



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 62 October 2021

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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To cite this article: Joyce, H., Rogers, M. & Davey, M. (2021). On making *Marvellous*: A performance about old age and death made out of conversation, improvisation and distillation. In F. Collins, H. Joyce and N. Maloney (Eds.) *The Place of Writing in Intercultural and Intermedial Creative Collaborations*. TEXT Special Issue 62.

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Abstract:

Here we respond to the making of *Marvellous* (2021), a theatre work about ageing, and reflect on mothering and daughtering generally and our relationships with our own nonagenarian mothers in particular. Using autobiographical and life writing techniques in three voices we (the makers) develop the content of *Marvellous* to portray the intimacies of ageing and approaching dying, of memory and forgetting. We use this opportunity to contextualise *Marvellous* within each of our theatrical histories mirroring the fragmentary form of our theatre piece.

Biographical note:

Maude Davey is known for her burlesque and variety work as well as her acting work on stage and in film and television. She has directed at Red Stitch and at the Victorian College of the Arts, and for many independent artists. In Adelaide she was artistic director for Vitalstatistix Theatre Company between 2002 and 2007. With cabaret star Mama Alto, she founded the *Gender Euphoria* project in 2019, acclaimed at the Melbourne International Festival (2019) and at Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (2020). She won a Green Room Award for Most Outstanding Performance for *Melancholia* (2018, adapted by Declan Greene) and was awarded an Order of Australia Medal in 2020 for services to the Performing Arts.

Hester Joyce is an actor, director, writer and filmmaker, whose career began in Auckland in the 1980s as an actor/director in political, street and professional theatre creating, producing and directing new feminist work. Hester combines creative practice (with expertise in screenwriting, performance and screen biography) and research into screen and performance. She completed a Harry Ransom Fellowship, University of Texas, Austin in 2015. She was the co-editor of *Journal of Screenwriting* (2014-2019), and the co-author of *New Zealand film & television: Institution, industry & cultural change* (2012) as well as numerous journal articles and book chapters on screenwriting, screen aesthetics and national cinemas.

Meredith Rogers is an actor, writer, dramaturg, director and designer, with five decades of experience. She was a founding member of the innovative Home Cooking Theatre Company in the 1980s. She was assistant director of the ground-breaking contemporary art gallery, the

Ewing and George Paton. She left the gallery to join the hugely influential Mill Theatre Company. Her book on that company was published in 2016 by Australian Scholarly Publishing. Recently her work with queer site-specific theatre company Gold Satino includes *Seduction* (2019) and the award winning *This is Grayson* (2018) which returns in 2021.

Keywords:

Autoethnography, feminism, performance, collaborative practices, ageing

Introduction (Maude Davey, Hester Joyce, Meredith Rogers)

In the staging of *Marvellous* (2021) the two performers alternated between three modes: speaking as themselves, either directly to the audience or to each other; naturalistic exchanges between daughter and mother and performed anecdotes, if you will, describing real exchanges illustrating the banality, humour and challenges of the lived experience; and impersonation of the two mothers in relation to each other, in suspended psychological spaces. These last formed the central emotional journey of the event, as the imagined mothers approach their own deaths. The physical score of the performance incorporated the transformational use of a few objects – two tiny chairs, two large chairs, two large beanbags, two handbags – within a simple set in which the major pieces were a sail and an orange blow up boat.

Performance ethnographer Gay McAuley writes of anecdote as an analytical resource, describing it as the “principal means whereby performance theory is articulated and transmitted from one group to another in this highly oral professional practice” (1998, p. 76). These three accounts are personal and particular in the way of anecdote, even as they enact and describe the entwined theory/practice of the theatre workshop and rehearsal room. They are perhaps most closely aligned with the discipline of critical autoethnography, in which, particularly for those who work in the area of performance, as Stacey Holman Jones observes:

embodiment is embraced rather than erased; we make the body the “nexus of meaning-making”, the source of the stories, movements, and speech that is created in the ethnographic exchange. (as cited in Jones et al., 2018, p. 7)

The three pieces reflect on a shared and shifting process of representation (quotation, transcription, memory) and interpretation (character improvisation, free writing led by provocations) that merge as story. The elusive subject of course is the mother – the mothers – who are represented, quoted, remembered, interpreted through the bodies of their daughters who both came from them (the daughters’ bodies carry the maternal bodies within them, in their chromosomes, in their cells, in the patterns made by their protein chains, as well as in their memories including their sensual bodily memories) and are creating them. Created by them, creating them. There are multiple frames through which to build a picture of the mothers – text, physical relationship with objects (the bean bags as mothers’ bodies) – and then there is

the shimmering between the creating daughter and the created mother that is present when Hester plays Mae and Meredith plays Pam.

Generations (Meredith Rogers)

It's spider season here and the two Golden Orbs that make webs in my garden every night are looking very heavy/gravid/pregnant/full. I love them. I love watching them draw these amazing structures out of their bodies every night. And then, almost every morning, I forget they've been there and walk into the webs, face first. It's not a pleasant experience but I know they're tucked away somewhere safe by the time the sun is up, so I'm not afraid. But I am amazed at how strong, stretchy and sticky the strands across my cheek and hair are, like the strands Hester talks about in *Marvellous*:

a torn telephone line

stretched to a mesh, a cobweb,

tensile, fragile, sticky. (*Marvellous*, draft 22, 2021, p. 15)

This year's spiders are the daughters of last year's of course, so I have a sort of fellow feeling with them, and an admiration for their generational regeneration, for their savage altruism in the way they make these beautiful structures to secure food for themselves and through them for their young. At the end of summer, when I first noticed the webs, I wondered if they really were Golden Orbs. The spiders looked so small and insignificant. Not now! Now they are large and round and very efficient in their nightly preparations. Gravid is the word for them in spite of their skinny, articulated legs and the speed with which they bundle up their prey. I think they die after their hundreds of babies are born so it's a shorter cycle than ours but still I feel a connection. They make me think about time and generations and what makes us want to expend the enormous amounts of energy it takes to drag these pieces from our bodies/our memories/our lived lives.

By the time my first daughter was born in 1983 I had participated in two amazingly rich workplaces and, with my friends Suzanne Spinner, Barbara Ciszewska and Rosalind Hill, created the Home Cooking Theatre Co. to celebrate the work, lives and creative friendships of women. I was already pregnant with Isobel when we took a second season of *Not Still Lives*, about painters Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor, to Sydney and then to Adelaide. The headline in the Adelaide Advertiser "Pregnant Meredith a real trouper" indicated not only sub-editors' universal enthusiasm for bad puns (we were performing in Troupe Theatre in Adelaide) but also the relative invisibility of pregnant bodies on stage, or indeed in any workplace in the 1980s. By the time we made a piece about mothers and daughters and sewing in 1986 (*Running Up a Dress*) I was pregnant again so my second daughter Romanie was already onstage in that premiere performance.

When Hester talked to me about making a piece about our mothers, I didn't realise at first that it would complete a kind of theatrical cycle for me. *Running Up a Dress* was made by women

in the throes of learning how to be mothers while simultaneously reflecting on the way they themselves had been raised. Indeed the two acts of the play are titled “Act I My Mother Made Me a Daughter” and “Act II My Daughter Made Me a Mother”:

Daughter: We are bonded together, faster than any seam.

The Cloth: All I can offer is resistance. I may wear out before my time, fray, fade, disintegrate, unravel. Inevitably I will not be as she imagined.

Daughter: Inevitably I will be more than she bargained for. (Spinner, 1988, p. 60)

Marvellous was originally conceived as a piece about the difficulties that our generation encounters in caring for our “oldest-old” mothers, but in the rehearsal room it transformed into a more interesting piece in which the older generation were the key protagonists, the tellers of the tales, the witty conversationalists, the poets of [in]continence management. It begins with the two mothers speaking to us from the other side of death. In an early exercise, Maude asked us to imagine what our mothers would say about being dead. The first thing I wrote was:

Here it is then the biggest thing, I don’t seem to feel anything at all. (*Marvellous*, draft 22, 2021)

But almost immediately I started a conversation between her and me, mother and daughter, in which she hands over her authority to me:

I asked her the other day, what happens next? She was shocked. I wonder why? (*Marvellous*, draft 22, 2021, p. 2).

And then as Hester describes leaving – “This bag of bones... this hundred year old carriage” (*Marvellous*, draft 22, 2021, p. 2) – I describe a birth:

But I remember when she was born, and I pushed and pushed and pushed.

It was as if I’d given birth to myself. I hadn’t though. I’d given birth to her and to her daughters too (*Marvellous*, draft 22, 2021, p. 3).

I put it in my mother’s mouth and although I’m sure she experienced birth in much the same way, they are still my words about one of my birth experiences, given to her and spoken onstage by me. Unable to imagine her separately from me in thinking of this moment, I fold us together. I am confident she won’t mind. I could have asked her if that was how it felt for her, but even though only a few months ago she could ask me “what happens next?” she’s moved on from all that now. The slow but irreversible disengaging from the business of life has progressed to the point where she’s no longer even sure where she will sleep each night. She still knows who I am though, her daughter, Meredith.

The Midwife: Bonding – a process whereby a finer weaker fabric is permanently attached to another. The purpose of bonding is to strengthen and reinforce the weaker fabric to enable it to withstand more wear and tear than it could alone (Spinner, 1988, p. 59).

But for us humans (as opposed to dress fabric) that process only works in one direction, at the end of her life when the mother's flesh is finally wearing thin no bond can save it from disintegration.

H: All paper skin, dried and desiccated (*Marvellous*, draft 22, 2021, p. 2)

M: Pam – big black bruises from capillaries breaking down under the skin (*Marvellous*, draft 22, 2021, p. 23).

Materials. Fabric. The way we make things. A lineage in methods. There is as much theatrical as familial lineage in the design elements of *Marvellous*. My first note on the design registers the idea that everything starts from the here and now. We are Hester and Meredith and we are in La Mama Courthouse in February 2021. But it is already a transformable space containing magical elements and prosaic objects used as they are and as transformable things.

How many objects can be only themselves? – Marmalade/handbags/boat/sail/life jacket?

What is in the space? –The floor black with big splodges of grey/red/pink/white made by cutting shapes in vinyl flooring laid on the black floor, an island made of rostra 1800 x 2000 set on the diagonal and lined up with the audience stairs.

Hanging things – two beanbags, two large chairs, two small chairs, a boat?

Handbags, life jacket, a sail and fixings. (Rogers, January 2021, *Design notes*)

I've left out some of the things I thought we might use but didn't in the end. Hester brought the beanbags to us as an inciting principal.

When I was looking for fabric to make the beanbags, the woman in the shop said that the brocade I was looking at was "one the beanbag man used". I had no idea there was still such a thing as a bespoke beanbag business. But there was, and when I went there, I found, behind the stacks of designer greys and off-whites, a pile of covers on sale for much less than the cost of the fabric alone. I guess that the people who would be drawn to these extravagant tapestries were unlikely to seek out beanbags as key elements in their home décor. But their old-fashioned richness was exactly the strangeness we needed for our beanbags that would stand in as bodies and burdens as well as boats and mysterious pods floating in a liminal world between audience and performer, theatre space and the world – or at least a little room in Carlton in February 2021.

The material body/loving the mother's body – I watch my granddaughter smack her lips and laugh for sheer joy as she grabs my daughter's breast. It's hers and it's her. They are the same. What does Bion say in *Second Thoughts on Psychoanalysis* (1967)? The baby invents the idea of the breast to deal with the need to suck, as thinking arises in order to deal with the chaos of unruly thoughts. Her joyful enthusiasm in this moment is shadowed by the dark tragedy of separation she feels when the breast and the mother are withdrawn. But what do we remember of this first chaotic, intense engagement? Nothing. Even as we re-enact it over and over through our lives together.

My daughter looks at me sometimes and I know what she's thinking. She never says anything though (*Marvellous*, draft 22, 2021, p. 27).

These are also lines I've written for Mum about me but in fact I have no idea what I might have been thinking. I might be noticing she has a new dressing on the fragile bruise on her wrist. Or I might simply be trying to work out what maintenance is actually possible. Can I get Mum into a clean top? Will these shoes fit on her swollen feet? Or should I simply leave the battered slippers where they are and forget that she was once a woman who could carry off a "red linen cheongsam embroidered all over with bunches of yellow wattle" (*Marvellous*, draft 22, 2021, p. 5).

Creating our mothers (Maude Davey)

Your mother is like a ship that sails ahead, maintaining a constant distance. She is what you are becoming. One day she will be gone from the horizon but you will sail on, ahead of your own daughter. What she will become.

In 1992, I made a show with Margaret Mills and Melissa Reeves called *Never Let Me Go*, which we presented at Napier Street Theatre. *Never Let Me Go* was a performance in two parts. In the first part we remembered the mothers we had as children, enacting and constructing a procession of fragmentary images from our memories, dreams and fantasies; in the second part we impersonated our mothers in what we called "a bizarre yet supremely ordinary evocation of three middle aged women having dinner together" (Williams, 1992). Thirty years later I am making a show called *Marvellous* with Hester Joyce and Meredith Rogers, in which they impersonate their own mothers. In a newspaper interview at the time I was quoted saying:

One of the things we say is that daughters actually create their mothers. Daughters restrict and confine their mothers in their conception and perceptions of them. This is an attempt in some ways to find their voice in us (Williams, 1992).

We were so solipsistic, weren't we? As children always are. We consider our mothers our creations. Their existence before us is shadowy, a convenient fiction perhaps, generated from the need for them to have been made so that they can make us – only in order that we can in turn make them. Their existence is predicated on our existence. We come first in our mothers' lives.

Today Meredith, Hester and I find ourselves the restricted and confined middle-aged women who seemed so mysterious (and contingent) to our thirty-year-old selves, projecting ourselves forward into our very old mothers and trying to find their voice in us. Still creating our mothers. Still coming first. What I remember, from performing *Never Let Me Go*, was the delicious pleasure of dressing up in my mother's clothes and pretending to be her. It was as if it wasn't really acting, not in the naturalistic sense. Impersonation is different from acting. Look at Alec Baldwin playing Trump on *Saturday Night Live*, or better, Sarah Cooper when she lip-synchs him on TikTok. We are not fooled. The effectiveness of the act lies in the gap between the original and the pretence. We are delighted to see the way the conjuring of the Trump (or the

mother) shimmers across the pretending body to generate new and different meanings. When Hester and Meredith pretend to be their mothers a particular energy crackles through the rehearsal room. I could watch them improvising in that place for hours. What I am looking for, through and into their performance is what is revealed about the relationship between the mothers and their pretending daughters. Scraps and fragments, tiny clues as to who these people are that my friends have come from. As their mothers, Mae and Pam, Hester and Meredith talk about their daughters:

M: Meredith drinks more than I do.

H: Hester eats more than I do.

M: Well yes so does Meredith. (*Marvellous*, draft 22, 2021, p. 27)

They roll their eyes, judgemental. The conjured mother shimmers a little, the pretending daughter comes into focus. Is this a remembered or an imagined judgement? Is it a faithful rendition of the mothers' view of their daughters? Or is it the daughters' own critical voices being put into the mothers' mouths?

We say these shows are about our mothers. We intend them to be about our mothers. A homage, we say. But they're really about us. In *Never Let Me Go* the images in the first half were about us in relation to our mothers. Who were we that came from these women, was the primary question we asked, not Who are they? In the second half, the dinner party, we were interested in how they would be without us. What might they say about us? How might they reveal themselves (ourselves) in unexpected ways? We expected we might discover something about them through the act of impersonation. Maybe to imagine ourselves into their bodies – Melissa wore a padded slip to make her larger – to call each-other by their names, to consciously imitate their little tics and habits (the way my mother taps her front teeth with her fingernails) would let us into their minds. For what purpose, I wonder now.

In the same press interview I said:

We look at the idea of being revolted by your mother's body and also about holding your mother to blame ... The essential experience for a little girl is the experience of being left by one's mother. At some stage you realise she has gone and that you have no power to summon her back and no matter how hard you wish for it to happen, you are left in a starving, parched, dying desert ... we look at the ways you shelter yourself ever after from that experience (Williams, 1992).

Oh, the tangle here between my mother and myself, of love and hate, delight and horror, adoration and revulsion. How terrifying it is to think of my daughter regarding me from a similarly selfish and judgmental perspective. I was nattering with my best friend recently, whose mother had died in 2019. I use "nattering" here to describe a creative, productive exchange, the seemingly random spinning off from the matter at hand that layers the thinking with anecdote and analogy. She said she was musing with her sisters about whether the love a child has for their mother (perhaps she said parent, the specificity is mine) is the greatest love of one's life. Her sisters, both of whom are mothers, flat out disagreed. You love your children

more than they love you, they told her. (We know that to be true don't we, looking ahead to our mothers who would do anything for us, and looking behind to our daughters for whom we would do anything.)

I wonder if I would have the courage to make a show about my daughter? Project myself back into her life and experiences, impersonate her ticks and habits. I can't imagine it. I used to be able to impersonate her when she was very little, how she called "high heels" "hee highls", for my friends' amusement. Not now. It is no longer permitted me. The contract is different. Our daughters do create us. I am not the person I would be if I did not have a daughter. I am restricted and confined by her constructions of me – or at least I try to restrict and confine myself. I want to be a good mother. I consider her interests when making my life decisions, they come first. That's a good mother, isn't it? Putting the interests of your family first.

I remember when my mother came to see *Never Let Me Go*. She said afterwards: "I can see that it's not really me up there on the stage, it's someone you need me to be to make the story work." I thought that was very sensible when she said it. What I didn't recognise was her generosity in allowing me to pretend to be her, and not be offended by the liberties I took. I'm not sure I could be so generous.

Beyond Silents (Hester Joyce)

Impending Death (SFX: The last lyrical)

I see only diminishing lesser

Fog. Struggling to hear, see, taste.

Feeling too much and not enough energy to remember how it goes

There's darkness at the edges and fuzz in the centre

Did I remember what I need to remember

I have to get this last right

I am awake now

Damn. I thought that was it.

It's the big black door

There's nothing on the other side

I know that but that's probably better than this

This diminishing. This slow decline

A chorus of... The murmuring of my soul

Is dying upon me. (*Marvellous*, draft 19, 2020, pp. 29-30)

This fragment of text, this last lyrical, was excised from our performance piece *Marvellous* draft 19. “Impending Death” was written by Meredith Rogers and me, as a spontaneous response to a provocation guided by Maude Davey, dramaturg and director. The fragment lies on the rehearsal room floor homeless and abandoned because we could not make it work in the most recent production of the play (La Mama Courthouse, Carlton, February 2021). Or because it was extraneous to the version of our mothers’ lives that becomes *Marvellous*. At the time of writing “Impending Death”, our nonagenarians (Mae and Pam) were alive, as we imagined the slippage between how they looked at death and how death looked back towards them. George Saunders’ ghosts were rattling around in my body sounding out a new shape for them, like Lincoln in the liminality of the bardo grappling with the loss of his son by pulling death forward while at the same time fending it off (Saunders, 2017).

Marvellous is itself a fragment, and a collection of fragments that explores “the everyday lives and extravagant, sometimes fantastical inner lives of two nonagenarian women and their 60+ plus daughters. *Marvellous* inter-weaves the voices and psycho-physicalities of these women: their connectedness, their failing/falling bodies, their wayward imaginative memory worlds” (Rogers, *Press release* 2020).

Beenbags: 60 plus 30: life after 90 is an old name for our project about two nonagenarians and their adult children. The lives of plus 90s are dependent often on the lives of their no-longer-children – now in their 60s and 70s – now their carers. A violence born of love that wrenches away visions of finishing work, returning to former passions, finding pleasurable activities, travelling. Few imagine the oldest-old time where the desire and facility to do these things disappears. Fewer imagine spending this time as carers. Sixty-year-olds looking after 90-year-olds are witnessing their own, inevitable, not always optimistic, futures. People currently in their 90s were born before the period defined as “The Silent Generation” (Loria and Lee, 2018). What name might we give them? Almost Ghosts? Nearly Dead? Beyond Silents? Our work plays in the space, the relationships between Baby Boomers and the Beyond Silents.

Another discard from *Beenbags* is the original inspiration for this work; a story my sister told me about a friend, who in the despair of caring alone for two elderly parents with a wandering dementia, resorted to sitting them in beanbags that they were unable to get out of. Constraint by stealth. (As we learn through rehearsals getting out of a beanbag at 60 is a challenge, at 90, we imagine, impossible). I imagined the stage curtains opening, lights lifting on two older actors sitting in beanbags Beckett-like, crying “I can’t get up” then exclaiming “Why are we still here?” Detritus cast out to the understory. Later “I’m up I’m up” is a triumphal cry when our mothers achieve sitting to standing. We also discover that a beanbag can stand in for many things and can easily dip into the obscene. When an oldest-old falls in the night and only the old is there – the performance of returning both to bed demands extreme physicality – an oldest-old cannot get herself up from the floor and the old cannot lift the oldest-old (“oldest” terms – Humboldt and Leal, 2015). In performance I hear the audience audibly moan when Meredith says “her arms came apart, the sinews like broken elastic” (*Marvellous*, draft 22, 2021, p. 11).

The working title *Beenbags* has an offensive “e” replacing the more innocent “a”. There’s violence and denigration implied in substitution. And frustration. As the Covid-19 epidemic has exposed, we do not as a society value our elders, those who have become “has-beens” before truly dying. Our beanbags, pallid pink coloured brocade bodies hanging in space, become an expansive substitution – our mothers, their flailing, falling, failing bodies, a hospital bed, a cradle, lovers, husbands, flights of fancy – objects to be thrown, flung, hung, dropped, lifted, carried, held.

Marvellous was written on the rehearsal floor through guided improvisations, verbatim and auto/biographical writings guided by Maude Davey. These writings from the space and body were recorded audio visually and handwritten on paper to use in a “close work” technique which Alana Valentine distinguishes from “verbatim” in *Bowerbird: The Art of Making Theatre Drawn from Life*. Valentine means “drawn from interviews or archives, from the imagination or zeitgeist of being alive in a particular time and place” (2018, p. 10). We assume that by examining the tensions within the microcosm there’ll be reflections on and implications for the macrocosm. Pam and Mae are rewritten by their daughters in the live imaginings and rememberings of who they, and we, are. We are them, them us, at once. At its heart the relationship between these two generations, mining direct biographical experiences, taking various roles as mothers and daughters in a boat (River Styx), waiting at a bus stop, going for coffee, in a waiting room. Waiting. On. For.

In the midst of the making Mae died so that two of us are no longer in the hinterland of impending death – me now before and Mae after. Death looms more the longer one lives. Now, in Covid-19 we, daughters of Mae, are thankful she died before the pandemic – her mind was stronger than her body and lockdown would have been her undoing. Her last pathway to death was gruesome; she showed us that dying is simple.

Conclusion

This writing is necessarily unfinished. It comes from the middle of a process that will stop when we do. *Marvellous* asks both performers and audience to project themselves forwards into the experience of our/their own “oldest-old”. We look back to what they were in order to look forward to what we may become. In tracking some of the threads that wind together in the performance, *On Making Marvellous* accompanies and expands upon the performance event, situating it in relation to specific evolutions of feminist performance practice. The echoes and residues of past performances carried into a work by the makers and their audience proliferate in myriad assemblages, which are the performance of *Marvellous*, and which become reference points for our thinking of ourselves over time. In the same way, the assemblage here provides a reference point for our thinking of feminist performance practice over time, not in order to draw conclusions, but in order to look forward to what we may become.

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