’, *NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Teacher Education* 23, no. 2 (2021): 272–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794121102744>.

⁷³ Peter O’Connor and Michael Anderson, *Applied Theatre: Research: Radical Departures* (Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 24.

⁷⁴ Jane Isobel Luton, *Performing the Interview: Embodied Reflections and Data-Dramas* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2026).

⁷⁵ Brad Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, Theme Issue ‘Practice-Led Research’* 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Brad Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, Theme Issue ‘Practice-Led Research’* 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 3.

*Practice as research*⁷⁷ is a qualitative method that allows the practice-oriented researcher the opportunity to investigate the “situations of practice – the complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts which are increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice”.⁷⁸ Practice as research seeks solutions beyond contemplation “through or out of a problem, but rather [...] ‘practise’ to a resolution”,⁷⁹ asserting that the practice is a critical antecedent of the research. Haseman’s *Performative Research* paradigm embraces strategies and methods from *Qualitative research*. But rather than making a direct contribution to the “intellectual or conceptual architecture of a discipline”⁸⁰ or limiting the communication of practice to “meaning-making”⁸¹ alone, these Qualitative methods remain concerned with investigating, improving, or solving issues within practice.⁸² I embrace *Performative Research* because my own work—while not an attempt to solve a specific problem of theatre practice—is rooted in making sense of both practice and practitioner, and in an era of crisis, generates knowledge and captures experience through meaning-making. *Performative Research*, I argue, is not just about doing drama or theatre, but it is the embodied performance, presentation, or expression of our creative practice—whether it be ink to paper, camera to film, or clay to sculpture, artefact and process to exhibition, director and actor from rehearsal to stage. As I will show later, my *Performative Research* was not merely the process of directing and [dramaturgy](#), but a layered creative endeavour—encompassing design, costume-making, sewing, fabrication, prop-building, set design, audiovisual design, creation, and implementation, logistics, administration, event planning, advertising, and catering—a layered narrative of my practice conveyed through the final creative output. This is how I embrace, embody, and enact *Performative Research*—by expressing myself practically, pragmatically, aesthetically, emotionally, intuitively, and dramaturgically through every facet of the work.

⁷⁷ Brad Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, Theme Issue ‘Practice-Led Research’* 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Brad Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, Theme Issue ‘Practice-Led Research’* 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Brad Haseman, ‘Rupture and Recognition: Identifying The Performative Research Paradigm’, in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, ed. Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett (Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 147.

⁸⁰ Brad Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, Theme Issue ‘Practice-Led Research’* 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 3.

⁸¹ Brad Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, Theme Issue ‘Practice-Led Research’* 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 2.

⁸² Crisis in theatre might be regarded as an issue in the sense of its disruptive nature, but it is not one easily solved in a single PhD thesis. It requires a careful process of cultural change and development through practice.

Through the process, I have come to understand my research as contributing to the knowledge of how Greek tragedy is made in times of crisis and within a contemporary Aotearoa context. Though the project began with a focus on creative exploration, the later findings offer insight into the unforeseen challenges that arose directing theatre during an era of crisis. Meaning, as Richard Schechner interprets, is “always performed: Always in rehearsal [...] performatives are not ‘true’ or ‘false,’ ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ They happen”.⁸³ Haseman suggests that “final research questions may emerge late in the study, as the most potent and important questions arise”⁸⁴ through practice. However, the key issue faced by artist-researchers is the obligations in academia to identify a problem, outline aims and objectives, meet a goal, produce tangible and evident findings, and answer a research question. This framework and linear timeline often clash with the lived realities of creative practice. As an artist-researcher, it has been one of the most difficult challenges I have encountered in the university setting, and when asked by academic colleagues, I often described my research in evolving but key themes and foci of crisis, ancient Greek tragedy, and non-theatre sites of performance rather than with a precise research question and objective. Accompanied by an exploration of crisis, it became evident that my research would naturally evolve and transform as I faced new and unexpected challenges, embracing the inevitable and unpredictable changes that would occur during my research.

Reflecting on my theatre company, Corvus Theatre Co., I describe us as a research-based company. When I describe myself and what I do in an academic setting, I see myself as an artist-researcher—an artist, actor, director, dramaturg, designer, researcher, and educator. In a sense, my work becomes a *chicken and egg* dichotomy, asking which comes first? Do I make theatre to fulfil the objective to *do research* resulting in a published chapter, journal, or thesis? Or does the research come first in the form of a question, hypothesis, or theory, resulting in an opportunity to *do theatre* in response to these, as a creative practice component?⁸⁵ A third possibility is as an artist-researcher, I make theatre for the sake of making theatre, and then realise that all theatre is a form of research, as I make discoveries through my shared practice, and then articulate these ideas after further inquiry, exploration, discovery, and play. This is *Performative Research*. In *Performative Research*, practice is neither antecedent nor succedent to the research—rather, it is synergetic, reciprocal, and iterative, neither *practice-led* nor *research-led*. My creative practice is a process of refinement and iterative exploration that allows *me* to deepen and enhance *my* knowledge and experience in an era of crisis.

⁸³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction, Third Edition* (Routledge, 2013), p. 146.

⁸⁴ Brad Haseman, ‘Life Drama Applied Theatre in Papua New Guinea: “It May Be Performative, but Is It Performative Research?”’, in *Applied Theatre: Research: Radical Departures* (Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 239.

⁸⁵ I would suggest that my Master's research followed a more traditional Qualitative pathway.

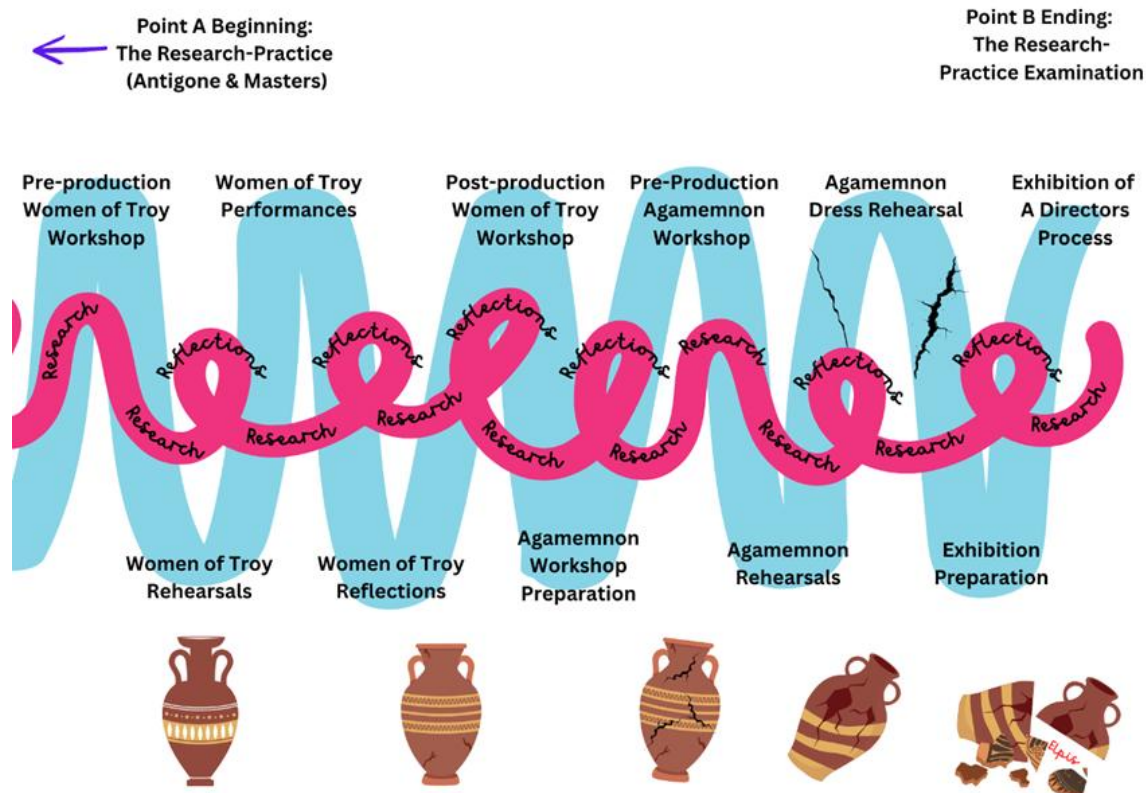


Figure 9. *Performative Research Visualised*, a graphic created by Holly.

Performative Research encompasses not only the contextualising of my research through dramaturgical practices and methods, but also performance as a mode of inquiry. It proved particularly appropriate when, in a moment of necessity during rehearsals for *Women of Troy*, an actor stepped away from the production, and a replacement could not be secured to play the role of Talthybius. As director and researcher, it fell on me to assume the role myself. Already knowing the lines as an embodied and engaged director, through repeated readings and prompts in the rehearsal room, I transitioned from an auditory engagement with the text to an embodied one *with* my actors and participants. This shift opened a new pathway of exploration in my research: what does it mean to embrace, embody, and employ crisis from *within*, to be involved *in* the production and research, not only as the facilitator but as an inhabitant? What does it mean to be fully immersed in my research?



Figure 10. Holly in the character role of Talthybius, the Soldier, Women of Troy, 2023.

This unexpected experience prompted a deeper examination of both the actors' processes and the efficacy of my own directorial and dramaturgical approaches. What kinds of reflections and resonances arise when performing an ancient, *yet timely*, play within the broader sociopolitical and institutional contexts? What challenges and resilience emerge under such conditions? How might the performers and I—now also an actor—navigate the themes of the work amid the turbulence of our own lived experiences? Can theatre-making and research *truly* coexist, not as parallel pursuits or weighted against one another, but as interwoven modes of knowledge production?

This moment became a catalyst for me in a broader exploration into how crisis might be embraced, embodied, and employed across my roles as director, designer, dramaturg, and now *actor*. It invited a reconsideration of the rehearsal room not only as a site of artistic generation, but as a space for reflective and responsive research *in action*. *Performative Research* is not merely methodological or strategic—it is paradigmatic. It is my lens that frames my world through performance—recognising that my performativity is research, and my research is performative. My creative practice, immersed in theatre and drama, is both a method and a worldview—the theatre I have made, watched, and participated in has informed and influenced how I understand history, philosophy, science, and politics. Performance has become my way of making sense of the world—of encountering and responding to its multiple crises and complexities through embodied, affective, and intellectual engagement.



Figure 11. Holly plays dual roles, as director and actor (*Watchman Elpis*), *Agamemnon*, 2024.

The Creative Practice *Artefact*: Curating an Embodied Exhibition

As the artist-researcher, I encounter the tension of balancing artistic creation with the demands of academic research. When framing the creative project or production through aims and objectives, questions and answers, the artist-researcher contends with the need for scholarly rigour versus their innate pursuit of artistic expression. Theatre director Anne Bogart articulates the dichotomy of resistance against restrictions of academic inquiry while recognising the fundamentals of undertaking preliminary research for a production. If research is the primary driver, she argues, the work risks becoming an exercise in validation rather than a dynamic exploration. She suggests

In every creative process there comes the moment where you have to stop worrying about whether or not you know enough about the subject you've been studying. A rehearsal is not about proving that what you have worked out before is the right solution for the play. The research eventually gets in your way. If you don't get beyond the homework, the outcome will become academic. Academic art simply validates the research. It does not challenge it.⁸⁶

Research is often touted as a journey—a well-worn trope in academic writing. Equally familiar is the idea of walking in other people's shoes—a cliché of empathy, of understanding others by stepping into their perspectives. In research, we are expected to do both—to journey our own path shaped by curiosity and discovery, while drawing on the knowledge and steps of those who have come before us. But in practice, a path might become cluttered with too many shoes—all different styles, sizes, and broken-in in different ways—and I find myself tripping over them on the path of *my* research. I have realised I need to wear my own comfortable shoes to run this research race. I have learnt to gently reject the friends, the thinkers, theories, and methods, who are valuable but no longer relevant on my journey. And instead, walk arm in arm with the ones who are—the companions in theatre practice, direction, [ancient Greek tragedy](#), and crisis theories, who help me keep pace, stay grounded, and move forward. In this way, I allow the research to remain dynamic, challenging the knowledge I inherit, and creating space for new insight rather than simply validating what is already known.

Performative Research is a response to Bogart's concern, treating the production as a *living* artefact. While I come into the rehearsal room as an informed director, able to articulate context and content, and with evolving directorial and design concepts for the production, I allow my rehearsal space to be a site of discovery alongside the actors, rather than just an enactment of my pre-determined ideas or to fulfil a research question. This approach additionally acknowledges that the production will evolve, adapt, and be shaped by the unpredictable nature of our era of crisis. Although my productions are funded and located within an academic research institution and contextualised in a

⁸⁶ Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), p. 133-134.

doctoral project, *Performative Research* prevents the production from becoming solely academic, disrupting the dynamic exploration and excitement of creation.

The term *artefact* is itself contentious in creative practice research,⁸⁷ often evoking something archaeological, historical, and static, and locked behind glass, rather than something alive, evolving, and shaped by ongoing discovery. Welby Ings argues that the written exegesis in creative practice itself can become constrained by the academic conventional setting of “twelve-point Times Roman type, with written text double-spaced on one side of a prescriptively margined, white, portrait, A4 page”.⁸⁸ Every creative decision in this written exegesis is deliberately *performative* and aims for creative, academic, and audience *accessibility*, from the use of Aptos font to the inclusion of full footnoted references, photographs, and hyperlinks to music and videos, creative tables, and graphic designs.

A concern for me is that my creative work risks becoming predictable and lifeless when research is imposed onto it, rather than emerging through it. It is through iterative practice that we deepen our understanding of ourselves, our artistry, and our research. Jillian Hamilton and Luke Jaaniste acknowledge and articulate the two kinds of artefacts that emerge in creative practice research: the *effective* artefact designed to effect change and the *evocative* artefact, intended to evoke affect and resonance. The effective, often associated with design practice, still “pursues a solution (or resolution) to a specific problem that is important to a particular community, and it incorporates practice with the intention of producing an artefact that effects change”.⁸⁹ Through *Performative Research*, I seek to create an *evocative* artefact.

What does my creative practice *artefact* look like, and how might it be understood within an institutionally acceptable and examinable framework? Robin Nelson suggests that where the creative work is ephemeral—such as in theatre or other performance mediums—“it is ideal if the practice can be experienced directly in any assessment process.”⁹⁰ Yet, the conditions of my research resist such ideal and concrete circumstances because the projects unfolded amidst ongoing personal, local, national, and global instability, shaped by the uncertain nature of crises. This in turn complicated timelines and financial budgeting, including the applications for performance rights

⁸⁷ Welby Ings, ‘The Authored Voice: Emerging Approaches to Exegesis Design in Creative Practice PhDs’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47, no. 12 (2015): 1277–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2014.974017>, p. 1278.

⁸⁸ Welby Ings, ‘The Authored Voice: Emerging Approaches to Exegesis Design in Creative Practice PhDs’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47, no. 12 (2015): 1277–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2014.974017>, p. 1278.

⁸⁹ Jillian Hamilton and Luke Jaaniste, ‘The Effective and the Evocative: A Spectrum of Creative Practice Research’, in *Material Inventions: Applying Creative Arts Research*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 233.

⁹⁰ Robin Nelson, ed., *Practice as Research in the Arts (and Beyond): Principles, Processes, Contexts, Achievements* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 40.

within an examinable timeframe, the availability of performers, and restricted access to resources and the usage of a non-theatre location as a site of rehearsal and performance spaces, all while working around AUT Events' own external hirages into these spaces. This environment of uncertainty, liminality, and transience must be acknowledged not only as context but as an integral aspect of the research methodology itself.

With the added disruption of institutional crises, supervisory changes, my own health crisis, disputes over the use of rehearsal and performance spaces, interpersonal conflicts, and ultimately the cancellation of the final performances of *Agamemnon*—all of which I reflect on in Chapter Five—it became impossible to position the productions as the sole or primary site of examination. To do so would misrepresent the findings of my research, reducing it to a product-based evaluation of aesthetic properties or the successful execution of my directorial methods, rather than recognising it as an evolving process and discovery of meaning through making under conditions of uncertainty.

This was a problem that Jane Luton and I explored together in a dialogue about our analogous experiences of drama education in separate secondary schools as teacher and student, mother and daughter. We discussed how assessments and institutional criteria can support authentic theatre-making and “can be a helpful way to encourage students to understand what makes drama effective”.⁹¹ However, we recognised that while assessments can provide an opportunity to create theatre, the weight of academic expectation can disrupt the agency of an artist to create their art, let alone feel they have “ownership of [their] art”.⁹² As an artist-researcher, we are serving three communities: those within our practice—directors, dramaturgs, designers, actors—those of the academy—the institution and our academic colleagues—and those who view our work in public settings—the general public, audiences, and spectators. Our work must be accessible in the ways we create and the ways we write. I acknowledged these constraints of assessment conditions during my Masters research, reflecting on the decisive conclusion that was required of the creative project, where “I wanted to continue adapting and developing dramaturgical methods and responses”.⁹³

Because this research was not undertaken through a formal PhD in *Directing Theatre* or *Theatre Studies*, and I was not being examined for my competency as a director, the work was therefore afforded a certain playfulness and flexibility in its direction, sitting outside

⁹¹ Jane Isobel Luton and Holly Charlotte Luton, ‘A Dialogue Across the Circle: Creating “Authentic” Theatre for Achievement Standards in New Zealand Secondary Schools’, in *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People*, ed. Selina Busby et al. (Routledge, 2022), p. 384.

⁹² Jane Isobel Luton and Holly Charlotte Luton, ‘A Dialogue Across the Circle: Creating “Authentic” Theatre for Achievement Standards in New Zealand Secondary Schools’, in *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People*, ed. Selina Busby et al. (Routledge, 2022), p. 373.

⁹³ Holly Charlotte Luton, ‘PEEP: Antigone, An Exploration of Performing Live Theatre During a Pandemic, Using Sophocles’ Antigone’ (Masters Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2021), <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/14479>, p. 50.

of a traditionally well-defined theatre production framework for examination. As Hamilton and Jaaniste emphasise, the evocative artefact, which is

driven by individual preoccupations, cultural concerns or an aspect of human experience (such as memory, social issues or values, perception or emotion) can not necessarily be measured and evaluated in specific terms because the artefact may have no direct ‘application’ but instead may be purposefully poetic and irreducible in its meaning.⁹⁴

Instead, my research outcomes are documented through reflections of the practice in my final examined exhibition, *A Director's Process for Staging Ancient Greek Tragedy during an Era of Crisis*, used to “consolidate and enrich the research findings”.⁹⁵ The written reflections on my findings manifest in Chapters Four and Five of the written exegesis.

In returning to my early experiences of curious discovery through trips to museums, galleries, and sites of archaeological discoveries, I sought a means to present my research in a way that could invite participation rather than distance. As my family and friends will cheerfully attest to, I am the person who will eagerly put on a costume, handle an artefact, or take part in an interactive display when asked by a museum curator. Whether being invited to respectfully hold the skeleton of an ancient Roman unearthed in Britain, touch a piece of moon rock brought back to Earth by astronauts, smell a medieval shoe pulled from the River Thames, or don a World War I uniform and walk through a reconstructed trench, I find that these sensory encounters are forms of visceral knowledge acquisition—they make history and life tangible, immediate, and deeply emotional, personal, and human.

This same instinct underpinned my approach to my creative practice exhibition, aiming to make my research accessible by transforming the theoretical and written components of the exegesis into a visceral, sensory, participatory, and *performative* experience. Rather than encountering ideas through text alone, *Performative Research* allowed my community of practice—regardless of their academic or creative background—to see, touch, and interact with the materials, objects, and imagery that informed my directing and research process. In curating and creating this exhibition, I continued to make further discoveries about my practice and research. My exhibition was presented through reconstructed props, costumes, lighting, projections, sound, and archival fragments from my two productions of ancient Greek tragedy staged during an era of crisis. Participants could explore the exhibition through a map provided of the space, with icons indicating the interactive elements of each display. The exhibition was structured through

⁹⁴ Jillian Hamilton and Luke Jaaniste, ‘The Effective and the Evocative: A Spectrum of Creative Practice Research’, in *Material Inventions: Applying Creative Arts Research*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 234.

⁹⁵ Jillian Hamilton and Luke Jaaniste, ‘The Effective and the Evocative: A Spectrum of Creative Practice Research’, in *Material Inventions: Applying Creative Arts Research*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 234.

an imagined engagement of Strauss and Howe's *Fourth Turning*,⁹⁶ where participants physically journeyed through the *High*, *Awakening*, *Unravelling*, and *Crisis* of my research.

A DIRECTOR'S PROCESS EXHIBITION MAP

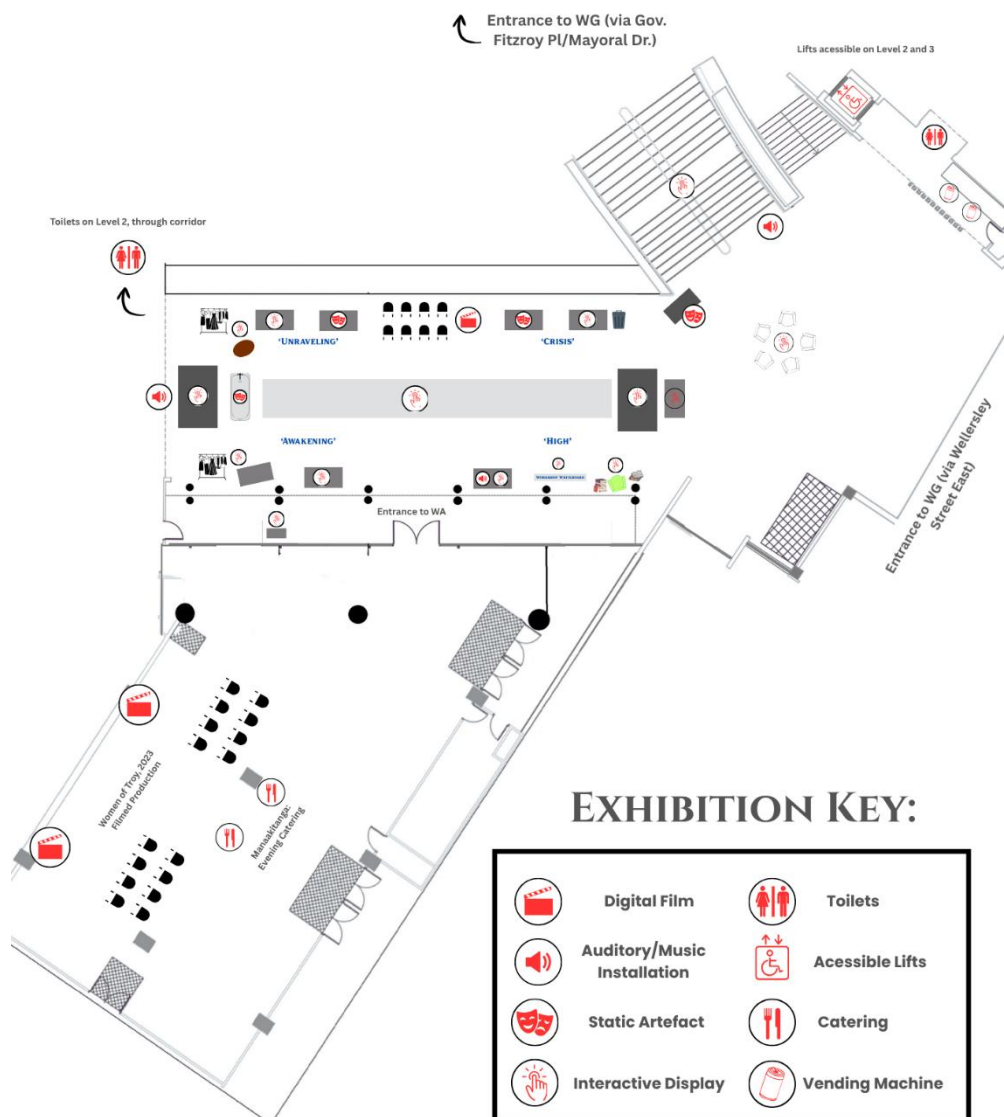


Figure 12. A Director's Process for Staging Ancient Greek Tragedy during an Era of Crisis, Exhibition Map, 2025.

⁹⁶ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy—What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America's Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (Broadway Books, 1997).

By embodying my research in this way, the exhibition aligned with my belief and experience that knowledge is not only obtained through intellectual discipline and study but also embodied, emotional, and personal. This exhibition invited participation, curiosity, and *play* from the attendees—the same qualities that underpinned my directing ethos with my actors. I further discuss this creative practice exhibition in my Chapter Five conclusion, culminating in a video interview which highlights key motivations and insights behind creating a theatrical exhibition for doctoral examination.

The productions staged throughout this research were always conceived as testing grounds for praxis rather than conclusive demonstrations. While they were documented through professional photography and videography, these artefacts are not *outcomes* in the traditional sense of qualitative or quantitative research, but as live laboratories,⁹⁷ spaces in which questions were asked, explored, refined, and embodied through performance. The evolving nature of the research has led me to embrace the richness of these conditions—a study not of my polished theatrical products, but of the director's process under pressure. It offers insight into the messy, non-linear, and often chaotic terrain of mounting a production in turbulent times, where crisis and creativity can intersect.

Therefore, this creative practice doctoral submission offers a multi-modal representation of my research. It includes a documented record of the creative artefacts in the form of photographs and video recordings of rehearsals and performances, design process and products including a display of props and costumes, supported by curated sound and lighting from the performances, detailed accounts of the processes, rehearsal reflections, director's notes, dramaturgical decisions, and the written exegesis, which complements, contextualises, and situates my work within broader theatre conceptual and disciplinary lineages. This multifaceted approach ensures that what is being examined is not merely the aesthetic quality of the work, but the process and procedural insights gained and generated through its making. Taking the form of a Gallery Exhibition, I therefore welcome attendees and the examiners to explore my work through an exhibition of Process and Practice.

As Robin Nelson articulates, practice should be “at the heart”⁹⁸ of a creative practice doctorate, and as such, the final research output must account for the specificity and instability of live performance for examination. My submission embraces that instability not as a flaw, but as a feature, reflecting a research process that is fragile, resilient,

⁹⁷ This approach echoes back to my earliest production of *Antigone*, which was literally staged in an engineering laboratory during the particularly unstable period of the COVID-19 pandemic, an early signal that my work would always inhabit testing spaces, both literally and conceptually.

⁹⁸ Robin Nelson, ed., *Practice as Research in the Arts (and Beyond): Principles, Processes, Contexts, Achievements* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 40.

responsive, resonant, embodied, and entangled with the very crises it seeks to understand.

Some crises, however, are unforeseen. I acknowledge that during the rehearsals for *Agamemnon*, a personal health crisis, combined with internal challenges, ultimately led me, as the director, to conclude the production following the first dress rehearsal. While this final production may be considered by some to be a *failure* in a commercial sense, having not been staged for a paying audience, it nonetheless remains a valid site of research where findings were produced through photographs, videos, and artefacts. The production was a second testing ground for the possibilities of embracing, embodying, and employing crisis as an impetus for theatre-making, but subsequently became an opportunity to examine the limitations when these methods were no longer viable. After all, my research is about making theatre during a time of crisis, and what more challenging situation than reflecting on the unforeseen crises that caused the production to end prematurely? *Agamemnon*'s unexpected conclusion has allowed me to critically challenge and reconsider my own practice—and what happens when and if a creative production does not make it to the stage, and what lessons I have learnt from this experience. However, fortunately, I had organised my professional photographers to be present at this dress rehearsal, and I draw on these photographs as a means of reflecting on the process and the crises that unfolded.

Authentic and Honest Reflections of Creative Practice

Because practice research is driven from a very personal and experiential⁹⁹ perspective, Haseman recognises that it can be a very “individualistic and idiosyncratic”¹⁰⁰ process. Although this project examines some of my own experiences, I am interested in the varied perspectives of the actors who made the drama alongside me. The lived experience of the practitioner, actor, and director is especially significant as the performances transpired in non-theatre sites of performance. Site-specific practitioner, Mike Pearson, suggests that the reflections of lived experience are vital in non-theatre location performance, as it belongs, resides, dwells and exists alongside the *activity*, *audience*, and *place*¹⁰¹ “in the multiple creative articulation of *us*, *them*, and *there*”.¹⁰² He asks the practitioner to consider on their journey, “How am I affected? What do I feel? What do I

⁹⁹ Brad Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, Theme Issue ‘Practice-Led Research’ 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Brad Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, Theme Issue ‘Practice-Led Research’ 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 19.

¹⁰² Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 19.

perceive? What do I experience?”.¹⁰³ I consider these questions during my research, and through theatre, I make discoveries about the experience of *doing* theatre.

As a means of honest reflection, I have intentionally incorporated profane language into the reflective Chapter Five of my practice as a tool for modern *catharsis*. Profanity allows me to authentically express the emotional intensity I experienced during the creative process and moments of crisis, capturing frustration, urgency, and raw emotion in ways that formal language cannot.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 22.

¹⁰⁴ Johnny Saldaña, ‘Blue-Collar Qualitative Research: A Rant’, *Sage* 20, no. 8 (2014): 976–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413513739>, p. 977.

Chapter Two

Contextual Review

In Chapter Two, I will discuss the contextual foundations of my research, both literary, theoretical, historical, and situational. I discuss the function of a Contextual Review, rather than the traditional Literature Review in Creative Practice research. I contextualise the dramaturgical nature of my research, using the ancient Greek myth of Pandora's jar, as a critical storytelling device to conceptualise how crisis manifested and shaped my creative practice. I engage with key theorists to examine contemporary and historical conceptions and understandings of crisis. The chapter discusses the positioning of the research to see crisis as an opportune, generative moment—one that can be embraced, embodied, and employed as an impetus for theatre-making.

Reviewing Research through Context

A key difference between creative practice and traditional research outputs is the methods of research review. Haseman suggests that “statements of purpose, background, relevant literature, significance of the research problem and definitions of key terms”¹⁰⁵ are central to *problem-led* design research. However, the “substantial literature review, seldom applies for the practice-led and applied theatre researcher”.¹⁰⁶ As Hamilton and Jaaniste suggest, the “forming context is what gives rise to the types of questions asked and the research aims and this, in turn, inflects the approach and role that the resulting artefact plays in the research outcomes”.¹⁰⁷ Rather than seeking a *gap in the knowledge* or solving an issue of practice, artist-researchers undertake a contextual review to situate their practice within the greater history and context of their relevant fields. A contextual review allows the artist-researcher to consider other kinds of *literature* beyond the written non-fiction theoretical academia relevant to their practice. For instance, I read a fiction book, see a theatre production, dance, or live music concert, watch a film or television series, listen to or analyse a piece of music, visit a museum, gallery, or archive to view artefacts and artwork. These have informed, inspired, or influenced my own research and practice. Below, a figure tabulates my curated selection of contexts that have influenced my research.

¹⁰⁵ Brad Haseman, ‘A Manifesto for Performative Research’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, Theme Issue ‘Practice-Led Research’* 118 (2006): 98–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ Brad Haseman, ‘Life Drama Applied Theatre in Papua New Guinea: “It May Be Performative, But Is It Performative Research?”’, in *Applied Theatre: Research: Radical Departures* (Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 239.

¹⁰⁷ Jillian Hamilton and Luke Jaaniste, ‘The Effective and the Evocative: A Spectrum of Creative Practice Research’, in *Material Inventions: Applying Creative Arts Research*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 235.

NOVELS	Pat Barker, <i>The Women of Troy</i> , (2021) Costanza Casati, <i>Clytemnestra</i> , (2023) Pat Barker, <i>The Voyage Home</i> , (2024)	
Women of Troy, National Theatre Archive, (2000) Antigone, National Theatre, (2012) The Burnt City, Punchdrunk, (2022)	Antigone, Regents Park Open Air Theatre, (2022) I Joan, The Globe Theatre, (2022). Cabaret, KitKat Club London, (2022) The Picture of Dorian Gray, Sydney Theatre Company, (2023)	THEATRE PRODUCTIONS
PLAYTEXTS	Philip Vellacott, <i>Trojan Women</i> , (1973) Don Taylor, <i>Women of Troy</i> , (1990) Robert Fagles, <i>The Oresteia</i> (1966)	Steven Berkoff, <i>Agamemnon</i> , (1973) Ted Hughes, <i>The Oresteia</i> , (1999). Oliver Taplin, <i>The Oresteia</i> , (2018)
American Psycho, (Lions Gate: 2000) Troy, (Warner Brothers: 2004) The Handmaid's Tale, (Hulu: 2017-2024)	Portrait of a Lady on Fire, (2019) The Serpent Queen, (Starz, 2022-2024). Kaos, (Netflix: 2024)	FILM & TELEVISION
MUSIC	Kate Bush, <i>Army Dreamers</i> , (1980). Vivaldi, <i>Four Seasons</i> , (1723) X-Ray Spex, <i>Oh Bondage! Up Yours!</i> , (1977)	Madonna and Quavo, <i>Future</i> , (2019) Florence & The Machine, <i>Cassandra</i> , (2022) Paloma Paris, <i>labour</i> , (2024)
Auckland War Memorial Museum, <i>Ancient Greeks: Athletes, Warriors, and Heroes</i> , (2022). British Museum, Room 19, <i>Greece: Athens</i> , (2022). The death of Priam, Black-figured amphora, (British Museum: 550BCE)	Artemisia Gentileschi, <i>Judith slaying Holofernes</i> , (1625) Paul Delaroche, <i>The Execution of Lady Jane Grey</i> , (1833) John Collier, <i>Clytemnestra after the Murder</i> , (1882)	EXHIBITIONS, ART, & ARTEFACTS

Figure 13. Table of Curated Contextual Sources: Novels, Theatre Productions, Playtexts, Film & Television, Music, and Exhibitions, Art, & Artefacts

Haseman suggests that “credible research investigations must be located within, and built upon, relevant fields of inquiry. Effective research builds upon, or challenges, the discoveries of others”.¹⁰⁸ As evocative research, my practice is situated in, builds upon, challenges, and is informed by a two-and-a-half-millennia of culture and the history of theatre direction and design, ancient Greek tragedy, performances of Euripides’ *Women of Troy* and Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, and non-theatre location performances. The research is informed by my own experiences and pragmatic responses to crises that arose throughout the research.

Readiness is a Ritual: Living with Crisis in Aotearoa

As I have explained in Chapter One, the positioning of this research explores the difficulties of theatre-making for practitioners during an era of crisis. I write this through the experiences of my own practices as a director, dramaturg, designer, and actor working in Aotearoa between the years 2021-2025. The last 5 years have been a time of national and global economic and political instability. Making theatre in these conditions was particularly difficult, and important decisions regarding how, when, where, and what kinds of theatre to make were significant. While these multiple crises presented notable and consequential challenges, the positioning of my research was to see crisis as an opportune moment to make sense of the world, and as a time to embrace, embody, and employ crisis through the theatre-making processes. Echoing theatre director, Anne Bogart, I too aspire “to create theatre that is full of terror, beauty, love and belief in the innate human potential for change”.¹⁰⁹ This sentiment resonates deeply with me because I believe Greek tragedy embodies these very qualities—confronting the challenges of crisis and recognising the resilience of humans while offering a space for reflection, understanding, and the possibility of transformation.

In Aotearoa, we are acutely aware of the possibilities of crises occurring nationally. Growing up as a child, we participated in emergency response planning as an essential life lesson. Aotearoa is a subtropical country and sits on the *Ring of Fire* in the Pacific. As a result, two potential major events that can occur are Tropical Cyclones and flooding, amplified now by the global climate crisis, and earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic activity due to our tectonic positioning. At primary school, we learned many mnemonics to remember safety procedures in case of disaster scenarios—including “drop, cover, and hold” for earthquakes and “if it’s long, get gone” for possible subsequent tsunami evacuations. We learnt household fire safety in the form of prevention and procedure—“get down, get low, get out”. In later years, at Intermediate and Secondary school, we learnt lockdown drills as school grounds are often open to the public.

¹⁰⁸ Brad Haseman, ‘Life Drama Applied Theatre in Papua New Guinea: “It May Be Performative, But Is It Performative Research?”’, in *Applied Theatre: Research: Radical Departures* (Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 237.

¹⁰⁹ Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), p. 84.

Only recently, in 2025, has the Civil Defence government agency, National Emergency Management Agency [NEMA] released the first comprehensive *Catastrophic Event Handbook* to provide the public with a “blueprint to respond to the most severe disasters”.¹¹⁰ This delay in publication perhaps reflects the significance of our changing world right now and the increasing importance of being prepared for the crises we face today, alongside the urgency required in our responses. Just as NEMA recognises the changes to our world, I am interested in how we as theatre practitioners have responded and adapted to crises and disaster events in Aotearoa—and what responses we might need to prepare for in our increasingly unstable and rapidly changing world. As artists, do we wait for a crisis to be a catalyst for change, or do we have an obligation to ready ourselves and our practice for the next *once-in-a-lifetime* crisis? I define crisis as it is understood in the dramatic context of the project, drawing on key literature and academics on the theory of crisis. These include natural disasters and political and economic challenges that have affected theatre practice, venues, and institutions in Aotearoa. I review crises in contexts that have informed my research.

Two of the most profound and wide-reaching crises to affect Aotearoa were the COVID-19 pandemic and the Christchurch Earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. While my focus lies in the post-pandemic political and economic consequences that cause ongoing and significant disruption to theatre venues and institutions nationwide, I will briefly reference the Christchurch earthquakes to consider how theatre practitioners responded to disaster with resilience—creating work that fostered connection, community healing, and adaptability in the face of ongoing instability.

In the discussion of crisis, Fisher and Balme propose that the COVID-19 pandemic was “the most severe crisis to affect the performing arts since the Second World War”¹¹¹ and must be addressed when discussing crisis in a post-2020 world.

The *Birth* of Crisis: When Pandora’s Jar Fell Over

In the ancient Greek myth, Pandora, the wife of the potter Epimetheus, is left alone to care for one of his clay jars. While attending to her cooking and cleaning duties, she knocks over the jar, releasing untold chaos into the world.

As a precursor to discussing the theoretical and historical contexts of crisis, I contextualise the dramaturgical nature of my research through the lens of the ancient Greek myth of Pandora’s jar—recontextualised by Natalie Haynes¹¹²—as a critical storytelling device. I use the myth to symbolise the catalytic and cataclysmic nature of

¹¹⁰ National Emergency Management Agency, ‘Catastrophic Event Handbook Released’, *Catastrophic Event Handbook Released*, 12 February 2025, <https://www.civildefence.govt.nz/resources/news-and-events/news-and-events/catastrophic-event-handbook-released>.

¹¹¹ Tony Fisher and Christopher Balme, eds., *Theatre Institutions in Crisis: European Perspectives* (Routledge, 2021), p. xii.

¹¹² Natalie Haynes, *Pandora’s Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021).

crisis, aiming to make sense of the multitude of ensuing consequences I encountered during the creative-making process. The myth of Pandora's jar tipping over encapsulates a catalytic moment. Chaos lay hidden beneath the lid, and when the jar was overturned, chaos was unleashed into the world—marking one of the earliest crises in ancient Greek mythology.

For me, Pandora's Jar is emblematic of the COVID-19 pandemic—a pivotal moment in the 21st century, consequential in revealing many previously unaddressed crises within the culture and practice of theatre. Throughout my research, the contents of the jar continued to be emblematic of the subsequent crises and the consequences that arose. Releasing untold grief for humankind, I have interpreted some of the original contents of Pandora's Jar in the following symbolic ways:



Figure 14. Pandora's Jar, releasing untold chaos into the modern world

The canonised version of this myth has evolved that Zeus, King of the Gods, exploits Pandora's *womanly curiosity* and castigates her for the wrongdoings of her husband and brother, leaving her in possession of a box, which she nosily opened and peered inside...

However, Natalie Haynes calls our attention to the mistranslation by scholars over time of *jar* to *box*. Instead, Haynes emphasises that Zeus leaves Pandora with the care of a clay pot, which, unknown to her, contains all the world's chaos.¹¹³ Perhaps, as was expected of women, Pandora was attending to domestic duties, and "as anyone who has ever swept a kitchen floor would cheerlessly testify – lids aren't always tightly fastened"¹¹⁴ and ceramic jars are not particularly stable.

In August 2024, a young boy demonstrated just how fragile these ancient pots are, knocking over a 3,500-year-old vase on display at the Hecht Museum in Haifa, Israel.¹¹⁵ They are objects that one might not "necessarily choose to store a set of evils that will cause mankind untold griefs for millennia to come".¹¹⁶ The mistranslation of Pandora's myth forces us to reevaluate her actions from a deliberate, or evil intent to open a *box* to an accidental tipping over of a *jar* – a jar that was no doubt prone to instability, especially so on a flagstone floor. As Haynes suggests, Pandora "has been particularly ill-served by history"¹¹⁷ and she "is the mechanism by which Zeus decides to take his revenge."¹¹⁸ The critical detail I draw from the story is that chaos and crisis are *already present*, brewing and stirring beneath the lid. It takes the inciting action of the jar to fall over, a catalytic moment, to reveal what was hidden from view. Thus, Pandora's Jar has become a critical symbol for me in interpreting the pandemic as a catalytic moment—a trigger that sparked a chain reaction of crisis—then the jar was knocked over to reveal many ensuing calamities and their consequences, which were inexorable. Some of these crises which affected us in our current times include local restrictions and cancellations of performances and arts festivals, closure of theatre venues and education institutions,¹¹⁹ and long-term post-pandemic economic impacts such as arts funding challenges amid

¹¹³ Pandora. The first human woman, as believed by the ancient Greeks, is a figure of theodicy. Like her Abrahamic, biblical counterpart, Eve, Pandora was the ancient Greeks' vindication for the existence of evil, blamed for causing all the chaos and crisis in the world. She was created by Zeus as a punishment for humanity. After Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind, Zeus sought revenge. Pandora, moulded from clay, is gifted to Epimetheus, Prometheus's brother. Despite his brother's warnings to never accept gifts from Zeus, she is accepted by Epimetheus to be his wife. One day, she is left in the care of a jar, presumably one made by her husband, a potter, which, unknown to her, contains Zeus's revenging trick—all the chaos of the world.

¹¹⁴ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (New York: Harper Collins, 2021), p. 8.

¹¹⁵ Ashifa Kassam, "'I Couldn't Believe It Was My Son Who Did It': Boy, 4, Smashes Bronze Age Jar in Israel Museum', *The Guardian* (London), 28 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/28/i-couldnt-believe-it-was-my-son-who-did-it-boy-4-smashes-bronze-age-jar-in-israel-museum>.

¹¹⁶ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021), p. 8.

¹¹⁷ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021), p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021), p. 15.

¹¹⁹ The closure of some of these venues and institutions was not necessarily caused by the pandemic but rather aggravated by the subsequent economic recessions.

rising global and national inflation. Further crises, include the escalation of the war in Ukraine by Russia, conflict between Israel and Palestine and the on-going genocide of the Palestinian people,¹²⁰ withdrawal of the American military in Afghanistan and restored control by the Taliban, the fall of the Assad Regime and independence in Syria, and the second term of Donald Trump's Presidency.¹²¹

As I write this exegesis, the current United States administration is contributing to increasing global tensions, threatening Ukraine,¹²² Panama,¹²³ Greenland,¹²⁴ Palestine,¹²⁵ Iran¹²⁶ and Canada with military invasion.¹²⁷ In February 2025, Chinese warships carried out Naval exercises using live munitions in international waters off the Tasman sea.¹²⁸ Tensions are rising in Aotearoa, particularly in response to the attempted disestablishment of Te Tiriti o Waitangi¹²⁹ by the current right-wing coalition government.¹³⁰

What is Crisis? Making sense of the Chaos

The notion of Crisis is as old as the ancient Greeks. Etymologically derived from the Greek word, *krisis*, it was viewed as a *turning point in a disease*—a moment of change which indicates either recovery or death. Today, we often consider that crisis is a time of

¹²⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'UN Special Committee Finds Israel's Warfare Methods in Gaza Consistent with Genocide, Including Use of Starvation as Weapon of War', United Nations Human Rights, 14 November 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/un-special-committee-finds-israels-warfare-methods-gaza-consistent-genocide>.

¹²¹ Jeff Mason, 'Kennedy Center Board, with Trump as the New Chair, Fires Its President', United States, *Reuters*, 12 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/kennedy-center-board-with-trump-new-chair-fires-its-president-2025-02-12/>.

¹²² In a televised Cabinet meeting at the Whitehouse on March 1st 2025, with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, Vice President J.D Vance and President Trump berated Zelenskyy, subsequently withdrawing military funding to Ukraine and pausing disclosure of military intelligence.

¹²³ Samantha Waldenberg and Michael Rio, 'Trump Reiterates Threat to Retake Panama Canal "or Something Very Powerful" Will Happen', *CCN World, Americas*, 2 February 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/02/americas/panama-china-belt-and-road-initiative-rubio-visits-intl-latam>.

¹²⁴ Alys Davies and Mike Wendling, 'Trump Ramps up Threats to Gain Control of Greenland and Panama Canal', *BBC News*, 8 January 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4gzn48jwz2o>.

¹²⁵ David Smith, 'Trump Says US Will "Take over" Gaza Strip in Shock Announcement during Netanyahu Visit', *US News, The Guardian*, 5 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/05/donald-trump-plan-to-take-over-gaza-strip-netanyahu-visit>.

¹²⁶ Thomas Mackintosh and Nadine Yousif, 'What We Know about US Air Strikes on Three Iranian Nuclear Sites', 23 June 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg9r4q99g4o>.

¹²⁷ Jeffrey B. Meyers, 'Canada, Greenland, Panama, Gaza and Now Ukraine: Wake up, World, Donald Trump Is Coming for You', *The Conversation*, 20 February 2025, <http://theconversation.com/canada-greenland-panama-gaza-and-now-ukraine-wake-up-world-donald-trump-is-coming-for-you-248737>.

¹²⁸ Tessa Wong and Simon Atkinson, 'Planes Diverted as China Conducts Rare Military Drill near Australia', 21 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clydv58l57do>.

¹²⁹ One of Aotearoa's foundational documents between Indigenous Māori and the British Crown.

¹³⁰ Eva Corlett, 'Nearly Half of New Zealanders Say Government Policies Increasing Racial Tensions, Poll Finds', *The Guardian*, 20 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/20/new-zealand-1news-verian-poll-racial-tension>.

heightened danger or difficulty, an unstable situation, or a time when important decisions must be made.

In modern scholarship, there are many researchers across the disciplines of history, anthropology, and philosophy who have sought to define and interpret what crisis is and means.¹³¹ Sylvia Walby frames crisis as a large-scale event with disproportionate consequences.¹³² Others emphasise crisis as a condition of instability or rupture rather than a singular occurrence.¹³³ Janet Roitman argues that crisis operates as a lens through which events are interpreted and given meaning.¹³⁴

In theatrical discourse, Heiner Müller suggests that crisis is not merely represented on stage but is at the heart of its history and practice—that “crisis is synonymous with theatre”.¹³⁵ He proposed that performance functions as a site of ongoing tension and critique of our crisis society.¹³⁶ Despite these differing perspectives, certain core characteristics remain.¹³⁷

Walby defines crisis as “an event that has the potential to cause a large detrimental change to the social system and in which there is lack of proportionality between cause and consequence”.¹³⁸ It might also be described as a time of *chaos*, *catastrophe*, “‘risk’, ‘disaster’, ‘revolution’, ‘tipping point’ and ‘critical turning point’”.¹³⁹ She advises that while the event might last a “relatively short duration”,¹⁴⁰ the resulting consequences are often “large as compared with the event. The consequences need to be at scale, in terms of spatiality or scope, for the concept of crisis to be appropriate”.¹⁴¹

Seeing crisis as an unstable situation or tipping point which results in sometimes catastrophic situations much larger than the original impetus, the metaphor of Pandora’s jar appears appropriate and pertinent to my research—an unstable jar, accidentally tipped over, unleashing a multitude of chaos.

¹³¹ Sylvia Walby, ‘Crisis and Society: Developing the Theory of Crisis in the Context of COVID-19’, *Global Discourse* 12, nos. 3–4 (2022): 498–516, <https://doi.org/0.1332/204378921X16348228772103>, p. 500.

¹³² Sylvia Walby, ‘Crisis and Society: Developing the Theory of Crisis in the Context of COVID-19’, *Global Discourse* 12, nos. 3–4 (2022): 498–516, <https://doi.org/0.1332/204378921X16348228772103>, p. 500.

¹³³ Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2013), p. 10.

¹³⁴ Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2013), p. 3.

¹³⁵ Tony Fisher and Christopher Balme, eds., *Theatre Institutions in Crisis: European Perspectives* (Routledge, 2021), p. 1.

¹³⁶ Tony Fisher and Christopher Balme, eds., *Theatre Institutions in Crisis: European Perspectives* (Routledge, 2021), p. 1.

¹³⁷ Sylvia Walby, ‘Crisis and Society: Developing the Theory of Crisis in the Context of COVID-19’, *Global Discourse* 12, nos. 3–4 (2022): 498–516, <https://doi.org/0.1332/204378921X16348228772103>, p. 500.

¹³⁸ Sylvia Walby, *Crisis* (Polity Press, 2015), p. 14.

¹³⁹ Sylvia Walby, ‘Crisis and Society: Developing the Theory of Crisis in the Context of COVID-19’, *Global Discourse* 12, nos. 3–4 (2022): 498–516, <https://doi.org/0.1332/204378921X16348228772103>, p. 500.

¹⁴⁰ Sylvia Walby, ‘Crisis and Society: Developing the Theory of Crisis in the Context of COVID-19’, *Global Discourse* 12, nos. 3–4 (2022): 498–516, <https://doi.org/0.1332/204378921X16348228772103>, p. 499.

¹⁴¹ Sylvia Walby, ‘Crisis and Society: Developing the Theory of Crisis in the Context of COVID-19’, *Global Discourse* 12, nos. 3–4 (2022): 498–516, <https://doi.org/0.1332/204378921X16348228772103>, p. 499.

Crisis can be understood not only as an event or as a singular definition, but as a threshold, condition, or state consistently marked by instability, transformation, and heightened stakes. Its significance or consequence can be both “real and it is socially interpreted [...] The interpretation of a crisis as permitting or requiring a state of emergency to be declared produces a centralisation of political power that can have consequences.”¹⁴² That is, a crisis is often determined by political entities, but we cannot dismiss the very real, experiential, and lived consequences experienced by an individual or community.

In this research project, crisis has manifested in three contexts, theatre *in* crisis, theatre *of* crisis, and theatre *about* times of crisis. From the lived experiences of our crises that *occurred* before, during, and after the stagings of Corvus Theatre Co’s *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon*, to the crises that *affected* the methods and making of these productions, to the *thematic* crises within these ancient Greek plays—the contexts in which they were originally performed, and the interpretation of crisis as resonating with our world. In this research, I encountered both macro and micro levels of crises on global, national, local, and personal scales.

In the years preceding the pandemic, there was an air of imminent catastrophe and an urgency for preparation in a rapidly changing world. In 2015, O’Connor and Anderson, drawing on earlier theories of a post-normal world, noted that these times felt particularly unique given the number of crises that were—and still are—occurring simultaneously.¹⁴³ The former United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, commented in 2009 that “we have never seen any era when we have been hit by all these multiple crises at the one time”.¹⁴⁴ In 2024, the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, stressed this sentiment, suggesting that the world is in an “age of chaos”.¹⁴⁵ Theatre-maker and researcher, Avra Sidiropoulou suggests that the multitude of emergencies “stalking the third millennium [...] have precipitated a climate of profound social and cultural instability and trauma, which may well be the material of modern tragedy”.¹⁴⁶ In her writings, she identifies many crises including “Covid-19, migration and forced displacement, terrorism and religious intolerance, climate change, the failure of neoliberalism, and the establishment of tyrannical political and media formations all

¹⁴² Sylvia Walby, ‘Crisis and Society: Developing the Theory of Crisis in the Context of COVID-19’, *Global Discourse* 12, nos. 3–4 (2022): 498–516, <https://doi.org/0.1332/204378921X16348228772103>, p. 501.

¹⁴³ Peter O’Connor and Michael Anderson, *Applied Theatre: Research: Radical Departures* (Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 8.

¹⁴⁴ Associated Press in Dublin, ‘United Nations Peace Missions in Peril, Says Ban Ki-Moon’, *The Guardian*, 7 July 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/07/un-peacekeeping-forces-dublin-speech>.

¹⁴⁵ Al Jazeera, ‘UN Chief Warns of “Age of Chaos” as Security Council Divided on Gaza’, Al Jazeera, 7 February 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/7/un-chief-warns-of-age-of-chaos-as-security-council-stays-divided-on-gaza>.

¹⁴⁶ Avra Sidiropoulou, ed., *Staging 21st Century Tragedies Theatre, Politics, and Global Crisis* (Routledge, 2022), p. 1.

over the world”.¹⁴⁷ Roitman argues that “beyond global geopolitics, crisis qualifies the very nature of events: humanitarian crisis, environmental crisis, energy crisis, debt crisis, financial crisis, and so forth”.¹⁴⁸ As the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation [NATO] chief, Jens Stoltenberg states, “the world is now much more dangerous, much more unpredictable and much more violent”.¹⁴⁹ O’Connor and Anderson argue that “life for many, in the increasingly chaotic, complex and crumbling world of the twenty-first century, begins to feel like a war zone, a world without hope”.¹⁵⁰ Perhaps the hostility of the world is objectively circumstantial. The world as ecology is no more violent than the experience of our ancient ancestors,¹⁵¹ but our leaders are more volatile, and our tools and information is more consequentially destructive and violent—with Artificial Intelligence, disinformation, accelerated climate change, and nuclear weapons.

Further drawing on Roitman's interpretations, crisis functioned not only as the context for this research but also as a mode of knowledge production¹⁵²—a lens through which events, processes, and experiences were interpreted, structured, and given meaning.¹⁵³

Permacrisis: An Era of Crisis?

Some have described these times in which we live as a *permacrisis*.¹⁵⁴ It was selected by Collins Dictionary as the *word of the year* in 2022, a portmanteau of the words *permanent* and *crisis*. Permacrisis is not a convergence of independent events which happen to occur simultaneously, but rather is a phenomenon of incessant crises, interconnected by causation and as a consequence of each other. Permacrisis has been described as a word that “perfectly embodies the dizzying sense of lurching from one unprecedented event to another, as we wonder bleakly what new horrors might be around the corner”.¹⁵⁵ As a director and researcher—lurching from crisis to crisis—as I mentioned in Chapter One, I believe crisis is the zeitgeist, the spirit of our age.

However, there is much that can be positively gained from our crisis times. Müller suggests that crisis offers a time for action and contemplation, where we might “look

¹⁴⁷ Avra Sidiropoulou, ed., *Staging 21st Century Tragedies Theatre, Politics, and Global Crisis* (Routledge, 2022), p. 1.

¹⁴⁸ Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2013), p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ Laura Kuenssberg, ‘Laura Kuenssberg: West Facing “authoritarian” Alliance, Says Nato Chief’, *BBC News*, 6 April 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-68743805>.

¹⁵⁰ Peter O’Connor and Michael Anderson, *Applied Theatre: Research: Radical Departures* (Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 9.

¹⁵¹ Yuval Noah Harari, *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks From the Stone Age to AI* (Penguin Random House Company, 2024).

¹⁵² Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2013), p. 14.

¹⁵³ Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2013), p. 13.

¹⁵⁴ Adam Lent, ‘Permacrisis or Polycrisis? It Matters.’, *Medium*, 24 November 2022, <https://medium.com/@adamjlent/permacrisis-or-polycrisis-it-matters-642391bc7304>.

¹⁵⁵ David Shariatmadari, ‘A Year of “Permacrisis”’, Collins Dictionary Language Lovers Blog, 1 November 2022, <https://blog.collinsdictionary.com/language-lovers/a-year-of-permacrisis/>.

both to the past and to the future [which] entails a significant degree of interpretation”.¹⁵⁶ Crisis is “a lens through which change can occur”¹⁵⁷, suggests Sidiropoulou. Walby proposes that it might activate “reflections on alternative possibilities”.¹⁵⁸ As a director, I believe that theatre offers us a unique opportunity to reflect on past crises through the thematic devices, stories, and contexts of these ancient plays. It is a time for decision-making and adaptation. By embracing, embodying, and employing our lived experiences of crisis as an impetus for theatre-making, we gain more than just an opportunity to transform the world, but to make sense of it. As is the philosophical characteristic of *Performative Research*, we as theatre-makers might not necessarily obtain straightforward answers, but through our making processes, find meaning, make sense of our practice, and explore new methods of making. I reflect on my own work as a theatre-maker to make sense of my practice, asking the following questions of myself

- 🧑🏽 What crisis(es) are we currently facing?
- 🧑🏽 How did these crisis(es) occur?
- 🧑🏽 How do these crisis(es) affect us as theatre-makers?
- 🧑🏽 What is it like to make theatre during an era of crisis?
- 🧑🏽 What is it like staging, directing, and performing ancient Greek tragedies in an era of crisis?
- 🧑🏽 What is it like performing these plays in non-theatre locations?
- 🧑🏽 What *is* working for us in making theatre at this time?
- 🧑🏽 What *is not* working for us in making theatre at this time?
- 🧑🏽 What discoveries might we make during this era of crisis?
- 🧑🏽 How might we embrace, embody, and employ our experiences of crisis into the work we make?
- 🧑🏽 What might we learn from the past and present theatre-making, and how might we better it for the future?

Generational Theory: The Hero in a Crisis, the Artist in a High

Sociologist, Neil Howe, and historian and theatre-maker, William Strauss, formulated a *generational theory* to theorise and interpret the cycles of historical crises.¹⁵⁹ They propose that history is cyclical, and the characteristics and archetypes of each period might forecast the conditions and events that will affect each generation. Each

¹⁵⁶ Avra Sidiropoulou, ed., *Staging 21st Century Tragedies Theatre, Politics, and Global Crisis* (Routledge, 2022), p. 2.

¹⁵⁷ Avra Sidiropoulou, ed., *Staging 21st Century Tragedies Theatre, Politics, and Global Crisis* (Routledge, 2022), p. 2.

¹⁵⁸ Sylvia Walby, ‘Crisis and Society: Developing the Theory of Crisis in the Context of COVID-19’, *Global Discourse* 12, nos. 3–4 (2022): 498–516, <https://doi.org/0.1332/204378921X16348228772103>, p. 500.

¹⁵⁹ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy—What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America’s Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (Broadway Books, 1997).

generational period or “**Turning**”¹⁶⁰ typically lasts 20 years, and each **saeculum**—a period of 80-100 years, approximately a human lifetime—encompasses four *turnings* that correspond to a season of the year. Within each Turning, a new generation is defined by an archetypal character, identified by Strauss and Howe using a key character from the Trojan War myth.¹⁶¹

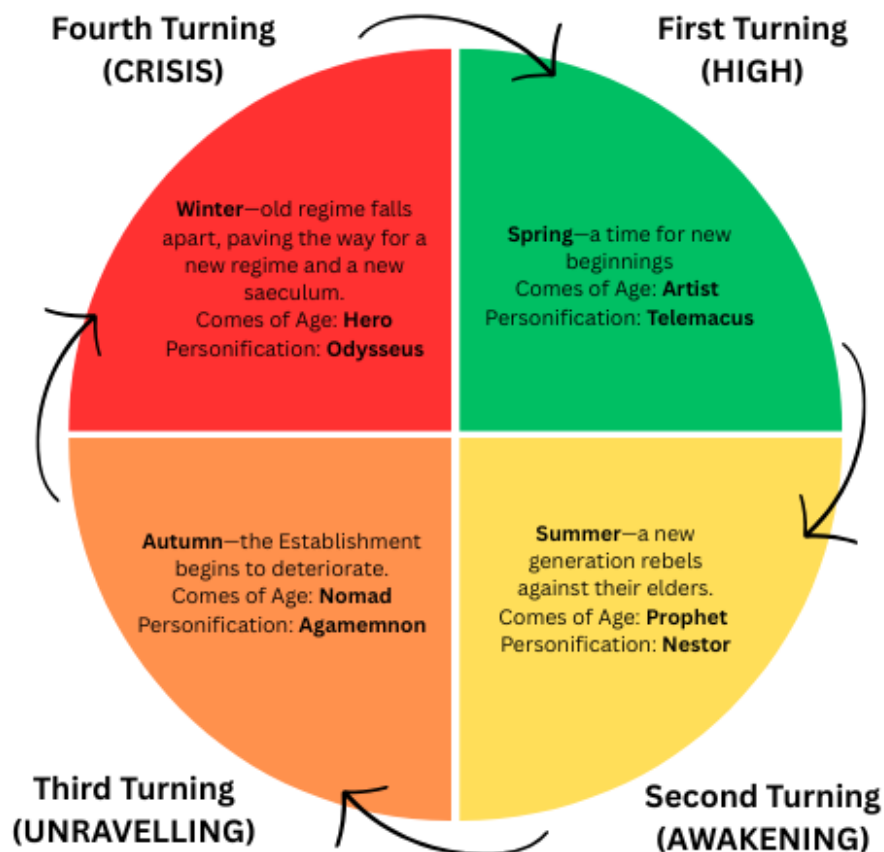


Figure 15. Diagram created by Holly to represent the saeculum of generational cycles.

The Fourth Turning, *Crisis*, is upon us, “winter is here”¹⁶². The Heroes, who come of age in this era, are shaped by the turbulence of crisis, both embodying and enabling the artistic voices of the generation to follow.

Some argue this theory is suppositional as it operates speculatively using “meta-historical frameworks that purport to predict optimistic future outcomes rising from the

¹⁶⁰ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy—What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America’s Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (Broadway Books, 1997), p. 3.

¹⁶¹ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy—What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America’s Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (Broadway Books, 1997), p. 86.

¹⁶² Francis Fukuyama, ‘Big Histories for the Big Future’, *The New York Times* (New York), 18 July 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/18/books/review/the-fourth-turning-is-here-neil-howe-end-times-peter-turchin.html>.

current ashes of polarization and conflict”.¹⁶³ Harari suggests, we must be mindful of a *hindsight fallacy*, that what “looks inevitable in hindsight was far from obvious at the time”.¹⁶⁴ Schechner argues, “this ineluctable continuity – a knowable past that determines a stable present leading to an inevitable future – is a fiction. The past is full of holes; the present is provisional, the future not known”.¹⁶⁵ The privilege of hindsight allows us to see history and its events as mapped in a kind of divine pathway, a straightforward and singular route, and thus, crisis might seem an inevitable occurrence of cause and consequence.

But history is complicated and messy. Harari acknowledges that the unifying characteristics of humanity are imagination and the creation of collective myths and stories. He suggests that *imagination* helps us to organise our societies and create order “by classifying [the world] into imagined categories”¹⁶⁶. These categories of people, places, time, and events are simply how we make sense of our messy and chaotic world. And thus, a cyclical theory to understand crisis emerges as a framework—a way to map and interpret these recurring patterns in human experience—helping us grasp how we too might collectively navigate fragile times, learning the lessons of resilience like our ancestors that came before.

Crisis as Dramatic Structure, Crisis as Cyclical

Our world is cyclical. The Earth completes one orbit of the sun every 365 days—366 in a leap year—and one rotation on its axis every 24 hours, with time measured in unchanging cycles of days, months, and seasons. Throughout history, cultures have shaped their understanding of time around these cycles, especially in agricultural societies where the seasons dictated life’s patterns.¹⁶⁷ Similarly, for many women, the menstrual cycle offers an embodied sense of temporality and a structured, cyclical lived experience.

In ancient Greece, multiple festivals were held throughout the year, tied to seasonal changes, to celebrate agricultural, religious, and civic aspects of life. Among them were theatrical celebrations dedicated to Dionysus, the god of wine and theatre. These festivals, such as the Lenaia in winter and the City Dionysia in spring, not only honoured Dionysus but played a crucial role in the development of Greek drama, reinforcing the

¹⁶³ Francis Fukuyama, ‘Big Histories for the Big Future’, *The New York Times* (New York), 18 July 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/18/books/review/the-fourth-turning-is-here-neil-howe-end-times-peter-turchin.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Penguin Random House Company, 2014), p. 266.

¹⁶⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction, Third Edition* (Routledge, 2013), p. 145.

¹⁶⁶ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Penguin Random House Company, 2014), p. 153.

¹⁶⁷ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy—What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America’s Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (Broadway Books, 1997), p. 10.

deep connection between seasonal cycles, religious observance, cultural expression, and participation in civic life.

In ancient Greek tragedy and myths, crisis manifests as a cyclical element, with conflicts and consequences that repeat and recur. This cyclical structure of crisis poses questions for its audience—How do we make sense of the world, and how do we break free from the cycle of crisis? In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, the titan Prometheus is condemned to an eternal cycle of suffering, his liver constantly regenerated only to be devoured again by Zeus' sacred eagle, trapping him in an endless cycle. The *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus illustrates multiple possible cycles of revenge, with each character's death leading to the next in an unbroken pattern of retribution, Iphigenia for Helen,¹⁶⁸ Agamemnon for Iphigenia, Clytemnestra for Agamemnon and Atreus for Thyestes, Aegisthus for Atreus and Agamemnon. These examples highlight the recurring nature of crisis in Greek drama, showing how cycles of conflict and suffering persist unless disrupted.

Crisis is not only the moment of intense conflict in the plot of tragedy but also the point of *anagnorisis* or discovery, for both the characters and the audience watching. It is the moment when the truth is revealed, often about a character's identity, actions, or fate, forcing reflections of their understanding of the world. The *Chorus*, a voice of wisdom in the play—often representing the ordinary people¹⁶⁹—communicate these lessons to the character and audience, offering insight into how the tragic events might be avoided or altered. As Pickering suggests, “the dramatic conflict intensifies through the rising action, often in a series of complications, until a turning point: a peripeteia, climax, or crisis is reached”.¹⁷⁰ The *peripeteia*, or turning point, is a climactic event in Greek tragedy, marking a shift in fortune for the tragic hero. Similarly, crisis in our own lives can be seen as a *peripeteian* moment, a pivotal turning point where we are confronted with an opportunity for reflection and change. Thus, as Walby suggests, crisis is a climactic and transformative event, inviting transformation and contemplation¹⁷¹ of how we might change our outcomes and break free from the cycles of tragedy in our own lived experiences.

As a director staging *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon* in modern contexts, I invite the actor and audience to engage with the dramatic tension of the original works and to contemplate how we might meet the challenges we face today, drawing parallels between the tragedy on stage and our own lived experiences. The shocking moments such as the infanticide of Astyanax or the murder of Agamemnon in the bathtub, are followed by the Chorus, who invites the audience to remain invested in the story,

¹⁶⁸ While Helen is not killed, Iphigenia is sacrificed to aid the Greeks victory in returning Helen to Sparta.

¹⁶⁹ Senators in Sophocles' *Antigone*, slave women in Euripides' *Women of Troy*, and Clytemnestra's palace staff and old war veterans in *Agamemnon*.

¹⁷⁰ Kenneth Pickering, *Key Concepts in Drama and Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 55.

¹⁷¹ Sylvia Walby, 'Crisis and Society: Developing the Theory of Crisis in the Context of COVID-19', *Global Discourse* 12, nos. 3–4 (2022): 498–516, <https://doi.org/0.1332/204378921X16348228772103>, p. 500.

encouraging them to reflect on the aftermath and the lessons it offers. As Pickering writes, “the play may be more exciting prior to the crisis but more absorbing afterwards”.¹⁷² The Chorus challenges the audience to think beyond these moments of fiction, urging them to consider their own realities in light of the actions and consequences on stage. I challenge the actor and audience to consider how our own crises might serve as pivotal moments for reflection, transformation, and change in our lives and society. As a female director, I believe we are perhaps uniquely positioned to explore the themes of crises depicted in ancient Greek tragedy, drawing on our embodied and lived experiences and historical realities of crisis that have shaped women's lives across time.

The Evolution of Theatre: Resilience through Adaptation

When Müller suggested that theatre is synonymous with crisis, he was referring to its function—what theatre does—as a site of disruption, confrontation, and transformation. However, I argue that there is more to this notion. Theatre is not only a space of crisis in its practice but a product of enduring crisis, again and again, throughout history. Beyond its critical function, theatre itself has been shaped by institutional and cultural crises, political suppressions, censorship and restrictions. The story of theatre is a story of crisis.

John Steinbeck once suggested that theatre “is the only institution in the world which has been dying for four thousand years and has never succumbed. It requires tough and devoted people to keep it alive.”¹⁷³ Kenneth Pickering says that “it is important to remember that we are discussing a vital and constantly evolving artform.”¹⁷⁴ It is theatre’s ability and necessity to evolve alongside and embrace cultural, political, and technological shifts that have enabled its survival. Theatre, as the Greeks understood it, differs vastly in its cultural, political, and technological functions from the modern day. Yet its ritualistic and communal essence remains an enduring characteristic, both as a means for entertainment and a space to reflect and critique the values and concerns of contemporary societies. Even when it has been outlawed, its venues destroyed, or its practitioners denied a means of making a living from their art, theatre has persistently redefined itself through new forms, styles, and interpretations—by revisions, adaptations, and innovations, pushing the boundaries of tradition and embracing new possibilities of performance.

Yet, theatre is also a fragile entity. It is susceptible to those same cultural, political, and technological shifts that enable it to flourish, that serve to potentially operate as a catalyst for its disruption and ultimate demise. I am intrigued by the etymology of crisis—*krisis*—which embodies the stark choice between *adaptation* or *death*. Understanding

¹⁷² Kenneth Pickering, *Key Concepts in Drama and Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 55.

¹⁷³ John Steinbeck, *Once There Was a War* (Penguin Books, 2001), p. 23.

¹⁷⁴ Kenneth Pickering, *Key Concepts in Drama and Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. viii.

that theatre has the potential to be both fragile and resilient highlights its duality—the relationship of vulnerability and strength—that challenges me as a theatre practitioner to create theatre in our current, complex era of crisis.

As human beings, our very existence is defined by our capacity to evolve¹⁷⁵ and adapt¹⁷⁶ to survive. Hutcheon and Bortolotti reinforce that adaptability is an “essential part of what makes us all human”.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, theatre has undergone a two-and-a-half-millennia process of evolution, encountering multiple adaptations of its form, function, and values to ensure its survival. While ancient Greek tragedy might differ in its original functions and cultural contexts, it continues to be studied, performed, and staged across the globe, suggesting an enduring fascination with the form. Peter Meineck suggests that its continued performance for centuries and millennia beyond its ancient origins demonstrates a “process of adaptation [which] has allowed Greek drama to survive and thrive”¹⁷⁸ and “in the evolution of reception and application of Greek drama in the modern world, to adapt *is* to survive”.¹⁷⁹ In theatre, adaptation manifests as a contextual transformation of the artform—shaped by cultural, technological, and political conditions. Adaptation also manifests as a process of content transformation—the reinterpretation or adaptation of a work of literature, text, genre, or form from one medium to another in response to those same contextual conditions—the cultural expectations, political climate, and technological changes.

Adaptation of the Genre: Directing Modern productions of Greek tragedy

According to Hutcheon, adaptation as a transformative process of content requires three conditions. The work must be an acknowledged transformation from one art form into another.¹⁸⁰ The second, that a work must be a “creative and interpretive act of [...] salvaging”¹⁸¹ or *borrowing*, paying homage to previous works. The third, the adaptation must be an “extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work”.¹⁸² Some well-known adaptations of ancient Greek myths or stories that fulfil the three conditions

¹⁷⁵ Evolution is the gradual, ongoing and long-term process of change to a species' behaviour, physical, and/or genetic characteristics, culminated by many adaptations to environmental changes.

¹⁷⁶ Adaptation is the species' physiological or behavioural more immediate response to those environmental changes, enhancing its possibility of survival.

¹⁷⁷ Peter Meineck, ‘Forsaking the Fidelity Discourse: The Application of Adaptation’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, ed. Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 90.

¹⁷⁸ Peter Meineck, ‘Forsaking the Fidelity Discourse: The Application of Adaptation’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, ed. Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 86.

¹⁷⁹ Peter Meineck, ‘Forsaking the Fidelity Discourse: The Application of Adaptation’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, ed. Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 109.

¹⁸⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006), p. 35.

¹⁸¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006), p. 35.

¹⁸² Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006), p. 35.

include the book series *Percy Jackson*¹⁸³, the film *Troy*¹⁸⁴, the television series *Kaos*¹⁸⁵, the video game *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*¹⁸⁶, and the song *Cassandra*¹⁸⁷ by Florence and the Machine.

As a theatre director, my primary objective is to deliver an engaging and dynamic production to an audience. Staging ancient Greek theatre in modern, Western, 21st-century contexts is a difficult task. While there are many adaptations of Greek tragedies available for performance, as a director, I intentionally choose to work with translations. I make this decision to avoid interpretations of a writer that might be imposed on a work to suit modern conditions or political climates. Hutcheon acknowledges that there can be “no such thing as a literal translation”¹⁸⁸ due to the cultural and temporal distances¹⁸⁹ between the ancient world and our own.¹⁹⁰ Taplin argues that the translation should approach the source material with respect, considering the ways modern cultural contexts shape its interpretation.¹⁹¹ He is particularly concerned with the potential loss of the *original* work’s historical, political, and cultural relevance when it is oversimplified or commercialised for contemporary audiences. A respectful adaptation, in his view, engages with the core themes and values of the *original* while acknowledging the context of different mediums or modernised settings. However, Taplin acknowledges that the dramatic features of Greek theatre, such as the Chorus, the epic sense of the [amphitheatre](#), and the communal experience of ancient performances as a civic duty, let alone the ancient Greek language, are difficult, if not impossible, to replicate *authentically* in contemporary adaptations.¹⁹²

Instead, I seek out translations that strive to preserve the rhythmic, thematic, and emotional intensity of the *original* text. While no translation is entirely neutral, this approach allows for a closer engagement with the source material and helps bridge the historical and cultural divide, making the work both compelling and accessible for a contemporary audience. A translation allows me to form my own directorial interpretation without filtering the work through another artist’s creative lens.

¹⁸³ Rick Riordan, *The Lightning Thief*, Percy Jackson & the Olympians (Miramax Books, 2005).

¹⁸⁴ *Troy*, directed by Wolfgang Petersen (Warner Brothers Pictures, 2004).

¹⁸⁵ *Kaos*, directed by Georgi Banks-Davies and Runyararo Mapfumo (Netflix, 2024).

¹⁸⁶ Ubisoft Quebec, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, Montreal, QC, released 2018, PlayStation 4.

¹⁸⁷ Kid Harpoon et al., *Cassandra*, performed by Florence + the Machine, Universal Island Records, 13 May 2022, Song.

¹⁸⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006), p. 16.

¹⁸⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006), p. 16.

¹⁹⁰ Although, there are some institutions including Bradfield College, in the United Kingdom, in collaboration with Oxford and Cambridge Universities, who stage ancient Greek theatre productions using Classical ancient Greek language in their outdoor amphitheatre.

¹⁹¹ Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Routledge, 2002), p. 129.

¹⁹² Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Routledge, 2002), p. 127.

But Peter Meineck argues that discussions of ancient Greek tragedy are difficult because we are on “slippery ground: can we really talk about an original play?”¹⁹³ He notes that the *original* plays were themselves “transpositional”,¹⁹⁴ adaptations of existing material and accounts from a variety of other mediums, such as historical or mythical stories, epic or lyrical poems, choral music and dance, and vases and scenery painting. The ancient dramatists themselves *salvaged* and *borrowed* from each other's works. Meineck further suggests that the editorial process the ancient dramatist undertook was a means of adaptation, cutting the length of the story, rearranging events, or even creating their own dramatic plot twists¹⁹⁵, and as each production was “revived and reperformed, further cuts and edits must have been made to suit budgets, local conditions, the theatrical aesthetics of the day, and casting needs, among much else.”¹⁹⁶

To perform works to a supposed *original* standard or condition requires that a work must conform to a rigid and academic standard, thereby restricting creative reinterpretations from flourishing naturally. We encounter a similar possible rigidity in performing ancient Greek theatre in an academic or institutional context. How can the plays in their dramatic and theatrical form thrive without adaptation, as we make discoveries in the rehearsal room that recontextualise and allow us to resonate with the play? As Sidiropoulou suggests, it is “thanks to its adaptability, the dramatic canon has been revisited across different mediums and practises, becoming universally popular”.¹⁹⁷

In staging these plays, I discuss with the actors, the adaption of page to stage, from the mythic, to contemporary, to translation, to our stagings—the contexts of the mythic Thebes, Troy, and Argos, of Sophocles, Euripides, or Aeschylus’ ancient Athens, of the translators Don Taylor and Ted Hughes, and of our 21st century global contexts and staging in Aotearoa. Through transitions and adaptations of Greek drama, I believe we come to understand ourselves and the changes of culture, society, our values, and our beliefs. As Lorna Hardwick suggests, “theatre translation is a connector between ancient and modern audiences [...] It shifts perceptions of both ancient and modern and this

¹⁹³ Peter Meineck, ‘Forsaking the Fidelity Discourse: The Application of Adaptation’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, ed. Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 83.

¹⁹⁴ Peter Meineck, ‘Forsaking the Fidelity Discourse: The Application of Adaptation’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, ed. Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 84.

¹⁹⁵ As demonstrated in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, giving Clytemnestra the axe to deliver the revenging blows onto her husband, rather than her role as an asset in Aegisthus’ plot.

¹⁹⁶ Peter Meineck, ‘Forsaking the Fidelity Discourse: The Application of Adaptation’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, ed. Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 84.

¹⁹⁷ Avra Sidiropoulou, ‘Adaptation as a Love Affair: The Ethics of Directing the Greeks’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, by Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 138.

makes it important for the understanding of cultural change”¹⁹⁸. Yet we additionally come to understand what has remained, the likeness and reflections of ourselves in our ancient counterparts. Bakogianni supports that “modern productions of ancient Greek drama have to find a theatrical, linguistic, and ideological register that allows them to form an affective bridge between our classical dramatic texts and the preoccupations, problems, and anxieties of today. Otherwise, ancient Greek drama risks becoming an unnecessary relic of the past with nothing of value to say to the present”.¹⁹⁹ Encountering crisis *within* the themes and staging these plays *within* crisis, is where I have come to recognise that theatre, while fragile, can be fiercely resilient in times of crisis as a form, discipline, and practice. Our human experiences are not unique thematically, and we have shared these iterations of crisis with our historical counterparts.

¹⁹⁸ Lorna Hardwick, ‘Translating Greek Tragedy to the Modern Stage’, *Theatre Journal* 59, no. 3 (2007): 358–61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2007.0148>, p. 361.

¹⁹⁹ Anastasia Bakogianni, ‘Trapped between Fidelity and Adaptation? On the Reception of Ancient Greek Tragedy in Modern Greece’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, ed. Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 332.

Theatre, About, Of, In Times of Crisis

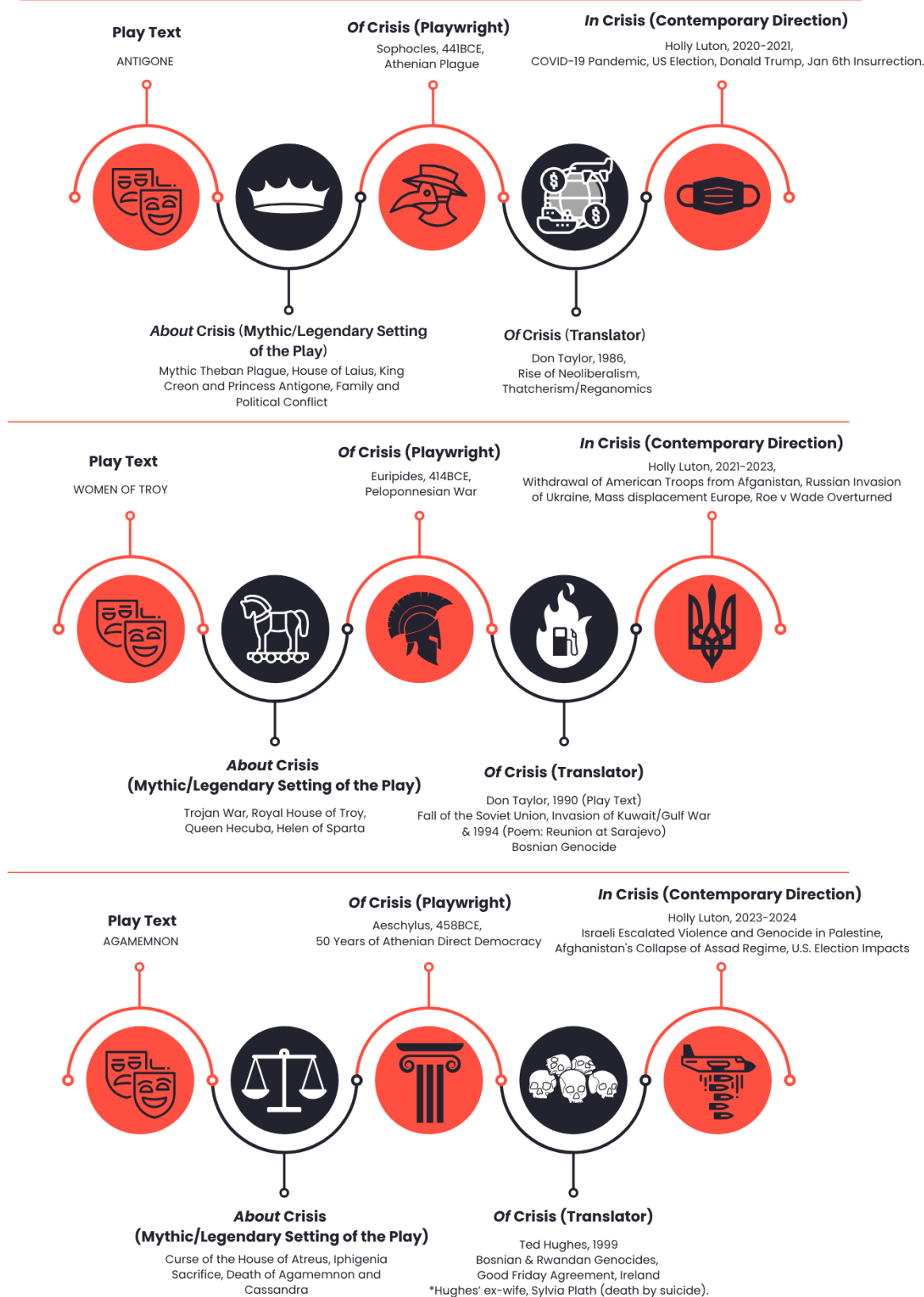


Figure 16. Theatre About Crisis, Of Crisis (Playwright), Of Crisis (Translator), In Crisis (Contemporary Direction)

It is worth noting that several male academics and critics have characterised the director's adaptation of ancient Greek tragedy for contemporary performance as a form of *bastardisation*—a *blasphemous* or *radical* tampering with the original texts. Katie Mitchell has repeatedly faced these criticisms for her directorial choices in staging tragedy,²⁰⁰ and as Charles Spencer reviewing her 2007 production of *Women of Troy* once stated “her own particular speciality [...] is smashing up the classics”.²⁰¹ Taplin's arguments often employ language that is arguably patriarchal, as evidenced by his consistent use of the male pronoun for the director, playwright, and audience. As Pickering asserts, theatre is a dynamic and evolving art form, and one of its most significant cultural transformations has been the inclusion of women. Just as language, cultural values, and the role of women in theatre and society have changed and evolved, I argue against Taplin's stance that adaptations should aim to *replicate* or *faithfully* reproduce the *original* work, particularly because we do not live in an ancient Greek society. As a female director staging these plays with female actors for an audience of women, I am acutely aware of the societal rejection of our participation in the civic engagement and performance of theatre in ancient Athens. My work, as a female director, will inherently be an adaptation, reflecting my lived experience and offering a lens that the original works could not foresee.

Rather than attempting to *improve* the work, my goal is to create a platform where marginalised voices can engage with and reinterpret the original material. The adaptations I create should not be seen as insults to the *original* but as recontextualisations that invite modern theatre-makers and audiences to connect with these plays in ways that reflect our contemporary social and cultural dynamics. The historical exclusion of women from both the creation and viewing of these works means that it is only within the last [saeculum](#) that female directors are able to adapt and reshape these plays, reclaiming these stories about the female experience for ourselves, and making them accessible and resonant for today's audiences. My work, by nature, is an *adaptation*, and through creative measures, I aim to capture the dramatic characteristics of Greek drama—swapping Greek masks for pandemic medical masks, reimagining the [amphitheatre](#) as a grand staircase, incorporating song and dance to heighten tension or add satirical elements, and transforming the Chorus from a collective entity to individual characters through both physical movement and dialogue.

²⁰⁰ Georgia Luckhurst, 'Katie Mitchell Hits out at “misogyny and Rage” of British Theatre Critics', *The Stage*, 24 November 2023, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/katie-mitchell-hits-out-at-misogyny-and-rage-of-british-theatre-critics>.

²⁰¹ Charles Spencer, 'Women of Troy: Euripides All Roughed Up', *The Telegraph*, 30 November 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20071224015308/http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2007/11/30/bttroy130.xml>.



Figure 17. The Chorus women in song and dance, Women of Troy

Many questions play on my mind as a director when staging these plays—when is it appropriate or is it appropriate to take creative liberties in adapting these plays from page to stage? How much artistic licensing is afforded to us? What might this look like? Do these adaptations detract from the *original* source material? Do these liberties extend to changes to the text? Like Aeschylus, is it appropriate to twist the plot for shocking affect? How might our 21st century lived experiences unconsciously and consciously weave their way into the kinds of directions we stage the plays?

Grammatas et al. suggest that the long-held belief in the *original* authorship as the sole creator of meaning and the primary authority over how a work should be performed is being actively challenged by directors and practitioners.²⁰² Fidelity to the *original* text is no longer paramount.²⁰³ While the text is still a central focus point, and respect must still be maintained in addressing the work, meaning is, instead, increasingly realised through performance, where the director, actors, and audience each contribute to the construction of meaning, rather than simply reproducing what the playwright wrote millennia ago. This shift has given rise to a new and distinct approach to directing ancient Greek tragedy, where the author's text is just one component of a broader creative process, and not necessarily the most significant one.²⁰⁴ Mitchell asserts that creative freedom and artistic expression flourish when the director is the highest authority in the construction of productions,²⁰⁵ then actors, and finally the playwright. This was a sentiment echoed by ex-Artistic Director of Sydney Theatre Company, Kip Williams, in a pre-show talk I attended for his international touring production of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.²⁰⁶ Williams spoke of the freedoms that come with being the overseer of the company and the key theatre-maker, suggesting that there are fewer requirements to substantiate your ideas through the chain of command. The only person who needs to trust your ideas is yourself, as the director.

Ultimately, I can never truly know what the *original* works would have been like as a woman, as I would have been excluded from experiencing them. By virtue of our female existence, it is this very lens of exclusion and marginalisation that informs and empowers our directional approaches as women.

²⁰² Theodore Grammatas et al., *The Values of Ancient Greek Drama and Theatre in Space and Time: The Present of the Values* (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens Press, 2023), p. 13.

²⁰³ Peter Meineck, 'Forsaking the Fidelity Discourse: The Application of Adaptation', in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, ed. Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

²⁰⁴ Theodore Grammatas et al., *The Values of Ancient Greek Drama and Theatre in Space and Time: The Present of the Values* (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens Press, 2023), p. 20.

²⁰⁵ Michael Billington, 'Who Comes First – Playwright or Director? It Depends Which Country You're in', *The Guardian*, 24 November 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/nov/24/german-theatre-director-katie-mitchell>.

²⁰⁶ *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, produced by Sydney Theatre Company, adapted and directed by Kip Williams (Kiri Te Kanawa Theatre, Aotea Centre, 2023), Theatre Performance.

Directing the Greeks in Aotearoa

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of modern professional productions of tragedy for public viewership staged in Auckland within the last 15 years that I could reference or draw upon creatively.²⁰⁷ Educational institutions lead the way with performances of the form. The tertiary University of Victoria, Wellington's *Victoria Ancient Theatre Society*, regularly performs productions of ancient Greek theatre with its students.²⁰⁸ Some Secondary school students who study Drama can be assessed on their performance of Greek drama as a theatre form,²⁰⁹ as I was in my Drama classes at school. But mostly, these productions are designed and directed for research purposes, staged within assessment criteria, or styled in ancient Greek *traditional* conditions and conventions, complete with masks, tunics, and cloaks.

Anastasia Bakogianni, a lecturer in Classical studies at Massey University in Auckland, spoke to actor and director Michael Hurst about the lack of tragedy, let alone Greek drama performances in Aotearoa. Hurst, who has directed Auckland Theatre Company's only Greek drama in its 33-year history—Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* in 2015—suggests that

the biggest challenge to doing [Greek drama] comes from the persistent idea that Greek tragedies are miserable [...] Agreed, the tragedies are in fact tragic, but this should be no more a disqualification for them than for any modern tragedy – their suffering is accessible and relevant, and where the relevance needs to be funnelled through adaptation, then so be it. So convincing companies to present the Greeks is difficult [in New Zealand], and so is convincing the public that what they will see will be riveting and transforming. In my experience, once they get into the theatre, they love it.²¹⁰

Given its staging in an academic setting, I made the decision to cut back the scripts of *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon* for a concise and timely production that could fulfil my academic and director objectives of the work, making the works both accessible for my actors and audience. I made the deliberate choice to stage these plays at no longer than

²⁰⁷ *Puppet Antigone*—a production staged with the Auckland Men's Prisoners, directed by Dr. Rand Hazou and Derek Gordon—I drew upon archival material during my Masters, although this production was not for public viewership. *Puppet Antigone*, produced by The Unit 9 Theatre Group, directed by Rand Hazou and Derek Gordon (Auckland Prison, Paremoremo, 2017), Theatre Performance. Other productions have included the international touring production of Oedipus in the Korean language in 2018 and Rachel House's adaptation of Medea in 2016. However, these three productions have either not been publicly accessible or were adaptations of existing tragedies.

²⁰⁸ The University of Victoria, Wellington, 'Victoria Ancient Theatre Society', accessed 30 January 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/victoriaancienttheatresociety/>.

²⁰⁹ The New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 'AS 91216 (A) Annotated Exemplars: NZQA', accessed 30 January 2025, <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/subjects/past-exams-and-exemplars/drama/as-91216-a/>

²¹⁰ Michael Hurst, 'Michael Hurst Interviewed by Anastasia Bakogianni', interview by Anastasia Bakogianni, 12 May 2017, Video Interview, <https://www.massey.ac.nz/about/colleges-schools-and-institutes/college-of-humanities-and-social-sciences/research-in-the-college-of-humanities-and-social-sciences/humanities-media-and-creative-communication-research/classical-world-new-zealand/michael-hurst-interview/>.

one hour and forty-five minutes without an interval, to condense the dramatic, thematic, and emotional intensity of the play, joking with my cast that the faster we finished the performance, the faster we could head to the pub afterwards.²¹¹ However, I was concerned as a director that any script cuts I made for the sake of timing or directorial vision could be seen as compromising the integrity of the form. The dilemma over cutting scripts for performance, especially in the case of translations, often sparks debates about authorship and the integrity of the *original* work. While translations are adaptations in their own right, with much of the heavy lifting done by the *original* author, they, too, are reinterpretations of pre-existing myths and narratives, constantly evolving. As I have briefly mentioned, directors like Mitchell have faced similar criticisms, with some academics labelling her as a "vandal, ripping apart classic texts, distorting them to her own dubious purpose".²¹² In navigating these concerns in my own practice, I was mindful of the balance between preserving the text's *original* heart while adapting it for contemporary performance.

Viewing Mitchell's director's notes and annotated scripts at the National Theatre Archive in London, in 2022, gave me an insight and a newfound confidence to trust my creative oversight as the director. Mitchell has a no-fear attitude when dealing with traditional texts, supporting the idea that a director should "have [their] scissors to hand when [they're] about to direct"²¹³ a classic play text. She suggests that cutting text is necessary to effectively communicate one's ideas.²¹⁴ When staging a form that is unfamiliar to Aotearoa actors and audiences, cutting the text down in size allowed me to flesh out the central themes, myths, and archetypes, and discuss the relationships, potential parallels, and modern subtexts of performing these plays against our lived experiences with the actors. The cuts gave us the opportunity to play out the mythic stories in illustrative ways without needing to speak entire scenes. Together with the actors, we devised pre-show scenes²¹⁵ to be enacted as the audience took their seats in the auditorium, which provided some context as to when, where, what, and who these characters might be. Editing the script to distribute Chorus lines to individual ensemble members allowed the named Chorus actors to build character and backstory. Cutting the play in half from three hours allowed me to intensify the climactic tragedy that would otherwise be disrupted by an intermission for the audience. In some ways, the lack of

²¹¹ This joke also acknowledged the timeframe that we were afforded in a non-theatre location, requiring the whole cast and crew to be out of the building by 10 pm at Auckland University of Technology.

²¹² Charlotte Higgins, 'Katie Mitchell, British Theatre's Queen in Exile', Stage, *The Guardian*, 14 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jan/14/british-theatre-queen-exile-katie-mitchell>.

²¹³ Charlotte Higgins, 'The Cutting Edge', Stage, *The Guardian*, 24 November 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/24/theatre.stage>.

²¹⁴ Charlotte Higgins, 'The Cutting Edge', Stage, *The Guardian*, 24 November 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/24/theatre.stage>.

²¹⁵ *Antigone*: The Chorus cleaning and cleansing the plague while Antigone awaits her sister; *Women of Troy*: The Chorus women, Hecuba, Cassandra, and Helen, patrolled by the Greek army soldiers, awaiting their fate as slave women to the Greeks; *Agamemnon*: The Watchmen partying and keeping watch for the beacon fires on the roof.

interludes builds up the [cathartic](#) release for an audience, and parallels the experiences of the thematic contexts; there is no break for those who are experiencing political upheaval, war, trauma, and abuse.

As a director, I focus my attention on the thematic and allegorical parallels between Greek tragedy and our own modern world. The social, political, and historical contexts or mythic stories in the play, are fundamentally different from our own experiences and may not be fully comprehensible or relevant to contemporary audiences. I, therefore, selectively cut dialogue from the Chorus interludes, which were mythically dense.²¹⁶ But these contexts are still discussed with the actors in rehearsals to provide background material and frame the context and world of the play.

The Role of the Director

In the theatre, the director's job is to unify various elements of a production while coordinating with a wide network of collaborators to create a cohesive and complete vision for a final performance of the story. As Hugh Morrison suggests, the director operates as both the "interpreter of the play and the trainer and guide of the actors".²¹⁷ Morrison further argues that being a director requires a combination of analytical rigour and human sensitivity, that they "must be intelligent, deductive, reflective, curious, and rational".²¹⁸ A director should also have an "insatiable and broadminded curiosity"²¹⁹, attuned to the social and political conditions that shape human experience. Sidiropoulos emphasises the importance of vision and risk, suggesting that "a good director is a fearless director who remains consistent and relentless to the mission of realising a vision, no matter how utterly illogical it may appear to others".²²⁰ She suggests that inspiration is the "fuel that gets your engine going".²²¹ Directing begins with a "sincere instinctual attachment to an idea; an image; a sound; a person; or a sensory, emotional, or intellectual stimulus, which activates the imagination, generating a mood for reflection and a desire for expression and participation".²²² In this sense, a director is not only an organiser of theatrical elements, but what Morrison describes as an "editor and presenter of human beings"²²³—shaping the representation of lives, relationships, joys and sufferings on stage.

²¹⁶ As Aristotle in *Poetics* suggests, the Chorus in the plays of Sophocles are the model Chorus. As in Euripides' plays, the "songs have no more to do with the story than with any other tragedy. That is why [The Chorus] sing interludes". Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford University Press, 2013), 1456a25.

²¹⁷ Hugh Morrison, *Directing in the Theatre* (A & C Black, 1984), p. 6.

²¹⁸ Hugh Morrison, *Directing in the Theatre* (A & C Black, 1984), p. 13.

²¹⁹ Hugh Morrison, *Directing in the Theatre* (A & C Black, 1984), p. 14.

²²⁰ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 1.

²²¹ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 5.

²²² Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 5.

²²³ Hugh Morrison, *Directing in the Theatre* (A & C Black, 1984), p. 14.

These perspectives position the director between two intersecting demands: the need for critical reflection and the drive toward imaginative, and at times instinctive, realisation. However, Sidiropoulou also acknowledges that while directing is deeply informed by instinct, it is equally grounded in learned “technique, form, control of the stage, developing your own language, and making informed choices,” whether acquired through formal education or embodied practice.

My own directing practice sits in tension between these positions. I often experience a kind of rapid associative thinking, where visual, spatial, and affective images emerge faster than I can immediately articulate them—as Sidiropoulos suggests, the illogical vision.²²⁴ In rehearsal, while my succinct overall vision remains on the horizon, I aim for an iterative, exploratory process in the moment. I regularly ask actors to “give it a go,” testing ideas in action rather than over-determining them in advance, allowing the work to evolve through doing. At the same time, I maintain a strong emphasis on communication and responsiveness, continually checking in with actors to ensure that my ideas are comprehensible, and remaining flexible where they are not. As director Lucy Kerbel emphasises, these processes are not a reflection of my lack of confidence as a director, but rather a prompt or an opportunity for creative ideas to be challenged and explored collaboratively.²²⁵

A central component of my role as director, therefore, lies in translating my *own* internal, abstract vision while also serving as a translator of the *playwright’s* script into clear, communicable, and actionable material for actors and collaborators. This process draws on both my formal tertiary training and experiential, tacit knowledge, developed through observing, participating in, and leading rehearsal processes, resulting in a continually evolving repertoire of strategies, tasks, methods, and methodologies. In this way, my directing knowledge draws on both my intuitive and disciplined practice.

My process is also informed by my passionate interdisciplinary approach to world-building, drawing on a range of artistic, cultural, and historical references to inspire and generate thematic resonance. I use music, both classical and popular, to shape the atmosphere and emotional rhythm of scenes, while visual art serves as a catalyst for staging and character exploration. For example, in *Agamemnon*, the painting *Clytemnestra* by John Collier informed aspects of character development and physical composition. In *Women of Troy*, I explored contemporary ancient pottery as a form to generate tableaux and movement scenes.

Jonathan Miller suggests that “every live staging of a printed play could theoretically be considered an adaptation in its performance”.²²⁶ The director’s job is to undertake the

²²⁴ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 1.

²²⁵ Paulette Marty, *Contemporary Women Stage Directors: Conversations on Craft* (Methuen Drama, 2019), p. 235.

²²⁶ Jonathan Miller in Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006), p. 39.

task of a *secondary* adaptation when shifting the story from page to stage, to “actualize the text and to interpret and then recreate it, thereby in a sense adapting it for the stage”.²²⁷ However, a director must find a balance between what the playwright provides in the text and what is practical and suitable for the contexts in which the director has set the play. In the 21st century, we cannot grasp the ontology and contexts of a bygone era to replicate the world of the playwright. There are no “native speakers of ancient Greek, nor for that matter of Elizabethan English”.²²⁸

What we can do is create a new world for the play through design and performance methods to bring the work to life. My stagings instead aim to expose the themes and contexts that continue to have relevance and resonance of the world today and a sense of what those themes might mean to us—the timeless and universal themes of the human condition. The resonances of love, loss, pride, the abuse of power, money and corruption, war and its aftermath, refugees, the subjugation of women and minorities, and our fraught relationships between faith, beliefs, people, and the Gods. These plays with their settings of plague and war are contrasted and set against the backdrop of our own lived experiences, connecting the contextual Athenian plague of Sophocles’ world and the textual plague in *Antigone*, with our COVID-19 pandemic, and the contextual Peloponnesian War of Euripides’ world and the textual Trojan War in the *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon*, with the current wars and humanitarian and refugee crises happening globally in the Middle East and Ukraine.

The repression of women within both plays and during the ancient playwrights’ times, paired with political undercurrents in which we are performing these plays, highlights the persistent dogmatic beliefs that women are inferior in many places in the world—visible today in contexts ranging from post-Roe v. Wade America, to Afghanistan, to Aotearoa’s own struggles with gender equity in leadership, representation, and employment.²²⁹ Performing these plays in contemporary contexts as female actors and directors is particularly poignant given the invisible roles women played in ancient Athenian society. The fight for female autonomy over our voices and bodies is not a new concept. Nor is the concept that men would like women, as Edith Hall suggests, “to be docile and retiring. But the force and frequency with which [women have] enunciated this ideal of femininity suggest that women did not always embrace it”.²³⁰ The speeches of Hecuba, Cassandra, Andromache, Helen, and Clytemnestra, suggest that women will not go quietly. Though written through a male gaze, these female voices resist erasure—they rage, grieve, manipulate, confront, challenge, and demand to be heard across time.

²²⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006), p. 39.

²²⁸ Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Routledge, 2002), p. 128.

²²⁹ Catherine McGregor, “‘Dark Day for NZ Women’ as Pay Equity Regime Guttled under Urgency”, The Spinoff, 7 May 2025, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/the-bulletin/07-05-2025/dark-day-for-nz-women-as-pay-equity-regime-guttled-under-urgency>.

²³⁰ Edith Hall, *The Ancient Greeks: Ten Ways They Shaped the Modern World* (Vintage, 2016), p. 7.



Figure 18. Clytemnestra drags her axe towards Agamemnon, Agamemnon 2024.

I also acknowledge that my role as a female director extends beyond the interpretation of patriarchally-oriented texts to an active engagement with the gendered dynamics of the rehearsal process itself. With a majority female-identifying cast, creating space for the actors to openly, and often humorously, engage in conversations that could be considered private or *messy* within other professional contexts were not only permitted but recognised as integral to the work—discussions around lived experiences and the politics of our gender autonomy, our relationships, child-birth, raising children, ageing, menstruation, menopause, and the embodied realities of performing in female-presenting bodies. These conversations were careful and purposeful, allowing actors to channel discussions into dramaturgical considerations.

Humour played a crucial role in this process, functioning not to diminish the weight of the conversation but as a tool for navigating it—allowing the actors to process difficult themes, build relational trust, and reclaim agency within narratives that centre trauma and subjugation. Backstage, the humour continued, with moments that highlighted costuming, physical comfort, and the practicalities of performance as women. These seemingly mundane exchanges contributed to a sense of trust and solidarity within the ensemble.

Paulette Marty has undertaken an extensive collection of interviews with global female directors, providing insight into their practice and craft in theatre-making.²³¹ Director Anne Kauffman discusses how her sense of humour and personality were vital in creating her work, allowing the actors' creativity to flourish organically.²³² In “attempting to keep [her] gender out of the room [she] essentially eliminated what made [her]” work her own.²³³ She argues that our “personhood is the grease that enables the truly original creative process to happen”.²³⁴ Director Kimberly Senior faced the difficult dilemma of being called a female director when her male colleagues expected no gender association with their title. She later recognised that the moniker *female-director* should be a superhero “cape [worn] with pride”.²³⁵

Several performers reflected on the significance of being allowed to engage in gendered discussions during the PPDW, noting that such conversations felt both necessary and rarely afforded in the productions they had previously performed in as women. This raised important questions about my practice, the openness I had made possible, and the extent to which the director's gender may shape not only the interpretive framing of the work but also the lived experience of its creation.

²³¹ Paulette Marty, *Contemporary Women Stage Directors: Conversations on Craft* (Methuen Drama, 2019).

²³² Paulette Marty, *Contemporary Women Stage Directors: Conversations on Craft* (Methuen Drama, 2019), pp. 229-230.

²³³ Paulette Marty, *Contemporary Women Stage Directors: Conversations on Craft* (Methuen Drama, 2019), p. 229.

²³⁴ Paulette Marty, *Contemporary Women Stage Directors: Conversations on Craft* (Methuen Drama, 2019), p. 230.

²³⁵ Paulette Marty, *Contemporary Women Stage Directors: Conversations on Craft* (Methuen Drama, 2019), p. 230.



Figure 19. Andromache and the baby Astyanax, Women of Troy 2023.

Theatre in an Era of Crisis

As a means of making sense of and contextualising my theatre practice in these current times of crisis, I briefly discuss three historically relevant examples of crises to draw meaningful parallels and insights. As my thesis is framed through stagings of ancient Greek tragedy, I returned to its crisis origins as a form which emerged from political upheaval and the rejection of the old tyrannical system to establish a new Athenian Democracy. I examine the Christchurch Earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. As an emerging artist-researcher during the COVID-19 pandemic, I consider the multitude of continued long-term consequences and their impacts on national theatre practice that were revealed in the pandemic, and how these continue to affect and challenge my own practice throughout my research. These distinct case studies help to understand how theatre-makers responded to their own respective crises and adapted their practices in the face of upheaval. Saldaña suggests, “at this particular and unstable period in our world history, many theatre artists are asking themselves what is ‘the theatre of the future’”.²³⁶ Theatre Historian Gabriel Egan suggests that calamitous events which affect theatre are “of prime importance for understanding the history of drama”²³⁷ and considering these past events can help us to recognise the challenges and changes to our current theatre practice.

Greek Drama: Born from Crisis

In its 2500-year history, theatre as an art form encapsulates a multitude of different cultural and historical forms, practices, play texts, playwrights, and practitioners. Although the ancient Greek plays initially appear as other-worldly in temporal contrasts of language and culture, academics generally agree that the Greek myths and stories are captivating because of recognisable universal and timeless themes of the human condition and experience, especially during our turbulent times.²³⁸ As Sidiropoulou suggests, tragedy reflects the “current sociopolitical anxieties, and for this reason, directors turn to it for guidance and wisdom”.²³⁹ It is precisely their universality that allows us to transplant these plays into our own contexts, interpret them for our own times, and thus resonate with and connect to their themes. While its *content* can help us make sense of our times of crisis, theatrically and thematically, its context demonstrates an enduring history of resilience, born from, flourishing, and performed in constant times of crisis.

²³⁶ Johnny Saldaña, *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage* (Left Coast Press, 2011), p. 213.

²³⁷ Egan, Gabriel. ‘The Closure of the Theatres’. *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Caroline Literature, 44 (2014): 103–19, p. 103.

²³⁸ Theodore Grammatas et al., *The Values of Ancient Greek Drama and Theatre in Space and Time: The Present of the Values* (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens Press, 2023), p. 21.

²³⁹ Avra Sidiropoulou, ‘Adaptation as a Love Affair: The Ethics of Directing the Greeks’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, by Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 139.

When I speak about the conception of theatre by the ancient Greeks, I am specifically referring to the city-state of Athens. *Ancient Greece* is a term in classical reception that encompasses the many different city-states in the region, but it is essential to remember that concepts of democracy, philosophy, and theatre were largely shaped in Athens during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. This distinction is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, when I discuss participation in civic and theatrical life, I am referring specifically to male citizens of Athens, those who had the privilege of voting, holding office, and engaging in public life. Women and slaves, excluded from citizenship, did not participate in these democratic processes, including the theatrical and philosophical traditions that flourished in Athens. Secondly, Athenian democracy actively fostered a culture of artistry and intellectual pursuit, in which theatre played a central role in civic identity and public discourse. As Hall suggests, “in trying to understand how a city could produce so many great men in so few generations, it is illuminating to consider their collective experience of growing up as participants in such a rich festival calendar”.²⁴⁰

Theatre was not merely entertainment, it was a means of political participation and philosophical exploration—reflecting the values and ideologies of the Athenian polis, and therefore exclusive to male participants. When I, as a woman, direct these plays with other female actors, there is a layered recognition—our participation was banned in ancient Athens, yet, many Greek plays are named after women or centre on female stories and characters from myth.²⁴¹ This tension between representation and exclusion is something I explore further in my reflection on staging *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon*.

Although women were excluded from public theatre attendance and participation, there were many festivals and events that allowed women’s pursuit of knowledge and entertainment to flourish away from the eyes of men, such as the Thesmophoria—a festival celebrating the goddesses Demeter and Persephone.²⁴² While rare, there are notable exceptions to the broader exclusion of women from public intellectual life, including the female poet, Sappho, and the philosopher, Aspasia.

In the fifth century BCE, Athens transitioned from an autocratic system to a radical experiment in democracy. This profound political shift was mirrored in its cultural life, particularly in the development of theatre. While Greek drama predates democracy, it was within this new political system that theatre truly flourished. The democratisation of Athens encouraged active male citizens’ participation, not only in politics but also in culture and arts. The City Dionysia, in which playwrights submitted tragedies, comedies, and satyr plays for competition, became a state-sponsored event, reinforcing the intersection of politics, religion, and culture. Attendance at the theatre was not only

²⁴⁰ Edith Hall, *The Ancient Greeks: Ten Ways They Shaped the Modern World* (Vintage, 2016), p. 140.

²⁴¹ Edith Hall, ‘The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 105.

²⁴² Edith Hall, *The Ancient Greeks: Ten Ways They Shaped the Modern World* (Vintage, 2016), p. 141.

encouraged but, in many cases, *required* of Athenian citizens, ensuring that the theatre functioned as a civic space where political discourse could unfold. Theatre was one of the most important rituals of participation by a citizen in Athenian Democracy. But as Critchley reminds us, “we should never forget that the festival of the Great Dionysia was first instituted around 532 BCE under the leadership—indeed the apparently benevolent tyranny—of Pisistratus and his growing political ambition.”²⁴³

However, Athens' political landscape remained unstable throughout the fifth century BCE, shaped by war, shifting power structures, and internal strife. These tensions found their way into the theatre through the stories and themes highlighted by the playwrights. For example, Euripides' *Women of Troy* (415 BCE) would have resonated with Athenian audiences in the wake of the brutal destruction of Melos and the ill-fated Sicilian Expedition during the Peloponnesian War.²⁴⁴ At the time of staging my own version of this play in contemporary times, Ukraine was invaded by neighbouring Russia.

Interestingly, discussions about adapting Greek tragedy today often overlook the brevity of its original era. As Vernant and Vidal-Naquet observe, tragedy “appears at a historical turning point that is limited and dated. It is born, flourishes and degenerates in Athens, and all almost within the space of a hundred years.”²⁴⁵ Despite the form's timeless recognition in its themes, its actual lifespan was remarkably ephemeral.

Rising from the Rubble: The 2010 and 2011 Christchurch Earthquakes

There is an ongoing discourse about how and whether we can continue to make theatre during these natural disasters and how we might ensure theatre in Aotearoa's security for the future. The Christchurch Earthquakes of 2011 caused enduring and devastating consequences for the theatre community, while highlighting their resilience.

The Canterbury Repertory Theatre's production of *Hamlet* was struck with a real-life tragedy when the Repertory Theatre building sustained irreparable damage and was *red-stickered*, leaving behind the costumes, set, and props all trapped beneath a crumbling theatre. But a tragedy with far greater impact affected the cast when the actor, playing Laertes, Jamie Gilbert—son of the director Robert Gilbert—died during the quakes. In a gesture of extraordinary resilience and love, Robert chose to continue the production in honour of his son. The cast relocated to Burnside High School's performing arts centre in May of 2011 and Robert stepped into the role of Laertes. Holding a minute's silence backstage as a tribute to Jamie before the show began, this production became a symbolic space to channel the grief of the city and the resilience during a time of crisis. Many of the cast members, too, had lost their homes, family, and friends in the earthquakes. Robert suggests that “live theatre [...] always feels a little bit risky, but it

²⁴³ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, The Greeks, and Us* (Profile Books Ltd, 2020), p. 23.

²⁴⁴ Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. xii.

²⁴⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (Zone Books, 1996), p. 25.

comes down to how the cast copes",²⁴⁶ carrying on with theatre in crisis is to cope with the tragedy and to bond through a shared grief.

In the subsequent years, several arts and events venues were renovated and restored, including the Town Hall, Christchurch Arts Centre, and the Court Theatre—a project which has taken 14 years and has now opened its doors in 2025.²⁴⁷

Despite the devastating impacts of the Earthquakes and the subsequent pandemic crisis, theatre in Christchurch has continued to be relevant, and its communities have demonstrated resilience in keeping theatre alive.²⁴⁸ The *Resilience Greater Christchurch* project, founded from the impact of the Earthquakes, is dedicated to helping “cities around the world become more resilient to the physical, social, and economic challenges”²⁴⁹ that will arise in the 21st century.

COVID-19: Theatre-making during a Pandemic in Aotearoa

In March 2020, I had just begun my Master of Design at AUT. My research topic, then an early iteration of exploring ancient Greek drama in non-theatre locations, was disrupted when the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a global emergency as COVID-19 spread rapidly around the world. The then Prime Minister of Aotearoa, Jacinda Ardern, guided by a mantra of kindness and commitment to protect the nation’s safety,²⁵⁰ moved immediately to shut down the nation’s borders and institutions. Cautionary measures and procedures were put in place to restrict large—and *unnecessary*—communal and public gatherings, including places of entertainment, worship, shops, places of work, and schools, with the aim of protecting vulnerable people.²⁵¹ Like a Greek tragedy, this moment of *peripeteia*, or the sudden change in circumstance, transformed my understanding of theatre practice and its value and meaning in this new and ever-changing era of crisis. At the time, I contemplated how these turbulent times would

²⁴⁶ Nicole Mathewson, ‘Dad to Honour Dead Son in Hamlet’, *Stuff*, 5 May 2011, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/4964517/Dad-to-honour-dead-son-in-Hamlet>.

²⁴⁷ Anna Sargent, ‘Court Theatre’s New \$61 Million Playhouse Opens in Central Christchurch’, RNZ, 4 May 2025, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/559885/court-theatre-s-new-61-million-playhouse-opens-in-central-christchurch>.

²⁴⁸ In November 2022, the Christchurch City Council announced that funding had been secured for the development of the Court Theatre’s new central city theatre venue – a project that aims to be completed by 2024. The new venue will house two theatre spaces, a front of house hospitality area, an education studio, and several multipurpose spaces aimed to “ensure a full range of theatre experiences available for all ages of audiences from all parts of our community”. ‘Hawkins Appointed to Build The Court Theatre’, Newsline, 3 November 2022, <https://newsline.ccc.govt.nz/news/story/hawkins-appointed-to-build-the-court-theatre>.

²⁴⁹ ‘Resilient Greater Christchurch Plan Overview’ (Greater Christchurch Partnership, December 2014), https://resilientcitiesnetwork.org/downloadable_resources/Network/Christchurch-Resilience-Strategy-English.pdf, p. 2

²⁵⁰ Jacinda Ardern, *A Different Kind of Power: A Memoir* (Penguin Books, 2025).

²⁵¹ Holly Charlotte Luton, ‘PEEP: Antigone, An Exploration of Performing Live Theatre During a Pandemic, Using Sophocles’ Antigone’ (Masters Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2021), <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/14479>, pp. 14-15.

redefine the conventional rules and rituals of theatre-making and what adaptations would be required to the ways we made, enacted, and saw theatre.

Forced to shift the scope of my Masters research, I sought to embrace, embody and employ the pandemic into my practice. I was prompted to design and deploy a practical and aesthetic creative solution to directly address some of the issues that arose when producing live theatre during the pandemic and reflect on our turbulent times through the resonating themes that emerged in the play. Using dramaturgical and performative methods, I created, applied, and executed a new methodology to stage [a production of Sophocles' ancient Greek tragedy, *Antigone*](#). I called this methodology 'PEEP' (Pandemic/Epidemic Embodied Performance).²⁵²

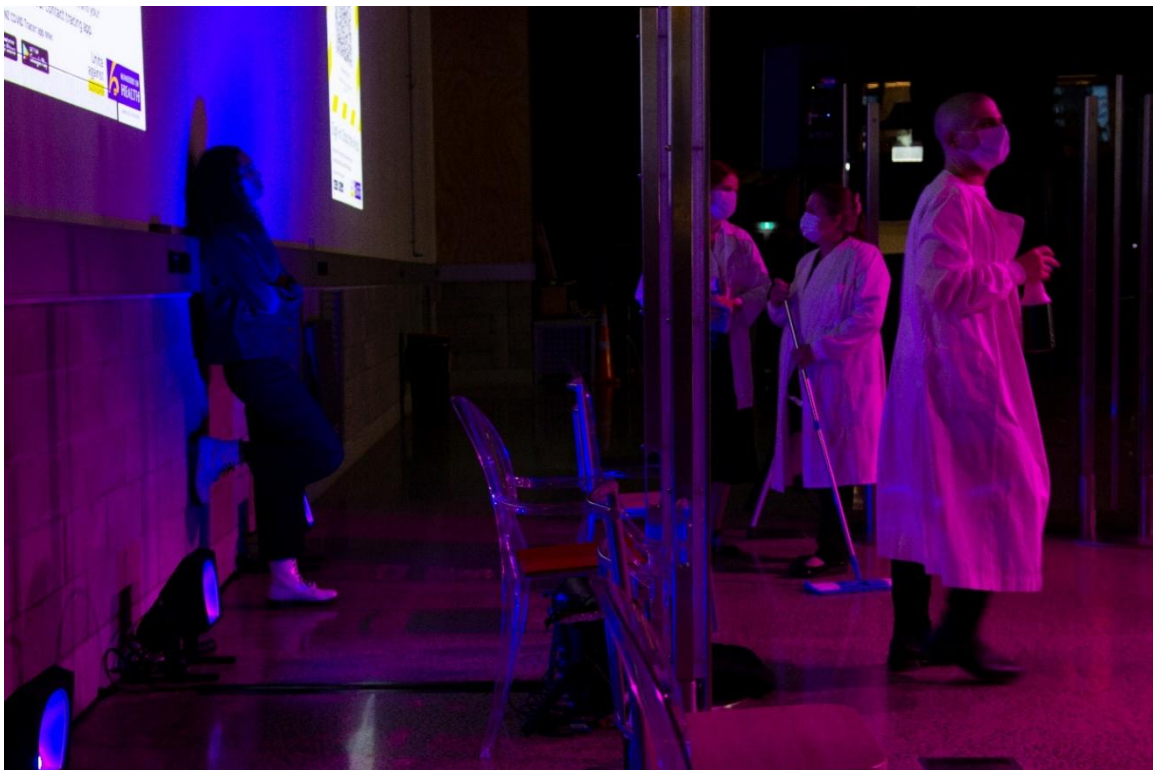


Figure 20. Antigone and Chorus in Antigone, Corvus Theatre Co.

The pandemic was employed through every practical, aesthetic, and thematic decision of the rehearsal and performance—from the choice of play to its thematic and contextual exploration in rehearsals, to the pandemic processes and expectations of rehearsal, to the design of the set, costumes, properties, sound, and lighting. An example of this included the pragmatic solution of performing in a large Perspex box in the Engineering Laboratory to separate the actors from the audience, what later became known as the *glass box in the glass box*. The box became an aesthetic element, as the actors sprayed fake blood inside onto the transparent walls, refracting the light. In the thrust

²⁵² Holly Charlotte Luton, 'PEEP: Antigone, An Exploration of Performing Live Theatre During a Pandemic, Using Sophocles' Antigone' (Masters Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2021), <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/14479>.

configuration of the box, the actors drew on the mirrored effect of the Perspex to listen and respond to each other without making direct eye contact.²⁵³ The box functioned as a thematic storytelling device to convey and resonate with the *bubble*²⁵⁴ of isolation during our own lived pandemic and the separation between Creon, the King, and his people during a time of great crisis, the *plague* on the house of Thebes, paralleled against our own tense political climate.

While the pandemic was a time of instability for many theatre-makers nationally and globally, I began to see crisis as a serendipitous opportunity to embrace this creatively potential moment, reflect on, resonate with, and make sense of this crisis zeitgeist, as I moved into my doctoral research.

An Approaching Crisis: The Economic Conditions in Pre-pandemic Aotearoa

Despite the pandemic, artists and creatives throughout the country rallied in defence of the performing arts during these difficult times, cementing theatre as a vital cultural aspect with enormous financial benefits for the country, and demonstrating the resilience of the artform.

Pre-pandemic research commissioned by *Creative New Zealand* found that the majority of New Zealanders agreed that “the arts improve our society and help define what it is to be a New Zealander”²⁵⁵ with fifty per cent of the population having attended a theatre, dance, or music event.²⁵⁶ In the education sector, Aotearoa is an outlier, being one of only five countries²⁵⁷ in the world where drama or theatre is a discrete subject in the national curriculum.²⁵⁸ From the data, we might consider that theatre in Aotearoa reflects a positive national attitude and is regarded as a legitimate artform cemented in society and one worthy of financial and social support.

When Jacinda Ardern was elected as the Prime Minister in 2017, she assumed the role of the Minister for Arts, Culture, and Heritage. There was a sense of excitement and

²⁵³ ‘Interview with the Cast of CTC’s *Antigone* (Extended-Cut)’, interview by Holly Luton and Corvus Theatre Co, 21 March 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXCb4mWxFcE>.

²⁵⁴ He Kitenga, ‘Bubble Concept Goes Viral’, The University of Otago, New Zealand, 6 October 2020, <https://www.otago.ac.nz/profiles/bubble-concept-goes-viral>.

²⁵⁵ Jonathan Baker, ‘The Show Must Go on, but It’s Time to Re-Think How We Fund the Arts in NZ’, The Conversation, 24 March 2021, <http://theconversation.com/the-show-must-go-on-but-its-time-to-re-think-how-we-fund-the-arts-in-nz-156488>.

²⁵⁶ In 2020, the performing arts industry contributed \$2.3 billion to the economy (0.95% of the GDP), Skills Active Aotearoa, ‘Performing Arts’, Skills Active Workforce Scan 2020, 2020, https://www.skillsactive.org.nz/assets/0-ALL-DOCS/Research-and-projects/2020-Scan/7c3c9f021f/Performing-Arts_Workforce-Scan-2020-FINAL.pdf.

²⁵⁷ Others include Australia, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, Iceland, and the Canadian province of Ontario.

²⁵⁸ Patrice Baldwin, ‘In Defence of School Drama: Don’t Let Arts Fall off the Curriculum’, Teacher Network, *The Guardian*, 30 October 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2012/oct/30/defence-school-drama-arts-curriculum-ebacc>.

anticipation with a Prime Minister at the helm for the arts, who wanted to “see a country where the arts are available to us all”.²⁵⁹ This was in glaring contrast to the outgoing conservative National Party Minister, Chris Finlayson, who, as the Minister for Arts, had described the role as keeping “the luvvies at bay and [to] stop them complaining”.²⁶⁰

However, there appeared to be a “gulf between rhetoric and action”,²⁶¹ as theatre academic James Wenley has suggested. While the pandemic will undoubtedly be analysed by historians for generations to come, for the arts sector, the economic and financial sacrifices may prove to be among the most consequential, shaping the long-term and continued impacts on the arts. During this time, *social obligations* took precedence in order to protect the *wellbeing* of the nation. Yet, a paradox arises in research conducted by the Ministry for Arts, Culture, and Heritage exploring the “value of the arts for social inclusion and wellbeing”.²⁶² Two of the five key findings show that the arts *support* social wellbeing and inclusion, and that wellbeing is *supported* by engaging in and with the arts.²⁶³

Yet, during the pandemic, when wellbeing was extremely important, the arts were the first to be paused, sidelined, or deprioritised. The sector faced disproportionate economic hardship, revealing a deep inconsistency between the acknowledged value of the arts and the practical support extended to it in times of national emergency. The promise made by the Prime Minister in 2017 to make the arts available to everyone was simply not possible without investing in the creative schemes to help fund arts projects across the pandemic and beyond. With the current cost-of-living crisis, artists have become more disparaged than ever in keeping their art forms alive. The then government brought about many new funding schemes to support Aotearoa artists, but some have argued that these came too late and should have been implemented some 15 years before the pandemic.²⁶⁴

²⁵⁹ James Wenley, ‘We Need to Break the Cycle of Crisis in Aotearoa New Zealand’s Arts and Culture. It Starts with Proper Funding’, The Conversation, 21 February 2023, <http://theconversation.com/we-need-to-break-the-cycle-of-crisis-in-aotearoa-new-zealands-arts-and-culture-it-starts-with-proper-funding-199772>.

²⁶⁰ James Wenley, ‘We Need to Break the Cycle of Crisis in Aotearoa New Zealand’s Arts and Culture. It Starts with Proper Funding’, The Conversation, 21 February 2023, <http://theconversation.com/we-need-to-break-the-cycle-of-crisis-in-aotearoa-new-zealands-arts-and-culture-it-starts-with-proper-funding-199772>.

²⁶¹ James Wenley, ‘We Need to Break the Cycle of Crisis in Aotearoa New Zealand’s Arts and Culture. It Starts with Proper Funding’, The Conversation, 21 February 2023, <http://theconversation.com/we-need-to-break-the-cycle-of-crisis-in-aotearoa-new-zealands-arts-and-culture-it-starts-with-proper-funding-199772>.

²⁶² Ministry for Culture & Heritage, ‘Valuing the Arts Research Report (Dec 2022) | Ministry for Culture and Heritage’, December 2022, <https://mch.govt.nz/valuing-arts-research-report>.

²⁶³ Ministry for Culture & Heritage, ‘Valuing the Arts Research Report (Dec 2022) | Ministry for Culture and Heritage’, December 2022, <https://mch.govt.nz/valuing-arts-research-report>.

²⁶⁴ Carmel Sepuloni, ‘Govt Investment in Arts Delivers Strong Economic Results’, The Beehive, 16 May 2023, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/govt-investment-arts-delivers-strong-economic-results>.

Artists in Auckland have faced further concerns regarding available performance spaces. With the ever-increasing rental, hireage, repair, and management costs of venues as a result of rising inflation, community, amateur, and professional theatre companies alike are struggling. Large commercial theatres for professional companies have been built in Auckland, in the last 15 years, including the Q Theatre and Auckland Waterfront Theatre. However, smaller companies, which often operate out of smaller venues, have struggled to find a home.²⁶⁵ The University of Auckland in 2016 announced that seismic renovations to the campus' Maidment Theatre and Musgrove Studio would not go ahead.²⁶⁶ The theatre was demolished in 2018. The St James' Theatre, Auckland's historical *Grade I* vaudeville theatre, has been closed since 2007 due to major fire damage. Multiple plans to restore the theatre were abandoned. In a twist of fate, the Green Party Auckland MP, Chloe Swarbrick, announced that the restoration project would go ahead, with a planned opening in 2025 to coincide with the theatre's centenary.²⁶⁷ But this beautiful moment was shattered when the Auckland Mayor, Wayne Brown, threatened that if construction was not underway by June 2024, he would "withdraw the funding and recommend the building [be] demolished",²⁶⁸ calling the theatre a "dispiriting situation that ruins part of our city centre and blocks efforts at rejuvenating the area".²⁶⁹ While funding approval has now been granted for the theatre's restoration, "a date [...] to restart has yet to be determined".²⁷⁰

²⁶⁵ In 2015, theatre directors Dr Miles Gregory and Tobias Grant, using the latest research on Elizabethan theatres, created the *Pop-Up Globe*, building a temporary scaffold structure which resembled the designs of the original second Globe Theatre. The project was met with enormous success, with an estimated 750,000 attendants over its four years of performances. This concept was particularly embraced by young people, who attended the theatre as part of curriculum Drama and English, and as a place of social gathering. Unfortunately, the pandemic crisis—through economic disruptions, restrictions on gatherings, and reduced attendance rates—was a significant factor in the *Pop-Up Globe* entering liquidation in March 2021. The theatre was demolished in 2022. In a city of just over a million people, the closure of the *Pop-Up Globe* marked a significant cultural loss—particularly for the community of actors, artists, and audiences it brought together.

²⁶⁶ Patrice Dougan, 'University of Auckland's Maidment Theatre to Close for Good over Seismic Strengthening Costs', *New Zealand Herald*, 2 November 2016, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/university-of-aucklands-maidment-theatre-to-close-for-good-over-seismic-strengthening-costs/EUCMH2YKFMTXWO4PPT4YP72MGA/>.

²⁶⁷ Cherie Howie, 'St James Theatre Auckland: Restoration Planned after Government Promises \$15 Million', *NZ Herald*, 22 July 2023, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/st-james-theatre-auckland-restoration-planned-after-government-promises-15-million/22LGUP55UFEWDO4J7LUPJICWEU/>.

²⁶⁸ Bernard Orsman, 'Mayor Threatens Demolition of St James If Restoration Doesn't Start Soon', *NZ Herald*, 27 August 2023, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/aucklands-historic-st-james-theatre-could-be-demolished-if-restoration-work-does-not-start-soon-says-mayor-wayne-brown/RBX45KI5UNBLJJ5KKM6MV7B47Y/>.

²⁶⁹ Bernard Orsman, 'Mayor Threatens Demolition of St James If Restoration Doesn't Start Soon', *NZ Herald*, 27 August 2023, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/aucklands-historic-st-james-theatre-could-be-demolished-if-restoration-work-does-not-start-soon-says-mayor-wayne-brown/RBX45KI5UNBLJJ5KKM6MV7B47Y/>.

²⁷⁰ Sam Smith, 'St James Theatre Restoration Set to Continue after Years of Delays', *Stuff*, 27 February 2025, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/nz-news/360595794/st-james-theatre-restoration-set-continue-after-years-delays>.

In 2023, the Auckland Council, headed by Mayor Brown, released an annual draft budget that proposed to cut \$36 million from the local arts community. A petition to “STOP THE CUTS”²⁷¹ argued that this proposition would destroy the lifeline of artists and the greater city. Thankfully, the Auckland community agreed, and the proposal was scrapped.²⁷²

Additionally, tertiary theatre and drama courses are fighting for survival in Aotearoa as we face a critical moment of financial and political uncertainty. Wenley and O’Donnell have each written extensively about the significant cuts to the Theatre and Drama department at Victoria University in Wellington, the oldest department in the country.²⁷³ As is frequently the case, theatre is often the last subject to be *funded*, but the first to be *defunded*, as was the case at Victoria in 2023, to make way for a \$30 million fiscal hole²⁷⁴ as a consequence of the pandemic. The proposal was later scrapped due to community outrage and support. This is not the first time that theatre education in Aotearoa has been threatened during times of global and national crises. Following the Christchurch earthquakes in 2011, The University of Canterbury subsequently “abandoned its theatre and film studies programme”.²⁷⁵ The future of several tertiary programmes in Aotearoa remains uncertain,²⁷⁶ and for the moment, Toi Whakaari is the country’s leading tertiary Drama school.²⁷⁷ Although the pandemic might have globally been declared as over, it exposed a number of other issues that “have been ignored or deferred, but which are now perceived as dire”.²⁷⁸

²⁷¹ Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi, Arts Regional Trust, ‘Stop the Cuts’, Stop the Cuts: Proposed Cuts, March 2023, <https://www.stopthecuts.co.nz/proposed-cuts>.

²⁷² OurAuckland, ‘Mayor Supports Reducing Cuts to Arts and Social Services as Part of Balanced, Sustainable Budget’, OurAuckland, 17 May 2023, <https://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/news/2023/05/mayor-supports-reducing-cuts-to-arts-and-social-services-as-part-of-balanced-sustainable-budget/>.

²⁷³ David O’Donnell, ‘New Zealand’s Oldest University Theatre Programme Under Threat - The Theatre Times’, The Theatre Times, 28 June 2023, https://thetheatretimes.com/new-zealands-oldest-university-theatre-programme-under-threat/?fbclid=IwAR3d0QPgUdBB343l0CF2p20dVpMHR_3aOfVpt4eGalKd3u7l5l8VCtNDJmY.

²⁷⁴ John Gerritsen, “‘Tragic’ Blow for Staff as Victoria University Proposes Cuts to Jobs and Entire Subjects”, Radio New Zealand, 21 June 2023, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/492389/tragic-blow-for-staff-as-victoria-university-proposes-cuts-to-jobs-and-entire-subjects>.

²⁷⁵ James Wenley, “‘Unforgivable Attack’ - Latest Blow In Gutting Of NZ Theatre Education”, The Big Idea, 22 June 2023, <https://thebigidea.nz/stories/unforgivable-attack-latest-blow-in-gutting-of-nz-theatre-education>.

²⁷⁶ James Wenley, “‘Unforgivable Attack’ - Latest Blow In Gutting Of NZ Theatre Education”, The Big Idea, 22 June 2023, <https://thebigidea.nz/stories/unforgivable-attack-latest-blow-in-gutting-of-nz-theatre-education>.

²⁷⁷ James Wenley, “‘Unforgivable Attack’ - Latest Blow In Gutting Of NZ Theatre Education”, The Big Idea, 22 June 2023, <https://thebigidea.nz/stories/unforgivable-attack-latest-blow-in-gutting-of-nz-theatre-education>.

²⁷⁸ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy—What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America’s Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (Broadway Books, 1997), p. 103.

Crisis: An Exciting Opportunity or a Logistical Nightmare?

At the time of undertaking my doctoral research, AUT was experiencing its own internal institutional issues. In 2022, AUT opted to make 230 staff redundant across all faculties and departments, both academic and professional, from scientific to artistic. Despite making a “\$12 million surplus”²⁷⁹ during the pandemic years, AUT aimed to lower its running costs through redundancies and other “cost-cutting measures”.²⁸⁰ These redundancies were later suspended “following a ruling by the Employment Relations Authority”.²⁸¹ Consequently, as Jonathan Killick suggests, this revocation in essence sent out “a list to employees of people [the university] wants gone”.²⁸² In spite of the major changes and with a lack of growth in doctoral enrolments at the university, I was awarded the Doctoral Scholarship, which covers all university fees and a stipend to fund the creative practice projects of the research.

While tertiary Theatre and Drama programmes are continually fighting for survival across the country, AUT does not have a dedicated theatre programme, although there are theatre specialists across the many departments at the university. My doctoral research has instead been situated within the Schools of *Art and Design* and *Communication Studies*. After completing the production of *Women of Troy* in 2023, the university’s only black box studio—complete with green room and dressing rooms, a vital space utilised by the film-acting teaching staff, extracurricular performance clubs, and by me for my doctoral projects—was abruptly repurposed into a *Virtual Reality Lab*. Despite the active use of the space for teaching, workshops, rehearsals, and productions, this decision was made without consultation with and notification to the occupants and artists—and it appeared as though my academically and financially supported work was no longer a priority within the institutional framework.

Amid these difficulties, my research faced its own crisis when my previous supervision team withdrew their engagement at a critical point in the project due to other job opportunities. It was an unexpected and destabilising moment that forced me to re-evaluate how I sought guidance and support in the final stages of my doctorate. These shifts were emotionally complex for me—it was deeply upsetting, and I oscillated between feelings of empowerment and deep despair, filled with grief, anger, and yet an

²⁷⁹ Jonathan Killick, ‘AUT Suspends Redundancies, but Sends out List of Names of People It Wants Gone’, Stuff, 22 December 2022, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/300772448/aut-suspends-redundancies-but-sends-out-list-of-names-of-people-it-wants-gone>.

²⁸⁰ Jonathan Killick, ‘AUT Suspends Redundancies, but Sends out List of Names of People It Wants Gone’, Stuff, 22 December 2022, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/300772448/aut-suspends-redundancies-but-sends-out-list-of-names-of-people-it-wants-gone>.

²⁸¹ Jonathan Killick, ‘AUT Suspends Redundancies, but Sends out List of Names of People It Wants Gone’, Stuff, 22 December 2022, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/300772448/aut-suspends-redundancies-but-sends-out-list-of-names-of-people-it-wants-gone>.

²⁸² Jonathan Killick, ‘AUT Suspends Redundancies, but Sends out List of Names of People It Wants Gone’, Stuff, 22 December 2022, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/300772448/aut-suspends-redundancies-but-sends-out-list-of-names-of-people-it-wants-gone>.

unexpected strength. The result of these crises acted as a catalyst for momentum—a turning point that, while painful, ultimately propelled me forward in my research and practice. A new supervision team was subsequently appointed, and their support and insight helped the work regain momentum and gave me a restored sense of empowerment in my research.

Experienced and equipped in navigating unforeseen crises, the removal of the black box studio introduced a fresh set of challenges that tested my strategies for adaptation and performance. In the wake of this crisis, I reflected once again on the necessity for the relocation of my projects into non-theatre locations.

Working in non-theatre locations can be an exciting and visceral experience. However, these common spaces and publicly occupied areas require a stripped-back approach to design and direction. There is no ability to leave anything behind in this performance space, and props and set must be packed away after every rehearsal and performance to avoid possible theft, breakage, or disruptions to public foot traffic. Adding to these challenges was the frustrating and logically complex process of booking these non-theatre locations for rehearsals and performances. While part of the university infrastructure, and with a duty to prioritise staff and students' creative and research projects, AUT Events must contend with external commercial bookings, conferences, and events to sustain itself financially.²⁸³ They, too, were dealing with a university during a time of tense disruptions. At times, despite having pre-booked and confirmed the use of these event spaces for rehearsals and performances, we encountered situations where my cast and I arrived to find the space unavailable, occupied, or altered to accommodate other uses, with conference equipment already set up or not packed away. As it was, both *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon* were each rescheduled three times, requiring renegotiation of dates with the royalty holders, and negotiations and discussions with the cast.

²⁸³ AUT Events offers the use of its event spaces and equipment hire at no direct cost for staff and students at the university. However, associated labour, such as technical support or venue staffing, incurs charges for hourly rates.



Figure 21. Holly on the phone with the events team, dealing with a further disruption to the production of Women of Troy, while at Auckland Airport, about to depart for an international conference, 2022.

These scheduling inconsistencies created a lack of reliability that frequently disrupted rehearsals in both productions and added stress during production weeks. Over time, this unpredictability became a crisis in itself and something of a running joke—a repeated disruption that my cast and I learned to absorb with humour, resilience, and adaptability. Despite these challenges, the staff we worked with were always generous and supportive, with technician Paul Summers becoming a good friend and colleague in designing the lighting for each of my productions.

A further problem with the loss of the studio was the absence of a centralised and accessible storage facility for our props, costumes, and set pieces near our performance space. This became a tedious and *logistical nightmare*. Instead, we found ourselves transporting our rehearsal and performance materials and resources back and forth

between my car, the performance space, and my office—located in a separate building and on the seventh floor across campus, through a labyrinth of elevators, stairwells, long corridors, office and study spaces, and an outside courtyard. These resources and materials included everything from books and scripts, suitcases and chairs, to a bathtub and chaise longue on wheels—which subsequently broke in its transfer between spaces. Without access to the green and dressing rooms—inaccessible in the creation of the *Virtual Reality Lab*—costume preparation and backstage routines, as well as privacy for the actors, had to be reconsidered. These constraints demanded constant flexibility from myself, my cast, and crew, adding an unexpected layer of administrative labour to the creative process. Further requests that I then remove my props from my shared office, while I was unwell, added to the strenuous labour of the research projects and my own well-being. With my own health emergency during *Agamemnon*, this whole logistical process became untenable. While these may seem like a small challenge in the bigger picture of an era of crisis, in a single production, they are small fractures in Pandora’s jar that add to the fragility and instability of a larger crisis of the theatre-making experience.

Yet in spite of, and in some ways, because of these conditions, I discovered a necessary and vital opportunity to reimagine and reflect on the fragility and resilience of theatre existing outside of traditional architectures and institutions. Like the serendipity of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Building 20,²⁸⁴ the institutional tensions and absence of rigid bureaucratic oversight and subject constraints afforded a paradoxical kind of freedom for my practice—to create theatre without boundaries, unconstrained by conventional spatial or theatrical expectations. This disruption became a catalyst for my research to experiment in my thinking and practice, compelling me to find ways of working that were responsive and resilient. This form of theatre can be extremely exciting and yet deeply frustrating.

Despite the major economic and institutional impacts and ongoing consequences of the pandemic, culture and arts endure. There is a paradoxical disparity at a grassroots level for theatre in Aotearoa as an institutionally unfunded and underpaid art form, and the resulting creative theatre that continues to be made. Theatre demonstrates that while it is fragile, it can be resilient in times of crisis, as it has been many times throughout history. Which returns me to the question I asked in Chapter One—do we wait for crisis to be a catalyst for change, or do we have an obligation as artists to ready ourselves for the next *once-in-a-lifetime* crisis?

This chapter has contextualised crisis through a metaphorical, theoretical, literary, contextual, historical, situational, and personal framing. All these lenses provide context and rationale to my research and practice. As I will discuss in the next chapters, I have come to recognise many creative opportunities that can occur during an era of crisis,

²⁸⁴ MIT’s Building 20: ‘The Magical Incubator’, produced by From the Vault of MIT, 2016, YouTube Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2O_NhKHa13A&ab_channel=FromtheVaultofMIT.

while acknowledging the sense of deep frustration and difficulty where crisis cannot always be embraced, embodied, employed, solved, or addressed. Throughout my practice, in both successes and failures, I came to find where resilience lived and where fragility revealed itself. These moments were not always initially clear-cut, and at times could be deeply uncomfortable or challenging. Sometimes, the most valuable insights about my practice emerged from the unresolved tensions or from moments where things fell apart entirely, as in the production of *Agamemnon*. These moments made me wonder about how we deal with crisis, not just in the here and now, but in the possible and likely occurrences that may face us again in the future. Will it be possible to find hope among the broken pieces of Pandora's jar?

Chapter Three

The Research Design, Methods and Methodology

In upholding my realistic and optimistic proposition to recognise crisis as a tool for theatre-making, I also assert that encountering and embracing crisis cannot be reduced to a prescriptive list of strategies. Following Roitman's proposition of crisis as a lens—as a mode of knowledge production²⁸⁵—this research resists the formulation of crisis as either a problem to be solved or a methodology to be replicated.

Instead, through this research, I have attempted to generate a series of emergent practices. These are ways of working that arose through the lived experience of directing my own productions of *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon* under conditions of instability. I do not offer the tasks, methods, and methodologies that I discuss in this exegesis as prescriptive strategies for another director to follow, nor as a universal framework for theatre-making in crisis. This thesis, after all, is titled *a* director's process, not *the* director's process. Rather, I present situated reflections—examples drawn from my own practice that invite interpretation, adaptation, and reimagining by other practitioners in their *own* contexts and crisis conditions.

To render these methods as fixed strategies would risk reducing crisis to a singular, solvable condition or event, which would be disingenuous to the practice of meaning-making through a *Performative Research* paradigm and thereby contradict the central exploration of this research. Instead, I offer these reflections as invitations for the practitioner who might find points of resonance between our works, and where you might embrace, embody, employ, or reframe, reinterpret, or even *resist* my approaches within your own practice. The knowledge produced here is necessarily personal, partial, embodied, and tacit.

However, within this research, you will find recurring reflections, offered not as solutions, but as provocations for your own practice.

- ☞ Engage with and embrace the turbulence and uncertainty of the present moment as a generative force—allowing contemporary crises, politics, and lived realities to shape the work, its themes, and its evolution through rehearsal.
- ☞ Hold space for uncertainty, rather than seeking immediate resolution.
- ☞ Create rehearsal structures, while remaining anticipatory, flexible, and responsive to changing conditions.
- ☞ Approach your practice with good humour and resilience, allowing space for error and recovery.

²⁸⁵ Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2013), p. 14.

- 🎧 Prioritising care and manaakitanga, alongside artistic rigour, *including care for the self*.
- 🎧 Embrace interruption and disruption as generative forces within the process
- 🎧 Recognising one's own skills and limitations and allowing space for generative mistakes and failures.

In this chapter, I discuss my practice as a theatre director and dramaturg, the creation of my theatre company, and my ethos, personal mantras, methods, and drama games, tasks, and strategies that I employed in making theatre during unstable conditions. As a director, my practice has been influenced by many personal and professional experiences, and I discuss how my methods and practices shaped, developed, and informed the spirit and process of my work through my creative practice projects—two stagings of ancient Greek tragedy, Euripides' *Women of Troy* and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

In addition to the practical methodologies of directing and dramaturgy, I utilised several methods and tools of documentation in rehearsals and performances to capture and reflect upon my research and practice. These included photography, video and audio recording, workshop transcriptions, archiving production materials, sketches, annotations, and reflective note-taking as part of my director's script. These methods are well-established within Practice as Research frameworks and have been recognised as reliable and effective for capturing, preserving, revisiting, and disseminating knowledge derived from creative practice. As Robin Nelson suggests, these methods using "advanced digital technologies have facilitated interrelationships of words, sounds and images, each informing the others"²⁸⁶ and are often better than written words for communicating creative practice research. Theatre, by its nature, is ephemeral and has therefore long relied upon changing contemporary forms of documentation to preserve its transience.

Photography and videography were used throughout the workshop, rehearsal, and performance process to capture visual, spatial, and embodied interactions that might otherwise be lost once the moment had passed. As Jane Luton notes, [recordings] "can never fully replace the liveness of the theatrical event, but as a valuable research tool it allows us to press the stop and rewind buttons during playback to explore key moments in more detail."²⁸⁷ These recordings captured our bodies and voices directly and could be revisited and analysed without relying solely on our own interpretations or memories.

While the written transcriptions of the PPDW do not fully capture the nuances of tone and gesture, writing interactions as though they were stage directions helped convey the

²⁸⁶ Robin Nelson, ed., *Practice as Research in the Arts (and Beyond): Principles, Processes, Contexts, Achievements* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 82.

²⁸⁷ Jane Isobel Luton, *Performing the Interview: Embodied Reflections and Data-Dramas* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2026), p. 84.

emotion and activity within the space—the tears, the laughter, the thoughtful, agreeing murmurs.

Videos and photographs of the processes and performances, costumes (finished and unfinished), props, music, storyboards, personal and contextual artefacts, thesis extracts, my director's sketch and model books,²⁸⁸ and annotated scripts were archived throughout the research process. These later formed part of the documentary record through the creative practice exhibition, providing insight into my creative, practical, and organisational structures that shaped the research and productions.

Central to my practice is a commitment to be embodied through Performative Research. I work on my feet, as an active and attentive director, walking alongside the actors, sometimes in roles beside them, aiming to engage my actors from a perspective of empathy and presence.

Creating a strong ensemble of actors plays a vital role in my productions, not only in echoing the framework of ancient Greek drama through the Chorus as a collective entity, but as a means of embodying a shared purpose, unity, and mutual spirit of togetherness. This collectively enables iterative discovery and collaborative experimentation, allowing each actor's ideas to surface organically in the rehearsal room, thereby strengthening the overall dramaturgical integrity of the production and the support network of each other. An ensemble framework fosters trust between actors and director, responsiveness, and a shared sense of ownership within the work while recognising the collective responsibility and unity required for a successful and cohesive vision to be enacted. The success of the production hinges on the ensemble's ability to listen, reflect, think, respond, move, and breathe as one, creating a coherent, living vision that transcends individual performances. I have found that channelling the lived cultural concepts of Māori tikanga—principles—can help to further the role of ensemble and sense of [whanaungatanga](#)—developing reciprocal family and kinship-like relationships, from support, care, wellbeing, responsibilities and obligations—through [Manaakitanga](#)²⁸⁹—reciprocity, generosity, and care.

A vital aspect of my practice is the use of humour. It acts not only as a strategy for managing and navigating the emotional intensity, thematic weight, and engagement with the seriousness of Greek tragedy, but also as a means of revealing lightness, vitality, and hope within the plays as we perform during these turbulent times. Humour helps foster

²⁸⁸ A method I undertake across rehearsals in each production I stage.

Holly Charlotte Luton, 'PEEP: Antigone, An Exploration of Performing Live Theatre During a Pandemic, Using Sophocles' Antigone' (Masters Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2021), <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/14479>, p. 88.

²⁸⁹ Holly Charlotte Luton, 'Practices of Manaakitanga: Staging Antigone in a Pandemic', Conference Presentation, Intersections 2022: Care and Crisis, London, United Kingdom, 21 March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9xXNadfEeg>.

the sense of ensemble and creates a sense of trust, breaking down authoritative barriers between director and actor.

Music plays an important role in my productions, functioning both as a storytelling device—as it would have done in the original stagings of Greek drama—and as a dramaturgical and performative tool. Music helps support actor and character development and offers thematic cues to audiences through curated thematic playlists designed to subconsciously initiate reflection on the play’s concerns—thematic songs centred around violence, women, power, politics, and protest.

Following the ancient Greek convention of avoiding violence onstage, I explore stylised depictions that resist the desensitisation common in modern media. These methods draw from the symbolic and stylistic, allowing the horror and tragedy of the violent plays to be felt rather than shown. Simon Perris’ discussion of ancient Greek violence has further influenced my stagings, as I choose to depict these dramatic scenes through other means—spoken and stylistic violence in *Antigone*, sung violence in *Women of Troy*, and danced violence in *Agamemnon*. Violence in Greek drama is often post-mortem, with dead bodies presented to the audience via a wheeled platform known as the [*ekkyklema*](#). We touched on this element in *Agamemnon*, using the bathtub on wheels to present Agamemnon’s body, and the chaise longue on wheels to present Cassandra’s body.



Figure 22. The soldiers sit on the red velvet chaise longue on wheels, Agamemnon, 2024.



Figure 23. Clytemnestra draws back the bloody towel from Agamemnon, dead in the bathtub on wheels, Agamemnon, 2024.

Staging ancient plays in contemporary ways, I reflect on how my productions move between worlds, blending elements of ancient Greek tragedy with contemporary theatrical stagings, or using anachronistic contexts and elements to create the world of the play. The costumes, set pieces, and props were created with anachronistic timelines in mind to stir and muddy the ancient and contemporary worlds—layering past and present events as co-existing uneasily. This temporal layering allowed themes of war, grief, and resilience to resonate across eras, making the tragedies feel urgently current. This included using old suitcases and grain sacks that resonated with the refugee and humanitarian crises of the mid-20th century.

I consider how staging these epic plays in epic spaces—in non-theatre locations—helped to situate our productions outside the ritual and rules of traditional and Eurocentric theatre models. In *Women of Troy*, I inverted the [amphitheatre](#) itself—transforming the stairs into a stage for the action, placing the audience on the floor looking upwards, reframing the ancient to meet the present, making the audience more observant and attentive of the action. Rather than the audience sitting looking down on the action, they look upwards towards it.



Figure 24. Plaster model of an ancient Greek amphitheatre placed in front of the Grand staircase, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

Research is a fundamental aspect of my work. Regardless of the imposition of an institutional research pathway to make theatre, I guide my actors to explore their work through research and discovery, undertaking individual and ensemble group tasks to create, develop, ideate, imagine, and share their discoveries about their characters, context, and content of the play. Drama games, playfulness, and experimentation become synergetic methods that I use to facilitate discovery, character development, and the shaping of dramatic scenes with my ensemble. I discuss some of the drama games I used as sites of discovery in the rehearsal processes, including written and oral tasks, and [drama conventions and strategies](#), such as hot seating, the debate circle, the machine, and the waiting game. Each of these are designed to deepen the rehearsal process.

Corvus Theatre Co: Creating my Theatre Company



Figure 25. [Corvus Theatre Co Logo](#), created by Holly.

To stage [Antigone during my Masters Research](#), I decided to create a theatre company with a name that would embody the ethos of my methodologies, practice, and context in which the company was formed. In reflecting on some key symbols that emerged in the Greek tragedies I was exploring, I stumbled upon the repeated metaphors and symbols of birds, particularly Crows, Rooks, and Ravens. In researching the *Corvus* genus,²⁹⁰ I uncovered some interesting connections between them and my aims and objectives as a theatre company—the importance of collectiveness, the ability to adapt, and the function of play. Crows have often been described as among the most intelligent species of birds. They can learn and then adapt their behaviour based on changes in their environment. Play is an integral and essential quality of their behaviour,²⁹¹ and although they do subsist as a species, they find strength together as a flock. An interesting significance that I discovered was that *Corvus* could be found in nearly every corner of

²⁹⁰ Rooks, Ravens, and Crows.

²⁹¹ Mark Bekoff and John Byers, *Animal Play: Evolutionary, Comparative and Ecological Perspectives*, (1998), p. 27.

the Earth, except South America, Antarctica, and Aotearoa. I found that the word Corvus further played on the words Chorus, COVID, and virus, relating to the characters, themes, and context in which our company was formed.²⁹² I thus created a symbol, the black carrion crow, to be the face of our company—its body turned on an attention to the future, while its head turned to face behind it, reflecting on the past.



Figure 26. Holly with Crows in London, August 23, 2022

Embodying and employing this behavioural play further, I find a strong resonance between the qualities of Corvus and my own approach to directing. I draw on a wide range of drama strategies, tools, and [conventions](#) gathered through my training, observation, and experience—many of which I have then adapted, recontextualised, or constructed in creating my own work. Drama games in my rehearsals are not arbitrary or superficial. While the rehearsal process is full of life in laughter and play, the games are purposefully utilised or crafted dramaturgical methods with clear artistic objectives, helping to support the thematic, dramatic, and emotional architecture of my work. They form a central part of my rehearsal methodology, creating a space for discovery, embodiment, and connection. As a director, games enabled a reflective, responsive, and adaptive process, grounded in my own knowledge and shaped by the specific needs of the work and the ensemble. Like the crows, we play—and in that play we learn, gather, and adapt.

²⁹² Serendipitously, one of our actors in *Antigone* and *Women of Troy* has a doctorate in New Zealand bird behaviour and has extensive knowledge of crows as a result of caring for some while residing overseas.

The [Corvus Theatre Company website](#) has enabled me to archive and access resources, photographs, videos, programmes from the rehearsals and performances of the three productions I have staged thus far.

The Pre-Show Workshop: Making Discoveries about the Drama

A key discovery I made through my creative practice projects was the significance of pre-production workshops held prior to auditioning actors. Inspired by the work of Polly Findlay and Marianne Elliott, I came to understand these workshops as rehearsal tools, and as vital spaces for observation. They became a kind of scouting ground, allowing me to see how the actors interacted with one another, embraced character and individual tasks, how they responded to the unfamiliar material, and how they articulated their thinking and rationale behind their creative choices. These workshops were publicly advertised via the Corvus Theatre Company website and local Facebook groups and were open to all Auckland actors who might be interested in exploring ancient Greek tragedy, both as a theatrical form and as specific play texts. Actors could then choose to audition for the production if they felt a connection to the work and my methodologies.

Because Greek tragedy is a form not widely performed in community, amateur, and professional Aotearoa contexts, the pre-production workshop gave actors a chance to engage with a form they may not have previously encountered, and for me to gain insight into their critical thinking, collaboration styles, and openness to the process.

Drawing on my background as a researcher and tertiary educator, and viewing my mother's own secondary school production processes, I approached all workshops with detailed lesson planning and structure, undertook an extensive reading of the play and preliminary research of my own, purchased the rights to perform the play, condensed the play script, booked multimedia equipment and the Blackbox studio and performance spaces, prepared the meals for the attendees, and organised, prepared, and printed materials, research resources, and curated props that the actors could use in the workshop. The workshop session included a text reading of the edited play without assigned roles,²⁹³ with each actor reading one line of dialogue or a few lines of a monologue before passing it to the next actor. The actors engaged in both individual and group tasks, physical theatre exercises, and reflective activities such as sticky notes or whiteboard prompts to record emerging thoughts. We shared a morning tea and lunch that I prepared. This shared moment later became a vital element of the rehearsal process itself, to reinforce the sense of community, nurturing minds and bodies, through simple offerings like tea, coffee, biscuits, fruit, and sandwiches.

In concluding the workshop, the actors were thanked for their time, effort, and enthusiasm, and encouraged to audition within the following weeks, which resulted in a large turnout of actors to the audition. The actors who came to audition were cast based

²⁹³ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 133.

on their participation in the workshop, and creative skills, positive attitude, effort, enthusiasm, warmth, and humour.

The Post-Production Workshop: Making Sense of the Drama

As part of my reflective practice, after the production of *Women of Troy*, I facilitated a PPDW, approved by AUTECH, with some of the actors from the production in November 2023. An open invitation was extended to all actors involved in the production, with ten attending, along with me as the director, researcher, workshop facilitator, and actor. The purpose of the PPDW was to revisit the production process, allowing the actors to reflect on their experiences and share both personal and professional insights into their methods of character development and participation in performing a Greek tragedy through a non-theatre location framing.

The session incorporated dramatic methods and processes to prompt and initiate the discussions, including a revisitation of the performance site, reenactment of scenes, reflections of the props and costumes, and discussion of photographic and video documentation. Additionally, we brainstormed ideas for future non-theatre location performance spaces in Auckland. The PPDW further served a research function, gathering data through audio, video, and photographic documentation that would inform the next creative phase of my doctorate, which involved staging Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

The actors were encouraged to contribute dramaturgical artefacts such as mood boards, annotated scripts, and notes to provide a deeper layer of exploration and analysis of the production process. Two actors sent material they had created to help develop their roles. The rich, anecdotal data generated in the PPDW added to the tacit, embodied knowledge within the research process, which was made explicit through structured reflection and creative re-engagement.

Participation in the PPDW was voluntary, with initial contact made via email, allowing two weeks for the actors to consider the invitation. Those who agreed completed consent forms, and the PPDW took place a month after the invitation, with final responses gathered two weeks beforehand. The PPDW adhered to the principles of Partnership, Participation, and Protection as outlined in the Treaty of Waitangi.²⁹⁴ The partnership between the researcher and participants was grounded in trust, mutual respect, and their previous collaboration on *Women of Troy*, ensuring a supportive environment for reflection and knowledge-sharing.

Confidentiality was maintained within the context of the PPDW, but due to the public nature of *Women of Troy*, complete anonymity could not be guaranteed, as the actors were publicly known through the performance, social media, and printed theatre programmes. Their data was anonymised in the transcription using randomly assigned

²⁹⁴ The central document of agreement between the British Crown and Māori, signed 1840.

pseudonyms drawn from the Greek alphabet—*Alpha, Delta, Epsilon, Gamma, Iota, Kappa, Lambda, Omega, Sigma, and Zeta*. Occasionally, when an actor could be identified due to an explicit reference to the role they played, they are referred to as their character in that particular moment.

The PPDW adhered to trust-based models central to theatre practice, ensuring that any sensitive issues were addressed with professionalism and respect. Ultimately, the research aimed to create a respectful, open space for participants to share their experiences and contribute to the development of new knowledge of performing Greek tragedy in Aotearoa, in non-theatre locations, particularly in an era of crisis.

On My Feet: The Performative Researcher/Director

With sore feet and a tired voice, I came to recognise both the physical toll and the embodied energy required of me in the dual roles of director, dramaturg, and actor. Over time, I began to understand that my work was not only about leading from the front but about engaging as a *Performative Researcher* from within. I was not simply inspecting or investigating research from a distance, but was generating my research through performance, with my body, in the space, and alongside the actors. A keyword I use throughout this research is *exploration*. It encompasses the *embodiment* of knowledge, to view research through the making, doing, and performing of theatre.

Throughout my practice, I do not direct from behind a desk. For me, it suggests a separation, both physical and psychological—an assumption of authority, the boss watching their work from afar. Instead, in rehearsal you can find me kneeling or cross-legged on the floor or perched on the edge of a stool—somewhere I can spring up from quickly. My director's script is often lying across the concrete floor, propped on a chair in the corner, or travelling with me around the room—with messy handwriting and annotations from quick thoughts and excitement of the action. Anne Bogart encounters a similar feeling, writing,

I know that I cannot sit down when work is happening on the stage. If I sit, a deadness sets in. I direct from impulses in my body responding to the stage, the actors' bodies, their inclinations. If I sit down I lose my spontaneity, my connection to myself, to the stage and to the actors."²⁹⁵

This resonates deeply. Directing, standing up and being physically present in the space is about more than energy. It is about proximity, immediacy, and being in constant conversation with what is unfolding in action. I like to respond to and encourage actors not only with words, but with movement, with posture, with gesture. Being on my feet allows me to *show* rather than *tell*. I might join them in the scene, mirror them, react to them in character, or guide them. Standing allows for responsiveness. It signals attention and availability to an actor. It reminds the actors that I am not apart from them, not

²⁹⁵ Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), p. 86.

against them, not a static audience member, not above them, but with them, for them, and for the process. Sitting too long can feel like an inattentive withdrawal. Standing keeps me in my body, tuned to the impulses that emerge in rehearsal, their bodies and voices, their instincts and my own.



Figure 27. Holly works on the floor with the cast, rehearsing the Fire song, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

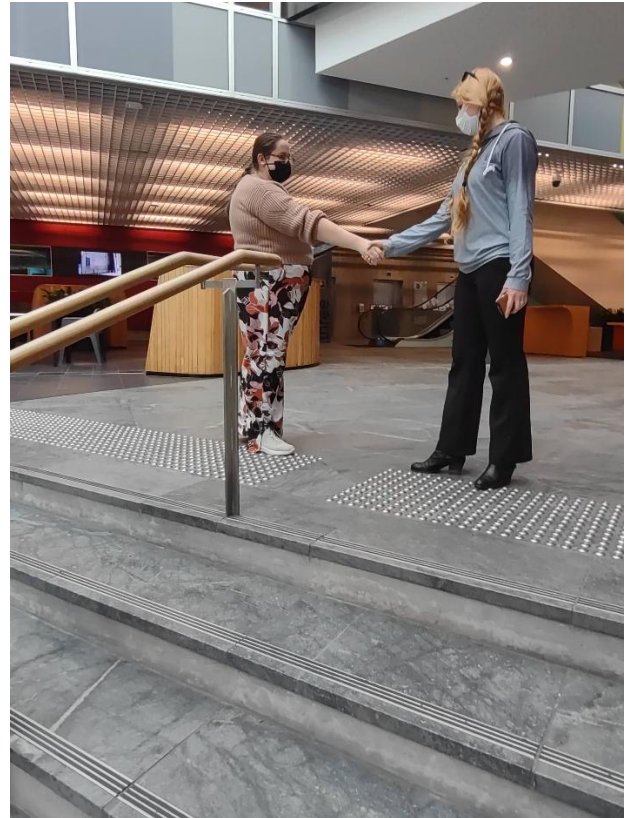


Figure 28. Holly directing the goddess, Athena in the opening sequence, *Women of Troy*, 2023.



Figure 29. Holly works with the Chorus on the Bathtub Dance Sequence, *Agamemnon*, 2024.

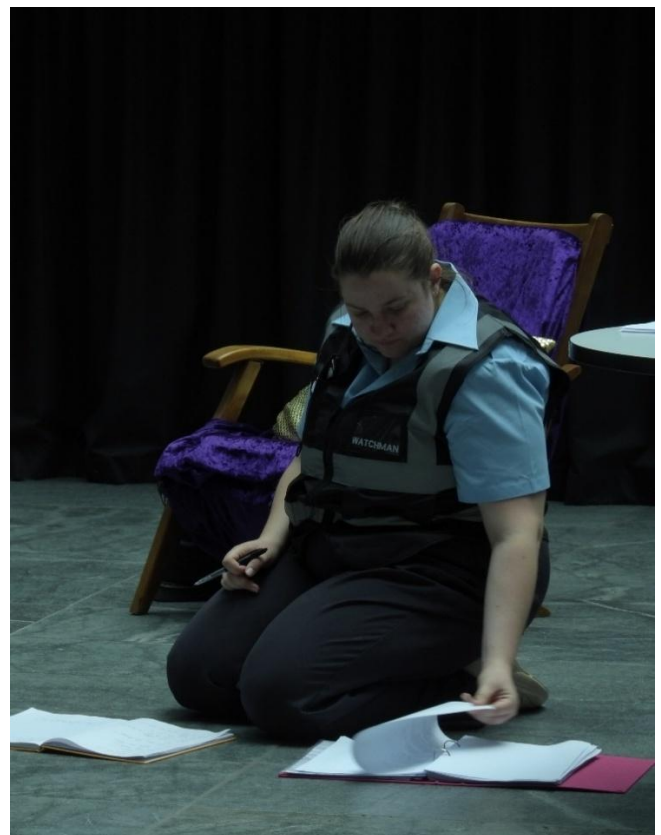


Figure 30. Holly as director, dressed in character, takes notes during the Dress Rehearsal, *Agamemnon*.

Creating The Ensemble: Strength through Manaakitanga and Whanaungatanga

Creating a strong ensemble of actors is vital in my productions. Given the inherently collaborative nature of research-theatre, the ensemble becomes a means to enable iterative discovery and experimentation, allowing each actor's ideas to surface organically in the rehearsal room. This process can strengthen the dramaturgical integrity of the production, research outcomes, and the support network among the cast.

As previously discussed, my directorial and dramaturgical influences, both from those I have studied and those who have mentored me, have significantly shaped the central role of the ensemble in my work. This is particularly evident in my approach to staging Greek tragedy, where the ensemble reflects the original function of the Chorus as a unified, collective entity. I aim to ensure that every actor has the opportunity to play an integral role in the play, treating no one as more important than another, including those in *lead* or characterised roles. This ethos extends to the final bow, which I direct to be taken in unison rather than individually. One actor spoke of this unison in the *Women of Troy* PPDW:

ALPHA:

... So I'm so glad that our bow for our performance of *Women of Troy* wasn't individual, and I think it helped because we took the stuff off the stairs. Because it not only signified the collective importance of us all together as the ensemble, but really broke the audience out of, we are not these characters, we are actors.

Figure 31. PPDW Transcript, Alpha discusses the collective bow

Where once the Chorus would have spoken in unison as a single entity, today, as a director, I utilise the possibilities for individual characterisation for many actors. The Chorus is an integral and vital *character* who steers the momentum of the play as representatives of the civic, ordinary people²⁹⁶ and, as Paul Woodruff argues, leads the expressions of grief in tragedy as a "grief leader".²⁹⁷

I strive to foster a rehearsal environment built on encouragement and constructive development. I avoid any form of criticism that could be taken personally, instead offering alternatives that support the growth of the actor's skills and confidence. A key part of this process involves the early, careful division of distributing choral lines and giving a character name to each actor during close text analysis. This allows each actor to explore and develop their own characterisations, dynamics, and relationships through the rehearsals. While I come prepared as a director with a coherent and creative vision for the work, I prompt the actors at every stage of the rehearsal to share their ideas and work

²⁹⁶ *Antigone*: The senators of Thebes, *Women of Troy*: The enslaved women, *Agamemnon*: Elders of Argos and Household staff in the Palace of Argos.

²⁹⁷ Paul Woodruff, 'Sharing Emotions Through Theater: The Greek Way', *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 1 (2016): 146–51, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2016.0010>, p. 66.

collaboratively alongside me. Through this process, I aim to support a deeper engagement with the play’s language, themes, historical, and cultural context for the actors. Sidiropoulou notes that many directors in staging Greek tragedy encounter a unique challenge—what is often referred to as “the chorus problem’, the actual or implied presence of the gods, and tragedy’s elevated language”.²⁹⁸ Through my stagings, I find the challenge of the Chorus most exciting, reimagining their functional and reflective role in contemporary ways, acting as spectators in our society, gossiping, watching, and making sense of the world around them, offering a critical lens for the action, paralleling the experience of the audience in the real world.



Figure 32. The goddess of wisdom and war, Athena, plots the Greek's punishment with Poseidon, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

Similarly, characterising the gods offers further opportunities for actors to be present throughout the duration of the play. By framing the gods as akin to contemporary political figures—decision-makers and representatives who determine the outcomes of our lives—their presence becomes one of silent surveillance or restrained response. This role was particularly highlighted in the scene of Astyanax’s death in *Women of Troy*. The gods appeared ghost-like—Poseidon dressed in a blue suit and tie, and umbrella in hand and Athena in scarlet red ball dress and feathered collar—drifting through the space, watching as the women of Troy wail and fight with the soldiers, as they delivered the news

²⁹⁸ Avra Sidiropoulou, ‘Adaptation as a Love Affair: The Ethics of Directing the Greeks’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, by Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 140.

of the child's fate. For a moment, the audience wonders whether the gods will intervene—whether they are actually present in the action and might save the child. Instead, their indifference suggests that his fate is already sealed, a decision made by them. In this way, their presence becomes more dynamic—not through direct action, but through the weight of their inaction. Similarly, interpreting the Watchmen as Furies in *Agamemnon*, and as an extension of the Chorus, reframed and deepened the subtext of the play's themes of revenge and fate, that they too were always watching and that the action was preordained by Fate—“And his killers, in their turn, will be choked in his blood. This is how Fate has arranged our existence”.²⁹⁹



Figure 33. *The Watchmen as The Furies, confronting Cassandra, Agamemnon, 2024.*

By merging these otherwise singular character roles into the wider ensemble, the actors not only become vital to the play's immediate action but take on a deeper subtextual presence and resonance throughout the play, contributing further to the thematic fabric and affirming their greater value in the collaborative labour of the production. Choosing the right translation can ease the challenge of the heightened language. Rather than assuming the actors might not be able to understand the play, I focus on interpreting it in embodied, meaningful ways—through tone, gesture, choreography, music, and staging—to make the language and the play alive, for both actor and audience, and for the actor to connect with the text viscerally, emotionally, and physically.

²⁹⁹ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 66.

Uniquely, I found that our productions were integrating our experiences of living in Aotearoa. Implementing concepts from Tikanga Māori cultural principles through our production processes further enriched the expectations of the ensemble and deepened our sense of [whanaungatanga](#)—the collective family and kinship-like relationships which grow over time through reciprocal foundations of support, care, wellbeing, responsibilities, and obligations—the root word, deriving from whānau, meaning family. This concept is underpinned by [manaakitanga](#)—a principle centred on hospitality, reciprocity, generosity, and care. This was especially generated through *kai*, food, the shared meals prepared by me.



Figure 34. Lunch with the cast, prepared by Holly. Holly gives notes to a cast member, Agamemnon, 2024.

During every large ensemble rehearsal on Saturday afternoons—and some Wednesday evenings—I either purchased takeaway pizzas or prepared lunches and afternoon teas, and a few dinners for the actors, catering for cultural, health, and dietary requirements. These shared moments became a vital aspect of our ensemble process. Gathering around food offered more than sustenance, it nurtured our sense of community. The actors were encouraged to sit and chat with one another, often gathered in a circle or around one of the university campus tables. This time outside of formal rehearsals

allowed the ensemble to bond, reflect, and relax, nurturing both minds and bodies.³⁰⁰ Importantly, this time ensured that actors had the autonomy to get to know one another, providing space away from the rehearsal expectations. These moments opened the opportunity to share notes with the cast or ideas amongst themselves in a relaxed and encouraging setting. Because I was unable to pay the actors, providing food became an essential act of [aroha](#), care, and support—funded personally from my research scholarship and thoughtfully planned, purchased, and prepared by me each Friday before rehearsal. I organised free parking on the city campus, recognising the financial, logistical, and safety considerations involved in accessing the rehearsal space in late evenings and over weekends.

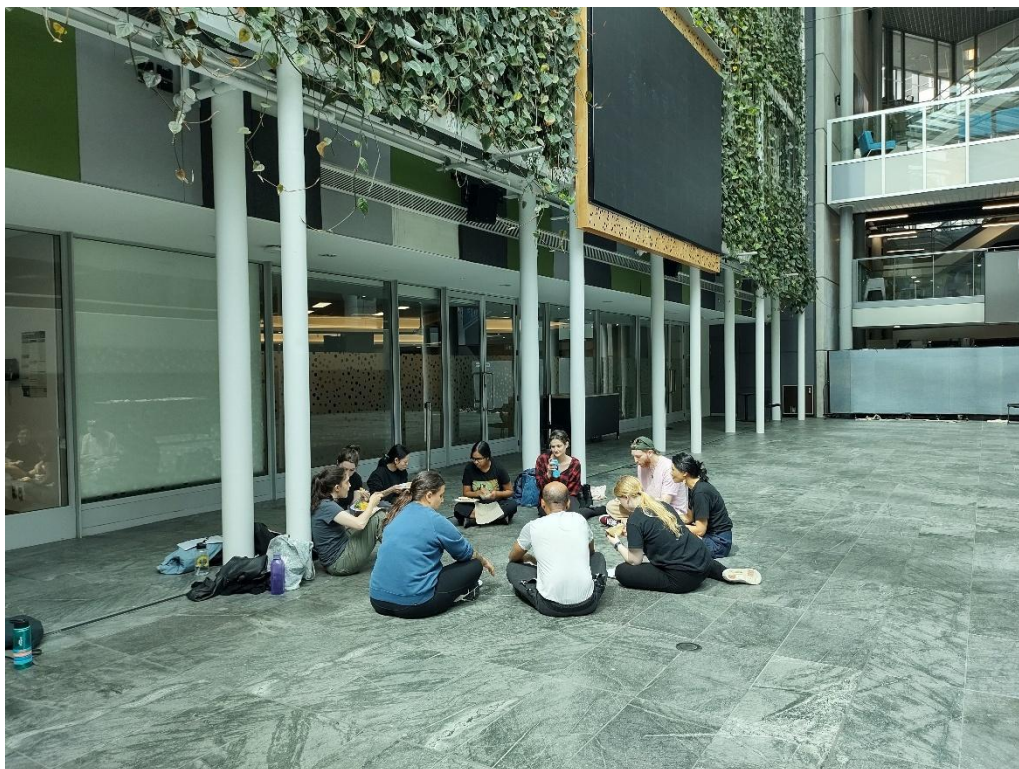


Figure 35. The cast eating lunch together in the atrium, Agamemnon, 2024.

From a research perspective, these dedicated and regulated meal breaks played an essential ethical role for the research participants. The lunches offered a safe, on-campus setting where participants could interact naturally and decompress, while maintaining the integrity and boundaries of the research process. My continued presence in the space ensured I was available should any actor require support, assistance, advice, clarification, or guidance, additionally allowing me to monitor the safety and tone of the environment without intruding on their autonomy. These simple acts of care, catering a homemade meal, with tea, coffee, fruit, biscuits, sandwiches, and salads,

³⁰⁰ Fiona McNamara and Borni Te Rongopai Tukiwaho, *04: Working Together: Safety, Respect and Wellbeing* (Playmarket, 2023), p. 21.

proved fundamental in building ensemble, through artistic collaboration and through shared care.

Humour, Laughter, and Play: How to Deal with Serious and Tragic Themes

Several actors have commented that our rehearsal space was always full of laughter and enjoyment. But capturing these recurrent moments of genuine humour and laughter throughout the rehearsals and PPDW process highlighted a significant cultural aspect of our company and my embodied strategies as a director. In an early *Women of Troy* rehearsal, a moment of my embodied strategies and humour was captured by a cast member filming from the balconies above the grand staircase. In the video link below, I am directing the scene in which Cassandra enters dancing. To encourage bolder choices from the actor, I break into a deliberately silly dance, poking fun at myself and the absurdity of the moment. The whole cast bursts into laughter, and the actor playing Cassandra begins to embrace the opportunity to move more playfully around the stage. This moment demonstrates how embodiment and humour were powerful tools for ensemble development, inviting the actors to let go, take risks, and explore bolder, even ridiculous, choices. It is through laughter that discovery begins.



Figure 36. [Video of Holly dancing with Cassandra on the staircase in *Women of Troy* Rehearsals, and Cassandra in Performance, *Women of Troy*, 2023.](#)

A transcribed moment from the PPDW shows the warmth and humour of our cast developed through these ensemble and humour methodologies.

HOLLY:
Oh, here we go! Hiya EPSILON, hiya KAPPA!

EPSILON and KAPPA enter the space. EPSILON is wearing a brightly colourful outfit, with van Gogh Sunflower pattern trousers, yellow boots, and an orange jacket.

DELTA:
My goodness! You are colourful!

HOLLY:
Now, do you need your parking permit?

EPSILON begins to sing.

EPSILON:
Bring me sunshine in your smile, Bring me laughter all the while,
In this world where we live there should be more happiness, So
much joy you can give to each brand new bright tomorrow...

*The whole cast erupts into laughter. EPSILON begins to dance.
Holly jokes:*

HOLLY:
So, we know who we are putting in the tap number for the next
show! Blimey!

*Holly and the cast hug and greet KAPPA and EPSILON. They take
their seats. Holly returns to the table.*

Figure 37. PPDW Transcript, Humour in the Rehearsal Room

I feel a personal responsibility as a director to create a warm, welcoming, and enjoyable theatre environment. This ethos is based on my lived experiences, raised in a household full of laughter and humour, watching many British comedies from stage to screen, and with a personal belief that life is too short to be miserable.

But is it right that we should laugh in times of crisis and while performing tragedy? Bird, Donelan, et al question the *legitimacy of humour* in their research, and ask:

Is it okay to be funny? In our offices, there is laughter, ironic sometimes, desperate and a little manic occasionally. In the studio, we wonder about the humour and playfulness in our play. Even while we laugh through rehearsals, replaying moments of our lives we ask: If this scene is funny, is it a legitimate way to interpret data and construct meaning?³⁰¹

³⁰¹ Jane Bird et al., 'Alice Hoy Is Not a Building – Women in Academia', in *Performing Research: Tensions, Triumphs and Trade-Offs of Ethnodrama*, ed. Judith Ackroyd and John O'Toole (Institute of Education Press, 2010), p. 98.

What function does humour serve in the theatrical rehearsal space? Why do we do it? What is the significance of all this laughter? I have discovered that humour can support the ensemble nature of the work, creating a sense of the collective *we* and *us* and open a pathway of discussion about serious *matters* in an informal but controlled setting, resulting in moments of discovery about the play, the characters, the context, and about our own lived experiences.

There are two kinds of humour as suggested by McGraw and Warner—a *violation* when we laugh at something that seems “wrong, unsettling or threatening”³⁰² and the *benign* when we laugh at something that seems “okay, acceptable, or safe”³⁰³. A violation might occur when we laugh at someone’s genuine hurt or pain, perhaps falling down the stairs, which we then might feel guilty about. The latter occurs if the person is unhurt, which likely results in a reaction of “at least one of three ways: they feel amused, they laugh, or they make a judgment – “that was funny.”³⁰⁴ In theatre we feel we can laugh because we know the actions are fictional or have not caused genuine physical harm to the actor on stage. Theatre, as Sidiropoulou suggests, “should always reflect the chaotic textures of life, where people laugh at the most uncomfortable moments and mean things that are the exact opposite of what they say”.³⁰⁵ Ironical humour in these moments of tragedy can help us to foster relationships with each other and to help make sense of crisis in our often-chaotic world.

In this research, because we are dealing with tragedy, it was necessary to build an environment in our rehearsal that recognised the safe space to talk about the serious matters of the play, its contexts, and our lived experiences, and to recognise when and if humour was appropriate within these discussions. As the actors had consented to engage with the academic nature of the research and the play text, I felt that we had a foundational grounding to build rapport, to support each other in these discussions, and to enjoy the process through laughter. This was demonstrated in our PPDW when we allowed the laughter to flow into tears, to confront the crisis of the play and its contexts, contend with our experience as actors performing these plays, and then to have fun making theatre.

Humour helps me to build rapport with my actors and better communicate my ideas in the rehearsal process, avoiding language that could be perceived as condescending, patronising, arrogant, or dismissive. As Sidiropoulou suggests, humour and the sharing of stories, “however personal or embarrassing—can offset a director’s assumed

³⁰² Peter McGraw and Joel Warner, *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny* (Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 10.

³⁰³ Peter McGraw and Joel Warner, *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny* (Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 10.

³⁰⁴ Peter McGraw and Joel Warner, *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny* (Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 10.

³⁰⁵ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 183.

entitlement and control with a condition of vulnerability, making it easier for the group to join the participatory journey of production as an equal voyager”.³⁰⁶ Throughout my practice, multiple actors have returned to be a part of my company. These actors became familiar with my methodology, style, and processes as a director, in particular the shared spirit of humour. For those who are new to my production, humour is a method in which the new actors can build relationships with the established ensemble, and with me as the director, to ease them into the theatre-making process. Humour inevitably allows us to work collectively as we become acquainted with one another through the forming of “inside jokes, intriguing mistakes, and memories”,³⁰⁷ some actors make new friends doing the productions. The use of humour is a fundamental strategy to maintaining stability among the ensemble when “a situation seems strained or tentative.”³⁰⁸

Although these plays are technically tragedies, we sometimes laugh at the actions of the characters, and how they respond to their situation—perhaps laughing because we too have endured the same, wondering why we have not learnt from the mistakes that came before. The distancing allows us to laugh, but when those moments appear to reflect reality, then we might cry. As Perris suggests, this distance that is afforded to us can enable the “realisation that actors do not suffer the fate depicted [and thus] permits us to lower our defences and enter into the event”.³⁰⁹

In staging Euripides’ *Women of Troy*, we might laugh at the absurdity of the Trojan Horse and how anyone could fall for such a trick but be shocked to learn that this is a tactic still used in modern warfare. We too find ourselves laughing at Menelaus’ quick-witted insults towards Helen or remarks about a woman’s deviant behaviour but want to cry at the very real experiences of sexual assault and rape perpetuated by men in power. In staging *Agamemnon*, we might laugh at Clytemnestra’s empowering moment, as she dances around the stage with a bloody axe, but we recognise the cycle of revenge and violence, the suffering of the women, and the brutality and cruelty of the family. The important distinction is that we laugh upwards towards those in power and cry for those who suffer.

Part of my responsibility in directing tragedy is to create a space that acknowledges both the seriousness of the material and the privilege we have in not living through its realities. Because of the nature of this research, making sense of the crisis times in which we live, my role as a director carries particular weight. There is a fine line between knowing when we can laugh at the absurdity or sharpness of a moment and when the moment requires us to listen and contemplate. In staging theatre in Aotearoa, we are privileged to have the

³⁰⁶ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 16.

³⁰⁷ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 16-17.

³⁰⁸ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 74.

³⁰⁹ Simon Perris, ‘Violence in Adaptations of Greek Tragedy’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, by Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 256.

safety of distance³¹⁰—of myth, fiction, time, space, and our reality—and yet we are constantly reminded through the media of how close these stories feel to the *global world* in which we live. Through this creative practice, I encounter a dichotomy. As a director, I bring an acute emotional sensitivity to the work—I love to feel, and I care deeply about the work I am making and for the actors I am working with. But as a researcher, I must also cultivate a necessary distance—I am a facilitator of the research and for my participants, not just a maker. That dual role requires a kind of armour—one that protects both me and the ensemble—because without it, the emotional weight of staging tragedy would be overwhelming.

During rehearsals of *Agamemnon*, a white dove frequently flew into the atrium, walking about the theatre space. Laughter would always ensue in referencing the symbol of Aphrodite, perhaps witnessing the aftermath of her games, and punishment for Helen’s judgment as the most beautiful woman. It felt like an eerie coincidence to the Chorus’ first story, the black bird and the white bird, Menelaus and Agamemnon, and the Corvus crows and the white dove.

³¹⁰ Peter McGraw et al., ‘Too Close for Comfort, or Too Far to Care? Finding Humor in Distant Tragedies and Close Mishaps’, *Psychological Science* 23, no. 10 (2012): 1215–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612443831>, p. 1216.



Figure 38. The white dove appears in rehearsal, Agamemnon, 2024.



Figure 39. The white dove appears in dress rehearsal, Agamemnon, 2024.

Humour can enable us to process, connect, empathise, and build trust in the rehearsal space. It invites a suspension of our defences, and sometimes, that is where the most honest and organic work can flourish. In my rehearsal room, laughter at times led to tears, and vice versa, because the emotional landscape of tragedy is not fixed, it is complicated, and often ridiculous in its cruelty. Drama and theatre, after all, are symbolically represented by the intersection of two ancient Greek masks, of Comedy and Tragedy, a reflection that the two can coexist. We laugh, we cry, and we position ourselves somewhere in the middle.

Stillness and Silence: Engagement with Tragedy

Frecknall considers that it is not the audience's fault if they do not understand the content of the story, suggesting that connecting with theatre is "all about heart [...] it's got nothing to do with intellect."³¹¹ However, I would argue that the true issue lies not in a lack of understanding of the content itself, but in failing to recognise the layers of meaning within the context in which the story is presented. This includes engaging with the political, social, or emotional landscape that the narrative reflects or parallels, even

³¹¹ Kate Wyver, 'Strung out: The Afterlife of War Horse's Joey and Other Puppet Stars', Stage, *The Guardian*, 4 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/sep/04/weird-afterlife-puppets-theatre-war-horse-joey>.

when the content itself may be abstract or complex, such as an ancient Greek myth. As both audience members and actors, we may enter the theatre unaware of what awaits us, but beyond that, there is an expectation that we are active participants in society, critical thinkers, media literate, aware of the world around us, able to distinguish fiction from non-fiction, and able to recognise the influence of stereotypes and propaganda. A prime example of this disconnection can be found in the character of Sally Bowles' apparently flippant remark in *Cabaret*³¹²—"Politics? What's that got to do with us?" It underscores a dangerous detachment from the wider implications of the narrative, an apathy that, with historical hindsight, proves fatal. When actors are cast in my productions, they are expected—as citizens of the world—to engage with the intellectual discourse through my theatre methodologies and come to understand the implications of staging the plays in our era of crisis. The play they are performing is not a closed world—it matters in relation to the broader landscape of global tensions. There is a demand for critical, reflective engagement with the material, its contexts, and its resonances and parallels with the present.

When staging an ancient Greek tragedy, where the subject material is tragic throughout, it is important that the climactic and focal rising moment of *peripeteia* and/or *anagnorisis* falls into a moment of *catharsis*. *Catharsis* does not necessarily have to result in crying, but, as Aristotle suggests, is a purging of emotion to "evoke pity and fear"³¹³ from an audience. Utilising stillness allows time for the audience to breathe and contemplate what has transpired, to pause for thought in the falling action and final resolution of the play. For the actors, stillness offers the opportunity to embody the aftermath of tragedy with restraint and presence, to hold the space rather than rush to fill it, and to let the emotional impact land without distraction. As a practical application, stillness allows the actors to briefly pause from the physical demands of the play.

In all three of my stagings of Greek tragedy, I directed that stillness should fall after the most confronting moments. In *Women of Troy*, silence fell on the audience after the song *Fire* by Katerina Gimon³¹⁴ I interspersed into the play text, in which the Chorus women wailed, lamented, screamed, and beat their bodies, as the body of Astyanax was thrown from the walls of Troy. Two of my friends attending the show quietly whispered to one another about the shocking revelation, asking, "Oh my god! They're not going to kill the baby, are they?" to which the other replied, "This is Holly directing a Greek tragedy. What do you expect is going to happen?"

³¹² From the production of *Cabaret* that I saw in London in 2022. *Cabaret*, book by Joe Masteroff, music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb, directed by Rebecca Frecknall (Kit Kat Club, Playhouse Theatre, London, 2022), *Theatre Performance*.

³¹³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford University Press, 2013), 1452a.

³¹⁴ Performed with permission by Cyprus Choral Music, Katerina Gimon, *FIRE - (from Elements, Mvt 3)*, 2013, Music Composition, <https://cypresschoral.com/composers/katerina-gimon/fire-from-elements-mvt-3/>.

In *Agamemnon*, drawing on the appearance of the Furies from Aeschylus' later plays in *The Oresteia* trilogy, I doubled the characters of the Watchmen as embodying the Furies. In a moment of comedic stillness, the Furies dragged a bathtub into the centre of the stage in which Agamemnon, in a hallucinatory fantasy, was executed by his wife, Clytemnestra. Her axe, steered by the hands of her Watchmen-turned-Furies, added an eerie weight to the moment. With X-Ray Spex's *Oh Bondage! Up Yours!*³¹⁵ underscored the scene, stirring the action along, the audience left to balance their laughter and enthusiasm for the music with the haunting contemplation of justifying such a brutal murder.

Inspired by Frecknall's methods, these contrasting elements of stillness and tragedy compel the audience to confront the enduring resonance of these themes, dismantling any illusion of detachment from the global tensions of our era of crisis. In these critically tumultuous times, theatre can play an imperative role in prompting actors and audiences to recognise the parallels between past crises and our current lived experiences. As a director, it can at times feel as though we are screaming into the void, shouting to the audience, "Do you understand?". These plays are not merely entertainment—we unequivocally challenge our audiences to pay attention, to confront the harsh realities of the present moment and the potential uncertainties that await us.

Music and Movement: Depictions of Violence on Stage.

Thematic music and song are another key aspect of my practice, both as a storytelling device and as a dramaturgical and performative tool. Song, movement, and dance were central to the performance of ancient Greek stagings, which "all featured choral dances that nurtured peer group identity".³¹⁶ The use of music in my two productions fostered and strengthened our ensemble, working as one to deliver the story through a collective framework. In each production, I took time to build a collaborative playlist that the cast was encouraged to contribute to, with modern songs that spoke to the central themes of our plays—violence, women, war, power, self-determination, politics, and protest. My thematic playlists, which I curated for both *Women of Troy*³¹⁷ and *Agamemnon*,³¹⁸ from a wide range of genres and eras, became a means to subconsciously initiate reflection on the play's concerns by the audience as they entered the auditorium. Below is a table with some of the songs from each playlist

³¹⁵ Performed with permission by Universal Music. Poly Styrene, *Oh Bondage! Up Yours!*, performed by X-Ray Spex, EMI, 1977, Song, 2:49.

³¹⁶ Hall, Edith. *The Ancient Greeks: Ten Ways They Shaped the Modern World*. London: Vintage, 2016, p. 141.

³¹⁷ Corvus Theatre Co, 'Women of Troy Playlist, 2023', Spotify, 17 December 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0ELoQcvOD3muYbAnJF4UHS>.

³¹⁸ Corvus Theatre Co, 'Agamemnon Playlist, 2024', Spotify, 18 September 2024, <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/03t1LiQUiBnJbIZ5WXhJ8x>.

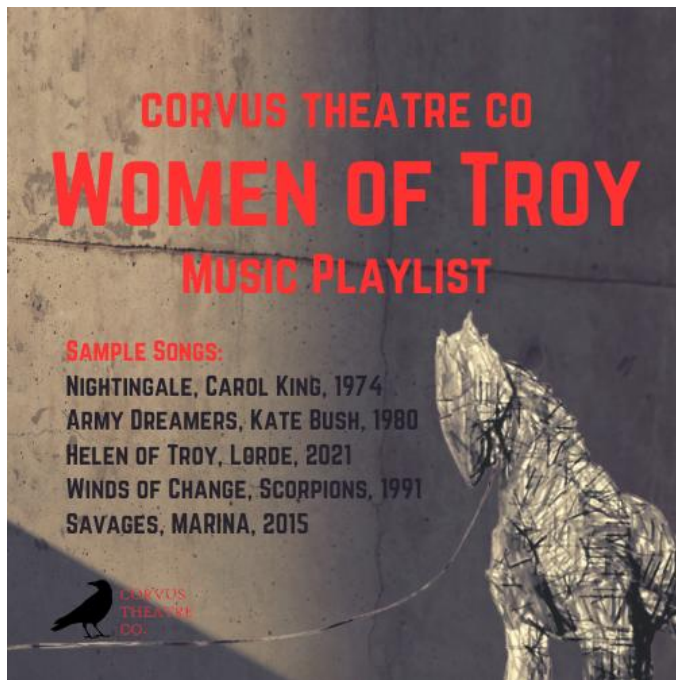


Figure 40. [Women of Troy Music Playlist](#).



Figure 41. [Agamemnon Music Playlist](#).

These playlists become an integral part of the rehearsal environment—playing as actors arrive, during warm-ups, over lunch breaks, and in more focused moments when music can help shift the energy or deepen our connection to the play material. Sometimes a song serves as a guide for physical warm-ups or as a prompt for thinking about the play through a different lens, not just intellectually, but emotionally, rhythmically, and viscerally. Music is a tool I have used to help actors reconsider their actions, motivations, movements, or emotions of a scene. As Mitchell suggests, when used appropriately, sound and music can be an effective emotive tool that can “help to support the work the actors are doing and sharpen how [the director can] transmit [their] analysis or interpretation of the material”.³¹⁹ My use of sound aimed to encourage the actors to deepen their characterisations and contextualisation of the play, allowing both them and the audience to become more immediately immersed in the world of the play through the diegetic and nondiegetic music and sounds.

For example, in *Agamemnon*, three kinds of music were used to underscore the play and propel the action forward. Some of the music was diegetic—part of the story world. Some nondiegetic—as if only heard by the audience. Some were a convergence of both—metadiegetic—this leaves the audience unsure of whether the sound is within the world of the play or an imposed soundtrack. As the thematic playlist played during the audience’s entry, the Watchmen were seen dancing on the palace roof, as if responding to the music in a diegetic context. Several of Vivaldi’s orchestral pieces underscored the play, framed as though classical music was Agamemnon’s musical taste—symbolising

³¹⁹ Katie Mitchell, *The Director’s Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 86.

his continued control over Clytemnestra while he was away at war. These songs functioned as non-diegetic pieces—unheard by the characters. In contrast, to stylise the killing of Agamemnon, I underscored the scene with X-Ray Spex’s *Oh Bondage! Up Yours!*—replacing the traditional Chorus dance sequence. This song functioned metadiegetically—abstract in its presence, imitating a kind of drunken or drug-induced frenzy. It represented Clytemnestra’s reclamation of control—over herself, her actions, and even her musical preferences. In this sense, both audience and characters are left to consider whether the moment unfolded in a feverish haze or if the brutal violence was screamed and shouted into real, undeniable clarity. The implementation of the Furies,³²⁰ through the Watchmen characters in this scene, introduced another layer of ambiguity and mythic possibility—as if the Furies had conjured the moment itself. With the Chorus adorning a pair of sunglasses, there was a further suggestion that they were blind—both literally and metaphorically—to their complicity in the cyclical revenge until the violence had fully unfolded. This imagery further evoked the cliché that “justice is blind”—yet she is not. Clytemnestra sees everything. She sees the Furies and does not look away. Her vengeance is not passive or impartial, but intentional, embodied, and fiercely personal.



Figure 42. [Video of *Oh Bondage! Up Yours!* Process and Dance Sequence in Dress Rehearsal, *Agamemnon*, 2024.](#)

³²⁰ Each Watchman was assigned the secondary Fury’s name: Alena as Alekto, endless anger; Sophia as Megaera, jealous rage; and Elpis as Tisiphone, vengeful destruction. They were decorated in red sunglasses to imitate the Furies blood-eyes, golden wings, attached by Velcro to their watchman vest, golden snakes to adorn their arms, and a name badge *Fury*, to sit on top of their *Watchman* name badge.



Figure 43. “But now he must bathe and drown In the blood spilled by his own forefathers”, The Furies call upon the Chorus, standing over the bathtub, Agamemnon, 2024.



Figure 44. “Bind me, tie me, chain me to the wall, I wanna be a slave to you all. Oh bondage, up yours! Oh bondage, no more!” The Furies and Chorus bind Agamemnon, Agamemnon, 2024.

In *Women of Troy*, sound played an important role in both the use of effects and music. I used a thematic playlist as the audience entered—with the actors already in character, waiting silently on the staircase, involved in the action we had devised in rehearsals. The final song on the playlist, Vera Lynn's *A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square* played, as though from a radio, which was perched on a weathered crate at the front of the stage. These anachronistic elements were designed to evoke a sense of a mid-century wartime atmosphere within a modern setting.

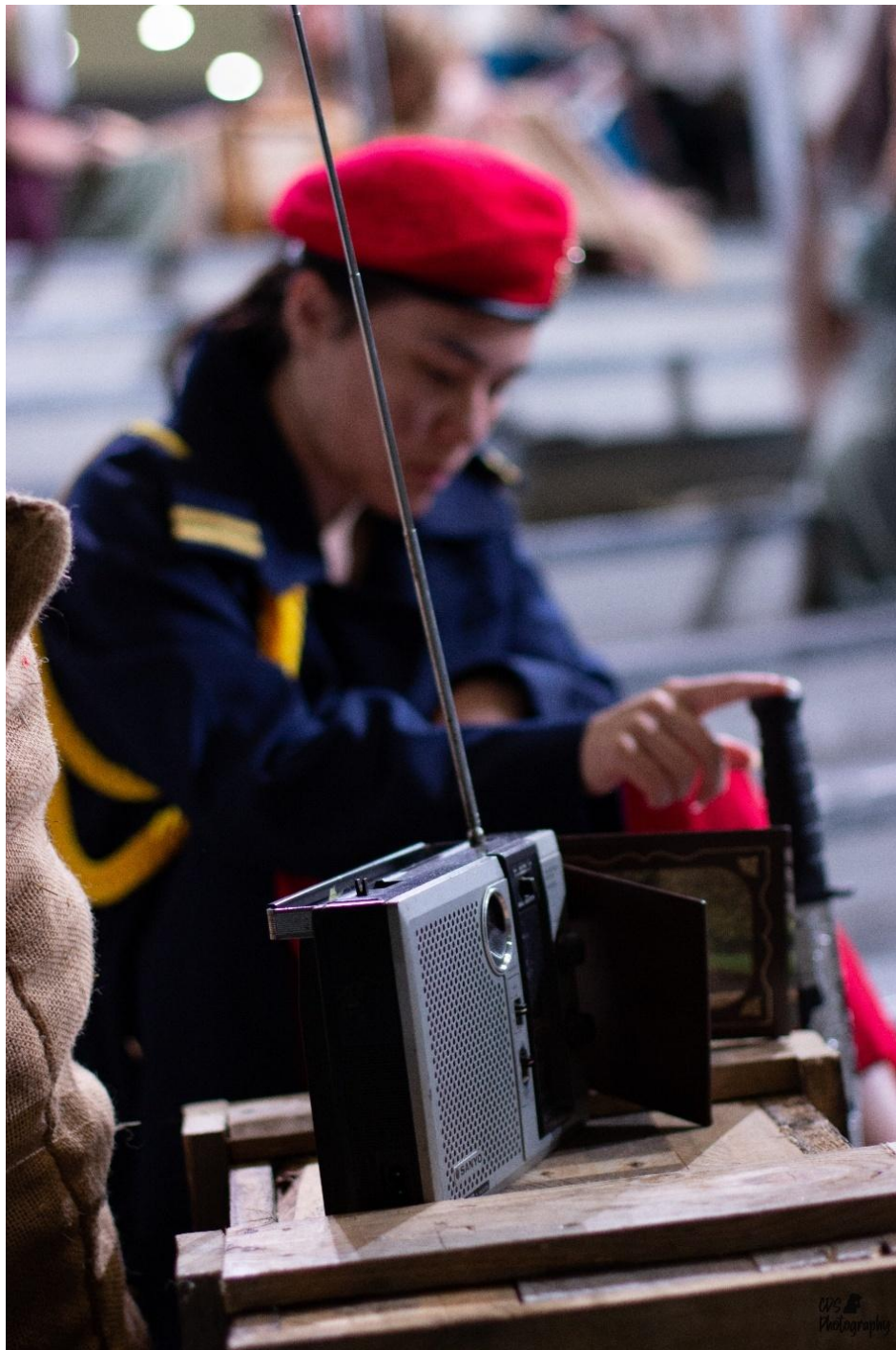


Figure 45. *The Radio plays, as Sebastos, the Soldier, awaits their orders, Women of Troy, 2023.*

The song subtly gestured toward the themes of birds and nightingales, which are symbolic in the play. These themes resonated with the audience when Hecuba spoke of “the mother bird at her plundered nest”.³²¹ This metaphor extended to the haunting image of Astyanax being thrown from the walls of Troy, like a baby bird pushed from its home. As the music began to warp, distort, and fade into a static, crackling sound, the actors slowly turned toward the radio, focusing the audience’s attention as though hearing a memory or a ghost of Troy. This song was repeated, playing again in the concluding scene as the women were locked in a freeze frame—forced by the soldiers onto the ships as Troy burned around them, the gods pointing towards their fate. Upstairs, at the top of the stairs, Hecuba, holding the last remaining artefacts of her family—a wedding dress, pictures, and a baby blanket—danced slowly, accompanied by the haunting static from the radio, this time, becoming louder and clearer for the audience to hear.

³²¹ Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. 10.



Figure 46. Hecuba clutching the baby blanket of Astyanax, surrounded by the blood confetti of the sacrifice and Cassandra's wedding dress, Women of Troy, 2023.

I selected a few royalty-free songs to accompany the action and drive the story forward—music that was dissonant and droning with drumming, lyres, aulos or pan-flute instruments, to create a tense, weighty atmosphere of an ancient Greek world. This music was particularly important in Cassandra's entrance scene, where she flippantly dances in the prophetic knowledge that Troy will be annihilated completely, and she will be married off to the Greek king, Agamemnon. In the image below, Cassandra is seen holding up her burning torches and a bouquet of sunflowers, which she shoves into the face of the soldier, Sebastos—an image that I directed to parallel a confrontation of a

Russian soldier by a Ukrainian woman captured on camera,³²² giving him sunflower seeds—a flower that has become synonymous with Ukrainian resistance.



Figure 47. Cassandra gives the soldier, Sebastos, a sunflower bouquet, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

³²² Ukrainian Woman Offers Seeds to Russian Soldiers so “Sunflowers Grow When They Die”, directed by Guardian News, 2022, YouTube Video, 1:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L17Bi7zBJHI&ab_channel=GuardianNews.

Performed live with the cast, I incorporated the a cappella choral piece [Fire by Katerina Gimon](#)³²³ as the Chorus's grief song to mourn the forthcoming execution of Astyanax. This raw, haunting, and wailing composition became a powerful expression of collective female grief. Drawing on my background in music theory and choral singing, I worked closely with the actors throughout rehearsal to perform it viscerally, as if from the gut. The song allowed for a guttural, spitting, crying, and screaming expression of our collective grief and for the women's suffering. This performance was not to be something polite or restrained but dissonant, furious, and full-bodied. The actors reflected on how the song tapped into something ancient and cultural—the expressive mourning of women who are enraged and broken.

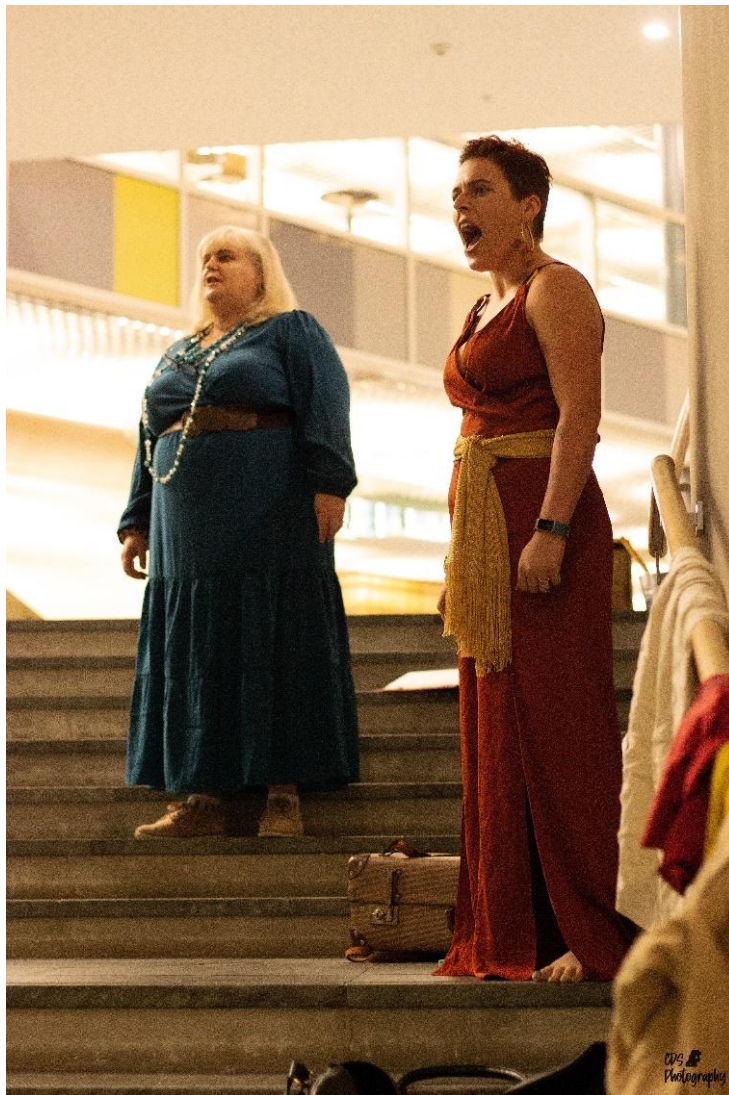


Figure 48. [Video: The Chorus Women sing Fire, Women of Troy, 2023.](#)

³²³ Performed with permission by Cyprus Choral Music, Katerina Gimon, *FIRE* - (from *Elements*, Mvt 3), 2013, Music Composition, <https://cypresschoral.com/composers/katerina-gimon/fire-from-elements-mvt-3/>.

Throughout *Women of Troy*, I used a few sound effects to evoke the setting of the play near the harbour of Troy, and the ongoing final battles between the Trojans and Greeks—a missile rocket, whirring overhead before exploding to a distant rumble, and a foghorn, twice-played in quick consecutive blasts. At the beginning of the play, on Poseidon's entrance, a missile rocket was heard, with the women on stage, sharply turning their attention to the sound, before covering their heads to protect themselves, as it exploded in the distance. To signal the departure of each of the Trojan women who are sent away to be slaves to the Greeks, I used the sound effect of a cargo ship's foghorn. This auditory motif became a recurring signifier of loss, drawing both the audience's and the onstage characters' attention to the reality that one of their own had truly gone. The foghorn played twice, once before a character's exit to signal their imminent departure and reading of the ships, and again sometime after they have exited to signal to the remaining characters on stage their departure from the harbour. The foghorn acted as both a transitional cue between scenes and carried emotional weight, eliciting a different emotional response with each departure for the women as they turned their attention above the audience as though watching the ships depart the harbour. For Cassandra, taken to be a slave of King Agamemnon, it provoked a quiet pity. For Andromache, taken to be a slave of Neoptolemus, it underscored the depth of despair. For Helen, spared by her husband and reunited with Menelaus, it signalled rage—felt by the Trojan women who watched her escape judgment and justice, seemingly unscathed by the destruction of their city, they believed she had helped set in motion. This recurring sound effect helped punctuate the structure of the play and highlighted the emotional stakes of each woman's fate.



Figure 49. Menelaus spares Helen's life, Women of Troy, 2023.

At the end of the play, I directed a foghorn to sound, as the women were rounded up by the soldiers in slow motion, making their final evacuation preparations. The gods again appearing, speaking the opening lines and conversing about the consequences for the Greeks and the fate of the Trojans. A missile rocket was again heard to bookend the play, as the women cried out, seeing the crumbling walls of Troy fall around them. In the text, Euripides denies the audience the closure of seeing Hecuba taken away. In my staging, I echoed this refusal, choosing to preserve Hecuba's final words, as an act of resistance—the stoic Queen, surrounded by the remnants and artefacts of her family, who remains loyal to her city and the dead. Dancing gently to the music of the radio, this became a

final, defiant gesture against the forced erasure of her history and identity. The Chorus women were too directed in a freeze-frame, the audience not knowing whether they too would remain or leave, never hearing the second foghorn of a ship leaving the harbour. The final rocket and rumbling sound effect paired with the freeze-frame, created an uncertainty and fear that perhaps no one had made it out at all—not even the Greek soldiers.³²⁴ In this moment, the violence did not end; it repeated, reinforcing the brutal cost of ambition and retribution in war, not of its leaders, but by the casualties of women and children, and the young people on the front lines, heightening the tragedy of the play and the reflected realities.



Figure 50. “March down to the Archaean fleet!”, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

Music as an integral part of my practice offers a way to depict violence and the emotional terrain of anger, rage, and grief through non-violent means. Greek tragedy contains violent themes, and the ancient dramatists were not in the least bit “squeamish about presenting on stage the *results* of violence in the most appalling form”.³²⁵ In line with the ancient Greek convention of avoiding the direct portrayal of violence onstage, I have sought ways to stylise violence that resist both the fictional graphic realism in contemporary media and the very real horrors of our crisis-filled world—and the subsequent desensitisation it often causes. Simon Perris notes that “given the ubiquity

³²⁴ The image drew upon the historical tragedy of Chunuk Bair, where New Zealand soldiers in the first world war were struck down by their own British allies after reaching the summit at Gallipoli .

³²⁵ Simon Perris, ‘Violence in Adaptations of Greek Tragedy’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, by Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 248.

of violence in Greek tragedy and the genre's corresponding reputation for bloodshed, adapters cannot dodge the question of violence".³²⁶ Rather than *dodging* it, my method instead leans into the symbolic and the suggestive, creating space for the horror and tragedy of violent acts to be implied and felt rather than shown. Perris and Sidiropoulou's discussions of violence have shaped my approach. Recognising theatrical violence as something liminal, allusive, and emotionally resonant encouraged me to frame violence in *Women of Troy* through song and in *Agamemnon* through dance—touching on the contemporary functions of the Choral interludes in ancient Greek stagings. Sidiropoulou notes that as a director, "part of your skill to inspire lies in preparing your company and your audience to appreciate ambiguity over fixed and authoritative semiotic structures that tell you what can only be imagined."³²⁷ She argues that violence onstage, though fleeting in the dramatic time of the performance, can leave a lasting impact when rendered through evocative language, sound, or visual metaphors and symbols. My stagings aim to harness that ambiguity, to conjure emotional and ethical complexities of the tragedy, and to invite the audiences to imagine rather than directly see the unsettling experience of violence in these ancient tragedies through layered, and often shocking or unexpected means. In the original staging of *Agamemnon*, the audience would not have witnessed the murder itself—the body would have been revealed only afterward, rolled out on the *ekkyklema*. Contemporary audiences, however, often demand something more viscerally or visually dramatic from modern theatre. Rather than resorting to realism or literal violence, I translate this moment through stylised choreography and music, allowing the act to unfold symbolically rather than graphically, and touch on the original *ekkyklema* using a wheeled bathtub and chaise longue.

Epic Stagings: Performance in Non-Theatre Locations

Last but not least, a major aspect of my practice has been the staging of Greek tragedy in non-theatre locations. This dramatic mode of performance in my research began as a necessity to respond to the lack of performance spaces available to us on the university campus and then, serendipitously, discovered these spaces could function as sites of theatrical possibility and reflections of the crises that the work was framed through. This approach echoes back to my earliest production of *Antigone*, which was staged in an engineering laboratory during the particularly unstable period of the COVID-19 pandemic, an early signal that my work could inhabit testing spaces—both literally and conceptually. Situating my practice outside of non-theatre spaces operated as a means of breaking free of the rituals, rules, and conventions imposed on traditional Eurocentric, *proscenium arch theatre*—hiding the artifice behind wings and the closing of curtains between acts, and the restricted actor/audience configuration. The non-theatre

³²⁶ Simon Perris, 'Violence in Adaptations of Greek Tragedy', in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, by Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 253.

³²⁷ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 16.

locations allowed us to explore the raw thematic and contextual intensity of these dramatic and enduring plays.

In early iterations of my practice, I was inspired by the work of Mike Pearson³²⁸ and his explorations of site-specific and site-sympathetic performance. As I furthered my practice, I came to recognise that this identification did not exactly suit my own work. While I was drawn to non-theatre locations, my work is not truly site-specific in the sense of being shaped by or in dialogue with the unique history or architecture of the site. Instead, I was staging work in unconventional, non-theatre spaces, utilising the architecture for its atmosphere, dislocation, or resonance, rather than responding to the site in the way site-specific performance traditionally demands.³²⁹ The distinction is subtle but important—the site served the production needs, not the other way around. However, the grand staircase and atrium were not neutral entities. The scale, architecture, and character of these spaces created a sense of epicness and excitement, creating a different kind of resonance for the actors and audience. In researching the space, I discovered that Chris Scott who led Jasmax’s architectural design team in creating the Sir Paul Reeves Building, remarked that he wanted to “put the theatre back in ‘lecture theatre’”.³³⁰ In the ten years the building has existed, my productions are the only theatre productions to have been staged in these spaces.

In speaking about the memory of returning to the grand staircase, the actors in the *Women of Troy* PPDW reflected on the joyous and personal ownership of this space. Unlike a traditional theatre, where many productions may come and go, this play—at that particular moment in time—was ephemeral, existing now only in their shared memory. The transcribed audio captures a reflective and emotional reunion as the cast returns to the concrete staircase where they rehearsed and performed. They instinctively take up their former positions, as though the characters are re-entering the scene, revealing how deeply embedded the physical environment had become in their memory and sense of belonging to this non-theatre space.

³²⁸ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

³²⁹ I regard that staging a site-specific production of *Women of Troy* might look like locating the work in the ancient ruins of Troy in modern Turkey, or site-sympathetic in a similar ancient ruins context.

³³⁰ Mike Barrett, ‘Purple Pin Case Study—Spatial: Jasmax, AUT Sir Paul Reeves Building’, The Designers Institute, March 2017, <https://designersinstitute.nz/case-study/aut-sir-paul-reeves-building/>.

GAMMA:

It's interesting walking around the campus, because I come here for lunch sometimes, and just walking down the stairs, and feeling like I know these stairs better than anyone else who is around. And I don't even study here. But there is this weird connection that you have you know...

Gamma rubs her hands across the stairs. Omega imitates Gamma.

That, looking at others, you don't know these stairs as well as I do. I know how many, I know the texture, the marks, the scuffs.

The group all laugh. She continues rubbing her hands on the floor.

I know how far I need to move to pull myself onto the banister, I know how much weight I can pull down on. It's a weird sense of pride, of knowing this space better than anyone else.

LAMBDA:

Yeah, nostalgia, as well? I totally feel that as well, Gamma. I walked past here this morning to park my car and took a picture of the space and I thought "eek I'm back!"

[The conversation continues...]

DELTA:

Its funny how, familiar we are with the space, and where we stand and choosing a spot.

The cast murmur, agree.

ALPHA:

That was my instinct, to sit right here.

HOLLY:

Yes, I noticed that, how you immediately went to the spaces you took up as the characters.

OMEGA:

It's that feeling of where we settled, or where is more comforting, and familiar, I just sat down and though "hah, yeah this is mine"

Figure 51. PPDW Transcript, The cast return to the staircase

Pearson acknowledges the emotional memory and sensory resonances conjured in these non-theatre locations.³³¹ The conversation unfolds in a blend of laughter, nostalgia, and philosophical musings. The actors express a strong emotional connection to the stairs, describing them as "*theirs*", despite being part of a public university building. They recall moments from the rehearsal process, note how the physical space remains unchanged, and speak about how their time there transformed it into a site of creativity, comfort, and shared experience. In an unscripted, candid moment, a student asks

³³¹ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 29.

permission to pass through the stairwell. The actors laugh, waving them through, remembering how often this exchange happened during rehearsals.



Figure 52. *The Women of Troy* cast sits on the stairs, preparing for the dress rehearsal, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

On the stairs during the PPDW I lead the cast through a reflective exercise. They are given a copy of a poem constructed by translator Don Taylor—a post-script reflection of his own, written during the Bosnian genocide, an imagined scenario of the women of Troy in the modern world, named “Reunion at Sarajevo”.³³² I invite the cast to read these words aloud on the stairs. The cast sit, stand, and lie on the staircase, delivering these ghostly, haunting words. Prompting the actors to reflect on these haunting words and the *ghostly memories* of the space, we discuss what has changed, what has not, how the global crises—the war in Ukraine, and now, genocide³³³ in Gaza—resonate. They discuss the idea of liminality, how the stairwell functioned as a crossroad between the world of the play and real life, between public and private, permanence and ephemerality. Jen Harvie highlights the tactile knowledge that is generated in performance in non-theatre sites as a

powerful vehicle for remembering and forming a community for at least two reasons. First, its location can work as a potent mnemonic trigger, helping to

³³² Don Taylor, ‘Reunion at Sarajevo’, in *Women of Troy*, by Euripides, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. 63.

³³³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘UN Special Committee Finds Israel’s Warfare Methods in Gaza Consistent with Genocide, Including Use of Starvation as Weapon of War’, United Nations Human Rights, 14 November 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/un-special-committee-finds-israels-warfare-methods-gaza-consistent-genocide>.

evoke specific past times related to the place and time of performance and facilitating a negotiation between the meaning of those times.³³⁴

In the PPDW, some actors brush their hands on the stairs, bannisters, and walls. This tactile memory prompts them to speak about the respect and care they took for the space during the short time it was *theirs*.³³⁵ They reflect on how performing in this unconventional setting challenged social norms, their own expectations of acting and performance, what theatre could be, and how the stairwell was transformed from a transient and liminal thoroughfare into a meaningful place.

A key aspect of this performance mode was encouraging the actors to break free from previous expectations of traditional and structured performance training on a [proscenium arch](#) stage—to be bold in their acting choices, to embrace the new opportunities this dramatic space offered, allowing them to turn their backs on the audience and other characters, speak face to face with another, walk up the stairs, crawl up them, lie on them, dance on them, swing on the bannisters, climb under them, use the stairs as a symbol of power, in conversation, position, and hierarchy, and look over the balconies onto the action below.

While others now occupy this space in its intended function as an ordinary staircase in a university, the actors felt as if it still belonged to them. Their time in this space throughout rehearsal and performances created lasting emotional and symbolic ties, turning an unassuming and ordinary set of stairs into a charged and powerful theatre space, a kind of archaeological site of memory,³³⁶ layered with their work, presence, and connection.

Making Dramaturgical Discoveries through Research and Lived Experiences

Helen Freshwater's suggests that each person involved in the theatre-making process will "bring their own cultural reference points, political beliefs, sexual preferences, personal histories, and immediate preoccupations to their interpretation of a production".³³⁷ Perspectivism acknowledges that each participant or actor brings a body of knowledge of their own, brings a part of themselves and their world view to the work, which can strengthen the overall action and characterisation in the staging. Their perspectives might also develop the research that is conducted in the rehearsal space. For example, in my production of *Women of Troy*, a majority of the cast were women and immigrants, who brought a variety of cultural and social positions to the rehearsals and

³³⁴ Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 42.

³³⁵ Pearson describes the "scruffs, scratches, cuts, and stains" of passing moments in spaces. In our productions, we recognised the archaeology of the routine operations of the staircase and atrium—the scuffs on the staircase and atrium floor, the handrails worn down and polished for performance, or the piece of chewing gum cemented to the floor that became a blocking marker for an actor. Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 43.

³³⁶ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 42-46.

³³⁷ Helen Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 5-6.

production. Five cast members were mothers, and several had first-hand accounts of living in war-torn countries. It is important to recognise that the play includes content of a potentially upsetting nature, including themes of sexual assault and violence. What the actors choose to bring of themselves and their experiences to their work or to share with us as the ensemble is their decision. However, the rehearsal space was not designed to function as a therapeutic environment or a confessional space. While actors were invited to draw on emotional memory, as I have discussed earlier in dialogue with Mitchell's practices, this did not mean revisiting personal trauma.³³⁸ Rather, the process, facilitated by me, encouraged a careful, considered, and appropriate channelling of feeling into character and motivations. Similarly, the space was not a platform for unmediated political outcry. Personal beliefs and convictions were welcomed, but they were expected to be transformed into dramaturgical purpose—fuel for the work. The act of play and having fun within the rehearsal space is fundamental in order for the actors to feel that they can then separate themselves from the tragedy of the play when they leave the rehearsal space. In this rehearsal space, perspectivism operates not just as a philosophical idea but as a method—we generate meaning through dialogue, difference, and mutual recognition. The audience also “bring[s] their whole bodies with them into the auditorium”³³⁹ and this will determine how they view the play or what resonates with them. Together, actor, audience, and director challenge our notions of the world and the world of the play.

In the *Women of Troy* rehearsal space, the female ensemble actors particularly made connections between the sexual violence towards Cassandra and Helen and the discourse of the #MeToo movement.³⁴⁰ Hecuba's shaming of Helen for her inaction against Paris' sexual violence as she was *raped* was particularly poignant in our rehearsals

HECUBA:
Which one of the Spartans saw this happen?
Were there no witnesses? How loudly did you scream?³⁴¹

³³⁸ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 123.

³³⁹ Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, p. 18.

³⁴⁰ A term first used by Tarana Burke on the social media platform, Myspace in 2006. #MeToo is a social movement against sexual abuse, harassment, and rape culture, and has become a symbol for survivors to publicly share their experiences of abuse or harassment on social media.

³⁴¹ Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. 46.

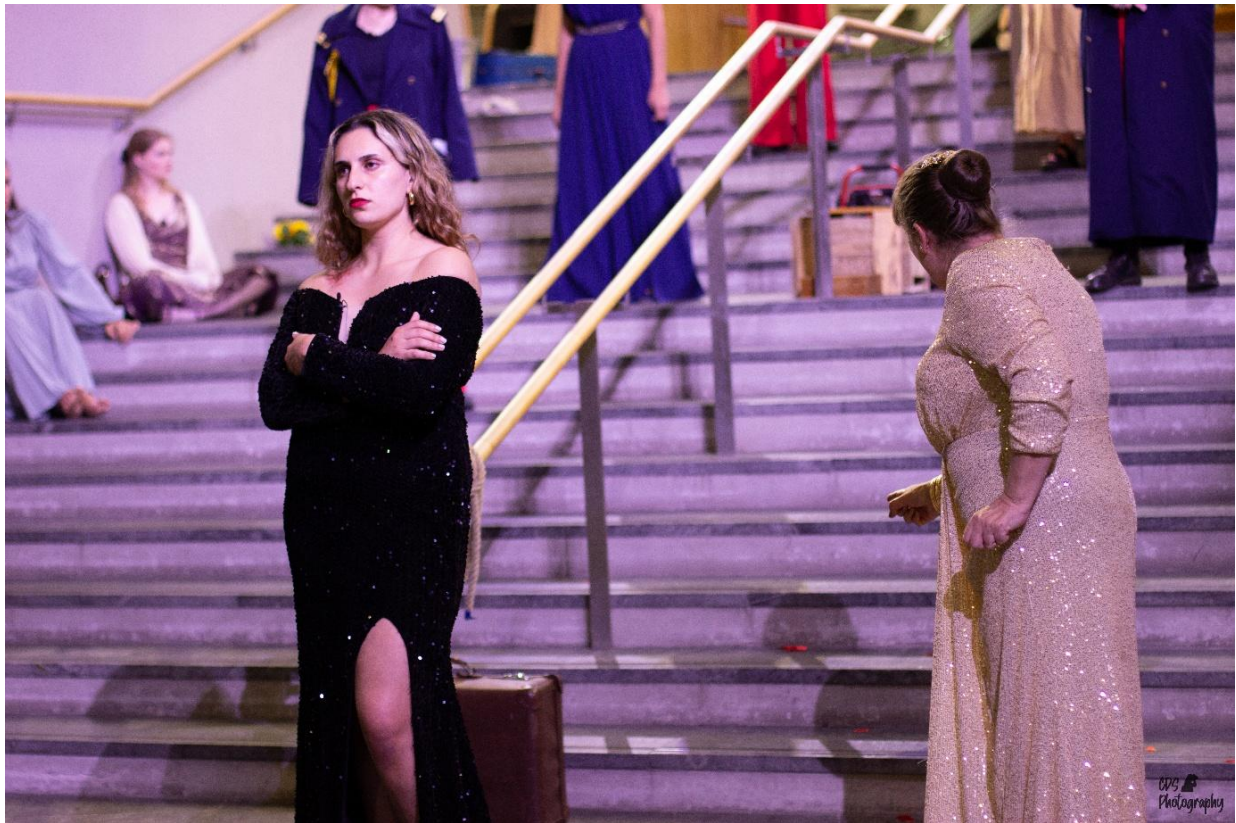


Figure 53. *The Chorus women and Hecuba reject Helen, Women of Troy, 2023.*

I recall how the actors visibly recoiled and audibly grimaced at this horrific line of questioning. The female actors in the cast were profoundly intent on reclaiming Helen and Cassandra's stories, who had been portrayed for centuries as *hysterical*, lying women.

Making Dramaturgical Discoveries through Play

Inherent in the experience of drama education in Aotearoa is the notion of play, through improvisational exercises, *theatre sports*, and the use of dramatic conventions³⁴² that sit at the heart of theatre-making. These playful foundations introduce students to core performance skills while fostering ensemble connection, and confidence in risk-taking, making bold and creative decisions, and the ability to devise moments outside of the scripted dialogue. These early experiences have carried through into my professional practice, where play remains a vital tool for discovery, collaboration, and cohesion in the rehearsal room. Play is an integral part of my company, and like many other practitioners, is a means of provoking and prompting discovery and creation through tasks and games. As Nadine Holdsworth notes, Joan Littlewood's use of games

³⁴² Some of these include, tableau, freeze frame, fast forward/flash back, slow motion, narration, third person narration, thoughts spoken aloud, hot seating, interview, interrogation, role on the wall, flocking/school of fish, dialogue, monologue, soliloquy, chorus, physical theatre, mime, dance.

held multiple functions in the early stages of rehearsal from creating the right conditions for practical work through relaxation and concentration exercises [...] to exploring the attitude and physicality of characters, to improvising the feel and tone of a unit, to generating text and working towards the overall style of production.³⁴³

In attending Punchdrunk's *The Burnt City*,³⁴⁴ in London in 2022, and experiencing the enormity of the space, I was curious whether actors had their own opportunity, like my own actors, to explore the dramatic splendour of this space—all its hiding spots, secret tunnels, and alleyways. Felix Barrett, the company's co-director, prompts his actors with a game of *Hide and Seek* to “find [their] safest space, [their] most threatening space, and the space where [they] feel closest to the gods”.³⁴⁵ The aim of the task is to create emotional resonances about their spatial proximity and to build the work from these responses.



Figure 54. [Video](#), *Holly Exploring the WG, Sir Paul Reeves Building, Performing in non-theatre locations*.

In creating my own work, workshops and rehearsals became spaces of playful experimentation, where scenes were discovered through improvisation, movement, games and tasks, built around ensemble exploration. This kind of play fosters connection, spontaneity, and a willingness to take risks without the pressure of

³⁴³ Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood*, Routledge Performance Practitioners (Routledge, 2006), p. 64.

³⁴⁴ *The Burnt City*, produced by Punchdrunk, directed by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle (One Cartridge Place, Woolwich, 2022), Immersive Theatre Performance.

³⁴⁵ Emma Cole, *Punchdrunk on the Classics: Experiencing Immersion in The Burnt City and Beyond* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), p. 71.

immediate product. When viewed through the lens of crisis, play becomes even more crucial as a means of counterbalancing the heavy material, developing trust, and encouraging a collaborative spirit where the actors can bring their own ideas to the work. Avra Sidiropoulou notes that understanding directing as

pure childlike fun and getting actors to just play with each other can expedite the group's physical and emotional partnership. In fact, a convivial atmosphere and a sense of festive occasion are fundamental to the bringing together of the environment, actors, and spectators.³⁴⁶

My methodology is shaped around this ethos of play. Rehearsal, for me, is not simply a site of preparation, but a *laboratory* or *playground* of discovery and creation. As Peter Brook noted in his reflections on Brecht's practices, "he was pointing out that the action of putting together a play is always a form of playing"³⁴⁷, for a "play is play".³⁴⁸ This resonates profoundly with my own approach because play is not a frivolous diversion from the work—it *is* the work. It is how meaning is made, tested, and embodied in the rehearsal room. Mitchell discusses that an important aspect of a director's work is "translating your intellectual understanding of the material into specific tasks for the actors to execute".³⁴⁹ While I am able to provide a philosophical and contextual framework for the actors, my aim is to build meaning together. It is through drama games and rehearsal strategies that the actors come to make sense of the play, as well as the methodologies, experience, expertise, and understanding I bring to the process as a director. I may not have all the answers initially, but I invite the actors to ask questions, to undertake their own research, so that we might pursue knowledge collectively. I enter into the rehearsal space with an overall vision of the production as the director, dramaturg, and designer, knowing what it is I want to explore and how to shape the overall dramatic, aesthetic, pragmatic, and thematic qualities of the drama. As the director, I am not interested in handing down direct instructions to actors. I want them to reach these insights themselves, not because I have instructed them, but because they will explore the process and my vision collaboratively through play and exploration. I then, in turn, will make discoveries alongside them. David Lan once remarked that "the art of directing is to make actors do exactly what you want – while making them think that they came up with it themselves".³⁵⁰ I find a kind of truth in this, not in a manipulative or controlling sense, but in how my role as the director is to hold space for genuine discovery from the actors while still guiding the trajectory and cohesion of the work. Anne Bogart too speaks of this genuine curiosity required from the director and cast, "not to supply answers but

³⁴⁶ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 17.

³⁴⁷ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 93.

³⁴⁸ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 175.

³⁴⁹ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 5.

³⁵⁰ Charlotte Higgins, 'Katie Mitchell, British Theatre's Queen in Exile', *Stage, The Guardian*, 14 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jan/14/british-theatre-queen-exile-katie-mitchell>.

rather to provide interest”.³⁵¹ She reminds me that interest and inquiry should be rooted in, but not halted by, a vulnerability of not knowing. The best rehearsal rooms are full of questions, simple and honest ones, both grounded in fascination for the process and for the product. This curiosity is further stimulated by my decisions to stage Greek tragedy in modern contexts, a contemplation and curiosity about the past and how and why resonances and parallels emerge between its ancient world and today. In the following sections, I discuss some of the games I undertook with the actors to build the two productions of this research.

Drama Game: The Interrogation

I used this game during the production of *Women of Troy* with the Chorus and Character women. The Interrogation drew on the drama convention of *hot-seating* and an imagined scenario: an interrogation of the women of Troy by a Greek soldier before their departure as slaves to their allocated masters—the Greek warriors and the Kings Odysseus, Menelaus, and Agamemnon. Each actor prepared by writing down who their character was on a sticky note, with the following prompts: What do you know? What can you infer? What have you created? As each role in the ensemble was named, including the Chorus women whom I gave a name in the edited script, what they knew might include their name or their hierarchy or societal position—for example, Queen Hecuba or Princess Cassandra. What they could infer about their character might include how they react to other characters, their relationship with others, their role in society or who they were before the play, or their perspective and opinions of the action or moment. For example:

THALEIA (CHORUS):
Perhaps forced into the bed of some loathsome Greek
— Gods curse such a night, and the evil
Powers that bring me to it! — Or maybe my slave’s back
Will break drawing holy water from the Peirene.³⁵²

These lines might imply to an actor that their character was a slave, that they loathe the Gods, and worry about the day they are sent to be prostituted to a Greek soldier. The Chorus women, in many ways, had more liberty to create their own back stories, built on contexts from their lines within the script or reading between the lines. What they created became their families, husbands, and children who had been slaughtered in the war, or imagining their last night in Troy in celebrating the gift of the wooden horse, or what they had brought with them in the rushed evacuation of the city. The actors were encouraged to create as much detail as they wished for the lives of their characters—their age, personality, whether they were a Trojan or a Phrygian, who their friends, allies, and enemies were, if they were a member of the Royal household, close to Hecuba, if they had seen the Greek ambush or spoken personally with Helen of Troy, if they had a family, partners, children, and *their* names. Playing the role of the interrogator, a Greek soldier, I,

³⁵¹ Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), p. 131

³⁵² Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. 13.

as the director—and later, actor playing the role of Talthybius in the production—stood behind the camera, and with a stern voice, called each character to sit on a chair and “state their name, their age, their husband, their children. Tell me who you are”. This activity saw the women come and go, as if in a *mincing-machine*, to sit in the hot seat. Talthybius, with a lack of remorse for their harrowing stories, shouted out a stern “next” to the women to change over from one character to another. The game allowed the actors to play their characters against an imagined soldier or an unseen moment of the play, prompting them to be confrontational or comply with the soldier, to respond, react, and develop their characters’ personalities.

Drama Game: The Waiting Game

One of my key methods as a director has been to devise a preshow sequence with the actors to immerse them and the audience in the world of the play the moment they all enter the auditorium. I have found this approach fulfils several directorial and dramaturgical objectives, including strengthening ensemble relationships, focusing the actors’ attention and dampening nervous energy, helping the actors to settle into their space, and to pre-empt any potential backstage tensions by transforming that energy into something dramatically useful on the stage. It helps to immerse the actors more fully into the world of the play, giving them a space to implement their own ideas, explore their characterisation, dynamics, and relationships, and to feel a deeper sense of involvement in the work, beyond simply delivering their lines—from the women of Troy waiting in a dockyard, to the Watchmen partying on the palace roof, soldiers planning an airstrike with Agamemnon from an underground bunker, and Clytemnestra lifting, running, and exercising in preparation for her vengeful plans. All of this can be seen by the audience as they enter the auditorium. Because we are performing in dramatically epic, non-theatre locations, without the burden or *safety* of the [proscenium arch](#), velvet curtain, and wings, these sequences keep me as a director from falling into the trap of defaulting to stagnant blackouts in both the opening and in-between scenes—another reason all my plays run without an interval. Those empty silences where the actors shuffle and stumble into place under the cover of darkness, to suddenly launch into a scene, can create an artificial stop-start rhythm. Instead, I prefer to utilise the fluidity and tension of a moment as a dramatic transition to flow and sustain the energy of the play and the attention of the audience. In order to create these devised opening sequences, I play different games with the actors depending on the outcome we wish to achieve, whether thematic or dramatic, providing some context of the place, time, tension, and situation about to unfold in the play.

In *Women of Troy*, I called this the *Waiting Game*. This game was originally carried out in the black box drama studio at AUT when we were not able to access our performance space due to a prior booking, and was later moved to the staircase of the WG building, where the cast could implement their acting choices on the staircase. At this stage of the

rehearsals, the actors had a greater understanding of who their characters were, their emotional responses to the scenario, and their relationship with one another.



Figure 55. The Waiting Game in the Blackbox studio, rehearsals, Women of Troy, 2022.

The objective of this sequence was to create a scene that imagined the women had been waiting in a dockyard in Troy, awaiting instructions from their Greek captors, and their fate as slaves to the Greek army, warriors, and Kings. I provided props for the actors, collated and curated for the play that, while anachronistic to ancient Greece, supported a sense of a mid-20th century location in a time of war—not too modern, yet not too far away from our lived memory. These included books, old brown leather suitcases, backpacks,

combs, brushes, makeup, photo albums and photo frames, a wooden chess and draughts board game, playing cards, dice, fake cigarettes, dollar bills, gambling tokens, knitting needles and wool, scarves, coats, and children's toys and clothes. The actors were asked to imagine that, as the women of Troy, they had been forced from their homes by the Greeks. Having been at a party in celebration of the arrival of the Trojan Horse, they only had time to grab a few personal items or belongings to bring with them. I asked them to pick one or two props from the collection that they were most drawn to, that they perhaps felt were completely impractical, or were pragmatic, or held memory and sentimental value. Using these items during the ensuing exercise helped each actor to further develop their character's backstories. Underneath this task, I played music from the thematic playlist to subtly shape and set the mood for the suspenseful, dark, tense, melancholic, or sombre atmosphere of the scene.

The actors were encouraged to trust their intuition and react to each other, the space, and the props. During the exercise, I called out several different timelines for *waiting*, including "just arrived at the dockyard", "one day of waiting", "one week of waiting", "one month of waiting", and "one year of waiting". I did not rush the process but tried as the director to respond to the scene that was developing. Because of the material of the play and the research framework of crisis, I prefaced the exercise with a guiding note: that the actors were *imagining* the scenario, not *living* it. I reminded them that they were empathising, enacting, and employing emotional resonances, but not embodying experiences and traumas—we are *doing*, not *being*. This was a key insight drawn from Mitchell's approach to creating theatre—employing Stanislavski's emotional memory, not emotional immersion.³⁵³ With the emotional weight and tragedy of these plays and the real contemporary parallels we drew on, it felt important to remind ourselves of the distance and proximity afforded to us as actors, creating a liminal space, charged and visceral, but *not* dangerous. A space where the actors could feel at ease in their creative choices, knowing they had permission to explore without personal risk.

During the game, some of the actors closely held the children's toys, as though cherishing the artefacts of their missing or dead children, looking at photographs of their imagined soldier husbands or sons, gambling for black-market items, pacing frenetically, combing their hair, putting on makeup to cover their bruises, or reading books. As I progressed through the *waiting* timeline, some characters became more anxious, aggressive towards each other, as though establishing new power structures amongst themselves. The longer the timeline progressed in the activity, the actors began to embrace or *accept* the fate of the women of Troy, calmly reading, crocheting, playing board and dice games, some even staring off into the abyss. To conclude the exercise, I, playing the role of the imagined Greek soldier, entered the scene carrying a clipboard, with final instructions for the women. Some characters were eager to hear the news, standing quickly, while others

³⁵³ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 233.

became distressed, moving to hide behind others, some reclusive, continuing their knitting, head lowered. In finalising the game, I asked the actors to move into the performance space where they could implement their choices, and then I introduced dialogue from the entrance scene of Talthybius and Sebastos as the Greek soldiers.



Figure 56. The Chorus women wait, rehearsals, Women of Troy, 2023.

As the play is mostly comprised of the women of Troy awaiting their fate, I found the Waiting Game to be a dynamic method for developing sequences throughout the play. The method provided the actors opportunity to implement their own ideas throughout the rehearsal process and thus build the world of the play. Contrastingly, in the above and below images, we observe the development of practice and performance through spatial and prop resonances—the spaces the actors gravitated toward in the early iterations of the game often remained significant, like territorial claims made on behalf of their characters. These choices were further enriched by the activities the characters carried out: playing chess and card games, reading, mending clothes, and putting on makeup.



Figure 57. The Chorus women wait, in performance, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

Drama Game: Tidy-Up Time

Similarly to the Waiting Game, *Tidy Up Time* functioned as a pre-show devising task. In Aotearoa, I fondly recall the memories of my early schooling being underscored by the beloved primary school tune, Tidy Up Time³⁵⁴—a song which encouraged students to pack up the classroom at the end of the day. As a humorous ode to these shared memories as actors, I named this task after the song.³⁵⁵ Tidy Up Time was influenced by the drama game, *The Machine*, an activity which requires actors to enter the performance space and create a repetitive movement, with actors adding to the scene one at a time, to eventually create an imagined machine together. In creating the opening sequence for *Agamemnon*, I wanted to give the sense that the celebratory and ceremonial grand hall of the Mycenae palace had been left largely abandoned, in favour of more modest and pragmatic rooms, while Clytemnestra's husband, Agamemnon, was away at war for 10 years.³⁵⁶ To set the scene for the actors, I placed a few props and set pieces into the space, including two chairs upturned and a large table on wheels to mimic the chaise longue, covered by two large dust cloths. Two wooden wine crates with empty wine bottles and a few empty drink cans were scattered around the space—later branded with an inworld design I created to further the setting of the play.



Figure 58. Wine Bottles and Beer Cans, *Agamemnon*, 2024.

³⁵⁴ Janet Channon and Wendy Jensen, *Tidy Up Time*, Echo Fred, Kids Music Company, 2004, Song.

³⁵⁵ This game is built upon a similar devising exercise I played with the actors during the rehearsals of *Antigone*, to develop the opening sequence. The actors mimicked a cleaning crew in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) scrubbing and wiping down the glass box, both a symbolic nod to the lived pandemic and as a pragmatic act, to remove any residual fake blood from the previous performance.

³⁵⁶ This deliberate setting added to the characterisation of Clytemnestra, who was also seen in the beginning scenes in exercise wear and running shoes, an image of humble, down-to-earth, casual rejection of material wealth as a Queen.

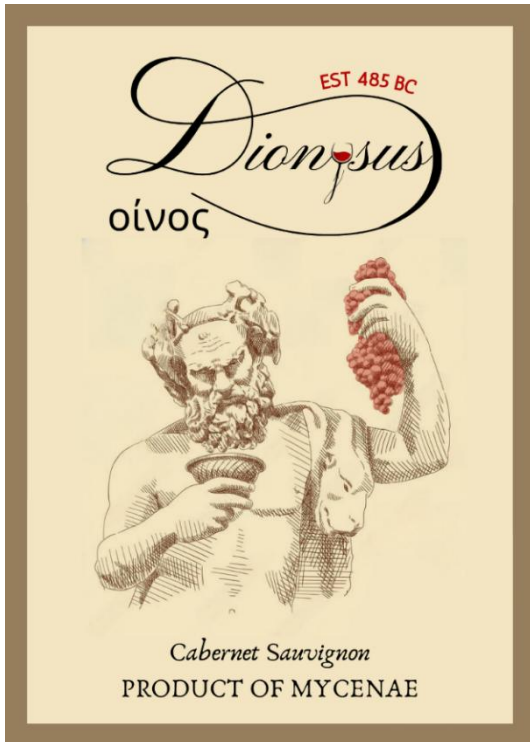


Figure 59. Label for Wine bottles, created by Holly Luton for Agamemnon, 2024.

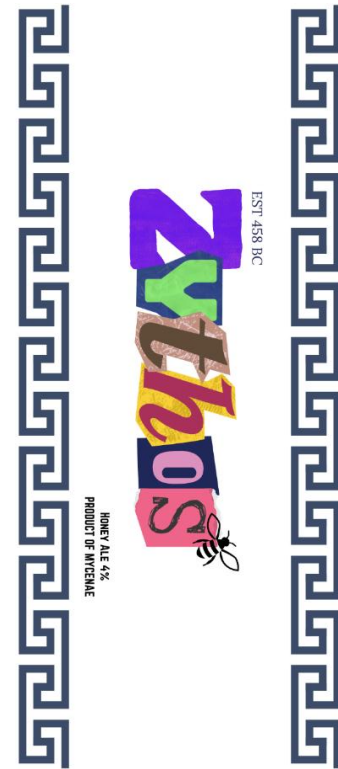


Figure 60. Label for Beer cans, created by Holly Luton for Agamemnon, 2024.

The actors were then provided a selection of props for the palace's domestic upkeep. These included mops, metal buckets, brooms, dusters, dustpans and brushes, squeegee bottles, polishing cloths, wine crates, a washing basket, an ironing board, bin bags, a pair of bright pink rubber gloves, and even a vacuum cleaner with a stubbornly short extension cord. These objects aimed to become character prompts for the actors, thinking about their choices and engagement with their cleaning tools in the space, whether enthusiastic, apathetic, frantic, or frustrated.

I then prompted the actors to imagine that the Chorus in this play were Clytemnestra's household staff, some young women, others, war veterans who had been employed in return for their loyalty and sacrifice as members of Agamemnon's army. I reminded the cast that these games and methods were rooted in *play*, but not in *pretending*. We were not to embody the action of cleaning, but to embrace and engage with it—to *do*, but not to *be*. This distinction was important, both as a humorous and care-oriented measure. We were not asking anyone to actually clean the space, but to create the illusion of cleaning, playing with rhythm, repetition, gesture, conversation and interaction with others in the space as methods for characterisation and world-building.

However, as I often remind actors when performing, the action still needed to be specific, truthful, and believable, calling upon our knowledge of *how* to clean. We are not *pretending* to clean, though, instead doing something real, even if the purpose and intention behind it are theatrical and imagined. To mop the floor like the most committed

employee or vacuum like it is your most hated job. While the task itself is performative and playful, it requires commitment.

In an earlier exercise, I had tasked the actors to discover the large atrium space for their performance by delivering a few of their lines of script with frantic or apprehensive energies—to move around the space, to find where they felt most safe, most vulnerable, and their home territory. Applying this to *Tidy Up Time*, I tasked the actors with the following: Choose a prop, enter the performance space, and begin some kind of repetitive action of cleaning. I invite them to take up as much space as you like, or as little as possible, feel free to lean against the pillars, sit on a crate or on the floor, climb the stairs and be on the balconies. I encouraged them to make use of the props in dramatic ways, to loudly open the bin bags, plug in the vacuum, and to blissfully walk through another character's cleaned floor.

What emerged from this game was a layered, playful, and increasingly chaotic domestic rhythm from the actors that hinted at both the tedium, monotony, mundanity, and tension of life inside this royal palace, as the Chorus prepared for the return of the King from war. Through this process, the cast could explore their characters through action and reaction, gesture, and spatial interaction. One of the actors took the role as overseer of the palace staff with a clipboard in hand, checking off a list of all duties and tasks, conversing with other characters, creating a backstory as a veteran and butler in the royal household. Two actors playing moving men lifted and parachuted the dust covers, moving the furniture into place, dusting off the chaise longue, and then taking a seat on it, poured two cups of tea for themselves. One actor mopped in wide sweeping arcs across the floor, splashing *imagined* water about, causing a reactionary movement of another character, who *slipped* and began arguing with them over their reckless mopping. Two characters chattered loudly and gossiped about Clytemnestra's relationship with Aegisthus, and their worry about her husband returning home, as they scrubbed and brushed at the floors. Another actor hurriedly climbed to the second floor and began polishing the bannisters on the balcony. One actor with a washing basket, iron, and ironing board ironed and folded the undergarments of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Another actor, dramatically snapping on the pink gloves, and cracking open a bin bag began to pick up the empty cans. The Watchmen, who had contributed to the mess, watched from a distance, laughing, before trying to light a cigarette for a smoke break. The actor playing the butler hurried over, handing the Watchmen a bucket and scrubber, pulling the cigarette from their mouth and tossing it into the bucket. Another Watchman was handed the vacuum, plugged it into the floor socket, creating a loud, blasting, whirring sound. With apathy, they vacuumed the floor for great lengths, causing the butler to *trip* on the extension cord.



Figure 61. *The Chorus clean the palace, Agamemnon, 2024.*



Figure 62. *The Chorus marches into the palace halls, Agamemnon, 2024.*

Wrapping up the task, I asked the actors to reflect on their choices, and with genuine humour and laughter, spoke about how the choices were becoming foundational in developing their characters and interaction with one another. They reflected on how their movements spoke to the lives these characters had been living in Agamemnon's absence, whether they were underqualified young staff or elderly staff who should have retired some years before. I asked them whether they found that what emerged was a sense of duty, loyalty, or rebellion in their choices to take tea and smoke breaks, as storytellers or gossipers undertaking their tasks, a prelude to the tragedy that would unfold.

Taking the chaos of the game, I worked with the actors several times to create an ordered and structured scene around their choices, that could be performed consistently in each run through. Importantly, many of the props were carried through and implemented into later scenes, including the washing basket, which eventually held the sacrificial dress of Iphigenia and napkins for Atreus and Thyestes' feast, and the mops and brooms were repurposed as weapons when the Chorus confronted Aegisthus.



Figure 63. The soldiers hold the torn, bloody dress of Iphigenia during the story of her sacrifice, Agamemnon, 2024.



Figure 64. *The Chorus and Aegisthus gather around the bath and chaise, imitating the feast of Atreus, Agamemnon, 2024.*

Drama Game: Enduring Themes, Archetypal Autocrats, and Persisting Parallels

A further directorial method I tasked the actors with during rehearsals was to consider some of the themes and archetypes within the play text, and whether there were parallels emerging through the making process that were influenced by our lived experiences. I asked them to reflect on past and present political figures or contemporary media personas that echoed the themes and dramatic context of the plays. This method functioned beyond just a characterisation task for the actors, but as a discussion about whether and how they felt the ancient Greek plays resonated beyond their mythic and historical origins.

There is a consensus among classical scholars that the ancient dramatists crafted their plays in direct dialogue with their contemporary political and social realities³⁵⁷ and drew on their own lived experiences as citizens of Athens, a city-state that frequently experienced many internal crises, conflicts, and shifting alliances. Their audiences, too, made up of the male citizenry, would likely “have faced dangers and dire discomforts on campaigns”.³⁵⁸ The plays themselves, therefore, recognised “the disgruntlement of the

³⁵⁷ Avra Sidiropoulou, ‘Adaptation as a Love Affair: The Ethics of Directing the Greeks’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, by Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 139.

³⁵⁸ Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 109.

ordinary soldier to be expressed on several occasions”.³⁵⁹ Aeschylus undoubtedly employed his own experience as a soldier in the Persian Wars at the Battle of Marathon and Salamis to write his plays, particularly in his history-play, *The Persians*. These experiences would have heightened his thematic insights into the complexities of war and divine justice, influencing his depictions of fate, leadership, and human suffering in *Agamemnon*. Euripides was certainly influenced by the ongoing Peloponnesian War in writing *Women of Troy*. Produced shortly after the Athenian massacre and enslavement of the people of Melos,³⁶⁰ a neutral island, the play is widely interpreted as a searing condemnation of Athens’ brutality and wartime atrocities, and as Don Taylor evidently notes, is an antiwar play.³⁶¹

Similarly, by inviting my actors to draw their contemporary political and social realities, I encouraged them to explore parallels and therefore contribute their personal responses to the work. This framework aimed to help the actors make sense of the text, recognise the enduring relevance of these tragedies, and convey these new reflections between the world of the play and our own, with an audience. Inevitably, in our productions, I have found that actors are not only willing but often eager to engage in political and social conversations. They come to rehearsal wanting to share their findings with me, sometimes without the words to articulate exactly what it is or why the play seems to resonate so deeply with them, but with a clear sense that the play does hold meaning. In my rehearsals, I aim to create a space for the actors to explore and express these emerging insights, carefully and creatively, without the pressure to arrive at fixed conclusions or receive definitive answers.

In this exercise, I ask the actors to take some time outside of rehearsal to identify some key events, themes, and archetypes of the play and reflect on and examine where and if they see these emerging in contemporary examples. I prompt them to think about how they might emulate and embody these traits through their character’s voice, body, movement and space—their actions, reactions, spatial proximity, gestures, tone, volume, and physical presence. They might, for example, draw on particular political leaders or events they have seen in the news or read about, or reflect on the systemic issues that arise when these archetypal people are in power—like the displacement of people from their homeland, ethnic or gendered violence during a time of war. They are encouraged to annotate their scripts, draw diagrams, print pictures, take newspaper clippings, or make a few notes from the many classical and historical books I supply in rehearsal. I sometimes provide actors with external reading material where they might ask for greater insights into their character or mythic contexts. For example, during *Women of Troy*, I provided the actors playing Cassandra and Helen with an academic article about the marriage rituals of ancient Greek society. I printed geographical maps

³⁵⁹ Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 109.

³⁶⁰ Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. viii.

³⁶¹ Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. vii.

for the Chorus women to familiarise and locate themselves, and then proximate their bodies in the opening speeches as they discuss “Mount Etna”, “Tunis”, and the “Ionian Sea”. During *Agamemnon*, I was asked by an actor about the lines of succession in mythic Greece, which we went away and researched, and brought subsequent information back into the next rehearsal. During rehearsals with Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, we explored the background of their characters, considering how their histories might justify or motivate their character’s decision to vengefully kill Agamemnon.

The actors are then invited to bring any material they wish to the rehearsal, both in the form of their characterisation and creative choices, and in preparation for some ensemble output through discussions, tasks, and games. This reflection allows the actors to locate the emotional truth and cultural relevance in their performances. The aim is to encourage the actors to think further beyond the text and ponder why the play holds meaning for today.

In *Women of Troy*, the actors and I reflected on the parallels of the Second World War in Europe and the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the autocratic leaders who led their nations during these times—such as Adolph Hitler and Vladimir Putin—and some of the subsequent atrocities that were committed during these conflicts. These operatic and theatrical movements, and powerful archetypes and resonances influenced the character movements, bodies, and voices, and my design choices of music, props, sound, and costume.

In *Women of Troy*, the actors and I reflected on the chilling parallels between the atrocities of the Second World War and the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, both marked by the devastating consequences of autocratic rule. Figures like Adolf Hitler, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump became central vocal and physical references for the actors. We discussed how far-right leaders often perform power through exaggerated, almost operatic movement with sudden bursts of voice and theatrical gesture. I discussed with a few actors the famous photographs taken by Heinrich Hoffmann of Hitler rehearsing his speeches in front of a mirror. These images, of clenched fists and outstretched arms, revealed a staging of man as myth, an embodied control through carefully crafted spectacle. In our production, we channelled these gestural archetypes—not to glorify, but to expose and subvert. These archetypal parallels of power influenced the actors’ physicalities and the overall design, with war soundscapes and dark costume elements that echoed twentieth-century authoritarian aesthetics.

During the *Women of Troy* PPDW, the actors and I revisited the images of war and displacement that had informed the production and the ways in which we brought these resonances of grief, rage, and hope into our performances. In an emotionally heightened moment, I revealed to the actors the photograph that had profoundly shaped my early research in 2020 and deeply resonated with me—an image of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child who had washed up on the beaches of Turkey in 2015, not far from the original site of

Troy.³⁶² We then discussed our depiction of Astyanax in his white, bloodied shroud, carried by Hecuba, alongside the devastating images emerging from Palestine, showing parents with the shrouded bodies of their dead children. The emotional resonance and horror of these parallels led us to reflect on the ongoing, cyclical nature of war and its enduring impact on women and children—echoes that persist more than 2400 years since Euripides first staged *Women of Troy*.



Figure 65. Hecuba reunited with her grandson, Astyanax, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

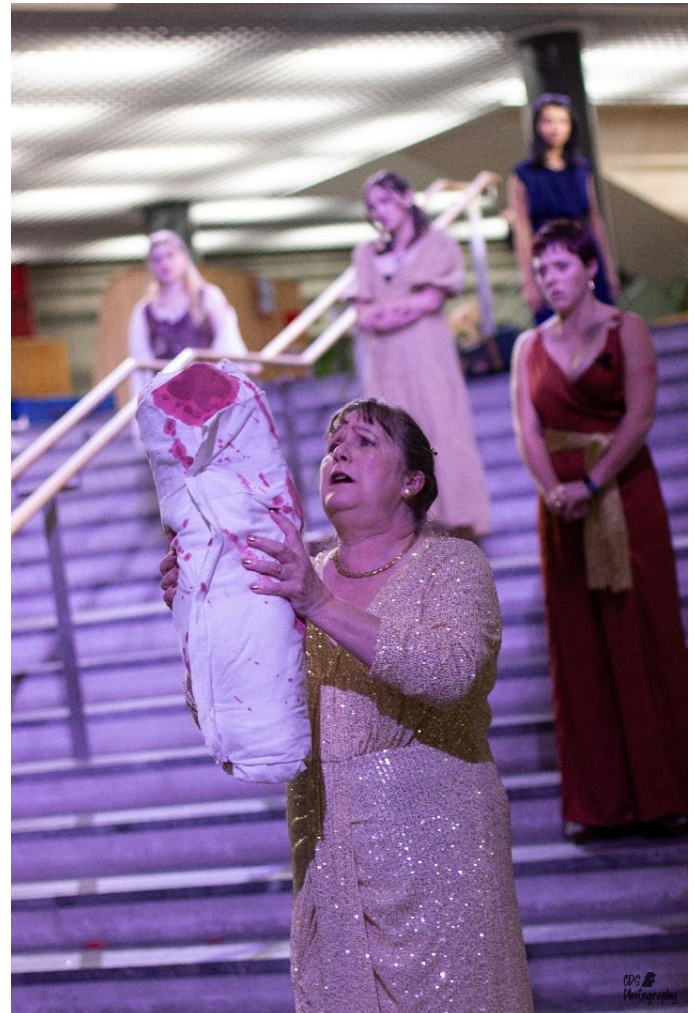


Figure 66. Hecuba with her grandson, Astyanax, in a bloody shroud, slain by the Greek soldiers, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

During the production of *Agamemnon*, the actors and I explored the autocracy of King Agamemnon, his brutal sacrifice of his own daughter, and the subsequent invasion, rape, and slaughter of Trojan civilians. Parallels emerged in the rehearsal space with the ongoing escalations of violence in Ukraine and the Middle East, and the genocide of the

³⁶² Saeed Kamali Dehghan, '8,500 People Lost in Mediterranean since Death of Three-Year-Old Alan Kurdi', *The Guardian*, 1 September 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/01/alan-kurdi-khaled-hosseini-mediterranean-refugees-sea-prayer>.

Palestinian people by Israel.³⁶³ These dual scenes between the lived experience and the play provoked the actors during the PPDW to draw connections and comment on the similarities they perceived between world leaders and the gods. With a tense election campaign in the United States approaching, the actors and I reflected on how the election outcome might shape the final rehearsals of the production, and how the election decision would have consequences on these ongoing conflicts.

EPSILON:

Yes, and when so many of these men are so incompetent, anyway! I mean, for god's sake, just look at Trump! I don't know whether they'll vote for him again, I damn well hope not, but at this rate, but I can't imagine him being in power again.

ALPHA:

The worry is what if he does get re-elected?

Figure 67. PPDW Transcript, Epsilon and Alpha discuss parallels between Women of Troy and global leaders.

Drama Game: Hot Seating, Speed Dating, and Character Debating

To support the ensemble in developing and understanding their characters during the rehearsals, I employed the drama convention of hot seating, followed by a character-based speed dating exercise, and a character debate. These tasks were designed to prompt the Chorus to build their own characterisations beyond the limited information I had provided to them—namely, their assigned names and distributed lines. This task aimed to help the *lead* character roles in understanding their own emotional weight, motivations, and relationships within the world of the play. By deliberately withholding specific backstories or any interpretive conclusions I had drawn myself as the director, I created space for the actors to engage more actively and imaginatively with the text and context. This approach aimed to spark ownership and individual creative investment in the characters they were portraying, empowering them to draw their own inferences in a close reading of the text and to then construct layered, creative decisions in the rehearsal room and original character identities. This exercise was employed during the rehearsals of *Agamemnon*.

In preparation, I first tasked the actors with a Hot Seating exercise. The actors were given five to ten minutes to write down as much information as they could infer about their character on a sticky note. Crucially, I invited them to distinguish between information directly supported by the text, ideas they could interpret by reading between the lines, and material they had imagined or invented entirely. For example, they were asked to consider details that were more obvious from the script, such as their name, occupation,

³⁶³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'UN Special Committee Finds Israel's Warfare Methods in Gaza Consistent with Genocide, Including Use of Starvation as Weapon of War', United Nations Human Rights, 14 November 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/un-special-committee-finds-israels-warfare-methods-gaza-consistent-genocide>.

opinions, or political leanings within the world of the play. Details they could infer might include how they responded to other characters, and thus their relationships with each other, who their allies, friends, and enemies were. Finally, they could create who they were on a more personal level, their age, birthplace—Mycenae, Sparta, or Athens—along with their character’s family or societal role, and their specific role as a member of the household.

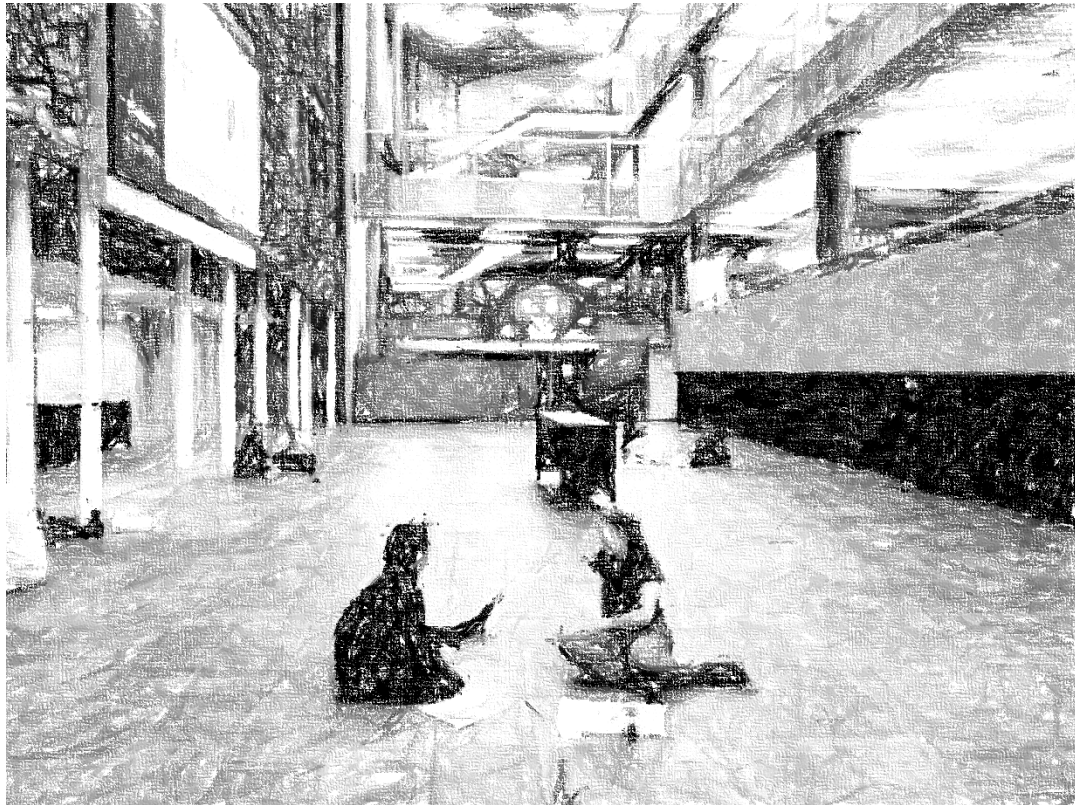


Figure 68. Hot Seating Game with the Actors, Agamemnon, 2024.

Taking this exercise to the next level, the actors were then split into two groups to imitate a speed-dating session in character. Half the actors remained stationary, encouraged to sit or stand around the room in a circle, while the other half of the actors rotated around the room, meeting and speaking with the stationary actors in five-minute intervals. Tasked to remain in their character role, during each pairing, the actors were to introduce themselves, sit, stand, bow, shake hands, and engage in an improvised discussion as if in a private conversation or an official gathering with other characters. As the director, I facilitated the game by asking the characters to introduce themselves to each other, their name, their age, their occupation, and to tell each other about their lives. Following the speed dating activity, I held a short reflection period, encouraging the actors to write down a few further thoughts on another sticky note, and to then place this into the front of their scripts, which they could refer back to throughout rehearsals. I asked them to consider what had surprised them, what they had discovered about their character’s motivations, loyalties, friendships, or tensions, and how these emerging dynamics might inform future scene and character work.

In a final game, I asked the actors to form one large circle around the room, seated. This task asked the actors to engage in a debate and discourse about the context of the play entirely in character as Watchmen, Soldiers, Veterans, and Palace Staff. They could only draw on what they knew about the world of the play and the myths as though these were living histories to them. This game aimed to draw out the political and emotional stakes of the world within the play. Remaining in character again, each actor introduced themselves to the group. For example, “Hi, my name is Elpis, and I am a Watchman, and I love my job”.

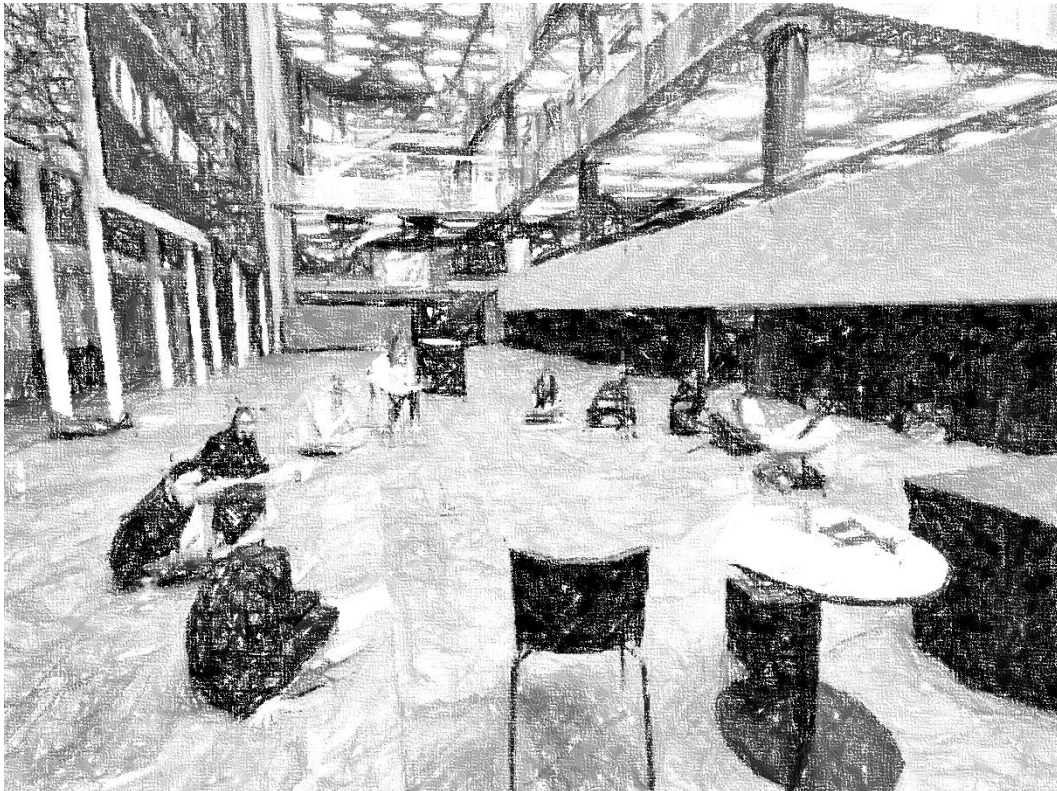


Figure 69. Debate Circle Game sketch, *Agamemnon*, 2024.

To heighten the stakes, I facilitated the game as director and participated in the debate in my character role of *Elpis*, a Watchman. In character, I was able to deepen the discussion by providing insights into the play text and context, challenging the characters’ ideas, and making greater sense of the in-world relationships we were developing, both between my own character and others. Stepping briefly out of character as myself, *Holly*, the Director, Dramaturg, and Researcher, I was able to contribute further provocations, pose new questions for the actors, and shift the energy and direction of the discussion where necessary. To distinguish myself in the facilitator role, I made the decision to raise my hand for the actors in order to prompt them with questions or stimulate the discussion further with new prompts. This duality helped maintain narrative flow while prompting the actors to think critically about the world of the play and its meaning for audiences.

Some initial open questions to set the tone of the debate included:

- 🗣️ How do you feel about working in the Palace of Argos?
- 🗣️ What are your thoughts on Queen Clytemnestra?
- 🗣️ Does she treat you well?
- 🗣️ How do you feel about King Agamemnon?

These prompts helped to establish character attitudes, relationships, and interactions among the Chorus, forming alliances and revealing tensions. As the conversation developed, I introduced deeper moral and political questions for the characters:

- 🗣️ What are your thoughts on the War?
- 🗣️ Are we justified in the invasion of Troy?
- 🗣️ Why do you think you feel that way?
- 🗣️ How do you feel about the Queen Clytemnestra's sister, Helen's, involvement in this war?

As the debate progressed, the tone naturally escalated, revealing conflicting ideologies, unexpected emotional responses, and emerging power dynamics within the Chorus, offering a rich, embodied understanding of the political landscape of *Agamemnon* and its relevance in a lived contemporary context. The debate reached a particularly intense moment when I posed the following questions to the characters:

- 🗣️ How did you react when you heard the news about the King sacrificing his daughter, Princess Iphigenia?
- 🗣️ What did you think about King Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter?
- 🗣️ In what ways was it necessary or just?

During the game, the actors gave voice to their characters' diverse range of loyalties, grievances, and personal histories, enriching the emotional landscape of the play. Several characters were passionate about their allegiance and loyalty towards Clytemnestra. Some characters who were veterans and soldiers expressed gratitude for her continued support, emphasising that she had paid and boarded them, especially those who identified as veterans of the war. Others articulated frustrations over the imbalance between their labour and the compensation they received, echoing working-class dissatisfaction and exploitation. Some characters recalled memories of Princess Iphigenia, either as a child in the palace or as a peer and friend, adding layers of emotional complexity to their reactions to her sacrifice. Disagreements also surfaced regarding the brutality and violence of King Agamemnon, and some characters expressed a concern that the Queen's grievances might manifest into rage, for "*how could a mother not feel anger for a child slain?*". Others made quick-witted remarks about the morally dubious relationship between Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. These exciting discussions further animated the debate and revealed ideological fractures within the Chorus characters.

Throughout this exercise, as director, I observed subtle moments where actors visibly broke from character, through a sigh, a shocked facial expression, or tension in the body, betraying discomfort or dissonance between the character's beliefs and the actor's own.

Concluding the game as the facilitator, I asked the actor to relax and take some time to briefly reflect with each other about how they felt. There was a moment of shared laughter and sighing, an instinctive recognition of the emotional weight we had just carried together. The actors spoke with excitement about how the task had opened up new discoveries about the play, deepening their understanding of the characters' justifications and motivations. One actor articulated the nauseating "*cognitive dissonance*" they experienced while embodying a character who defended war and sacrifice, acknowledging how physically uncomfortable it felt to speak words that drastically contrasted with their own personal convictions as an actor. Another actor spoke about the feeling of being torn between justifying Clytemnestra's cycle of revenge in the mythic realm with the lived reality of a modern legal system that should protect those who have been wronged. These reflective moments of rupture provided an entry point for a carefully facilitated discussion about some historical and social contexts of ancient Greece, encouraging the ensemble to consider how ancient moral frameworks intersect or clash with contemporary values and political ideologies.

These improvisational exercises proved especially useful in fostering ensemble cohesion and drawing thematic parallels between the world of the play and the present day. They allowed for subtle character nuance to surface, underscoring the social and political stakes of the play from multiple, often conflicting, perspectives within the Chorus. The process gave the actors the space to interrogate their character's position within the text, whether they might be a sycophant, a contrarian, a *flip-flopper*, or a character with an unwavering conviction. Ultimately, the intention was for the actors to discover shared values or tensions between their characters and to explore how these dynamics might translate into embodied interactions on stage, laying the groundwork for a politically and emotionally charged ensemble performance.

The Cracks Begin to Appear in Pandora's Jar

While my directorial methods and practices shaped, developed, and informed the spirit and process of my work, unfortunately, two challenges emerged during the rehearsal session of the *Hot Seat*, *Speed Date*, and *Character Debate*. One actor appeared to struggle to stay in role during the exercises and, without dramaturgical prompting or provocation, spoke out of character, personally about *their* political opinions, thereby disconnecting and disrupting the agreed framework of the exercise.

This moment was significant because it unsettled a core ethos of my directorial practice, in the careful balance between open, critical dialogue and structured, dramaturgical inquiry. While I actively encouraged the ensemble to engage with contemporary political

realities, I stipulated that these must be shared through a strategic, dramaturgical framework—grounded in character building and thematic resonance. My intention was not to suppress personal response, but to channel it with purpose and theatrical rigour.

In this instance, that framework fractured, exposing the limits of my assumptions around trust and the permeability of the rehearsal room. Rehearsals, which had regularly been held in the public-facing atrium and staircase, now heightened my awareness of visibility and responsibility, challenging my earlier confidence in the stability of such a framework during *Women of Troy*. As both director and *now* lecturer, I became acutely aware of my roles as a facilitator of the ensemble and as a representative of the university, and the safety of the political and thematic discourses during rehearsals. This moment revealed a new complexity in my practice, the challenge of balancing political engagement, dramaturgical coherence, and collective care.

Simultaneously, while the ensemble sessions appeared to strengthen cohesion and deepen thematic exploration among those present, uneven and irregular attendance meant these intended outcomes were not consistently reflected across the wider rehearsal process and ensemble. Rehearsal notes and reflections I recorded during the final dress performance, and subsequently shared with the cast, document several moments of uncertainty among a few actors. These included missed cues, confusion around blocking, instances in which actors repeatedly broke character to clarify stage positions or scene progression, and the introduction of unrehearsed physical actions that had not been explored in rehearsal. In some cases, these moments also disrupted the concentration of other actors within the dress performance. A few actors later privately expressed their frustration and embarrassment at being disrupted during their performances, which I noted in my director's journals. On more than one occasion, my technicians and creative team recognised the disruptions from the expected process.

These moments I noticed occurred among performers who had not been present during the weekly ensemble sessions—some citing a lack of personal investment to engage with the ensemble rehearsals, suggesting that these were optional rather than integral to the research and creative process. In contrast, the Chorus—who had consistently attended these sessions—demonstrated a stronger sense of cohesion and responsiveness within the group dynamic, as was evident in the photographs and directors' notes taken during the final dress performance. As Katie Mitchell argues, establishing a consistent rehearsal vocabulary and framework that actors and directors share can lead to a common understanding of the work and its professional conditions.³⁶⁴ Where participation in these sessions was inconsistent, this shared vocabulary appeared less engaged and employed across the production. As a result, valuable opportunities were missed to deepen the

³⁶⁴ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 125.

actors' understanding and engagement with the play's context and character development, and to uplift and enrich the whanaungatanga of the collective ensemble.

The cracks in Pandora's jar began to appear, and the base of the vessel wobbled unsteadily on our flagstone floor. Notably, such issues did not arise during *Women of Troy*, where the ensemble model was uniformly embraced across the entire cast. The contrast between my two productions invites further consideration of the conditions that allowed ensemble work to flourish or fracture. Newer questions began to arise in this fractured moment: How can ensemble-driven methodologies succeed when not all participants feel equally responsible for their part in the research and creative process? Might a clearer, more explicit and reiterated framing of my research and directorial purposes and boundaries support deeper engagement rather than disruption? I began to question *whether* crisis could *actually* be embraced, embodied, and employed, and *if* resilience is always possible in our era of crisis?



Figure 70. A vessel on a flagstone floor tips over, *Agamemnon*, 2024.

Chapter Four

A Director at Work, Creating the World of the Play: Critical Ideas Underpinning the Practice

In this chapter, I explore the critical ideas, thematic concerns, and dramaturgical elements of my directorial and design approaches that shaped my creative practice productions: Euripides' *Women of Troy* and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The chapter discusses the theoretical and practical application of key elements in the staging the works including choice of text, location of the work, casting, rehearsing, textual exploration with the actors, and staging processes, and the design choices of set, costume, props, sound, and lighting. I reflect on how these elements were developed and how they contributed to the creation of each play's unique world. I unpack the core concepts underpinning my practice: crisis, fragility, resilience, and resonance and I analyse how these ideas informed the thematic direction of the productions, shaped the rehearsal process, and guided key creative decisions. I explore the political parallels embedded in the plays and how contemporary crises—both societal and personal—were consciously embraced as dramaturgical forces in the making of the work.

Staging Euripides' *Women of Troy*

HECUBA:

Now,
When the city is taken, and every Trojan
Fighting man lies dead, you have become terrified
Of a little child!³⁶⁵

When I began my Master of Design at AUT, I had considered staging Euripides' *Women of Troy*, in a conventional theatre space, exploring the themes of the global refugee and humanitarian crises. With the disruptions of the pandemic four weeks into the programme, I steered my research in a new direction, towards an exploration of this new and emerging crisis. My initial designs for *Women of Troy* were placed in the desk drawer of my office.

In 2021, having completed my Masters programme and newly emboldened by a growing confidence in my practice, I returned to my office, ready to begin my doctoral research. As I tidied up my desk, I pulled open the drawer and discovered a poster I had sketched during the early iterations of my Masters research, in a pre-pandemic world. Written across the top of the sketch was the annotation: "Euripides' *Women of Troy* in a conventional theatre space."

³⁶⁵ Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. 52.

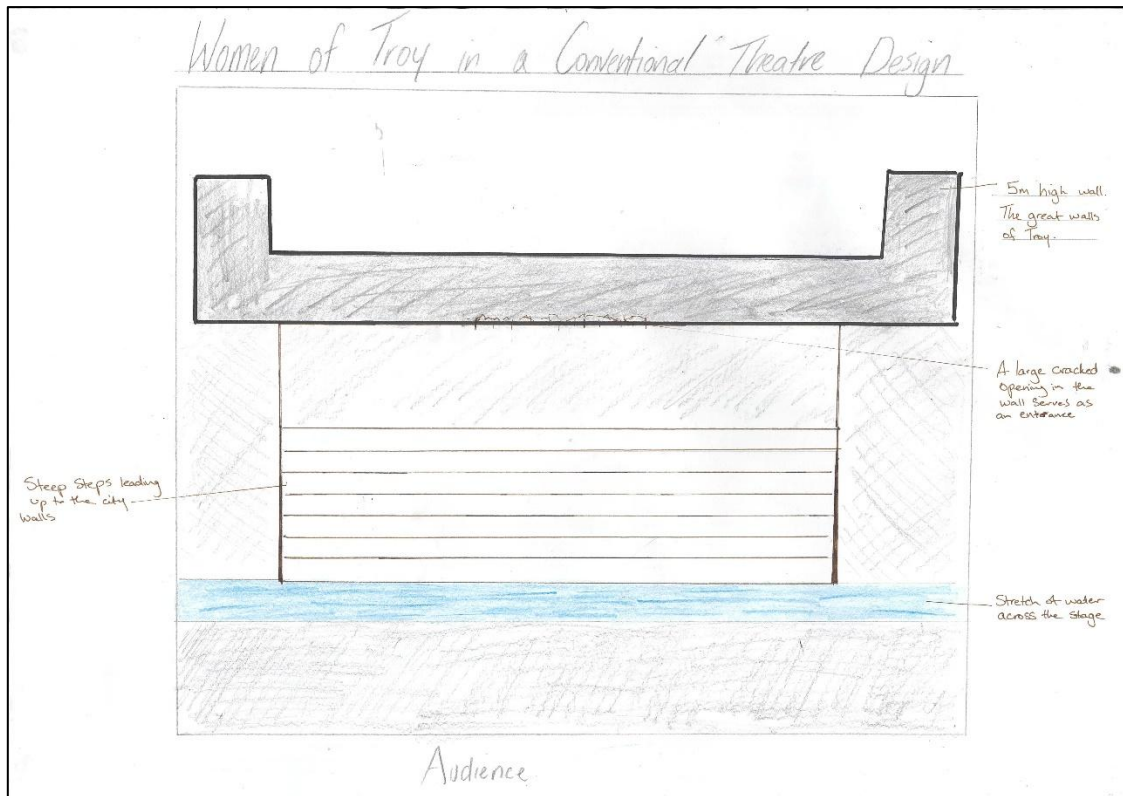


Figure 71. *Women of Troy* in a conventional theatre space sketch.

Attached to the design was a newspaper clipping from *The Guardian*—the haunting image of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child who drowned while fleeing the Syrian civil war, his body washed ashore on a Turkish beach not far from the ruins of ancient Troy. I had nearly thrown the poster away, but this almost forgotten sketch and that devastating photograph reignited the design and direction of what would become my 2023 doctoral production. The annotated design imagined a towering, grand set of stairs, constructed in an industrial, concrete-like space to evoke the brutalised ruins of Troy. Above it, an elevated balcony level—an eerie perch from which the Gods could watch the mortals below. It was from this height that the body of the small child, Astyanax, would be cast down.

While walking through the atrium of the Sir Paul Reeves building at the AUT City Campus to get lunch, I encountered a moment of *anagnorisis*, and I realised that this space resonated with me—it reminded me of the sketch I had rediscovered. From the grand concrete staircase to the underground tunnels and elevated balconies, to the mezzanine floor shaped like the prow of a Greek ship and the skylight atrium as though gazing up to an Imagined Olympus.³⁶⁶ I had discovered the place where I would set my production of the *Women of Troy*.

³⁶⁶ Holly Charlotte Luton, 'Inside Glass Boxes and Outside Waterfront Gantries: Directing Contemporary Performances of Ancient Greek Theatre in Times of Crisis.', Conference Presentation, Theatre and Performance Research Association Conference: Working Group Session 3: Directing and Dramaturgy, University of Essex, 13 September 2022.



Figure 72. The discovery of the Grand staircase, 2022.

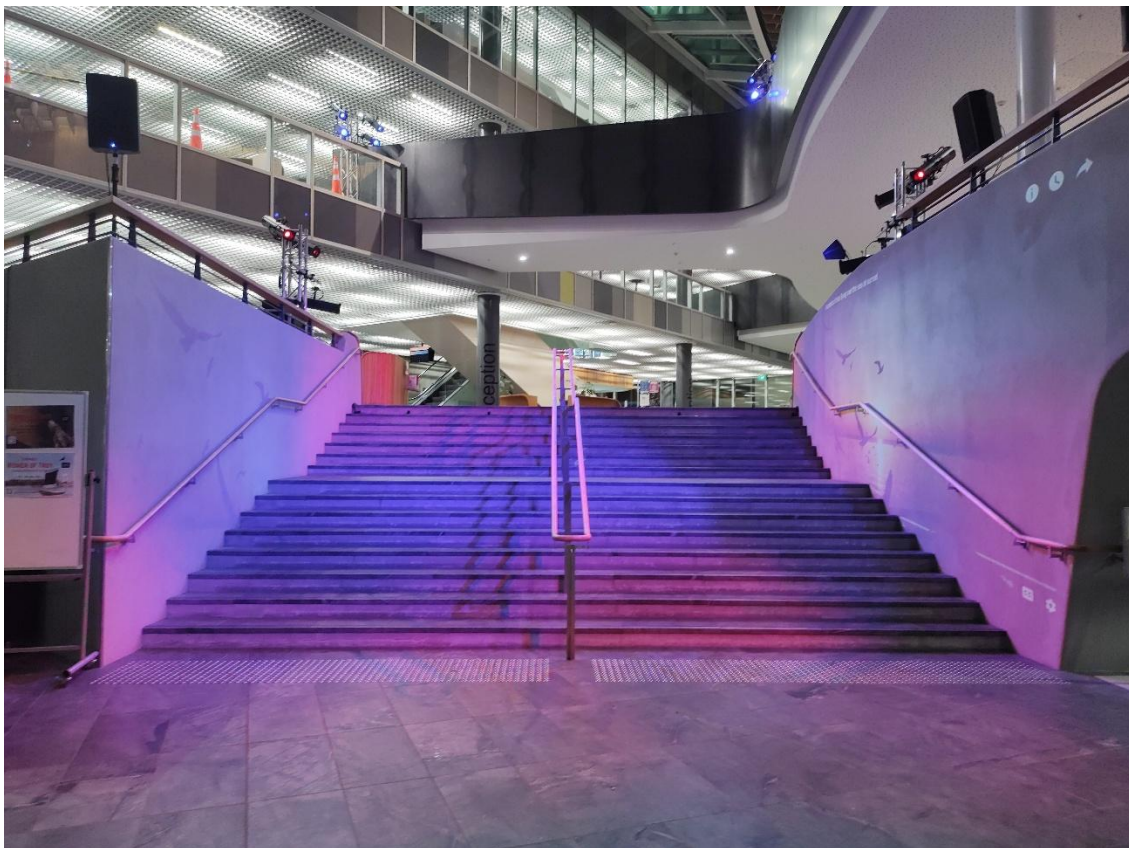


Figure 73. The Grand staircase, with projections and lighting, Women of Troy, 2023.

Having already staged *Antigone* in an engineering laboratory—the furthest kind of location from a traditional theatre space—I wondered if I could use this staircase to represent Troy? Peter Brook argues that theatre—the performance, the act, or its creation—can occur anywhere, without the need for a purpose-built space,³⁶⁷ and it should not be defined by or confined to the Eurocentric architecture—traditional configurations, rows of red velvet seats, painted sets, the wings, the [proscenium arch](#), and the black stage. Theatre throughout the ages has one thing in common: a roughness—a roughness in the

salt, sweat, noise, smell: the theatre that's not in a theatre, the theatre on carts, on wagons, on trestles, audiences standing, drinking, sitting round tables, audiences joining in, answering back: theatre in back rooms, upstairs rooms, barns: the one-night stands, the torn sheet pinned up across the hall.³⁶⁸

Rough theatre aims to abandon the fundamental rituals and rules of the fixed theatre locations, for the chance to fail through experimentation and success in creation, trying new methods of practice and exploring the possibilities of performance rather than its limitations. Pearson suggests that working in non-theatre locations allows a performance to flourish as a “site of imagination [...] a site [that] may be transformed by the disruptive presence of performance seeking a relationship other than that of a ready-made scenic backdrop against which to place its figures.”³⁶⁹ In these spaces, the location is not fixed, decorative, or secondary to the performance, but becomes an active agent of transformation. Performance does not simply happen *in* a space—it redefines the meaning of the space itself. When Jasmax—the team who designed the WG Building at AUT—described its intention to “put the theatre back in ‘lecture theatre,’”³⁷⁰ I contemplated the implications of that statement. The space’s grandeur was no longer passive in my eyes—it invited, even demanded, a kind of dramaturgical negotiation. What was once an ordinary, unassuming staircase now offered the potential for spectacle. I found myself asking: what does it mean to find a theatre space, rather than build one? Who could pass up the opportunity to perform in a ready-made, multimillion-dollar performance location? I felt I had found my theatre.

In the programme I created for the performances of the *Women of Troy*, I discussed the design of the space—the designers from Jasmax aimed to deliver a building that merges the complexities of an education facility with the wider city complex. The site is steeply sloped, enabling ground-level entrances at its four lowest storeys, with balconies that cross the spectacle of the atrium, and a grand concrete staircase connecting the spaces.

³⁶⁷ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (Simon and Schuster, 1968), p 7.

³⁶⁸ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 78.

³⁶⁹ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 2.

³⁷⁰ Mike Barrett, ‘Purple Pin Case Study—Spatial: Jasmax, AUT Sir Paul Reeves Building’, The Designers Institute, March 2017, <https://designersinstitute.nz/case-study/aut-sir-paul-reeves-building/>.

Its most distinctive space, the atrium, in which we later held the production of *Agamemnon*, is “arranged around a concrete core draped with a ‘cloak’ of cherry beech. Across the ceiling soars a lattice-like, 600-ton ceiling form. Recesses in the cloak provide cave-like spaces, demarcating areas without the use of walls and challenging the scale of the building with more intimate moments”.³⁷¹

Stirred on by the disruptions to major Auckland theatre venues, and facing the absence of purpose-built performance spaces at AUT, I initially had doubts about whether the spectacle of this space could truly be harnessed. After viewing several other non-theatre sites around the city, I came to recognise the insurmountable logistical and financial challenges of creating theatre in spaces that, while not designed for performance, lacked the practical infrastructure to support it. Ironically, the Sir Paul Reeves building, though not intended as a theatre venue—was so purposefully theatrical, built in its visual and architectural *drama*, that it offered more potential than many conventional alternatives. It may not have been built for dedicated theatre performances, but it demanded a theatre performance within its theatrical walls. As my actors described in the PPDW on returning to the space:

ALPHA:

The space stays the same, it's just us and our memories of those moments. But nothing has changed. But there's something different about returning to this space, rather than returning to a theatre space.

OMEGA:

And when you look at the space initially, perhaps you think, “well, how could a theatre performance work here?”, or not even thinking of it as a performance space, we come back and yet it did, we did it.

Figure 74. PPDW Transcript, Alpha and Omega discuss working in the non-theatre location.

Setting the Scene: The Direction and Design of *Women of Troy*

In the photograph below, taken during an early *Women of Troy* rehearsal in 2022, I am directing the cast on the grand staircase. The image captures the scale and grandeur of the building, where the towering glass skylight floods the space with natural light, and during Auckland's stormy autumn, a reflective pool gathers above us during the rainy rehearsals. In the rehearsal room, we would often joke, acknowledging the imagined presence of the ancient Greek gods, as though watching our performance from Olympus through the skylight—Apollo bringing sunshine and blue sky, and Zeus, the heavy rain and thunderstorms. Looking upward toward the grand staircase, some of the actors are seen still wearing pandemic masks—an ongoing reminder of the pandemic contexts during the early inception of the work. While Aotearoa was lauded for its *COVID-free* practices,

³⁷¹ Mike Barrett, ‘Purple Pin Case Study—Spatial: Jasmax, AUT Sir Paul Reeves Building’, The Designers Institute, March 2017, <https://designersinstitute.nz/case-study/aut-sir-paul-reeves-building/>.

many performing arts festivals were cancelled across the country, and we were determined not to meet the same fate. However, on at least two occasions, we rehearsed via Zoom when some actors were unable to attend due to COVID infections. Alongside the pandemic, the global climate-emergency suddenly felt more local with the arrival of Cyclone Gabrielle and serious flooding in the North Island in February 2023. Our rehearsals were cancelled for over two weeks as we could not meet in person due to severe infrastructure damage throughout Auckland. Nor could we meet online due to power and internet outages across the city where a State of Emergency was declared.

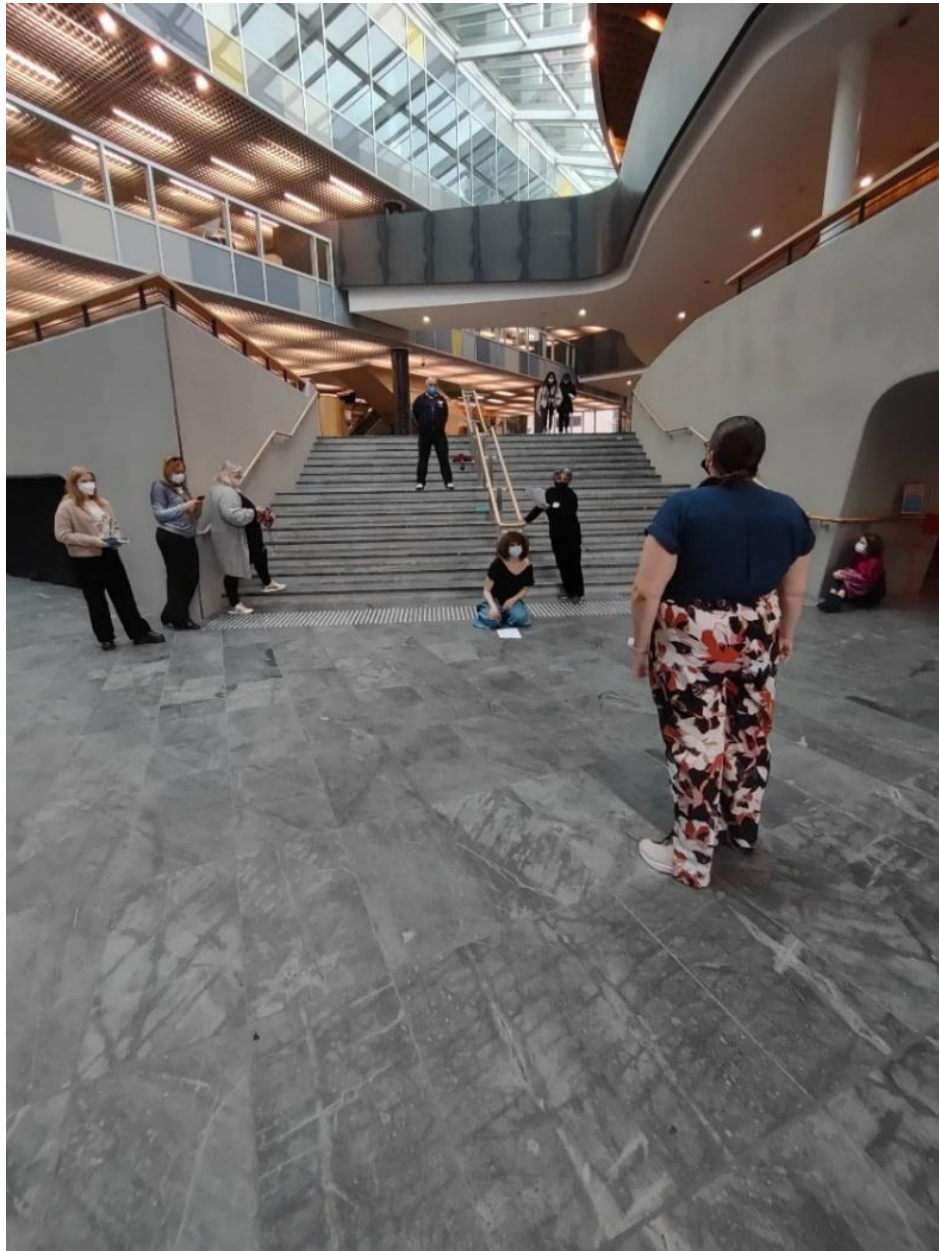


Figure 75. Early Women of Troy rehearsals from the ground floor, 2022.

Throughout the rehearsal process, the location brought its own set of surprises and challenges—questions as to where to place the lighting and sound equipment and how to direct the production in a liminal, publicly used space. Yet, through these logistical complexities, I discovered an unforeseen serendipity in making theatre within a public thoroughfare. Students, staff, and visitors passing through the university often paused to watch what was unfolding from balconies and mezzanines above, and on the ground floors below, captivated by the unfamiliar, emerging spectacle taking shape in an otherwise ordinary staircase that they had become so familiar with in their everyday lives. This was a completely unusual, new, and exciting process for me, the actors, and the visitors watching—where theatre is otherwise privately confined to a black box rehearsal space, away from prying eyes before the final public performances. The actors later commented in the PPDW about the performativity required of them throughout rehearsals, suggesting a kind of confidence that was growing in their skills—to put aside people watching them and make bold choices because they had become familiar with people watching the rehearsals as if it were a final performance. And so, I begin by asking my actors:

HOLLY:

Thinking about that public/private space idea, as actors, how does it feel where traditionally you might rehearse in a more private space like a studio, and how did it feel to have rehearsed this production in such a public way? How does that feel as an actor? Has it changed the way you perform, your dynamic as an actor?

DELTA:

I think for me, it's not often that we get to rehearse within the space that we will be performing. So, for this production, and we've talked about this, performing in those high heels, I felt so comfortable because I knew exactly what I was doing, how these shoes, my costume, and my props felt in this space. You know, we might only have a day or two performing in a space, from a technical rehearsal, but to be so familiar with the space was a challenge and a comfort. And having these people passing by made me recognise how much I needed to act, how much I needed to project, who I might be performing to.

CASSANDRA:

For me personally, I get very anxious performing for anyone, let alone for people who are just generally walking through our rehearsal space, walking down the stairs. It's very outside of my comfort zone. So, it was a challenge in that way, but a good challenge, to get in the headspace as an actor, that you are always in performance mode, and to not care what others think, a place to really experiment to the extreme. Yeah, at times I could be scary.

HOLLY:

Do you think it has changed your thinking as an actor? Do you see how your performance might be different?

CASSANDRA:

Gosh, I don't think I know, or think I've thought about that. I do think it has strengthened my skills as an actor. Or rather the idea that everyone here in the space is connected with each other, from the actors to the passerby, everyone is a part of the performance. And they are everywhere, not just in front of you. So perhaps more interactive.

HOLLY:

Just thinking as a director, and our job is to observe people, I have seen the change in you as an actor, CASSANDRA, from the beginning of our process to here now on the stairs. And thinking about our moments we did rehearse in the black box, there were more nerves, perhaps because of these traditional theatre 'social rules'. To being on the stairs, to a space that you command, you establish the rules, and especially playing CASSANDRA, thinking "this is my space". And I've seen that in all of you, a change in body language.

SIGMA:

I felt it when we were in rehearsal one night near the end of the process, when we had to rehearse in the black box, and I was all over the place, with my lines, my focus, just tripping over myself. Whereas out here, I am always at ease.

HOLLY:

That's interesting that, being in a space where you are not being 'observed', in the black box, you feel more like you are being watched.

ALPHA:

Similar to that point, thinking about the private/public space, we always expect that maybe the black box is a place to try things out without judgment or observation. So, this is very different, there are so many places that we can be watched from, some of which we don't even know where from. And you don't always see or know people are watching you, so there is a consciousness of being observed, and you change what you might do. But it is interesting that from the get-go, you are being watched, always performing.

HOLLY:

That's a really good point Alpha, and we've talked about this, that you often had this feeling at the beginning of our process "am I doing the right thing or am I in the wrong place". But by the end, I don't need to direct you, you are doing what you need to do as an actor to explore, experiment, to say "fuck it, if I'm in that person's way who cares". And here in this space without conventional rules, the sightlines are different, an audience member on this side might see something different to up there, they are invited to move. And we did have people on the performance nights who were up above us on the balcony watching the performance.

EPSILON:

Yeah, it was very cool to see these people who hadn't booked tickets just coming and standing for the whole performance, as though they stumbled upon the performance. And even the students we had leaving their exams on the technical night over here.

Epsilon points to the lecture theatre on level 3. The cast audibly agree.

SIGMA:

And it's fascinating because it wasn't distracting.

The cast nod and agree.

SIGMA:

Because we rehearsed in this living space, there were always distractions from students, the cleaners, and public conferences; it never mattered. It never threw us off. But it also alters how we perform, knowing that our audience would be all around us, and I know how you used to push me further about... "bigger, bigger, perform to everywhere"

Holly and the cast all laugh.

OMEGA:
It was a big change as an actor to feel like I wasn't limited to a box.

Figure 76. PPDW Transcript, the cast reflect on working in a non-theatre location.

In embracing that unfamiliarity of being watched *knowingly*, the fear of judgment transformed into a springboard for the actors—an acknowledgement that every rehearsal was, in its own way, a kind of performance. In a kind of panopticon, the actors began to move beyond any awareness, embracing the *not knowing* who was watching or even if they were being watched at all. By treating the passersby who observed the rehearsals as an audience, the actors found permission and potential to take greater risks without the burden of critique. A deep, intuitive confidence emerged in their work, knowing exactly what they were doing, and when they were in action, no stranger could question their performances. While these *kinds of performances* were not fixed or final—as a performance might be regarded—the rehearsals became ephemeral—a chance to play, discover, and explore, each time a new space of potential and possibility. In a world where most adults dread standing in front of others, the performers claimed their space with purpose, almost as if saying, “*I am doing something you cannot, so I will do it with everything I have got*”.

As the work developed, something shifted. People began asking permission to pass through the staircase—addressing me or the actors before walking through the space, which was, in a sense, becoming *ours*. They greeted me and the actors on their way to lectures and events, blurring the lines between audience and passerby, performer and visitor. With each rehearsal, our presence grew, breaking free of the confined boundaries of the performance space. We gradually began to claim more of the building—occupying the balconies, mezzanines, upper floors, and even bunker-like spaces. The staircase no longer felt borrowed—it had become *our space, our theatre*.

On the right mezzanine floor (stage left), as seen in the upper right of the image above, we placed the sound and lighting desk. Lighting bars were placed on the balustrades of the mezzanine and from the upper balconies, all directed down into the stairwell. In conversations with my lighting designer, Paul Summers, I expressed a desire to create a haunting, striking, forceful visual atmosphere—lighting that came from above and across the space horizontally, casting long, ghostly shadows, and throwing the actors' faces into eerie, downward-lit relief. No upward lighting was available because of our configuration, but this design choice contributed to the unsettling tone of the production, evoking a world watched from above, the women's fate decided by higher powers. Washes of reds, blues, greens, and purples set the scene, with two projectors placed on either side of the mezzanines to project effects of water reflections, blood, and fire onto the walls of the staircase. The emergency lighting would serendipitously make an appearance, creating a

secondary kind of Olympus or appearance of the god, Apollo, casting washes of bright, harsh, warm fluorescent lighting onto the cast.



Figure 77. “Happiness, there is no happiness. The lucky ones are dead.” A foghorn sounds, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

To the bottom right staircase (downstage left), was one of the cave-like spaces, connecting to the basement lecture theatres and—through a wide space, used as study areas—led to the green and dressing rooms to the far left (stage right) of the performance space. Hecuba made her first entrance from this underground bunker, representing a war bunker of the Trojan conflict, again, used later by the soldiers as an entrance, carrying the lifeless body of Astyanax. On the upper level, surrounded by glass balustrades, I directed Helen to observe the action from above before her entrance—visibly isolated from the other Chorus women, as though kept apart to avoid any potential acts of retribution. In early scenes, I positioned Cassandra above the Chorus women near to Helen, visible to the audience as she picked at her flower crown, lit a fire torch,³⁷² and danced—signalling the prophetic unravelling to come during her scene on the stairs. On the far-left unseen in this image, across the large atrium ground floor was another balcony, from which Menelaus would remain throughout the play before his entrance—seen with champagne

³⁷² An LED Light that flickered like a flaming torch.

glasses, celebrating the Greek's victory, and speaking with some soldiers, ordering and confirming the evacuation plans and capture of the women.

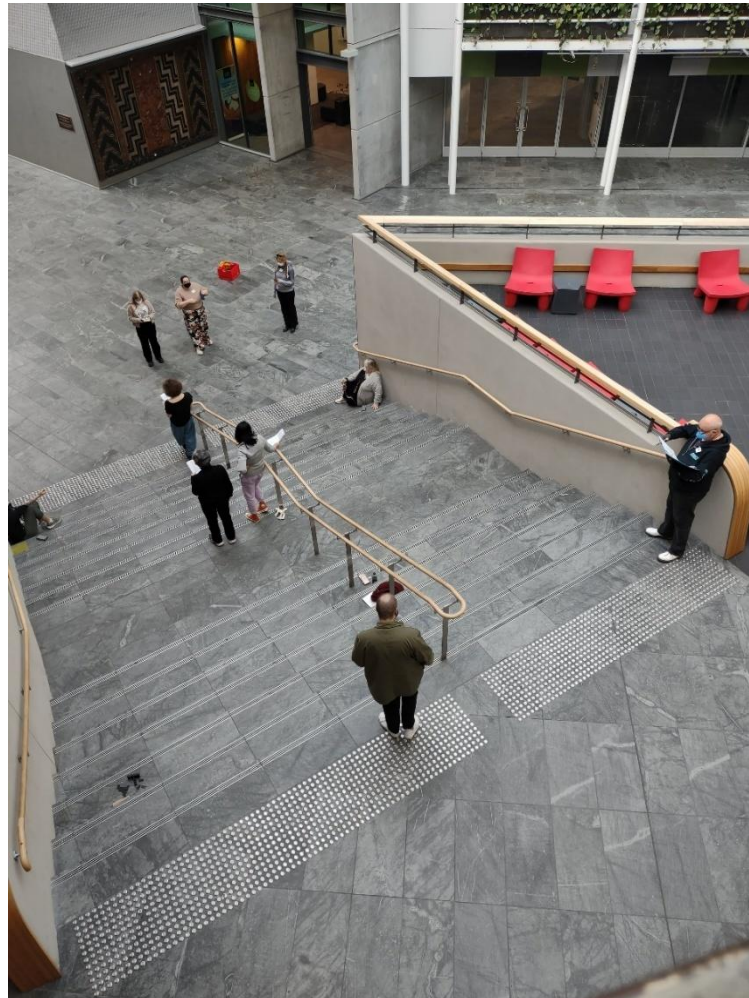


Figure 78. Early Women of Troy rehearsals from the balcony above the staircase, 2022.

Seen in the image above, a cherry wood bannister ran down the centre of the staircase and along both walls connecting the two floors. Props and costume pieces were hung from them, and the actors were encouraged to use the bannister as a tactile, grounding element—running their hands along it playfully or racing up and down its full length. It could only be crossed at the top and bottom of the staircase, with no gap in the middle, instead crossed by climbing over or crawling beneath it—an action that added a physical obstacle and heightened the sense of separation, struggle, and hierarchy. Two mezzanine floors overlooked the staircase, where both projectors were placed. These mezzanines served as the vantage points for the gods, looking down upon the mortal action below into the staircase. A few weeks prior to the performances, central Turkey was struck by a 7.8 magnitude Earthquake, killing 60,000 people. This event led us to reflect more deeply on the role of the gods in the play, as some historians consider that the actual fall of the legendary Troy, located in modern-day north-western Turkey, was likely the result of an

earthquake. Contemporarily, this event would have been attributed to the patron God of Troy, Poseidon, who appears in the play as God of the sea, horses, and earthquakes. Real events resonated with the fictional events of over two thousand years past. The larger balcony, on the fourth floor, from where the photograph was taken, was used by the gods in later scenes, and gave a direct view of the entire stairwell and could be accessed via a staircase, escalator, or lift.



Figure 79. The patron god of Troy, the Sea, Horses, and Earthquakes, Poseidon, tells the tale of his city destroyed by the Greeks, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

Over the mezzanine balustrades, we hung nautical ropes, rigging, and fishing nets, evoking the image of a dockyard—an improvised campsite where the captured Trojan women awaited their fate. Strung alongside them was a washing line, pegged with bras, undergarments, and baby clothes, suggesting the remnants of daily life interrupted, or the women’s desperate attempts to maintain some semblance of normality amid their displacement. Lining the staircase were buckets and brushes, used for washing clothes and functioning as makeshift lavatories—further grounding the space in the grim reality of their confinement. The props helped to reflect the “authentic traces of the [...] everyday life: the result of routine, tradition, habit, accident, event, social ritual, [and] dwelling”.³⁷³ The waiting of the women and these everyday tasks highlighted the transformation of their *survival* in crisis to *living* their crisis. Scattered along the staircase were suitcases and luggage bags, representing the hurried evacuation of Troy.

³⁷³ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 43.

Baby clothes and children's toys were placed intentionally throughout the space to evoke the haunting presence of *absent* children—ghosts who never appeared onstage yet were deeply felt. A wooden horse of wheels—the patron animal of Troy and an ill-fated omen of the city's fate. A wooden ship—floated by the women across a tapestry of water, as a lamp cast ghostly light from below. A chessboard—the women of Troy, symbolic political pawns in the game of war.

Pinned to two cork noticeboards were evacuation orders addressed to the women, some offering a chance to flee before the Greek invasion—sending their children to an undisclosed and unknown location. Also displayed was a map of Greece, marked with mugshot-style images of each woman, connected with red string that traced their eventual fates—enslavement, exile, or death. A brief reference to the unseen and slaughtered Polyxena, as her ghostly figure stared back from a missing persons poster.

Administrative files and documents, stamped with the Athenian Owls, scattered the stage. Using the information the ensemble had developed through the improvisational games and tasks in rehearsals, I created a brown file carried by Talthybius, which enclosed a visa-like application for each woman, each one stamped *denied* for evacuation. A clipboard, also held by Talthybius, contained detailed paperwork representing each woman's identity and life, and who their allocated masters and kings would be—for example, Cassandra to Agamemnon, and Hecuba to Odysseus. A letter, carried by Sebastos, signed by the Greek kings, was read aloud to the Chorus, culminating in the declaration of Astyanax's fate. While not seen in detail by the audience, the written documents helped create the world of the play for the actors and audience.



Figure 80. The Chorus Women leave, suitcases and handbags at hand, *Women of Troy*, 2023.



Figure 81. The Chorus women pass the time, crocheting a baby blanket for Astyanax, *Women of Troy*, 2023.



Figure 82. A child's wooden ship, *Women of Troy*, 2023.



Figure 83. A child's wooden horse on wheels, *Women of Troy*, 2023.



Figure 84. A child's doll and helmet, Women of Troy, 2023.



Figure 85. A wooden chess set on a crate, Women of Troy, 2023.



Figure 86. The Chorus women reenact the gift of the Trojan Horse, with a toy wooden horse on wheels, and with ropes, Women of Troy, 2023.

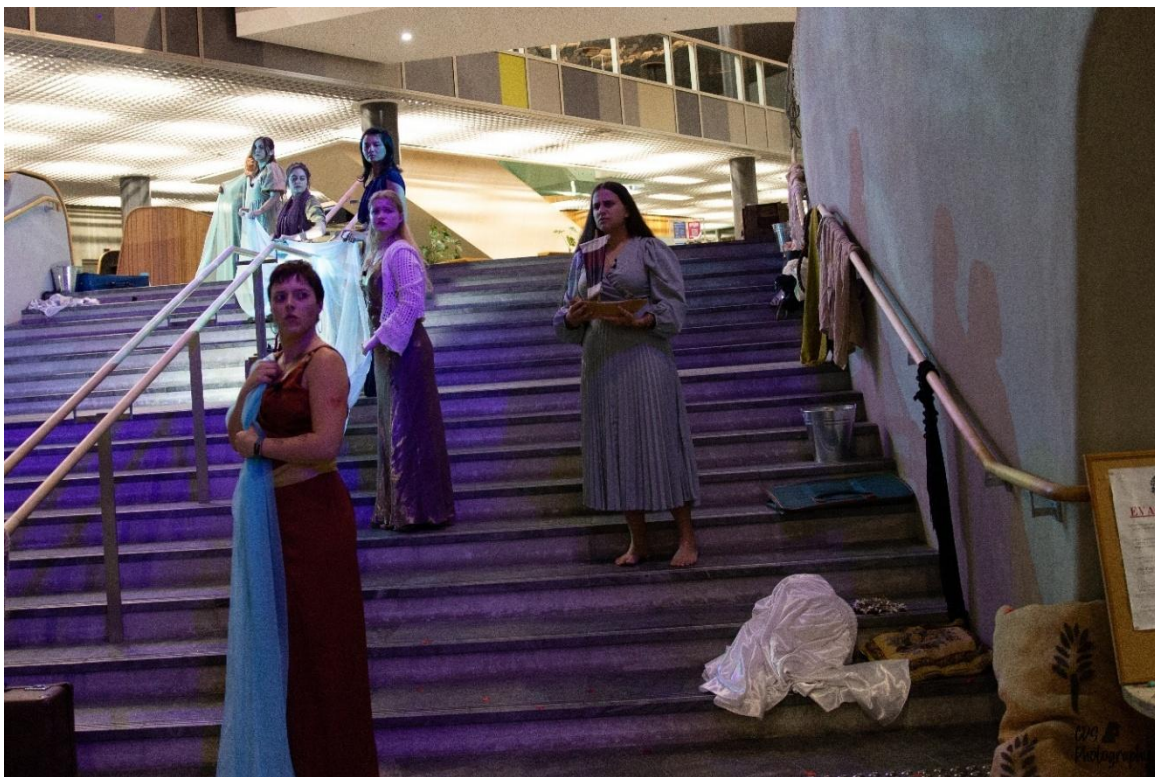


Figure 87. The Chorus women tell the story of Aurora, imitating the ships departing Troy, with a toy wooden ship and tapastry of blue fabric, Women of Troy 2023.



Figure 88. (A) The pinboard mapping the Women's allocations to Greek Kings, Women of Troy, 2023.

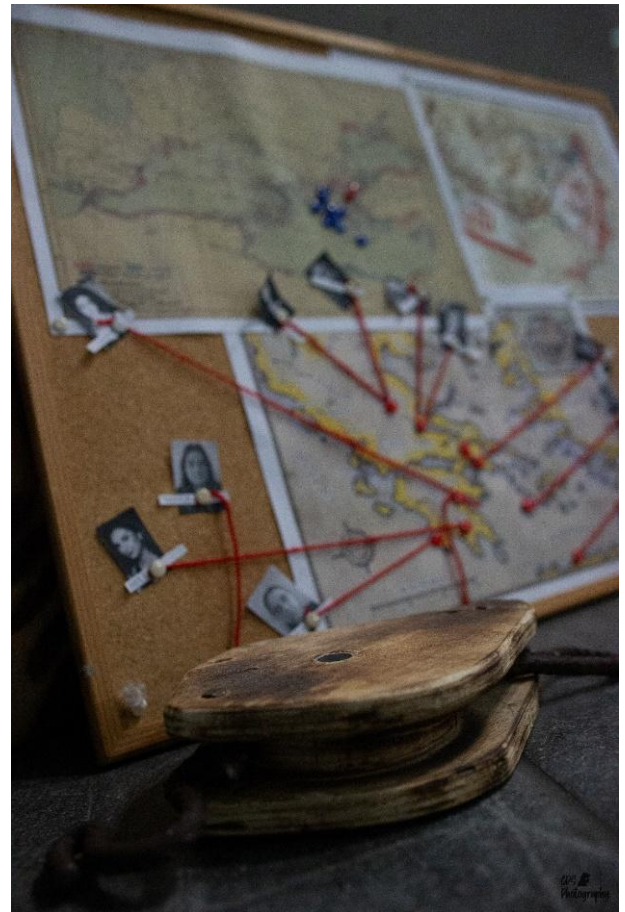


Figure 89. (B) The pinboard mapping the Women's allocations to Greek Kings, Women of Troy, 2023.



Figure 90. The pinboard with warfare plans, Women's mugshots, and maps of Troy, the Mediterranean region, and ancient Greece, Women of Troy, 2023.



CONFIDENTIAL

Re: The decision of the infant Trojan Prince, Astyanax.

11th April 2023

This meeting was attended by the leaders of the Greek alliance: Ithaca, Sparta, Mycenae, Athens, Arcadia, and Argos. Minuted by Talthybius, Officer of the Spartan Army.

By Order of the leaders of the Greek Council.

The matter as to the infant Trojan Prince, Astyanax, son of Prince Hector and Princess Andromache, and grandson of King Priam and Queen Hecuba, has been decided. With the greatest urgency, the child is to be executed.

Odysseus' speech carried the whole Council, that "the son of such a father must not be allowed to grow up, and he is to be thrown from the battlements of Troy".

Odysseus King of Ithaca *Menestheus King of Athens*
Mendano King of Sparta *Agapenor King of Arcadia*
Agamemnon King of Mycenae *Diomedes King of Argos*



EVACUATION

THE GREEK AUTHORITIES HAVE DECIDED THAT IF THERE ARE AIR RAIDS YOU WILL HAVE ANOTHER CHANCE OF SENDING YOUR CHILDREN AWAY.

YOUR CHILDREN WILL BE EVACUATED TO THE NATIONS OF THE GREEK ALLIANCE WHEN IT IS SAFE TO DO SO. THEY WILL REMAIN THERE UNTIL IT IS SAFE TO RETURN TO THE CITY OF TROY.

UNDER GREEK AUTHORITY, THIS SCHEME WILL BE FOR CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF FIVE. IT APPLIES TO NO OTHERS.

NOW IF YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO REGISTER YOUR CHILDREN FOR EVACUATION. FILL OUT THE PAPERS AVAILABLE AT THE BORDER.

You are free to make up your mind, but you must **MAKE UP YOUR MIND NOW**. It is your duty to do so for the sake of your children. The authorities cannot make their plans at all if they do not know how many they have to provide for.

If you require any help or there is anything you do not understand, go to the nearest border control operated by the Athenian or Spartan military, where you will either be able to get help or be told where you can.

Figure 91. The soldier's letter: The decision regarding the infant, Astyanax, Women of Troy 2023.

Figure 92. An evacuation notice, Women of Troy, 2023

The tile floor of the staircase and atrium was smooth and cold—an unexpected refuge during summer rehearsals and performances for the actors who lay and sat on the stairs. The edges of the stairs were lined with a black, sandy-textured anti-slip surface, while metal studs embedded in the ground floor and upper floor edges provided additional grip. These rough, studded patches became obstacles in themselves, carefully avoided by the actors as they walked or knelt across the space.

At the end of each night's performance, after the bows, I directed the actors to gather the props and set pieces as they exited the staircase. This choice served a practical function—assisting our small stage crew—but also operated as a continuation of the play, a kind of Epilogue. It became a final, choreographed farewell as the audience watched the Greek Soldiers and the Trojan women leave the ruins of their beloved city, Troy. The buckets, the ropes, their clothes, a child's toy—a little horse on wheels. What remained—a bare, grey concrete staircase—evoked the ruins of ancient Troy, allowing the audience to resonate with our contemporary realities. The actors carrying the brown suitcases off stage, particularly reflected the haunting images of the mid-20th-century displacements during the Holocaust and Nakba, while juxtaposed with the modern

clothes and luggage bags carried by the actors to imitate modern displacements. Evoking images of refugees carrying their lives in battered suitcases—their memories, livelihoods, and homes packed into whatever they can hold—asked the audience to contemplate what we might take with us if the circumstances required us to leave everything behind. What is left behind when a society collapses? What remains when we are gone?



Figure 93. “Troy is finished!” *The Chorus of Women of Troy*, 2023.

Usually, an audience does not get to experience the *striking* of the set, but as Pearson suggests, non-theatre locations deny the audience a transient exit from the auditorium as would be the case in a traditional theatre space.³⁷⁴ Each evening, we captured on camera many of the audience sitting in the stillness and emptiness, quietly reflecting as the thematic playlist and washed blue lighting was cast into the space. Because this was a social space and public thoroughfare during the day at the university, we were required to remove the auditorium chairs for fire evacuation purposes. As the crew began to remove these chairs, some audience members offered their assistance, removing their own chairs out of the auditorium and stacking them to the side of the space. This mutually shared moment felt as though we, as actors and audiences, were guests of this space and were required to leave it as we found it. As Pearson reminds us, it is “the unintentional, the random, the intimate unplanned touch of history’s passing... that

³⁷⁴ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 2.

attest to our presence and also, of course, to our absence...”.³⁷⁵ This stripping bare of the stage and absolute desolation of the play left the audience to contemplate the similarities between the ancient world of Troy, Euripides’ Athens, and our modern-day circumstances.

Using the staircase, I deliberately reversed the traditional shape of the ancient Greek amphitheatre—placing the action above, on the stairs, and the audience below, on the floor. The inversion and the non-theatre location created a kind of familiarity and yet strangeness, for both the actors and the audience. In recognising and embracing the theatricality of this once ordinary staircase, it felt fitting for the world of *Women of Troy*—a place that resided between here and there, the past and future, order and ruin, a crossroad that spoke between past crises and to our own era of crisis, giving the sense that we, too, are caught mid-collapse, unsure of what might come next for us, whether by fate or destiny.

Setting the Scene in a University Crisis

Amid this visceral and vivacious backdrop I was shaping through my directional and design choices, I could not help but recognise an underlying hostility woven through the beauty of the space and theatrically I was creating with the actors—not just because I had embedded this production in the brutal, industrial architecture, reflecting the archaeological-like, war-torn Troy—but also in the unspoken tensions of the university encountering its own crisis. Towering above us—watching like the character gods in the play—the Vice-Chancellor’s office overlooked our rehearsals and performances. The play itself was already an act of protest, shaped by the themes and global conditions of war and displacement, but in its playing, a more localised rebellion emerged—one that seemed to speak back to the institution itself. Was there a deeper meaning in staging a play about violence and collapse, fragility and resilience in the heart of a neoliberal university under pressure? Brook acknowledges the “lightheartedness to rough theatre, but rebellion and opposition feed it”.³⁷⁶ Pearson suggests that performance in non-theatre locations grants us the ability to “celebrate, confound or criticise location, history, function, architecture, microclimate.”³⁷⁷ In this case, the location became inseparable from the crisis it faced—forcing me into a second confrontation and contemplation of the play’s themes in relation to the site of performance. I began to recognise new ways in which we were embracing and embodying crisis, not only in the text, but through the eerie stillness the space afforded us. There was a lingering absence born from the post-pandemic impact on university life, with education shifting to online learning, and redundancies leaving office spaces and lecture theatres strangely hollow. It was as if the building itself resonated with the spectres of its former purpose, mirroring

³⁷⁵ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 42-43.

³⁷⁶ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 70.

³⁷⁷ Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4.

the desolation of Troy and a kind of archaeological site, in a contemporary academic context. Although there were visitors who encountered us during rehearsals, the actors and I recognised the quietness, stillness, and emptiness of this once bustling and lively space, heaving with students.

The Contextual Influences on the Production: Global Warfare and Conflict

As part of my directorial and design methodologies when staging my productions, I take time to carefully consider some key questions, themes, and resonances emerging in a close reading of the text. In this research stage of each production, I aim to distil the play into three or four key themes and parallels that the actors and I can draw upon to connect the world of the play to real contextual historical or lived examples. In the months leading up to the performances of *Women of Troy*, several major global events unfolded during the design and research stages. These events shaped my directorial and design concepts, as I recognised an urgency in the parallels and resonances between the world of the play and our own lived experiences.

In February 2022, Russia invaded neighbouring Ukraine in the largest European conflict since the Second World War.³⁷⁸ The subsequent humanitarian crisis and mass migration of six million Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war highlighted the increasing tensions and familiar threat of war once again in Europe.³⁷⁹

In August 2021, the United States withdrew its last military operations from Afghanistan, ending twenty years of conflict with the Taliban. I watched the live news as horrifying images of American troops loading military cargo planes, while women desperately lifted their children over their heads, passing them through the crowds across the barbed-wire fences, crying out for their children to be evacuated, and Afghani people holding onto the wheels of the planes, falling as they took off from the runway at the Hamid Karzai International Airport, Kabul. These moments evoked familiar images of the American evacuation of Saigon during the American War in Vietnam,³⁸⁰ and mythically, resonated deeply with the Greek soldiers abandoning Troy after ten years of bloodshed. The consequence of the Taliban's theocratic rule has resulted in the absolute subjugation and suppression of Afghani women, refusing them freedoms of self-determination, political involvement, the right to an education, to earn their own living, to move freely without a

³⁷⁸ Shane Harris and Paul Sonne, 'Russia Planning Massive Military Offensive against Ukraine Involving 175,000 Troops, U.S. Intelligence Warns', *The Washington Post*, 4 December 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad_story.html.

³⁷⁹ 'UNHCR: Ukraine, Other Conflicts Push Forcibly Displaced Total over 100 Million for First Time', UNHCR, accessed 12 June 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/news-releases/unhcr-ukraine-other-conflicts-push-forcibly-displaced-total-over-100-million>.

³⁸⁰ In 2018, I assistant-directed a school production of the musical, *Miss Saigon*. With a historical interest in 1960s American culture and history, I was asked to also work as a dramaturg and researcher on the project.

male chaperone, to wear what they like, to talk in public, to listen or participate in performing arts and music.³⁸¹

In the United States, women too were being stripped of their right to bodily autonomy, in a decision made by the United States Supreme Court in June 2022, to overturn *Roe v. Wade*—the protection of abortion under the constitutional 14th Amendment *right to privacy* or excessive government intervention in private lives. Protests to protect abortion as a recognised amendment enshrined in the constitution continue across the country today, in opposition to the current right-wing Republican administration.

I reflected on how ubiquitous violence is, and how our access to it now as modern audiences is instant, visceral, and horrifying. Ancient Greek audiences were made up of only male citizens. Unless those citizens were veterans, many may never have witnessed such brutal images of violence, slaughter, and rape, that were perpetuated by the Athenian army. As Taylor reminds us, *Women of Troy* was an anti-war play. He asks

if the anti-war party were in a small minority, would the play have been allowed, when the likelihood was that it would offend the majority of the audience? As with so many fascinating questions about Greek drama, we simply don't know. All we do know is that it was presented, so the Archon must have thought it, for whatever reasons, suitable material for the Dionysiac festival.³⁸²

Unlike these audiences, we are saturated with images of war, suffering, and death in real-time on social media and in the daily news cycle. In this way, *Women of Troy* felt uncomfortably close—not a distant myth, but a reflection of what was unfolding before us.

Watching the global images of women suffering, suppressed, and oppressed, while resiliently fighting for their survival, rebelling, and protesting, I began to feel that *Women of Troy* was urgently relevant and necessary for our contemporary contemplation. In returning to my design concepts, I begin researching, brainstorming, planning, and preparing to stage a production of *Women of Troy* as my first doctoral project. These contexts made me think deeply about autonomy and agency, about women's rage and grief, and the brutal repetition across history of women and children as victims during times of conflict.

I wondered why their suffering was seen as an inevitable consequence, and why history has romanticised these women as victims and mourners—especially in Greek tragedy with figures like Hecuba and Andromache, burdened by grief in the absolute destruction of their own children, citizens, and nation. I reflected on the roles of Cassandra and Helen, and how their stories are a reminder of rape as a violent weapon of humiliation

³⁸¹ Amnesty International, 'Women in Afghanistan: The Back Story', Amnesty International UK, 24 November 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history>.

³⁸² Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. ix-x.

and control in war—where female bodies become politicised and punished. I thought about the play’s tragic climax, the killing of Astyanax, and the death of children as collateral in war—an act of total annihilation of a future, a deliberate erasure of the next generation, like the young Trojan prince. I wondered how, in my production, we might reclaim these women’s stories, recognising their suffering as not by accident, but by design, through systemic structures that make them powerless under militarised patriarchy. How do we move their stories beyond lamentation and victimhood into resilience? These questions became the groundwork for the production, helping to identify the direction and design of the production.

Mitchell recognises the importance as a director to identify and isolate a few key themes or major ideas in the work that can then guide the work of the production efficiently. She reminds the director to “not think about this process as a reductive one that oversimplifies a more complex picture. Rather, see it as a way of efficiently mapping the intellectual structure behind the action.”³⁸³ These questions and lived resonances that were emerging steered my direction into exploring three key themes: the cost of war, female suffering and resilience, and hypocrisy and accountability.

Taylor reminds us that the key theme of the play is the tragedy, brutality, and “agony of war, the fact that it causes mass death, separation of loved ones, slavery and suffering. Euripides confronts us mercilessly with this unavoidable truth”.³⁸⁴ In the face of rising global tensions and conflicts, it became clear that I could not stage this work without directly engaging with its anti-war core and the resonances of our era of crisis.

In recognising what I believe to be the most significant themes of the play as the director, I refined these themes into a few key lines from the text to highlight the play’s central concerns and to encapsulate the emotional and political weight of the play for both the actors and the audience.

³⁸³ Katie Mitchell, *The Director’s Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 49.

³⁸⁴ Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. x.

Key Themes of Women of Troy

The Cost of War: Absolute Destruction



ATHENA:

So that the Greeks Will learn their lesson, and in future, respect My temples, and fear the power of the gods.

MENELAUS:

I have come to fetch the Spartan woman It gives me no pleasure to speak her name The woman who was my wife. Helen. The Greek soldiers [...] Have handed her over to me, to kill her Here on the spot - unless I decide To take her back to our Argive homeland.

HELEN:

All the Trojans were against it. Well then. Husband. Can you still think it right to kill me? Could you do such a thing with any justice? I had no choice. I was raped, not married.

HECUBA:

Menelaus, Consummate The Greek victory by killing your wife! Death is what she deserves. And other women Will learn from her example that wives who betray Their husbands must expect to die for it.

HECUBA:

Oh you Greek's you are so proud of yourselves as thinking men and fighters

DAMARIS (CHORUS):

The Trojans were cut down In their own homes, in sanctuary, beheaded where they lay Sleeping, a whole generation of women raped in their own Bedrooms, breeding bastards for the Greeks, desolation for Troy.

ANDROMACHE:

Why Are you killing this child? What has he done In his innocence? He's guilty of nothing!

MENELAUS:

Well. I've certainly made him pay for that With the gods' help of course - him, And all his people - the Greeks have butchered The lot, and turned his great city Into a wilderness.

HECUBA:

But now, When the city is taken, and every Trojan Fighting man lies dead, you have become terrified Of a little child.

TALTHYBIUS:

All company commanders with orders To fire the city, there's no need to wait Any longer, till your torches burn out In your hands. Burn everything down! When we have reduced the whole lot to ashes Then we can celebrate, leave Troy, and go home!

Hypocrisy and Accountability



Female Suffering and Resilience



HECUBA:

Lift up your head from the dust, Heave up from the earth
The weight of your misery, you whom the gods have cursed.
Troy has ceased to exist: and we, by birth Troy's Kings and
Queens, rule nothing now. The old life is gone, old gods,
old hearth And home, destroyed. We must endure it.

CASSANDRA:

Goodbye Mother. No tears. Oh land of my fathers, dead
brothers who lie Under this earth, Father who sired me,
soon, soon we'll meet, [...] and you'll greet Me with joy
for the victory I bring: the family at whose hands Troy
died And all her people perished, the House of Atreus,
destroyed!

HECUBA:

No, no one is happier dead. The living At least have hope.
To be dead is to be nothing.

KYPRIS (CHORUS):

Your suffering is like mine. Your anguished words Give
voice to our deepest agonies and fears.

RHEA (CHORUS):

But if the gods had not decided To make the greatest suffer
most And trample us all in the mud, what nonentities We
would all have been! No one would ever Have heard of us, no
songs would have been written In memory of our suffering,
nor would the poets A hundred generations hence have taken
us As their great theme.

HECUBA:

Hecuba Into the abyss. My legs are trembling, But I won't
fall. Old limbs, strengthen Yourselves. Your slavery is
beginning...

Figure 94. Key Themes of *Women of Troy*: The Cost of War, Hypocrisy and Accountability, and Female Suffering and Resilience.

In this final process, the actors and I discussed whether one line might summarise the weight of the play. This was Hecuba's line, spoken in confronting the soldiers, who have been ordered to throw the last remaining child, the Trojan Prince, Astyanax, Hecuba's grandson, from the walls of the city.

HECUBA:

Now,
When the city is taken, and every Trojan
Fighting man lies dead, you have become terrified
Of a little child!³⁸⁵

³⁸⁵ Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. 52.

Theatre of War: Thematic Exploration of War, Sexual Violence, and Subjugation of Women in *Women of Troy*

When directing tragedy, particularly in our era of crisis, a production has the potential to be ethically complex or charged. When directing *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon*, amidst the increasing global tensions, it was important for me to be attuned to both plays resonances and reflections of war, sexual violence, and displacement. In this way, my role as director also had to find a balance between facilitator and mediator, aiming to ensure that the rehearsal room was a space of care, rigour, and ethical engagement while still allowing space for creative direction, discovery, and risks. As Taylor writes, “there are moments in the play which are almost unendurable to read and must in the playing touch on emotions and levels of experience we would all rather not contemplate”.³⁸⁶ As previously discussed, it was important to me that I allow *emotional resonances* to flourish rather than initiating any kind of conversation or incorporation of *direct trauma* into the work. This allowed the work to be urgent and stirring, while providing the ensemble opportunity to explore the weight of the material at a safe distance through metaphor, parallels, and creative play, rather than re-enactment of traumatic events. Through *Women of Troy*, we were “seeing the bloody events of the contemporary world in a tragic”³⁸⁷ narrative structure—one that brought forth the suffering of the characters and the grief and rage of the actors, manifesting in mythic, historical, and contemporary echoes. Carrying these worlds on our shoulders, we came to recognise that it is not just the disorder of the characters nor the women enduring contemporary global conflict, but “it is *ours* too. Our war, our rage, our (disavowed) grief”.³⁸⁸ In this way, the production became a form of embodied and empathetic protest beyond those we had marched in as actors in the park opposite the Sir Paul Reeves building in Auckland City³⁸⁹—an attempt to comprehend war and violence through a dramaturgical and embodied lens. As difficult as it is to imagine peace and resolution, performing ancient Greek tragedy can “be the starting point for any such aspiration.”³⁹⁰

³⁸⁶ Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. vii.

³⁸⁷ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, The Greeks, and Us* (Profile Books Ltd, 2020), pp. 19-20.

³⁸⁸ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, The Greeks, and Us* (Profile Books Ltd, 2020), p. 20.

³⁸⁹ Many actors in the production actively engaged with several marches that occurred in Auckland, including support for Pride, and the Ukrainian and Palestinian people’s suffering.

³⁹⁰ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, The Greeks and Us* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2020), p. 20.



Figure 95. Hecuba and the Chorus women hold a funeral for Astyanax, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

In the image that had so profoundly resonated with me—the photograph of young Alan Kurdi—it was vital that I approached his desecrated body with respect and not exploit the suffering he endured. For me, this caring intention manifested in the treatment of the doll that represented Astyanax. We imagined that he, too, was a character on the stage—not merely a symbol of loss, but a presence that we honoured as a fellow actor. This act of imagining supported my aim that Alan’s story was not being appropriated or sensationalised. The image is still profoundly shocking. Just as I had seen in Elliott’s productions of *War Horse* and *Angels in America*, it was pivotal for me as the director that the audience believed that they were engaging with the devastating fate of a *real* baby on stage and not a plastic one—an animate, living, breathing being, not an inanimate one—intensifying the tragedy of Astyanax’s execution. I directed that whenever Astyanax was on stage, he must be held correctly, interacted with, and treated as though he were another actor. This was elevated by the parental knowledge of several actors who could draw on their experience of holding their own children. Throughout the rehearsals, Astyanax came to life, as he was carried over a shoulder, had his back patted to comfort him, laid on an actor’s knees, his face gently wiped, spoken to and sung to. After each performance, several audience members approached me in confusion, believing that they had seen a real baby on stage and not a doll. This made the climactic moment in which his body was represented with his baby blanket filled with red confetti thrown from the balcony, especially shocking. However, because we were also dealing with upsetting material in this tragic play, it was fundamental for me that the actors were given space to step back from the emotional connection to Astyanax, to regard him as a doll outside of rehearsal mode. This allowed the actors, and I, to separate the fictional from the very real experiences of a child in a time of conflict. A further key separation of the *real* tragedy from the fictional was creating a separate, shrouded, bloody body that did not contain the Astyanax doll.

In the two images below, fiction and reality are placed side by side, in haunting proximity between art and reality—the photograph of Alan Kurdi, and a still from my production. While one captures the horrific loss of a child to war, the other is a fictionalised moment, constructed with compassion and critique. Drawing on the photograph and placing it side by side with the still from my production, I aim not to exploit Alan’s story, but as a gesture of remembrance for him and the ethical engagement we undertook in the production. The photograph is confronting but invites reflection of the shared emotional territory between real, ongoing suffering, and the way we processed and navigated that suffering through the production. In this way, the image of Alan was a reminder of the stakes of what we were representing as director and actors, and through Astyanax, a prompt to the audience that these stories are not merely entertainment—like the contemporary stagings of the ancient dramatists; they are a warning of the present times.

FIGURE 96 REDACTED FOR PUBLICATION

Figure 96. FACT—"Shocking Images of Drowned Syrian Boy Show Tragic Plight of Refugees", 2017.³⁹¹



Figure 97. FICTION—"Oh you Greeks!" Hecuba and the bloody body of Astyanax, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

³⁹¹ Helena Smith, 'Shocking Images of Drowned Syrian Boy Show Tragic Plight of Refugees', *The Guardian*, 2 September 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees>.

Rehearsing and performing the play in such a public setting, I considered how to address the serious themes of the play—the cost of war, female suffering, and female oppression. In a traditional staging of this ancient Greek play, Helen’s character would not have appeared on stage until the moment she spoke. But in our version, and in wanting to emphasise the ethos of the ensemble, I directed *Helen* to be present throughout the play. She is seen by the audience, high up on the balcony, waiting to be confronted by the Chorus of women who blame her for their suffering. Later in the PPDW, the actor who played *Helen* spoke about what it was like to be ever-present, acting and reacting to the on-stage action, the solitary confinement of the character, and judgment of the Chorus, as she waits to hear her fate too.

HELEN:

I think playing Helen was a little bit different for me because of her internal thoughts, like, most of the play, she doesn’t speak, she has all this time to think and reflect. And so, my internal thoughts were usually: how is she making herself more palatable for other people to honestly, to get the goals she wants to reach, to be in certain spaces that she doesn’t necessarily feel she belongs in. And I think that’s a symptom for a lot of women...

The cast nod and agree.

... that a lot of girls have to curate how you come across in certain spaces, you maybe, don’t feel like you belong. And I feel Helen is at that turning point where she has to beg and plead. I mean, god forbid, I have to plead with a man to do something, but you know it’s a reality. And so it makes for an interesting change for Helen to be on stage alone, and then to speak her mind, and say how she is feeling, and show that emotion how she is feeling. And that, to be honest, is totally different from how I am in real life, that feeling of not being able to show emotion, and rage, and frustration.

Figure 98. PPDW Transcript, Helen speaks about resonances of the character and lived experience.

For several weeks, *Helen* was unable to attend rehearsals as she was participating in a pre-planned university exchange. She and I both saw this as an exciting opportunity rather than a difficulty, to draw out the absence of *Helen* before her confrontation with the Chorus. Before the actor left, I rehearsed with her separately from the Chorus to develop the intensity of the scene. On her return, bringing the characters of *Helen* and the Chorus together, the dramatic tension was palpable. Together with the ensemble, we spent some time discussing what that moment felt like, the paradox between the rage and anger for wanting someone to blame, and the guilt and grief we felt for *Helen* and her situation. This moment was strengthened by Taylor’s translation, resisting softened language, using the word *rape* to describe her story of assault and kidnapping. In the PPDW, the actors reflected on this powerful moment in rehearsal

DELTA:

Whereas I actually really like that moment where you as Helen do shout "I was raped", and you let it sit every night for the audience. Because even we as people, we say they were 'assaulted', we dampen our language so as not to be so violent, but to shout and allow those words to come out is so powerful.

HELEN:

Its wild how it is an everyday thing, just in our language, and it's what you said HECUBA you have to be kind or else you are seen as mean, you know, Helen has to pander to Menelaus.

Figure 99. PPDW Transcript, The tension of Helen and the Chorus.

During rehearsals, it was important that we carefully chose when and where to use the word *rape*, not just because we were rehearsing and performing so publicly, but so as not to desensitise the power of Helen's words—it had to remain a shocking moment for the characters and audience, disrupting previous narrative assumptions about Helen's story.



Figure 100. Helen tells the story of her capture and assault, Women of Troy, 2023.

Grief and Rage: The Portrayal of Powerful Women in *Women of Troy* and Agamemnon

One of the discussions that the actors raised in the *Women of Troy* rehearsals and later again in the PPDW highlighted the importance of text selections based on the community of actors. Many of those who perform in the amateur and community theatre spaces emphasised the common catchphrase of how *difficult it is to find male actors*. However, as the actors observed, the Greek tragedies are teeming with complex, powerful female characters.

SIGMA:

But perhaps one of the best things is that since the 70's, 80's, women have been claiming, or perhaps reclaiming these plays, these stories about women, and staging them. They are some of the best roles for actresses to play.

HOLLY:

And it is funny, isn't it, how most of the plays are about women?

The group audibly agree.

DELTA:

Women of Troy.

SIGMA:

Elektra.

KAPPA:

Antigone.

ALPHA:

Medea.

ZETA:

Lysistrata.

HOLLY:

And why is it that these plays written by men, women are central to these stories, or not even central, these plays are directly about women, their experiences, their power, named after them?

Figure 101. PPDW Transcript, Ancient Greek Plays about Women.

There is a dramatic paradox that women were the central subject of these plays, named after them in many instances, yet they were totally excluded from participating in the dramatic enactment of their lives, let alone their exclusion from Athenian democracy. As Critchley denotes, the "democracy that was denied to [women] publicly is somehow extended to them theatrically".³⁹² Edith Hall points out that of the surviving tragedies, only

³⁹² Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, The Greeks, and Us* (Profile Books Ltd, 2020), p. 62.

one possesses no women—Philoctetes,³⁹³ explaining that “female tragic choruses in the surviving plays outnumber males by twenty-one to ten”.³⁹⁴

Staging these plays, therefore, often avoids the struggle of finding male actors. But where we have encountered difficulties, adaptations were made, including casting women in traditionally male character roles.³⁹⁵ In *Women of Troy*, two male actors were originally cast in the roles of the soldiers, Talthybius and Sebastos.³⁹⁶ Due to scheduling conflicts, the actors were unable to perform these roles. I reached out to several actors to resolve this issue without success, and for many weeks, these roles remained vacant. I instead approached an acting friend, who identified as female/non-binary, to fill the role of Sebastos, and having memorised the script as the director, stepped into the role of Talthybius myself. These traditionally male soldier roles were now embodied by female-presenting performers. This casting created an emotional tension within the all-women ensemble and with the audience alike. With only two male-identifying performers playing Poseidon and Menelaus, the presence of women enacting such brutality in killing the child Astyanax disrupted expectations, provoking a sense of moral dissonance—*How could these soldiers, appearing as women, kill a child?*³⁹⁷

As a director, I chose not to alter the characters' male identities, language, or costuming, honouring their original ancient intentions. This idea was carried through from my production of *Antigone*, where the female-identifying actors playing Creon and Teiresias were still regarded as male in language.³⁹⁸ Yet we remained aware of the realities of our own bodies—our movement, voices, and presence signalled contemporary gender identity as women. The resulting tension underscored a central truth—*cruelty transcends gender, violence is not the domain of men alone, brutality is a human failing*.

³⁹³ Edith Hall, ‘The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 105.

³⁹⁴ Edith Hall, ‘The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 105.

³⁹⁵ Although in every original staging of the plays in ancient Greece, both male and female characters would have been played by male actors.

³⁹⁶ Traditionally, there is one soldier character in *Women of Troy*, but this was split in my production for dramatic effect. I felt that there were two distinct emotional responses and archetypes of Talthybius—the empathetic and the pragmatic soldier.

³⁹⁷ We know, of course, that women carrying out violent acts in Greek tragedy are not uncommon, with roles such as Medea, who kills her own children, and Clytemnestra in revenge for her child.

³⁹⁸ Holly Charlotte Luton, ‘PEEP: Antigone, An Exploration of Performing Live Theatre During a Pandemic, Using Sophocles’ Antigone’ (Masters Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2021), <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/14479>, p. 48.



Figure 102. “What a lovely bride for my Commander-in-chief!”, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

Two questions played on our minds as we reflected on the *Women of Troy*:

1. Could there be any justice for women and the horrors *they* faced in war?
2. Could there be justice for the infanticide of their *children* in war?

A few weeks before the final performances of *Women of Troy* in April 2023, I began to consider what tragedy I might stage next. The decision process was based on numerous artistic, directorial, thematic, textual, and contextual considerations and involved several conversations with the *Women of Troy* actors, questioning:

- 🗣️ What tragedies/myths are familiar or unfamiliar?
- 🗣️ What tragedy might be most challenging and exciting for us to perform and for an audience to see?
- 🗣️ What tragedies and themes resonate with the current crises we are encountering?
- 🗣️ What happens before and what happens next in the story of the Trojans and the Greeks?

Through these conversations with the actors—later confirmed in the PPDW—I recognised that these themes resonated with the actors and their experience of living in our era of crisis, the cost of war, suffering, resilience, revenge, and accountability.

Staging Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

CHORUS:

So the great King, Agamemnon,
Launches his thousand keels
On the blood of a virgin.
To reclaim a stolen whore.
Iphigenia for Helen.
He takes what he wants—and he pays for it!³⁹⁹

Feedback from the cast indicated a desire to see more powerful female stories and to learn what else happens next in the Trojan War myth. I undertook some fiction and non-fiction literature reviews, including Constanza Casati's novel *Clytemnestra*,⁴⁰⁰ Haynes' *Pandora's Jar*,⁴⁰¹ and Pat Barker's *The Voyage Home*.⁴⁰² Hayne's statement was pivotal in my selection of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* as my next production:

So, Clytemnestra is a byword in the ancient world, and ever since, for a bad wife, the worst wife even. But for wronged, silenced, unvalued daughters, she is something of a hero: a woman who refuses to be quiet when her child is killed, who disdains to accept things and move on, who will not make the best of what she has.⁴⁰³

Agamemnon, written by Aeschylus, is the first play in The Oresteia trilogy, and was first performed at the festival of Dionysus in 458 BCE, winning first prize. It is the only *surviving* example of an ancient Greek tragic *trilogy*. Aeschylus' play differs from the recognised myth of the time as illustrated on surviving pottery and fragments and in the Homeric narrative,⁴⁰⁴ which places the blame of Agamemnon's murder on Aegisthus—Agamemnon's cousin and Clytemnestra's lover. Clytemnestra was no more than “an axe-wielding cheerleader”,⁴⁰⁵ baiting Agamemnon towards his death, as Aegisthus plunged the blade into the King.

³⁹⁹ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 14

⁴⁰⁰ Constanza Casati, *Clytemnestra* (Penguin Random House Company, 2023).

⁴⁰¹ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021).

⁴⁰² Pat Barker, *The Voyage Home*, The Women of Troy (Penguin Books, 2024).

⁴⁰³ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021), p. 171.

⁴⁰⁴ Peter Meineck, 'Forsaking the Fidelity Discourse: The Application of Adaptation', in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, ed. Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 84.

⁴⁰⁵ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021), p. 165.



Figure 103. Aegisthus threatens the household staff with Clytemnestra's axe, Agamemnon, 2024.



Figure 104. Aegisthus revels in the murder of Agamemnon, as he sits on the bathtub, knife in hand, Agamemnon, 2024.

In Aeschylus' telling—while Aegisthus revels in this murder of the King—it is Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, who wholeheartedly takes the glory for his murder:

CLYTEMNESTRA:
See, my work
Perfected. I don't disown it.
When the moment for action came I made no mistake.
[...] I pushed the blade into him. Once, twice.
Twice he screamed.
[...] I placed the point for a third and final time
And drove the blade clean through him.⁴⁰⁶

According to classical scholars, there is little evidence to suggest that the play was performed after its first iteration, with no surviving examples of revivals.⁴⁰⁷ This absence could suggest that Aeschylus' depiction was far too shocking for even the "sturdiest men in the theatre",⁴⁰⁸ watching the potential opportunity of their own wives brutally murdering them, should they have the chance. Certainly, if the play had been performed before an audience of women, perhaps they might have recognised something of their own experience in her defiance.

At the time the play was first performed, "Athens was recovering from devastating violence in a primal class struggle ultimately caused by the opening up of rights to the lowest class of citizens by Cleisthenes' reforms."⁴⁰⁹ In her 1999 production of Ted Hughes' translation, Katie Mitchell drew upon contemporary circumstances to intensify the drama's urgency—the conflict in Northern Ireland and genocides in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Rwanda.⁴¹⁰ In our own era of crisis, I too began to reflect on what it might mean to stage the play amid the continued war in Ukraine, the Israeli genocide of the Palestinians, the looming 2024 U.S. election, and—drawing on the context of the ancient play's original staging—a worsening global economic chasm of wealth inequality under late-stage capitalism. What does this play have to say when performed in a time where power and wealth is hoarded, vengeance is cyclical, and justice for those suffering under turmoil feels elusive? In rehearsals, I explored these ideas with the ensemble, playing the hot seating and debate games, asking how their characters felt towards the Trojan War, the King, Agamemnon, and the Queen, Clytemnestra. Clytemnestra's lines, "you are lucky. This great house knows how to treat slaves well",⁴¹¹ struck with the characters, a line dripping with self-justification and subjugation softened by civility. Their character responses began to navigate these deeper themes of power and cycles of suffering in the subtext and context of Aeschylus' play.

⁴⁰⁶ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 68-69.

⁴⁰⁷ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021), p. 149.

⁴⁰⁸ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021), p. 150.

⁴⁰⁹ Edith Hall, *The Ancient Greeks: Ten Ways They Shaped the Modern World* (Vintage, 2016), pp. 136-137.

⁴¹⁰ Lorna Hardwick, 'Staging Agamemnon: The Languages of Translation', in *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004*, ed. Fiona Macintosh et al. (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 218.

⁴¹¹ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 50.



Figure 105. *The Chorus challenge Aegisthus, Agamemnon*, 2024.

In researching the play further, I uncovered an added tension in the myth that is not present in the play text—“Agamemnon kills two of Clytemnestra’s children, more than a decade apart.”⁴¹² In Casati’s novel, she too acknowledges Agamemnon’s brutality, telling of the murder of Clytemnestra’s husband, Tantalus, and their infant child.⁴¹³ This missing and devastating detail in the play—instead focusing on her adultery rather than a deep maternal rage—made me see a different side of the plays I was staging. There was a wide juxtaposition of reactions to the consequences of war—the quiet resilience of the women of Troy and the violent resistance of Clytemnestra, who grieves for two children.⁴¹⁴ In directing my production, I worked closely with the actor playing Clytemnestra, particularly on her delivery of the line “He murdered his own daughter, *my* daughter.” While not explicitly referenced in the play, the actor and I chose to emphasise the repetition of *my*, feeling the possessive pronoun carried greater weight for us—it was a haunting recognition of another ghost alongside Iphigenia.

⁴¹² Natalie Haynes, *Pandora’s Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021), p. 171.

⁴¹³ Constanza Casati, *Clytemnestra* (Penguin Random House Company, 2023), 161-3.

⁴¹⁴ This contrast was particularly interesting as a director in discussion with the actor playing Hecuba in *Women of Troy*, who loses at least seven children to the Trojan war or as a consequence of the war (Cassandra, who is later killed by Clytemnestra, and Polydorus who is later killed by King Polymestor). We considered why Hecuba is not more enraged at the destruction of her entire city, people, and family: husband, sons, daughters, and grandson?

CLYTEMNESTRA:
Why didn't you judge Agamemnon?
He murdered his own daughter, *my* daughter,
On the whim of some shivering priest
Who had to [fucking] come up with something.⁴¹⁵

To heighten the absurdity and horror of the justification for Iphigenia's murder, we added the word *fucking*, when the actor tripped over the moment in a tension of her body and voice. This addition sharpened the moment, underscoring the tragic ridiculousness and barbarity of the situation and Clytemnestra's fury at the prophet Calchas' rationalisation for violence through ritual.

Another significant aspect of my production was the visual image—made potent through later interpretations of the myth—of the murder weapon itself. In Aeschylus' version, Agamemnon is killed offstage, likely with a sacrificial knife, reinforcing the ritualistic parallels of his and Iphigenia's deaths. However, in modern retellings—including John Collier's famous painting *Clytemnestra*, which inspired my poster design—the image of an axe was central to contrast the ritualistic sacrifice to one of brutal vengeance. This image was fundamental for me in reframing Clytemnestra's retaliation as unapologetically bloody and vengeful. Unlike Hecuba's deep grief and sorrow, Clytemnestra is fuelled by grief that manifests in furious rage, not simply born from the betrayal, but of unimaginable loss.



Figure 106. *Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon presented through danced violence, Agamemnon, 2024.*

⁴¹⁵ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 71

The Chorus tell the story of Iphigenia's sacrifice, and it was important to me to symbolically stage this moment, as though the Chorus were reenacting a memory they had either lived through as veterans or heard whispered through the palace walls. Haynes notes that in the original play, Iphigenia is not mentioned by name.⁴¹⁶ In contrast, Hughes repeats her name multiple times throughout the passage, reasserting her humanity—she is not just Agamemnon's daughter, but a young person with a life and story of her own. Haynes observes that at the height of this violence, the Chorus breaks apart before any explicit, bloody outcome is revealed or mentioned.⁴¹⁷ In my version, the Chorus narrates and reenacts the events symbolically up to Iphigenia's death, taking everyday items from inside the palace and using them as props within their own storytelling scene—mops and table cloths to imitate Calchas, a chaise longue as a sacrificial altar, a yellow table cloth as a dress, a yellow dress once belonging to Iphigenia, torn to pieces, nautical ropes from the storerooms. One actor I directed to play an *imagined Iphigenia*, wrapped in a yellow tablecloth, who is raised up by the ghost-like soldiers, pleading for her life. She leaps from the chaise. She is then replaced by a small yellow dress, torn apart by ghost-like soldiers,⁴¹⁸ who slowly gather the ropes and disappear into the palace doors. My focus was not just the vengeance of Iphigenia, but what she represented—the bloodshed of *thousands of fictional* children at the hands of Agamemnon and his soldiers, and the *millions of real* children killed as collateral damage of war and conflict.

⁴¹⁶ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021), p. 150.

⁴¹⁷ Natalie Haynes, *Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths* (Harper Collins, 2021), p. 150.

⁴¹⁸ Prepared to be torn, fixed with Velcro and red ribbons to symbolically imitate blood.

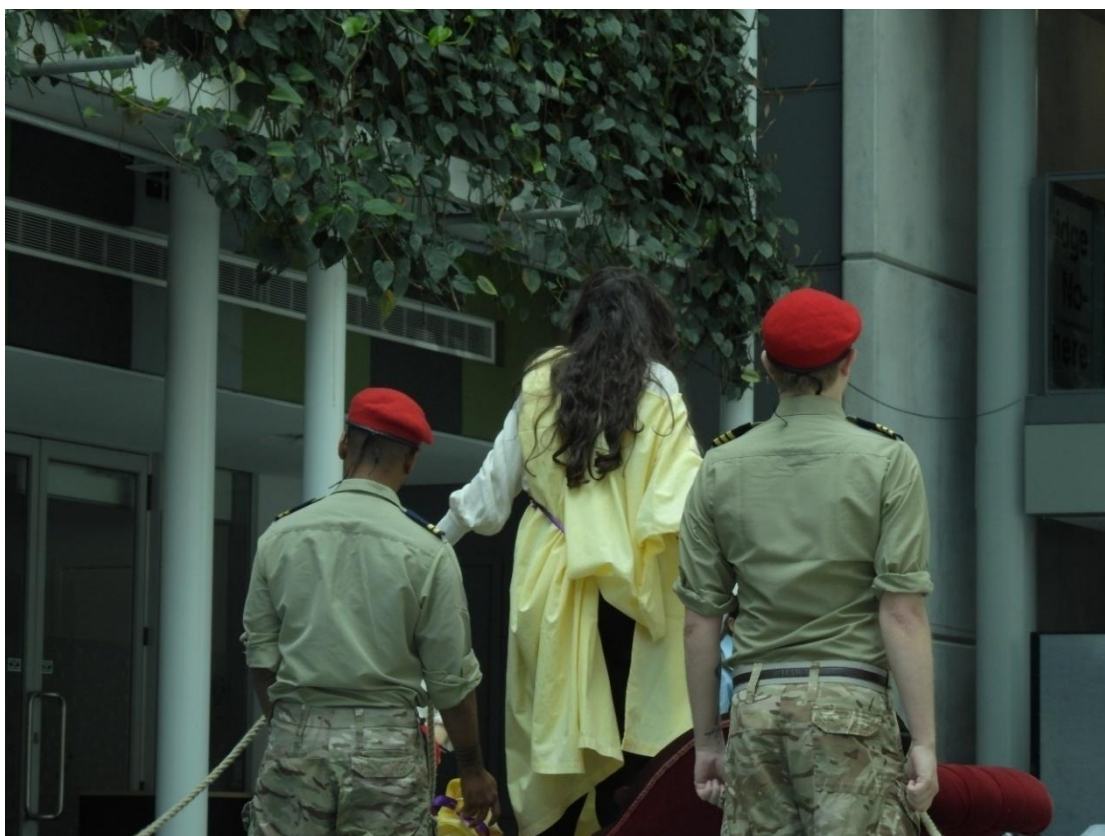


Figure 107. *Iphigenia's sacrifice, reenacted by the Chorus, Agamemnon, 2024.*

Their deaths become symbolised in the bloody footprints that would appear on the tapestry that Agamemnon would walk on. I purchased several *Bloody Bath Mats*,⁴¹⁹ colour changing bathmats, that, when walked on in wet feet, change from white to red. These would appear as Agamemnon stepped on each piece along the tapestry, stretching the length of the atrium, after Agamemnon's feet had been washed by the Chorus women. These images resonated more deeply for the actors and me, as we watched the horrific news of the genocide and airstrikes in Palestine and saw brutal images of parents carrying the bodies of their dead children.

⁴¹⁹ *Bloody Bath Mat: Colour Changing Bath Mat Turns Red When Wet*, n.d., PVC/polyester novelty bathmat, <https://bloodybathmat.com/>.



Figure 108. The tapestry rolled out by the Chorus and Watchmen, *Agamemnon*, 2024.

A further challenge, as I suggested in Chapter 2, is selecting the right translation for my production. One that fulfils my research and performance objectives—a text that balances visceral imagery with rhythmical and critical language, where moments of the play could speak most truthfully to the present era of crisis, and one that resonates for actors and audiences. I read many versions of *Agamemnon*, from translations to adaptations, verse and prose, classical speech and modern idiom.

Captivated by the female gaze and its emotional force, choosing to focus my production on the themes of rage and revenge, I was drawn to Ted Hughes' translation of *Agamemnon*—a version rich in visceral imagery and rhythmic intensity. As I was reading Hughes' text, I experienced the words like synaesthesia—they danced off the page, and I could physically visualise and embody each moment as though it were happening in action on the stage. But in selecting his work, I came to recognise an unspoken, yet significant ghost that lingers beneath his words—of the author, Sylvia Plath, his deceased wife. Though only a small part of the broader historical and literary context surrounding this translation, her presence felt too significant to ignore. It became important to me as the director to acknowledge this undercurrent in conversations with the cast—the complex legacy of Hughes' abusive relationship with Plath,⁴²⁰ and the cultural tensions and parallels evoked. It added an uneasy but important, generative layer to the cast and my understanding of the text's emotional terrain, especially in navigating discussions

⁴²⁰ Danuta Kean, 'Unseen Sylvia Plath Letters Claim Domestic Abuse by Ted Hughes', Books, *The Guardian*, 11 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/11/unseen-sylvia-plath-letters-claim-domestic-abuse-by-ted-hughes>.

about these women's experiences of grief and suicidal ideation.⁴²¹ It was no longer just about Clytemnestra's grief and rage, but a grief and rage that spoke for us all.

"He takes what he wants—and he pays for it": The themes of Revenge and Justice

Like the early research stages of *Women of Troy*, I brainstormed three or four key themes that emerged in a close reading of *Agamemnon*. While three themes stood out distinctly, I found there was a heavy overlap between them, highlighting the complex interwoven subjects of revenge, justice, and rage—*The Cycle of Revenge, Justice and Accountability*, and *Feminine Power: Grief and Rage*. In the close reading, there was a quiet acknowledgement of the previous production and story of the women of Troy, as their presence lingered on the edges of the text, of their memory and fate.

CLYTEMNESTRA:
Troy on its hill,
Cascades with blood, as under a downpour
Of bodies from the heavens,
Shattered and entangled with each other
In every passage - mutilations,
Amputations, eviscerations. The women
Are kneeling, shoulders heaving, with eyes hidden,
Over what were yesterday
Husbands, fathers, sons.
They labour at a grief that is already
The first labour of slaves.⁴²²

Below is a figure of a few selected and significant lines from the play that highlight for me the themes of the play.

⁴²¹ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 42.

⁴²² Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 20.

Key Themes of Agamemnon

The Cycle of Revenge



ELPIS (WATCHMAN):

So the great King, Agamemnon, Launches his thousand keels
On the blood of a girl. To reclaim a stolen whore.
Iphigenia for Helen. He takes what he wants

PENELOPE (CHORUS):

-and he pays for it.

CASSANDRA:

But the gods watch these deaths, They are sending one to
avenge us. A true son of his father's justice Who will
punish his mother. Now an exile blowing in the wind, He
will put the topmost stone On this family's monument Of
bloody crime. The gods have sealed the contract That binds
the son of Agamemnon To get the full price For his father's
carcase.

HAEMON (SOLDIER):

Reason fails, mind is a casualty Of this bloody succession.
The throne of Argos Slides on blood, in a tilting house -
Everything rushes Towards some great scream.

PENELOPE (CHORUS):

That leader who herds His people en masse Into glorious
graves - Let him be sure: Heaven is watching. When his
high hand Unbalances justice The Furies wake up. That man
strides Assured and proud Into the abyss.

CLYTEMNESTRA:

Here's my husband, Agamemnon, Dead as the floor that he
cannot feel, And from which he will never get up. And here
is the hand that Justice contracted To kill him. And it
killed him. Yes, I have killed him. So there the whole
truth lies.

AEGISTHUS:

Justice! At last the day of justice has dawned. This is
perfect proof that the gods Watch men and punish evil.
What a beautiful sight To see this man gagged and bound In
meshes knotted by the Furies!

Accountability and Justice



Female Power: Grief and Rage



CLYTEMNESTRA:

You think I'm some irresponsible woman? You are making a mistake. My heart and my brain are like this blade, Bronze, and forged with a purpose.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Why didn't you judge Agamemnon? He murdered his own daughter, my daughter, On the whim of some shivering priest Who had to [fucking] come up with something.

Figure 109. Key Themes of *Agamemnon*: The Cycle of Revenge, Accountability and Justice, Female Power: Grief and Rage

In reading and rehearsing the play, there were lines we acknowledged for their dramatic irony. While dramatic irony may not have been the original intention of the ancient dramatists, it arose through the audience's foreknowledge of the myth, creating a tension between character action—a *tragic inevitability*, a key convention of ancient drama. However, performing these plays in contemporary contexts where audiences are often unfamiliar with the original myths, produces a different kind of tension. In rehearsal, this frequently resulted in laughter, particularly around moments that would have been foreknown in the ancient world.

JASON (SOLDIER):

The truth is: Menelaus
Has vanished off the earth's face.
And his ship's gone with him.

DIANA (CHORUS):

You mean he sailed with you from the shore of Troy?

IANTHE (CHORUS)

– And you lost him?⁴²³

But for both ancient and modern audiences, watching Clytemnestra kill Agamemnon is and would have been shocking, as an unexpected twist to the earlier mythic depictions.

⁴²³ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 33.

Today, these shocking moments of dramatic irony border on absurdity, and thus become humorous. It became important to embrace moments of humour—not to undercut the tragedy—but to manage the emotional weight of the play. The parallels to our own lives, or the absurdity of certain choices, became glaring. If we did not laugh at Clytemnestra's response, we could only cry for her situation. Humour, in this way, became both a mechanism for dealing with the tragic material and as a rehearsal tool of critical engagement.

These themes and resonances led me to consider moral and legal justice, and the depictions of women in Greek tragedy striving for an unobtainable notion of justice. As Hall reminds us, a contemporary woman of the ancient dramatists was as excluded from theatre, as they were from the ancient democratic process of Athenian law. Let alone their mythic counterparts—such as Medea and Clytemnestra—where “law courts had not yet been invented”.⁴²⁴ A modern Clytemnestra might have had access to a justice system that would serve Agamemnon three life sentences⁴²⁵ for the murder of her first husband and child, and their daughter, Iphigenia. Yet “Clytemnestra had no alternative if Agamemnon was to be called to account”,⁴²⁶ and so it is no wonder that these *dangerous* women felt the need to take matters into their own hands. There is an irony that the image of justice that resides in almost every Western courtroom is a woman—*Lady Justice*. Named after the Roman goddess, *Justitia*, originating from the ancient Greek goddess, *Dyke*. Yet, she herself would have had no say in her own legal autonomy.

But what is justice? It is the age-old question asked by Socrates that continues to be contemplated in Western philosophy. Theatre, Democracy, and Philosophy arose contemporaneously in ancient Greece, and so it is unsurprising that these deep moral questions are enacted and contemplated in the fictional realms of the theatre. Harari proposes that *justice* is like a myth itself—nothing more than a story, an imagined concept, constructed and agreed upon by two parties because they both believe in the same “existence of laws, justice, human rights—and the money paid out in fees”.⁴²⁷

Revenge, says Robert C. Solomon, is “part and parcel of our human nature and equally essential to justice, not just character flaws or human weaknesses.”⁴²⁸ As humans, we are deeply complex, and we are not exempt from the feelings of grief and rage. Vengeance is culturally engrained across the world from religious literature to the theatrical genre of

⁴²⁴ Edith Hall, *The Ancient Greeks: Ten Ways They Shaped the Modern World* (Vintage, 2016), p. 156.

⁴²⁵ In modern Greece, murder carries a life sentence, with the possibility of parole after 16 years. For multiple life sentences, parole eligibility is available after 20 years.

⁴²⁶ Edith Hall, *The Ancient Greeks: Ten Ways They Shaped the Modern World* (Vintage, 2016), p. 136.

⁴²⁷ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Penguin Random House Company, 2014), p. 31.

⁴²⁸ Robert C. Solomon, *In Defense of Sentimentality (The Passionate Life)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 21.

the *Revenge Tragedy*.⁴²⁹ Our emotional resonances and responses to the world have determined what is fair and what is just in our modern society, what is legally or morally justifiable and what is destructive vengeance. The essence of tragedy is conflict—a battle of armies and nations, between men and women, slaves and masters, gods and mortals, what is right and wrong, what is fair and just. Anne Carson asks then, “Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief.”⁴³⁰ These were philosophical questions we explored in the rehearsal process with the cast through characterisation tasks and games. Our PPDW allowed for further intellectual conversation, much as the ancient Greeks revelled and yearned for debate and contemplation about the world through philosophy and theatre.

Like pity and fear evoked for an audience, rage and grief are cathartic emotions purged by the characters of tragedy. Hecuba has immense grief as she weeps in vain for her slain husband Priam, all her daughters and sons, and her grandchild, Astyanax. But it is Clytemnestra who exhibits that powerful and dangerous combination of both grief and rage. Solomon argues that justice without emotion,

justifies passivity, mere judgment, and not action. It leaves us unmotivated, uninvolved in the world, as if justice is merely to be hoped for from some higher power and not a personal virtue to be cultivated and exercised.⁴³¹

This was a point of discussion in the *Women of Troy* PPDW, when the actors discussed the Chorus women’s hopeful expectations of divine intervention for their suffering.

LAMDA:

And there is also the idea of trust in these leaders, and the Gods in the play, constantly praying to the Gods for guidance and intervention, you know “the Gods will save us, the Gods will save us!” But it becomes more and more evident through the play that the women have been abandoned by the Gods. And especially that scene when they come down from Olympus and walk amongst the mortals, and they could intervene in this moment when Astyanax will be taken from Andromache, that moment of absolute horror and violence, the atrocity of killing him, and yet they walk away.

The group murmur.

HOLLY:

HECUBA, what is one of your final lines in the play?

HECUBA:

Oh gosh ha ha, don’t ask me!

⁴²⁹ An English Elizabethan and Jacobean genre of drama, known for dark themes and violent plots involving revenge. Examples include Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*.

⁴³⁰ Anne Carson, ‘Tragedy: A Curious Art Form’, in *Grief Lessons—Four Plays by Euripides*, trans. Anne Carson (New York Review Books, 2006), p. 7.

⁴³¹ Robert C. Solomon, *In Defense of Sentimentality (The Passionate Life)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 21-22.

The group all laugh, trying to remember their lines from the play.

HECUBA:

Oh yes! "Oh, you gods, but why bother to call on them? All our prayers, all our sacrifices have been in vain...

DELTA, LAMDA, KAPPA, OMEGA speak in unison with HECUBA

... worthless, a waste of time".

LAMDA:

Yeah, and I remember, THALEIA'S monologue...

DELTA:

...Oh yes, the prayer to Zeus.

LAMDA:

"you have abandoned us", and you know it's that feeling of like, oh shit, were in a crisis, and we've got these people in power, our leaders, our politicians, the UN, and they've abandoned us, or that they can't do anything.

KAPPA:

Oh god yeah. These people in power, and they have none.

[ACTOR]:

And unfortunately, humans have this desperate need to believe that there is something beyond us, something eternal thing, a thing we might search for in a time of crisis, some sort of God, salvation, deliverance from this horror, to take us out of this, whatever God to them might be, but will never come. I was just saying to GAMMA, that as someone who Captions the news, because that's my job, everyday there are videos I have to watch of kids in Gaza, children covered in rubble, blood, screaming, and their parents falling to their knees and...

[ACTOR]'s voice becomes hoarse, they begin to cry. LAMDA across the circle begins to wipe away tears too.

... crying out, and saying I've lost my entire family, and you know raising their arms to the sky, and saying God why?

GAMMA and KAPPA, who are standing either side of [ACTOR], comfort her, hug her. KAPPA is also emotional. [ACTOR] wipes away tears. [ACTOR] rubs KAPPA'S arm in reassuring comfort. Holly offers a box of tissues for the cast. She pauses the conversation to check in with the actors.

[ACTOR]

And it's just... yeah... But it's just a cruel fate. Because you want something beyond these people in power to come and rescue you, but nothing happens.

Figure 110. PPDW Transcript, the Chorus Women's hopeful expectations of justice through divine intervention.

This PPDW took place one month after the October 7th 2023, attack in Israel by Hamas, and the retaliatory escalated conflict against the Palestinian people by Israel.⁴³² The actors in the PPDW spoke about the recent events. At times, the actors express their emotional resonances for the play's themes and what they are seeing through the media. These careful conversations were not possible without the rapport and bonds, the *whanaungatanga*, we built as a company of players to support and care for one another. This discussion heightened my rationale for staging *Agamemnon*, a play that asks what good is the law for a population who are excluded from it? What good is justice for women who cannot legally obtain it? They must then take matters into their own hands. If justice is passive, then revenge is force, revenge is action, revenge is change.

The *Chorus* convey their views in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* that "evil begets evil".⁴³³ But they also suggest that "evil for evil is justice, and justice is holy".⁴³⁴ No man can get away without punishment or the scorn of his people when "he takes what he wants [...] he pays for it".⁴³⁵ Whatever our political views and our views of the play, how can one not feel grief and rage at the images of women and children suffering in war?

Costuming: Crossover and Contrast between Worlds of the Plays

Costumes are perhaps the most fundamental aspect in designing and setting the scene, helping both actor and audience to become more actively engaged and immersed in the world of the play.⁴³⁶ They transform the actor's experience from *I am playing*, to *I am*. Costumes are not just an outfit to be worn or "decorative accessories of the actor; in an important sense, they are what makes a performer an *actor* rather than any other kind of performer."⁴³⁷ Where I deliberately resisted *prettiness* and *polish*, a costume that romanticised suffering felt like a betrayal of the play's brutal core. From head to toe, a costume must serve the character's truth and the world they inhabit—not the actor's personal aesthetics or desire to be seen in a certain light. That said, the costume and makeup process remains one of the most thrilling stages in rehearsal—a moment where characterisation and dramaturgy begin to materialise through aesthetic design. Sometimes, these costumes are beautiful—but beautiful in their brutality.

Costuming was approached where possible with sustainability and budget in mind—prioritising second-hand sourcing, repurposing old garments, or, where new items were necessary, ensuring they were low-cost, bought in bulk purchases, and could be used multiple times across productions. This was especially important given the demands of the work—costumes needed to withstand physical destruction or heavy wear, such as

⁴³² Sérine Meradji, 'Rights Expert Finds "Reasonable Grounds" Genocide Is Being Committed in Gaza | UN News', 26 March 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147976>.

⁴³³ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 38.

⁴³⁴ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 94.

⁴³⁵ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 14.

⁴³⁶ Jane Luton et al., *Level 2 Drama Study Guide* (ESA Publications, 2013), p. 170.

⁴³⁷ Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 19.

Antigone's prison jumpsuit and lab coats stained with blood, Cassandra's torn and dirtied wedding dress, and the tearaway, bloodied costumes of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. Immediately following the dress rehearsal of *Agamemnon*, but before the production's cancellation, Cassandra's costume was burnt, muddied, sweat-marked, and deliberately degraded and distressed to aesthetically reflect her descent into captivity and the unseen rough journey from one play text to another.

Rather than borrowing or renting—as the budget could not accommodate these extra costs—each costume was purchased with reuse in mind. This further ensured each item felt new to each audience while remaining part of our own creative toolkit. I was approached by a director who later borrowed the costume used for *Helen* for her own production at no charge. Actors provided their own shoes and undergarments for hygiene and sizing purposes, and where basic garments were needed, such as white shirts, black dress pants, or skirts, actors either supplied their own or they were provided by me. Additional items—such as hooded robes, military costumes, and suit jackets—were made or tailored to fit.



Figure 111. The Chorus Women in *Agamemnon*, household staff in dress blacks and whites, *Agamemnon*, 2024.



Figure 112. The cast prepares for performance 1, *Women of Troy*, 2023.



Figure 113. The cast prepares for performance 2, *Women of Troy*, 2023.

In *Women of Troy*, the actors and I collaboratively agreed that makeup and special effects could further cement their characters into the devastated world of the play, with dirt, cuts, bruises—and for the women of Troy—smudged makeup. These details helped to physically extend the emotional and psychological wounds of the characters. The contrast of elegance to ruin, once-beautiful ball dresses—worn in celebration of the gift

of the Trojan Horse—set against their brutalised bodies, highlighted the tragic nature of great people who fall through [hubris](#).



Figure 114. *The Chorus women, bloodied and bruised, grieve for Astyanax, Women of Troy, 2023.*

One of the most exciting aspects of staging *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon* in close succession was the opportunity to explore crossover and contrast of myths, characters, and thematic resonances. Sometimes this appeared as textual acknowledgement, like references to the women of Troy's suffering at the end of the war. Other times, as familial contrasts in the appearance of the brothers Menelaus and Agamemnon, and twin sisters Helen and Clytemnestra. Or in the literal presence of the shared character of Cassandra. From the outset, I considered how to creatively situate the plays in relation to one another. I felt I had three opportunities: to either replicate the same world across both productions, to blend aesthetics with some shared design ideas, or to craft entirely distinct worlds. With several actors appearing in both productions, it became important to differentiate the narrative settings in casting, both to support the actors' character transitions and to foreground the thematic consequences of the Trojan War myth across different perspectives and locations. There were, however, a few recurring design themes that linked the two. Ropes appeared in both productions as a pragmatic object, and a visual cue to naval motifs and as metaphors for captivity and power—especially used in the dance sequences of the *Trojan Horse* and *Oh Bondage! Up Yours!* The sequined black dress, worn by Helen, was also worn by Clytemnestra, suggesting a subtle undercurrent of kinship and rivalry between the sisters. This choice allowed me to quietly

but powerfully point out the inherited burden of femininity, powerful resilience, and suffering both women had faced in their mythic patriarchal systems—with Clytemnestra's dress ill-fitted, suggesting a kind of uneasiness in playing the role of the good, traditional housewife and homemaker, and a discomfort in comparisons between her and her sister.

Costuming was otherwise deliberately altered to distinguish the plays' differing atmospheres and themes. The military uniforms reflected a tonal shift in anachronistic timelines—one of a more hierarchical, bureaucratic warfare and evacuation with the Marine officers in *Women of Troy*, to a ground-level combat *boots-on-the-ground* khaki soldiers in *Agamemnon*. However, both soldiers wore the red berets, a symbolic resonance of global military special forces, of blood, cruelty, and complicity. Both brothers, Menelaus and Agamemnon, dressed in black to conjure ominous thematic resonances of oppression, state violence, and fascism. Menelaus was adorned in wealth, encrusted with looted jewellery and fine fabrics—his costume suggested both colonial greed and opportunistic gain in the annihilation of Troy. A fresh wound across his face hinted that he had recently come from the battlefield. In contrast, Agamemnon wore a decorated uniform heavy with medals and honours, signalling a more abstract violence—one of destruction orchestrated from afar. We played into the idea that Agamemnon had never set foot on the battlefield itself, in the preshow devised sequence, where he could be seen with his soldiers in the bunker of the atrium, directing airstrikes from safety while others bled for him. His black costume, with a tight, red tie, would later be used to blindfold him in the Oh Bondage! Up Yours! dance sequence.

An unplanned casting shift led to a productive tension. When the actor originally playing Agamemnon had to withdraw, the actor who had played Menelaus in *Women of Troy* stepped into the role, another example of a potential crisis that could be embraced for thematic tension. The shift was especially charged given the brotherhood of the two characters. Together, the actor and I explored how their demeanours might differ: Menelaus as reactive, Agamemnon as cold, calculated, and quietly violent.

A key aspect of the costumes for both Clytemnestra and Agamemnon was creating outfits that would be bloodied during the dance sequence. Due to practical concerns that the atrium floor and other costumes could be stained and damaged with the fake blood, I sought a creative and visceral solution in the form of a tearaway costume for both characters, that could reveal the bloodshed in dramatic beats of the music, hidden underneath their pristine uniforms and pant suits.



Figure 115. *The Furies bind and chain up Agamemnon, his shirt torn away, revealing a bloody vest, Agamemnon, 2024.*

Purity, Prophecy, and Plunder: Iconography of Cassandra between Plays

Importantly, the role of Cassandra was intentionally recast to support the distinct worlds of each play and my creative methods for the ensemble. The actor who had delivered a stunning performance as Cassandra in *Women of Troy* was cast as the Chorus leader in *Agamemnon*. This created a unique dynamic where her embodied knowledge of Cassandra informed our Chorus rehearsals, helping to seed a deeper collective understanding of the prophetic foresight that haunts the house of Atreus. This shifting narrative was also carried through in the costuming, where I chose to foreground three key themes of Cassandra's story—*Purity, Prophecy, and Plunder*.



Figure 116. *Cassandra in the Wedding Dress, Women of Troy, 2023.*



Figure 117. *Cassandra's Prophet Robe, Modelled by Holly during costume creation, Agamemnon, 2024.*

Purity was rendered with bitter irony. Cassandra—a Trojan princess, once the virgin bride of Apollo, and made prophetic by him, never to be believed—is raped by Achilles and made a sex slave of Agamemnon as a spoil of war. My intention was to deliberately subvert any kind of romantic or romanticised aesthetic. Cassandra was no longer adorned in a white wedding dress of purity and protection. Instead, this red ball dress—visually resonant with Attwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*,⁴³⁸ and connotations of sexual impurity, subjugation, and violence—was distressed, burned, frayed, muddied, sweat-stained, and bloodied. I discussed with the actor the transitional change of character between stories and about how the dress should feel, as though it had been dragged through the rubble, and stepped over the dead bodies of her family. This costume was not intended to be pretty, though there was beauty in its brutality—a once-elegant ball gown, dirtied and torn. And yet, in the wearing, elegance became something striking—almost defiant and resilient, framing the character not as a victim, but as a tragic figure of power, grace, and imminent death.

⁴³⁸ *The Handmaid's Tale*, written by Bruce Miller, aired 2017-2025, on Hulu.

Evidently, *prophecy* is central to Cassandra's identity, but here it was understood as a woman who could see that death was imminent. Her priestess, prophetic power was embodied visually through an iridescent golden-red robe that enveloped the actor with a veiled hood—a pristine, almost sacred layer that concealed the brutal reality beneath of the distressed ball gown. This hood carried emotional weight, hiding the Cassandra's face from the view of Clytemnestra, before her introduction by Agamemnon to his wife, and the Chorus. This robe was designed to be torn away during the performance, echoing Cassandra's symbolic tearing of her wedding dress in *Women of Troy*. The Chorus explicitly states that they “believe every word [she] says”,⁴³⁹ an acknowledgement of her situation, a death not in vain, but relief brought about by its imminence. In conversation with the actor, we discussed the prophetic visions of Cassandra and the power her voice needed to carry in the scene.

Plunder completed the triad. She was not entering the palace as a princess, dignitary, or revered priestess, but as a *possession*—Agamemnon's trophy of war. Clytemnestra's lines about treating the slaves well ring with deep irony in this context. The choice to have Cassandra enter the palace bruised and filthy, without the dignity of preparing herself, was deliberate. Like the women of Troy, we had discussed special effects make-up to show the bruises and physical harm of the character, too. Her brutalised body prompted another question for the actors—is the bath Clytemnestra offers Agamemnon an act of decency for Cassandra, or an extension of taunting cruelty?

CLYTEMNESTRA:
Cassandra! Come in.
You too have to be cleansed
In the ritual bath.⁴⁴⁰

Cassandra becomes another object of “plundered splendour”⁴⁴¹—a woman of high status, now reduced to a sexual trophy. Like Andromache, her slave life is now framed by defilement. I drew on Barker's *The Voyage Home*⁴⁴² as a secondary source to justify and deepen the creative decisions I had already made as the director and designer. Barker's Cassandra became a haunting echo, affirming another emotional crisis of a woman's suffering at the heart of the play.⁴⁴³

⁴³⁹ This line was also spoken by the actor who had played Cassandra in *Women of Troy*, a gesture of connection between these women and the story of the character they had played. Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 59.

⁴⁴⁰ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 50.

⁴⁴¹ PHOEBE (CHORUS):

The son of Achilles will hang up Troy's plundered splendour
As a trophy under some Phthian temple roof!

Euripides, *The Women of Troy*, trans. Don Taylor (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2007), p. 28.

⁴⁴² Pat Barker, *The Voyage Home*, *The Women of Troy* (Penguin Books, 2024).

⁴⁴³ Pat Barker, *The Voyage Home*, *The Women of Troy* (Penguin Books, 2024).



Figure 118. Cassandra tears off the Wedding Dress, Women of Troy, 2023.



Figure 119. Cassandra's prophet robe lies discarded on the palace floor, Agamemnon, 2024.



Figure 120. Holly Sewing Costumes for the *Watchmen*, Agamemnon, 2024.



Figure 121. Holly Sewing Costumes for Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, 2024.

While costumes, sound, and props were in place for the first full dress rehearsal, some creative elements were not brought to fruition, aiming to be further developed, refined, and finished in the remaining rehearsals. In the photograph above, in which I sit at my sewing machine, piecing together the final costumes, what I did not know then was that I was unwell—and within a week, I would be hospitalised.

October 19th, 2024 marked the final iteration of *Agamemnon*, the first full—and ultimately final—dress rehearsal. We gathered together at the end of the performance with our usual shared lunch—that I had still prepared despite my exhaustion and unknown illness. I gave the cast notes, grateful for their hard work, dedication, and enthusiasm.

But throughout this rehearsal, I had been carrying a growing concern—a sense that the production and my research were *unravelling*. While the Chorus had remained focused and attentive, there was a veiled undercurrent of something I could not quite name at the time—an inattentiveness, an absence, a friction that a few actors had not been fully engaged. Only in hindsight, through photos, videos, and reflective writing, have I been able to articulate what I felt during that process. What I intuitively felt at the time was that something was *very* wrong. In the photographs below, taken mere moments apart in the

rehearsal, a scenario which disrupted the process caused my demeanour to drastically change. Captured on camera, my visceral intuitions that I had felt at the time, and reflectively ruminated about again and again, had been validated. There were other moments of disruption and lack of focus throughout this dress rehearsal that were not captured visually but brought to my attention or that I had recognised as the director observing the play. Although I attempted to deal with some of these issues that arose through actors' notes, or spoken in privacy away from the ensemble, I was still left feeling shocked, upset, frustrated, and angered by what had occurred unexpectedly, blaming myself for the tension that had not been present in my company previously, staging *Antigone* and *Women of Troy*.



Figure 122. *Agamemnon Dress Rehearsal*, contrasting images of Holly as the director, taken a few seconds apart, from excitement to shock, *Agamemnon*, 2024.

In a literal sense, the incomplete tapestry prop of the production—recreated in my creative practice exhibition, splayed out before the sewing machine—was becoming a metaphorical *unravelling* of my research and production—an intuitive knowing that this creative journey was not going to reach a well-refined conclusion.

At this point, the cracks in Pandora's jar had fractured wide open. The jar was toppling, and chaos had already begun to spill out. I did not have the words for it then, but now I can begin to piece together the broken fragments and attempt to make sense of what happened, how it happened, and why. By the end of that rehearsal, the jar had smashed entirely, and the reverberations would echo through my research for months to come.

Chapter Five

Considering Fragility, Resilience, and Resonances in an Era of Crisis: A Reflection on my Practice

In this chapter I discuss the discoveries I made as a theatre practitioner staging two ancient Greek tragedies during my doctoral research. These plays are *about* crisis thematically, were originally performed *in* crises contextually, and are now performed *in* our own era of contemporary crises. The chapter contributes to the ongoing discussions about performing, directing, and creating theatre in crises in Aotearoa as a female director.

I reflect critically and formally on the tensions that arose during my productions, and the fragile and precarious responsibility as a leader, in both my roles as Researcher and Director. I consider whether theatre and research can occur simultaneously and whether the individual expectations, demands, and responsibilities required to be a *Participant* and an *Actor* can coexist. I reflect on the mistakes I made in my own practice and the importance of reiterating the framework of the production as research. I propose that in order for theatre and research to successfully coexist, actors must be selected carefully, considering individual and group dynamics, responses, and behaviours, have an understanding of dramaturgy through a relevant qualification or expert experience, and that every rehearsal must be treated as though it were a research session.

When tensions arise, or the dynamics of a group begin to shift, the ensemble structures I have built as a director can begin to strain. I reflect on how this impacted the creative process, and the ability to lead with clarity and care. These outcomes prompt me to consider the emotional demands and *limitations* of my role as a director, the resilience required in our practice, and the negotiation of care in the rehearsal room. I reflect on these moments, exploring the possibilities and limitations, challenges and resilience required to sustain a research project alongside a theatre production in a time of global, national, and ultimately personal crisis.

In the months following the conclusion of my two productions, I found myself experiencing widely contrasting emotional reflections and [catharsis](#). With *Antigone* under my directing belt and now completing *Women of Troy*, I felt elevated in my confidence and abilities as a director and dramaturg to undertake a production during a time of crisis, facing ever-changing, turbulent and challenging moments and events. Spurred on by the success of *Women of Troy*, I was excited to speak with the actors in the PPDW as they reflected on the experience and methodologies in creating the production, and was eager to begin planning and preparing for the subsequent production of *Agamemnon*.

But in the months following the conclusion of *Agamemnon*, I found myself experiencing a profound sense of grief. Grief is a feeling not uncommon in post-production environments—much like actors who speak of *post-show depression*, directors often grapple with the emotional void left by a completed production. However, when a production does not reach a fully realised or neatly resolved conclusion, that grief can feel even more acute. After the cancellation of *Agamemnon*, I found myself caught in a cycle of reflection and rumination, over and over, feeling the familiar emotional stages of shock, anger, sadness, frustration, and, eventually, acceptance that comes with the experience of grief. I questioned whether these feelings and situations I had experienced were uniquely personal, or whether other practitioners and directors had encountered the same emotional, professional, and creative challenges in their practice.

While directing often requires us to be outgoing, bold, active, and extroverted facilitators of the rehearsal space, behind the scenes, it can be very isolating and a lonely experience. In the close-knit, highly visible theatre community, especially in a small population of Aotearoa, one's work is constantly subject to scrutiny by actors, a creative team, and an audience. To use a colloquial expression, it can feel like “everyone knows everyone”. The process of leading a production often feels like navigating a space of both immense responsibility and deep vulnerability. I found myself questioning: *Am I alone in feeling this way? Has anyone else experienced these same challenges?*

Seeking reassurance and perspective, I turned to four international female directors and practising academics in both theatre and film: Judith Weston, Anne Bogart, Avra Sidiropoulou, and Katie Mitchell, whose work has informed my own practice. As I explored their work, I began to see common themes emerging of performativity, the inherent challenges of directing actors, and the necessity of foundational frameworks built on patience, trust, and the permission to make mistakes. These reflections led me to create an imagined dialogue, a space where I could engage with these directors in a candid, open, and honest conversation about my experiences, juxtaposed with their insights and methods to better understand my own experiences and the parallel challenges they, too, have faced. Through this dynamic conversation, I imagine a comfortable space where I sit, figuratively, in a round discussion with these influential directors. Inspired by the intimate and unscripted format of *Nothing Like a Dame*,⁴⁴⁴ this discussion unfolds in a private setting, where honesty and vulnerability can take centre stage. Here, we are not just directors but individuals who share the same fears, doubts, and triumphs about our work. The dialogue of the four directors is taken and referenced from books and articles written by them. *Holly's* dialogue is my own reflection. The dialogue of the four women Holly speaks with is not placed in speech marks to imitate a

⁴⁴⁴ *Nothing Like a Dame*, directed by Roger Michell, interview with Eileen Atkins et al. (Picturehouse Entertainment, 2018), Documentary.

script. However, the directors are all referenced in footnotes from their own published writings.

In this imagined dialogue, as a form of honest reflection, I have intentionally incorporated colloquial expressions and profane language to achieve modern [catharsis](#). Profanity can enable us to candidly and authentically express the emotional intensity of a situation, especially one during a time of crisis. Profanity is deeply embedded in the cultural and social languages of the United Kingdom and Aotearoa, where swearing can be an expletive infixation, language intensifier, used in insulting ways, or as a term of affection, camaraderie, or titles of endearment. My use of profanity during this dialogue has allowed me to capture the frustration, urgency, and raw emotion in ways that formal language cannot when discussing the experiences I encountered during the creative process and crisis events. As a director, I frequently use profanity in the rehearsal room, much like humour, to instil the ensemble, and break down authoritative barriers between myself and the actors, to laugh at myself, and make light of our crisis situation, but never directed at anyone or used to insult. In turn, the actors' use of profanity reinforces their lived experiences of crisis and reflections of the creative process in an authentic manner. In the transcripts of the PPDW, I do not censor the actors' discussions, preserving the integrity of their expression as swear words appeared 35 times, in the forms of *fuck*, *shit*, *bloody*, *bitch*, *bastard*, and *piss*. Swearing became an integral means for us to express the extreme emotional response to situational and thematic crises. These intensive moments in rehearsals were implemented into the script by me as a cathartic expression of the characters, Hecuba says "*bullshit*", Agamemnon shouts "Troy is *fucking* annihilated", and Clytemnestra wails "because some shivering priest had to *fucking* come up with something!" In performing a classical text, the actors and I discussed the shocking effect of profanity in bringing the themes and world of the play to a modern audience, and the resonances and parallels of lived crises.

Profanity enables a raw and honest evaluation of my work, acknowledging what went wrong, considering possible alternative approaches, and articulating the lessons I learnt as a director and researcher. Swearing serves not only as a marker of extreme emotion but also as a cathartic release, reinforcing the authenticity of my lived experience. This approach aligns with scholarly discussions on profanity as a legitimate linguistic and emotional tool, such as Johnny Saldaña's *Blue-Collar Qualitative Research: A Rant*, which advocates for expressive, colloquial, and emotionally driven academic discourse. As Saldaña suggests, swear words are "not always meant to shock, but to make a point, or because I'm angry [and] Profanity is subjective, anyways".⁴⁴⁵ If the reader is more

⁴⁴⁵ Johnny Saldaña, 'Blue-Collar Qualitative Research: A Rant', *Sage* 20, no. 8 (2014): 976–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413513739>, p. 977.

offended by the use of the profane rather than the subject matter of crisis, then, as Saldaña says to his readers “fuck you—go read somethin’ else”.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁶ Johnny Saldaña, ‘Blue-Collar Qualitative Research: A Rant’, *Sage* 20, no. 8 (2014): 976–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413513739>, p. 977

Anne, Judith, Katie, Avra, and Holly: An Imagined Dialogue between Directors

Characters:

Judith Weston

Anne Bogart

Avra Sidiropoulou

Katie Mitchell

Holly Luton

The five directors are sitting in a garden overlooking the native bush and hills in rural South Auckland. They are enjoying coffee, tea, and a selection of cakes that Holly has baked.

Scene 1: Artistic Intuition and Foundational Theory and Training

AVRA:

Many argue that directing is basically about instinct, and therefore, it cannot be taught. I tend to disagree. Much though directing is about instinct, it is also about technique, form, control of the stage, developing your own language, and making informed choices.⁴⁴⁷

JUDITH:

Sometimes people think intuition is the first idea that comes to you, that intuition requires no reflection. This is not the case. In order to access your intuition, you need to get below your preconceived ideas and access your deepest resources. You need to recognize and reject pedestrian and obvious and clichéd choices. I don't intend to dampen or make you distrust your intuition. You can't be a good director without good instincts.⁴⁴⁸

HOLLY:

Yes, talent and instinct are great, and I apply this also to the actors who come and audition for my productions. But practical application and theory matter just as much in making truly great theatre. Instinct and talent alone can only take you so far. I think what separates a strong director (or actor) from an exceptional one is the ability to refine those instincts through knowledge, theory, structure, and practice. I've found that understanding different practitioners, methodologies, methods, tasks, and tools, studying the context and history of theatre, and being exposed to a range of artistic traditions, forms, and practitioners have helped to shape and sharpen my director's instincts rather than stifle them.

⁴⁴⁷ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 1.

⁴⁴⁸ Judith Weston, *Directing Actors: 25th Anniversary Edition - Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2021), pp. 5-6.

KATIE:

Some think that directing is an inherent talent that can only evolve on the rehearsal room floor, during the process of making shows. Others think that it is a skill that can be learnt over time in an educational context. I am of the latter opinion and I find it strange that most actors, at least in the UK, undergo a structured training, whilst directors do not. I regret not having been taught myself and feel that the craft of directing, like acting, can only benefit from a preliminary training period.⁴⁴⁹

HOLLY:

Throughout my directorial career, I have felt this impending sentiment of needing to trust oneself, especially as a young director and advancing academic in a research field. Despite being the most qualified and experienced theatre-maker in the room, I feel that the more I learn, experience, and know, the less confidence I have felt in trusting my own instinctual creativity. My workshops have helped to settle some of that niggling voice of self-doubt, to bring others along on my creative journey, to understand my artistic vision, and bring the work to life through different eyes.

AVRA:

There is an extraordinary number of practitioners (including actors, writers, and designers) who have received no formal training within an academic or conservatoire setting and who could benefit from a study that details the fundamentals of theatre making—both regarding theoretical underpinnings and practical applications.⁴⁵⁰

HOLLY:

For myself, I am working from a double lens of director training and practice. On one hand, I've undertaken formal education and research, studying both historical and contemporary directing techniques, exploring different rehearsal methodologies, watching numerous international theatre productions, been mentored by and observed the practices of many directors, and critically analysed how these directors work with actors and text. But at the same time, I'm constantly testing and applying these ideas in my own rehearsal room. Using the space as a site of iterative discovery, seeing what works and what doesn't, making mistakes and reflecting on them, adapting to the specific needs of the production and the crises we encounter, and learning through doing. It's this combination of structured learning and hands-on experience that has allowed me to develop my own artistic intuition and theoretical approach.

Scene 2: The Director, The Dramaturg, The Actor: Performativity and Embodiment

AVRA:

Some practitioners who come to directing through acting have a natural way of speaking

⁴⁴⁹ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 1.

⁴⁵⁰ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 1.

to performers and are usually treated with less suspicion, at least initially. Others have a stronger background in dramaturgy and may have trouble addressing the ensemble in clear, understandable language—they tend to intellectualize, discussing ideas instead of actions and abstract concepts rather than playable tasks. On the other hand, some directors find it difficult to accept that a “Method” actor needs “a moment” to “prepare,” or, by the same token, that some actors will resist improvisation or find table work tedious. Share your progress and respect your actor’s part in it. Learn to be patient: trust is won gradually.⁴⁵¹

HOLLY:

As an actor, I bring strong communication skills and an understanding of performativity, embodiment, movement, and vocal foundations to my productions. As a dramaturg/researcher, I provide an intellectual and contextual framework to the work. As a director, I understand and implement methods, methodologies, tasks, and tools for the actors. In *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon*, balancing these three roles was especially important, as I also performed alongside the actors. It was crucial to ensure that no single area of expertise dominated or was left unfulfilled. My focus on tasks, methods, and performativity could not come at the expense of the actors’ critical engagement with the material. Likewise, the thematic and textual analysis had to support rather than overshadow the directorial vision and aesthetic quality of the production.

ANNE:

I know that I cannot sit down when work is happening on the stage. If I sit, a deadness sets in. I direct from impulses in my body responding to the stage, the actors’ bodies, their inclinations. If I sit down I lose my spontaneity, my connection to myself, to the stage and to the actors.⁴⁵²

HOLLY:

I learnt this ethos from my own mother, watching her direct productions. She never sat. And especially not behind a table! I have always been acutely aware of being an active and attentive director, moving alongside my actors, having an empathy of understanding of their experience of learning lines, choreography, and content. Performativity and embodiment has also helped my actors, and me too, to make better sense of the material. Rather than telling actors, I am able to show them, walk in the space with them. For me, Performative Research then seems an appropriate research method for creating research-theatre as a director because it requires me to be performative. Even in my classrooms at University, I am always active and moving—my students give me a dazed and surprised look. They must think I’m crazy about how much I move when I deliver lecture materials and talk to them and not to a PowerPoint slide. I’ve been told by students I am theatrical and embodied and that I make more sense in delivering context

⁴⁵¹ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 196.

⁴⁵² Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), pp. 85-86

than just content. As directors, our energetic responses and impulses can enhance the production when communication with the actors is unrestrained by a chair, table, or video platform. Our energies become synchronised. Some actors might find this an unusual or uncomfortable experience at first, so unused to a process of mutual discovery of character, content, and context. Multiple actors have remarked to me how unusual this style of directing was to experience in Aotearoa and that it was surprising and exciting to see a practising director—entering the audition and rehearsal room and seeing me as the director standing! My script perched on a chair pushed into the corner of the room, and instead playing and acting the material alongside them. Even when I do have to sit, I find there is no time for rest, bouncing up from my chair or leaping up from the concrete floor. From my own experience as an actor auditioning and rehearsing, I find that the invisible wall created by a table or chair—the director seated in the dark—gives a sense of insecurity, a perceived hierarchy of the director, rather than as the leader offering guidance, support, and thoughtfulness. A director knows they are the leader of the production. But as a director, I want trust from an actor, to not be scared by this barrier between them and me, to give me the most unfettered, impulsive choices. I feel that can only come from the empathy of mutual embodied experience.

Scene 3: Building Trust in the Ensemble

AVRA:

Commitment, trust, and flexibility are quintessential elements of collaboration.⁴⁵³

HOLLY:

I remind the actors that the first building block of trust is that I have cast them in the production. That my faith and trust in them was initiated the moment I wanted them in the play.⁴⁵⁴ It is hard to break down insecurities from actors, but it is easy to build trust through guidance, support, and showing actors that you are a thoughtful director—that you know what you are talking about and that you trust the actor to take these foundations and flourish.

AVRA:

Naturally, in an ensemble of people who barely know each other, insecurity, impatience, and self-centeredness are to be expected. Trust time to relieve you of such hindrances, trust actors to reveal themselves to you, and finally, trust yourself to learn by trial and error.⁴⁵⁵

HOLLY:

In Aotearoa, we refer to the idea of support over time as *whanaungatanga*—the reciprocity of support, care, and guidance. Forming and developing the ensemble in my productions is fundamental to creating successful theatre. As the ensemble, we utilise the extended rehearsal period to cultivate a mutual network of trust and support between myself and the actors, as well as among the actors themselves. As rehearsals progress, the room becomes more dynamic, playful, and generative. Actors share discoveries, make deliberate and thoughtful choices, and embrace the freedom to take risks, to *fail*, and to laugh at themselves.

AVRA:

‘Actors’ directors’ are more inclined to give their performers initiative, an approach favoured by mature and confident ensembles.⁴⁵⁶

HOLLY:

A good ensemble director should also create an environment where the actors can operate with quiet assurances that risk is met not with fear but with collective support. In this space, mistakes are not failures but necessary opportunities for growth.

ANNE:

I overheard a young director in technical rehearsals repeatedly ask an actor if he was

⁴⁵³ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 133.

⁴⁵⁴ Fiona McNamara and Borni Te Rongopai Tukiwaho, *04: Working Together: Safety, Respect and Wellbeing* (Playmarket, 2023), p. 16.

⁴⁵⁵ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 73.

⁴⁵⁶ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 72-73.

comfortable. I finally had to ask him, ‘Is the point of a rehearsal to be comfortable?’ A good actor gets in the director’s way. A good director gets in the actor’s way. They set up purposeful resistances between them because differing perspectives serve to clarify the work at hand.⁴⁵⁷

HOLLY:

Personally, I love resistance from an actor. I had an actor in my production of *Women of Troy* ask me several times if *they* were in the way. I always told them that they are never “in the way”, whatever that means in a non-theatre space on a grand staircase, and that as an actor and character, they should embrace and embody the uncomfortable, to be “in the way”. Resistances should also come in the form of playing devil's advocate, to challenge me as a director of any preconceived notions I have of the play, and ask what if instead it is Antigone who is at fault, if Helen really went willingly to Troy, or if Agamemnon is a justified leader. Otherwise, what else are we in rehearsals for but to discover and explore alternative possibilities? But these resistances must be purposeful. What is the purpose of pushing for you to use that accent, use that prop, or wear that costume? Is it necessary—not for you as an *actor*—but for you as the *character*? Compromising between what is necessary and what is not.

⁴⁵⁷ Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), p. 151.

Scene 4: Patience from the Actor and Director

AVRA:

A good director is a fearless director who remains consistent and relentless to the mission of realizing a vision, no matter how utterly illogical it may appear to others.⁴⁵⁸

HOLLY:

Illogical—I sometimes feel like I am screaming into the void. I often find myself asking of the actors, “does that make sense”? I know it makes sense to me, but have I communicated this in a way that you—as the actor—can understand and interpret? I ask my actors for patience as I have a colourful vision in my head, all the moving parts—I feel my brain is often processing faster than I can speak. I tell my actors from the beginning of rehearsals about my vision, to go with me, and be patient. I encourage them to ask questions and to resist in moments that they don’t understand. I can re-articulate my ideas in a different way, show them rather than tell them, and move alongside them. I wonder how you all ensure that your vision translates clearly to actors? Do you ever struggle with articulating what you see in your mind?

JUDITH:

When I teach my class I take the students through a series of exercises, first with a monologue and then with scenes, and I ask them to be patient with me, to go with me, even if something seems a little strange.⁴⁵⁹

AVRA:

[On my to-do list for directors is] Showing patience when an actor is having a hard time with a particular scene, a speech, or a physical position.⁴⁶⁰

JUDITH:

Directors, it seems, are always looking for an instant result, and often are lacking in understanding or patience regarding acting as a process.⁴⁶¹

HOLLY:

As directors, actors expect a great deal of patience from us as they work through the material. The rehearsal space is a chance for exploration, discovery, and learning. With discoveries come mistakes. And mistakes are okay! We should be patient as they work through the material. I make a point of reminding my actors to try things out and see if it works. If it doesn’t, then we can try something new, but it’s really fundamental to test, discover, and explore our ideas in the rehearsal space.

⁴⁵⁸ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 1.

⁴⁵⁹ Judith Weston, *Directing Actors: 25th Anniversary Edition - Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2021), p. 4

⁴⁶⁰ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 198.

⁴⁶¹ Judith Weston, *Directing Actors: 25th Anniversary Edition - Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2021), p. 53.

JUDITH:

An artist needs to get kind of excited by mistakes.⁴⁶²

HOLLY:

Once we are in a consistent rhythm and have a better sense of the overall production vision, then generating and mediating becomes refining our choices. And I am deliberate in not criticising or putting down an actor's choices or mistakes, but prompting them to further their ideas—what happens if we make this choice more resistant, vulnerable, playful, aggressive, melancholic? But patience is a reciprocal relationship, and actors should also have a degree of patience as we work through the many roles, relationships, and resources required to direct a production, too.

ANNE:

Patience and flexibility is an art.⁴⁶³

HOLLY:

My patience is high—perhaps too high as I have been told by many an actor and director in my community. But I feel my tolerance for *bullshit* is low. A give-and-take between actors and directors is expected, necessary, and healthy to create really great theatre. But again, if those resistances are not purposeful and, as an actor, you are pushing purely for the sake of comfort or self-power, I wonder why we are here when the rehearsal space should be a place to push the boundaries and make discoveries beyond the comfort of our choices, preconceived notions, or identity. I think about my ethos and non-negotiables as a director. I have found that humour is a great tool for breaking down barriers, allowing for mistake-making and building up trust with actors. Especially in those productions when I am also acting alongside them, not just directing the actors. I will make mistakes too—I do make mistakes, trip up, and forget my lines. As directors, we are navigating our own practice, too. I try to be as purposeful and organised as possible, but the rehearsal room is a chance for me to discover, explore, and, at times, *fail*. Sometimes our directorial practice can only be bettered if we *fall* and *fall hard*.

⁴⁶² Judith Weston, *Directing Actors: 25th Anniversary Edition - Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2021), p. 4.

⁴⁶³ Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), p. 50.

Scene 5: Making Mistakes

JUDITH:

You have chosen a profession where mistakes are not always bad.⁴⁶⁴

HOLLY:

I think mistakes are a complicated concept for many artists. We often feel that mistakes mean failure. And that failure is fatal or final. Mistakes can feel especially dangerous when money, time, resources, careers, or projects are at stake. Or even our emotional investment into our projects.

JUDITH:

You will make mistakes. We are mistake-making creatures; we were built that way. What you as a director, the person in charge, must learn how to do is to bring creativity and a positive approach to mistakes, your own and others'.⁴⁶⁵

HOLLY:

It was hard at first to accept that *Agamemnon* concluded in the way it did, and to recognise the mistakes I made along the way. But I found my research to be infinitely more exciting through the mistakes that I made—talking frankly and candidly as an artist about failure. Not that I didn't panic at first! But I found a new creativity in what went wrong and learned to reflect on how these mistakes better my ethos, vision, and practices as a director.

KATIE:

The best way to develop as a director is to analyse your mistakes. When a production ends the first feeling you will experience will be relief that it is over. You will want to rest before anticipating the next production or looking for the next job. Before doing either, take an hour or so to reflect on what you have just done. Write down your observations and make sure you refer to them just before you embark on your next job. If you had a problem with an actor, think through the way in which that problem evolved. Look back at each stage of the process, including casting, and pinpoint anything you did which contributed to the problem. Take a mental note of this so that you avoid doing the same thing next time.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁴ Judith Weston, *Directing Actors: 25th Anniversary Edition - Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2021), p. 4.

⁴⁶⁵ Judith Weston, *Directing Actors: 25th Anniversary Edition - Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2021), p. 5.

⁴⁶⁶ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 221.

Scene 6: Directing in Crisis

ANNE:

Most people become highly creative in the midst of an emergency. In the instant of imbalance and pressure, quick and decent solutions to big immediate problems must be found. It is in these moments of crisis that native intelligence and intuitive imagination kicks in: the woman who lifts a car because her child is trapped beneath, an inspired strategic choice in the crisis of battle, the quick decisions in the heat of a final rehearsal before a first night audience. I have found that, creatively, imbalance is more fruitful than stability.⁴⁶⁷

HOLLY:

From my director-research beginnings during the COVID pandemic, I have viewed crisis as an opportune moment to embrace, embody, and employ crisis as an impetus for theatre making. Crisis for me in theatre isn't just an obstacle, it's an active force, a provocation that demands invention and creativity. In my own work, I've found that instability, whether logistical, political, or emotional, prompts both me and my actors into a state of heightened creativity, forcing us to engage with present and immediate issues.

JUDITH:

Moreover, the ability to see the darker side of life is an asset not just for directing dramatic and tragic movies, but also for directing comedy, since comedy often has pain inside it.⁴⁶⁸

HOLLY:

Perhaps that's why I've always maintained my sense of humour throughout this research, even joking with hospital staff from my surgery bed. Crisis—as you suggest, Judith—shares a deep connection with the absurd, the tragic, and the unexpected. If we don't laugh, we'd just break down and cry.

⁴⁶⁷ Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), p. 130.

⁴⁶⁸ Judith Weston, *Directing Actors: 25th Anniversary Edition - Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2021), p. 5.

Scene 7: When Things Go Wrong

AVRA:

When things are tense, try to keep your cool. Many a great director has had to rely on a timely comment, a joke, or a witty icebreaker to rescue a situation that risked being marred by idleness and incompetence, malicious gossip, petty politics, or mere miscommunication. And did I mention reward? Don't forget to offer praise when someone has had a breakthrough or a moment of revelation.⁴⁶⁹

KATIE:

There are moments in every rehearsal process where the director privately—or publicly—loses their nerve. For example, you might not be able to immerse an actor in the character accurately and you might begin to feel defeated by the struggle to do so. If an actor is unable to learn their lines and it might suddenly feel impossible that they will ever manage to perform the role, it's possible that the first run-through will be a complete disaster with no structure or clarity. How you manage these vulnerable moments will determine the success of the production the audience see. Either you will buckle or you will hold your nerve with renewed determination. Try to hold your nerve; it will be better for everyone involved in the production if you do. They will see there is a problem and that you are working on it. Remember, the more you practice your craft, the more attuned you will be to those moments where you are vulnerable to loss of nerve. This knowledge will enable you to cope better. There will also be moments in the process when the rehearsal room suddenly and unexpectedly turns into a frightening place. This may occur because a private relationship between two actors (that you know nothing about) explodes in front of you, or perhaps one actor has been consistently undermining another. These events are characterised by sudden bursts of emotion, usually aggression or tears. Another actor is often the target but the director can also be at risk.⁴⁷⁰

HOLLY:

I find this to be especially true when dealing with a production that is framed *in, of, and about* crisis. Thematically, when a play deals with crisis, war, or trauma, the emotional stakes in the room naturally heighten. Actors carry that intensity, and sometimes unconsciously, and it can manifest in unexpected ways—tensions surface, personal insecurities are projected, and the rehearsal space becomes charged with more than just the demands of the text. Again, this can be really difficult if you have actors who are maliciously gossiping in the rehearsal space. I wonder how you might deal with this or if this can be remedied. When does it reach a point where it can't be remedied, especially when you find out late in the process that this is happening in the background? How do you diffuse a situation where passive aggression or whispered comments begin to erode the foundation of the ensemble? How does this kind of behaviour foster animosity and a

⁴⁶⁹ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 74.

⁴⁷⁰ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), pp. 123-124.

breakdown of trust in a space that has otherwise functioned as a positive, productive, safe, and caring environment in previous productions?

KATIE:

When this happens, remember that you are in charge and, if things get out of control, it can often be wise to call a break. Make sure you leave the rehearsal room, walk round the block a couple of times, either alone or with someone you can trust (like a stage manager or an actor not directly involved in the event). Analyse what happened and think of the best steps you can take to remind everyone involved that this is a professional environment.⁴⁷¹

HOLLY:

This was something I did do. But I often found that the least experienced actor—or an actor who tells you of their previous insecurities—are the ones who make the most comments about other actors' behaviours. Their discomfort can manifest as control, deflection, or even targeted undermining of their fellow cast members. When this happens, my role as a director has to shift. I have become not just a creative leader but a mediator, a stabiliser, and sometimes even a punching bag. I have to decide when to step in, when to address issues directly, when to give people space to self-regulate, and when to step away entirely. I also have to be aware that I may become the target and the perceived villain in a situation. The challenge is balancing authority with empathy, ensuring that everyone in the room still feels safe while also maintaining professional boundaries. There is a fine line between allowing an actor to express frustration and preventing that frustration from poisoning the process. In my experience, the best way to counteract this is by reinforcing the integrity of the ensemble from the outset. But this is a problem if actors don't feel they should be involved in the ensemble processes. Setting clear expectations for behaviour, checking in with actors individually, and cultivating an atmosphere where people feel heard but *not entitled* to disrupt the process. Reminding them that they not only actors, but research participants, and this is a research process. If conflict arises, my instinct is always to acknowledge it rather than let it fester. Sometimes, a private conversation is all it takes to reset the tone. Other times it requires a more deliberate and greater intervention—like you suggest Katie—like calling a break, or taking time to step outside, and reassessing how to move forward. What I keep returning to is the idea that a crisis onstage can be creatively productive, but a crisis in the rehearsal room must be handled with care. Otherwise, what should be an exploration of tension and catharsis can turn into something genuinely harmful. Sometimes, the best course of action is to remove an actor from the production—a participant from the research—if they are jeopardising the integrity or creative process. And don't make the mistake of asking this actor to return because you feel guilty or pressured to. As a director,

⁴⁷¹ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 124.

you have the right to ask an actor to step away from the production. And especially as a researcher, you must protect the research process and other research participants.

Scene 8: Casting: Choosing the Right Actor over the Best Actor

JUDITH:

Actors are irrational and baffling “other.”⁴⁷²

AVRA:

With all that in mind, be alert to what different people and personalities need and keep your preconceptions and common judgment errors in check.⁴⁷³

JUDITH:

Perhaps an actor you think is wrong for the part—you must make the choice to work with that actor or give yourself permission to walk off the project.⁴⁷⁴

HOLLY:

Agamemnon encountered some very tense situations that could not be remedied. It left me feeling completely drained, exhausted, devastated, and angry. As a result of my serious health scare, I made the difficult and disappointing decision to cancel the production. While in the hospital—moved from ward to ward—I brainstormed and considered all the possible scenarios that would allow the production to go ahead. However, given the emergency escalation for my treatment, the fundamental framework of the production as my doctoral research project, and as the only funder and administrator of the project, the appropriate decision I could make was to end the production.

But I also have to be honest in that this was not the only reason. In reflecting back on Agamemnon, I recognise multiple minor issues that arose throughout the rehearsals. These minor issues soon exposed a far larger problem that would unravel into chaos. Minor details are like small fractures in a jar. Many minor details together become large problems, and like small fractures in a jar, make it fragile. A base foundation is also fundamental, and Pandora's jar demonstrates that an unstable foundation, paired with a small bump, can cause an unravelling of chaos. No minor detail can be missed in a production. This is what makes creating theatre so fragile to crisis—external and internal. Not only are we dealing with outside factors—the flagstone floor, the unstable jar—it is the internal struggles, the Chaos brewing inside, that can release untold and unforeseen troubles. In recognising the many fractures that had accumulated and the unstable foundation of the jar, by then, it was too late to patch any cracks or catch the tumbling jar.

AVRA:

As a director, you are responsible for the entire group, the whole production, but also for

⁴⁷² Judith Weston, *Directing Actors: 25th Anniversary Edition - Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2021), p. 2

⁴⁷³ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 73-74.

⁴⁷⁴ Judith Weston, *Directing Actors: 25th Anniversary Edition - Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2021), p. 5.

yourself. To be of better use to everyone, you should keep looking inward and be attentive to your company's voice but also alert to your own instincts. [be alert to] a few mental notes to which you can always revert when your own motivation slackens and working with the actors seems strenuous, fragile, or a standstill.⁴⁷⁵

HOLLY:

Maybe it's one of the biggest lessons I have learnt from this experience—the manaakitanga, the care was always focused for my actors, making sure they were fed, looked after, encouraged, reassured, but I recognise that the self-care went amiss, especially during crisis, and by then it was too late to resolve any conflicts or strenuous situations on my own. Katie, you spoke earlier about mistakes, especially when it comes to casting. I wonder if you could explain why this is foundational.

KATIE:

Casting is about choosing the right actors for the play and the right actors for your rehearsal process. If you cast an actor who is right for the part but who will not undertake your process, you may waste valuable time in repeated conflicts about working methodology, meaning that the actors who want to work in your process will be caught in the crossfire. The result will be a production where the actors do not inhabit the same world. On the other hand, if you work with an actor who is absolutely willing to work alongside you but cannot possibly deliver the character, everyone will be in the same world but one person will not be believable. Try to get a balance.⁴⁷⁶

HOLLY:

I reflect on what worked and why in *Antigone* and *Women of Troy* to make them a success, commercially, creatively, and communally as an ensemble. And it all comes down to the people. Choosing the *right* people over the *best* people in a production is fundamental to elevating the strains and stresses that come with making theatre. What do the right people look like? As Katie points out, finding the people who are going to approach your process and methodology with enthusiasm and attention, working alongside you, rather than against you, to effectively convey and deliver a character and the world of the play. Principles, ethos, and attitudes are also essential in the audition, workshops, and rehearsal space. I find that many of the questions directors might have about how an actor will behave in a rehearsal space will be answered by how they behave or even if they attend the preliminary workshops. Although not necessary, similarly to a referee in an interview, speaking to other directors or creative teams might be useful to help you make casting choices. On occasion, personality clashes may not offer a complete perspective about this actor, but consistent responses by many different creatives and practitioners might provide some insight.

⁴⁷⁵ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 193-194.

⁴⁷⁶ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 99.

Questions when casting an actor might include: Is the actor warm and friendly, not just towards you as the director, but towards people they don't know in the cast and creative team? Does the actor have a sense of humour? Can they understand, recognise, and laugh at their mistakes? Is the actor consistently late to rehearsals? Are they eager to rush off at the end of a rehearsal, leaving their props and costumes to be sorted by someone else? Does an actor in a 'leading' role actively and enthusiastically participate in the Chorus and ensemble tasks and methods as much as the tasks you have asked of them individually? Does the actor only associate with other lead actors and not the ensemble cast? Can they also carry on, improvise, or think on the spot when something surprising or unforeseen happens on stage? Particularly when casting the *named* characters or *lead* roles, are there sufficient, highly experienced or qualified actors who have a confident understanding of dramaturgical methodologies, theatre context, and technical, theoretical, and practical performance knowledge and skills in your rehearsal room?

My focus is to foster a strong ensemble. Throughout the rehearsals, I make a point to emphasise and reiterate to the actors this methodology. For me, especially in directing Greek drama, in which the Chorus are a central character and entity, the ensemble becomes the fundamental foundation of my practice. While I also spend a great deal of time one-on-one with 'lead' actors, working through the text material, research and context, I expect that these actors have the experience, training, knowledge, integrity, and intuition to understand the demands of the job and rise to the challenge.

Holly laughs at the strenuous conversation. The women all nod, agree, and laugh. They take a short break, as Holly offers around more coffee, tea, and cakes.

Scene 9: Being a Director: The Challenges and Successes

HOLLY:

Directing is...

Holly sighs and imitates speech marks with her fingers.

fucking hard work, isn't it!

The women laugh, nod, and agree.

As you have all pointed out, almost every director comes to directing through acting, or as Nicholas Hytner⁴⁷⁷ cynically put it, every disgruntled or unsatisfied actor wants to become a director. I would argue that most actors would like to try their hand at leading a cast. Some would argue *they* could do a better job playing a lead role or directing. However, many do not recognise or understand the demands and expectations the role requires of us. I have seen a few actors throughout my career quickly realise they were out of their depth in leadership because they did not understand the demands and expectations or were not prepared to take on the challenge.

Being a director can be fun, yes. But it isn't just moving people around a stage and taking the glory for the final product; It's the deep-rooted processes and roles we employ in all aspects of the production. As Edward Gordon Craig suggests, the director must be a master of all crafts in the theatre.⁴⁷⁸ maker. In some ways, my role became an almost panoptical one within the production, having an overarching overview of and navigating multiple creative roles as director, researcher, dramaturg, designer, maker, and even actor. We are actors—understanding the demands of a script, how we use our bodies and voices in and around a space. We are dramaturgs—analysing a script, context, and content and effectively communicating this to a cast. We are conductors and choreographers—painting and weaving bodies through the space. We are designers—responding, creating, and fabricating all the moving parts of a space, lighting, sound, props, costumes, and set, having a consistent vision that transitions from a rehearsal room to a stage smoothly. We are Human Resources—responding to and dealing with the multitude of personalities, experiences, and problems of the actors. We are Health and Safety committees—responsible for the potential risks of the space. We are CEO's—required to be the face of the company, communicating with the many. And at this moment, we are trying to deal with all of this in an era of crisis.

AVRA:

The collaborative nature of theatre-making notwithstanding, you are expected to envision the entire production, draft out models of staging, provide the materials, and oversee its progress. Combining the functions of an architect, a contractor, and a construction

⁴⁷⁷ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. xi

⁴⁷⁸ Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre* (William Heinemann, 1914), p. 159.

worker, you will be held accountable for handing in a functional and enterprising building plan.⁴⁷⁹

HOLLY:

Don't get me wrong—I love being a director! I love watching actors take a vision from your brain and bring it to life. But it is at times hard and dirty work. Many an audience member will come to the theatre and be amazed by the work they see on stage, never seeing the dirty oil, cogs, and noise of the machine, the moving parts all mincing together. The recognition of a director is often unseen by an audience, but I think this is the beauty of our work. We are, in many ways, the mechanic or artist who repairs and restores a work, the details of which an audience will never see. But it's an esoteric language, only known between directors, those who can recognise our preparation, methodologies, artistry, and successes.

AVRA:

In the end, the absolute test of the directors' and actors' entire period of preparation, rehearsal time, and actual performance is the audience's response to what it sees and what it hears. Few spectators are concerned with tracing the process behind the product. Most crave to experience an effortless performance of a fluid and stirring story, irrespective of the methodology that has been applied to realize it. All the audience perceives is the actor in performance. Choosing to accept the constitutional illusion of the stage world and of character, it does not know, nor should it care about the work that has gone into the production.

HOLLY:

Directing is a privilege, joyous, wonderful, exciting, but hard. It is especially hard when you are working with limited time, money, resources, and support. When you do everything in your power to support, guide, and lead your team from a place of *aroha* or *agápē*—*unconditional love, compassion, empathy, care, respect* and *manaakitanga* for the people and the process, but that patience, responsibility, and initiative are not mutual or reciprocated.

AVRA:

All the support, love, and comforting awareness that you have done the best that you could to create the circumstances for creativity are there, but now the [...] actor is ready to open those wings and fly. Nothing can or should stop that from happening.

HOLLY:

I will not exploit my position of authority as the director or researcher. I don't have an ego attached to the project, nor a hunger for control. But as directors, it is our job to be the principal unifier of all elements of the production, and we do have an emotional investment in our projects and for the actors. We build the nest, teach the birds to fly, and

⁴⁷⁹ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 11.

when the moment comes for flight—we step back and let them soar. We are Corvus crows after all. The success of the production hopefully means we did our job well. I love watching them fly; it brings me such joy and excitement to see all their hard work, attention, and effort of the actors come together in the final performances. It is not easy to do a theatre form that is so unknown by the Aotearoa community, and I am awed by their skills, ability, and vitality on the stage as they bring the work to life.

ANNE:

A good actor stops me in my tracks too. The quality of their stillness or movement or speaking is hard to dismiss. Although I am not aware of what it is that they are doing to generate this magnetic presence, I know that I cannot look away. I cannot walk on. What is the actor doing to stop me in my tracks?⁴⁸⁰ As a director, my biggest contribution to a production, and the only real gift I can offer to an actor, is my attention. What counts most is the quality of my attention. From what part of myself am I attending? Am I attending with desire for success, or am I attending with interest in the present moment? Am I hopeful for the best in an actor or do I want to prove my superiority? A good actor can instantly discern the quality of my attention, my interest. There is a sensitive life-line between us. If this line is compromised, the actor feels it. If it is cheapened by my own ego or desire or lack of patience, the line between us is degraded.⁴⁸¹

HOLLY:

It's about intuitiveness. I find that actors who are less experienced really love to be pushed to further their skills. But this can be really hard with actors who are insecure. It's another reason why the ensemble rehearsals are really key—because it's about creating an equitable rehearsal room—that we are all on the same page, that no one actor is more valued than another, and that everyone understands the enormous processes that it takes to create a story as an ensemble.

AVRA:

There are various tactics that directors can solicit to influence and motivate. Removing actors from a secure place by alternately complimenting and critiquing them is a strategy of maintaining focus and perspective, even if it does not always come across as a friendly act in convivial spirit. Yet, given how differently actors tend to handle instructions and criticism, conditioned by their disposition and training, you should be prepared to push a variety of buttons. You may, for instance, request physical images and coordinate improvisations for actors with a manifestly text-based approach; give initiative and elicit resourcefulness and drive from less experienced actors who wish to be told exactly what to do; or even, during select rehearsal exercises, grant protagonist's status to actors with minor parts in performance.⁴⁸²

⁴⁸⁰ Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), p. 64.

⁴⁸¹ Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), p. 74.

⁴⁸² Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 73.

HOLLY:

There's so much to sit with—ideas I'll carry with me, question, reflection on, and return to as I approach the next production. Thank you all for the conversation, I've really valued your insights. It's rare to be in a space where we can speak so openly about the weight, the wonder, and the work of directing theatre.

The women finish their tea and cakes. Holly thanks them all. They sit and continue to enjoy the beauty of the Hunua hills.

Agamemnon: Facing an Unforeseen Personal Crisis

On Saturday, October 19th, 2024, the actors and I undertook our second run-through and first full-dress rehearsal. Aiming to start at 11:30 am, we ran the production as though it were a full performance, including the pre-show and non-scripted devised scenes, which the audience would see as they entered the auditorium. Our stage manager was present at the rehearsal to get a sense of the full production, organise the foreseeable administrative and management requirements, and help resolve any issues the cast might encounter. Our lighting designer also made a brief appearance to discuss some lighting options for the next technical rehearsal. Excluding lighting, this dress rehearsal included the use of costumes, props, set, and sound. The rehearsal was photographed by two professional photographers who captured the behind-the-scenes organisation and production from the ground floor, and balconies and mezzanines above. In line with the agreed consent forms, the rehearsal photographs produced would serve as key research findings. As in all my productions, I spoke to the cast and crew about our key rules and reminders before we began the dress rehearsal run-through.

- 👤 Although rehearsals are a chance to play and explore, we are going to treat this *dress* rehearsal as though it were a full performance, with total attention, focus, and energy.
- 👤 Therefore, the dress rehearsal is set in stone until we return to any scenes at another rehearsal time.
- 👤 The dress rehearsal is not an opportunity to try any new major choices or changes.
- 👤 If anyone has missed a key rehearsal, they are advised to step back and allow the other actors to carry. This is especially for moments of physical theatre, fight, or dance choreography.
- 👤 To stay in character and stay focused, especially if anything out of the ordinary occurs. For example, you drop or forget a prop, you forget a part of the costume, or you have a wardrobe malfunction.
- 👤 People will be watching you throughout the rehearsal, as you can see security, students, and staff. Ignore them. Treat them as though they are your audience.
- 👤 If you forget a line, stay calm, take a pause, shout out to the stage manager for your cue, or summarise or make it up. If you feel the pause is longer than previously rehearsed, other actors pick up the cue and deliver your next lines.
- 👤 You are to use the props (do not imagine or imitate).
- 👤 Wear your correct costumes. For those who are not required until later on the show, do not put on heavy jackets, robes, dresses, heels, or boots.
- 👤 Ignore the photographers—they will capture the best of you, which will be everything you do! They can't make you look photogenic if you look at the camera.
- 👤 Enjoy the run, put your full energy into the work. If it's too much, we can dial back energy. If it's too little, it is very difficult to push you further.

Throughout the run, many AUT students, staff, and some security guards were seen by the actors and I watching the run-through around the atrium space, leaning over the balconies, and watching from the glass windows of the offices far above the performance space. In one resonant moment, we recognised the cross-over between reality and fiction, as the actors playing the *Watchmen* noticed the *real* AUT Watchmen—security guards on the balcony—watching the actors dressed in security costumes playing the *fictional* Watchmen, who were also on the balcony—fictional Watchmen watching the real Watchmen. A complex, multifaceted panopticon in action and performance. This moment heightened for me the thematic tensions within the play, paralleling the political tensions of protest in these difficult times—the people of Argos always being watched, careful of their voices, and any opinions they might have about the horrific actions of their leaders. As the chorus state “long ago we learned to keep our mouths shut”.⁴⁸³

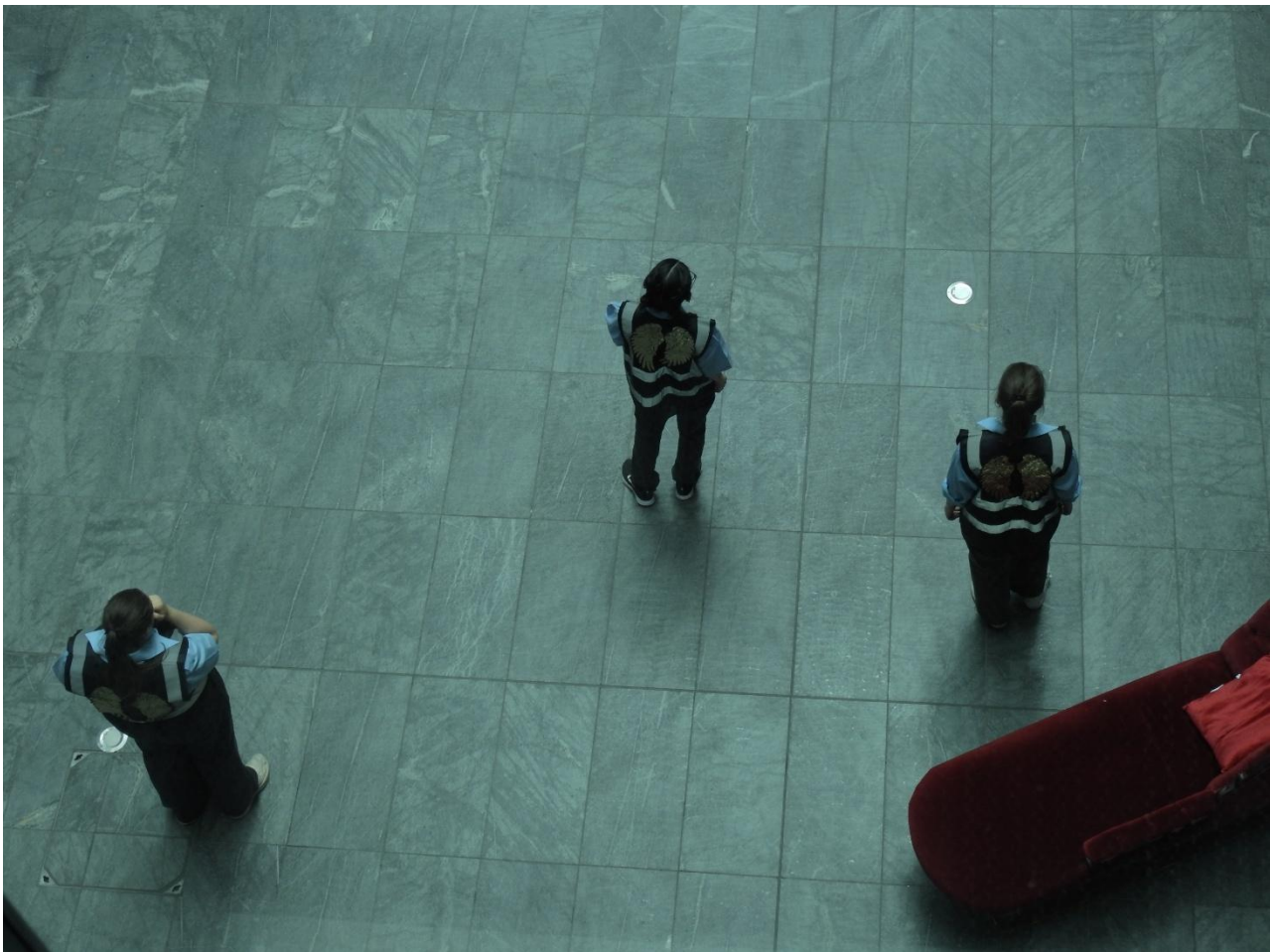


Figure 123. *The Fictional Watchmen, playing the Furies, being watched from above on the balcony, Agamemnon, 2024.*

⁴⁸³ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 29.

It is difficult to reflect on a production that felt, simultaneously, both a success and a failure, revealing the instability of what *resilience* means within a process shaped by disruption, fragility, and crisis. There were many instances when, as both actor and director, I admired the actors' performances—recognising their weeks of hard work, and the transformation of nervous energy into focus and excitement. Watching the Chorus, particularly in the choreographed dance sequence, was electric. It later became evident in reflections of the documented photographs and director's notes that actors involved in *Women of Troy* fostered an uplifting, supportive environment of mentorship, guidance, and focus for the newer cast within the *Agamemnon* ensemble. This continuity between projects, both research and performance, suggests how connection can enhance whanaungatanga within an ensemble, building a culture of care, trust, and shared responsibility within the rehearsal room.

Reflecting on the photographs and videos across the *Agamemnon* rehearsals and the artefacts, costumes, props, and sets later displayed in the creative practice exhibition, I am proud of my directorial vision, seeing it come to life in colour, design, and action. I am especially proud of the actors who brought vitality to the work, bringing these ideas to life. However, this sense of completion and success is mediated through documentation rather than a live encounter.

It is a beautiful moment as a director, feeling at ease while watching actors take your ideas and allow them to flourish with their own personal touches and energy. While I look back at the production with joy, it is tinged with a grief, sadness, melancholy, frustration, and at times, *rage*—because the production and the actors' hard work were never seen by a public audience. In a sense, this *failure* exposed how dependent theatre is on conditions of visibility, and how quickly and unexpectedly that visibility can be withdrawn. I wanted the audience to remember how exciting these ancient plays are in Aotearoa contexts, but that exchange between performance and audience never had the chance to occur.

What I did not yet realise during the final dress rehearsal was how increasingly unwell I had become during the final two weeks of the rehearsal process. For someone who rarely gets sick—who had avoided COVID for five years and never spent a night in hospital or undergone major surgery—the signs were easy to dismiss in the moment, but unmistakable in hindsight. Looking back at the photographs, I can now recognise the visible clues of my deteriorating health—the shift from my usual energetic, excitable, embodied, and focused presence as a leader, director, and mentor, to hunched, pale, and visibly exhausted, requiring more breaks and more attuned attention to remain focused. Layered over my own declining health were increasingly fragile conflicts and unresolved issues that began to surface in rehearsal—some serious and some urgent—which I was managing alone. Some photos capture those moments too—the weight of

responsibility, the strain of holding everything together without adequate support, patience, or tools to help me deal with the challenges.



Figure 124. Holly as director, *a director in crisis*, *Agamemnon*, 2024.

On Wednesday, 23rd October, I was instructed by my doctor to go to the Hospital Emergency Department [ED], *immediately*. I was met by an 8-hour wait in the ED, and throughout this time, I was moved in and out of various medical cubicles, had numerous blood tests, and was infused with canular antibiotics and pain killers—all the while, the staff were kind, caring, and apologetic for their medical system under their own state of crisis. After an overnight stay, surgery under general anaesthetic, and intense painkillers, I was finally discharged after 48 hours.

The experience was frightening but enlightening, giving me a new perspective on times of crisis, and an insight into another kind of theatre—the operating theatre. In Aotearoa, we are extremely privileged to benefit from a Nationalised Health System, and while the wait times can be long, the resilience of the doctors and nurses was inspiring. I encountered a similar required mutual trust between practitioner and patient in the health system, and like director and actor, a trust based on knowledge, respect, and patience during these difficult times of crisis.

Unfortunately, I was left with a lengthy healing process, requiring two months of avoiding any physical labour. On the advice I received from my medical practitioners and supervisors, I was required to cancel the production of *Agamemnon* for the sake of my own health and inform the cast of this decision, thanking them for their hard work by formal email. Having spent over a year planning and preparing for the production, this decision was utterly disheartening for both the actors and me.



Figure 125. Holly in a hospital bed, October 2024.

While recovering from my surgery, in the week that followed the cancellation, I continued to reflect on the play's text and its resonance with current events and crises. On top of the already stressful circumstances, one week later, I watched as the United States elected Donald Trump for a second term. Hoping for the best but expecting the worst, the cast and I had discussed the possible outcomes of the election and the impact it would

have on the thematic resonances of the play. Further resonances took place in the ensuing weeks, with calls by the International Criminal Court for the arrest of Benjamin Netanyahu for war crimes⁴⁸⁴ and the overthrow of the dictatorial Assad Regime in Syria.⁴⁸⁵ It was heartbreaking that our play would not have the opportunity to contribute to the political discourses and resonances in these new moments of crisis.



Figure 126. *The Chorus* face Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, “the righteous curse of the public! Where were they? And where were you when this man murdered our daughter, my daughter?”, *Agamemnon*, 2024.

Where fragility manifested in the inability to continue staging the production, resilience instead emerged in the continuation of the research itself. What might otherwise be framed as a failure of practice became, in the research context, generative—an opportunity to reflect on, analyse, and articulate my findings through this unexpected crisis pathway.

These crises were not global but personal, and in that sense, less visible and less easily named. In focusing on large-scale crises that felt more collectively experienced and historically significant, I had overlooked the more immediate, yet equally disruptive crises that can occur within the rehearsal room.

⁴⁸⁴ International Criminal Court, ‘Netanyahu’, International Criminal Court, 21 November 2024, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/defendant/netanyahu>.

⁴⁸⁵ Aleks Phillips, ‘Syria: Rebels Seize Damascus as Assad Flees Capital’, 8 December 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9vkmp11mrmo>.

But these moments opened the way to engage with the difficult, under-discussed conversations around failure in theatre-making.⁴⁸⁶ While practitioners such as Weston suggest that sometimes it is better to walk away from a project,⁴⁸⁷ moments like these complicate that position, asking instead what it means—if it is even possible—to endure, to remain resilient. In this sense, what felt embarrassing and treacherous to articulate became a necessary site of reflection, exposing the realities of directing that are often smoothed over or left unspoken.

Performative Research: Director and Actor, Researcher and Participant

While my health prevented the production from continuing, I had begun to face some difficulties in my directorial relationship with a few actors in *Agamemnon*. The first was the challenges in creating a strong foundational cast. The second involved navigating the blurred lines between actors as creative participants of a theatre production and as academic research participants in a performative research project, and the differing expectations that come with each role. The third raised important questions about why qualifications matter in theatre-making, especially when framed through the lens of *Performative Research*. And the fourth concern was my own dual role as director and researcher, and the tension between being a kind, collaborative leader and an assertive, decisive one. In these reflections, I explore both the frustrations and fears of jeopardising the research and the unexpected beauty found in moments of resilience and crisis.

The Casting Process: Choosing the Right Actors and Participants

Choosing the *right* participants for a research project is just as important as casting the most *capable* and *competent* actors for a production. As Sidiropoulou suggests, “in auditions, directors evaluate how an actor’s particular skills and personality attributes will serve a specific role but also the general requirements of the production”.⁴⁸⁸ Casting is a difficult process, requiring skill, experience, and artistic and emotional intuition to choose the *right* actors, with an awareness of how the ensemble will coalesce and collaborate with each other and the creative team. Finding a balance, as Mitchell suggests, is a difficult job. Sometimes, the *best* actor is not always the *right* actor for your process.⁴⁸⁹ My aim is to find actors who are warm and friendly in all their interactions with both cast and crew. An actor must be punctual, enthusiastic, flexible and open to experiment in the rehearsal room, bringing their own research and ideas to the process also. They must bring good humour and resilience to their work. A play’s success

⁴⁸⁶ Matthew Hemley, ‘Exclusive: Royal Exchange Director Stef O’Driscoll Breaks Silence on Show Cancellation’, *The Stage*, 20 September 2024, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/exclusive-royal-exchange-director-stef-odriscoll-breaks-silence-on-show-cancellation>.

⁴⁸⁷ Judith Weston, *Directing Actors: 25th Anniversary Edition - Creating Memorable Performances for Film and Television* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2021), p. 5.

⁴⁸⁸ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 59.

⁴⁸⁹ Katie Mitchell, *The Director’s Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 99.

depends on the casting and how an actor interacts with and forms relationships with the entire ensemble.⁴⁹⁰

Throughout my directing career, I have had to remain responsive and adaptable throughout the casting process without assuming stability from the outset. I acknowledge that practising in this turbulent era means actors often navigate complex, changing personal circumstances alongside the production.⁴⁹¹ Across my productions, I have encountered situations where actors have needed to withdraw at early stages of the process. These decisions have arisen for a range of reasons, including health, shifting time commitments, relocation from Auckland and Aotearoa, or competing professional obligations. I have not approached these scenarios as failures on the part of the actor or myself, but as reflections of the wider conditions in which my productions are being staged. I have had to recast actors in both Chorus and named principal roles.

A key part of my methodology has been a commitment to care, and where possible—within my abilities, resources, and budget—I have worked to support actors to remain involved in ways that are sustainable for them and the production. This has included adapting rehearsal processes, my own methodologies, modes of participation, and allowing for different working rhythms, particularly in relation to both mental and physical health. As part of both my research and production ethical processes, I privately discuss with actors their needs and concerns, and how those needs might be accommodated to preserve their dignity without compromising the expectations and demands of the production and research. When actors stepped back from the production, this necessitated a return to the casting process. Recasting was not just a logistical task but required a careful, intuitive consideration of how a new actor might embody their role, enter an already-formed ensemble dynamic, and how the character itself might shift in response. Rather than seeing recasting as a disruption, it became, once again, another site of generative inquiry. The need to find replacement actors, often at short notice, revealed both the vulnerabilities and the resilience of theatre-making processes. In more complex instances, where participation became misaligned with the expectations of the production and the research, I sought external professional guidance. Decisions included, at times, asking actors to step back from the work. These decisions were not undertaken lightly or in haste, but were made with consideration for the wider responsibilities, sustainability, and cohesion of the ensemble, the production, and the research framework. As Sidiropoulou also suggests, we not only have a responsibility for the “production as a whole”, but also to ourselves, our safety, and our physical and mental health.⁴⁹²

In the casting process, I considered a few of the following methodological questions:

⁴⁹⁰ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), p. 59.

⁴⁹¹ Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 73-74.

⁴⁹² Avra Sidiropoulou, *Directions for Directing: Theatre and Method* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 193-194.

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE, PRODUCTIVE, AND SUPPORTIVE ACTOR/PARTICIPANT?



AN ACTOR WHO:

- Recognises their own capacity and commitments, communicates availability clearly and early, and knows when to prioritise the production or step away.
- Commits their full attention, effort, enthusiasm, and focus while in rehearsal and on stage, upholding the expectations of the project.
- Shows genuine enjoyment and finds energy, curiosity, and meaning in the work.
- Arrives early or on time, valuing punctuality as a professional standard of the work and research.
- Demonstrates a sense of professional responsibility not just as an actor, but also as a research participant in a shared process.
- Is present for dress rehearsals and performances, ensuring they are present and focused during discussions of safety protocols, procedural notes, and ensemble refinements.
- Learns their lines within a reasonable timeframe, allowing space for play, discovery, and scene development.
- Listens and responds attentively on stage, stays in role, improvises when necessary, and supports the flow and rhythm of the performance.
- Prepares for their role in their own time, engaging in independent reflection, research, and rehearsal, bringing those findings into the rehearsal space to enrich the work.
- Provides thoughtful insights, asks questions, and reflects constructively on the work and the play text.
- Attends the ensemble rehearsals and participates fully in team building, characterisation, and collaborative tasks and methods during rehearsals.
- Actively stays involved when absent by asking for notes, offering to attend digitally, and staying connected to the work.
- Approaches creative and logistical differences with openness, curiosity, and solution-focused communication.
- Understands that the rehearsal room is a creative, intellectual, and collaborative space, where whanaungatanga is encouraged, but does not override the artistic and research expectations and goals.
- Approaches character and scene work with openness, letting go of fixed interpretations in favour of exploration and discovery.
- Respects the complexity of the process, acknowledging the invisible labour, and brings empathy, professionalism, and initiative to support the creative team.
- Listens actively when the director, creative team, or crew are giving notes, and supports a focused rehearsal environment.
- Upholds a respectful, inclusive, and supportive atmosphere, treating cast and creatives with professionalism at all times, by empowering others and centring the collective over personal gain.
- Trusts the production team's vision and contributes with confidence, while respecting the larger dramaturgical framework.
- Meets the demands of their role by asking questions, seeking support, taking initiative, and balancing confidence with humility and adaptability.
- Takes responsibility for personal props, costumes, and set pieces, and assists where possible in helping the creative team reset the rehearsal and performance space.



WHAT MAKES AN INEFFECTIVE, UNPRODUCTIVE, AND UNSUPPORTIVE ACTOR/PARTICIPANT?



AN ACTOR WHO:

- Does not commit their full attention, effort, enthusiasm, and focus while in rehearsal or on stage as per their signed agreement?
- Is consistently and significantly late to rehearsals?
- Is late to the dress rehearsals and performances, and therefore misses the safety protocols, procedures, and ensemble practices undertaken with the cast?
- Does not learn their lines within a reasonable timeframe?
- Frequently misses their cues on stage?
- Does not stay in character throughout their performance?
- Does not prepare for their role in their own time?
- Does not participate in the team building, characterisation, and ensemble tasks and methods in rehearsal?
- Is seen to be gossiping, disparaging, or belittling the cast or creative team in the rehearsal space?
- Talks while the director, creative team, or crew is giving notes to the cast?
- Has multiple creative and logistical disputes with the creative and production team?
- Evidently prioritises the production as a social space, with the creative and research process taking a secondary role?
- Does not employ their professional commitment as an actor and responsibilities to the research as a participant?
- Has preconceived notions about a character or scene, and is not open to exploration, play, and discovery during the rehearsal process?
- Does not trust the production team to make informed and thoughtful decisions about the production?
- Struggles to meet the demands of their role due to inexperience, insecurity, or overconfidence?
- Undermines the ensemble dynamic by manipulating and controlling fellow cast members to serve their own interests?
- Rushes off at the end of a rehearsal, leaving their props, costumes, and set pieces to be sorted by someone else?



Expectations of the Dual Roles: Actor and Research Participant

In theatre, it is not uncommon for actors to form social relationships inside and outside the rehearsal process, and this was expected and anticipated in the ethical considerations. However, a dichotomy arises in undertaking creative practice research through theatre, as it is unusual in research for participants to engage with each other outside the research space. This was stated in the consent form and throughout our rehearsal sessions that materials relating to the production and the research were not to be discussed with anyone outside rehearsals, which could thereby compromise the confidentiality of any research findings and any material created by the actors. During *Women of Troy*, a post-production social event was organised and supervised by me to celebrate and congratulate the cast, recognising their hard work, with small gifts, cards, a shared barbecue and drinks, and an opportunity for the actors to view the production video.

However, a shift in dynamics began to emerge when actors initiated social gatherings outside of the formal rehearsal and research sessions. While informal social interaction is often an expected part of theatre-making, this moment raised concerns about the boundaries, professionalism, integrity, and protection of intellectual properties and research generated by the actors, and the potential sharing of personal material, concepts, and ideas developed within the protected space of rehearsals with individuals outside the project. This prompted a critical question: If theatre performance typically allows for informal social interaction, can it still function as a research project in which participants are expected to engage professionally and exclusively within designated research settings? Furthermore, how might the careful selection of actors/participants help mitigate the emergence of unintended power imbalances and safeguard the collaborative research process? I consider this may be an important and vital step to include in any future theatre-making process and ethical procedures.

Why Qualifications Matter in Performative Research Theatre-Making

At the outset of this research, I did intend to prioritise qualifications or formal experience in the casting process. While I acknowledged the value of an actor's experience and training—and indeed, a majority of actors were qualified across *Antigone* and *Women of Troy*—it was only through the evolving rehearsal processes that I came to fully understand how the functionality of the ensemble relied on a strong foundation of knowledge, skill, and expertise. The challenges that emerged, particularly during *Agamemnon*, clarified for me that qualifications and professional experience significantly contribute to the strength, cohesion, and direction of both the ensemble and the research itself.

As I reflect on the imagined dialogue, qualifications can streamline and enrich the work in multiple ways—they support the actor's understanding of the theoretical and historical contexts discussed in rehearsals, clarify expectations within rehearsal and research settings as actor and participant, and allow for more skilful, intuitive, and imaginative

approaches to the dramatic work. For the purposes of *my* research, I define qualifications as a completed or in-progress tertiary-level Diploma or Bachelor's Degree in Drama, Theatre, or Performing Arts. As the projects progressed, I noted how each production decreased in the number of qualified actors:

Corvus Theatre Co Production Comparison: Trajectory of Drama/Theatre Qualifications

• 5 of 6 actors with a relevant qualification (83.3%) • 2 of 6 actors with a relevant post-graduate qualification (33.3%)	• 10 of 16 Actors with a relevant qualification (62.5%) • 4 of 16 actors with a relevant post-graduate qualification (25%)	• 7 of 16 actors with a relevant qualification (43.75%) • 3 of 16 actors with a relevant post-graduate qualification (18.75%)
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Figure 127. Comparison of Drama/Theatre Qualifications.

This gradual shift revealed the significant weight the qualified performers carried in their ability to participate in ensemble methodologies, navigate the rehearsal and research processes, and engage with the complexity of ancient Greek tragedy in non-theatre locations. Those with formal training in previous productions were able to model techniques and professional discipline that supported and mentored the wider cast, allowing emerging performers to grow.

However, the emphasis on qualifications raises a difficult question—does this approach risk becoming exclusionary? Unfortunately, in Aotearoa, funding for performing arts research, let alone for theatre in general, is scarce, as I have discussed in Chapter Two on theatre in institutional and financial crisis. As an independent theatre company created for the purposes of my doctoral research, I have struggled to define our identity in Aotearoa, asking where we fit as a community or professional company. Without the resources to pay actors, I relied on other means to offer value and support—catered meals, parking permits for on-campus access in the city, rehearsals and performances in high-quality facilities and venues, professional technical collaborators and peer mentorship, and the chance to engage with rarely performed theatre forms. These contextual factors are crucial when considering how emerging performers might be supported to thrive within a demanding theatre-research framework. This raises a fundamental question: must a production financially compensate its actors to be considered *professional*? Or can professionalism be measured instead by the structure,

rigour, technical execution, and artistic outcomes of the work, even when the cast includes amateur or emerging actors?

Actors who were not necessarily *qualified* were often experienced in community or amateur theatre, demonstrated an aptitude and excitement for the project, and saw it as an opportunity to enhance their skills and knowledge as performers through the learning process of doing a theatre production of a professional standard. The qualified actors and highly experienced amateur performers brought embedded knowledge of dramaturgy, rehearsal culture, vocal and physical technique, and were able to meet the demands of performances in non-theatre locations with consistency and creativity. They also helped guide the tone and expectations of the process, thereby elevating the ensemble's strength and reinforcing my vision as a director. Many of the qualified actors were secondary and tertiary Drama educators and were able to support the production in further ways with their extensive knowledge of the form, expectations of theatre practice, research, and the required assessment conditions⁴⁹³ of my doctoral research.

In practice, working with trained actors often determines the scope of what can be achieved within a given rehearsal or research timeframe. These actors typically understand their role in a collaborative process and have nuanced knowledge and the tools to critically engage with text and context.⁴⁹⁴ They are attuned to both the demands of live performance and the nuances of theatre in academic or research contexts. Their presence can enrich and inform the rehearsal process, allowing for experimentation, layered interpretation, and moments of meaningful discovery.

Directing an ensemble without such grounding presents different challenges. A longer rehearsal period may be necessary, with the director stepping into further roles, not just as the interpreter of the play,⁴⁹⁵ but as a teacher or trainer.⁴⁹⁶ This was particularly apparent in *Agamemnon*, where some actors appeared to struggle with the expectations and demands of the roles required of them—their punctuality, focus, and collaboration. Some of these included written and spoken agreements, to learn their lines within reasonable timeframes, take initiative to notify the director and creative team of scheduling conflicts in advance of rehearsals, arrive on time to rehearsals with an enthusiastic attitude, treating each other with, [aroha](#), care and respect, to engage with the ensemble methodologies of the rehearsal and research space, to focus and listen

⁴⁹³ Jane Isobel Luton and Holly Charlotte Luton, 'A Dialogue Across the Circle: Creating "Authentic" Theatre for Achievement Standards in New Zealand Secondary Schools', in *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People*, ed. Selina Busby et al. (Routledge, 2022).

⁴⁹⁴ Hugh Morrison, *Directing in the Theatre* (A & C Black, 1984), p. 6.

⁴⁹⁵ As a director, we must find a balance between identifying what we have been given textually by the playwright or translator (language and stage directions) and what is practical and suitable for the contexts in which we set the play. We must explore and interpret the text and subtext—read between the lines, explore context and discover through practice. Untangle the meaning of the ancient and modern language choices, the rhetoric, tone, emotion, sarcasm, innuendo, and euphemisms.

⁴⁹⁶ Hugh Morrison, *Directing in the Theatre* (A & C Black, 1984), p. 6.

during notes or safety briefings. Despite these consent agreements, some requirements were not met. Disengagement—whether due to misaligned expectations or unfamiliarity with the research and creative process and culture—had a noticeable impact on the company's cohesion and, consequently, weakened our shared sense of purpose.⁴⁹⁷ This tension affected not just the production itself, but also the integrity of the research process.

Although I tried to create a shared, respectful environment—with opportunities for discussion, questioning, and mutual exchange—I became increasingly aware of a gap between intention and reality.

The Role of Leadership: Directing with Kindness or Assertiveness?

Reflecting after each rehearsal and ruminating on my directorial practice, I often find myself wondering, how did I conduct myself, present myself, and communicate with my actors? *Was I too nice or too mean? Too soft, too understanding, too patient, too forgiving? Too willing to explain myself? Too willing to let the actors' decisions take precedence over the cohesive vision?* And when I did assert my boundaries and expectations, was I too strong? Barbara Rhode on the role of women in leadership suggests that “women who come on too strong evoke labels such as ‘bitch,’ ‘ice queen,’ and ‘iron maiden’”.⁴⁹⁸

Our gender as female directors is always on show, always criticised. There is a continual negotiation between being too heavy-handed, too confident, too aggressive, or conversely too generous, too patient, too accommodating—the “velvet glove with a hand of steel”.⁴⁹⁹ Director Roxana Silbert reflects on her time at the Royal Shakespeare Company in the UK, noting that many young female directors are still learning how to claim authority in the rehearsal room—how to say no with clarity and confidence, and without apology. She recounts an instance in which she composed a lengthy, carefully justified email in response to a male director's request to move into another rehearsal space, while her female collaborator simply replied: “I'm afraid this will not be possible. Love, X”.⁵⁰⁰ The disparity between responses reveals not a difference in capability, but in the learned pressure on women to explain, soften, and justify their authority, especially as directors in a historically patriarchal role. Kauffman reflects on an early belief that, to be taken seriously as a director, she had to suppress her personality, humour, and

⁴⁹⁷ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (Routledge, 2009), p. 125.

⁴⁹⁸ Deborah L. Rhode, *Women and Leadership* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 11.

⁴⁹⁹ Paulette Marty, *Contemporary Women Stage Directors: Conversations on Craft* (Methuen Drama, 2019), p. 238.

⁵⁰⁰ Paulette Marty, *Contemporary Women Stage Directors: Conversations on Craft* (Methuen Drama, 2019), p. 238.

perspective to become an authoritative director—an approach she later recognises as unsustainable, damaging, and “insane”.⁵⁰¹

In moments when I have sought to be generous, patient, or accommodating to my cast and crew's needs, I have been conscious of how these choices might be perceived. In this sense, what might be read as collaborative openness in my own practice risks being interpreted by some as a lack of decisiveness or confidence—a “push-over” tendency—rather than a deliberate methodological choice grounded in collaborative, ensemble work. On balance, when I have been required to be assertive in my directorial decisions, I run into what Rhode identifies as the double bind, in which authority in women is persistently seen as excess—where a simple “no” is asking too much. Rhode considers that

Women who do seek leadership positions are subject to double standards and double binds. What is assertive in a man seems abrasive in a woman, and female employees risk seeming too feminine, or not feminine enough. On the one hand, they may appear too “soft”—unable or unwilling to make the tough calls required in positions of greatest influence. On the other hand, those who mimic the “male model” are often viewed as strident and overly aggressive.⁵⁰²

My reflections and questions do not come from a lack of confidence in my artistry, knowledge, and ability to lead, but from the experience of negotiation in the rehearsal room through ensemble methodologies. As a woman in a historically male role, I feel a continued sense of responsibility to lead with kindness, care, and compromise, but acknowledge that I must also bring clarity, firmness, efficiency, and assertiveness to final creative decisions.

I contemplate—what are my expectations of the actors? What are my non-negotiables and boundaries as a director? How do I find a balance as a director between kindness but firmness? I offer my actors room to explore and room to resist, regarding the rehearsal room as a space for mutual experimentation and discovery. I welcome ideas from the actors, *I listen, I learn, I collaborate*. My creative process is *collaborative* in nature through ensemble methodologies, but the production and the research are not a *collaboration* of practice—I am the executor of the decisions as the director and researcher. Leadership in a rehearsal space is not domination, but a responsibility for the work, for the actors and participants, and for oneself. As director-researcher, I have a responsibility to the story, to the safety of *all* the actors,⁵⁰³ to the integrity of the production, and to *my* research.

⁵⁰¹ Paulette Marty, *Contemporary Women Stage Directors: Conversations on Craft* (Methuen Drama, 2019), p. 229.

⁵⁰² Deborah L. Rhode, *Women and Leadership* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 11.

⁵⁰³ Fiona McNamara and Borni Te Rongopai Tukiwaho, *04: Working Together: Safety, Respect and Wellbeing* (Playmarket, 2023).

I consider my non-negotiables from the actors might include:

- 🧑‍🎤 An expectation of kindness, enthusiasm, attention, and professionalism as both an actor and participant in the creative work and the research project.
- 🧑‍🎤 An expectation that a “no” or “maybe” is followed by a proposal or a question, not passive aggression.
- 🧑‍🎤 An expectation that actors will offer alternatives in scene work with curiosity: *“I’m not sure about this choice—may I try this instead?”*
- 🧑‍🎤 An expectation that the final performance decisions will be honoured once decided, for the safety and cohesion of the ensemble.

Offering Creative Alternatives: Being a Director, Dramaturg, Designer, and Researcher

And in turn, as the director, I offer the same:

- 🧑‍🎤 I try to ensure that I do not say “no” or shut down an acting choice but rather offer a redirection or a reimagining.
- 🧑‍🎤 Every creative and design decision has a purpose, whether practical or theoretical, for the consistency of the story, and for the safety of all the actors.

CREATIVE CONSIDERATIONS



Scenario Example	Practical Reasoning	Theoretical Reasoning	Story/ Direction	Safety	Proposal/ Solution
An actor wants to use fake blood in a scene	There is a high likelihood of staining the clothing of all the actors in the scene. These costumes are borrowed/owned by the actors or me; we do not want to be washing whites every night with potential long-term stains. Respecting the space in which we are working, we are guests of this space. Thinking about Tikanga Māori, principles and ethos, blood and violence are already controversial matters, and we must respect for this space that is not our own. The potential staining of these expensive tiles would be both disrespectful and cause irreparable damage. As a representative and student of the university, our company must be respectful of the facilities and resources provided to us	Simon Perris, on depictions of Violence in Greek tragedy. It is not necessary for a violent play to include literal depictions of violence in order for an audience to resonate with the themes. The Greeks did not depict violence on stage. We live in a world that is increasingly desensitised to violence on screens. Violence can be just as powerful in stylised ways.	This is not the direction we are taking in this production. Fake blood in Antigone was purposeful for parallels between a cleansing ritual of the space and the destruction of a family. An audience to anticipate violence and be shocked by the stillness or satire of the scene. We aim to use stylised violence to resonate with real lived experiences.	The tiled floor becomes slippery and, therefore, dangerous for actors to move safely.	Red confetti will be used/ dropped from the balcony to depict the violent killing of Astyanax. A tear-away dress/shirt will be used with fake blood painted onto a disposable/re-usable costume for the killing of Agamemnon and evidence of Clytemnestra's actions.

As these tables and questions demonstrate, directing is a complex process of negotiation, contemplation, and constant reflection—always asking, am I doing this effectively?

However, these boundaries and non-negotiables can create their own tensions, especially when kindness is then mistaken for weakness, or firmness for aggression and bullying. Rhode's views on women in leadership begin to ring in my ears after every rehearsal. I find myself second-guessing—*was I too sharp? Too vague? Did I explain myself enough? Or too much? Did I apologise too many times for something that was out of my control? Were there mistakes I made that could have been better resolved?*

There are double standards at play in directing theatre as a woman. In the hands of a male director, an artistic decision might be met with compliance, even admiration. In mine, it might be met with challenge, negotiation, or quiet dissent. Or worse: *sabotage masked as resistance*. Mitchell is often painted as abrasive, humourless, or high-minded. But she is one of the most respected directors working today. Her reputation swings between “vandal” and “visionary.”⁵⁰⁴ Her seriousness is sometimes misunderstood as severity. But those who have worked with her for decades speak of her gentleness, her humour, her integrity.⁵⁰⁵

So, what happens *if* I assert a boundary in the rehearsal room? *If I say, “No, you can’t change your blocking in the middle of a dress rehearsal or performance because it’s dangerous to your scene partner, the ensemble, and disrespectful to the process?” Or, if I say, “No, I will not approve of that costume, and you must ensure you are wearing appropriate undergarments. It is inappropriate for the character and could compromise your safety as an actor, as well as the safety of your fellow cast members and the audience”.* Directing requires us to be assertive with actors and participants, even those who may be friends, colleagues, or family members. Does assertiveness make me difficult? A diva? A dictator? Or am I not simply a director doing the job required of her—upholding the artistic integrity of the production and research, and ensuring a duty of care for *all* her actors and her own wellbeing? I still wonder how to balance assertiveness with kindness.

A serious consideration for any director is whether they have the right to remove an actor from a production—and in my case, a participant from a research project—if their presence is disruptive or potentially harmful to the creative vision, research intentions, and the ensemble and participants? While it is a difficult decision, the answer is inevitably yes. As a young emerging artist and female professional, I have struggled with the conflict of people-pleasing. Leadership is *not* about people-pleasing. It is about

⁵⁰⁴ Charlotte Higgins, ‘Katie Mitchell, British Theatre’s Queen in Exile’, Stage, *The Guardian*, 14 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jan/14/british-theatre-queen-exile-katie-mitchell>.

⁵⁰⁵ Charlotte Higgins, ‘The Cutting Edge’, Stage, *The Guardian*, 24 November 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/24/theatre.stage>.

protecting the integrity of work and the well-being of actors and participants. Sometimes that means making difficult calls, with consideration, clarity, and care.

Perhaps the lesson here is that being nice is not the same as being a *pushover*. Being kind does not mean *never* saying *no*. And being a woman in charge does not mean we have to live with the curse of being *too nice*. It means learning to be fierce *and* fair, kind *and* clear, graceful *but* unafraid of potentially being seen as the villain by some. It is a point reiterated by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in reflections on dealing with the COVID-19 crisis in Aotearoa, “people [will] only see the decisions you made, not the choices you had”.⁵⁰⁶

These issues are almost always considered from a position of hindsight. These moments of conflict did not form the majority of the theatre-making experience, but when they did arise, they forced me to examine my boundaries, my values, and my role as a director. Across my practice, I have been fortunate to work with actors who bring care, trust, enthusiasm, and professionalism into the rehearsal space—actors who are generous, supportive, playful, excited, and deeply committed to the collaborative process. As Bogart suggests,

the saving grace in one’s work is love, trust and a sense of humour—trust in collaborators and the creative act in rehearsal, love for the art and a sense of humour about the impossible task. These are the elements that bring grace into a rehearsal situation and onto the stage.⁵⁰⁷

But leadership, by its nature, is tested in the exceptions to the norm. These moments, rare as they may be, still shape who I am as a director and researcher. These unfortunate scenarios have sharpened my sense of what I will allow, what I will resist, and what I must protect in the theatre-making process. In this written exegesis, this tension manifests even in the language I use—the term fragility, while present in the thesis title, is the least used of my three key terms (fragility, resilience, and resonance) and is most often paired with the word resilience.

⁵⁰⁶ Katharine Viner, “‘Empathy Is a Kind of Strength’: Jacinda Ardern on Kind Leadership, Public Rage and Life in Trump’s America”, *The Guardian* (London), 31 May 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2025/may/31/jacinda-ardern-kind-leadership-public-rage-life-trump-america>.

⁵⁰⁷ Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), p.

A Director's Process Creative Practice Exhibition: Interview with Holly



Figure 128. [*Video Interview with Holly, A Director's Process Creative Practice Exhibition*](#)

In this interview, I respond to a series of questions that situate my creative practice exhibition within this research. The interview includes photographs and videos of the curatorial process and evening event. I discuss how creative practice differs from traditional research pathways and why I chose to present my research as an exhibition. I also speak about how I encouraged audience interaction, what it meant to return to the performance spaces—sites that had become associated with fragility in the research—and how I approached themes of resilience while staging Greek tragedy in this turbulent era. Importantly, the interview begins to articulate some key findings in curating the exhibition. There was a serendipity in presenting my creative practice as an exhibition within the sites of performance—not just in arranging the artefacts of *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon* on the staircase, across the mezzanines, and in the atrium through static and performative ways, but in transforming the research to exist as both performance and as museum practices, a format that felt appropriate to the archiving of ancient Greek histories.

Drawing on the first chapter of my exegesis, in which I positioned myself as the researcher, I wanted to create a similar mode of curiosity and engagement that I had experienced in encountering art, performance, histories, and philosophies through museums, galleries, and heritage sites. Attendees who walked through my exhibition were encouraged to touch, move, wear, play, and participate—to try on costumes, handle props, and contribute their own reflections through tasks and activities. This was a key

intention in moving *Performative Research* beyond the researcher, towards how a reader or audience might access and experience my research in embodied ways, especially when my communities included those from within and/or outside of performance and academia.

Two key devices centred these ideas. Standing, facing each other, across the sprawl of the metres-long tapestry were the figures of Cassandra from each play, their costumes and props placed on mannequins—their symbols, an embodiment of crisis and tragedy. At the end of the exhibition sat Pandora’s jar, as a symbolic container for fragility and resilience. Audiences were invited to pin their thematic and experiential crises onto either Cassandra, and place their *Elpis*, hopes, into Pandora’s jar. The responses revealed a wide range of lived experiences to global crises across theatre and research—creative tensions, workplace bullying and harassment, cancelled projects due to illness and injury, the embarrassment and shame that can accompany failure, actors and research participants dropping out, practitioners taking on multiple roles, and systematic underfunding and under-resourced research and practice. Within Pandora’s jar lay reflections often framed as either “*I hope...*” or declarative statements. Opening the jar revealed a collective expression of both vulnerability and resilience, calls for collaborative and respectful care, a desire to keep performance alive in times of crisis, and a sense of shared disillusionment. There were strong hopes that stories of the marginalised continue to be seen and heard, alongside clear statements that theatre should be fully funded, accessible, and supported. A persistent thread also emerged: the need to remain hopeful, even in crisis, and the understanding that theatre endures, that it matters, and that it must be protected. Alongside these were also provocations, including calls for theatre to remain human-centred, pointing to ongoing tensions around authorship, labour, and the technology-centred future awaiting creative practice.

In concluding responses from attendees, there was recognition of the challenges I had navigated throughout my research and of the value of meaning-making over solution-focused outcomes. These contributions and findings extended the research beyond my own practice, making visible the collective experience of crisis and care.

Performative and Embodied Research, The Third Paradigm

In curating the creative practice exhibition for examination and writing my conclusion, I began to contemplate how effectively my research had captured and generated what Haseman first proposed as *Performative Research*. By weaving performativity throughout the written component—in graphics, photographs, videos, and transcripts—and by using the exhibition as a site of archiving, displaying, and embodying four years of creative practice, I realised that the exhibition also invited a kind of audience performativity. Their experience of *accessing* the research became an embodied experience, continuing the research process through their own embodied contributions—where knowledge became tangible for a variety of readers and researchers.

In recognising this, I am also aware that embodiment as method and methodology has long been central to creative practice research and performance studies, where knowledge is understood as lived, situated, and felt as much as it is articulated—from Saldaña’s ethnodramatic methods for embodied research dissemination⁵⁰⁸ to Nelson’s articulation of Practice as Research.⁵⁰⁹ My project sits within and contributes to this existing body of embodied and Practice as Research methodologies, while supporting and extending Brad Haseman’s framing of *Performative* beyond methodology into *paradigm*.

I further wondered whether Haseman’s *Performative Research* is merely one step in a broader trajectory of *new* research. My project acknowledges and celebrates his conceptualisation, but I also found it to push beyond its original boundaries. What emerged feels closer to what I describe as *Embodied Research*—an extension of Haseman’s *third paradigm* that calls upon contributions from multiple disciplines beyond the scope of creative practice, from sport science to health science, communications studies and art and design, law, and the humanities, where research can be understood not just as measurable numbers—quantitative—or solution-based problem solving—qualitative—but as meaning-making—*Performative and Embodied*. Research that can be generated and disseminated in participatory, palpable, tactile, creative, and interconnected ways through the lived relationships between researcher, research, *and* reader, community, and audience. This paradigm is not only performative, it is embodied and inhabited by a deep relational connection between making and meaning, of body, process, and knowledge.

Crisis as a Generative Framework

In returning to the central research questions that have underpinned this exegesis, it becomes clear that crisis does not function as a problem to be resolved; rather, it emerges as a condition, a framework, a lens through which meaning-making occurs. This research does not seek to establish a replicable or solution-based methodology of crisis, but instead to recognise that crisis is not an obstruction, but is a generative paradigm—one that is inherent, embodied, and continually negotiated within both this turbulent era and contemporary theatre practice.

As both director and researcher, I came to understand that I was not always positioned to be a stabilising force, responsible for resolving external disruption, but rather to work alongside and within instability and uncertainty. In this way, crisis shifts from something to be managed to a condition that actively reshapes the ethical and aesthetic properties of the rehearsal process itself.

⁵⁰⁸ Johnny Saldaña, *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage* (Left Coast Press, 2011).

⁵⁰⁹ Robin Nelson, ed., *Practice as Research in the Arts (and Beyond): Principles, Processes, Contexts, Achievements* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

While this research resists the formulation of fixed strategies or prescriptive frameworks, I reflectively identify a series of emergent positions and propositions that arose through the lived experience of staging *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon*, as explored in Chapters Three and Four, and through critical reflection on both the successes and failures of my practice, as discussed in Chapter Five. These include an openness to interruption as generative, a willingness to allow structures to remain permeable and responsive, an engagement with the urgencies of the present moment as a force shaping the work, and an ongoing commitment to humour and resilience.

Within this, crisis as a practical condition of the rehearsal process, also foregrounded care as a central framework: care for oneself, for the ensemble, for the production elements, and for the integrity of the process and research. Importantly, such care does not preclude tension, disagreement, or difficulty, but was negotiated through and often tested by these conditions.

These are not intended as universal strategies for all directors, but as points of resonance through which I hope practitioners and researchers might interpret, adapt, reframe, or resist these approaches within their own contexts.

The original contribution of this research, therefore, lies not in offering solutions for theatre-making in crisis, but in articulating crisis itself as a productive lens through which directing can be understood and reimaged. By positioning crisis as a mode of knowledge production—one that is experiential, embodied, relational, and tacit—this exegesis contributes to broader conversations within practice-led research. In doing so, it challenges solution-driven paradigms, embraces *Performative (Embodied) Research*, and instead foregrounds meaning-making as a valid and evocative research output.⁵¹⁰

There, among the broken pieces, was *Hope*.

When Pandora's jar tipped over, it was not the act of opening that brought about chaos, but a reminder that chaos had always been beneath the lid. Like Pandora's jar, this project has attempted to lift the lid on the many crises that shaped my theatre practice at a time of personal, local, national, and global crises that are "far from over"⁵¹¹—the ongoing consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, political unrest, wars, conflicts, genocides, ecological collapse, financial recessions, the unstable infrastructure of arts and neoliberal education in Aotearoa.

Yet amidst these threats, I found that it was the personal, micro-crises—the ones that seemed insignificant against the backdrop of global catastrophe—that caused the jar to

⁵¹⁰ Jillian Hamilton and Luke Jaaniste, 'The Effective and the Evocative: A Spectrum of Creative Practice Research', in *Material Inventions: Applying Creative Arts Research*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 234.

⁵¹¹ Sylvia Walby, 'Crisis and Society: Developing the Theory of Crisis in the Context of COVID-19', *Global Discourse* 12, nos. 3–4 (2022): 498–516, <https://doi.org/0.1332/204378921X16348228772103>, p. 506.

shatter. It broke under the weight of uncertainty, instability, and resistance. Rehearsals halted, and the production of *Agamemnon* ceased. For a time, I stood among the broken fragments, unsure whether it could ever be pieced back together.

But in reflection, in imagining a dialogue with my companion female directors and theatre-makers, I came to recognise *Elpis*—the last remaining object in Pandora’s jar, *hope*. Not of naive optimism, but a quiet, persistent presence of resilience. A hope that coexists with grief, pain, and frustration and what was not realised in final performances, and a resilience forged in confidence and in *doubt*—the possibility of starting again, of reimagining practice and practitioner after the tragic fall. Bogart observes that “most people become highly creative in the midst of an emergency. [...] It is in these moments of crisis that native intelligence and intuitive imagination kicks in”.⁵¹² This idea guided my work. As I considered at the beginning of my research, I came to find that there were times where crisis could be embraced, embodied, and employed as an impetus for theatre-making—and later, where it could not. But where crisis could not be utilised in the theatre practice, I saw it as an exciting prospect that lay in the research findings—what I had learned, what was challenging, and what must be done differently next time.

Bogart also writes, “imbalance is more fruitful than stability.”⁵¹³ I have lived and breathed this idea through *Women of Troy* and *Agamemnon*. As a director, I have discovered that a crisis can halt creation, but it can also redefine it. It demands urgent artistry, flexible thinking, and instinctive responses. It calls upon the director to be a strategic responder—one who finds meaning in the disruption. And a recognition, a *peripeteia*, of when this is not possible, acknowledging our limitations, where we do not have the tools or resources for creation and stability. At times, it was the smallest of cracks that went unnoticed, but through repetitive strain, they caused the most damage.

In reflecting on and curating the final *crisis* displays in my creative practice exhibition, I found myself contemplating further images and objects that could figuratively and literally capture the visceral, emotional experience of the second production’s collapse and cancellation. I wanted attendees to feel something of that rupture, to resonate with the emotional weight of the crisis that I had encountered in the projects. As I re-explored the props stored in my spare room, I realised that three vessels of crisis had emerged to be placed in the exhibition: an unorganised, messy prop box, a rubbish bin, and Pandora’s Jar—each offering a different layer of crisis, from despair to *hopeful possibility*.

The first vessel, the prop box, captured the physical and emotional pain of the process. Sat untouched from the final dress rehearsal, unorganised, and stripped of care I had worked so hard to maintain through all facets of the production and process. It became

⁵¹² Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), pp. 129-130.

⁵¹³ Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (Routledge, 2001), pp. 129-130.

a container not only of objects but also of my disappointment, exhaustion, and illness that I pushed through, unaware of the increasing weight, heavy on my shoulders.

The second vessel, the rubbish bin, spoke to words I had associated with the cancellation: rubbish, dirty, messy, emotional, endings, objects we want to hide away and never look at again. In my final display, I placed a large black plastic bin with my director's script resting on top, a wooden heart, a little toy crow, a box of tissues, and a mirror. But even as I looked at it, I felt disconnected—the production, the photography, the actors' work, the company ethos, my creative ideas, my aroha and my manaaki, all deserved more than a metaphor of discarding. We had reached a full-dress rehearsal, one that I was incredibly proud of, both in the actors' work and my own directorial and design ideas. A bin could not honour what had lived and what had meaning. I could not place these objects inside.

The third vessel, Pandora's Jar, offered a final recognition of *hopeful possibility*, that one day I might return to the production, reshaped or renewed—or in Strauss and Howe's cyclical structure, that I might eventually move into an entirely new phase, gently placing the production behind me. Pandora's Jar became a symbol of what remained after crisis—not the erasure of the work, but the lingering potential for *healing, forgiveness, and creative transformation*.

Throughout this process, Pandora's Jar became a recurring metaphor for artistic possibility. As mentioned in Chapter Two, when the little boy knocked over the ancient jar in the Hecht Museum, the director proposed that this breakage provided an invaluable learning opportunity, to invite reflection and be a part of the restoration—"there are instances where display items are intentionally damaged, and such cases are treated with great severity, [...] however, this was not the situation. The jar was accidentally damaged."⁵¹⁴ When something breaks, we often rush to blame—but accidents happen, mistakes are made, we reflect, we learn, we repair, and we restore. From this modern example of a fragile jar, we can better make sense of these times of crisis, and acknowledge that Pandora is no longer to blame, for what we now understand—as recognised by Haynes—was an accident. We acknowledge that despite the fragilities, we can also be fiercely resilient. Perhaps if Pandora had been met with a kindness from a Japanese Kintsugi-shi⁵¹⁵ artisan, her jar could have been repaired with gold, revealing the fractures of crisis as a beauty in the evidence of survival.

My directing methods have transformed through the process—in successes and failures. Working in non-theatre sites of performance, which brought their own set of challenges,

⁵¹⁴ Ashifa Kassam, "'I Couldn't Believe It Was My Son Who Did It': Boy, 4, Smashes Bronze Age Jar in Israel Museum', *The Guardian* (London), 28 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/28/i-couldnt-believe-it-was-my-son-who-did-it-boy-4-smashes-bronze-age-jar-in-israel-museum>.

⁵¹⁵ The Japanese art form of repairing broken ceramics or pottery with precious metals.

has taught me to adapt to the impermanence. I no longer fear disruption or chaos—I expect and [embrace](#) it. I have affirmed my ensemble work with actors [collaboratively](#)—guiding, supporting, and trusting one another through a mantra of kindness, care, but firmness. This research has forced me to confront my own assumptions about [resilience](#), hope, and what theatre practice and practitioners are capable of. As Saldaña notes, academics for centuries have argued “over the events and crises that will kill theatre, and yet it endures”.⁵¹⁶ These moments have taught me that disaster is not a weakness—it is a truthful response to a truthful world. Tragedy, as Critchley suggests, “obliges us to see our implication within the conflicts of the present and our responsibility for them. If the present is defined by disaster, then tragedy shows us our complicity with it”.⁵¹⁷ But tragedy can also offer us “a bracing [and] skeptical realism that heavily qualifies what we think of as hope, but perhaps also deepens it into a form of courage”.⁵¹⁸ The cast of *Women of Troy* highlighted this for me. In the PPDW, amid words like “grief” and “exhaustion,” I did not recognise the hope.

HOLLY:

Nice, cool. Not a lot of positivity, aye?

OMEGA:

Well, there is ‘hope’! And ‘grateful’.

GAMMA:

‘Warm-hearted’. ‘Privilege’.

OMEGA:

In terms of the experience of doing the play, there is a lot of positivity.

SIGMA:

I think that is quite interesting that everyone is looking at it in the context of doing the play, “oh I had a lovely time”, but we tend to forget the content. There is hope there, in the resilience of the women, and in doing the play.

HOLLY:

And don’t you think that it is interesting [...] how, when we are in a stage of crisis, I have pointed out how “there is not much positivity there”. And yet all of you have pointed out “warm-hearted, hope, grateful”.

You just have to look for it. It is there, in crisis, but we tend not to see the positivity, hope, or opportunity in a time of crisis. It just seems an interesting metaphor, this task for an overall view of how we might perceive our experiences in these moments of crisis.

Figure 129. PPDW Transcript, the actors and Holly discuss hope.

⁵¹⁶ Johnny Saldaña, *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage* (Left Coast Press, 2011), p. 213.

⁵¹⁷ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, The Greeks, and Us* (Profile Books Ltd, 2020), p. 28.

⁵¹⁸ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, The Greeks, and Us* (Profile Books Ltd, 2020), p. 29.

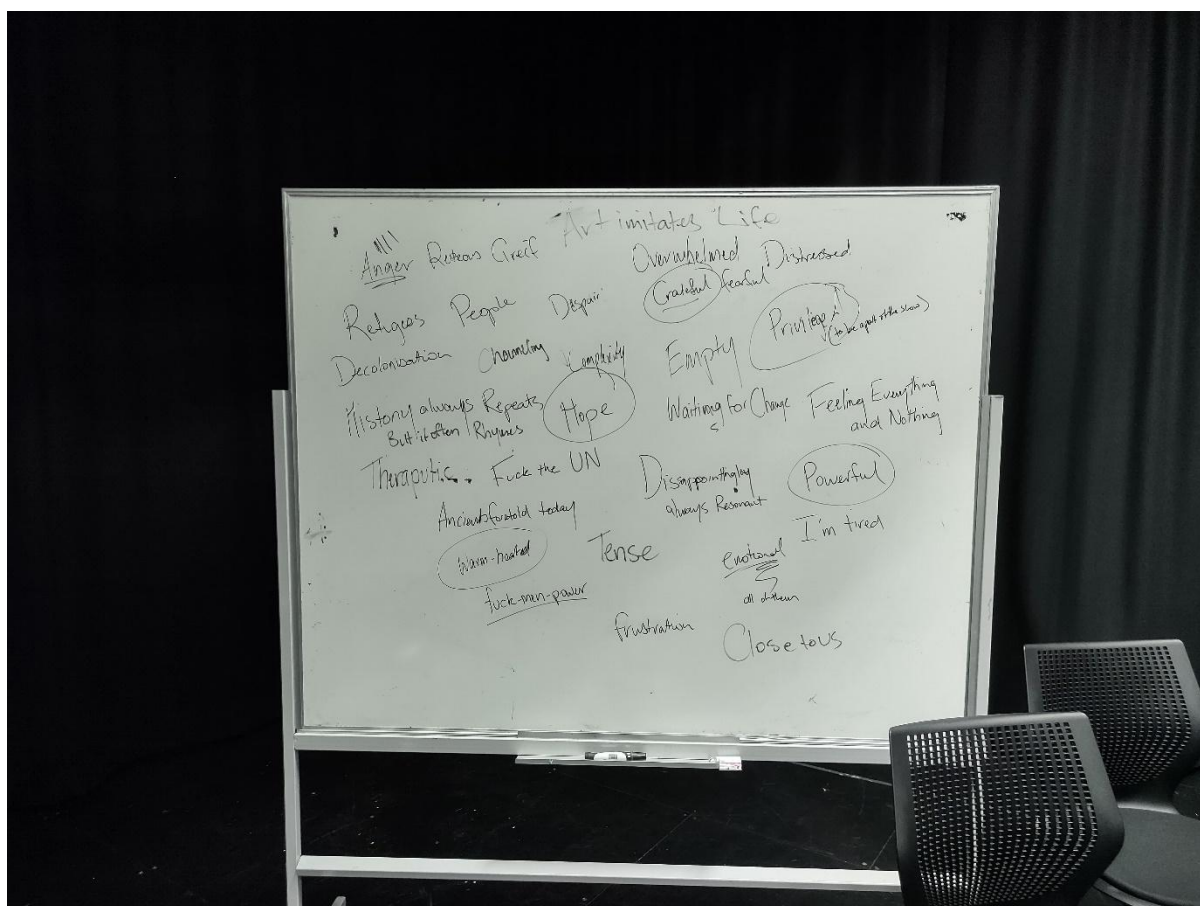


Figure 130. The Women of Troy PPDW whiteboard, annotated with feelings about the production, November 2023.

These were sincere expressions of what the actors felt while performing tragedy in an era of crisis: that, while the material was tragic, there was hope for the women's fate and for theatre-making amidst the turbulence. The actors reminded me that hope is not always obvious—it must be found among the broken pieces.

The character Ritsa in Barker's *The Voyage Home* discusses the brutal journey she has endured in the fall of Troy, suggesting that "you don't always need hope. Sometimes it helps just to have your despair recognised, and shared."⁵¹⁹ In *Agamemnon*, the characters contemplate what hope is. It is a kind of truth, a goodness, a justice that will be revealed in the moments of suffering and despair—for "truth comes with pain".⁵²⁰ Still, I find myself returning to the jar. *Elpis*—*hope*—was the final thing that remained. My future work will not shy away from crisis but lean into it, and importantly, intervene before the jar begins to tip.

⁵¹⁹ Clare Clark, 'The Voyage Home by Pat Barker Review—a Brilliant Finale to the Trojan War Trilogy', Books, *The Guardian*, 7 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/aug/07/the-voyage-home-by-pat-barker-review-a-brilliant-finale-to-the-trojan-war-trilogy>.

⁵²⁰ Pat Barker, *The Voyage Home*, The Women of Troy (Penguin Books, 2024), p. 7.

As I write this conclusion, there is a great uncertainty among my generation about the kind of world that awaits us, as the generation of Heroes and Artists continue to face an era of catalytic and cataclysmic crisis—of increasing global tensions and probable global warfare, accelerated climate change, and an information inflation of Artificial Intelligence and disinformation. Theatre might not be able to save the world, but it can certainly remind us that the world is worth saving. Tragedy reminds us that these are short glimpses into human existence, that we endure. But theatre proposes that these are not inevitable consequences. Bakogianni asks, “is watching theatre [...] a radical act or is it merely an escape from an unbearable reality? And, critically [...] what is the function of ancient drama in a society riven with deep political divisions and facing a deeply uncertain future?”⁵²¹ When we choose to make theatre—or to sit in its audience—in this era of crisis, there can be no excuse to say we did not know or did not understand. When an actor reveals the tragic fate of the shrouded Astyanax, the audience will see the children of Palestine. When another speaks of a “leader who herds his people en masse into glorious graves [...] that man strides assured and proud into the abyss,”⁵²² they will recognise the tyrants of our time—those who lead with arrogance and annihilate with impunity. These are not distant dramatisations. They are resonant parallels of our real world. They offer invitations to reckon with, to remember, and, perhaps, to act or intervene. My practice cannot single-handedly transform the world, but it might sharpen awareness, ignite compassion, and offer small intuitions that lead to greater interventions. There, among the broken pieces of the jar, is *hope*.

⁵²¹ Anastasia Bakogianni, ‘Trapped between Fidelity and Adaptation? On the Reception of Ancient Greek Tragedy in Modern Greece’, in *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, ed. Avra Sidiropoulou and Vayos Liapis (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 345

⁵²² Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*. Translated by Ted Hughes. Faber and Faber, 1999, pp. 25-26.

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Glossary of Key Terminology

A GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMINOLOGY



Crisis

From the ancient Greek **krisis**—the turning point in a disease that indicated adaptation, recovery, or death. A time of heightened chaos, catastrophe, risk, disaster, revolution, danger, or difficulty. A tipping or critical turning point. An unstable situation, or a time when important decisions must be made. The consequences are often larger than the crisis event itself. It can be determined by political entities or socially interpreted.



Permacrisis

Selected by Collins Dictionary as the word of the year in 2022. A portmanteau of the words **permanent** and **crisis**. Permacrisis is not a convergence of independent events which happen to occur simultaneously, but rather is a phenomenon of incessant crises, interconnected by causation and consequence of each other.



Zeitgeist

The Spirit of the Age.



Saeculum

From the Latin, meaning a **human age** or **generation**. Usually comprised as lasting between 80–100 years, the cycle of an average human life.



Turning

A **20–25-year era** occurs in four repeated cycles: **High, Awakening, Unravelling, & Crisis**. A period of societal or philosophical change.



Pandora's Jar

Recontextualised by Natalie Haynes. A mistranslation from **pithos (jar)** to **pyxis (box)**. Rather than a deliberate act of defiance, the opening of the vessel is reframed as an **accidental tipping**, which releases untold chaos upon humankind.



Theatre

As the **Artform**—A live performance, production, staging, spectacle. Theatre is the experience that occurs on the stage and off.



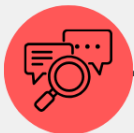
Drama

As the **Work**—A written text or script that can be read or analysed.



Director

The leader or guide of a theatre production. Executes the overall vision and cohesion of the production, and makes decisions regarding blocking, staging, tone, and pacing.
For Holly, this role is not separate in function from the Dramaturg.



Dramaturg

The critical and contextual researcher for a production. Interprets and analyses the drama and gathers research for the material and contextual basis of the production.
For Holly, this role is not separate in function from the Director.



Dramaturgy

The practice of shaping a production—critical thinking about how a performance communicates its ideas, emotions, and narrative to an audience through structure, logic, meaning, and effect.



Collaborative

A rehearsal and creative approach that invites input, discussion, critical engagement, and creative exploration from actors. While the process is **collaborative**, the work itself is not a **collaboration** in terms of authorship—the final artistic and research outcomes remain under the director's sole cohesive vision and ownership.



Actor (Ancient Greek)

Known as a **Hypokritēs**, meaning an interpreter (krite) from underneath (hypo). This actor embodied mythic or dramatic figures, wearing character masks and stylised costumes. The career was ritualistic and an interpreter of meaning, rather than an individual characterisation. **A Hypokritēs is always a male person**, playing all roles. **Thespis** is the first recognised actor, playing an individual character. He is often referred to as the father of tragedy.



Actor (Modern)

Actor, while traditionally meaning male performer, is interpreted in this research context as **an egalitarian and gender-neutral term for all performers**. A modern actor is a performer who uses their voice, body, emotion, and techniques to embody characters. Unlike the *Hypokritēs*, modern actors often strive for psychological realism, emotional nuance, and individual interpretation or characterisation.



Ensemble

From the French, **ensemble**, meaning all the parts of a thing considered in unison. A **group of actors who work collaboratively and cohesively**, contributing equal creative weight to the work, rather than as individuals or lead roles. In this research context, ensemble is both the entire cast and the methodological approach to working together collaboratively.



Chorus

In contemporary Ancient Greek Theatre, the Chorus was a unison character role, voicing and **representing the civic, ordinary people of the play**. Often made up of 15 *Hypokritēs*, who spoke, sang, and danced in unison. In this research context, the Chorus are the unnamed roles of the original drama text, given a character name by the director, and serve as individual characters that represent the civic, ordinary people of the play. For example, the Senators in *Antigone*, the Trojan Women in *Women of Troy*, and the Veterans and Household Staff of the Palace in *Agamemnon*.



Proscenium Arch Theatre

The traditional Eurocentric performance space of theatre. Named for its picture-framing device that situates a play on a stage, creating a clear separation or fourth wall between actor and audience, as the audience faces front-on to the actors. Conventions of the Proscenium Arch include velvet curtains that sit on either side of the stage and open and close at the beginning and end of the play, blackout lighting between scenes or acts, and painted scenery backdrops, flats, or sets to create the world of the play.



Amphitheatre

The performance space of the ancient Greek theatre. *Amphitheatre*, **meaning the place for watching**, is well-known for its sloping auditorium built into the hillsides of Athens, where a tiered, staircase seating arrangement could house 20,000 audience attendees, as they faced the actors below. The structure of this concave, cone-shaped allowed natural amplification of the actor's voices. The amphitheatre included a large circular performance area for the Chorus known as the Orchestra, painted scenery backdrops, staging, and a backstage area for costume changes known as the Skene house, and two entrances on either side of the performance space known as the Parados. **In this research, I flip this idea on its head, with the actors instead performing on the sloping staircase and the audience seated in the orchestra-like level, facing upwards toward the actors.**



Ancient Greek Drama

The classical play texts of ancient Greek theatre. Only a few of the original plays survive in their entirety, attributed to the most renowned or famous playwrights of the time: the tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and the comedian, Aristophanes.



Ancient Greek Theatre

The earliest recognised form of Western performance, emerging around **700 BCE in Athens**—marking a shift from storytelling, *I am playing*, to embodiment, *I am*. Derived from the word *Theatron*, a place for watching, it was both a ritual practice and a civic duty, deeply tied to religious festivals such as the City Dionysia. It encompassed the dramatic genres of **Tragedy**, **Comedy**, and the **Satyr play**, and served as a space for communal reflection on politics, morality, and the human condition.

While the term ancient Greek may suggest a *pan-Hellenic* practice, the form specifically refers to the context of the **city-state Athens**—much like the association of Greek democracy and philosophy.

Attended, performed, and seen only by male Athenian citizens. **Not women**, and not slaves.



Pan-Hellenistic

The Greeks. While Greece was made up of many city-states, the Greek plays often refer to the collective culture of the Greek peoples, especially in reference to the Greeks of the Trojan War—Athenians (Menestheus), Spartans (Menelaus), Mycenaeans (Agamemnon), Ithacans (Odysseus), Thessalians (Achilles), and Argives (Diomedes).

Unlike the Olympics, attended by male citizens from the many city-states, attendance to the ancient Theatre was **restricted to male citizens of Athens**.



Ancient Greek Tragedy

A dramatic genre. Featuring serious themes of human suffering and moral conflicts. Often involving mythological, legendary, or contemporary stories familiar to the ancient Athenian audience. **The play's plot deals with the downfall of a noble or heroic character due to fate, their own personal flaws, or the will of the gods.**



Drama Workshop

In this research, a structured and interactive drama workshop was conducted in which actors and participants reflected on the process of staging *Women of Troy*. The session examined the methods and strategies used to develop character, build scenes, and explore contextual frameworks, using a combination of **group games, practical exercises, and facilitated discussion**.



Drama Conventions

Based on the **Aotearoa NCEA Drama curriculum**, taught in secondary school. Includes, but not limited to the following:

- **Textual Conventions:** narration, monologue, soliloquy, dialogue, chorus/spoken in unison, echo, spoken thought, breaking the fourth wall, multi-roleplaying.
- **Structural & Dramatic Conventions:** slow motion, flashback, flashforward, freeze frame, still image, silence/stillness, tableaux, montage, mime, soundscape, Verfremdungseffekt, placards, dramatic irony, subtext, symbolism, cyclical structure, reverse chronology, juxtaposition, object transformation.
- **Process Conventions:** role on the wall, the machine, debate circle, interview, interrogation, hot seating, physical theatre, dance, Laban Efforts, mask work, puppetry, shadow work, ensemble work, improvisation.



Embrace

To believe or accept: to contemplate, reflect on, welcome a concept, scenario or situation.



Embody

To be: To apply this concept, scenario, or situation in a tangible way or physical form.



Employ

To do: To use a concept, scenario, or situation as a tool, method or strategy for making, applying this thematically, dramaturgically, textually, or contextually.



Fragility

To be vulnerability, disrupted, exposed. In this research context, **not necessarily a flaw or weakness.**



Resilience

To withstand, resist, recover, and **adapt to vulnerabilities.**



Resonance

What makes you **feel**—what stirs something familiar, speaks to inner knowing, evokes a tangible emotional response. **Frisson.** The sudden recognition of **the parallels or connection between fiction and reality—between images, moments, and memory.**



Peripeteia

Sudden reversal of fortune. The moment in a plot that takes an unexpected turn for the tragic character, usually from fortunate to tragic. **An ancient plot twist.** (Often goes hand-in-hand with Anagnorisis).



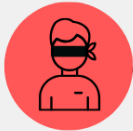
Anagnorisis

The critical turning point in which the tragic character makes a **critical discovery** about their identity, the identity of other characters, or the nature of their situation. (Often goes hand-in-hand with Peripeteia).



Catharsis

As articulated in **Aristotelian philosophy** on Tragedy: Tragedy **arouses pity and fear** in its audience, evoking a catharsis—a purging or release of emotion—**often through weeping for the tragic character**. In watching the tragic character's downfall—often caused by their hamartia—the **audience experiences an emotional release**, and in release, we come to better understand ourselves, the nature of humanity, and our vulnerabilities.



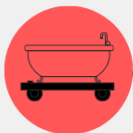
Hamartia

The fatal flaw. A tragic character's error, usually through **ignorance or naivety**, not always malicious or intentional.



Hubris

Wilful and excessive pride, arrogance, or overconfidence which brings about the fall of a tragic character.



Ekkyklema

Literally meaning to be “rolled out”. A stage mechanism made up of **a platform on wheels that can be rolled out onto the stage to reveal the dead body of a character in a tragic play**. For example, Agamemnon and Cassandra (in my production, I imitated this original function through the **bathtub** and **chaise lounge** on wheels to reveal their bodies).



Manaakitanga

A kind of **hospitality** beyond the generosity of food, but the process of **support, kindness, and respect through care** for others to maintain relationships, well-being, and the safety of the collective whole.



Whanaungatanga

The root word, deriving from **whānau**, meaning family. Signifies the **strength of reciprocal familial or kinship-like relationships** built over time through mutual support, care, and the fulfilment of individual responsibilities and obligations for the well-being of the collective.



Aroha

Similar to the ancient Greek **Agápē**, meaning unconditional love. **Care, compassion, empathy, respect.**

Appendix A: Ethics Approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

8 September 2023

██████████
Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies

Dear ██████████

Ethics Application: 23/243 **A Dramatic Crisis: Theatre-making in New Zealand during complex times.**

The Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) has **approved** your ethics application at its meeting of 4 September 2023.

This approval is for three years, expiring 4 September 2026.

Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. Inclusion in the Information Sheet 'benefits' section that the researcher will gain a PhD qualification.

Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTEC unless requested but must be completed before commencing your study.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics) and as approved by AUTEC.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEC approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEC, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: holly.luton@autuni.ac.nz; ██████████

Appendix B: Consent for Participation in Women of Troy Post-Production Workshop



Consent Form for the Women of Troy Workshop

Project title: **A Dramatic Crisis: Theatre-making in New Zealand during complex times.**
Project Supervisor: [REDACTED]
Researcher: **Holly Luton**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project and the workshop taking place on **11th November 2023** in the 'Participant Information Sheet' dated 11 October 2023.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that the researcher will take notes, photograph, video, and audio record the workshop for transcription.
- I understand that I may bring any written material along that I used to help develop my role in the production (an annotated script, drawings, journaling, or note taking).
- I understand that the video and audio recording will not be seen by anyone other than the researcher (Holly Luton) and/or supervisors.
- I understand that the photographs, transcriptions, and findings of the workshop will be published in the written exegesis and subsequent publications.
- I understand that my identity and that of my fellow participants and our discussions in the workshop is unable to remain anonymous due to the performance of Women of Troy in the public domain.
- I understand that confidentiality will be respected in that matters of a sensitive or private nature will not be sought or revealed.
- I understand that taking part in this research is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the research then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data is *not* possible.
- I understand that my involvement in this workshop will not guarantee a place in the next production of the research with Corvus Theatre Co nor will my decision to withdraw from the research impede on future opportunities to work with Corvus Theatre Co.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 4th September 2023 AUTECH
Reference number [REDACTED] 23243_08092023

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this consent form.

Appendix C: Example of Talent Release/Consent Form for Participation in Corvus Theatre Co. Productions

Holly Charlotte Luton

Talent Release Form: Corvus Theatre Co

Auckland University of Technology

Talent Release Form for Actors/Participants.

Holly Luton Doctoral Research and Corvus Theatre Co

Researcher: Holly Charlotte Luton

Supervisors: Dr Ross Brannigan
Professor Christina Mulligan

I, _____, hereby grant Researcher, Holly Charlotte Luton, my consent to be an actor and research participant for **[production]**, through the Institution of the Art and Design Postgraduate Department at Auckland University of Technology.

This consent will take effect from **[first rehearsal date]**.

- a) I confirm that I am over 18 years of age and capable of entering a contract.
- b) I agree to be a part of this research and have the opportunity to ask for and receive a copy of the final thesis findings.
- c) I commit that I will give my full effort and attention to this project.
- d) I commit to the dates of the technical rehearsals **[insert dates]** and performances on the **[insert dates]**.
- e) I understand that I have up to 14 weeks prior to the first performance of **[production]** to remove myself the process allowing suitable time to recast of my role.
- f) I understand that if I withdraw from the study before this deadline, I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been *produced*, removal of my data may not be possible.
- g) I have the opportunity to ask any questions and to have them answered.
- h) I understand and abide by the health and safety procedures of Corvus Theatre Co and the health and safety policies of the academic institution of AUT. Where instruction is given, I will act accordingly for the benefit and safety of myself, and everyone involved.
- i) I consent to not disclose sensitive information regarding the research/performance outside of rehearsals with non-participants.
- j) The Researcher and the Institution will always use discretion when using my image and/or profile and will not use it to discredit me in any way.
- k) I consent to the use my name in the research process.
- l) I confirm that this Researcher and Institution has the right to record me through photographs and video formats.
- m) The Researcher and Institution has the rights to use my performance, voice, likeness, image, etc. as it pertains to **[production]** and any related materials, such as publicity, marketing, etc. in any capacity. This includes distribution, promotion, exhibition, etc.
- n) I consent that my name, likeness, photographs, videos, and related artefacts of the rehearsal and performance process will be submitted in the final thesis.
- o) I consent that this material may be used beyond the research including but not limited to, academic articles, journals, conferences, performances etc.
- p) I understand that these materials (videos, audios, artefacts) will become the property of the Researcher and this Institution, including copyright therein, and I acknowledge that I am not entitled to payment or any other compensation for the use of such material.

- q) I waive all personal rights to object to the use of my image, name, or personality in connection with any imagery, video, or audio of me in the production and research processes.
- r) I agree that, by retaining this release form signed by me, the Institution can be assured that it has my permission to proceed.
- s) I confirm that all information listed in this document is true and accurate.

This documentation will be kept for up to a period of five years on site at Auckland University of Technology, after which it will be destroyed.

Participant Name (Print) _____

Participant Signature _____

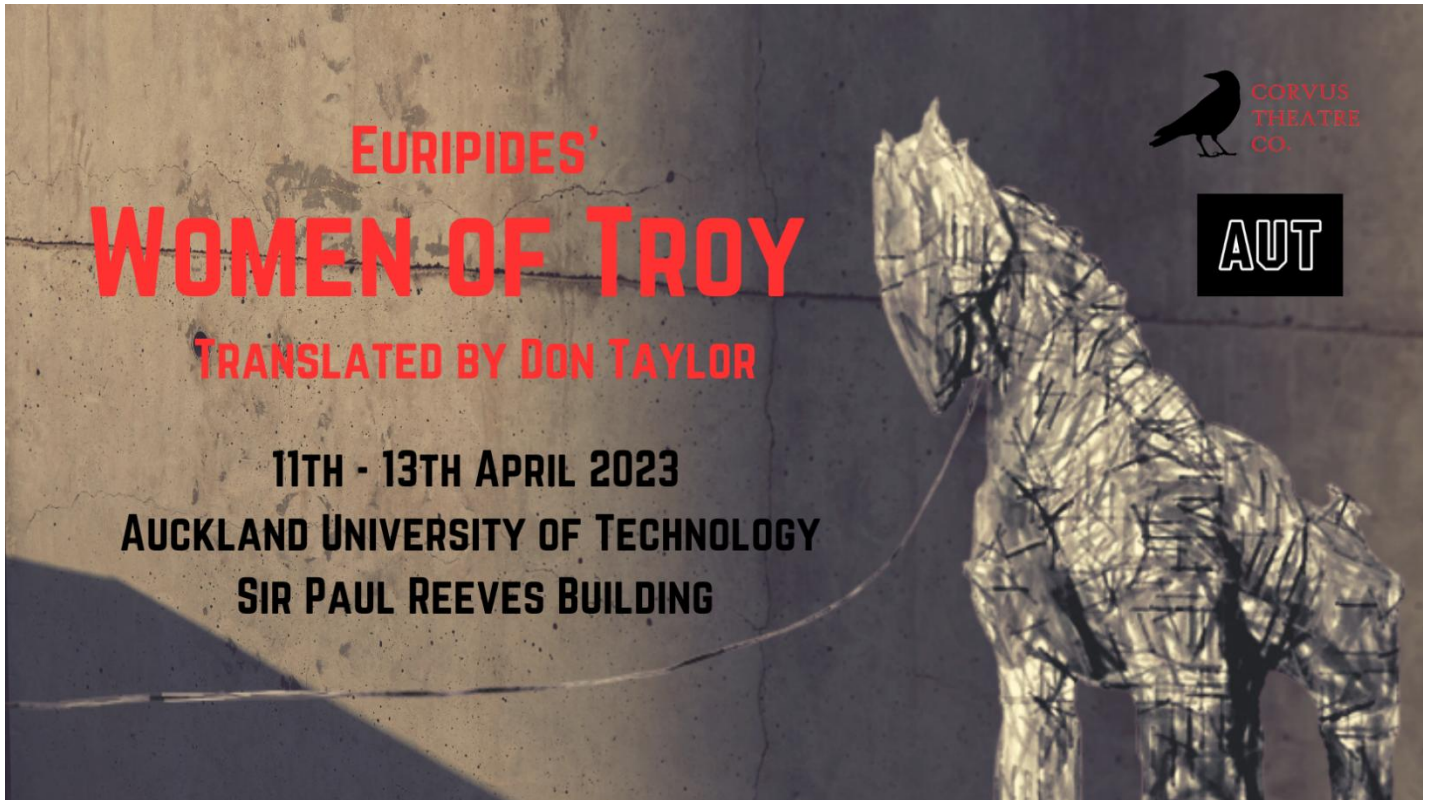
Date _____ [first rehearsal date] _____

Researcher Name (Print) _____ HOLLY CHARLOTTE LUTON _____

Researcher Signature _____  _____

Date _____ [first rehearsal date] _____

Appendix D: Video: Corvus Theatre Co, Euripides'
Women of Troy, 2023.



*The archived recording of Corvus Theatre Co's Women of Troy is available on request for research purposes only.
corvustheatreco@gmail.com*