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Up and Down: The Queer and Affective Potential of (the) Transition (from the Perspectives of a Director, Sound Designer, and Lighting Designer)

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This article is an exploration of the ideas galvanizing our practice-based research. Structured as a dialogue between a director, sound designer and lighting designer, this piece explores how the nexus of queerness, affect and performance informs each of our specialist areas. We articulate how affect and queer theories drive our individual enquiries and use our experience of working together on the Australian premiere production of Lachlan Philpott's promiscuous/cities to consider the relationships between our disciplines. We focus on moments of transition—common components of any theatre piece—as a way of interrogating how this interdisciplinary dialogue works within the development of the work and performance outcomes. Throughout this dialogue, we ask what the state of transition does for each of us when we make or see a piece of work—whether this be an experience of temporal instability, a rhythmic movement into a new state or a form of punctuation—and we consider how we can approach affect and queer thinking through these transitional moments. These moments of possibility are what excite us and push us to consider the potential of our individual practices through the experience of collaborative performance-making.

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Up and Down: The Queer and Affective Potential of (the) Transition (from the Perspectives of a Director, Sound Designer, and Lighting Designer)

Alyson Campbell, Meta Cohen, and Emma Lockhart-Wilson

We are writing this short piece collaboratively as practitioners working from different perspectives: director Alyson Campbell (AC), sound designer Meta Cohen (MC) and lighting designer Emma Lockhart-Wilson (ELW). We have teased out how our specific specialist thinking on the nexus of queerness, affect, and performance interweave and inform each other, and have landed on the example of the transition—a common component of any theatre work—as a way to interrogate how this dialogue works. We refer to our recent collaborative work on the Australian premiere production of Lachlan Philpott's *promiscuous/cities*.¹

I. AC: What is exciting each of us in practice-based research (PBR)? For all of us, affect and queer theories—and particularly how they speak to each other and how they are in dialogue with our practice—are driving our individual, and now collaborative, enquiry.

ELW: A key element of PBR for me is integrating the lighting design into performance development. By bringing light into the process of making earlier, we can expand the palette we have to work with so that a beam of light might have as much impact on what happens in the final performance as a piece of spoken text or choreography. I'm really influenced by Katherine Graham's work on scenographic light and the power of light as an affective dramaturgical element (2016, 2018), so that's one of the things I'm trying to push my practice toward within my research: to consider how this use of lighting in the development of performance might resonate in the affective experiences of audiences.

MC: What excites me about PBR is the opportunity to explore interdisciplinary thinking in my theatre practice. As a sound designer and dramaturg, I am interested in how I can use musical frameworks to understand the ways in which performance can move us. I am particularly influenced by the work of Matthias Rebstock and David Roesner on what they call “composed theatre” (2012), which applies musical language and techniques to theatre. My PBR work has explored how musical methods can give us an added layer of specificity in theatre-making; a vocabulary to fine-tune the rhythm of a performance; and a way of creating nonnarrative climactic points through builds in density, texture, or dynamic. I am currently exploring the queer(ing) potential of these techniques, and my explorations are underscored, punctuated, and driven by my sound design work.

Alyson Campbell is a freelance director and dramaturg whose work spans a broad range of companies and venues in Australia, the UK, and the US over the last thirty years. Alyson is professor in Theatre at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, where her research, artistic practice as a director, teaching and activism converge around gender and sexuality, particularly queer performance and dramaturgies, contemporary representations of HIV and AIDS, and feral pedagogies. **Meta Cohen** is a queer composer, dramaturg, and sound designer working across music, theatre and interdisciplinary art. Meta's music has been performed in diverse venues ranging, from London Synagogues to the Sydney Opera House. Meta is currently undertaking a PhD at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. **Emma Lockhart-Wilson** is a lighting designer with a strong interest in the affective potential of interaction between performer bodies and designed elements. Emma has designed lighting for companies including Australian Theatre for Young People, Monkey Baa, DeQuincy Co., and Version 1.0. Emma is currently a PhD candidate at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, researching affective scenographies in queer feminist performance in Australia.

AC: What excites me, or maybe what exercises me, currently, is trying to figure out more precisely how to articulate this relationship between affect and queerness in performance. I've spent a lot of time working on ways to articulate what I'm doing on the floor when I make a particular choice about the rhythm of a scene or the way bodies are arranged or how they move. Concepts from Eugenio Barba such as "organic dramaturgy" (2000), or François Lyotard's "energetic theatre" (Lyotard, Knap, and Benamou 1976) have helped, along with the vocabulary we get from Viewpoints. In theatre fields, the latter is derived most often from Anne Bogart (Bogart and Landau 2005), but the genesis of Viewpoints in dance from Mary Overlie (n.d.) speaks closely to why it has been so helpful to thinking about the affective, rather than semiotic, value of a choice to have a performer move in a certain direction at a certain time with a certain energy and pace, etc.² Addressing this alongside a queering impetus is what I am really exploring in practice—including this collaborative process we're starting to find together.

II. AC: How do we each understand affect's relationship with queerness?

ELW: I think the affective experience is key to a lot of the queer performances I've seen. Whether it's the movement of an ensemble of bodies in a theatre space or the interaction of people coming together to dance in a communal space, there is something in the act of doing, the act of making an experience with and for a queer community, that fits with the theoretical underpinnings of a lot of queer projects. Sara Ahmed's concept of being oriented or disoriented by interactions with objects speaks to the importance of queer experiences of the world (2006). Following the ideas of queer phenomenology, I think that in crafting experiences through practice-based research, we can learn about queer ways of existing in and resisting our political and social environments.

MC: Perhaps this lies in the intersection between the specificity of the artistic choices we make and the flexible potential of each moment in performance. In creating pieces that are not solely driven by narrative structure or meaning-making, there is an impulse to avoid pinning down a singular interpretation or normative subjectivity, which we might understand as queer (see Alyson's work building on Elizabeth Freeman's ideas of queer hybridity: Campbell 2016). By focusing on the affective ability of performance to move us, we are talking about the potential for a particular intensity of experience that might lead us to theorizing around queer utopia, influenced particularly by the work of José Esteban Muñoz, who writes on queerness as a potentiality that has not yet been reached (2009). This desire to create performance moments in which we might feel queerness as "the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (Muñoz 2009, 23) requires a precise series of choices to create work that is fixed-yet-open, specific-yet-flexible.

AC: That helps me think about the work I started in my PBR thesis, which was focused on working toward an affective dramaturgy, based on resisting what Brian Massumi (1995) and some strands of affect theory would see as modes of representation that rely on producing conventionalized sets of feelings that an audience can recognize *as* an emotion. I am interested instead in focusing on the "intensity" of an image, which could work at a different rate, and in different modes, for each person. We may—and we almost certainly will—reach emotion/s, but what they might be is not prescribed. There is something queering in the refusal, or an attempt to refuse, to determine how any individual spectator might respond to a moment of performance.

I know other strands of affect theory, notably Ahmed (2015), sit more happily with the idea of emotion. That is something I'm working my way through currently. Another concept is one of "viral dramaturgies" (Campbell and Gindt 2018), which can work in any audience or any

“assembly” (Butler 2015) of people, but can do something particular when there is a resonance between stage and audience that is to do with queer people in a space together and how energies flow between and build to be something bigger than the sum of individual parts.

III. To take this idea of fluidity and openness further, we consider the transition in work we’ve made together. In particular, we ask, what does the state of transition do for each of us when we make or see a piece of work, and how can we apply affect and queer thinking to it?

ELW: From the point of design integration and flow, there is something very important about the starting point of a transition. If it’s one state moving to another, that starting point and the timing of the up and down fades really set *when* the transition will land. So, it’s vital that that starting cue point draws us into the action of the transition but also that it allows us to move to a point of completion that fits with the movement or performers. I think it’s an interesting experiment to think of the transition less as a crossfade in intensities and more as an experience of the past and future pushing against each other in a moment of instability. Watching the change from one lighting state to another, you don’t necessarily know *where* you’re going to land until it’s complete and that future state becomes the present. I think that kind of temporal meshing of visual and spatial arrangements really speaks to a queer affective potential. In *promiscuous/cities*, there are lots of visually interesting arrangements of people, but the transition is where you don’t know what the next arrangement will be; it’s a moment in which bodies and design elements are in flux, and I think that often gives us a sense of possibility, a moment of “maybe.”

MC: Sometimes this moment of “maybe” also contains allusions to moments we’ve already experienced, or suggestions of a world that might eventually emerge, which leads me back to Muñoz in terms of a queer gesture that looks both backward and forward (2009, 26). It’s interesting what you were saying the other week, Emma, about the transition sometimes being the movement between two things and sometimes existing in its own world: that a transition can have different modes. From my perspective, it can also be an opportunity for a rhythmic shift: a musical movement into a new state, or an opportunity to break up the fatigue of rhythmic monotony. Importantly, this shift can also be a gesture of crescendo/build/*Steigerung*, or the opposite; in *promiscuous/cities*, sometimes transitions take place between scenes with wildly different stakes.

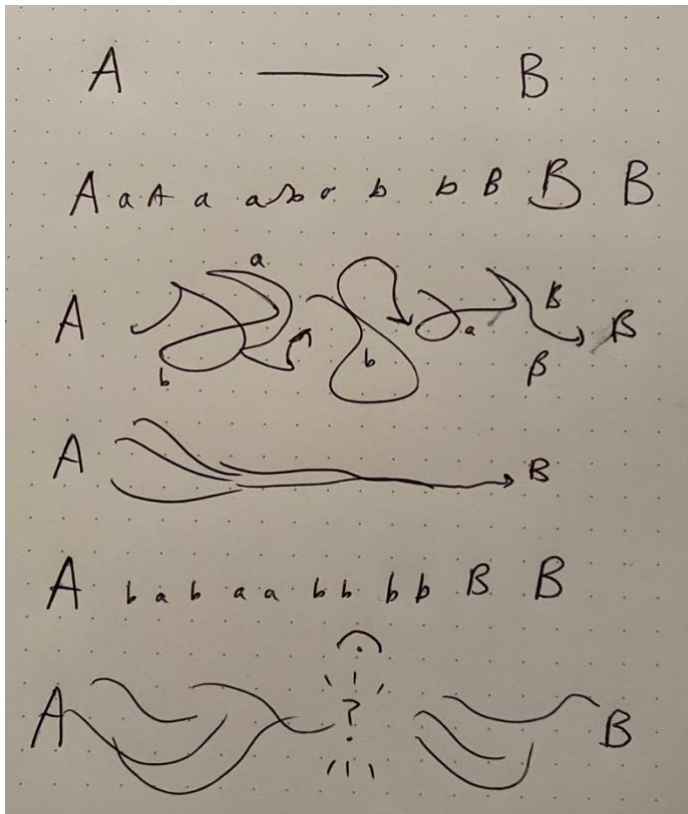
AC: Transitions are so often underestimated as a state in performance! I suspect we’re lingering on the transition because we feel it’s full of (queer) potential. By its very nature, it moves us from one thing (a mood, a physical arrangement, a lighting state, etc.) to another. Scenes have a certain feel and rhythm, of course, but the transition is a particular mode where the (ever-new) dynamics and energy and scene-setting happens. Em, your response leads me to wonder if we need a new term—not a crossfade, but a blur, or queer mess, or. . .

ELW: Collision?

AC: Oh, I like that! We might ponder that. In this case, are we thinking of the transition as a coming together of things from two directions: a gentle (or not so gentle) crash? Em, you also used the words “mesh” and “smush” in our chat, which I enjoyed a lot!

MC: Absolutely—there’s definitely something in the setting-up; the movement from A to B is only part of the point. It’s the question of whether you keep the energy from the scene before, or go with the scene coming up, and this can be different in each instance. Musically, the transition

might reframe things we've heard in A and suggest fragments of B, or drive us swiftly into the tempo of B, or hold on to the last remnants of A while B crashes toward us. . .



Meta illustrates some potentials for transitions or movements between A and B. This method is part of Meta's dramaturgical graphic scoring practice, which they use to process and articulate work through a musical lens. This method is currently in development (see Murray, Campbell, and Cohen 2021).

ELW: I think part of the interesting thing about light in terms of transition/s is that it's always in relation to the objects and people—i.e., light hits something and allows you to see it. It's in relation to the physical, but there's something intangible, maybe? You don't see the beam of light until it hits something like a body or haze or the floor, so its visual presence is always relational. It makes me want to think more about the relationship between sound and objects/bodies.

MC: I think in performance, sound shares this relational quality with light: for me, it is about regarding performing bodies or inanimate objects as innately musical things, so they are able to relate to each other musically (and to music or sound that you might put against them). This might be about the rhythm of a gesture, or the tempo and dynamics of a lighting shift. In music, we talk about sparseness and density of texture, and we could think about this in terms of the density in the space. So, when I'm balancing the type of sound I will put against a movement or a light, this is also about whether the sound is in harmony with or in opposition to the action of the stage.

AC: I suppose this ties in with my aims toward a dramaturgy of punctuation.³ I will see a head turn as punctuation. . .

MC: For me, that's a great example of musical thinking in action: although you can't hear it, that head turn has a visual rhythm that relates rhythmically to all the other movement.

AC: There is something about space and time—the transition as a particularly heightened moment of temporal and spatial organization.

MC: To return to Barba's frameworks, the transition might put us more in tune with the organic or dynamic dramaturgy, rather than the narrative; we are freed from the signifying function of scenes, and the moment is instead driven by “the rhythms and dynamisms affecting the spectators on a nervous, sensorial and sensual level” (2000, 60).

AC: Yeah, 90 percent of those transitions were about energetic shift, 10 percent about getting somewhere else to make the new physical arrangement required for a “scene.” That does point me back to Lyotard, too.

Conclusion

We are just at the start of this conversation, really, but thinking about the transition has fired the three of us up and provided an avenue for us to put our individual but interrelated queer slants (Ahmed 2006) and practices together in collaborative thinking built on our collaborative making. That is something really exciting emerging from PBR in the field of live performance for us.

Notes

1. Lachlan Philpott, *promiscuous/cities*. Australian premiere production, Woof Theatre at Theatre Works, Melbourne/Naarm, January 19–24, 2023. Dir. Alyson Campbell, Sound design Meta Cohen, Lighting Design Emma Lockhart-Wilson, Set Design Leon Salom, and Costume Design Casey Harper-Wood. See <https://www.alyson-campbell.com/>.
2. Mary Overlie's Six Viewpoints Study offers a vocabulary to dancers and other artists. The six viewpoints are Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement, and Story. Bogart expands on these for theatre to nine viewpoints (or more, including more recent additions of pitch, dynamic and timbre to do with voice). The most well-known nine address elements of time (tempo, duration, repetition, kinaesthetic response) and space (architecture, topography, spatial relationships, gesture and shape).
3. I thank my former colleague Paul Monaghan for this description of my work as a director.

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