

'Standing in the shadows'?: Reframing homosexuality in musical theatre

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'STANDING IN THE SHADOWS'?:
REFRAMING HOMOSEXUALITY IN MUSICAL THEATRE

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
University of Wolverhampton for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

November 2019

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how the gay male is represented in musical theatre and considers how musical theatre writing practice can be utilised to create new iterations of the homosexual male character in musicals. The study has three main objectives: to explore the persistent patterns of gay representation in musicals, to investigate dominant heterosexual ideologies with musical theatre practice and to consider how I might create an intervention against the heterosexist, heterogenous norms of the form. Whilst there is existing scholarship that explores the connections between the homosexual male and the musical, both on stage and in the audience, there is little research examining the subject from the perspective of the musical theatre writer. This research addresses this gap by creating an original musical, *Pieces of String*, and providing an analysis of the creative process and the creative product. Whilst the investigation considers the Broadway/UK musical theatre canon, the primary focus is on contemporary musicals written and produced since 2000 which further contributes to the field and affords academic consideration to newer musicals which have not yet received such scholarly treatment. The study uses Sara Ahmed’s theory of queer fatalism, Daphne Brooks’ ‘occupation’ theory and Miller’s idea of the showtune as denial as frameworks through which to examine the existing texts and also to create an original work. The findings of this research question the cultural assumption that the musical is a gay genre, and conclude that the form actually repeatedly asserts its heterosexual hegemony. *Pieces of String* locates itself within that hegemony and subverts it through its inclusion of multiple leading gay characters and focus on gay-specific narratives.

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For Haz, for everything

For Millie, for being there

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a practice-led study of homosexual representation in commercial musical theatre written by a writer-composer. Its title borrows a lyric from the musical that forms the practice product of this research, *Pieces of String*, but repurposes it as a question. This reflects the conflict at the centre of the research: there is an assumed association between gay men and musicals and yet homosexual representation in musical theatre is limited. I ask if, contrary to cultural and social assumptions, gay men are being ill-served by the form. Employing my own writing praxis, I address the lack of diversity within the depictions of the gay male, as well as examine the challenges faced when attempting to resist the tropes of the form. Firstly, I explore the homosexual characters and their narratives portrayed in the field, describing persistent patterns and deviations. Secondly, I examine how these onstage sexualities are constructed by investigating the dominant heterosexual ideologies within the practice and the effect that these have upon the writer. Thirdly I consider how I might create an intervention within my own work against the heterogeneous heterosexist norms of the form.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING: Identifying the landscape

This research examines gay male representation in commercial musical theatre. It looks at existing examples of gay characters and homosexual narratives within musicals from across the past forty-five years; from Paul in *A Chorus Line* (1975) to Jamie in *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie* (2017), from *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983) to *Heathers* (2014). The thesis builds on James

Lovelock’s research (2016, 2019) which argues that, during the twentieth and the early part of the twenty-first century, gay characters in musicals have historically fallen into very specific tropes: the ‘drag queen’, the ‘drama queen’ and the ‘dancing queen’ (Lovelock, 2019, 2016). Whilst it is true that representation is changing – and swiftly – stereotypes still abound. Thus, is it possible for musical theatre, typically believed to be disproportionately occupied by homosexual men, to avoid repeating heterosexist tropes and offer a more nuanced presentation of the gay lived experience? The research tries to answer this question practically by creating a new piece of musical theatre: *Pieces of String*. My show places original gay male characters – that do not adhere to the tropes identified in the written part of the thesis – into the popular medium of musical theatre. The research goes further still by positioning homosexuality, homophobia, and gay shame at the forefront of the narrative of the show which, as discussed later in this thesis, is still relatively rare.

In 2019, at the time of writing, *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie* (2017) is the only musical playing in London’s West End which centres around a gay character. Dan Gillespie-Sells and Tom Macrae’s show is inspired by the true story of Jamie New, a teenager who wishes to attend his school prom in drag. *Come From Away* (2017) includes a gay couple, the Two Kevins, as part of its ensemble, and Harry in *Mamma Mia* (1999), and Elder McKinley in *The Book of Mormon* (2011) provide two homosexual characters in supporting roles. During the research period, there have been depictions of gay men in musicals that have come and gone, including but not limited to: *Yank!* (2010), initially produced at the Hope Mill Theatre in Manchester before transferring to London’s Charing Cross Theatre; a revival of Jonathan Larson’s *Tick, Tick...*

Boom! (2001) at the Park Theatre; *Miss Nightingale* (2011) which toured the UK before two short residencies in London; the UK premiere of *The View Upstairs* (2017) which played at the Soho Theatre in London in 2018. These shows are evidence that representation of gay men in musical theatre is increasing, yet still limited, with gay characters rarely foregrounded as protagonists.

Lovelock identifies that the persistent representations of gay male characters in musicals ‘largely adhere to three main narrative tropes, labelled here as the ‘drag queen’, the ‘drama queen’ and the ‘dancing queen’” (Lovelock, 2016, p. 13) and most of the examples above can be located into at least one of these. Lovelock has said that ‘the most successful LGBTQ+ characters in recent musical theatre have come from real life’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 204) and includes the two Kevins in *Come From Away* in this summation. It is true that the Kevins do not easily fit into the tropes identified by Lovelock, thus suggesting a more nuanced portrayal of gay identity. However, it should be noted that the journey of the characters differs from the real life experience of the men. Kevin Tuerff and Kevin Yung were indeed in a relationship during the events depicted in *Come From Away*, and that romantic relationship ultimately ended. The writers of *Come From Away*, Sankoff and Hein, chose to include the break-up as part of the musical, despite this actually occurring many years later. Of course, artistic licence must be taken when adapting real-life events into a fictional work, but here the net result is that a homosexual relationship is seen as being unsustainable, in contrast to the happy and burgeoning heterosexual relationships of other characters. This coheres with Sara Ahmed’s theory of queer fatalism (2017), which I use to explore

homosexual relationships being unable to flourish in *Pieces of String*, later in this thesis.

This research is not solely about quantity of representation, but also of quality: when Harry in *Mamma Mia* is revealed to be in a same-sex relationship it ‘feels forced and irrelevant to the narrative as a whole’ (Lovelock, 2016, p. 17) whilst Elder McKinley in *The Book of Mormon*, in one show-stopping number, proclaims that the way to deal with his homosexuality is simply to ‘turn it off’ (Parker, Lopez & Stone, 2011). In assessing quality of representation, it is important to consider the writer’s process in bringing gay characters to the stage – if indeed they make it to the stage at all. This raises questions about the external pressures that producers and other creatives bring to bear upon the development of a show. For example, *In The Heights* (2005), Lin Manuel Miranda’s first show, began as a gay story that followed Lincoln, a taxicab dispatch worker ‘in love with his best friend Benny’ (Miranda, in *Broadway Backstory*, 2016). This storyline remained through years of development and workshops – Lincoln’s existence only came into question when commercial producers came on board. Miranda recounts that Jeffery Seller and Kevin McCollum took him to see another one of their shows, *Avenue Q* (2003), and during the song ‘Fantasies Come True’ (Marx, 2003) Miranda thought ‘oh shit, that’s our plot’ (Miranda, in *Broadway Backstory*, 2016). The character of Lincoln ‘began to die there because *Avenue Q* had done the “I’m in love with my best friend and in the closet” sub-plot kind of perfectly’ and ‘did it way better and funnier than I did it’ (Miranda, in *Broadway Backstory*, 2016). It is interesting that Miranda felt that a comical sub-plot telling of this storyline meant that there was no room for a more serious, central narrative version in

his own show. This indicates that there is, or certainly was, limited space for homosexual lives and experiences in musical theatre. As Miranda notes, ‘Lincoln died so the rest of us could live’ (Miranda, in *Broadway Backstory*, 2016), tellingly privileging heterosexual lives over homosexual ones. The character of Lincoln no longer exists in *In The Heights*. This might not be considered unusual: characters often come and go during development, being condensed and combined where necessary. But not only does Lincoln not exist, there are now no gay or LGBTQ+ characters in the show at all. There is still a huge amount of stigma in Latino communities towards gay men (see Li et al., 2017; Brooks et al., 2005): Lincoln could have been a real step forward for homosexual intersectional representation. Instead, the character and any non-heterosexual identities have been erased.

RATIONALE: Outlining the reasoning for this research

The musical has historically been regarded as a theatrical home for the homosexual. From the supposition that there are a “disproportionate number” of gay men among its major architects’ (Miller, 1998, p. 39) to the assumed abundance of ‘male chorus members in musical theatre [that] are predominantly gay – it’s a fact’ (Barnes, 2015, p. 111). The ‘cult of Broadway Musicals’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 90) has long been a ‘common language for gay men’ (Clum, 1999, p. 28), resulting in the ‘stereotype that gay men have been particularly invested in musical theater, indeed that love of musical theater is a sign of gayness’ (Clum, 1999, p. 29). Notwithstanding these assertions, the number of characters clearly identified as homosexual is limited and they often

appear as secondary characters supporting a heterosexual, heteronormative central protagonist.

I am a gay man who writes musicals. I was born in 1981 and grew up in a Britain with a very different attitude to homosexuality than the one I find myself writing in today. During the 1980s and 1990s the AIDS epidemic decimated the generation of gay men above me and ensured that I grew up believing that being homosexual was a death sentence. This fear worked in tandem with Section 28, in which the ruling Conservative Government legislated that teachers were not allowed to promote homosexuality within schools. I came out in 1997, the year that Tony Blair’s New Labour government took power in the UK and subsequently amended a great number of discriminatory laws against homosexuals. Despite the nominal legal equality we have now reached in Britain, I have faced opposition to my desire to include multiple homosexual characters and narratives within my work. This opposition has come both from producers and theatres. This is jarring when considering the cultural assumption that musicals are a safe space for homosexuals. So potent is the assumed connection between homosexuals and musicals that ‘the character of the musical theatre aficionado is a staple’ (Wolf, 2002, p. 20) within popular culture representations of gay men. I soon realised that the constrictions being placed upon my work were specific to musical theatre: my playwriting was not put under the same scrutiny. It seemed that there were quite rigid expectations about what should, and should not, be included in a musical. These expectations related not only to subject matter, but also to character. As already mentioned, the gay characters in musicals largely adhere to a very narrow scope and I was aware I was seeing neither

myself, nor my lived experience, reflected within the form. This research identifies the confines placed upon musicals, explores how such confines are constructed, and works to refute them practically. *Pieces of String* tells a story that focuses on homosexual characters and issues that are directly linked to their sexual identity. The research, then, challenges the heterosexual hegemony by placing homosexual characters at the centre of the narrative and using the form to question the intrinsic struggles of a non-heterosexual sexuality.

This thesis is an original contribution to knowledge in a number of areas, both practically and academically. It stands as an analysis of the current state of male homosexual representation in musical theatre. David Savran has said that musical theatre ‘has long been ignored, marginalized, or cordoned off in scholarly work’ (Savran, 2003, p. 27) and though there has been a marked increase in musical theatre studies since Savran’s statement, there is still a paucity of material to draw upon focused specifically on sexuality and the musical. As discussed in Chapter Two, much of the existing material focused on sexuality and the musical concentrates on musicals from the ‘golden age’ and the connection with the gay spectator (Clum, 1999; Miller, 1998, et al). When this research extends to include contemporary musical theatre spectatorship it does so only tangentially. Therefore the musicals I choose to examine within this thesis are shows that have largely been unexplored by musical theatre scholars.

Although on-stage representation increased with such seminal works as *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983) and *Rent* (1996), these shows have already received a great deal of attention. Therefore, I have largely refrained from

discussing these musicals in detail here. Far less attention has been given to more recent musicals that have not had the impact of the aforementioned shows, or have perhaps not had the time for their impact to be clearly established. By focusing upon musicals that largely date from the year 2000 onwards this study therefore expands rather than expounds upon the discourse already in existence in the field. This is the first research project that approaches gay representation in musical theatre through practice, and, more specifically, through a written, rather than performance, practice. The study benefits from my hybrid position as a theatre-maker and an early-career researcher and thus gives parity to the creative process and the cultural product, positioning them as equal to the historiographical work of this thesis.

This study is unique in applying the theories of queer fatalism (Ahmed, 2017) and gay shame (Halperin and Traub, 2009) to musical theatre practice, in order to shift the heteronormative narrative to a more homo-positive location. There has been a substantial shift in the quantity and quality of LGBTQ+ representations within musical theatre since the inception of this research project. However, *Pieces of String*, centering, as it does, ‘a gay love story from the second World War and its impact on families for generations’ (Davies, 2018), remains distinct for using homophobia and ‘issues of sexual acceptance’ (Vowles, 2018) as primary subject matter. Musicals that include gay storylines often trade in the currency of gay tropes (as outlined by Lovelock, above, and detailed in the next chapter) and subsequently present bigotry as a necessary adjunct to homosexuality. Whilst Ahmed’s queer fatalism argues that this is unavoidable, acceptance of sexuality as a central theme is rare in musical theatre. Therefore, this thesis is unique in offering an

original piece of musical theatre which places shame *and* acceptance of sexuality at its centre.

TERMINOLOGY: Defining key terms within this study

This thesis is focused on the representation of gay men in musicals aimed at a mainstream audience as opposed to shows created and performed in fringe and less commercial venues. The musicals discussed herein thus all include gay male characters. Whilst primary focus has been given to those musicals that privilege gay male characters and narratives over heterosexual ones, it would be remiss not to also consider shows that include gay supporting roles, particularly as these are often the most commercially successful. In order to differentiate the two, I considered using the term *gay musicals* to describe the musicals where being gay, or gay identity, is a key feature of the plot. This posed questions about my definition of gay musicals, however, for it fails to consider the impact of a gay sensibility upon a show: might a musical with no clear gay characters or narratives be replete with such a gay sensibility that it could be considered gay? Or, more crucially, is a musical written by a gay creative team in a time and place where homosexuality is illegal necessarily imbued with a gay sensibility? Further, as with any label, applying one necessitated the creation of others: suggesting there are *gay musicals* suggests that there are *bisexual musicals*, *pansexual musicals* and so on, and risks siloing the genre. Outside of this thesis, however, I have begun to explore this area of research in more detail. In a paper entitled ‘Queer Evan Hansen: Is anybody waving back at me?’, delivered at the 2019 Song, Stage and Screen XIV conference at the University of Leeds (see Appendix F), I examine

how a musical with no gay characters can still have a gay sensibility. I look forward to continuing my research in this field.

In contrast, some scholars (Halperin, 2012; Miller, 1998; Steyn, 1997) suggest that all musicals are inherently gay, and there is a cultural assumption that supports the notion that musical theatre is a ‘somehow *gay genre*’ (Miller, 1998, p. 16). This thesis argues against this, and posits that all musicals are, in fact, inherently *straight musicals*: heterosexuality pervades the form so strongly that so-called *gay musicals* are always existing within, and in opposition to, a heteronormative status quo. Consequently, I chose not to annexe gay musicals within straight musicals and thus simply use the term *musicals* and specify the content as relative to my research, where necessary. Furthermore, I find myself moving between using *musicals* and *traditional musicals* in a synonymic manner. If I draw any distinction between the two I use traditional musicals more often to discuss classics of the form, and those that very clearly follow the primary model as discussed in Chapter Five.

MUSICALS: British, Contemporary, Traditional and ‘golden age’

As a British writer working in Britain today, *Pieces of String* could be considered a British musical. Indeed, if, as Gordon, Jubin and Taylor suggest, ‘British musicals are those that contain stories pertinent to British audiences, that are developed in British theatres’ (Gordon, Jubin and Taylor, 2016, p. 5), then *Pieces of String* fits the criteria. Nonetheless, because the focus here is on sexuality it is not helpful to this research to draw distinctions between U.S. and British musicals. Whilst I have endeavoured to include a combination of American and British musicals in my study, the literature I have selected

focuses primarily on American musicals. This is partly necessary due to the body of work available which responds to the Broadway musical, and also, given that my work is heavily influenced by musicals from the Broadway tradition, it is not pertinent to make a geographical distinction. Indeed, a comprehensive comparative analysis of British and American musicals requires consideration beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, for the purposes of my study I include both British and American musicals under the term *musicals*. As previously discussed, *traditional musicals* is typically employed to refer to older shows that might be considered more established or classic, such as those following the Rodgers and Hammerstein model. Much as *musicals* and *traditional musicals* are sometimes used synonymously within this study, so too are the terms *traditional musicals* and ‘golden age’ *musicals*. I locate the traditional musical as largely being part of the ‘golden age’ hence their close relationship to one another here. As stated previously, for the purposes of this study I use the term *contemporary musicals* primarily to refer to shows first produced since 2000, a period from which many of the musicals analysed within this thesis are taken.

GAY

As I am discussing gay representation in musicals it is imperative that I clarify how I intend to use the word ‘gay’ within this thesis. More than most, this word’s definition has evolved and changed over time: in the late 1300s Chaucer used it as a synonym for light-hearted and carefree (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 1343-1400), in the last century it became an identifying word for homosexual and homosexuality, with one of the first usages appearing in Noel

Coward's 1929 lyric for '(We all wore a) Green Carnation' (Coward, 1979) and since the late 1970s the word has increasingly been used as a derogatory slang term to mean 'foolish' or 'stupid' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). This usage gathered considerable pace with UK school students in particular, with a 2008 report from The Guardian newspaper citing it as 'the most frequently used term to put someone down' (Curtis, 2008).

For brevity, I shall be using 'gay' to refer to male homosexuality and male homosexuals. My work, unfortunately, compounds existing lesbian, bisexual and trans- erasure within musical theatre and I am acutely aware that my exploration of solely male homosexuality, as a white cisgender man, does nothing to redress this imbalance. However, as this research is a personal response to my lived experience as a gay man it is necessary that the focus is narrowed to a scope that reflects my own cultural and socio-political understanding of homosexuality. It must also be acknowledged that contemporary understanding of sexuality does not limit itself to the binary of hetero/homo-sexuality, and instead views sexuality as a spectrum, or as fluid and changeable. As a practice-led research project, my personal authorial voice and lived experience as a gay man is privileged. My experience as a British gay man in a heterosexual world means that I have historically viewed my sexuality in opposition to a heterosexual norm. Therefore this thesis continues, reluctantly, to perpetuate the binary forum, and considers a more thorough examination of alternative sexualities and their representations in musical theatre to be beyond the scope of the research.

QUEER

'colloquial (orig. U.S.). Of a person: homosexual (frequently derogatory and offensive). In later use: denoting or relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms.'

(Oxford English Dictionary, 2019)

Similarly to 'gay', the word 'queer' has evolved to have multiple applications. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that 'queer' has been used as an epithet for 'homosexual' since the late 1800s: the term was first used by the Marquess of Queensberry in a letter to his son, Bosie (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019), infamous for his relationship with Oscar Wilde. In recent times, this stigmatised term for homosexuality has been reclaimed as a powerful marker of non-conformist identity. There are multiple benefits to utilising queer as an identifier, not least that it does not carry any obvious connections to a particular race, gender or sexual orientation: queer can now refer to anything outside of the heteronormative patriarchal hegemony. It is important to note, however, that queer has not ceased to mean homosexuality and is still often used derogatively. The word has also been assigned to queer theory, the branch of social and cultural studies that 'seeks to challenge or deconstruct traditional ideas of sexuality and gender, esp. the acceptance of heterosexuality as normative and the perception of a rigid dichotomy of male and female traits' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019), and which I draw upon in this research.

In this thesis I have refrained from using queer as an identifier. Firstly, for personal reasons: I fall in between two generations that use queer in different ways; the gay male who wears it as a reclaimed expression of their homosexual identity, and the younger person who uses it as a rejection of the mainstream and of social norms. Neither of these uses feels appropriate to me

and I am unable to detach myself from the unpleasant connotations of the word. Secondly, Savran notes that the early queer initiatives were too often dominated by ‘the persons, agendas, and styles of white, middle-class, gay men’ (Savran, 2003, p. 58), and this pattern emerges throughout the literature, too. As a white, middle-class, gay man myself I do not wish to undermine the word and deny it the multiplicity it encourages. Therefore, I use it to refer to queer theory and queer studies but not as a synonym for gay men.

Queer can also be used as a verb – queering – to refer to the act of revision and reinterpretation that a hitherto hegemonic character or narrative, both in its depiction of sexualities and gender identities, undergoes in revival productions.

‘4. *transitive*. To analyse or reinterpret something from the perspective of queer theory (see [QUEER adj.¹ Special uses 2](#)). More generally: to consider from such a perspective; to make (more) relevant, accessible, or susceptible to audiences or perspectives representing diverse sexual and gender identities.’
(Oxford English Dictionary, 2019)

As our societal understanding of diverse identities evolves, a number of musicals are being reimaged to reflect this. If, as theatre audiences, we ‘take for granted that what we see is heterosexuality’ (Dolan, 2010, p. 2), then this process of queering works both as an act of inclusion for previously ignored identities, and as an act of resistance against a heteronormative, patriarchal norm. In Chapter Three I discuss queering through recent revivals of *Oklahoma* (1943) and *Company* (1970) and consider how this diverges from Brooks’ theory of occupation (2014).

METHODOLOGY

I apply a multimodal framework to the research project. I approach the practice research through autoethnography, drawing on my own lived experience and ‘autobiographical data to analyze and interpret [my] cultural assumptions’ (Chang, 2008, p. 9). Whilst autoethnography can often cleave to autobiography, my project is far less constrictive than this suggests. Rather, I use personal experience as the impetus for beginning this research, and lived experience as a portal through which to create fictional characters that continue the discourse and shift the focus away from me specifically. This works in conjunction with a more traditional historiographical investigation of the literature. An awareness and understanding of the theoretical context is vital to inform the work and ensure I am locating it appropriately within the field. Further, as this study examines a writing practice rather than performance, I will always respond to the written material the authors have created: it is beyond the scope of this research to include performance analysis, therefore my response is to the text of the script and score and not an actor’s interpretation of it.

The practice portfolio is comprised of the complete performance script and the filmed recording of an original piece of musical theatre, *Pieces of String*. The recording took place during a two-week run at the Mercury Theatre, Colchester in 2018. I employ my practice as a bookwriter, lyricist and composer to construct the practice component of this research, in direct conversation with the literature. Although my practice includes composing, and I wrote the score of *Pieces of String*, this thesis does not include a musicological assessment of the work. As I am approaching the research from

a cultural materialist and autoethnographical perspective, with a focus on text and narrative, it is beyond the scope to assess the musicological work of my creative output. I would welcome further research which examines *Pieces of String* through its composition and musical landscape.

PRACTICE AS RESEARCH: The challenge of the practitioner as researcher

Since the written work is an exploration of gay representation in musicals and an investigation of how such representations are delivered and depicted, the practice must work as an extension and demonstration of this research. Therefore, it is imperative to establish what I mean by practice-as-research within the context of this study. There are a number of iterations of how practice is enfolded into the academy: practice-as-research (PaR), practice-led-research, practice-based-research. With regards to these permutations in musical theatre, Zachary Dunbar notes that ‘opinions vary minimally within academia’ (Dunbar, 2014, p. 58) and are typically reflective of usage rather than ‘unique inflections of meaning’ (Dunbar, 2014, p. 58). Despite this, I believe practice-as-research to be the most appropriate term for my study as it clearly locates the practice as the site of the research and allows it parity with the academic work. Dominic Symonds states that PaR is ‘the embodied observation of the world through a prism of experience and action’ (Symonds, 2013, p. 211) and this is especially accurate here, due to the autoethnographic nature of the work. As I discuss in more detail later in this thesis, *Pieces of String* begins embryonically as autobiography before shifting into something more reflective of my lived experience, rather than my personal biography. As

a writer and composer, my practice uses my lived experience, as Symonds suggests, to make tangible my observations of the world.

One of the biggest challenges in writing a musical as research is to be found in its very form: much of musical theatre PaR focuses on the performer rather than the writer. The rehearsal process allows for experimentations in which the performer, a malleable entity, can repeat, repurpose and reinterpret a text. In contrast, writing can be a solitary process and therefore the initial period of creating a work does not benefit from the external interpretation provided by a performer. This naturally divides the practice into distinct stages, solitary and collaborative, with the former leading towards the latter. Dunbar has questioned how much the ‘final outcome of practice – the *new* method, the *new* composition, the *new* production, the *new* form of drama therapy – [is] privileged over the process of testing, analysing, or formally probing the research enquiry’ (Dunbar, 2014, p. 65) and this raises pertinent questions about how *Pieces of String* is viewed within this thesis. Symonds identifies that the value of PaR ‘can also be seen as its limitation: the embodied, experiential and tacit knowledge that can be identified through practice is by its nature difficult to share or even explain’ (Symonds, 2013, p. 212) and indeed this is a difficulty that this thesis attempts to traverse. Ultimately, *Pieces of String* is the exegesis of my research, articulated in the idiom of musical theatre, and this thesis is the exegesis of *Pieces of String*, articulated in the idiom of academia. Therefore, each part is entwined and reflects and complements the other,

forming a whole: theory and practice-product owe their existence to the other, but are also now able to exist individually¹.

THE PRACTICE: Pieces of String

Pieces of String is an original musical that centres on two gay male relationships. I first wrote it in 2011 as a short piece for my Master’s degree², and then developed it into a full-length musical under the supervision of Perfect Pitch³. Throughout this process the show expanded and was given a number of readings and workshops. In 2016, as I began this research, the show was optioned for production by the Mercury Theatre, Colchester. The plot of *Pieces of String* is as follows: In 2010, it is the day of Edward’s funeral and his family – daughter Jane, and her children Ed and Gemma – are clearing out his house. Jane is upset with Ed for bringing his boyfriend Harry to the funeral and this tension is repeated between the two men. Harry leaves Ed, unhappy with his semi-closeted status. As the family argue they are interrupted by the arrival of Rose, Tom’s sister, who delivers a box of knotted shoelaces and a letter to Jane. This box reveals the homosexual relationship that Tom and Edward embarked upon during the war. The flashback scenes show Edward leaving his new wife Anna as he goes to war. In France, he falls for fellow soldier Tom and their relationship blossoms. When on leave, Rose (as a young girl)

¹ Musical theatre is a collaborative medium and in focusing on this in the thesis as the sole writer/composer it may appear that I have neglected to follow that custom. This is far from the truth. The theoretical frameworks I have chosen to locate in *Pieces of String* provide my collaborators: I would argue that I have chosen to collaborate with the work and ideas of Sara Ahmed, Daphne A. Brooks, D.A Miller, James Lovelock and David Halperin. It is through the engagement with their arguments and ideas that I was able to forge the musical and so, whilst I was not creating a new work in tandem with another musical theatre writer, there were always other voices in the writers’ room with me providing dramaturgical interrogation.

² I obtained my Master’s Degree in Musical Theatre (Writing) at Goldsmiths, the University of London in 2011.

³ Perfect Pitch are an Arts Council funded company dedicated to the development of new British musicals.

catches them kissing and Edward leaves Tom, very distressed. Many years later, Tom seeks out Edward to attempt a reconciliation. Edward is once again living with Anna and rejects Tom. Anna observes this and, though they stay together, her relationship with Edward never recovers. In 2010, it is the revelation of the secret love affair between her father and Tom that allows Jane to begin to understand where her prejudices stem from, and gives Ed the courage to attempt a reunion with Harry.

It was always my intention to tell a specifically gay story as I was tacitly aware that I was underrepresented within the form. The writing began prior to beginning this study and yet the show failed to fully find its identity, and indeed its final form, until I began looking at it through the lens of this research. In this way, the research undertaken as part of this thesis and the latter stages of the creation of *Pieces of String*, have consistently and productively co-informed, creating a body of research that sits firmly within a PaR model, as outlined above.

The domestic space – the family home – is a site of importance within the piece, partly as the home is a clear shared environment for different generations of a family and partly because it is a familiar space for me to draw upon. In Chapter Two I explore the resonance of using the domestic space as a location in more detail, drawing upon Sara Ahmed’s phenomenological reading of the home as a heterosexual space (Ahmed, 2006), and compare how I utilise this setting in *Pieces of String* with William Finn’s *Falsettos*, a show that similarly recounts gay stories in a domestic environment. *Pieces of String* divides its time between two distinct timeframes – the second world war

and modern day - which works to allow comment and comparison between the gay male relationships in their respective eras.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES: An outline of the thesis

In this introduction I have laid out the rationale for undertaking this research. I have identified resistance towards varied representations of gay males in the musical theatre and a desire to confront this through practice. I have clarified the terminology I use within the thesis, and acknowledged the problems of identity-erasure within this thesis, musical theatre and musical theatre studies. I have discussed the challenges facing the practitioner-as-researcher and acknowledged the position the theory takes within the process of creating new PaR.

Chapter Two examines how musical theatre studies has approached sexuality and in particular, homosexuality. I review the literature, drawing from musical theatre studies and queer theorists, to locate the research academically. I use Lovelock to clarify the tropes that are repeated in gay characters in musical theatre, and expand upon these terms where necessary. I also consider the supposed critical connection that is made between gay men and musicals, looking specifically at the work of Miller and Clum. To understand the ways in which heterosexual hegemony and the persistent heterosexual narratives in musical theatre occur, I examine how the domestic space has been used within the form to promulgate heterosexual familial ideals.

In Chapter Three I consider the theoretical frameworks of the research project, and examine these through individual case studies. First, I discuss

Miller’s concept of the show tune as denial (1998), using classic examples of the form such as *Gypsy* (1959). The chapter then goes on to investigate how Daphne Brooks’ theory of occupation (2014) could be applied to sexuality, citing Billy Porter’s performance of drag queen Lola in *Kinky Boots* (2013). Finally, I use Jonathan Harvey and the Pet Shop Boys’ musical *Closer to Heaven* (2001) to explore Sara Ahmed’s work on queer fatalism (2010, 2017).

The next two chapters shift the focus onto the practice, and thus the tone shifts too, as I examine my own work in *Pieces of String*. Using the production text and various developmental versions of the script, Chapter Four assesses the homosexual representation within *Pieces of String*. It uses *The View Upstairs* and *Yank!* as comparative studies, with the latter musical also serving as a tool with which to further explore Brooks’ occupation theory. Chapter Five uses Jack Viertel’s (2016) recent monograph *The Secret Life of The American Musical* as a guideline, to discuss how *Pieces of String* adheres to, and diverts from, traditional structures of the musical.

Finally, Chapter Six concentrates on one key song/scene moment from within *Pieces of String*: ‘Standing in the Shadows’. As previously discussed, I do not include a musicological analysis of this song. Rather, the chapter charts the lyrical and narrative development of the song through three discrete versions and considers how it filters gay shame through the showtune form, rejecting Miller’s notion of the ‘show tune rhetoric of denial’ (Miller, 1998, p. 8).

CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter I use the term 'literature' in a traditional and a non-traditional sense: to mean academic output and also to refer to musicals themselves. By considering musicals as cultural artefacts apt for examination, this thesis therefore encompasses artistic practice, and places it on a par with academic discourse. Examining musicals themselves, through libretti and cast recordings, enables an analysis of the tropes that have manifested as a result of the history of musical theatre practice. In contrast to the plethora of musical theatre shows available for evaluation, critical analysis of sexuality and musicals is a burgeoning field with, at present, a limited number of key texts that can be addressed. I will examine the work that deals directly with homosexuality and musical theatre first, establishing clearly the landscape in which this thesis locates itself, and allowing me to ascertain the gaps in the literature. This leads on to a broader examination of how sexuality is performed, both on stage and off, and will draw on queer theorists such as Judith Butler and David Halperin. There is a larger body of literature focusing on gay drama in stage plays rather than musicals (O'Connor, 1998; Sinfield, 1999) which explores the notion that theatre is a safe space for homosexuals. A notable example is Alan Sinfield's *Out on Stage* (1999), which chronicles lesbian and gay theatre throughout the twentieth century in both Britain and the U.S. In *Straight Acting* (1998), Sean O'Connor expresses an interest in plays that include a gayness which 'was not said or stated but was suggested, implied or hinted at' (O'Connor, 1998, p. 9) and applies queer readings to the work of a number of homosexual playwrights such as Wilde and Rattigan. Whilst these works are of interest, the significant differences in the ways that

musical theatre and ‘straight’ plays operate mean that much of this discourse lies beyond the scope of the thesis.

(HOMO)SEXUALITY AND THE MUSICAL

The assumed prevalence of gay men working in the field feeds the ‘long-established trope that musical theatre is a homosexual art form’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 187) and this trope has been repeatedly used as comic currency: both Lovelock and Barnes cite the Tony awards opening number from 2011 which loudly proclaimed that Broadway was ‘not just for gays anymore’ (Javerbaum and Schlesinger, 2011). Halperin states that ‘a stereotype doesn’t have to be generally valid in order to contain some truth’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 91) and this research resides squarely within this paradox: this thesis is founded on the cultural assumption that gay men and the musical are connected, in both a creative and a consumerist capacity, despite the dominance of heterosexuality within the form. Clum and Miller have both written monographs focusing solely on this specific link, whilst Steyn dedicates a chapter to ‘the fags’ (Steyn, 1997, p. 196) in his book about Broadway musicals. Barnes suggests that ‘gay men are so heavily represented that it is often safer to assume that the male you are dealing with is gay rather than straight’ (Barnes, 2015, p. 109). Indeed, as Ryan Donovan notes in his doctoral thesis ‘Broadway Bodies: Casting, Stigma, and Difference in Broadway Musicals Since "A Chorus Line" (1975)’, ‘the phrase “Broadway Musical” itself is a signifier for homosexuality’ (Donovan, 2019, p. 124) unlike plays or so-called ‘straight’ theatre.

A number of seminal homosexual readings of the musical (Miller, Clum, Wolf, et al.) emerged before wider musical theatre studies established itself as

a solid field. Subsequently, a great deal of the important work in this area relies on musicals from an earlier era, resulting in a limited amount of literature focused on more recent works. This chapter and the next deliberately utilise contemporary and academically underrepresented musicals (*Closer to Heaven*, *Kinky Boots*) alongside influential earlier shows (*Falsettos*, *Gypsy*). Furthermore, academic homosexual readings of the musical emerged prior to a more nuanced analysis of sexuality and gender within the field of musical theatre scholarship, and therefore these works frequently position homosexuality in binary opposition to heterosexuality. As discussed in my introduction, by focusing on the experience of the gay male in relation to a heterosexual hegemony, this thesis may have the similar effect of privileging that binary. However, it is important to acknowledge that there is an increasing body of work that focuses on sexuality and gender as a spectrum, and the wider LGBTQ+ community (Donovan, Lovelock, et al).

There have been a number of studies of homosexuality and musical theatre over the past thirty years. In 1997 Mark Steyn’s chapter, ‘The Fags’, with its homophobic title, appeared in his book *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight: Musicals Then and Now* (1997), swiftly followed by D.A. Miller’s *Place for Us* (1998) and John M. Clum’s *Something For The Boys* (1999). Stacy Wolf began to discuss musical theatre ‘from a feminist, lesbian perspective’ (Wolf, 2002, p. vii) in *A Problem Named Maria* (2002), expanding on her research with the publication of *Changed For Good* (2011). In *Our Musicals, Ourselves*, John Bush Jones includes a chapter titled ‘New Voices, New Perspectives’ (2003, p. 563–605) that places homosexuality, more specifically gay men in musicals, alongside so-called ‘women’s issues’, and

Raymond Knapp dedicates a chapter to gender and sexuality in his book, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (2009, p. 260–331). David Halperin discusses the concept of a ‘gay sensibility’ in detail throughout *How To Be Gay* (2012), particularly dissecting the idea of ‘gay femininity’ when focusing on Broadway musicals. In order to do this Halperin draws heavily upon the earlier works of Miller and Clum, already cited.

In the last decade, Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds devote a chapter of their *Studying Musical Theatre* textbook to ‘Sexuality and Queer Theory’ (Taylor and Symonds, 2014, p. 169–184) which offers an examination of divergent sexualities depicted in musicals. Most recently, Grace Barnes’ *Her Turn on Stage: The Role of Women in Musical Theatre* addresses the dominance of gay men within the field in her chapter ‘It’s Not Just For Gays Anymore! The Influence of Gay Culture on Musical Theatre’ (Barnes, 2015, p. 109–129). As mentioned previously, this title is also used by James Lovelock in his PhD thesis *Not Just For Gays Anymore: Men, Masculinities and Musical Theatre* (2016), which explored how young men connect to musical theatre as a stereotypically gay genre. Lovelock moves to look more specifically at the claiming, and reclaiming, of LGBTQ+ spaces in musical theatre in his chapter in *Reframing the Musical* (2019).

With the exception of Lovelock and Symonds, all of the authors listed (Steyn, Miller, Clum, Wolf, Bush Jones, Halperin, Knapp, Barnes and Taylor) were born prior to 1970 (Lovelock, 2016, p. 59). Thus ‘the majority of scholarship on musical theatre and sexuality comes from a specific generational standpoint’ (Lovelock, 2016, p. 60) and this generational hegemony results in some correlations between the works. The shows cited

by these authors focus largely on the ‘golden age of American musical theatre: ‘1943-1965’ (Naden, 2011). Indeed, Miller and Clum have written the only books to date that are solely concerned with gay men and musicals, and both concentrate on this era. These works focus largely on the connection assumed between the gay spectator and the musical and are written from a personal, rather than an academic, perspective, perhaps supporting the notion that gay men have a visceral and particular attachment to musical theatre.

As representation of homosexuality in musical theatre has been limited, the few more recent shows to include gay characters, such as *La Cage Aux Folles* and *Rent*, are dealt with by these authors in some detail (Clum, Miller et al). Barnes and Wolf use a broader data set to view the work through a feminist lens. Wolf divides her chapters chronologically, each focused on a different decade, allowing her to assess modern works such as *Wicked* (2003) alongside classics from the ‘golden age’ such as *Guys and Dolls* (1950) and *Hello, Dolly!* (1964). Grace Barnes also utilises some recent sources, although, as discussed later in the chapter, these examples are often unsatisfactory.

My own generational standpoint means that the ‘golden age’ is not where I begin my research. This thesis considers ‘golden age’ musicals to be foundational to the medium and its evolution, but not to the research. The majority of scholarship on musical theatre and homosexuality tends to be concerned with historical works and leaves a gap in the literature, which this thesis seeks to address. Lovelock has begun to tackle this space in the learning, approaching the subject from an oppositional reading, locating his theory in resistance to the ‘long-standing myth’ (Lovelock, 2016, p. 4) that

musical theatre is a gay genre. This thesis agrees with Lovelock and similarly positions itself in opposition to the culturally assumed gayness of the musical. The research then expands upon the work of Lovelock by approaching this opposition practically.

One concern with unpicking the ‘mythos of male homosexuality’ (Miller, 1998, p. 16) is that ‘in repudiating the *homosexual type*, [those who oppose] merely become the well classified, even classic specimens of the *homosexual typology* constructed in relation to him’ (Miller, 1998, p. 17). Miller is suggesting that one cannot refute the allegiance to musicals by gay men, and to do so is to succumb to another stereotype: the self-denying gay. Whilst Miller was writing twenty years ago, and therefore his response is clearly located in that earlier time, internalised homophobia and gay shame are important facets of my own lived experience today. Therefore I use my practice to investigate the impact this has on the individual in question, and the relationships with those around them. I explore gay shame in more detail in the next chapter, and assess how it might be applied directly to a musical number in Chapter Six.

THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER: Gender and its conflation with sexuality

In her seminal book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler theorises that gender is a ‘repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance’ (Butler, 2014, p. 45). Butler posits that gender is not something that a person *is*, but something that a person *does*; she stresses that this performance of gender is not a performance as we might understand it.

Rather, it might be considered to be *per-formative*: a repeated set of ‘acts, gestures and desire’ (Butler, 2014, p. 185) that are ‘*fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means’ (Butler, 2014, p. 185). *Gender Trouble* ‘sought to establish that normative sexuality fortifies normative gender’ (Butler, 2014, p. vi), exemplifying the academic discourse that combines gender with sexuality. Similarly, Chris Brickell states that ‘categories such as “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” have no meaning without their gendered underpinnings, and we always bring our genders to sexual interactions’ (Brickell, 2006, p. 98).

Although in the years since *Gender Trouble* was first published, some scholars have ‘drawn an analytical distinction between gender and sexuality, refusing a causal or structural link between them’ (Butler, 2014, p. xiv), such conflation is still rife amongst theatre scholars. In his book about post-war British Theatre, Andrew Wyllie describes the ‘inextricability of the link between sexuality and gender’ (Wyllie, 2009, p. 8). Knapp dedicates a chapter to gender and sexuality in his book *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (2009), asserting that the American musical ‘has proven to be a fruitful venue for exploring the dynamic interplay of gender roles and sexuality’ (Knapp, 2009, p. 260). In their chapter ‘“I Am what I Am”: Sexuality and Queer Theory’ in *Studying Musical Theatre: Theory and Practice* (2014), Taylor and Symonds explore ‘sexuality: both hetero- and homosexuality and gender identities’ (Taylor and Symonds, 2014, p. 169), further emphasising the connection between gender and sexuality and erasing sexualities beyond monosexual identities. They attempt to define sexuality as ‘the extent to which – and the reasons behind why – we conform to or subvert conventional

expressions of identity in regard to our gender or sexual preference' (Taylor and Symonds, 2014, p. 169), which again supposes that sexuality cannot be separated from gender identity. The chapter is necessarily condensed, as the book is a textbook: it offers case studies that match Knapp's; *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983), *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973) and *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* (1998). It should be noted that the commingling of gender and sexuality is common across all fields, and not limited to theatre scholars. I aim to challenge the dominant narrative by not assessing gender, or gender identity, specifically, within this study, and only addressing the link when absolutely necessary, such as with the 'drag queen' trope below.

The problem with conflating gender and sexuality is that this often results in the conflation of homosexuality, female/feminine gender identity and the performance of gender. R.W. Connell suggests that 'gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity...gayness is easily assimilated to femininity' (Connell, 2012, p. 78). The 'drag queen' trope, then, is the embodiment of this conflation and reveals itself as a product of both a misogynist and a binary ideology, whereby 'masculinity is shaped in relation to an overall structure of power (the subordination of women to men), and in relation to a general symbolism of difference (the opposition of femininity and masculinity)' (Connell, 2012, p. 223).

This implication that gayness can only exist in combination with 'femininity', perpetuates tropes and refuses to acknowledge other forms of homosexual presentation; there is little discourse surrounding the butch gay male in the musical, excepting when comically acknowledging the drag of

‘Masculinity’ (Herman and Fierstein, 1983). Of course, the gay male refuting ‘feminine’ stereotypes and ‘the preoccupation with masculinity and negative feelings about effeminate gay men’ (Sánchez and Vilain, 2012, p. 116) may also be seen as a reflection of how the gay man feels about himself. Despite this it is curious that for a form supposedly dominated by gay men, masculinity is only ever considered through its apparent absence, and the presence instead of so-called femininity, rather than any exploration of gay male masculinity.

THE PERFORMANCE OF SEXUALITY

In *How to be Gay* David Halperin asserts that ‘straight men...do not consider their own impersonation of straight men to be a performance’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 196) whilst homosexual men ‘by contrast, are distinguished by their consciousness of acting like straight men whenever they perform normative masculinity’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 197). This suggests that gay men can only perform gayness either in opposition to normative masculinity (i.e. gay male femininity) or through the drag of heterosexuality, producing an either/or and minimalising the scope of gay identities. None of the four gay male characters in *Pieces of String* have any overt identifiers of their sexuality according to expected cultural tropes. I have never specified that the actors should be heterosexual, or be able to pass as such, and yet it could be argued that the lack of any clear identifiers of homosexuality result in all the characters performing heterosexuality. Whilst heterosexual men have very clear expectations of behaviour imposed upon them by the patriarchal society in which we live, it is the ‘do not consider’ that is important in Halperin’s

statement; precisely because of the patriarchal norm, heterosexual men may be unaware that they, too, are engaged in a performance of self. It is important to note that this is shifting, perhaps due to a more heightened awareness of what has come to be known as toxic masculinity. However, Halperin’s assessment is reductive for the gay reader as it suggests that so-called normative masculinity is solely the domain of the heterosexual and denies homosexual men access to this unless through conscious performativity. Halperin goes on to suggest that ‘masculinity, at least in some of its incarnations, is typically a turn on for gay men’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 197), suggesting that the study of heterosexual performance is not only self-protective but erotic. This leads me to question whether my desire to present ‘straight acting’ gay men in my work is borne of an anxiety to make them more palatable to a straight audience, or because of an unconscious desire. I discuss this further in Chapter Six when I analyse ‘Standing in the Shadows’ and the same-sex kiss that occurs at the song’s climax.

HETERONORMATIVE NARRATIVES IN THE MUSICAL: the ‘safe space’ and the domestic space

In order to be able to replicate and interrogate sexuality within *Pieces of String*, it is vital that this research project considers how sexuality is constructed and performed in the world, as well as how performance constructs and presents sexuality on the stage. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler theorises a ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Butler, 2014, p. 24) engendered by the hegemonic ‘cultural matrix’ (Butler, 2014, p. 24) in which to be non-heterosexual is to be Other,

deficient, to embody ‘developmental failings or logical impossibilities’ (Butler, 2014, p. 24).

Within musical theatre studies, Taylor and Symonds identify an enforced heterosexuality that came to prominence in America in the 1950s: advertising and media projected ‘an aspirational domestic arrangement reinforcing the already-powerful rhetoric of the ‘American Dream’’ (Taylor and Symonds, 2014, p. 171). This heteronormative ideal – the ‘nuclear’ family – also made its way into musical theatre of the time; any demonstrations of sexuality, be they heterosexual yet overtly sexualized, or illicit and homosexual, were considered a threat to the nuclear model. Taylor and Symonds’ chapter dedicates a section to the socialisation of heteronormativity, stating that the U.S. in the mid-twentieth century ‘took the lead in defining *normative* sexuality according to the organizational unit of *the family* and the behavioural codes of *heterosexuality*’ (Taylor and Symonds, 2014, p. 171). Taylor and Symonds remind us that ‘sexuality is not an exclusively gay domain’ (Taylor and Symonds, 2014, p. 170), citing the 1950s-set *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982) which contextualises an ‘alien “other” as a perceived threat within American society’ (Taylor and Symonds, 2014, p. 174) by conflating racialised and sexualised tropes. The authors use this musical to demonstrate that ‘the expression of sexuality is not simply an expression of our orientation’ (Taylor and Symonds, 2014, p. 174) but rather something that uses a variety of forces to convey that which is normative, and that which is queer. *Little Shop of Horrors* does not contain any homosexual characters yet reinforces the dominance of heterosexuality. In contrast, I will explore this concept of socialisation of heteronormativity and the domestic ‘nuclear’ space, through

musicals with explicitly gay characters: William Finn and James Lapine’s *Falsettos* and my own practice, *Pieces of String*. This allows me to examine how homosexual characters and narratives are defined by, and respond to, heteronormative socialisation.

The heterosexual norm is expanded upon by Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). Ahmed locates the family home as a heterosexual space and suggests that it is ‘so full of traces of heterosexual intimacy’ (Ahmed, 2006, p. 11) that it cannot help being felt as a site of pressure to the non-heterosexual. Ahmed notes that the ‘family home puts objects on display that measure sociality in terms of the heterosexual gift’ (Ahmed, 2006, p. 90), so that the heterosexual ideal is consistently presented as an achievable fantasy. Indeed, Ahmed identifies the domestic family space not merely as a background location but as a space ‘that can orientate us towards a future’ (Ahmed, 2006, p. 90) demonstrating that heterosexuality, within the family home, is not only an orientation towards others, but something that we are orientated around.

It follows that the domestic space can be considered a hegemonic heterosexual location that is unsafe for the homosexual. As Stephen Vider notes, ‘the white, middle-class, female-centered but male dominant, reproductive home has occupied a privileged position’ (Vider, 2013, p. 881) in representations of American life and culture, and this includes the musical. *Falsettos* stages the domestic space within the musical theatre space. The authors choose to queer and disrupt the heteronormative conventions by depicting a family breaking apart, and coming together again, into both hetero- and homosexual relationships to form new and queer family formations.

Similarly, in *Pieces of String* the drama is focused on the family home: by placing the characters within that domestic setting I am able to explore the familial challenges that arise, and consider how homosexual characters fit into such a traditionally heterosexual environment.

In *Pieces of String* the gay characters have to leave the domestic space for homosexuality to flourish. For Tom and Edward, only when they are at war and away from the familiar, can they engage in a relationship. Conversely, their two separations occur within family spaces: Tom’s house and Edward and Anna’s home. Ed and Harry receive something of a romantic reprieve at the end of the show, but, again, Ed has to leave the house for this to occur. The choice of location implies an inherent difficulty for me to accept the home as a safe space for the homosexual, and supports Ahmed’s positioning of the family arena as a site of intrinsic pressure for the non-heterosexual. Ahmed’s notion of the homosexual manoeuvring through and around heterosexual spaces offers an interesting contradiction; namely that musical theatre could be considered a safe space for homosexuals but simultaneously a heterosexual space. Wolf notes that the ‘heteronormative narrative is so deeply embedded in musical theatre’s historical trajectory’ (Wolf, 2010, p. 8) that it is rarely acknowledged as a convention and not a requirement. Wolf’s own substantial queering of ‘straight’ musicals (2002, 2010) asserts homosexual and homosocial female relationships on stage, and challenges the heteronormative conventions of the musical by analysing female disruptions within the form, such as the queer conventions Wolf reveals in *Wicked* and the female pedagogical duet in *West Side Story* (1957).

A number of scholars (Clum, 1999; Miller, 1998; Barnes, 2015) have identified the musical theatre as a safe space for homosexuals, in large part because of the proliferation of gay men that work in the field (see Chapter One). Lovelock argues, however, that the ‘age-old trope of musical theatre as a safe “queer space”’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 191) has ‘rarely extended explicitly into the fictional worlds on stage’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 191), resulting in a tension between the product and those that make the work. Indeed, it is this very tension that has allowed homophobia and heteronormativity to appear simultaneously and to masquerade as homophilia. Lovelock suggests that the link between LGBTQ+ identities and musical theatre, particularly homosexual men, ‘has been utilized as an excuse to maintain an impoverished queer heritage’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 192) despite the form being able to perform and externalise what it means to be queer. In *Pieces of String* I actively sought to avoid any externalisation of gay or queer idiosyncrasies. Here, then, I detail the prevalent tropes that gay characters in musicals adhere to whilst in Chapter Four I consider these tropes in connection to my practice. I discuss how I found the tropes to be so dominant within the form that I felt unable to assert new external demonstrations of gayness, and chose instead to enact dissent by removing the expected tropes altogether.

TROPES: The persistent patterns of gay characters in musicals

Lovelock’s thesis, and his later chapter included in *Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture and Identity* (2019), offer some useful terms upon which to begin my study. He identifies three clear tropes into which gay representation in musical theatre fall. Lovelock states that until recently ‘the majority of queer

characters portrayed in musical theatre were gay men, who largely adhere to three narrative tropes that might be labelled as the ‘drag queen’, the ‘drama queen’ and the ‘dancing queen’ (Lovelock, 2019, p.188). I intend to use these definitions as a starting point for my research. As Lovelock acknowledges in his chapter, ‘the early 21st century has seen an increase in explicit representation of queer characters’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 188) however it is still possible to locate most homosexual characters within the confines of these tropes. Lovelock’s terminology is extremely helpful to this study so I use these terms as tools for analysis but expand them where necessary. For example, there is often a crossover within the tropes, which sees gay male characters being located within more than one of these categories; in *Rent* (1994) the character of Angel can clearly be located within the drag queen and the drama queen category. Thus, a new all-encompassing category needs to exist, and I propose using *fabulous* for this purpose. I will dedicate proper consideration to this term, and will argue for its use, later in this chapter.

THE DRAG QUEEN

As previously discussed, gender and sexuality are rarely considered as discrete. Nowhere is this more evident than when investigating the trope of the drag queen. Specifically, this trope trades on patriarchal culture’s ‘simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity’ (Connell, 2012, p. 143) and the suggestion that ‘from the point of view of a hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily assimilated to femininity’ (Connell, 2012, p. 78). The drag queen can be found in a great number of musicals (*La Cage Aux Folles*, *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert*, *Kinky Boots*, *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie*)

and is typically a physical embodiment of the gay male performing femininity through the adoption of a female performance persona. There are exceptions of course, where female characters are played by male actors, almost exclusively for comedic purposes: Edna Turnblad in *Hairspray* (2002) and Miss Trunchbull in *Matilda* (2011). For the purpose of my research, I will be discussing those for whom drag has a narrative purpose: male homosexual characters. In *Rent*, *Billy Elliot: The Musical* (2005) and *The Producers* (2000), drag is presented as an expected adjunct to the character’s sexuality ‘perhaps betraying the heterosexual standpoint of the writers’ (Lovelock, 2016, p. 15), although in *Billy Elliot* Michael’s sexuality is not made explicit. More recently, *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie* introduced us to Jamie New, an openly gay teenager who wishes to attend his school prom in drag – and who can be seen as an example of a contemporary use of the drag queen trope.

Jamie is based on the true story of Jamie Campbell, subject of the BBC3 documentary *Jamie: Drag Queen at 16* (2011). Composer Dan Gillespie Sells questioned the lack of effeminate male representation on stage, and why these characters are rarely the heroes: ‘where’s that story of the effeminate male? That story NEVER gets told on stage’ (Gillespie Sells, in Connelly, 2017). In *Jamie* the character journey is centred on the performance of a feminine identity: ‘I want to be a boy. Who sometimes wants to be a girl’ (MacRae, Gillespie Sells and Butterell, 2018, p. 30) showing, once again, that ‘musical theatre continues to turn to the embodiment of femininity in drag performance’ (Lovelock, 2016, p. 13) as a means to explore gay characters. Gillespie Sells and writer Tom MacRae’s depiction of drag through a protagonist who is completely comfortable with his homosexuality can be

considered a resistance to the norms of the form: Lovelock states that *Jamie* ‘is able to negotiate 21st century drag identities through drawing on the real-life experiences of Jamie Campbell’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 206) with the use of biography enabling the writers to explore ‘changing generational attitudes towards gender and sexuality’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 206). Indeed, *Jamie* is undeniably a contemporary take, but it is still ultimately using the currency of the drag queen trope. I attempt an alternative strategy of resistance, which also uses lived experience but doesn’t in any way rely upon the drag queen trope. Indeed, the absence of this trope in *Pieces of String* is notable.

THE DRAMA QUEEN OR THE TRAGIC-GAY

The ‘drama queen’ epithet brings certain cultural connotations, being used in the vernacular to dismiss suffering as insincere or exaggerated. I suggest that tragic-gay is a more suitable term, acknowledging the trauma present in these narratives without offering a tacit judgement of them. Tragic-gay can also be more readily applied phenomenologically to the writer and the spectator, rather than just referring to the characters on stage. This symbiosis of creator, character and audience is of particular import to my research, originating, as it does, from lived experience and reflecting my own tragic-gay impulses.

The drama queen stereotype in musical theatre first appeared in the 1970s. Paul in *A Chorus Line* (1975) is often considered to be the ‘first significant sympathetic portrayal’ (Barnes, 2015, p. 122) of a gay character to appear in a musical. However, Paul is also a classic example of the tragedy imposed upon gay characters in musicals: he talks of being rejected by his parents when they discover his sexuality and ultimately injures himself, ruining

his audition and, possibly, his career. From the late 1980s onwards the subject of AIDS understandably appeared often in musical theatre, as it so disproportionately affected the Broadway and musical theatre communities. *Elegies for Angels, Punks and Ageing Queens* (1989), *Falsettos* (1992), *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* (1992), *Taboo* (2002), *Elegies: A Song Cycle* (2003) all dealt with the subject.

The drama queen trope can also be seen in *Bare: A Pop Opera* (2000), *Rent*, and *Closer to Heaven*, which I use in the next chapter to explore queer fatalism. In both *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* and *Rent* ‘the gay character is sacrificed for the benefit of the straight protagonist’ (Lovelock, 2016, p. 16), indicating heterosexual bias. In the former, both the source material and the musical were written by homosexual men – the novel by Manuel Puig, the musical by John Kander, Fred Ebb and Terrence McNally – and the adaptation stayed true to the original story. *Rent* was written by Jonathan Larson, a straight man, who diverted from the Puccini source material by sacrificing homosexual drag queen Angel in order to save heterosexual Mimi. The fate of the gay characters in these musicals implies that homosexuality must be punished: both musicals privilege heterosexual lives over homosexual ones. Knapp notes ‘how persistent the “homosexuality-must-be-punished” trope proved to be in the mid-1970s’ (Knapp, 2009, p. 264) yet the examples cited above demonstrate that the drama queen trope persists. In *Pieces of String* the homosexual characters are afforded parity with the heterosexual ones, and do not die ‘as a consequence of being who they are’ (Ahmed, 2017) as is often the fate of LGBTQ+ characters. Although the show centres around Edward’s funeral, his death acts as a catalyst for the narrative and is not shown to be a

product of his sexuality: Edward’s death, of old age, is a normal one rather than tragic and unexpected. Furthermore, his death occurs outside of the confines of the plot and the audience is not subjected to a portrayal of yet another homosexual fatality.

THE DANCING QUEEN

Lovelock states that the dancing queen is a ‘threefold conflation between camp, homosexuality and musical theatre’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 190), a neat summation of the various parts that combine to create this character type. Lovelock states that the dancing queen trope prevents gay characters from having any real impact upon the narrative ‘by reducing them to a single musical number’ (Lovelock, 2016, p. 17) which often presents them as exuberant and frivolous. Lovelock identifies Rod in *Avenue Q* as a rare example of a gay character that is actually allowed a believable journey. Despite this, the use of puppets and the comic tone of *Avenue Q* might work to minimise the verisimilitude of the representation. Even given the fact he is a puppet, the clandestine love Rod has for Nicky was deemed successful enough to prevent Lin Manuel Miranda from pursuing a similar narrative in *In The Heights*, as mentioned above.

The dancing queen trope allows authors to use the production number to trade on the currency of bigotry, ostensibly mocking myopic opinions. This appears in a number of forms but most often is seen in huge production numbers; toying with the absurdity of homosexuals attempting to simply stop being gay, as in ‘Turn it Off’ (*The Book of Mormon*) or as a supposed celebration of the artistic power of homosexuality, as in ‘Keep it Gay’ (*The*

Producers). It is worth noting that both of these numbers were written, at least in part, by heterosexual men, which is perhaps evidence that the ‘homophobic humour amongst straight men still revolves around the limp wrist, the mincing walk and innuendo about castration’ (Connell, 2012, p. 219). Indeed, a defining feature of the dancing queen trope is the employment of homophobic epithets and Laurence O’Keefe, heterosexual composer/lyricist of *Legally Blonde* (2007) and *Heathers* (2014), makes repeated use of these. Rather than locating the dancing queen as a singular character, as is common, O’Keefe uses the trope as a theatrical moment, with the vocal lines and commentary distributed between a number of characters. The focus is typically still centralised around a gay character however it has developed to be ‘dancing queen’ as a modality rather than as a singular person. In both *Legally Blonde* and *Heathers*, O’Keefe, along with his collaborators, chooses the outing of a gay character as a setting for a production number.

In *Legally Blonde*, ‘There! Right There!’ (O’Keefe and Benjamin, 2009, p. 112) offers a ‘comic’ assessment of Nikos, the pool boy. Protagonist Elle believes that Nikos is homosexual but is rebuked by her heterosexual boss, Callahan, who claims Nikos is simply European. This song trades on assumptions of homosexuality and on a xenophobic attitude, and paints both gay and European men as effeminate, and Other. When the ensemble ask ‘is it relevant to assume/that a man who wears perfume/is automatically, radically fey?’ (O’Keefe and Benjamin, 2009, p. 113) they are mocking alternative versions of masculinity. Indeed the entire concept of the song, evidenced in its title, is focused upon the outing of a character and of homosexuals having visibly identifiable traits: the other characters are literally pointing these out –

‘There! Right there!’ There is a female gay character involved in this song but Enid is nothing more than a butch lesbian stereotype – and her inclusion in the ensemble of this number makes gay people implicit in this outing too.

O’Keefe continues his adapted form of the dancing queen trope in *Heathers*. After high school jocks Ram and Kurt are murdered and falsely labelled as gay, their fathers sing ‘My Dead Gay Son’:

‘WELL, I NEVER CARED
FOR HOMOS MUCH,
UNTIL I REARED ME ONE.
BUT NOW I’VE LEARNED TO LOVE...
I LOVE MY DEAD GAY SON!

(Murphy and O’Keefe, 2018, p. 93–94)

In this number the fathers are exposed for having a secret gay relationship themselves, therefore this number *is* performed, in part, by homosexual characters. Once again, O’Keefe, along with co-lyricist Kevin Murphy, crowds his lyrics with gay clichés: ‘Friendly fellows dressed up like their fav’rite [sic] village person!’, ‘They’re up there disco dancing’, ‘They grab a mate and roller skate while Judy Garland sings!’ (Murphy and O’Keefe, 2018, p. 94–96). Murphy describes this moment in the source movie as ‘a very funny comic moment indelibly linked to the very ugly reality of homophobia’ (Murphy, in Murphy and O’Keefe, 2018). Yet despite his awareness of the homophobic tone here, Murphy admits that he was not concerned with it. Rather, he states that ‘this was a case of me falling on [sic] love with a song title, pure and simple’ (Murphy, in Murphy and O’Keefe, 2018) which indicates a lack of consideration for the trope it perpetuates whilst also privileging heterosexual lives. Murphy goes further to suggest that by including the secret love affair between the two fathers, an invention for the musical, the song had become imbued with ‘high-

stakes emotion well worth singing about’ (Murphy, in Murphy and O’Keefe, 2018). As Lovelock identifies, ‘contemporary musicals are based on much older source material that does not present LGBTQ+ characters in an inclusive manner’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 204) and this is evident in *Heathers*. There is an implication that allowing the fathers to proclaim their love publicly somehow negates the homophobia in the number, when in fact the core homophobic sentiment from the source material remains. In *Pieces of String* I do not have previous material to consider, however I do also depict the public outing of one of my characters. In Chapter Four I address how I choose to show this, and how I deliberately eschewed using the dancing queen trope.

FABULOUS

I want to expand upon Lovelock’s work by proposing the term ‘fabulous’, which, along with tragic-gay, has not been previously proposed by Lovelock and is thus specific to this research. ‘Fabulous’ is often used as a descriptive term for a certain type of gay man, or a homosexual way of being. Tony Kushner argues it is possible to define ‘fabulous’ as a manifestation of ‘a particular, usually oppressed, subculture’s most distinctive, invigorating features’ (Kushner, 1995, p. vii), therefore it might be considered as a combination, or extension, of the above tropes – drama queen, dancing queen and drag queen.

Kushner describes ‘fabulous’ as the ‘gay equivalent of the indefinable, ineffable thing young African Americans used to identify as *soul*’ (Kushner, 1995, p. vii), as something that is innate. Kushner’s claim is problematic because it fails to recognise that fabulous ‘emerges from black gay culture,

and particularly from the social world of voguing’ (Moore, 2018, p. 24) and thus denies the derivation of the term. However, Kushner’s version aligns itself with musical theatre, which similarly offers a less political and more sanitised version of ‘fabulous’ than its black gay culture original. This research acknowledges the origins of the term and is also cognisant of the – often quite literal – whitewashing that occurs when translating ‘fabulous’ into musical theatre. Similarly, musical theatre’s use of ‘fabulous’ often denies the intersectionality of the term, by presenting predominantly white gay men appropriating vogue culture through drag performance. Kushner also asserts that ‘when you attempt to delineate it, you move away from it’ (Kushner, 1995, p. vii), which exemplifies the difficulty in trying to specifically locate fabulousness. Despite this, Kushner lists the ‘salient features of Fabulousness’ (Kushner, 1995, p. vii) as, among others, tragic history, defiance, drama, glitter. Moore supports this reading, noting that ‘you can’t understand fabulousness unless you get that it emerges from trauma, duress, exclusion, exhaustion, and depression’ (Moore, 2018, p. 21), which perhaps explains how what is ostensibly a positive presentation of defiance can be considered part of the drama queen trope.

In his 2013 article ‘Oh Hell, May, Why Don’t You People Have a Cookbook?': Camp Humor and Gay Domesticity’, Vider notes that Susan Sontag’s idea of camp can be described as a way of ‘*seeing* the world – of exposing, and treasuring, artifice and excess in popular culture’ (Vider, 2013, p. 878), and that fabulousness is therefore perhaps best considered as ‘a way of *being* in the world, a strategy of everyday performance’ (Vider, 2013, p. 878). Therefore fabulousness, even more so than camp, is performance; the

proponent of fabulous is rarely unaware of their fabulousness. Indeed, fabulous is a ‘philosophy of creativity that has many things in common with the gay sensibility of camp’ (Moore, 2018, p. 19) but fabulous is inherently political. Moore states that ‘this sense of confrontation separates it from camp’ (Moore, 2018, p. 19). When fabulous is presented on stage in a musical, typically by heterosexual writers, it necessarily loses some, if not all, of its political agenda: the performative elements of fabulousness, the ebullience and the flamboyance, become the most important aspects and are offered up as entertainment. Moore asserts that ‘fabulousness, at its heart, is an expression of visibility for people who are made invisible’ (2003) and whilst musical theatre enables fabulousness to be seen, it also compromises and commercialises it.

In *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (2003) Savran argues that musical theatre ‘epitomizes many of the struggles that have long haunted the American stage, in particular, the opposition between crass commercialism and “distinguished” art’ (Savran, 2003, p. 27). Savran is speaking specifically about American theatre but his identification of musicals as a ‘middlebrow’ art form is pertinent in Britain too, and helps explain some of the difficulties the form faces. Whilst vogue culture may not be considered ‘distinguished’ art, it lays outside of the centre ground in which the musical is located and therefore also clashes with the ‘crass commercialism’ Savran is discussing. To combat this opposition, one must be consumed by the other and commercialism wins out: characters such as Leigh Bowery in *Taboo* and the drag queens in *Priscilla* dress ‘fabulous’ in musical theatre clothing. The former, in particular, is a clear example of how the musical theatre form appropriates and softens the political. In real life, Leigh Bowery

was an avant-garde artist, in *Taboo* he is neatly positioned as a fabulous supporting character, without political edge. Fabulous is attitudinal as well as sartorial as I discovered during the writing process of *Pieces of String*. Despite actively removing the dancing queen and drag queen tropes from the show, I initially wrote Harry as fabulous. In Chapter Four I investigate my tacit bias towards fabulous, as evidenced in Harry, how I challenged it by removing any signs of fabulous from him, and explore what my reticence towards this trope might reveal.

LIVED EXPERIENCE/AUTOBIOGRAPHY: personal perspectives in practice

In this chapter I have observed that some key texts that focus on the gay male and musical theatre are written from a personal perspective (Miller, Clum). When we look at the practice we see that this pattern is repeated. William Finn, in particular, has used his lived experience as inspiration in his work: *Falsettos*, *A New Brain* (1998) and *Elegies: A Song Cycle* all directly address themes, and sometimes dramatise people, from Finn’s own autobiography. *Falsettos*, itself a composite of three earlier shorter works, was the first Broadway musical to include AIDS affecting a central character. The musicals listed above present a ‘close relationship between the characters in the musicals and the lived experiences of the gay and bisexual creatives involved in the writing process’ (Lovelock, 2016, p. 16), offering an additional poignancy to the work. These musicals have particular relevance to this research, focusing as they do on the lived experience. Of the three, *Falsettos* shares a domestic setting and the investigation of homosexual characters’ interior lives alongside

familial structures with *Pieces of String*, and therefore bears the closest scrutiny. This will be examined in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter began by assessing how sexuality is constructed and performed on stage, then applying this specifically to musical theatre, thereby locating homosexual representation both critically and practically. I explored the musical as a heterosexual space and contrasted this with the cultural association that links gay men with the form. I employed Ahmed's description of the domestic space as unsafe for the homosexual and considered how heterosexual narratives might contribute to perpetuating this notion. I have drawn heavily on the work of Lovelock, in particular his definition of the tropes of gay male representation in musicals: the drag queen, the drama queen and the dancing queen. In addition to Lovelock's terminology I have suggested the use of tragic-gay in place of drama queen, and that fabulous might be a more comprehensive word to use as a companion and development of the drag queen and the dancing queen. This chapter has also explored how musical theatre scholarship has addressed homosexuality and the musical, arguing that musical theatre scholars tend to approach their work from a personal viewpoint, filtered through their lived experience. This research privileges the lived experience of the author which echoes an above-identified predilection within musical theatre scholarship. However, it simultaneously identifies a limitation of the research.

In the next chapter I continue to investigate the connection between gay men and musicals, looking expressly towards how the gay male spectator has

used and responded to coding in musicals. I then consider various frameworks from other fields, Daphne Brooks' *Occupation* (2014), D.A. Miller's *Showtune as Denial* (1998), and Sara Ahmed's *Queer Fatalism* (2017), and apply these to specific musicals as case studies in order to establish how they might be utilised within my own practice.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This thesis is concerned with the representation of gay men in musicals. It considers how I, as a practitioner, might challenge the existing accepted depictions of gay men when creating an original piece of musical theatre. In order to explore representation through the practice, a comprehensive understanding of the academic context is needed. In the previous chapter I explored how homosexuality has been discussed in musical theatre studies, and as a specific strand of queer studies. In this chapter, I focus more specifically on some key elements of gay representation, and on the discourse around such representation, such as homophobia, coded semiotics and gay sensibility. I then examine the main theoretical frameworks upon which this research locates itself, drawing on the work of Halperin, Brooks, Ahmed and Miller.

CODED SEMIOTICS: The ‘resistant reader’

The coded semiotics in musical theatre have been a popular subject for discourse amongst academics (Steyn, 1997; Miller, 1998; Clum, 1999; Halperin, 2012 and Barnes, 2015). Originally applicable to all sexual orientations, it is Steyn who identifies the separation point between hetero- and homo- coding in popular culture as the advent of rock and roll in the 1960s. He asserts that the (hetero)sexually overt lyrics from bands such as The Rolling Stones meant that ‘heterosexuals no longer needed the coded sexuality of Broadway songs’ (Steyn, 1997, p. 199), whilst ‘for homosexuals, the sly, coded sexuality became even more appealing’ (Steyn, 1997, p. 199). As Clum notes, ‘gay men have always been experts at reading our own texts

into musicals’ (Clum, 1999, p. 211) and it is precisely this identification with coded characters that appeals to the closeted gay audience member.

When discussing the gay male audience, Barnes draws upon Judith Fetterley’s work. Fetterley’s feminist approach to U.S. fiction asserts that re-reading through one’s own specific political lens is necessary as ‘more than an academic matter, more than an act of literary criticism, more than a possible text for courses on women in American literature, more even than the source of dialogue; it is act of survival’ (Fetterley, 1989, p. viii). This act creates a *resisting reader*. Barnes applies this to musical theatre and notes that ‘the world [gay men] are viewing onstage is heterosexual, but they resist this reading and transform it into a homosexual one’ (Barnes, 2015, p. 110), suggesting that all gay spectators are resisting readers; later in this chapter I discuss a socio-political occupation of the musical, and I consider in more detail how the resisting reader might contribute to the work onstage. Often, the gay male viewer ‘equated the suffering of women in musicals with their own personal trials’ (Barnes, 2015, p. 110) and positioned themselves at the centre of this heterosexual narrative, at the disposal of the handsome, straight leading man. Miller offers an interesting analysis of this phenomenon, focused on the character of Louise in *Gypsy*. Miller considers her a cipher for the ‘sissified figure of the boy-who-would-be-queen’ (Miller, 1998, p. 75) in the audience, but a cipher that is allowed to transform into the successful, attractive (to men) star, unlike the gay man watching. Notwithstanding Miller’s use of the derogatory and outdated term ‘sissy’, which betrays his generational standpoint, this raises pertinent questions regarding representation on stage: how might a writer implement characters and narrative in such a way that

seeking identification with a heterosexual life is not necessary? By including gay characters *Pieces of String* negates the need for coding. Indeed, through *Pieces of String* I am trying to remove the possibility for a resistant reading, by removing the thing that needs resisting: heterosexual romance. This is enacted by removing the need for a quotidian, local rebellion against the text/spectacle and paving the way for a more mainstream, more traditional emotional identification between gay audience and character. Unlike the privileging of heterosexual lives described in the writing practices in Chapter One, here the *homosexual* experience is privileged, producing the potential immediate identification through these characters.

GAY SENSIBILITY

Despite Sontag considering, in her seminal essay on camp, that ‘a sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about’ (Sontag, 1964, p. 515) the notion of whether we can locate a specific gay sensibility within Anglo/American culture has been much discussed within academic literature. Since the Stonewall riots – considered the birth of the modern gay rights movement – the ‘standard post-Stonewall view’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 308) has been towards essentialism: ‘the current vogue for locating sexuality...in genetics, the workings of the brain, neural pathways and cognitive development’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 309). In other words, sexuality is not something that is chosen but something that is innate within you. In *How to be Gay*, Halperin strongly rejects essentialism. He argues that implying that there is ‘some defining feature or property of gayness that all gay men share’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 133) is an unsound notion. Halperin goes further to argue

that essentialism ‘is to confuse a *culture*, and the practices that constitute it’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 133) with the multitudes of individuals who comprise said culture. Indeed, Halperin goes on to suggest that ‘being homosexual is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 135) to participate in gay culture. In other words, there should be no reason that a homosexual man (or woman) should be drawn to specific performers or have proclivities for particular things because of their sexual desires. This line of enquiry leads Halperin to assert that ‘homosexuality is not just a sexual orientation but a cultural orientation’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 12), clarifying what he views as a clear separation between a gay cultural identity and gay sexual practice. Echoing Butler, Halperin asserts that gay ‘refers not just to something you *are*, but also to something you *do*’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 13), somewhat contentiously suggesting that one need not be homosexual to operate within a gay sensibility or gay cultural identity. Halperin states that if homosexuality is exactly that, a sexuality, then ‘gay’ refers to everything else.

For many, not least Miller and Clum, the musical should be considered a part of gay culture. Halperin states that ‘the Broadway musical, as a queer art form, is therefore *more gay* than any gay man, than anyone with a gay identity, could ever be’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 107), raising questions about whether direct homosexual representation is in opposition to the inherent gayness of the form. Lovelock, however, considers Halperin’s definition of gay culture to be ‘curiously old-fashioned’ (Lovelock, 2016, p. 68), particularly as it draws so heavily upon the earlier work of Miller. Indeed, Lovelock notes that ‘Halperin’s refusal to acknowledge that young gay men on his undergraduate course might retain any connection to the musical’ (Lovelock, 2016, p. 69) is

an oversight that fails to appreciate the personal position that Miller is taking in his work. Halperin states that ‘making the Broadway musical more explicitly gay-themed – for example, by including characters who are gay men or even creating an entire musical about gay life...does not succeed in making the musical itself more satisfactory as a vehicle of gay desire’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 106). If, as Halperin suggests, the musical theatre is a gay form, then we must ask what it means that that very form and its development have been reliant upon coded semiotics that are themselves a product of a heterosexual environment. If ‘heterosexuality functions as a background, as that which is behind actions that are repeated over time and with force’ (Ahmed, 2006, p. 87), then we can consider the musical phenomenologically as an object that is the product of repeated heterosexual acts. I would argue that including gay characters and narratives removes the need for coding and thus reveals the musical in its true form: as a heterosexual cultural object.

If we look to the vogue culture forged in the dancehalls of New York in the late 1980s we find a scene that is *of* the culture, *by* the culture. As an underground movement, the ballroom scene was an intersectional society that existed for, and by, itself; it did not emerge from straight culture, as musical theatre did. Vogue and ballroom culture was subsequently, and most notably, appropriated by mainstream culture by Madonna in her 1990 song and video ‘Vogue’. Musical theatre however has evolved out of a heterosexual mainstream and to accept the representation of homosexuality within is to concede that musical theatre has treated gayness well, a position this thesis rejects. If I accept this view, my representation of gay males will always fail because it is not sanctioned by heterosexuals. In other words, if I believe the

depiction of gay men in musicals is fair then I am accepting an overemphasis on the foundations of musical theatre being homosexual. This thesis attempts to redress that imbalance not by diminishing the influence of gay creatives, but acknowledging that cultural assumptions have skewed reality from the heterosexual actuality. My practice emerges from the heterosexual norm and, as such, it will always fail unless it is sanctioned by heterosexuals. This is one of the challenges faced when working within the confines of a heteronormative form.

Barnes somewhat bolsters Halperin’s argument by offering that ‘homosexual men adopted musical theatre as part of a gay sensibility’ (Barnes, 2015, p. 111) and suggests that this is learned behaviour, encouraged by the safe space the theatre provides. Barnes seems to believe that musicals have evolved to include homosexuals in a positive way (*Kinky Boots*), erroneously suggesting that ‘in 2015, homosexual characters in musicals are well and truly out and proud, written and directed by gay men who never saw the inside of the closet’ (Barnes, 2015, p. 123). Not only does this indicate a lack of understanding that a gay sensibility might itself be a product of the closet but that in a heterosexist society it is impossible to avoid the closet entirely. Barnes suggests that changes in the gay sensibility are generationally led, and that the younger generation aren’t interested in the divas of old. However, when discussing *Priscilla*, she states that the younger gays are ‘so busy singing along to “Someone Left The Cake Out In The Rain” that they do not question if the image of gay men onstage is a truly respectful one’ (Barnes, 2015, p.

127)⁴. This position is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, *Priscilla* is a jukebox musical almost entirely comprised of hits from the aforementioned old divas so the very presence of young gay men in the audience implies an interest, however unconscious, in those performers and songs. Secondly, Barnes has not conducted any audience research so her observations are assumptive. Finally, Barnes does not seek to know why the gay men present might not question the portrayals on stage; is it because they can’t tell what is respectful, having been so inundated with negative images that this feels positive, or at least, performs positivity?

As previously discussed, Barnes is frequently dismissive of homosexual men in her chapter. She claims that Paul in *A Chorus Line* was only allowed to exist ‘because the show centred around Broadway dancers whom we all suspected were gay anyway’ (Barnes, 2015, p. 122), indicating her own homophobic assumptions. Indeed, Barnes’ statement that gay men began attending musicals in part for ‘the added attraction of an assemblage of like-minded men in the dress circle bar’ (Barnes, 2015, p. 111) is reductive, reiterating the image of gay men as promiscuous and reinforcing the link between sexuality and sexual practice. I was wary of colluding with this assumption in *Pieces of String* and worked to ensure that the gay male characters, Tom in particular, were not depicted as sexual predators within the show (see Chapter Six). Barnes’ homophobic assessment seems to suggest that the gay sensibility within musical theatre is entirely constructed either out of a gay man’s desire to substitute themselves for the women onstage, or

⁴ Barnes also mistitles the song ‘Macarthur Park’ here, incorrectly referring to it as ‘Someone Left The Cake Out In The Rain’.

because the communal areas of a theatre are places in which to obtain friends and lovers.

Barnes’ prejudiced tone follows Mark Steyn’s in *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight* (1997), whose provocative chapter title ‘The Fags’ is an indication of the combative tone he takes throughout. Steyn, a heterosexual man, suggests that homosexuality is an inappropriate subject for ‘a form mocked as insipid, bland, family entertainment’ (Steyn, 1997, p. 198). The cumulative effect of this statement is two-fold: it implies a fundamental disdain against the form itself as well as propagates the myth that homosexuality is an immoral or unnatural practice. Steyn was writing two decades ago therefore one might expect the discourse to have shifted since publication. However, Barnes’ text is much more recent and thus all the more alarming for its homophobic assertions. Because there is still a relative lack of literature on the specific subject of homosexuality and musical theatre, these texts are afforded prominence and therefore their assertions continue to contribute to the cultural assumptions linking the two.

SHOWTUNE AS DENIAL

Some scholars have considered the work of male writers, particularly when expressing the Self, to indicate an unintentional eradication of identity. This is something I am actively working against in my practice. Miller’s continued focus on the homosexual in denial, throughout his ‘essay on the Broadway Musical’ (1998), is evidence of this aforementioned identity eradication. It must be noted that Miller was writing twenty years ago and a musical such as *Jamie* would likely have been impossible – or relegated to remain resolutely in fringe-

based and alternative venues – in 1998, rather than occupying the mainstream as it does today. Miller locates the show tune as the ultimate act of denial. He argues that ‘in the act of dismissing the world, the subject has so thoroughly accepted his own dismissal’ (Miller, 1998, p. 8) from the world. In other words, Miller is claiming that the character is themselves a vehicle of self-suppression, precisely by the fact of their refusal to be suppressed. In discussing ‘Everything’s Coming Up Roses’ (Sondheim, 1959), Miller’s reading refuses to accept the apparent meaning of the lyric but rather suggests that ‘by letting us see that [s/]he is trying to hide his[/her] sufferings’ (Miller, 1998, p. 8) the character singing becomes additionally pathetic. In Jerry Herman’s lyric from *La Cage Aux Folles*, Albin proudly declaims that he does not care what the audience thinks of him; ‘So what if I love each feather and each spangle?’ (Herman and Fierstein, 1983, p. 34–35). Miller intimates that this is a misconception and that this ‘boisterous denial of suffering’ (Miller, 1998, p. 9) only serves to indicate to the audience how much the character actually does desire approval.

Miller’s interpretation of the showtune is pertinent in some instances, for example in the aforementioned ‘Everything’s Coming Up Roses’, Sondheim’s deceptively simple lyric for Rose at the end of Act One in *Gypsy*. Ostensibly a prototypical showtune, triumphantly asserting hope over adversity, it is the context that introduces an alternative reading of the sentiment. The spectator wants to believe Rose, and the sheer force of the music, and her performance, wills us to do so, especially in Ethel Merman’s forceful rendition. However, ‘in the context of the show, it’s a woman driving off the map’ (Steyn, 1997, p. 101). Jule Styne, the composer of *Gypsy*,

complained that ‘too many writers write self-pity. Audiences hate that in characters’ (Styne, in Steyn, 1997, p. 101), and noted that he and Sondheim chose not to write Rose a song that demonstrated her devastation. Miller’s evaluation of ‘I Am What I Am’ imposes the same self-denial upon Albin as on Rose, which is unsatisfactory as it does not factor in the distinct differences in context and personality between these characters. In Miller’s reading, Albin and Rose and their signature musical numbers are positioned as the same, ignoring the differences between their objectives: Rose is fixated on theatrical success for her children whilst Albin is claiming his identity following an enforced eradication of this by his son. Steve Swayne notes that Miller devotes almost half of *Place For Us* (1998) to *Gypsy*, expounding ‘on not only why he loves *Gypsy* but why this particular musical encapsulates the dashed and fulfilled hopes of every gay man who has ever lived’ (Swayne, 2002, p. 107) so it is evident this show had a powerful effect on Miller. It is possible therefore that he is viewing all subsequent showtunes through Rose tinted glasses. In Miller’s interpretation, there is a tension between Styne’s self-pitying writer and the apparent artistic intention of the showtune. Styne’s opinion appears to align with Miller’s, but, post-*Gypsy* at least, the polysemic showtune has been a staple of the medium. One only has to look at the insincerity lying beneath Eva Peron’s seemingly heartfelt address to a nation in ‘Don’t Cry For Me, Argentina’ (*Evita*, 1977), ‘a speech by a megalomaniac woman attempting to bamboozle half a million people’ (Rice, 2000, p. 366), or much of Sondheim’s subsequent output to see this multifaceted song type in evidence. In Chapter Six I examine ‘Standing in the Shadows’ through this lens, exploring the duality

of meaning delivered through both presentation and lyrical and textual content and offering this musical number as a riposte to Miller’s assertion.

OCCUPYING THE MUSICAL

In *Open Channels: Some Thoughts on Blackness, the Body, and Sound(ing) Women in the (Summer) Time of Trayvon* (2014), Daphne A. Brooks wonders what it means to ‘play with and inside of [a song’s] compositional and lyrical form with so much volatility that one jolts the listener, the spectator into a thrilling, moving, disruptive relationship with past, present and future, with old songs and new?’ (Brooks, 2014, pg.66-67). In her work investigating how the black female voice resists within performance, Brooks asks what it is to ‘occupy’ a song. In this study I utilise Brooks’ concept of occupation and apply it to the gay male through my practice as a musical theatre composer and lyricist. In doing so, I acknowledge the privilege at work here: as a white male writer borrowing from race theory and applying this theory to sexuality I am conscious that this act of appropriating Brooks’ term for use in this thesis might be considered emblematic of white culture adopting ideas from black culture. Indeed, this follows on from my discussion of fabulous and the mainstream appropriation of ballroom culture in the previous chapter. However, the discourse that Brook’s work encourages provides an excellent framework through which to consider this research and therefore I gratefully borrow it here.

In her article, Brooks explores Lauryn Hill’s ‘Black Rage’, a contemporary take on Rodgers and Hammerstein’s cheerful song ‘My Favourite Things’ from *The Sound of Music* (1959). Hill reimagines the original

as a song about institutional racism and, in doing so, transforms it into a ‘battle cry manifesto for the souls of new millennial black folk’ (Brooks, 2014, pg.67), alerting the audience to a layering of new meaning. The combination of the new lyrics – that reference slavery through to modern day police brutality against black citizens in the US – alongside a liberal approach to the melody allows Hill to ‘invade’ the song. The audience, bring their knowledge of the original song and its ‘images of Julie Andrews (and, before her, Mary Martin) invoking melody as a way to generate fortitude (to calm the von Trapp children’s nerves in the face of a thunderstorm)’ (Brooks and for José Muñoz, 2014, p. 67) and are therefore complicit in this ‘occupation’.

In a similar mode, an occupation can extend to a performer’s inhabitation of a particular role. *Kinky Boots* tells the story of a Northampton shoemaker who, in an effort to save his ailing business, enlists the help of drag queen Lola to design and manufacture the eponymous footwear. The show’s book writer, Harvey Fierstein, chose to make the character of Lola/Simon a ‘heterosexual transvestite’ (Fierstein, in Musto, 2013). According to Fierstein, ‘Lola is so damaged that she doesn’t have sexuality. She has sensuality and genius, but no self-worth’ (Fierstein, in Musto, 2013). Fierstein’s position deliberately attempts to reposition the notional homosexual character – the drag queen - as a heterosexual. This occupation – the inhabitation of an ostensibly homosexual character by a heterosexual one – could be considered a defiant act in itself, albeit one that might go unnoticed by the spectator. This suggests that the musical uses and performs homosexuality when it suits itself, and for its own purposes. However, the character’s originating actor, Billy Porter, is at odds with Fierstein. Porter, an openly gay man, opts to give

the character a sexual identity that matches his own: ‘Do you think after 25 years of being out, and now wearing a dress and playing the character the way I do, that I’m gonna be straight in it? Nobody’s gonna believe my version of the character is straight! That’s not how I play it!’ (Porter, in Musto, 2013). This potential occupation might also be referred to as ‘queering’ – the intentional introduction and application of gay characters, scenarios or sensibility to an existing (heteronormative) work, discussed in more detail below.

Whilst Brooks places the black female at the centre of her study, this thesis asks if it’s possible to use this notion of occupation to examine the role of the gay male, in particular how the lived experience of homosexuality can occupy the structural and narrative form of the musical. The practical element of this thesis, *Pieces of String*, addresses what it means for me as a gay writer to occupy this space, and subvert it by using an autoethnographic methodology to present real lived experience. With *Pieces of String*, because I am creating an entire piece of new work, the invasion of the text must be polyvalent: the socio-political agenda must be present across characters, musical numbers and dialogue, not just within one song or one moment. I ask if I can escape the tacit homophobia present in the musical form, and do so successfully enough to write and produce a piece of popular musical theatre with gay characters as protagonists. In her work on Sarah Vaughn, Brooks’ focuses on the work of the listener who – with some pre-existing knowledge of the musical piece, as well as, perhaps, the performer – arrives at the site of the occupation. In *Pieces of String* I use the implicit understanding that the audience has of the form and structure of the musical. Through practice, I

occupy this traditional, hegemonic form with a focus on the gay male experience.

QUEERING

There has been a recent move towards reinterpreting or reinventing existing musicals for a contemporary audience. This often involves addressing discrepancies in gender balance or a lack of non-heterosexual identities by transforming roles into different gender and/or sexual identities. In 2018 alone we saw Marianne Elliot’s gender revisionist production of Sondheim and Furth’s *Company* (1970) in London’s West End and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s (OSF) same-sex version of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma* (1943). In Elliot’s version of *Company*, Amy becomes Jamie, translating ‘Getting Married Today’ from a manic nightmare of impending marriage into one specifically about gay marriage. This change offers a uniquely contemporary take on a song that simply would not have been possible prior to the legal changes of recent years⁵. This interpretation can be seen as problematic, however, as it only offers a limited possibility of homosexuality: Jamie is a clichéd interpretation of a gay male, campily joking that ‘people will think I’m pregnant’ (Furth and Sondheim, 2019, p. 72) for wanting to get married. Similarly, the transformation of Ado Annie to Ado Andy in the OSF production of *Oklahoma!* suggests that ‘when Will asks for monogamy from the habitually available Andy, for example, it carries a different charge than

⁵ Gay marriage was made federal law in the United States in 2015 (See <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jun/26/gay-marriage-legal-supreme-court>). It had been law in the UK since July 2013 (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/same-sex-marriage-becomes-law>)

when, in other productions, Will asks the same of Annie’ (Collins-Hughes, 2018), commenting on the tacit understanding – and echoing Barnes’ homophobic assumption – that gay men are promiscuous. These queered versions continue to perform homophobia through superficially homo-positive representations of gay men, as well as reinforcing patriarchy via under-nuanced representations of women.

It is worth noting that the OSF production of *Oklahoma!* was directed by a gay man, whilst the revival of *Company* was directed by a heterosexual woman, indicating that both hetero- and homosexual theatre makers are complicit in the continued presentation of gay tropes. *Pieces of String* redresses the erasure and removes the need for queering or coded semiotics, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Without altering the original text significantly, queering is only ever likely be a shallow exercise; though things are altered on the surface, the foundations remain the same. Rather than queering an existing musical, and thus sartorially positioning homosexuality over a heterosexual body, *Pieces of String* makes the case for a specificity of character that is not always defined by heterosexuality, or required to act as the foil to heterosexuality.

THE CLOSETED HETEROSEXUAL

Clum describes heterosexuality as ‘the hanger on which we place the glitzy attire of the musical’ (Clum, 1999, p. 90), implying a sartorial version of Brooks’ occupation, dressing the heteronormative form of musical theatre with the ‘glitzy attire’ of homosexuality. As previously discussed, musical theatre has partly been built upon a foundation of closeted homosexuality meaning that

the ‘glitzy attire’ necessarily used heterosexuality to hide in plain sight and ‘straighten’ itself out. In the early part of the last century, the ubiquity of gay male voices such as Cole Porter and Lorenz Hart who, by necessity, wrote through heterosexual ciphers created a subtle tension between the heterosexual structures and hidden homosexual codes. If, as Butler asserted in *Gender Trouble* (1990), all sexuality is a performance, then it follows that all depictions of sexuality upon the stage become performances of a performance. Moreover, if the musical can be considered a ‘somehow gay genre’ (Miller, 1998, p. 16), so it goes that ‘the replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original’ (Butler, 2014, p. 43). *Pieces of String* can be read as supporting Butler’s assertion: by imbuing the heterosexual musical with homosexual narratives, I am exposing the musical as a heterosexual entity. This is a conscious action as a result of the research findings.

In contrast to cultural assumptions about the musical, the form is far from being the reserve of homosexual men, and has in fact long been co-opted by straight men. Steyn (1997) refers to Jonathan Larson, the writer-composer of *Rent* as a ‘(professionally) closeted heterosexual’ (Steyn, 1997, p. 208). Steyn claims that because of Larson’s untimely death prior to the show’s opening and the fact that ‘the show has an HIV-positive songwriter among its characters, it was assumed that Larson was yet another conscript of Aids (sic)’ (Steyn, 1997, p. 208). Steyn shows some surprise at Larson’s early death, but is more confounded by the writer’s sexuality, noting that ‘Larson seems to have been straight’ (Steyn, 1997, p. 208). Steyn’s interpretation is problematic; his

use of ‘seems’ implies an unwillingness to believe Larson’s heterosexuality, regardless of the fact. In failing to (fully) believe Larson’s heterosexuality, Steyn contradicts his own earlier assertion that ‘the Broadway Musical encompassed everything except the one subject its creators were specially expert in’ (Steyn, 1997, p. 201), namely, gayness. If we are to follow Steyn’s logic, then Larson could not be homosexual as to be so would make it impossible for him to write a piece that deals directly with homosexuality.

Despite this inconsistency, and the indication that Steyn’s viewpoint is informed by a dominant heterosexist position, it is worth considering what this notion of the ‘closeted heterosexual’ may mean for musical theatre. Despite the fact that ‘for much of the twentieth century, homosexual men have been identified with American musical theater as creators, performers, and audience members’ (Swayne, 2002, p. 99), there are a striking number of successful heterosexual men working in the field. In fact, arguably most of the significant contributions to the form – certainly in terms of financial success and mainstream awareness – have been authored by straight men: Stephen Schwartz, Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, Boublil & Schoenberg, Lin Manuel Miranda⁶.

QUEER FATALISM

‘I’m not crying just for you
I’m crying for me
Look around and see
I’m crying for all of us’

(Harvey and Pet Shop Boys, 2019, p. 63)

⁶See: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/leeseymour/2017/05/23/hamilton-leads-broadways-highest-grossing-season-ever-for-2016-2017/#2b360e866381> and <https://www.investopedia.com/slide-show/top-musicals/>

In her online article *Queer Fatalism*, an extension of the work on ‘Unhappy Queers’ that she began in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed dismantles the suggestion that a negative outcome for queer lives is an inevitability. Ahmed states that there is an ‘assumption that to be queer is to hurtle toward a miserable fate’ (Ahmed, 2017). The placing of homophobia upon successful queer lives is key here. Ahmed suggests that the moment ‘things stop working, in moments of loss...homophobia comes up as an explanation of what is not working’ (Ahmed, 2017). In other words, homophobia is inescapable for the queer person. This contradicts the notion that musical theatre is a safe space for the homosexual (Barnes, 2015; Clum, 1999; Miller, 1998). In her article, Ahmed positions the queer as the object of sadness; for a parent, for oneself. This phenomenological reading of the queer person ensures that unhappiness is inexorable, for, as Ahmed identifies, ‘to live a life in a certain way, a queer way, say, is to become the cause of your own unhappiness’ (Ahmed, 2017). Ahmed draws upon the lesbian Young Adult novel *Annie on My Mind* (1982) by Nancy Garden. In particular, Ahmed references one specific speech act from the protagonist’s father:

“Lisa”, my father said, “I told you I’d support you and I will. And right now I can see we’re all too upset to discuss this very much more, so in a minute or two I’m going to take you and your mother and me out to lunch. But honey, I know it’s not fashionable to say this, but – well, maybe it’s just that I love your mother so much and you and Chad so much that I have to say to you I’ve never thought gay people can be very happy – no children for one thing, no real family life. Honey, you are probably going to be a very good architect – but I want you to be happy in other ways, too, as your mother is, to have a husband and children. I know you can do both....” *I am happy*, I tried to tell him with my eyes. *I’m happy with Annie; she and my work are all I’ll ever need; she’s happy too – we both were until this happened.*

(Garden, 2017 [1982], p. 182)

This speech highlights the paradox that arises as a result of the act of ‘coming out’; namely that the expectation of an unhappy life causes sadness in the father, but that that unhappiness subsequently invites another sadness from the protagonist. This pressure upon queer people to be happy, and to deny the melancholy of their existence, can act as its own conduit to unhappiness. In Ahmed’s reading, there is a need for positive queer stories as a response to the assumption that ‘a queer life is necessarily and inevitably an unhappy life’ (Ahmed, 2017). However, this force to counteract the ‘social weight of queer fatalism’ (Ahmed, 2017) can become burdensome. When Ahmed asks us to ‘think of the work required to counter the perception of your life as being unhappy: the very pressure to be happy in order to show that you are not unhappy can create unhappiness’ (Ahmed, 2017), she is identifying a no-win situation for the queer person. If we look at the musical through this lens of queer fatalism, we find a rationale for the repeated tropes; the drag queen, the tragic-gay, the dancing queen and fabulousness. However, Ahmed doesn’t offer a solution to these problems. Is queer fatalism as inevitable as Ahmed suggests? This thesis explores how it might be possible to create characters and narratives within the musical that challenge the expectation of sorrow placed upon gay stories (see Chapter Four).

Closer to Heaven, the 2001 musical by the Pet Shop Boys and Jonathan Harvey, ends with a plea from the protagonist, Straight Dave, for a ‘Positive Role Model’. This final moment is offered as a hopeful coda for the character, yet it still does not allow him to be or to have that positive representation he seeks. Instead, he requests this from the audience. Although the writers chose to give Dave what appears to be a happy, or at

least a hopeful, ending, they could not avoid the shadow of queer fatalism; something I found similarly difficult to escape in *Pieces of String* (see Chapter Four). In *Closer to Heaven*, Dave’s gay male lover, Mile End Lee, dies just before the finale. This denies Dave and Lee the romantic happy ending so prevalent in classics of the form and perpetuates the image of the tragic-gay; dead or grieving. At Lee’s funeral, Dave sings that ‘there are people who think we lead a fabulous life’ (Pet Shop Boys, 2001) which initially seems to be at odds with Ahmed’s position. However, here the queer person is the cause of his own unhappiness and he defiantly rejects the happiness placed upon him by a heterosexual society; ‘No pain or strife, if only they knew the absolute truth’ (Pet Shop Boys, 2001). Moreover, in *Unhappy Queers*, Ahmed posits that ‘the happiness of the straight world is a form of injustice’ (Ahmed, 2010, p. 96), which invites a rejection from the queer inhabitant, as demonstrated in this song. Despite denying the fabulous life in the early part of the lyric, Dave goes on to instruct that the queers he is addressing should ‘go back to being fabulous’ (Pet Shop Boys, 2001), implying that the myth of gay equalling fabulous is actually fact. Of course, there is irony in this line too, a scathing self-awareness, all too familiar for the outsider. As Ahmed suggests that queer lives are constructed as unhappy lives, it forces us to ask whether the moves towards fabulousness are simply a way of constructing an antidote to the sadness?

The notion of queer fatalism offers a motivation for the movement away from sadness into the opposite extreme. Might musicals, in their traditional, escapist form, be an attempt to place the unhappy queer into a site of happiness? It could be argued that *Jamie* and *Priscilla* both do this

successfully. It is worth noting that the semi-happy ending in *Closer to Heaven* is afforded to a character with the moniker ‘Straight’, which implies that Dave’s ability to pass as heterosexual is what affords him his reprieve from the anticipated demise. Similarly, when Shell, the female potential love interest, discovers that Straight Dave is actually gay, she is devastated, even though she had suspected it. In this show, which attempted to be homo-positive, we are still presented with a gay man dying young and a heterosexual woman reacting poorly to the protagonist’s coming out. Shell’s reaction is not fuelled by homophobia so much as sadness for herself, a variation on the disappointed gay parent as identified by Ahmed. It is interesting that the gay writers of *Closer to Heaven* chose to write a heterosexual character also not able to obtain the object of their affection, ostensibly positioning Shell within pathetic coordinates, where homosexuality traditionally sits. Viewed through Ahmed’s concept, Straight Dave’s call for a positive role model feels desperate and impossible. Consequently ‘Positive Role Model’ becomes yet another act of denial, as suggested by Miller. I tried to avoid queer fatalism within the practice component of this submission but found that I could not. *Pieces of String* acts as evidence that Ahmed’s theory and the repeated tropes of the form cohere to forge an inescapable pattern, and thus I worked to challenge and question them rather than simply deny their existence.

Ahmed’s queer fatalism theory might also be seen as the evolution of gay shame: a miserable fate is all that is anticipated for gay lives because of the internalised homophobia exercised upon the self by the homosexual. According to Halperin, ‘gay pride itself is incompatible with an identity defined by failure’ (Halperin, 2012, p. 219) indicating, like Ahmed, that a positive

perspective on homosexuality is an impossibility. In their introductory chapter ‘Beyond Gay Pride’ in *Gay Shame* (2009) Halperin and Valerie Traub assert that the ‘goals of gay pride require nothing less than the complete destigmatisation of homosexuality’ (Halperin and Traub, 2009, p. 3) and suggest that this would require an elimination of shame, both personal and social. However, since they argue ‘gay pride does not even make sense without some reference to the shame of being gay’ (Halperin and Traub, 2009, p. 3), so it follows that to eradicate gay shame is to diminish the gay narrative. Therefore, this thesis uses its practical element to confront the supposed impossibility of positivity for gay men, by way of reclaiming and discussing gay shame within musical theatre. I discuss this further in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter has continued the work of the previous chapter by looking at homosexuals and musicals, but has concentrated the focus on specific techniques that are employed, such as queering or the use of coded semiotics. I have applied a number of key theoretical frameworks to existing works of musical theatre. I explored Daphne A Brooks’ notion of occupation by applying it to *Kinky Boots*, assessed Miller’s concept of the showtune as denial using his example of *Gypsy*, and viewed Sarah Ahmed’s queer fatalism through *Closer to Heaven*.

In the next chapter I analyse how *Pieces of String* performs and presents homosexuality, and identify how it endeavours to offer different versions of the gay male in musical theatre. I use David and Joseph Zelnik’s musical *Yank!* as a point of comparison and assess whether it should be

considered an occupation, as per Brooks' model, or simply a continuation. I also discuss *The View Upstairs* and compare how it uses stereotypes to progress homosexual representation, in contrast to *Pieces of String* which rejects them. I pay particular attention to the heterosexual character of Jane, identifying the impact non-homosexual characters have upon the depiction of gayness in the musical.

CHAPTER FOUR: HOMOSEXUAL REPRESENTATION IN *PIECES OF STRING*

In the previous chapter, *Closer to Heaven* was located within the framework of Ahmed’s queer fatalism, and *Kinky Boots* was used to explore Brooks’ concept of occupation. I argued that musicals are founded on structural heterosexuality which conflicts with the oft-repeated belief that musicals are inherently gay. This chapter continues the research by assessing how my musical *Pieces of String* performs homosexuality within a heterosexual structure. I ask how *Pieces of String* avoids or adheres to the tropes as defined by Lovelock and myself in Chapter Two. The chapter also locates *Pieces of String* within the wider spectrum of gay musicals, as defined in Chapter One.

Alongside an analysis of the gay representation in *Pieces of String*, I look at two existing musicals to investigate how they have responded to this issue: *Yank!* and *The View Upstairs*. *Yank!* is an original American musical which, similar to *Pieces of String*, tells a gay male love story during World War Two. *The View Upstairs* uses an historical event as a setting and inspiration, placing characters from two different timeframes together – as in *Pieces of String* – in order to explore gay culture and homophobia. Despite their parallels, there are distinct differences between *Yank!*, *The View Upstairs* and *Pieces of String*; addressing these will enable me to examine how other writers have tackled similar themes and demonstrate how *Pieces of String* strives to fill a gap in the representation. I investigate how *Pieces of String* tackles gay tropes such as coming-out and the use of cliché and stereotyped characters, as well as analyse *Pieces of String*’s heterosexual matriarch protagonist Jane. By applying Ahmed’s theory of queer fatalism, I position Jane as archetypal of

the parent role within narratives of gay lives. My analyses combine to demonstrate how homosexuality, and homophobia, is created through, and as a product of, my treatment of Jane in collaboration with the depiction of the gay male characters within the show.

PIECES OF STRING: Origins and comparative case studies of *Yank!* and *The View Upstairs*

As I have previously established, I intended to write a specifically gay story and *Pieces of String* was created through a combination of autobiographical and historical experience. The historical element of the story was inspired by a documentary, *Conduct Unbecoming* (3BM, Channel 4, 2002), which told the stories of homosexual relationships during World War Two. The knowledge I had of homosexuality in that period was limited to the persecution of gay people by the Nazi party. I was immediately interested in exploring this history that was hitherto unknown (to me). I made several attempts at writing something but struggled to form a coherent plot. Later, I wanted to write a play about the legal constraints against gay men donating blood in the UK. This featured a contemporary gay male couple. As with the previous idea, I had difficulty progressing further than some initial character-establishing scenes. I realised that by combining the two stories I would be able to discuss and explore, to compare and contrast, the differences faced by gay couples over time. This perspective appealed to me greatly as the comparison allowed me to thoroughly interrogate if and how homophobia and self-acceptance has altered over the last century: the story was thus immediately imbued with an emotionally epic scale, despite the ordinary everyday scope of its setting.

Initially I was particularly interested in using my own lived experience as a gay man in the show: Ed and Harry began as ciphers for myself and a former partner, who once invited me to a wedding but, being closeted, asked me to conceal our relationship: in my script the wedding became a funeral. I was keen to explore this conflict between being openly out and feeling forced to closet oneself to support a loved one. Over many drafts, these characters diverged greatly from my own lived experience, but the initial inspiration was firmly rooted in autobiography.

YANK!

Yank!, with a libretto and lyrics by David Zellnik and music by his brother Joseph Zellnik, premiered Off-Broadway in 2010. It follows naïve GI Stu and his relationship with Mitch, a handsome, stereotypically masculine and straight-passing fellow soldier. There are some striking similarities between *Yank!* and *Pieces of String*: both shows include a homosexual love story in World War Two, use cross-generational timeframes and involve the discovery of a secret past. Despite these likenesses, there are some fundamental differences between the shows that must be considered.

Yank! begins with a contemporary character, S, finding a journal in a junk shop. This acts a framing device for the show. As S reads from the diary, he becomes Stu, the diary’s author. Unlike *Pieces of String*, the inclusion of a modern day character is fleeting and used solely as a conceit to begin the story. *Yank!* is not concerned with comparisons with contemporary gay life, but instead places its entire narrative within the temporal location of World War Two. The Zellnik brothers, as fans of the classic Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway style, wondered if they could ‘write a show that they couldn’t write

in the 1940s, but gave us a reason to write in this style?’ (Zellnik, in Shenton, 2017). It is possible to apply Brooks’ model here: *Yank!*’s deliberate evocation of the 1940s era with thematic content that would have been contemporaneously impossible could be considered an occupation of the classic Broadway musical.

If, as Brooks suggests, cover songs and musical reworkings have the potential to ‘disturb cultural perceptions’ (Brooks, 2014, p. 64), it is conceivable that pastiche musical forms and structures can do the same. *Yank!* utilises the viewer’s knowledge of a traditional musical theatre narrative – namely that of the heterosexual love story – and challenges it by replacing it with a homosexual one. In many ways, the writers attempt to usurp the expectations of the viewer by offering unforeseen (gay) content where it is not anticipated. As Joseph Zellnik notes, the closer the writing ‘hewed to the older musical models, the more subversive it became’ (Zellnik, in Shenton, 2017), thus allowing the writers to create a piece that is at once both traditional and innovative.

Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals often included themes that were, for their time, progressive: *South Pacific* (1949) and *The King and I* (1951) both told inter-racial love stories. It has been argued that Hammerstein’s popularity ‘rests on his ability to circumvent the thorny aspects of racial representation and portray progressive ideals onstage’ (Johnson Quinn, 2019, p. 89), although Andrea Most argues that ‘*South Pacific*’s success actually lies not in its political radicalism but rather in its presentation of familiar racial tropes under a mask of comforting liberal rhetoric’ (Most, 2000, p. 312). The Zellnik brothers appear to follow the Rodgers and Hammerstein tradition very

closely, relying upon tropes of homosexuality in much the same way that racial tropes underline *South Pacific*. The Zellnik brothers note that ‘not putting quote marks round the gay stuff...was a very Hammerstein sort of thought’ (Zellnik, in Shenton, 2017), therefore creating a musical that follows in the classic tradition more than it may initially appear.

In his discussion of *Yank!* Lovelock notes how the song ‘Rememb’ring You’ (Zellnik and Zellnik, 2017) acts as a ‘portal into a queer heritage inhabited by the great queer lyricists of the 1930s and 1940s’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 197), and suggests *Yank!* can be seen as a ‘continuation of Rodgers and Hart’s sensibility within the framework of Hammerstein’s book musicals’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 197). ‘Rememb’ring You’ might be considered a closeted song: a lyric with the homosexual identity of the singer only being revealed through performance. Indeed, this lyrical closeting allows for the song to appear in different versions throughout the show, working as a heterosexual as well as a homosexual love song. Lovelock’s argument that ‘Rememb’ring You’ be considered a continuation of the traditional Broadway sentiment could be applied to the show in its entirety. The inclusion of gay characters in *Yank!* hints at a political agenda, and thus a potential occupation. However, by merely placing gay men into a traditional musical format, trading on the tropes already present in the field and not developing the homosexual representation, the Zellnik brothers have chosen not to capitalise on the political possibilities, not to successfully occupy the Rodgers and Hammerstein model, but simply to continue it.

All of the gay male characters in *Yank!*, excepting Mitch, are located within the stereotype of ‘gay male femininity’ as described by David Halperin

(2012, p. 8). Protagonist Stu hates ‘being around men’ (Zellnik and Zellnik, 2017, p. 11), setting himself apart from his hyper-masculine squad mates, and Artie, a photographer for *Yank* magazine, is visibly queer: ‘the gang knows Artie is different’ (Zellnik and Zellnik, 2017, p. 47). Finally, a trio of army stenographers perform masculinity when being observed but privately refer to each other with female pronouns and female pseudonyms from *Gone with the Wind* (1939). During the dialogue interspersed throughout the title song, Stu states he is a ‘fella somehow born into the wrong kind of body’ (Zellnik and Zellnik, 2017, p. 11), identifying Stu as physically different from the other men, lacking in stereotypical masculinity compared to his fellow GIs. Thus the notion of homosexuality being unmanly, or rather *not male*, is perpetuated. This feminisation of Stu, another example of the conflation of gender and sexuality as previously discussed, continues throughout the piece: he is described as having a ‘pretty face’ (Zellnik and Zellnik, 2017, p. 12) in contrast with Mitch who suggests Hollywood as a nickname for himself ‘cause I’m just that handsome’ (Zellnik and Zellnik, 2017, p. 20).

Yank! is filled with homophobic epithets – and the slurs are reserved solely for Stu. One of the first times Sarge addresses Stu directly he calls him ‘the most *pathetic* fruit fairy *cocksucker* I have ever seen’ (Zellnik and Zellnik, 2017, p. 9) and he is nicknamed ‘light loafers’ (Zellnik and Zellnik, 2017, p. 17) by another of the GIs. Even gay characters use this homophobic language, with Artie warning Stu that ‘fags don’t last a week on the front’ (Zellnik and Zellnik, 2017, p. 46). Whilst historically accurate, this type of language serves to propagate negative images of homosexuals. In contrast to *Yank!*, *Pieces of String* purposefully avoids giving space to homophobic language except in one

moment; after Young Rose catches Tom and Edward kissing she challenges Tom, who responds with ‘I’m what? A fairy?’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 102). The decision not to include homophobic language, which would be more historically accurate, raises questions regarding my position: is my loyalty to historical verisimilitude or to challenging the use of homophobic language (and in turn, heterosexist representations)?

The homophobic language in *Yank!* constructs a homophobic atmosphere that *Pieces of String* achieves without such epithets: in *Pieces of String* the characters’ beliefs, actions and interactions suffice. However, *Pieces of String* is not exempt from criticism: the characters’ discomfort and disgust with their sexuality also propagates a negative stereotype, and by choosing the acceptance of homosexuality – in oneself, in others – as a primary theme of the show, a lack of acceptance must at first be portrayed. This insidious adverse representation permeates the entire piece and subsequently the show becomes wholly reliant upon the reversal of opinions to act as a counterbalance. It is a tragedy that one cannot investigate homosexuality, or rather the acceptance of homosexuality, without putting the foil of homophobia into the show as well. This tragedy, and the notion of the tragic-gay as discussed in Chapter Two, moves from the writer to the stage and back again. If I consider myself a tragic-gay writer, it follows that I am unable to deal with the material of gay shame until I deal with the domestic tragedy of being gay. In other words, it is imperative that I address my own internalised homophobia and lived experience of gay trauma in order to fully understand, and thus claim ownership of, my gay shame, and by extension, that of my homosexual characters in *Pieces of String*.

THE VIEW UPSTAIRS

The View Upstairs, like *Yank!*, also shares some similarities with *Pieces of String*: both locate the action within a confined space and include characters from two different timeframes. *The View Upstairs* was first performed off-Broadway in New York in 2017 and received its UK premiere production at the Soho Theatre in August 2019. *The View Upstairs* begins in the present day with Instagram influencer Wes, who has recently bought a derelict building in New Orleans, taking cocaine and being suddenly transported back to 1973. We are now in The Upstairs, a real-life gay bar that was the target of an horrific arson attack in which 32 people died. Max Vernon, who, like myself, wrote the book, music and lyrics to his musical, has said that the musical intended ‘to show the ways in which, in the past 40 years, our worlds have changed drastically, and also not changed at all’ (Stichbury, 2019, p. 50). This mirrors my starting sentiment for *Pieces of String*: “look how far we’ve come, but how far we still have to go”. Indeed, Vernon has said that he wrote ‘this musical to shine a light’ (Vernon, 2018, p. 50) on what was the worst act of violence against the LGBTQ+ community until the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016.

The second song in the show is ‘#HouseholdName’ and, as tradition dictates it is Wes’s ‘I Want’ song. In the number, Wes proclaims ‘I don’t need community/I don’t have to belong’ (Vernon, 2018, p. 14) which arguably conforms to Miller’s idea of the showtune as denial (1998). The patrons of the bar enter during this number and Vernon utilises one of the key and recurrent theatrical devices of *Pieces of String* – dual timeframes – for one short moment: ‘there is fun and ethereal beauty to be mined from the two eras not seeing each other’ (Vernon, 2018, p. 13). Unlike *Pieces of String*, by allowing

these timeframes to commingle rather than co-exist, Vernon enables the characters to directly question the similarities and differences they share.

The View Upstairs utilises tropes appropriated from ballroom culture, particularly evident in the character of Wes, who shouts ‘the library’s open!’ (Vernon, 2018, p. 19) before making a ‘performance of putting on a pair of sunglasses’ (Vernon, 2018, p. 19), a direct depiction of the act of ‘reading’. Reading is a key facet of African American gay culture, which has migrated from the ballroom scene to the drag world and now, through cultural touchstones such as *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, has, to some degree, been appropriated by mainstream culture.

Whilst *Pieces of String* deliberately eschews the use of stereotypes in its characters, *The View Upstairs* opts instead to trade in these. Vernon consciously uses the currency of these tropes to comic effect and to show the differences, and similarities, between the historical characters and Wes. Vernon uses stereotypes and clichés as identifiers: when the bar’s patrons attempt to ascertain if Wes is gay – and therefore safe – they ask him to select either Oscar Wilde or Arthur Miller, Sonny or Cher; the choice of Cher is deemed to be a signal of Wes’s homosexuality, a joke that trades on our assumptions of gay men as diva-lovers and translates to a present day audience.

COMING OUT: the repeated process of coming-out and the ‘forced out’ moment

In *Pieces of String* I aimed to avoid using coming-out, a well-worn trope of gay stories, as a narrative tool. This is not to diminish the importance of these

stories, as coming out is ‘a necessary step in the lives of most queer people in the real world’ (Gilchrist and Reynolds, 2017) and arguably a defining moment in the life of the homosexual. The cultural products that utilise coming-out often revolve around one key moment, and do not acknowledge that the act of coming-out is a repeated process, rather than a single event. This results in a focus on a sensationalised and singular moment rather than the recurrent, and perhaps less dramatic reality: the disclosure of sexuality to friends, family, at the doctors, hairdressers. *Pieces of String* attempts to avoid this trope by concentrating on an understanding of one’s homosexuality, rather than the discovery of it.

It could be assumed that, as a moment of heightened emotion, coming-out would often be depicted in song but examples are actually very limited. Rather than specific coming-out songs, musical theatre tends to refract the coming out process into powerful solo songs of unspecific self-assertion. Of course, there is the aforementioned and oft-cited ‘I Am What I Am’ from *La Cage Aux Folles* but we must also add ‘The Acceptance Song’ from *The Prom*, in which a group of Broadway performers challenge bigotry, stating it is ‘not big of me, and it’s not big of you’ (Bequelin and Sklar, 2019, p. 35). A rare example of a coming-out song appears in *Bare* – although it is worth noting the attempt is unsuccessful. In ‘See Me’ (Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 2000) Peter attempts to come out to his mother, Claire, via a telephone call. Claire is obstructive and dismissive, telling her son ‘Peter, you tend to dramatize’ (Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 2000, p. 85) to which he replies, ‘there’s a reason for that, Mother’ (Hartmere and Intrabartolo, 2000, p. 85). This exchange demonstrates the bias of the drama queen trope: Claire’s line trivialises Peter’s

suffering, and Peter’s response implies that his emotional behaviour is endemic to his gayness.

In *Pieces of String* I do not include a song proudly asserting the self, in the vein of those listed above, nor do I attempt to musicalise the coming-out moment in one song. Instead, I opt to reflect the repeated nature of coming-out. I achieve this by releasing the information to different characters at different times throughout *Pieces of String*, but also by using the device of differing time frames to share these scenes with the audience, too. The dual time frames allow me to create greater dramatic conflict for the audience by giving them information before the audience has it: they know about Edward and Tom long before they see Anna finding out. By refusing to musicalise an ostensibly key emotional moment and instead diffracting it into multiple scenes – and yet following tradition by not writing a coming-out song – *Pieces of String* simultaneously challenges the conventions of musical theatre and adheres to them. While there is no coming-out moment, there are outings – unwanted and non-consensual revelations of homosexuality, or ‘forced out’ moments. Coming-out is a product (and process) of claiming a homosexual identity and as Edward never achieves this, the knowledge of his homosexuality is gained through three non-consensual outings – ‘forced out’ moments – throughout the show: when he is caught kissing Tom by Young Rose, when Anna catches him and Tom embracing, and when Jane, Ed and Gemma learn of his homosexual relationship via Tom’s letter. In the show’s first draft (V1), Edward was included in the interrogation scene at the opening. Although he rejected the accusation of homosexuality, this scene made clear to the audience that Edward was likely to have some sort of gay relationship or homosexual event

within the course of the story. There is a formal currency to the drama of being exposed as homosexual that I was using for Edward. Indeed, it could be argued that depicting ‘forced out’ moments is more harmful to the gay experience, and heterosexual understanding, than a more gentle coming-out process might be. However, I did not follow the casually homophobic Laurence O’Keefe model of turning any of these outings into comical production numbers (see Chapter Two). During the writing process I considered removing the interrogation scene from the beginning of the show but was concerned that doing so would turn the homosexual relationship into a surprise for the audience; I was more interested in the mechanics of Tom and Edward’s burgeoning romance than the shock value of it, and wished to avoid sensationalising their relationship.

Pieces of String does not entirely avoid sensationalism, however, as to introduce Tom via an accusation of illegal sexual activity – and via a scene stylistically different to the rest of the piece – sets him apart as Other. To combat this I borrow from *Conduct Unbecoming*, from which the interrogation scene was directly inspired: when the superior officer states he has had complaints about Tom’s (gay) behaviour, Tom responds ‘really? I haven’t’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 3). This shows Tom to be witty and endears him to the audience, whilst attempting to diffuse the Otherness of his introduction. It also establishes Tom as a resistant character who uses humour to operate resistantly, a reflection of me as a tragic-gay writer, demonstrating the tacit confines that affect my work. Although I do not fully escape dramatising the discovery of homosexuality, by excising the stereotyped and monolithic coming-out, I attempt to tackle it differently from the norm.

In Chapter Two, I explored how musical theatre characters wear an assumed heterosexuality and perpetuate heterosexual domestic ideals. While this makes it necessary to include revelations of homosexuality to disrupt the assumptions of the dramatic narrative, it was important to set up the relationship between the traditional, heterosexual lovers before introducing more challenging character relationships that veered from the expected narratives of a musical. Anna, who did not exist in the earliest draft, was included to give Edward more conflict. I endeavour throughout the musical to show that Edward and Tom’s relationship is just as typical, certainly in terms of emotion, as that of Edward and Anna. However, it could be argued that my desire to include a heterosexual romance, particularly one that is seen prior to a gay one, is a product of my own internalised homophobia and an anxiety about what is allowable in a musical. Conversely, the character of Anna sets up a heterosexual identity for Edward that facilitates the drama of the ‘forced out’ moment and allows me to deconstruct the heteronormative, happy heterosexual narrative.

CLICHÉS: Harry and the adherence and aversion to fabulousness

Figure 1 – Script excerpt from *Pieces of String V2* (p. 24)

Ed You don’t have to be so dramatic.

Harry It comes naturally. They give you classes when you come out. You get all of Cher’s back catalogue when you turn sixteen.

Ed I hate Cher.

Harry Wash your mouth out!

As discussed in Chapter Two, the fabulous queen can be considered a

development of the ‘threefold conflation between camp, homosexuality and musical theatre’ (Lovelock, 2019, p. 190) dancing queen trope. In earlier drafts of *Pieces of String*, Harry – as the gay character most comfortable with his sexuality – adhered to a more stereotypical fabulous queen type. There were a few key occasions (see figure 1) when he used humour and gay cliché to alleviate tension, initially intended to add comedy to an otherwise tragic story. It was successful – audiences laughed – however I was uncomfortable with what I felt to be laziness in the writing. Whilst it is arguable the above exchange gives an insight into the type of person Harry is, it relies upon a number of clichés: repartee to repackage criticism, gay indoctrination, diva worship and over-the-top outbursts. Furthermore, it felt to me that drawing Harry this way propagated stereotypes that I actively worked to avoid elsewhere in the text. I removed these lines, coming to understand that by presenting Harry in this way I was suggesting that to be accepting of one’s homosexuality was to fit a very narrow set of criteria or cultural attributes. My tacit understanding of the presentation of gay men in musicals led me to attempt to locate Harry amongst the other fabulous gay male characters in the medium, utilising the shorthand of stereotypes that audiences would understand. Closer investigation revealed a sub-textual element to this exchange, reflected in my own personality: that to respond to criticism of any kind with humour attempts not only to diffuse the current situation at hand but to remove the power of the criticism itself. To claim the joke is to claim its power. Writing Harry in this way felt natural to some extent but, upon deeper reflection, I realised I needed to challenge this behaviour in my work, and by extension, in myself.

There are two occasions where the director, Ryan McBryde, included a moment of humour that I initially found problematic. The first also includes Harry and is a development of the exchange already discussed. In response to Gemma complaining that Harry and Ed’s argument wasn’t gay enough – ‘why can’t you be more gay and, like, throw things and stuff?’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 11) – Harry replied, ‘don’t stereotype us Gemma, we’re not all divas. (*Flamboyantly*) We’re every colour of the rainbow’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 11). This line was cut from the rehearsal draft, as it showed Harry knowingly performing a gay stereotype. McBryde questioned its removal and argued for its return. On reflection, I felt the question of fabulousness itself posed a paradoxical challenge for the gay writer: the avoidance of these tropes may remove the propagation of homophobia but a resistance to them can also be a signifier of internalised homophobia. However, I decided I was limiting myself by being too hypercritical, perhaps due to the academic scrutiny I was, by this time, applying to the writing process, and reinserted the line. Interestingly enough, however, it never received a laugh in performance. This is potentially because it was an anomaly: the exact kind of cliché that the audience might have expected from a gay character but that was absent throughout the rest of the text. However, if I were to interlace fabulousness throughout the text, and show Harry as more consistently fabulous, the audience would start to relax and the musical would once again become a recognisably safe homophobic space for the audience, thus allowing them to comfortably collude with the writer in their homophobia. By not positioning Harry in this way, I am breaking the terms of the pact between audience and writer. By choosing to make all of my gay male characters avoid these tropes, they all fit into a similar

type. By making Harry more fabulous I could perhaps have shown a broader range of what gay men can be. In earlier drafts I included multiple clichés of fabulousness but, upon closer examination, decided I was letting myself down by including them. They serve as evidence that my love and in-depth knowledge of musical theatre result in my being indoctrinated by the trope of fabulousness and therefore predisposed to work within its homophobic or heterosexist confines.

The second moment included by McBryde was his own creation that built on a pre-existing comedic moment. In Act One, Scene Thirteen (see Figure 2), Edward nervously asks Tom if he has ever been dancing. This exchange results in Tom attempting to dance with Edward, an action we will see repeated later in the show with tenderness. However, as the men have yet to consummate or even vocalise their attraction, the exchange was written as purposefully comedic. McBryde suggested that Tom should take Edward’s hand and place it on his behind, causing Edward to recoil swiftly and exclaim ‘piss off!’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 51).

Tom’s objective in this scene is to make Edward laugh, which McBryde’s addition helps to achieve. However, it initially felt problematic for a number of reasons: it presents the homosexual as predator, albeit a light-hearted one, and depicts same-sex touching as, at best, comical and at worst, unpleasant. Although these notions are dispelled later in the show by their genuinely romantic relationship, this moment felt heterosexist and perhaps even homophobic. As a writer, I had concerns that the audience were not laughing with the characters but at the mere suggestion of homosexuality and same-sex sexual contact. Ultimately, Edward’s response is accurate to the

character’s present mindset and so the truth of his reaction won out; I added this moment to the script.

Figure 2 – Excerpt from *Pieces of String V3* (p. 51)

EDWARD
Dance with you?

TOM
Don’t worry, I’m not going to whack a dress on you. Come here.

EDWARD
Forget it.
(Tom goes to him and raises his arms, waiting for Edward to join him.)

TOM
So, if I’m Anna...
(He takes Edward’s hand and places it on his bottom.)

EDWARD
(Moving away, quickly)
Piss off!

TOM
Suit yourself, Ginger.
(Tom dances. Eventually, Edward laughs.)

The two examples I have cited are evidence of the different requirements placed upon gay male and heterosexual characters in musicals. In order to laugh at fabulous, as the trope dictates, there needs to be adequate context and character consistency set up for the audience. However, the audience do not require that instruction for same-sex touching as this is well practiced as a punchline. This exchange is emblematic of the challenges the gay musical theatre writer faces when working within the confines of a form that, as discussed in Chapter Three, has routinely used homosexuality in very stereotyped ways.

‘I’M GAY’: Explicit homosexual identification within the text

The tropes and clichés discussed in this chapter are evidence of implicit identifications of homosexuality: they work with(in) an audience’s understanding of gayness. Explicit identification is much rarer. As previously discussed, even Herman’s supposed anthem of gay identity and self-proclamation ‘I Am What I Am’ from *La Cage Aux Folles* never actually states that the protagonist is homosexual. As explored in Chapter Three, this song of proud identification can also be viewed as a paean to self-denial. Considering the themes in *Pieces of String* – and this thesis – it is worth noting that, within the show, the only explicit naming of homosexuality comes within the text rather than the lyric. In Act One, Scene Twenty, Jane starts to list what she considers to be her son’s attributes: he’s handsome, clever. Ed quips an addition: ‘I’m gay’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 82). This highlights his sexuality as something that is as intrinsic as the other attributes but that Jane refuses to name. As the first time Ed vocalises his homosexuality, it is an important moment – and a direct result of the journey of acceptance he goes on during the previous song, ‘Standing In The Shadows’ (see Chapter Six). The decision to include this information in the form of a constative speech act might be considered a political act; it refuses to moderate the statement with musical embellishment. It might also be evidence of Peter Stone’s assertion that ‘if you want the audience to really hear something, don’t put it in a lyric’ (Stone, in Viertel, 2016, p. 41). My decision not to musicalise explicit identification indicates an anxiety about the form itself, namely that important information will be somehow lost or diminished if placed into the score rather than the

script. Indeed, I never considered writing a song about homosexual identification, save for ‘Standing in the Shadows’, which addresses it obliquely rather than directly. The existing musical theatre songs that explicitly reference homosexuality such as ‘If You Were Gay’ from *Avenue Q* and ‘Keep It Gay’ from *The Producers* tend to be located in the dancing queen category, as discussed earlier in Chapter Two. This precedent engenders a hegemonic heterosexism and perpetuates the dancing queen trope, suggesting that the closer *Pieces of String* follows musical theatre patterns, the more heterosexist it would become. This contradicts the Zellnik brothers’ experience writing *Yank!*, mentioned above, that a show with gay content becomes more subversive the closer it adheres to traditional models.

JANE: The heterosexual protagonist

The character of Jane is central to *Pieces of String*, both in terms of familial chronology and as the primary location of external homophobia. Although the show tells the story of two gay couples, it is through Jane’s lens, and through her learning, that much of the socio-political impact is to be found.

In her ‘Unhappy Queers’ chapter, Sara Ahmed notes that ‘wanting the happiness of the loved other often hesitates with the signifier “just”. “I just want you to be happy” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 92) and I notice something similar in *Pieces of String*. After the revelation of her father’s historical homosexual affair, Jane tells Ed, ‘I only ever wanted you to be happy, Edward’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 135); the usage of his full name connects and confuses him with his grandfather. Moreover, Jane’s use of the past tense within this sentence suggests that Ed’s potential to be happy is no longer a possibility. In my own writing, then, I have

inadvertently established ‘only’ as a substitute for Ahmed’s ‘just’. Ahmed states that the use of such a signifier ‘might reveal something; as if wanting happiness is not to want other things that might demand more from the child’ (Ahmed, 2010, p. 92) but it is precisely this *demanding more* from the child that Jane desires. For Jane, happiness means heterosexuality and it is the lack of this that has obstructed Ed’s happiness. In coming-out stories ‘the speech act “I just want you to be happy” can also be used as a form of tolerance and acceptance’ (Ahmed, 2010, p. 94) but Jane uses it as an explanation and semi-apology. The signifier here conceals the true meaning; Jane ‘only ever’ wanted Ed to be happy but only if that version of happiness aligns with hers.

Jane was originally intended to be a non-singing character. This decision temporarily located Jane in the position typically appropriated by the homosexual character: the Other. This technique is used in *West Side Story* (1957) and *Spring Awakening* (2006) to delineate the Otherness of adult characters and their fundamental difference from the teenage protagonists. Geoffrey Block suggests that a character is ‘denied three-dimensionality or identity if he or she is not allowed to sing’ (Block, 2004, p. 51), however I was using this tool precisely to signify Jane’s identity. If, as Matthew Lockitt argues, ‘it is commonly accepted that characters rise into song as emotion becomes too strong for mere words’ (Lockitt, 2012, p. 188) then it seemed apt that, as Jane is unable to access her emotions, she would never reach the point at which she could sing. This placed additional focus upon Jane and, as such, she developed into the protagonist of the piece. Scott McMillin argues that ‘the performers in a musical must also handle the enlargement of their characters

into lyric time’ (McMillin, 2014, p. 149) and states that a non-singing character in a musical becomes ‘omniscient’ (McMillin, 2014, p. 150). McMillin uses Dr Brooks in *Lady in the Dark* (1940) as an example noting that ‘lyric time is beyond him’ (McMillin, 2014, p. 150) and suggesting that ‘because he knows everything, he has no enlargement into song or dance, nothing musical to be fallible about’ (McMillin, 2014, p. 150). Whilst rather overestimating the power and abilities of non-singing characters in most musicals, McMillin’s argument is inapplicable to *Pieces of String*: Jane is the opposite of omniscient, unknowing or at least unwilling to know.

The musical, then, became about watching Jane’s journey to finding her voice, quite literally: my show about homosexuality was now about a heterosexual woman’s acceptance of homosexuality. In V1, the show ended with Jane’s line, ‘I just need a minute’. This recalls a lyric from ‘War Stories’ and was spoken in time with the music; although the character was unable to sing, she had finally reached an emotional point where she was able to join in the song, albeit through dialogue. The line also intimates that although Jane has begun to accept her son’s homosexuality, she is only partway through the journey, reiterating the hesitation that Ahmed’s ‘just’ implies. The shift of focus onto Jane began to diminish the story of the homosexual characters. It became clear that although the audience wanted some resolution with Jane’s narrative, it was more important to see a conclusion for Ed and Harry. Once Jane became a singing character – from V2 onwards – the conceit of her joining the song in the final moments was no longer viable, for we had already heard her singing throughout. The piece then developed so that Jane obtained narrative closure before the end of the show by urging Ed to seek out Harry. This re-

placed the focus of the show back onto the homosexual characters, and allowed me to write a more hopeful ending than that with only Jane.

By making Jane, a straight woman, an integral presence on stage, I included a character that a heterosexual audience would be able to relate to, an access point to the story. Of course, some spectators may reject her bigoted behaviour but by allowing her a moment of redemption, I also offer a form of absolution to the audience: if the show ‘forgives’ Jane for her homophobia, it follows that this pardon applies to the audience, too. Jane is located as the site of homophobia within the show, and exists as such as a product of my own frustrations, a cipher for my lived experience and a proxy for the way society enacts homophobia. She also demonstrates my desire to address the imbalance in hetero-/homosexual representation by making a heterosexual rather than homosexual character the antagonist. It is interesting to note that some reviewers took issue with Jane, describing her as ‘something of a harpy, an easily dislikable (sic) target’ (Barton, 2019), and demanded ‘more justification for Jane’s vile homophobia’ (Davies, 2018). Despite her attempts to explain and clarify her behaviours, there is a great deal left unsaid and without a clear reason for her homophobia – no extreme religious or cultural beliefs – I understood how Jane could be seen as two-dimensional. As I have chosen to omit showing Jane’s upbringing, I have also omitted showing her being raised in a homophobic household. Many assume that ingrained homophobia must be a product of extremism, but *Pieces of String* argues that homophobia thrives in more subtle, atmospheric ways. In fact, these criticisms of Jane support my central argument: that musical theatre endorses homophobia through a persistent heterosexist output and can only

reject it in a demonstrative fashion. The lived experience of homophobia by a gay man is subsumed to the heterosexual, hetero-centric understanding of homophobia, what constitutes it and what creates it. At present, musical theatre as a form fails to offer sufficiently nuanced portrayals and experiences of homophobia for a mainstream audience to process.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have provided an overarching analysis of the representation of homosexual identity in *Pieces of String* and identified the ways in which it strives to present a different version of the gay male in musical theatre. I explored the character of Jane, noting that the prominence of a heterosexual, female pro-antagonist draws attention away from positive homosexual representation on the stage, and investigated the methods with which I tackled this problem. I have compared *Pieces of String* with *Yank!* and *The View Upstairs*: the former is a musical that tackles many of the same themes in a decidedly different style, whilst the latter similarly deals with generational differences between gay characters. I then used these analyses to investigate how *Pieces of String* challenges the archetypes of the musical.

In the next chapter I refer to traditional structures of the musical as a framework to analyse the form of *Pieces of String* in more detail. I view the practice through key song moments, identifying where I conform to, and where I resist, the expected structure of a musical.

CHAPTER FIVE: STRUCTURE AND FORM

In his book *Making Musicals*, Tom Jones, writer of *The Fantasticks* (1960), insists that ‘there is no “standard form”’ (Jones, 1998, p. 107) for a musical. Despite this, some authors (Engel and Kissel, 2006; Citron, 1997; Woolford, 2012; Viertel, 2016) have attempted to set out how a musical works, albeit with varying degrees of success. In this chapter I shall investigate how *Pieces of String* mimics and sometimes resists this traditional form of musical theatre. Viewing the practice through this lens allows me to scrutinise the rationale for adhering to conventions and to identify the challenges of adapting the form. In particular, I shall examine whether Brooks’ notion of occupation (2017) can be applied to *Pieces of String* and, if so, what this occupation looks like.

The main dramaturgical models of the musical that can be consistently applied are Jack Viertel’s *The Secret of the American Musical* (2016) and, to a lesser extent, Lehman Engel’s 1972 book *Words with Music: Creating the Broadway Musical Libretto* (2006) and this chapter will respond to the form structure set out by these authors with specific reference to *Pieces of String*, investigating how it adheres to, and deviates from, these structures. Lehman Engel’s text has been selected for dual reasons: his position and experience as conductor of many ‘golden age’ musicals and his role as the founder of the BMI workshop, which has taught the conventions of the form to a great number of composers and lyricists including Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, Maury Yeston, Robert Lopez, and Jeanine Tesori. The Viertel text provides a comprehensive analysis of the musical architecture of a show and offers the most contemporary rubric of musical theatre. Whilst addressing the prevailing

structures in the form, this chapter will investigate how those structures promote heterosexuality as the norm. As this chapter is more reflexive in content I depart slightly from my previous tone and use *Pieces of String* as primary source material to reflect on the work I have made.

THE OPENING NUMBER

Opening numbers in musicals are notoriously difficult to get right. Viertel notes that ‘there’s a lot to think about when creating an opening, but the first question is: What kind of show is it?’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 20) and answering this question correctly, or incorrectly, has the power to make or break a show. In his lyric anthology *Finishing The Hat* (Sondheim, 2010), Sondheim acknowledges this, stating that rewriting the opening number of *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum* (1962) ‘changed what had been a catastrophe in New Haven and Washington into a three-year hit on Broadway’ (Sondheim, 2010, p. 87). Unlike *Forum*, *Pieces of String* does not open with a complete song, nor does it include an overture, a mainstay of earlier musicals now rarely used. *Pieces of String* begins quietly, with a short sung prologue, a technique found in more contemporary musicals, such as *Rent*’s– ‘December 24th, 9pm’ (Larson in Hausam, 2003, p. 110). Thus the opening of *Pieces of String* is not flamboyant, it is restrained. It does not include a homosexual expression of Self, it introduces heterosexual characters. It is constrained and, in some ways, closeted.

In *Pieces of String*, the first characters the audience meet are two heterosexual women. Deploying these characters in a purposefully domestic setting is a deliberate attempt to deliver the expected tropes of a musical,

which will then be dismantled through the arrival of the gay male characters who are in fact the show's protagonists. However, the show did not always start like this. As mentioned above, in the earliest draft gay characters were introduced to the audience first, with Edward and Tom being interrogated by their army superiors about suspected homosexuality (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Script Excerpt from *Pieces of String V1 Draft* (p. 1)

Scene One

(Edward and Tom are sitting, separately, at small tables on different sides of the stage. They are both wearing their uniforms. Their interrogators are unseen and played by the other cast members).

Voice

Are you a homosexual?

Edward

What? Sir, No!

(Tom says nothing)

Voice

Are you a homosexual?

Edward

I told you. No! I am not a-

Voice

A homosexual.

Edward

I am not one of those.

(Tom still says nothing.)

Voice

I will ask you one more time Private. Are you a homosexual?

Tom

Are you?

Voice

This is a very serious matter Private. You could be court marshaled. Dishonourable discharge. I have had complaints.

Tom

Really? I haven't had any complaints.

The show opened with Edward and Tom appearing in stark and separate spotlights, with modern characters entering around them. This immediately informed the audience to expect varying non-naturalistic,

theatrical conceits throughout the show, and to read Edward and Tom’s locations semiotically: although they appear physically close together onstage, they are in different locations. Their response to the accusation is also different: Tom responds defiantly and humorously, whereas Edward is vehement in his denial. This scene remained the same through many drafts before the decision was made to remove Edward. The audience suspecting Edward’s homosexuality would undermine his relationship with Anna, which must be read as genuine in order to give the character clear conflict as his relationship with Tom progresses. The exact location and chronology of the interrogation had also always proved problematic, making theatrical but not logical sense; I adhered to a strict chronology within both timeframes and this was the only point where that chronology was broken.

In *How Musicals Work*, Julian Woolford breaks down story structure into twelve steps, beginning with what he terms ‘The Ordinary World’: ‘all stories begin at a place of stability...the key element here is that the situation is ongoing, stable, and that there is no immediate way of changing it’ (Woolford, 2012, p. 95). The ordinary world in *Pieces of String* is Jane struggling to connect with her children and accept Ed’s homosexuality, and Edward and Anna, filled with excitement for their lives ahead, moving into their new home. Instability is immediately introduced, however, as in the modern world we learn that ‘today’ is both Edward’s funeral, and in the 1944 timeline, Edward is leaving for war. Subsequently, the ordinary world in both timeframes is compromised and the ‘place of stability’ (Woolford, 2012, p. 95) is immediately unsettled.

(P)REPRISE: The reverse reprise and the unfinished song

Deploying a reprise before the song it references as part of a reverse chronology is an established technique within musical theatre with very particular dramaturgical possibilities and consequences. This technique can be found in Sondheim’s *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), whose reverse chronology means that ‘the reprises could come first’ (Sondheim, 2010, p. 381). In the song ‘Like It Was’ (Sondheim, 1981) Sondheim uses a ‘reverse reprise...to reference a past we haven’t seen yet’ (Sondheim, 2010, p. 390). In *Pieces of String* I include adapted verses from the final number ‘Pieces’ in advance of presenting the full song. I titled my version of the reverse reprise ‘(P)Reprise’, thus installing the preposition ‘pre’ to indicate that this extract arrives before the full version of ‘Pieces’ it is reprising. In *Merrily*, Sondheim uses the reverse reprise to reflect the reverse chronology of the show. *Pieces of String* runs in chronological order and therefore my own use of a reverse reprise differs from Sondheim’s. Instead, I use the ‘(P)Reprises’ as unfinished songs that recur throughout but cannot reach their conclusion until the characters are emotionally ready to sing the song in its totality – which arrives at the finale.

Pieces of String uses two time frames, one historic and one contemporary, that appear concurrently throughout the piece, often occupying the same spaces at the same time. The largest task I faced was introducing all of the characters and the time frames as concisely and clearly as possible. First, we meet Anna who is carrying boxes into the house; she is full of enthusiasm and hope. She surveys the house, a gesture that allows the audience to do the same, familiarising themselves with the location of the

majority of the show’s action. Anna exits to collect more boxes and is replaced at the doorway by her daughter, Jane. Jane, dressed in black and with a melancholy demeanour, is a stark contrast to her mother. Jane twice sings the first line of the ‘(P)Reprise’, ‘Take a breath’, but is unable to continue with the line. In opposition to the well-trod trope that characters ‘sing to express the most emotionally charged moments’ (Cohen and Rosenhaus, 2006, p. 40) of a musical, this first use of the unfinished song demonstrates a moment in which a character is in fact *too* emotional to sing. The reverse reprise is useful here, as the unfinished music and lyric of the (P)Reprise embodies the inability of the character to complete the emotional thought and feeling. This unfinished nature also reflects Jane’s inability to properly articulate herself: in just three words, we learn that Jane is a character in pain – and unable to communicate that pain – and I queer the traditional requirements of the musical. Throughout the course of *Pieces of String* I use the reverse reprise as a leitmotif for Jane’s sense of overwhelming emotion; we hear it again just before the interval when her father’s homosexuality has been revealed. The unfinished form of the reprise suggests that Jane is unclear what to do, or feel, thus her song cannot progress. Only when Jane reaches some closure with her homophobic relationship with Ed can she sing more than just the opening lines of the song ‘Pieces’, and be included in the entire musical number.

THE / WANT SONG: ‘In Our Own Little Way’ and the *We Want* song

‘There are no inviolable rules for the creation of enduring, popular musicals, possibly except this one. The hero has to want something that’s hard to get, and go after it come what may.’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 53)

The *I Want* song traditionally follows the opening number, or is sometimes combined with it, and is typically the first time we hear from the hero of the story. In *Pieces of String*, I wanted to challenge Viertel’s suggestion that an *I Want* song is a necessity by not including one. This was made easier by the multi-narrative form of the show; there is no singular hero. Sondheim demonstrated in *Into The Woods* (1987) that it is possible to have a multiple character *I Want* song: in the Act One Prologue ‘Into The Woods’ the characters individually sing of what they literally wish for. In the fairy-tale setting, being so explicit about character desire feels appropriate. However, within the context of *Pieces of String* the very notion of desire is problematic. The impetus for *Pieces of String* was to explore the acceptance, or lack thereof, of gay male relationships. I was concerned that writing a song that directly addressed this theme might be too didactic and ultimately decided that the audience needed to learn more about Edward and Anna’s relationship. To that end, ‘In Our Own Little Way’ was written, which - similarly to the aforementioned Sondheim song - functions as a composite of Woolford’s first step, ‘The Ordinary World’, and the *I Want* moment. *I Want* songs are typically very truthful admissions of desire from the protagonist. Rather than excising this entirely, I chose to queer this technique by creating an inauthentic, coerced expression of fantasy and desire; it becomes a *We Want* song for Edward and Anna.

The lyrical content of the song demonstrates that the heterosexual characters are permitted to imagine that anything is possible, and simultaneously offers an indication in the sub-text that this impossible dream is exactly that – impossible. In some ways this was a deliberate gesture

towards the ‘torn marriage manual(s)’ (Barnes, 1971) produced by the Sondheim/Prince collaborations of the 1970s. ‘In Our Own Little Way’ is a fantasy, filled with imagery of houses that are ‘fifteen stories high’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 15) or promises of world travel. The audience understands that these are nonsensical ideas but are swept up in the excitement the pair exude. Rather than the conditional love song trope (discussed below) of two heterosexual characters who seem to dislike each other at the beginning of the show but fall in love by the end (‘People Will Say We’re In Love’ – *Oklahoma!*, ‘I’ll Know’ – *Guys and Dolls*), I chose to portray Edward and Anna as being completely in love at the show’s outset. Their relationship gradually deteriorates throughout the show thus removing the expected heterosexual happy ending. If, as Wolf notes, ‘heterosexuality structures and ideologically underpins the plots of musicals’ (Wolf, 2010, p. 53), and ‘the celebration of heterosexual romance is [the Broadway musical’s] very purpose’ (Wolf, 2010, p. 203), then *Pieces of String* can be considered a direct challenge to this tradition. As such, *Pieces of String* follows Sondheim’s model, subverting the happy endings of the musical so that the traditional happy straight couple are not allowed to have happiness. This can be seen as disrupting the heterosexuality of the musical and retaliation against its heteronormative, heterosexual ideology. In ‘In Our Own Little Way’ Edward tempers Anna’s flights of fancy with a more realistic vision: paying the bills on time, spending the weekend by the sea. ‘A Couple of Regular Guys’ from *Yank!* shares some striking similarities with ‘In Our Own Little Way’: Mitch and Stu’s fantasy is to live a heteronormative life, comprised of settling down, earning a little money, painting the house. There is no matching song for Edward and Tom; their only

attempt at imagining a future together occurs in dialogue and is immediately denied (see Figure 4). Indeed, the fact that their future is beyond possible indicates the tragedy of their situation.

Figure 4 – Scene excerpt from *Pieces of String V3* (p. 86)

TOM

Once this bloody thing is all over, we’ll shack up together somewhere. You’ll get a job in a bank or somewhere just as exciting and I’ll stay at home and get your dinner ready like a good little wife.

EDWARD

Don’t talk like that.

‘A Couple of Regular Guys’ serves as an impossible *We Want* moment and demonstrates the necessarily tragic nature of homosexual relationships at that time. Rather than buy-in or submit to this, Edward will not allow Tom to dream of a future at all. Edward’s verse in ‘In Our Own Little Way’, however, does mirror the long-dreamed-of normality sought for in ‘A Couple of Regular Guys’, positioning a typical heterosexual existence as the reality against Anna’s fantasy. This reflects a subconscious desire in Edward for normality against his impending discovery of homosexuality. Ahmed’s discussion of the domestic space as an unsafe space for the queer (see Chapter Two) is pertinent here; as Edward is unaware of his homosexuality at this point the domestic space might be seen to be a comfortable domain for him. However, as Viertel notes, the *I Want* song should be the hero wanting ‘something that’s hard to get’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 53), therefore Edward’s fantasy being focused on the domestic implies that, for him, this seemingly simple existence will be difficult to obtain.

‘IN OUR OWN LITTLE WAY’: conditional love songs, conditional relationships and *Passion*

The conditional love song generally introduces the notion of romance between two characters and, according to Viertel, can appear in two forms. Either they are ‘full of uncertainty but powered by desire and hope’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 81) as seen in ‘If I Loved You’ from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Carousel* (1945) and ‘If I Could Tell Her’ from Pasek and Paul’s *Dear Evan Hansen* (2015), or they are ‘expressions of pure hostility but powered by desire and hope’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 81), expertly achieved by Frank Loesser in ‘I’ll Know’ (*Guys and Dolls*, 1950). Unlike these songs, ‘In Our Own Little Way’ is seemingly upfront about its intentions but our tacit understanding of dramatic narratives mean that such perfect happiness is untrustworthy. In some ways, ‘In Our Own Little Way’ might be considered an inversion of the conditional love song; conditional love songs are two people saying they will not end up together yet doing so, whereas this is about two people saying they will end up together and not – emotionally at least. In the context of the war setting, this future fantasy might point to an impending death, whereas it is actually about the failure of heterosexuality to thrive. The true conditions placed upon the song – primarily Tom and Edward’s relationship - are not present for either of the characters singing, nor are they present for the audience at that time, but instead foreshadow the events to come.

Whilst *Pieces of String* avoids the conditional love song trope, it does not completely eschew romance as a narrative theme. Engel lists romance as one of the key needs of the musical and, invariably, this romance takes a heterosexual form; boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl. Engel

acknowledges that ‘this general pattern has worked more than any other, but there have been satisfying variations’ (Engel and Kissel, 2006, p. 111). In *Pieces of String* the pattern is varied by including both heterosexual and homosexual romances, neither of which are presented without problems; boy-has-girl, boy-meets-boy, boy-rejects-boy-and-stays-with-girl-even though-he-still-loves-boy. This is an attempt at assimilation, presenting homo- and heterosexuality as equal, and equally troubled. It’s important to note that Edward, certainly at this early point in the story, identifies as heterosexual and does not question his love for Anna. There are parallels to be drawn here with Sondheim and Lapine’s *Passion* (1994).

Passion begins with the soldier Giorgio besotted with married Clara, with whom he is having a passionate sexual affair. Indeed, the show opens with an orgasm, and we see the lovers naked and entwined: *Passion* premiered a quarter of a century ago and yet mirroring such a sexual opening image with two men (or indeed two women) would still be challenging and shocking for an audience today. Giorgio is stationed to a military outpost where he encounters Fosca, a sickly and physically ugly woman. She falls instantly in love with the handsome soldier. As Sondheim notes, however, ‘the story was not about how she is going to fall in love with him...but about how he is going to fall in love with her’ (Sondheim, 2011, p. 145) which is in some ways similar to Edward’s narrative trajectory. In *Pieces of String* the love affair is more balanced and less obsessive than in *Passion*. However the inclusion of an unexpected relationship, with someone hitherto not attractive to the protagonist – in *Passion* an unattractive woman, in *Pieces of String* a man – is the same. As I discuss in this thesis, my latent homophobia is subtly

productive and informs my decisions, hence writing a male/male homosexual relationship that inhabits the same tragic space as Fosca and Giorgio.

MALE DUETS: The male/male love duet in musical theatre

Male duets in musical theatre have different functions. Often they appear as an expression of male competition. In this duet type, the song acts as a fight between two characters, each vying to overpower their opposing player. These can be comical or serious, dependent on the tone of the show they appear in. In another type, the duet acts as a collaboration between the two men onstage. These songs allow the characters to share in a common argument, even if they are separated within the piece by time and location. Rarer is the male/male love duet. When discussing female duets, Wolf states that the song ‘displaces the heterosexual couple’ (Wolf, 2010, p. 33) which could also be true of male duets. However, male duets often depict men competing for a female love interest, which ensures that the heteronormative purpose of the song is never truly eradicated.

In ‘The Confrontation’ from *Les Miserables* (1985), Valjean and Javert sing continuously over one another. This makes it clear that they are in combat and unable, or unwilling, to listen to the other’s point of view. In Jonathan Larson’s *Rent*, Mark and Roger, the heterosexual protagonists, belt out ‘What You Own’, a rock anthem railing against the commercial, corporate, homogenised system they see themselves as being separate from. Sondheim uses the male duet for comic effect in *Into The Woods*, pitting his hapless Princes against one another in a battle to best each other’s heartbreak and claim the most ‘Agony’. These are just a few examples among many and all

include heterosexual characters. Excepting ‘Agony’, which is directly about the male princes’ romantic yearning for female characters, the sexuality of the characters is not relevant. Understandably, the musicals with gay leading characters and homosexual themes are where we see male duets where one might typically expect to see a male/female duet: see also Sondheim’s ‘The Best Thing That Ever Has Happened’ from *Road Show* (2008) and Finn’s ‘What Would I Do’ from *Falsettos*. I will examine both of these songs in detail and place them alongside the two male duets in *Pieces of String* – ‘Walk Away’ and ‘Ordinary’ – later in this chapter. *Rent* is unusual in that it includes a truly sweet gay love duet in ‘I’ll Cover You’. Sung by Angel and Collins, the song is a declaration of their love for one another and is unabashedly romantic. When the lovers sing, ‘I think they meant it/ when they said you can’t buy love/ now I know you can rent it/ a new lease, you are, my love/ on life/ all my life’ (Larson, in Hausam, 2003, p. 150), there is no comment from the author on the nature of this love; this song could just as easily be sung by a heterosexual couple. Of course, the ‘all my life’ proves to be a very short time as Angel dies from complications of AIDS before the year is through. In this way, ‘I’ll Cover You’ functions in a similar way to ‘In Our Own Little Way’, a “Chekhov’s gun” of a song of such unalloyed happiness that cannot last.

‘WHAT WOULD I DO’

‘What Would I Do’ is a male love duet in William Finn’s *Falsettos*. It is less of a declaration of love between two men – Whizzer and Marvin – than an examination of the rationale for their relationship. The song comes in response to Whizzer asking if Marvin regrets their relationship. At this point Whizzer,

diagnosed with AIDS, is close to death. This gives the song an intense melancholy and sense of contemplation. The lyric places the love in past tense; ‘what would I do if I had not loved you?’ (Finn and Lapine, 1993, p. 171) which distances the romantic relationship from the present. The primary sentiment of this song is not about their love, but an acknowledgement of the friendship shared by the men. Indeed, a repeated refrain asks ‘what would I do if you had not been my friend?’ (Finn and Lapine, 1993, p. 172) which further places fraternity above passion. The continued references to their ‘friendship’ somewhat diminishes the positioning of this song as a hymn to a dying lover. Whizzer’s first lyric, ‘all your life you’ve wanted men/and when you got it up to have them/who knew it could end your life?’ (Finn, 1993) reminds the audience of his HIV status and positions gay sex as a death sentence. Though the tragic AIDS gay would ultimately become a trope in musical theatre, here Finn was writing through an autobiographical, autoethnographic lens, and the writing has historical accuracy and poignancy. ‘Unlikely Lovers’, which is heard earlier in *Falsettos*, demonstrates a more direct declaration of their romantic intent (see Chapter Four) but it is interesting that in this final, and only, duet between Marvin and Whizzer that friendship is identified as the most important element of their relationship.

‘THE BEST THING THAT EVER HAS HAPPENED’

Sondheim has, to date, only written one homosexual duet, and this in fact began as a song for heterosexual lovers. *Road Show*, written with previous collaborator John Weidman, told the story of the Mizner brothers and was

originally titled *Bounce* (2003)⁷. As Sondheim notes, it was director Hal Prince who felt that ‘John and I were cheating our subject by the lack of sex in the show – heterosexual sex, that is’ (Sondheim, 2010, p. 244) and elicited the inclusion of ‘The Best Thing That Ever Has Happened’ (Sondheim, 2003) as a heterosexual love duet. Prince himself is a straight man and it is interesting that Sondheim identifies Prince as the source of this traditional song form. In another riposte to Ahmed’s notion of the domestic space as unsafe for the queer person, the most recent version of the musical, *Road Show*, transforms the song into a duet between Addison Mizner and his homosexual lover, Hollis⁸. Much like ‘A Couple of Regular Guys’ in *Yank!*, the lyric here posits the notion of home and being alone together, in a somewhat heteronormative fashion, as the ideal. Unlike the previous song however, ‘The Best Thing That Ever Has Happened’ simply uses staying home as a means to be together, with little of the heteronormative fantasising that the *Yank!* song employs. This introduces a tacit understanding between the characters that they need to be alone in order to be their truest, and gayest, selves, not least because this seclusion protects them from the homophobic outside world. Hollis sings that Addison ‘might just be the best thing that has happened to me. So far’ (Sondheim, 2011, p. 287) but then tempers this with humour; ‘Of course not much has ever happened to me’ (Sondheim, 2011, p. 287). Initially, moderating their feelings with sarcasm may appear to show a reluctance from Sondheim to present the homosexual relationship in as forthright a fashion as he might a heterosexual one. Nevertheless, the final lyrics move into the

⁷ At two earlier readings, in 1998 and 1999, the later directed by Sam Mendes, the show was titled *Wise Guys*.

⁸ Despite the biographical origins of the story, Hollis is a fictional invention.

affirmative and both sing ‘you *are* (my italics) the best thing that’s happened to me’ (Sondheim, 2011, p. 287), dispelling the notion that Sondheim is hesitant at showing their love. Despite this, it could be argued that this song is a reflection of the tragic-gay as it secludes the gay men from the outside world. Sondheim and Weidman’s vision of a safe space in a domestic environment - providing there are no heterosexuals present - contrasts with *Pieces of String* which only ever shows the domestic space as a site of unhappiness for the gay characters (see Chapter Two.)

MALE DUETS IN *PIECES OF STRING*: Walk Away and Ordinary

Pieces of String includes two male duets, ‘Walk Away’ and ‘Ordinary’, which act as companion pieces to each other. Both portray a disintegrating homosexual relationship at a moment of crisis. Both songs embody the central concept of *Pieces of String*; look how far we’ve come but how far we still have to go. Each number subtly utilises the song types explained above, namely that of the male in competition with another. However, the difference in their structure reflects the differences in the temporal and societal positions of the characters. ‘Ordinary’ uses discord between vocal lines and key signatures to demonstrate a competition between two men, whereas ‘Walk Away’ is a more direct argument, with lines being split more conversationally between the men.

WALK AWAY

‘Walk Away’, sung by Ed and Harry, appears first and explores the troubles the couple are having in a considered, measured way: Ed and Harry have had this argument before and the conflict they feel is initially more cerebral in tone;

they are thinking through their decisions. The constantly moving accompaniment creates a shifting, unsettled feeling. This is mirrored in the lyrics in which Ed challenges Harry to walk away from the relationship. The accompaniment then abruptly changes into block chords when Harry retaliates, the chords musically framing the heaviness of Harry’s lines; ‘to somebody who won’t be so petrified?’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 28), ‘Maybe I should start the forgetting you?’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 28). The romantic problems are caused and exacerbated by Ed’s internalised homophobia and the lack of acceptance from his mother, Jane. This number crystallises the conflict that the men feel, both towards each other and within themselves. Whilst the verses are antagonistic, both choruses become internal ruminations on the love they still feel for the other. Ed sings a soaring melody acknowledging his hypothetical response to being alone, that he will ‘find I’m losing clarity’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 29). Harry’s chorus is filled with doubt; ‘but then/ you’ll flash that smile/ or squeeze my hand/ you’ll ask for patience/ I’ll understand’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 28). The choruses are written to act as counterpoint, a subtle message to the spectator that these characters do fit together and ultimately can find harmony, albeit with different approaches. This foreshadows the reunion that occurs in the final moments of the show.

‘Walk Away’ is an attempt to rationalise Ed and Harry’s trauma. By giving them self-awareness I am endeavouring to create depth and attribute nuanced emotions to the characters. This evidences an autoethnographic approach which does not avoid the trauma but attempts to challenge and question it. In *Autoethnography as Method* (2008) Heewon Chang states that alongside recording the personal stories of self-narrators, self-narratives ‘also

embrace the sociocultural contexts of the stories’ (Chang, 2008, p. 41) and ‘Walk Away’ allows me to do just that. The song acts as a microcosm of the societal difficulties facing contemporary gay male couples; the ‘look how far we’ve still got to go’ part of the initial concept. *Pieces of String* is not a self-narrative but, as discussed previously, the characters and relationship of Ed and Harry were embryonically based upon my own lived experience. As Chang notes, ‘the writing process evokes self-reflection and self-analysis through which self-discovery becomes a possibility’ (Chang, 2008, p. 41), and this occurred whilst working on this song in particular. I was forced to inhabit both sides of the argument and through this action, I was able to understand my own experience from a wider, and less self-referential, perspective. By writing a male duet that places the characters in opposition I am adhering to the conventions of the traditional male duet, but by making them lovers the conventions are simultaneously somewhat subverted. This song, therefore, might be considered to be a micro-occupation, following the Brooks model, which draws upon an audience’s knowledge of musical theatre male duets (as detailed above) but ‘occupies’ the song with homosexual love.

ORDINARY

‘Ordinary’ is a duet for Tom and Edward and builds out of their panic after being caught kissing by Young Rose: one of the ‘forced out’ moments discussed in Chapter Four. When the lyric changes from frantic demands, ‘don’t make me stand here and watch you unravelling’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 89), into more pleading questioning ‘how can we do this if you don’t let me in?’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 89), the vocal melody lifts and the rhythms become legato,

implying a shift into something slightly less erratic. However, the men have very disparate melodic lines and never harmonise. When Edward joins the song at the chorus the key changes, causing Tom’s last note to clash and indicating the discord between the men. During the chorus, Tom can only repeat Edward’s words back at him, albeit with an altered meaning. He cannot find anything to say to combat Edward’s mentality, which recalls the necessarily tragic outcome for gay relationships at the time shared by ‘A Couple of Regular Guys’. This is best evidenced with Edward’s lyric ‘I won’t achieve the things you want me to’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 90) to which Tom responds ‘you want me, too’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 90). Although the men are saying the same words they are not saying the same thing. This song uses the same tacit understanding of musical theatre form to subvert the conventions as ‘Walk Away’ before it. Again, this might then constitute a micro-occupation by showing a male/male competitive duet but being explicit that the characters are lovers. The adjusted format supports the overarching theme of the entire show: ‘look how far we’ve come, but how far we’ve got to go’ by depicting breaking gay relationships in different formats – one more cerebral, the other more emotional in tone.

TENT POLES: The Act One showstopper

‘Standing in the Shadows’ can be considered a ‘tent pole’ number, as identified by Jack Viertel. Appearing around an hour into the first act, the song arrives at a point where ‘we’re deep into the story’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 142) and in need of some respite from the narrative. Or rather, requiring an injection of energy in order to revive the audience. This often occurs ‘with a high-energy number

that gets everyone’s blood pumping hard enough to get us to the first act curtain’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 142) and ‘Standing in the Shadows’ fits this criteria. In *Pieces of String*, the jigsaw-like structure of the opposing timeframes means that most of the earlier numbers were written not to include musical buttons – a clear note or beat to signal the end of the song - or were staged in such a way that the action moved on too swiftly to allow for applause. This ensured that the musical retained constant movement and kept up the pace of the show. Subsequently, by the time ‘Standing in the Shadows’ arrives the audience are in need of an opportunity to applaud. Viertel states that ‘tent poles are usually fun. They’re usually up-tempo too’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 145), neither of which descriptors apply to ‘Standing in the Shadows’. However, Viertel does acknowledge some exceptions; ‘One Short Day’ in *Wicked* and ‘History Has Its Eyes on You/Yorktown’ in *Hamilton* (2015), and the latter example shares some tonal similarities with ‘Standing in the Shadows’. Viertel notes that at the end of the *Hamilton* numbers ‘you’d think it would be time for intermission. But cannily, the number gives the audience enough energy to sustain it through a couple more scenes’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 145) and ‘Standing in the Shadows’ functions in much the same way. The sheer force of the music, and triumphant, anthemic nature of the song suggest the closing of the act. However, by positioning the song where I have, the energy provided sustains the audience through some significant emotional scenes (see Chapter Five).

Although the tent pole is often ‘another one of those places where musicals are allowed – even required – to defy the logic of storytelling’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 142–143) ‘Standing in the Shadows’ does in fact have a clear narrative thrust. Indeed, the addition of narrative clarity was the main focus as

the song developed. V1 adhered to a more traditional idea of the tent pole and was largely an assault ‘on the other part of the brain – the part that responds to color and light, rhythm and pace’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 143) rather than progressing the plot. ‘Standing in the Shadows’ walks a fine line between trying to be commercially popular and still being able to do the heavy-lifting required by the plot, a liminal state that I was deliberately attempting to traverse. By using the tropes included in this song – the boyband/male quartet, the tent pole format – but instilling the number with the themes of gay love and homophobia, I am deliberately attempting to manipulate the audience into cheering for a same-sex kiss. Or, at least, applauding whilst a same-sex kiss occurs; this is a concerted attempt to frame gay male love as triumphant and something to be applauded and celebrated. This is part of my intervention into the form – a benevolent manipulation of the audience which creates a moment capacious enough to withstand innovative homosexual content (multiple gay leading characters singing about their gayness) without losing its musical theatre structural origins. In the next chapter I explore ‘Standing in the Shadows’ in detail.

ACT ONE CLOSER: Resisting the showstopper

‘Ordinary’ is the closing song of the first act. The number in this position is often a show-stopping moment, designed to send the audience out to the interval utterly exhilarated. Songs such as ‘Defying Gravity’ (*Wicked*) and ‘And I Am Telling You’ (*Dreamgirls*, 1981) are defining moments in musical theatre and follow a great tradition of ‘belted act 1 finales of female self-assertion’ (Wolf, 2010, p. 4). When an interval was introduced into *Pieces of String*,

something that I resisted for a long time because I worried that the break would disrupt the momentum of the story, my initial thought was to give Jane her first big solo to end the act. As Wolf notes, ‘the act-1-finale-of-female-self-assertion is a conventional song type’ (Wolf, 2010, p. 4), which I intended to utilise to create a star moment for the actress playing the character. At this point in the story, Rose has delivered the box filled with knotted pieces of string to Jane. These bits of thread and shoelaces are a signal of Tom and Edward’s enduring love for one another. I wrote a song for this moment, ‘Turning Stones’ (see Appendix D), which was focused on Jane’s attempts to conceal the news about her father’s gay affair from her children, and also to try to ignore it herself. Whilst the song was strong, and introduced a much needed moment of vulnerability for the character, it felt too sudden. Jane barely had time to register what was in the box, let alone process it and try to cover it up. There was also something problematic in making this moment about Jane. Now, Jane sings her ‘(P)Reprise #2’ and the show breaks for the interval on a cliff-hanger; the audience wants to know what is in the box. Viertel asserts that ‘it’s a rare musical in the twenty-first century that allows a first-act curtain to fall on anything but a showstopper’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 160) but in *Pieces of String* there is no cathartic moment of exhilaration that the audience might expect at this point. Instead, I queer conventions of the form by closing the act with a small scene, the reverse reprise again.

‘Standing in the Shadows’, musically and in terms of impact, is the logical choice for a first-act closer but I resisted this option. As I discussed above I decided to locate ‘Standing in the Shadows’ in the ‘tent pole’ position instead and use the energy it produces to propel the show through the

remaining scenes in Act One. ‘Ordinary’ adheres to the assertion that a first act traditionally ends ‘in a crisis that seems completely beyond redemption’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 158), however by adding the coda of the ‘(P)Reprise’ the dramatic focus returns to the heterosexual character. By positioning the reveal - to Jane - of Edward and Tom’s relationship at such a pivotal point in the narrative, their homosexual love is given an importance and a dramaturgical weight which acts as a balance to the narrative shift onto the heterosexual Jane. Despite this, it is undeniable that I am trading on the currency of the tragic-gay trope here - and of the ‘forced out’ moment - in order to provide the audience with a heightened moment of drama as they head into the interval. Closing the act on a site of trauma for the gay characters is evidence of my usage of the tragic-gay trope, and thus an indication of the challenges I faced when attempting to negotiate myself away from the expected representations of gay male characters. The positioning of Edward and Tom as the characters for whom the audience is rooting for, despite Edward’s heterosexual life with Anna, is in itself a subversion of expectations, however, and helps to counterbalance the reliance upon the tragic-gay trope.

ENDINGS: The eleven o’clock number, the next-to-last scene and the finale

Viertel states that in the final stages of a musical ‘there are really only three beats left in the act: the main event, the all-important result of it (also known as the next to last scene), and the finale’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 206) and *Pieces of String* follows this template with three distinct numbers. Firstly, ‘War Stories’ takes the traditional eleven o’clock number position, ‘Easy’ a solo for Jane,

appears in the next-to-last scene, and the finale song is an ensemble number, ‘Pieces’. After defying convention throughout the show it is interesting that in these final scenes I chose to cleave most closely to a traditional structure.

THE ELEVEN O’CLOCK NUMBER or THE MAIN EVENT

The eleven o’clock number is ‘a final star turn’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 206) that tends to appear very late in the show. Despite being a well-known trope of musical theatre, this number has shifted over time so that its ‘appearances have been scattered in recent years, as has its placement’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 206) although a big musical moment at this point in the show is still necessary. Viertel prefers to call this moment the ‘Main Event’, highlighting its difference from those star vehicles of old. This term is more appropriate for *Pieces of String* as the show’s ensemble nature removes the need for a star vehicle number. ‘War Stories’, therefore, takes this position and forms the ‘Main Event’ of Act Two. It can be said that ‘the eleven ‘o’clock number is often concerned with the Hero making the final decision that will return his life to a form of stability’ (Woolford, 2012, p. 172) however this is not how ‘War Stories’ functions. The song operates unusually by presenting Tom in real time, before leading to a recital from Rose of a letter written by Tom at the end of his life, before settling upon Jane for a final coda.

In some ways, ‘War Stories’ could be considered a hymn to the tragic-gay trope. Tom processes his grief at Edward’s rejection by foreshadowing Edward’s future, warning of a lifetime of sadness; ‘it’s not me that you’re deceiving/don’t you see the life you’re getting/will destroy you year by year?’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 132). The shifting time frames ensure that the audience

knows this to be true and allows the letter, which fills the second half of the song, to have a greater emotional impact. The letter appears immediately after Tom has sung ‘you’re mine’ three times, the final line being raised melodically to indicate his desperation: the line becomes a plea rather than a statement. The moment is underscored, adding emotional weight to the text.

Figure 5 - The Letter from ‘War Stories’ - *Pieces of String V3* (p. 132)

(Jane begins to read the letter.)

JANE

‘My darling Edward’...

(A light on Rose. Rose also reads the letter, although she is able to recite it from memory.)

ROSE

‘My darling Edward.

A long time ago I sat down to write this letter, and yet it’s taken me a lifetime to finish it. I want you to know I was happy for you. At least, I tried to be. Your wife, your child, your home. I hope you enjoyed them. I hope they were worth the choosing.

You get the life you deserve, didn’t someone say that once? I always thought that was a terribly cruel thing to say.

I found out that it was possible to go on without you. I made friends. I even fell in love once or twice. I wasn’t alone, I think you should know that.

It’s too late for us now. It always was. It’s too late for us because we arrived too early.

(Beat)

I longed for those deliveries, those tiny moments of you and me together. Lived for them. I waited for the day like a birthday, when I hoped, knew, that again you would be there telling me, in our way, that it was still me.

(Tom and Edward are lit, separately.)

TOM

‘Because, Edward, it was always you. Always...’

(Lights fade on Tom and Edward.)

It is slightly incongruous that Rose reads the letter rather than Tom. It would have been possible for Tom to recite his own letter, as he is still present on stage. However, I wanted the audience to hear an older voice saying those words. It might have been possible to use voiceover to include

an older actor, playing an older Tom, to do this. By allocating the letter to Rose another layer of subtext is added. The prose becomes imbued not only with Tom’s sadness but also with Rose’s regret and feelings of culpability. As discussed in the previous chapter, I have chosen to address direct identification of homosexuality within the script only. Tom does not explicitly state that he is a homosexual here, nevertheless when he says ‘it’s too late for us because we arrived too early’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 132) we understand that he is referencing the social and legal constraints that his and Edward’s temporal framework placed upon them. This allusion to their time-zone reminds the audience of Ed and Harry and subtly shifts the narrative focus onto their story.

In earlier drafts ‘War Stories’ culminated in a cacophony of voices as all the characters sung distinct lines over one another to represent the voices in Jane’s head. The intention was to show the many parts of the story interacting. The individual lines created an overwhelming sense of confusion, whilst still retaining a harmonic core. Much of this was intended to do the work that I was unable to have the then non-singing Jane do. In rehearsals, director McBryde suggested that the choral ending section should be cut, correctly noting that concluding ‘War Stories’ with the entire company singing together for the first time pre-empts the final song. Initially I was resistant, partly because of the impact that the musical chaos achieved and partly because I was very proud of my work as a writer; seven unique vocal lines working with and against each other is unusual and impressive. Ultimately, however, McBryde’s note allowed me to write a more dramatically satisfying ending to ‘War Stories’ which was intimate and focused on Jane, and which in turn prepared the character for

‘Easy’, which follows. ‘War Stories’ is the most overtly emotional moment in *Pieces of String* and thus adheres to the conventions of the form: providing a ‘Main Event’ which acts as both a culmination of the emotional journey of the characters, and an opportunity for an outpouring of emotion from the audience. It also adheres to tradition by trading on the currency of the tragic-gay and utilising the trauma associated with that trope to elicit an emotional response from the audience. Whilst this analysis may sound calculated, the actual process of creation was much more instinctive than this suggests, which in itself is evidence of the deeply embedded expectations of what gay characters in musicals can be.

THE NEXT-TO-LAST SCENE

Next-to-last scenes are most effective if kept simple and ‘when they answer questions for the audience in a direct way’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 219), and ‘Easy’ from *Pieces of String* appears to follow this instruction. Viertel goes on to state that this is not always a moment for song but I was keen to allow Jane an opportunity to explain her homophobia. In fact, despite the song being used as an apology, Jane never truly apologises for her behaviour. Indeed, when she does say sorry the line continues, ‘sorry/it’s hard to say I’m sorry’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 137) demonstrating that she perhaps is not truly sorry, or at least that a full apology is not within her capabilities at this time. Furthermore, she attempts to provide a rationale without ever truly providing one. She sings of wanting things to be easy, of it being hard to see ‘the life I planned/shifted out of place’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 137) continually turning the focus back onto herself. I chose to make this moment unclear, despite its

surface meaning, to reflect my lived experience; homophobia cannot be removed with one apology. This might be seen to act as a mirror to the repeated nature of coming out, showing that reparations for homophobia are similarly repetitive acts. This may be frustrating to an audience, who do not quite get the resolution they are seeking, but it allows me to keep pushing the limits of what the audience receives and what the form can achieve.

THE FINALE

A finale song can ‘relate the musical back to the outside world of the audience’s lives (Woolford, 2012, p. 178) and ‘Pieces’ adheres to this principle. The somewhat generic lyric here allows the audience to identify with the sentiment; history repeats but we can learn from it. Contemporary musical theatre finale songs are similar to opening numbers and ‘come in two varieties: the intimate ones that tie a beautiful knot and the noisy ones that shoot the works’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 249–250) and ‘Pieces’ resides squarely in the latter category. It is the first time in the show that all of the characters sing together, and in the chorus this is with four separate melodic and vocal lines. Viertel states that ‘shows begin with infinite possibility. They conclude with all possibilities removed save one. The lovers unite. Or not. The quest is rewarded. Or not. Everyone lives happily ever after. Or not’ (Viertel, 2016, p. 239). *Pieces of String* began with Edward and Anna dreaming of a happy future and Jane attempting to move on from her grief. By the end of the show the heterosexual happy ending has been denied but Jane has begun to move away from her grief. In other respects, *Pieces of String* ends with far less certainty than Viertel suggests is necessary. Edward and Tom do not live

happily ever after, but we learn that they loved each other for their entire lives, and continued to share that love through the exchange of knotted pieces of string. Harry and Ed are reunited but their future together is far from certain. The final number, ‘Pieces’, is unusual in that lyrically and musically it feels final, but the various story arcs are still in process. In part, this is due to its initial role as a coda after Jane’s story finishes. In the performance version the song was refocused to allow Jane, coming together with Gemma, to guide Ed towards a reunion with Harry. Therefore the narrative drive of the song occurs not in the text but in the action of the characters. Jane and Gemma urge Ed to seek Harry out and reflect that they ‘might just change the ending’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 140), a reference to Ed’s future but also a reprieve for Jane and her relationship with her children. Again, this is subtle and perhaps does not give the audience the closure they may expect. ‘Pieces’ is anthemic and, as with ‘Standing in the Shadows’ (see Chapter Six) positions a homo-positive storyline against rousing musical accompaniment. This presents the homophobic spectator with a conflict: the music tells them the ending is triumphant but frames a positive homosexual reunion. Indeed, the final moment of the show sees Ed call out to Harry, who turns and waits for him. They hold hands as the lights dim, offering a hint of happiness without depicting any real resolution.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have engaged with Engel’s analysis of the Broadway musical libretto and Jack Viertel’s song-plot approach to dissect how *Pieces of String* conforms to, and resists, existing musical theatre form. I argue that the practice

here inverts the conditional love song and denies the heterosexual romantic couple the traditional happy ending. Furthermore, I have detailed how I rejected a traditional *I Want* song, which works to challenge conventions but prevents homosexual characters expressing desire. I have discussed the use of the male duet as a tool for depicting romantic gay male relationships on the stage, and examined how ‘Walk Away’ and ‘Ordinary’ are examples of the competitive male duet and how both songs subsequently adhere to the tragic-gay trope.

In the next chapter I will focus in on one key moment in *Pieces of String*, the male quartet ‘Standing in the Shadows’. I will explore my use of boyband aesthetics to create a showstopping moment which toys with heterosexual tropes. Moreover, I will discuss how this song attempts to present, and challenge, internalised homophobia within the characters. In the next chapter I position ‘Standing in the Shadows’ as a riposte to Miller’s assertion that the showtune is an act of denial, and argue that the song is the first musical theatre song to directly confront gay shame.

CHAPTER SIX: STANDING IN THE SHADOWS

There are shadows all around
On the walls and on the ground
Casting darkness where they lay
Why'd you let the shadows stay?

'Standing in the Shadows' from *Pieces of String* (Gowland, 2018)

This chapter focuses on one key song/scene moment in *Pieces of String* - 'Standing in the Shadows'. This single number acts as a microcosm of the entire show and yet is also able to function somewhat as its own entity, without the constrictions an entire show imposes; thus, close analysis of this moment allows me to explore the differences between the micro and macro. 'Standing in the Shadows' has been selected for analysis for multiple reasons; it places the four gay male protagonists on stage at the same time – relatively unheard of in the musical theatre canon, it musically and narratively addresses the notion of gay shame, and it employs and manipulates musical theatre song form in order to challenge audience expectations. Whilst the depiction of gay shame adheres to the trope of the tragic-gay, here I am using the trope differently from other musicals by reclaiming rather than simply reaffirming. The song arrives at a moment of crisis for Ed and Harry, and a moment of decision for Tom and Edward, and culminates in an action that will have ramifications for all the other characters in the piece. As such, it plays a pivotal role in both the trajectory of the characters and the narrative arc of the entire show.

'Standing in the Shadows' is the only musical number which sees the four gay male characters in *Pieces of String* alone on stage together. It is very

unusual to see four gay male characters in a musical, not least all in leading roles and sharing the stage together. Ed, repressed and uncomfortable with his sexuality, is in a relationship with Harry, who resents closeting himself for Ed. Stationed abroad during wartime, Tom and Edward are embarking upon their first physical sexual encounter. Tom is as openly gay as the time period allows whilst Edward has recently married his childhood sweetheart. As far as the audience is aware Edward has never previously entertained homosexual thoughts.

There are three main versions of ‘Standing in the Shadows’ that I will be discussing in this chapter (see Appendix A, B and C). The first (hereafter V1), is the original, and was included in the initial semi-professional production of the show at Waterloo East theatre in 2011. The second version (V2) was the product of a number of rewrites, which I will detail later in this chapter, and was first included in the 2014 workshop at Tristan Bates Theatre, directed by Craig Revel Horwood. The following year this version was orchestrated for a promotional demo recording (see Appendix G). In Spring 2018, the performance version (V3) was presented at the Mercury Theatre, Colchester in *Pieces of String’s* first professional production. The benefits of analysing these three distinct versions of the song are manifold; it allows me to chart the trajectory of a song and the creative process, thus restating my case for PaR and a practice based analysis. It also enables me to examine how I challenge musical theatre expectations and tackle internalised homophobia through the development of one song moment. At the beginning of this thesis I outline three main objectives: to explore the persistent patterns of gay representation in musicals, to investigate dominant heterosexual ideologies within musical

theatre practice and to consider how I might create an intervention against the heterogeneous heterosexist norms of the form. The focus on this one musical number allows me to concentrate my investigation and look microscopically at how my practice achieves this.

SONG DEVELOPMENT: the journey from thematic to narrative function

‘Standing in the Shadows’ was the first song written for *Pieces of String*. The number was intended to function thematically and demonstrate the key premise of the show; look how far we’ve come but how far we’ve yet to go.

In V1 almost all of the musical numbers functioned thematically rather than narratively. They were typically sung by characters in the opposing time frame from the previous or concurrent scene. The intention was to comment on how history repeats itself and the past informs the present. This structure was viable for a short piece that had to work in broad strokes in order to tell the story efficiently. However, as the piece grew this concept undermined the expanded narrative journeys of the characters and the lack of specificity detracted from the story. The musical numbers acting as thematic asides confused the coherence of the plot by slowing the action, and subsequently impacted the experience of the musical as a whole. In his book *The Musical as Drama* (2006) Scott McMillin defines two orders of time in the musical; book time and lyric time. McMillin claims that ‘the musical’s complexity comes in part from the tension’ (McMillin, 2014, p. 6) found between these two orders of time. This delineation divides the form further as book time is considered ‘progressive time, in the sense that the ending is different from the beginning’ (McMillin, 2014, p. 6) whilst lyric time ‘interrupts book time in the form of songs

and dances' (McMillin, 2014, p. 7). McMillin challenges the idea of integration, noting that 'most songs and dances do not advance plots' but, rather, they show the audience different modes of characterisation. McMillin's theory fails to fully appreciate the nuanced ways in which a plot can be advanced; revelation of character through song can be as effective a way of furthering plot as more pragmatic book development. Despite this, McMillin's two notions of time do acknowledge the differences between these distinct components of the musical.

One of the major problems of V1 was the disconnect between 'book time' and 'lyric time', the dialogue and the vocal, for Edward (see Appendix A). The dialogue is rooted in narrative truth, and sees Edward nervous, anxious and excited about his tryst with Tom. This transitions into a thematic lyric mirroring Harry, which is much more measured in tone. In V1 the disconnect between McMillin's two orders of time was problematic for the actor and confusing for the audience. The problem was exacerbated by geography. In the opening dialogue it was clear where Edward and Tom were, however as soon as Edward started singing, his location became blurred; was he still in the scene with Tom? If so, could Tom hear him singing? The individual elements of dialogue and score were well executed, however 'what matters most is the alternation between the two. That's what gives the musical its lift, its energy, its elation' (McMillin, 2014, p. 33), and in V1 the shift between the two was stifling the internal logic of the piece. There are precedents of using thematic numbers in musical theatre, perhaps most famously demonstrated by the character of the Emcee in *Cabaret* (1966). The Emcee is able to comment upon the action in standalone numbers but the action of the piece

does not stop completely. Kander and Ebb choose to retain some more traditional book songs, forming something of a two-tier system of musical numbers. As I included more songs that worked as part of the action, ‘Standing in the Shadows’ began to feel out of place for attempting to be both thematic and narrative simultaneously.

BOYBAND AESTHETICS

In the previous chapter I discussed the relatively rare male/male duet. ‘Standing in the Shadows’, an all-male quartet, has some clearer precedents within the form. The precedent is largely set by musicals that explicitly reference all-male performance groups, such as those featured in *Jersey Boys* (2005) and *Forever Plaid* (1989). In these shows the songs mostly function diegetically, with both the audience and actors aware that the song is being delivered within a concert environment. The boyband is a cultural touchstone that I engage with here, and although performed non-diegetically ‘Standing in the Shadows’ nonetheless references a visual and aural boyband aesthetic. The number positions the actors as objects of desire and presents them as facsimiles of any number of boybands that may be recognisable to the audience. Most boyband performers sing in an atomised heterosexual position – as single independent figures despite being part of a group - thus allowing the (typically female) audience member to imagine themselves as the object of the singer’s affection. In ‘Standing in the Shadows’ the men are not only homosexual, but are also interacting with each other. This reduces the potential for the audience to feel romantically engaged with the performer,

however fantastical that might seem, and thus echoes the homosexual position of unrequited romantic longing.

The song diverts further from tradition by having all the characters singing in the same range. Typically, the male quartet utilises a wider selection of vocal ranges; Tenor, Baritone, Bass-Baritone and Bass. Here, I place all of the characters in the high baritone/tenor register. In contemporary musical theatre the male lead is typically cast as a tenor, for example Tony in *West Side Story*, Chris in *Miss Saigon* (1989) and Fiyero in *Wicked*; by placing all of the characters into the tenor range I am informing the audience that each of the men should be viewed as a male romantic lead.

In order to make a show that deals specifically with gay love, it is necessary to focus on the specifics of the characters. In Chapter Two I discussed how heterosexual love and the heterosexual ideal, via the nuclear family and heteronormative narratives, has been repeatedly presented to audiences as the perfect model. As gay love has not been repeatedly performed in the same way this research has to rely on the inversion of tropes and audience tacit knowledge, and act in opposition to them. This route brings its own difficulties, however. In an effort to avoid succumbing to tropes there is a danger that I may resist stereotypes so much that I create characters that are unrecognisable to an audience as authentically gay. My resistance to the tropes might fail to acknowledge that there lies some truth within them. Despite their shortcomings, the ‘dancing queen’, ‘drag queen’ and ‘drama queen’ offer three personality types upon which to build character, without these (or my expansions of these: fabulous and tragic-gay) there is the potential for my gay characters to become anodyne. If so, the audience’s tacit expectations of gay

men in musicals may be a useful tool with which to embellish the characters: the audience become resistant readers by overlaying a more conventional gayness on my characters. The positioning of the characters into this boyband aesthetic, then, added a different trope, an ostensibly heterosexual one, into the equation, further removing the need for me as the writer to include gay signifiers in the characters.

The allusions to the boyband were increased in V2; there was a key change added prior to the final chorus. Director Craig Revel Horwood requested this to create a more impactful ending. I hastily included a chorus to be sung a semitone higher which was effective but unsurprising. This ending stayed in the show throughout many versions and was included in the demo recording (see appendix). However, the inclusion of such an unsubtle key-change was acquiescing to the mainstream in a way that I had hitherto avoided. When we came to production I knew I had to change it. It was too reminiscent of the stand-up-from-the-stool moment so familiar from the performances of boybands of old and jarred with the more nuanced tone of the rest of the show. It was an overt allusion to the boyband aesthetic that, rather than utilising and converting the trope, merely replicated it. Leaving the key change as it was would change the intentions of the show; to walk the line between commercial viability and presenting a complex gay love story on stage. In V3, I opted to repeat the B bridge section instead, and introduced this as an a capella four part harmony. This evokes an all-male barbershop quartet, a musical reference that is often used in musical theatre. I also decided to move the key downwards from D Major to Db Major, rather than ascend to Eb Major as would be expected; the result is still a modulation but

one that avoids the anticipated semitone rise thus preventing the song from succumbing to more traditional ‘pop’ music clichés.

This thesis endeavours to explore the avoidance within my practice of the tropes of gay musical theatre characters, discussed in Chapter Two. Gay characters in musicals often have their skills shown through entertainment; their virtuosity is evidenced through their fabulousness, such as in *Priscilla* (see Chapter Two). Removing the accompaniment at this moment in ‘Standing in the Shadows’ gives the audience an opportunity to fully hear the skill of the performers as the song surges into the final chorus, this offers a moment of fabulous demonstrated entirely through vocal prowess without employing homosexual stereotypes; when the musical accompaniment is removed the starkness of the vocal skill is revealed and there is no place for the singer to hide – it is a musical removal of the closet. In other words, the lack of accompaniment leaves the vocalist exposed, creates a vulnerability in the performance and reveals something hitherto unheard in the show: the performer is stripped of his musical safety net. In this way, the a capella section might also be considered a vocal ‘forced out’ moment for the performer. This is a clear subversion of the musical theatre form as it offers homosexual skills through performance without the expected flamboyance associated with fabulous characters.

GAY SHAME: Lyrical and narrative reclamation of gay shame

If Eve Sedgwick’s assertion that ‘shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity’ (Sedgwick, 2009, p. 61), then ‘Standing in the Shadows’ is a concerted effort to address and thus recognise the power

of shame on the self. As the character with the least internalised homophobia, Harry calls Ed out for his gay shame and the final couplet in the first verse was rewritten to accommodate this; ‘casting darkness where they lay, why’d you let the shadows stay?’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 72). This final line becomes a question from Harry to his lover, after we have learned in previous scenes that this internalised homophobia is the reason that Ed and Harry are struggling to make their relationship work.

‘Oh, they throw sticks and stones
They’re breaking my bones
You’re breaking my heart’

(Gowland, 2018)

The bridge section, or pre-chorus, utilises the children’s rhyme ‘Sticks and Stones’ (Kinglake, 1844) but rather than being an act of defiance, as in the original, it acknowledges the victimhood of the singer and also allocates a perpetrator. The first two lines recognize the physical damage that might be inflicted by an unnamed ‘they’, taken to mean society, and therefore evokes violent imagery of gay bashing or homophobic hate crimes. The triple internal rhyme - Oh/throw/stones - uses the assonance to imply a sense of relentlessness and of impact. Despite this, a larger emphasis is placed on the final line: ‘you’re breaking my heart’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 73). This lyric is clearly directed towards the lover and so the audience is given a definite object upon which to attach the meaning. By placing this sentiment at the end of the phrase, the implication is that nothing is more painful or harmful than the damage that is done by those that love you. The repetition of the word ‘breaking’ similarly works to reinforce this notion.

‘There are shadows all around
On the walls and on the ground’

(Gowland, 2018)

The opening lyric of ‘Standing in the Shadows’ is a statement. It places the gay male at the centre of the drama. The implicit meaning is that gay men are the shadows and are everywhere. This is reflected for the audience by the only visible characters on the stage at that moment being gay men. In the initial version, the final couplet of the verse addresses an unnamed ‘you’; ‘*you* don’t notice them at all’. It is unclear in this moment whether Harry is speaking to Ed, or about himself, or indeed to the audience. A potential difficulty with this is that by attempting to speak universally and have multiple meanings the lyric actually becomes unfocused. This is problematic because a lack of specificity can mean a lack of authentic characterisation. It is possible that by being non-specific with the pronouns, the lyric trades on the clandestine and is therefore itself a product of, and a collusion with, closeting. Paradoxically, the closeted lyric emerges as a result of a closeted form and thus replicates and reaffirms the closet of the showtune.

The shift in intention with the number came as we prepared the performance version, V3. In order to work in the context of production the narrative journey of all the characters throughout the song needed to be clarified. Director Ryan McBryde was concerned that an audience would struggle to engage with the song if it was unconnected to the narrative. Over the course of the many rewrites it had become clear that the song was no longer simply about acknowledging that gay people exist and the central meaning had become much more nuanced. This change was partly in

response to a shift in audience expectation. The public discourse around homosexuality had evolved over the seven years of development and LGBTQ+ stories now appear with more regularity than they did at the beginning of the decade. There have been advances in LGBTQ+ rights worldwide – same sex marriage was legalized in the Republic of Ireland in 2015 and in Australia in 2017, both in response to a national vote – and an increase in LGBTQ+ films garnering awards, attention and positive critical and public reaction; *Moonlight* (2016) and *Call Me By Your Name* (2017) both won Academy Awards, whilst *Love, Simon* (2018) became the first teen movie by a major studio to focus on a gay character. In musical theatre, too, as discussed earlier in this thesis, LGBTQ+ stories and narratives were becoming more and more prevalent. This change meant that visibility was no longer the predominant issue. Tan France, one fifth of Netflix’s *Queer Eye* cast said “The original show was fighting for tolerance. Our fight is for acceptance” (France, in Paskin, 2018). This is a neat summation of the change in viewpoint that ‘Standing in the Shadows’ required. Now the show, and subsequently the song, was about internalised homophobia and so-called gay shame. Rather than comment on gay people being a part of life and the need for tolerance, it was now a number that spoke directly to the difficulty of accepting sexuality, both from an internal and external perspective.

‘Standing in the Shadows’ draws upon the suggestion that ‘gay pride does not even make sense without some reference to the shame of being gay’ (Halperin and Traub, 2009, p. 3) to transform shame into something triumphant. If we cannot have gay pride without gay shame, then by directly referencing this shame but framing it in a traditionally entertaining and joyous

showtune format, we are able to engender pride through the subversion and presentation of shame. In many ways, this performative setting of shame is not so unusual. Sedgwick argues that performance ‘interlines shame as more than just its result or a way of warding it off, though, importantly, it does those things’ (Sedgwick, 2009, p. 52) and this seems to agree with the primary intent of the song; to reject shame whilst acknowledging it. If shame resides in a liminal place ‘that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality’ (Sedgwick, 2009, p. 52) thus the performers in ‘Standing in the Shadows’ are similarly located in a liminal state, somewhere between the diegetic and the non-diegetic. Diegesis denotes an awareness of performance within the performance: ‘someone has a song to sing, according to the book, and goes ahead and sings it’ (McMillin, 2014, p. 104). Whilst this is not quite true in ‘Standing in the Shadows’, the number calls attention to itself by way of its use of performance techniques - the boyband aesthetics and male quartets discussed above – and creates something of an illusion of diegesis within the non-diegetic form of the show.

The chorus deliberately retains a slightly abstract lyric. Set to rousing chords and a descending bell-like accompaniment, the four men declare that they are ‘standing in the shadows, I am running from the world, I am shouting through the dark with all my might’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 73). Depending on the point of view of the character this sentiment can be read as triumphant or persecuted. Indeed, throughout the course of the song this dynamic changes for some of the characters, meaning one thing to begin with then being reclaimed by the end of the number. In V1 the chorus ended with a lyric directly referencing the deus ex-machina of the piece, a shoebox; ‘with a shoebox full

of secrets in my hand' (Gowland, 2011, p. 28). As with previous rewrites, this was something that was less problematic in the show's shorter, more abstract form but which confused the audience as the story was expanded. The lyric was altered for V3 to 'with a secret that is slipping from my hand' which still retains some sense of the abstract. It is not entirely clear what the secret actually is, however the implication is that for both couples this refers to their relationship and homosexuality. When placed into the narrative context of the characters, this lyric has a dual meaning: for Edward the secret slipping suggests the outing that is taking place throughout the scene, his homosexual desires being revealed; for Harry, the secret is a scathing allusion to his enforced closeting by Ed and the loss of their relationship.

The biggest lyrical development between versions occurs in the bridge section towards the end of the number:

Figure 6 - V1 Bridge 3 lyrics

HARRY/TOM/EDWARD

AND YOU'RE NEVER GONNA FIND WHAT YOU CAN BE
TILL THE DAY YOU FIND IT SHOULD BE ME
IT SHOULD BE ME

ED

AND YOU'RE NEVER GONNA FIND WHAT YOU CAN BE
TILL THE DAY YOU FIND IT CAN'T BE ME
IT CAN'T BE ME

In this lyric, Ed is musically singled out by singing a harmony line, a third below the other characters, and has just one word that is different; 'can't' instead of 'should'. It is a clear indicator of Ed's refusal to accept his relationship. Edward singing 'it should be me' is an effort to indicate his burgeoning feelings towards Tom, and his attempted acceptance of his newly

acknowledged sexuality. This is ultimately where he dramaturgically needs to be by the end of this number but in this early version the shift feels too abrupt for the character. As mentioned previously, the broad strokes needed to allow the narrative to work for a one-act piece meant that this lyric worked initially, however as the show expanded, the acceptance that Edward reaches needed more explanation.

Figure 7 - V2/V3 Bridge 3 lyrics

HARRY/TOM

I AM LOOKING AT A SUN THAT DOESN'T SHINE
LIVING IN A WORLD THAT ISN'T MINE
IT ISN'T MINE

EDWARD/ED

I AM TRYING TO CONCEAL THE WAY I FEEL
HIDING IN A SMILE THAT ISN'T REAL
IT ISN'T REAL

In Chapter Three I looked at Sara Ahmed's work on 'Queer Fatalism' (2017) and 'Unhappy Queers' (2010). The final version of the lyric, which has been in place since 2014, directly addresses Ahmed's theories and appears to concur with Ahmed's reading: 'that to be queer is to hurtle towards a miserable fate' (Ahmed, 2017). For Tom, and more specifically Edward, it is the external homophobia of the time that they are living in that causes them to fight against their feelings. Harry and Ed have a more internal homophobia to contest with, a reflection of the more progressive times in which they live. I explored this by privileging and acknowledging the interior lives of the characters, as shown in Figure 7. The song attempts to rebuff Ahmed's prediction of the inevitability of sadness by building towards a triumphant

finale. This is achieved musically but the narrative content of the number adheres to Ahmed’s theory. This juxtaposition of musical and narrative tone might be considered a formal reflection of the lived internal conflict of the homosexual. The musical theatre form of the show tune allows me to externalise and vocalise that which is typically internalised, thus making public what is private.

THE KISS

The concept of the ‘restorative power of the final kiss’ (Danesi, 2013, p. 127) stems from fairy tales; combining romance, a sense of the climatic and timing make the final kiss memorable. Tradition dictates that the two lovers kiss at the end of the show, but in *Pieces of String I* instead position the kiss at the end of ‘Standing in the Shadows’. This action posits the number as a condensed show within a show, and allows the kiss here some of the power afforded to the traditional final frame kiss. In V1, V2, and the rehearsal script, Tom and Edward enter and kiss immediately. During the first verse that Harry sings they find their way back to one another and kiss again. In rehearsals, the kiss between Tom and Edward was striking, not least for the sheer amount of time the actors were required to undertake this act.

To see two lovers, not least two same-sex lovers, engage in such a protracted embrace felt quietly revolutionary and I found myself surprisingly moved during rehearsals. There was also an undeniable erotic charge to such a passionate demonstration of a homosexual sexual encounter. It was with some consternation, then, that I received the director’s suggestion that we should cut this first kiss. McBryde suggested that having the characters kiss

more than once diminished its impact. The rewriting of the narrative throughout the song meant that the entire number was now reframed as a journey towards Edward's first sexual encounter with Tom. This placed me in a difficult position; I was torn between my desire to show two men kissing on stage in a way that would be impactful and new (at least for a musical), and the desire to follow the narrative needs of the dramatic moment. I was concerned that leaving the kiss to the final moment would somehow sensationalise it, which is something I had been wary of doing throughout the entire piece; I was keen that homosexuality never be fetishized for the consumption of a heterosexual audience. Although emotionally I was drawn to using the extended kiss, it was clear dramaturgically that the character journey arc was stronger if the kiss waited until the final chords of the song. My desire to conform to popularism in this moment perhaps thwarted my desire to create something more revolutionary, and evidences the constant conflict between the commercial and the artistic. It could be argued that the pressure of creating work in the popular arena of commercial musical theatre prevented me from pushing my artistic boundaries. However if, as Savran suggests, it is possible to create musical theatre 'that is both commercially viable and aesthetically and politically bold' (Savran, 2003, p. 55) then it could be said that 'Standing in the Shadows' already achieves this fusion of art and commerce; employing showtune techniques and infusing them with homosexual characters and expressions of gay love.

By making the kiss Edward's decision, rather than Tom's, the audience is allowed to appreciate the romance of the moment and is not unsettled by the misconception of coercion. One of the tropes associated with

demonstrations of gay desire is that of the gay sexual predator, as discussed in Chapter Three. One of my concerns when writing the character of Tom was that he should never seem predatory or opportunistic, and that Edward should act of his own volition. Homosexual panic, ‘a pathological psychological condition, perhaps brought on by an unwanted sexual advance’ (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 19) has been successfully used as a legal defence. This defence is founded on ‘unwarranted assumptions that all gay men may plausibly be accused of making sexual advances’ (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 19) and this assumption influenced the portrayal of the sexual consummation in *Pieces of String*. The last lyric, which is sung by all four gay male characters is ‘let the shadows fall’. In this telling it becomes a command, a demand. However, for Edward it is even more so; it is a refusal to accept his doubts about his homosexual feelings, and a commitment to this part of his sexuality. As the last notes ring out Edward moves towards Tom and pulls him into a kiss. This demonstrates that Edward is acting upon his homosexual tendencies of his own volition.

The rehearsal text in its newest version had transformed the song into a musical moment that was more directly relevant to each of the characters in their respective stories. The second verse now saw Ed mirroring Harry, rather than Edward. This kept the contemporary couple connected to each other, thus furthering our understanding of their relationship. It also reflected their stances within the piece, that of Harry being open and confident with his sexuality unlike Ed who ‘always fall(s) a step behind’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 73). It simultaneously allowed Tom and Edward to remain present in their scene and solved the problem of Edward being called upon to leave the action of the

scene to begin singing. The positioning of this kiss directly and deliberately toys with the heterosexual norms of the musical, replacing a heterosexual kiss with a homosexual one. This subversion may seem straightforward, but appearing as it does in a commercial musical, and being located where it was for maximum impact, the kiss still had the power to be shocking to the audience.

SHOWTUNE AS DENIAL: Showtune as acknowledgment

The gay characters in *Pieces of String* don't use 'Standing in the Shadows' to refute their struggle, they take the moment as an opportunity to recognize their position *in the shadows* and ultimately to reject it. In Chapter Three I examined D.A. Miller's assertion that the showtune is in some way an act of denial. 'Standing in the Shadows' directly challenges this reading of the showtune by not being a 'boisterous denial of suffering' (Miller, 1998, p. 8) but rather, a bombastic acknowledgment of it. In her chapter 'Unhappy Queers' from *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed asserts that 'it is always paradoxical to say something does not matter: if you have to say that something does not matter, it usually implies that it does' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 94). It could be argued that 'Standing in the Shadows' acts as a rejoinder to 'I Am What I Am'. Whereas the Herman number stands in defiant rejection of the pain visited upon the homosexual in a heterosexual world, 'Standing in the Shadows' owns rather than rejects that pain. My version of fabulous is not to shield grief with flamboyance but instead to say that I care, I'm affected and I am going to deal with it. Miller suggests that 'the true content of show-tune transcendence is simply the strength to endure a depressive status quo'

(Miller, 1998, p. 7) and this statement supports the work being done in ‘Standing in the Shadows’. However, I would argue that ‘Standing in the Shadows’ goes further in that the characters do not merely endure but, rather, transcend the status quo, if only for a moment. Here, I am taking a popularised form of musical theatre – in this instance the show tune and the male quartet – and inflecting with my own unique (and homosexual) viewpoint.

RECLAIMING THE MUSICAL

In Chapter Two I discussed the work of Daphne Brooks and considered how her notion of ‘occupying’ (2014) might be used to examine sexuality rather than race, and how it could be applied to the musical. Through that lens, ‘Standing in the Shadows’ could be seen as one such occupation, as it takes on the show-stopping musical theatre moment but instils it with an inherent gayness. The insertion of dialogue into the opening verse of the song might be considered in itself an occupation; a song set in a contemporary timeframe and sung by a modern character, that is ‘occupied’ by an historical facsimile. ‘Standing in the Shadows’ asks if it is possible to occupy a song when the audience has no prior knowledge of it. Instead, the song relies upon the tacit expectations held by the musical theatre spectator, and subsequently may offer manifold occupations. Firstly via an appropriation of the showtune form itself. Secondly via the inclusion of gay protagonists in a traditionally heterosexual position, that of the ‘lovers’. Finally, by addressing specifically queer themes, namely gay shame, the song is subtly politicised.

Whilst there are multiple occupations that can be located in this song, I would argue that a more fitting and useful term here could be *reclaiming*.

‘Standing in the Shadows’ asserts a right to sing about what has always been mine, my lived experience, in a form that I consider to be mine too, despite the inherent homophobia identified in previous chapters. *Pieces of String* as reclamation does not require the same strong political edge as Brooks’ model, for it has a different agenda. More precisely, I am not imposing a politicism upon the form qua Brooks. Rather, I am attempting to salvage the musical from the heteronormative, heterosexual sphere in which it has been trapped. Subsequently, ‘Standing in the Shadows’ never directly addresses the homosexuality of the narratives, but argues that its very existence is political. Even the most explicit lines, found in the final bridge section (see figure 6.3), are unspecific and could refer to any social outsider ‘trying to conceal the way (they) feel’ (Gowland, 2018, p. 74). In this instance it is the dramaturgical thrust of the narrative and the dialogue or non-sung action that occur throughout the number that challenge the norm. As the first song written for the show, ‘Standing in the Shadows’ has undertaken the most manipulation throughout its various versions. The research has enabled me as a writer to add narrative clarity to the song and imbue the number with a theoretical framework of gay shame, without sacrificing the formal origins of the song as a show tune.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have focused the study on one song/scene moment from *Pieces of String* – ‘Standing in the Shadows’ and charted its progression through three separate drafts. I have viewed the number through the theoretical frameworks of occupation (Brooks, 2014), gay shame (Halperin and Traub, 2009; Sedgwick, 2009), and the showtune as denial (Miller, 1998).

I argue that this song manipulates musical theatre form by using and subverting the performance aesthetics of the boyband and male quartet, whilst presenting four gay male characters together onstage in a shared musical moment. I suggest that the construction of the number and its transition from thematic to narrative has resulted in the song existing in a liminal state between diegesis and non-diegesis. I have discussed how the number attempts to challenge and claim ownership of gay shame for a brief moment within the musical, and in doing so, frames a homosexual kiss as a triumphant act. I considered the various occupations that the number contains and suggest, instead, that *reclaiming* is a more pertinent term, as it relies less on overt politicism and recognises my rights as a gay writer to the heteronormative form of musical theatre.

In the final chapter I draw my conclusions from the study in its entirety and look to what implications this research might offer for further investigation.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

This study investigated how musical theatre writing practice can challenge the ways in which homosexual men are represented by the form. The study also explored whether the cultural assumptions linking gay men and musicals are responsible for the perpetuation of homophobic tropes and considered the effect of this upon the practice. The study is based on analysis of existing text: of musicals themselves, academic responses to musical theatre and a phenomenological and queer reading of the onstage presentation of homosexuality. The resulting practical work, *Pieces of String*, indicates that tacit expectations, alongside commercial viability and responsibility, impact greatly upon the author's ability to traverse the persistent homosexual stereotypes in musical theatre.

The primary area in which this thesis advances musical theatre scholarship is in its use of practice as a means to investigate the representation of homosexuality in musical theatre. More specifically, this research uses the lived experience of the author as a starting point of an original work of musical theatre. The methodology has been developed through extensive exploration and investigation of existing materials; musical scores and libretti, alongside academic analyses. In conjunction with these resources, the study focuses on some key theoretical arguments through which to view the work; that of Halperin, Ahmed, Brooks, Miller and Lovelock. The field is explored in Chapters Two and Three whilst the practice product is given similar treatment in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

Musical theatre is a collaborative artform and this research creates a writing partnership between the author and the theories contained within. In

so doing, it might be argued that this thesis forms the first (to my knowledge) musical co-written by Ahmed, Halperin, Brooks, Miller (James Lovelock is a musical theatre composer in his own right and therefore is excluded from this list): applying the theories of this assemblage of scholars to my practice has enabled me to write *Pieces of String* through an analytical lens of academic theory.

In Chapter Two I looked specifically at how academia has addressed homosexuality in the musical. I identified the resources in the field and noted how they are often written in response to personal experience and therefore limited in their scope: in some ways, this thesis follows the trend set out by those earlier scholars in that it similarly takes a particularly personal view on the subject. Nevertheless the works of Miller and Clum, which examine the relationship between the homosexual and musicals, have proved vital. Both of these works, alongside Halperin’s *How To Be Gay* (2012) locate a great deal of the work on the role of the gay audience member and are therefore necessarily concerned with the cultural identity of the gay musical theatre fan. Whilst this thesis concentrates on the act of making rather than receiving a musical, the construction of a gay sensibility, which revolves around a love of musicals that they discuss, forms an integral part of the cultural assumptions with which this research contends.

The cultural assumption that musical theatre is by and for homosexuals pervades the form. This research dismantles that assumption and argues that the musical is, in fact, a heterosexual cultural object, with homosexuality located in its margins. This study, by its very nature, contests the suggestion

put forth by Miller, Clum and Halperin that including gay characters in a musical somehow negates their gayness. In contrast with these assumptions, this study explores the musical as a safe space for homosexuals, with particular investigation afforded to Sara Ahmed’s work locating the domestic space as an unsafe space for gay people. Through this lens I examined the conflict between heterosexual narratives and homophobic environments, with the use of the family home as a setting for *Pieces of String* reflecting this. A large portion of this work connecting gay men and musicals relies on reading coded signs within musical theatre material. Whilst this has been historically necessary, this study questioned its relevance today and sought to remove the need for homosexual codes by including prominent homosexual characters within the practice product.

At the beginning of this research it was recognised that the representation of homosexual men in musical theatre was dominated by three persistent stereotypes, defined by Lovelock as the dancing queen, the drama queen and the drag queen (2016, 2019). This research investigated these tropes and expanded them by including the terms tragic-gay and fabulous. Tragic-gay acts as an extension of the drama queen trope by allowing more scope for trauma whilst not carrying the patronising associations connoted by the term drama queen. Fabulous emerges out of black gay culture but, in being co-opted by musical theatre, loses some of its political agency. Indeed, as this counter-culture is consumed and transported into the mainstream culture of the musical, it becomes softened by the ‘glitzy attire’ (Clum, 1999, p. 90) of the form. This is echoed in the application of Daphne A Brooks’ occupation (2014)

theory which is similarly de-politicised once applied to musical theatre. *Pieces of String* is occupying the musical in a subtle way because the constraints of the mainstream prevent an overt politicism: oftentimes it is in avant-garde performance styles and venues where more overtly political works are allowed to exist. Perhaps, though, as Madonna’s ‘Vogue’ and *Rupaul’s Drag Race* have demonstrated, these marginalised forms will eventually find their way into the mainstream.

In Chapter Three the research focus shifted onto existing musicals which were viewed through three key theories; Sara Ahmed’s queer fatalism (2017), Daphne A Brooks’ occupation (2014) and Miller’s showtune as denial (1998). The study used *Closer to Heaven* to explore Ahmed’s suggestion that queer lives are destined to be unhappy lives, and linked this theory to Lovelock’s definition of the drama queen trope. Miller uses *Gypsy* as a means to explore his, and by extension a multitude of gay men’s, affiliation to musicals. This study assessed Miller’s assertion that show tunes should be considered acts of denial and this was further investigated through analysis of ‘Standing in the Shadows’ in Chapter Six. *Kinky Boots* was used as a case study for Daphne Brooks’ occupation, in particular Billy Porter’s performance of Lola, which contradicted the author’s intent for the role to be heterosexual. This perspective allowed me also to consider queering, noting that despite the opportunity for discourse that overlaying a differing sexuality or gender onto a role can bring, queering is not a fully satisfactory method to progress diverse sexual identities in musical theatre.

The latter half of this written thesis was dedicated to a comprehensive account of *Pieces of String*. Drawing upon the information garnered through the literature review it was possible to locate the ways in which homosexual representation in the show challenged, or conformed, to expectations. The case studies of *Yank!* and *The View Upstairs* in Chapter Four placed *Pieces of String* in context with its contemporaries and offered clear differences in how each show traverses the tacit expectations imposed upon them by the form. *Yank!* was identified as a continuation of the traditional model and not an occupation of it, whilst *The View Upstairs* presented an alternative route for the writer – that of utilising the tropes instead of rejecting them, as this thesis does. In addition, it was recognised that the homophobic atmosphere in *Pieces of String* is potentially as damaging as a continued use of homophobic language in *Yank!*. It was also noted, however, that in order to successfully question homophobia, its inclusion in the narrative – be that atmospherically or verbally – is necessary. Notwithstanding the exploration of gay male representation in *Pieces of String*, Chapter Four dedicated a substantial amount of time to the heterosexual female character of Jane. I discussed how she became the locus for homophobia within in the show and how, by using her as a method through which to show acceptance of homosexuality, her position within the narrative shifted in prominence through various drafts.

It was suggested in Chapter Five that Jack Viertel’s work on the structure of the Broadway musical might be used as a rubric through which to examine how *Pieces of String* adheres to, and resists, traditional patterns of construction. This was utilised alongside works by Lehman Engel and Julian

Woolford to explore conventional musical structure. The practice was shown to eschew heterosexual normatives such as the happy endings for straight lovers, and argued that the lack of an ‘I want’ song in *Pieces of String* simultaneously breaks with convention and limits homosexual expressions of desire.

The male duet is shown to be a tool for male competition; for female lovers, for power. Examples of gay male love duets are relatively rare but these were investigated alongside ‘Walk Away’ and ‘Ordinary’ from *Pieces of String*. The examples from my musical both adhere to the tragic-gay trope and this demonstrates a key finding of this research: that I was unable to fully discard all of the existing tropes. This research suggests that it is not possible to investigate homosexuality without putting the foil of homophobia into the show. I located myself as a tragic gay writer, too, and acknowledged how the use of my lived experience results in an exchange of trauma between practice and practitioner. In the future I am keen to challenge this further and investigate what the removal of gay tragedy might mean for my work. The work uncovered in this study is, necessarily, located close to my personal experience and therefore there is ample room for others to make similar excavations in their own work. Further, moving away from autoethnography and lived experience will be an interesting way for the form to explore themes of identity. The study directly responds to Sara Ahmed’s analysis of queer fatalism (2017) and locates this theory in the field of musical theatre. There is scope for work to continue to address and challenge the notion of queer fatalism, rather than allow it to continue to appear as an unconscious trope.

Chapter Six concentrated the study on one song/scene moment from act one of *Pieces of String* – ‘Standing in the Shadows’. It was argued that this musical moment manipulates musical theatre form by locating gay shame as a major theme, and is unusual for placing four gay male characters together on stage at the same time. The song utilises performance aesthetics such as those associated with the boyband and barbershop quartet to play with an audience’s expectations of the showtune. Further, the use of these aesthetic influences within a narrative number traverses the diegetic and non-diegetic, thus positioning the song in a liminal location between the book, the song and the performance. By analysing three distinct versions of ‘Standing in the Shadows’ this research was able to explore the transition from a thematic to a narrative number. The resulting moment in the show others the song, stylistically and formally, and offers a structure that mirrors its thematic content. Halperin argues that ‘gay pride does not even make sense without some reference to the shame of being gay’ (Halperin and Traub, 2009, p. 3) and ‘Standing in the Shadows’ contributes to this discourse practically: it uses and confronts shame through the performance of triumph. ‘Standing in the Shadows’ is a direct response to Ahmed’s assertion of the inevitability of sadness for the queer person by building towards a musically triumphant ending, which frames a moment of gay love: a same-sex male kiss. The shifting placement of this kiss raised questions for me as writer, and highlighted the tension between commercial viability and dramaturgical verisimilitude. My desire to depict a protracted gay kiss – hitherto unseen in musical theatre – in contrast with the narrative constraints of the musical is

emblematic of the challenges the practitioner as researcher faces when creating an original, cohesive piece of new musical theatre.

Despite this study identifying the musical as a heterosexual cultural object, in contrast with the literature, the research simultaneously asserts my ownership of the form as a gay writer. This reclamation of the musical argues that the form is at once mine and also not mine and ‘Standing in the Shadows’ reflects this dichotomy by appropriating the heterosexual showtune as a tool for gay men to reject their shame. The song conforms to tradition in failing to use the text to explicitly identify homosexuality, which might be seen as a failure to politicise the argument, although this study suggests that the song’s very existence is a political act.

It was recognised that one of the main problems with musical theatre studies has been the sometimes myopic treatment of the subject with regards to gender and sexuality. As the literature review in Chapter Two demonstrates, there is a continued conflation of these within the field. This study is amongst the first to attempt to separate gender and sexuality and undo some of the conjoining that has occurred throughout musical theatre studies. Despite this, the focus of the research necessarily limits the scope by privileging the gay male. The tropes of gay males in musicals rely heavily on this conflation and through the practice I discovered that these are not easy to dissolve. In *Pieces of String* I aimed to exclude the tropes but recognise that my rejection of them sometimes constricted the work. Nonetheless, I am hopeful, however, that as our collective understanding of diverse sexualities and genders expands, so too will our treatment of musical theatre, both academically and practically; we are certainly seeing this with edited

collections such as *Reframing The Musical: race, culture and identity* (2019). Moving forward, I would welcome practitioners developing the work of this study with a focus on their own sexualities and/or genders so that we build better representation across all areas of identity.

This thesis concludes that it is possible for homosexual representation in musical theatre to progress past the existing stereotypes and offer less stereotyped depictions of gay men. However, it also identifies a number of constraints that are placed upon me, as the writer, when attempting to do so. Our collective assumptions linking gay men and musicals are well established and, whilst this study goes some way in dismantling these expectations, a substantial shift is required in order to fully place diverse voices – be they gay, queer, or other – at the forefront of the musical. Despite this seemingly negative outcome, there are more and more new musicals which push the boundaries of what the musical can do, especially with regards to gay characters and narratives. It may seem to be a coincidence that three musicals have appeared in quick succession that tell stories of teenagers and their proms; *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie*, *The Prom* and the forthcoming *The Louder We Get* (2020), but I would argue that the sheer number of these shows being produced in a mainstream commercial environment is ultimately an encouraging sign (despite continuing to adhere to Lovelock’s tropes). The more representation there is, the more chance we have of creating an audience for gay stories, and thus more nuance in these stories will begin to emerge.

Michael R. Jackson’s *A Strange Loop* (2019) opened at New York’s Public Theatre and was a musical ‘about a black, queer man writing a musical about a black, queer man who’s writing a musical about a black queer man who’s writing a musical about a black queer man, etc.’ (Jackson, in Brantley, 2019). That Jackson is writing about his intersectional identity as ‘one lone gay black boy’ (Jackson, 2019) in a musical is a political act in itself, but that he goes further to also disrupt the form of the musical is thrilling, and points towards an exciting future for musical theatre in general.

Pieces of String offers a gay story in a different way than musical theatre tradition leads us to expect. It is unique for including multiple gay male characters and placing their stories at the centre of the narrative. Aside from simply including gay stories there is ample scope for musical theatre to develop structure and the form, too: *Pieces of String* uses dual timeframes to compare the gay male experience in different eras and filters those societal constraints through the characters and their experiences. Looking forward, I aim to expand upon the work of this study in my own practice, using future shows to continue providing multi-faceted gay male characters in original works of musical theatre.

This research has brought the lens of Ahmed’s queer fatalism (2017) to musical theatre studies and, in doing so, creates a new route for the field to investigate and explore depictions of homosexual, and queer, characters in musicals. Queer fatalism acknowledges an anxiety which forces the practitioner and scholar alike to consider the ramifications of using and eschewing character tropes in musicals. In return, *Pieces of String* and this research project contribute to the burgeoning understanding of queer fatalism

and allow us to question the inevitability of sorrow that Ahmed suggests. This research draws attention to the tensions between the writer and the writing, between the researcher and the research and, by challenging them and sounding the alarm, points towards a more optimistic future for the form. In my work I intend to continue to challenge and explore how my gay characters are represented and I hope that my work will encourage others to treat their homosexual characters differently, too.

Appendix A: 'Standing in the Shadows' V1

STANDING IN THE SHADOWS

Harry

THERE ARE SHADOWS ALL AROUND

(Music vamps underneath. Eventually **Edward** pulls away and looks around worriedly.)

Edward

Someone will see us.

Tom

No they won't.

Edward

How can you be sure?

Tom

No one ever comes here at this time.

Edward

Except you.

Tom

Yes. I want you.

Harry

ON THE WALLS AND ON THE GROUND

(Music vamps. **Tom** goes in to kiss **Edward** again but he pulls away before **Tom** can get there.)

Edward

So you bring them all here?

Tom

Kiss me.

Edward

Answer me.

Tom

Yes. The hundreds of them. They've all been in here. I lined them up. My platoon.

Edward

Don't make fun of me. I don't know what I'm doing.

Harry

CASTING DARKNESS WHERE THEY FALL

Tom

And I'm taking advantage?

Edward

No. Yes. No. I just feel...young.

Tom

Good. It's a whole lot better than feeling dead.

Edward

That's not funny.

Tom

I know.

(A pause. Slowly **Tom** starts to run his fingers up **Edward's** arm. This is tender but charged.)

Harry

YOU DON'T NOTICE THEM AT ALL

Edward

My heart is racing.

Tom

Mine too.

(They kiss.)

Harry

THERE ARE SHADOWS EVERYWHERE

Edward

THERE ARE SHADOWS EVERYWHERE

Harry

YET YOU PASS THEM UNAWARE

Edward

YET YOU PASS THEM UNAWARE

Harry

OUT OF SIGHT AND OUT OF MIND

Edward

CASTING DARKNESS

Harry

YOU ALWAYS FALL A STEP BEHIND

Edward

YOU DON'T SEE THEM

Harry

OH, THEY THROW STICKS AND STONES
THEY'RE BREAKING MY BONES
YOU'RE BREAKING MY HEART

Both

OH, THEY THROW STICKS AND STONES
THEY'RE BREAKING MY BONES
YOU'RE BREAKING MY HEART

I AM STANDING IN THE SHADOWS
I AM RUNNING FROM THE WORLD
I AM SHOUTING THROUGH THE DARK WITH ALL MY
MIGHT

Harry

STANDING IN THE SHADOWS

Edward

I'M WATCHING

Harry

I AM RUNNING FROM THE WORLD

Edward

I'M WAITING

Harry

WITH A SHOEBOX FULL OF SECRETS IN MY HAND
IN MY HAND

Edward

THERE ARE THREATS YOU CAN'T IGNORE

Harry

IN MY HAND

Edward

THERE ARE THINGS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Harry

THERE ARE SHADOWS ALL AROUND

Edward

THERE ARE PATHS YOU HAVE TO TREAD

Harry

ON THE WALLS AND ON THE GROUND

Both

THERE ARE THINGS THAT MUST BE SAID

Harry, Edward, Tom & Ed

AND YOU'RE NEVER GONNA FIND WHAT YOU CAN
BE

Ed

TILL THE DAY YOU FIND IT CAN'T BE ME
IT CAN'T BE ME

Harry & Tom & Edward

TILL THE DAY YOU FIND IT SHOULD BE ME
IT SHOULD BE ME

All

AND YOU'RE NEVER GONNA KNOW YOU CAN BE
FREE

Ed

TILL YOU UNDERSTAND IT CAN'T BE ME
WHY CAN'T YOU SEE?

Harry & Tom & Edward

TILL YOU UNDERSTAND IT SHOULD BE ME
WHY CAN'T YOU SEE?

All

I AM STANDING IN THE SHADOWS
I AM RUNNING FROM THE WORLD
I AM SHOUTING THROUGH THE DARK WITH ALL MY
MIGHT

(Lights back to the house.)

Appendix B: 'Standing in the Shadows' V2

Harry THERE ARE SHADOWS ALL AROUND

*(Music vamps underneath. Eventually **Edward** pulls away and looks around worriedly)*

Edward Someone will see us.

Tom No they won't.

Edward How can you be sure?

Tom No one ever comes here at this time.

Edward Except you.

Tom Yes. I want you.

Harry ON THE WALLS AND ON THE GROUND

*(Music vamps. **Tom** goes in to kiss **Edward** again but he pulls away before **Tom** can get there)*

Edward So you bring them all here?

Tom Kiss me.

Edward Answer me.

Tom Yes. The hundreds of them. They've all been in here. I lined them up. My platoon.

Edward Don't make fun of me. I don't know what I'm doing.

Harry CASTING DARKNESS WHERE THEY FALL

Tom And I'm taking advantage?

Edward No. Yes. No. I just feel...young.

Tom Good. It's a whole lot better than feeling dead.

Edward That's not funny.

Tom I know.

*(A pause. Slowly **Tom** starts to run his fingers up **Edward's** arm. This is tender but charged)*

Harry YOU DON'T NOTICE THEM AT ALL

Edward My heart is racing.

Tom Mine too.

(They kiss)

Harry THERE ARE SHADOWS EVERYWHERE

Edward THERE ARE SHADOWS EVERYWHERE

Harry YET YOU PASS THEM UNAWARE

Edward YET YOU PASS THEM UNAWARE

Harry OUT OF SIGHT AND OUT OF MIND

Edward CASTING DARKNESS

Harry YOU ALWAYS FALL A STEP BEHIND

Edward YOU DON'T SEE THEM

Harry OH, THEY THROW STICKS AND STONES
THEY'RE BREAKING MY BONES
YOU'RE BREAKING MY HEART

Both OH, THEY THROW STICKS AND STONES
THEY'RE BREAKING MY BONES
YOU'RE BREAKING MY HEART

Harry & Edward
I AM STANDING IN THE SHADOWS

Tom OH, THEY THROW STICKS AND STONES

Harry & Edward
I AM RUNNING FROM THE WORLD

Tom THEY'RE BREAKING MY BONES

Harry & Edward
I AM SHOUTING THROUGH THE DARK WITH ALL MY
MIGHT

Tom YOU'RE BREAKING MY HEART

Harry & Edward

STANDING IN THE SHADOWS
I AM RUNNING FROM THE WORLD
WITH A SECRET THAT IS SLIPPING FROM MY HAND

Harry FROM MY HAND

Edward THERE ARE THREATS YOU CAN'T IGNORE

Harry FROM MY HAND

Edward THERE ARE THINGS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Harry THERE ARE SHADOWS ALL AROUND

Ed OH, THEY THROW STICKS AND STONES

Edward THERE ARE PATHS YOU HAVE TO TREAD

Harry ON THE WALLS AND ON THE GROUND

Ed THEY'RE BREAKING MY BONES

Tom OH, THEY THROW STICKS AND STONES

Edward & Harry THERE ARE THINGS THAT MUST BE SAID

Harry & Tom

I AM LOOKING AT A SUN THAT DOESN'T SHINE
LIVING IN A WORLD THAT ISN'T MINE
IT ISN'T MINE

Ed & Edward

I AM TRYING TO CONCEAL THE WAY I FEEL
HIDING IN A SMILE THAT ISN'T REAL
IT ISN'T REAL

Harry I AM LOOKING AT A SUN THAT DOESN'T SHINE
LIVING IN A WORLD THAT ISN'T MINE
IT ISN'T MINE

Edward I AM TRYING TO CONCEAL THE WAY I FEEL
HIDING IN A SMILE THAT ISN'T REAL
IT ISN'T REAL

Tom I AM LOOKING AT A SUN THAT DOESN'T SHINE
LIVING IN A WORLD THAT ISN'T MINE

Ed I AM TRYING TO CONCEAL THE WAY I FEEL
HIDING IN A SMILE THAT ISN'T REAL

All STANDING IN THE SHADOWS
I AM RUNNING FROM THE WORLD
I AM SHOUTING THROUGH THE DARK WITH ALL MY
MIGHT
ALL MY MIGHT
STANDING IN THE SHADOWS
I AM RUNNING FROM THE WORLD
I AM SHOUTING THROUGH THE DARK WITH ALL MY
MIGHT
LET THE SHADOWS FALL.

Appendix C: 'Standing in the Shadows' V3

(1944. Having snuck away from main camp, Edward enters. He is in his vest and underwear. He is closely followed by Tom, wearing the same. As soon as they are sure they coast is clear, Tom grabs Edward and moves to kiss him.)

HARRY
THERE ARE SHADOWS ALL AROUND

(Music vamps underneath. Edward pulls away and looks around worriedly.)

EDWARD
Someone will see us.

TOM
No they won't.

EDWARD
How can you be sure?

TOM
No one ever comes here at this time.

EDWARD
Except you.

TOM
Yes. I want you.

HARRY
ON THE WALLS AND ON THE GROUND

(Music vamps. Tom goes to kiss Edward again, who again pulls away.)

EDWARD
So you bring them all here?

TOM
Kiss me.

EDWARD
Answer me.

TOM
Yes. The hundreds of them. They've all been in here. I lined them up. My platoon.

EDWARD

Don't make fun of me.

HARRY

CASTING DARKNESS WHERE THEY LAY

EDWARD

I don't know what I'm doing.

TOM

And I'm taking advantage?

EDWARD

No. I just feel...young.

TOM

That's a whole lot better than feeling dead.

EDWARD

That's not funny.

(A pause. Slowly Tom runs his fingers up Edward's arm.)

HARRY

WHY D'YOU LET THE SHADOWS STAY?

EDWARD

My heart is racing.

TOM

Mine too.

(They embrace.)

HARRY

OH, THEY THROW STICKS AND STONES
THEY'RE BREAKING MY BONES
YOU'RE BREAKING MY HEART

(Edward moves away from Tom.)

HARRY/TOM/ED

STANDING IN THE SHADOWS
I AM RUNNING FROM THE WORLD
WITH A SECRET THAT IS SLIPPING FROM MY HAND

(Tom goes to Edward.)

HARRY

FROM MY HAND

EDWARD

THERE ARE THREATS I CAN'T IGNORE

HARRY

FROM MY HAND

TOM

THERE ARE THINGS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

HARRY

THERE ARE SHADOWS ALL AROUND

ED

OH, THEY THROW STICKS AND STONES

EDWARD

THERE ARE PATHS I HAVE TO TREAD

HARRY

ON THE WALLS AND ON THE GROUND

ED

THEY'RE BREAKING MY BONES

EDWARD

YOU'RE BREAKING MY HEART

HARRY/TOM

THERE ARE THINGS THAT MUST BE SAID

I AM LOOKING AT A SUN THAT DOESN'T SHINE
LIVING IN A WORLD THAT ISN'T MINE
IT ISN'T MINE

ED/EDWARD

I AM TRYING TO CONCEAL THE WAY I FEEL
HIDING IN A SMILE THAT ISN'T REAL
IT ISN'T REAL

HARRY/TOM

I AM LOOKING AT A SUN THAT DOESN'T SHINE
LIVING IN A WORLD THAT ISN'T MINE
IT ISN'T MINE

ED/EDWARD

I AM TRYING TO CONCEAL THE WAY I FEEL
HIDING IN A SMILE THAT ISN'T REAL
IT ISN'T REAL

ALL

STANDING IN THE SHADOWS
I AM RUNNING FROM THE WORLD
I AM SHOUTING THROUGH THE DARK WITH ALL MY
MIGHT

OH, THEY THROW STICKS AND STONES
THEY'RE BREAKING MY BONES
YOU'RE BREAKING MY HEART

STANDING IN THE SHADOWS
I AM RUNNING FROM THE WORLD
I AM SHOUTING THROUGH THE DARK WITH ALL MY
MIGHT

STANDING IN THE SHADOWS
I AM RUNNING FROM THE WORLD
I AM SHOUTING THROUGH THE DARK WITH ALL MY
MIGHT
LET THE SHADOWS FALL

(Tom & Edward kiss.)

Appendix D: 'Turning Stones' Lyric

Jane

I TRY NOT TO LOOK TOO CLOSE AT MY REFLECTION
I TRY NOT TO SCRATCH BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE DAY
I DON'T NEED TO CATALOGUE MY IMPERFECTIONS
I DON'T WANT TO KNOW WHAT LIES BENEATH

I DON'T GIVE MUCH THOUGHT TO INTROSPECTION
I DON'T HAVE MUCH PATIENCE FOR EXAMINING THE HEART
YOU OFFER YOUR TRUTH UP FOR DISSECTION
YOU'LL SOON FIND THE TRUTH'S GOT LIES BENEATH

YOU WASTE TIME TURNING STONES
AND ACT SURPRISED WHEN ALL YOU FIND IS SKIN AND BONES
YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'VE ALWAYS KNOWN IS TRUE...

I WON'T INDULGE HURTFUL DECLARATIONS
I WON'T ALLOW HISTORY TO POISON MY TODAY
YOUR WORDS HAVE UNWANTED IMPLICATIONS
I ALREADY KNOW ROT LIES BENEATH

I WON'T WASTE TIME TURNING STONES
JUST TO FIND THERE'S NOTHING THERE BUT BROKEN BONES
I'LL KNOW WHAT I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN IS TRUE...

I CAN'T STOP THE EARTH WHEN IT'S TURNING
I CAN'T CHANGE THE SHIFT IN THE SEASONS
I CAN'T STOP THE HEART WHEN IT'S BREAKING
I CAN'T CHANGE THE SECRETS YOU KEPT
THE TEARS THAT I CRIED
THE NIGHTS THAT I WEPT
THE YEARS THAT YOU LIED

NO MORE TURNING STONES
NO MORE
IT'S BEST TO LEAVE THESE THINGS ALONE
I CAN'T CHANGE ALL THE THINGS I THOUGHT WERE TRUE
SO PLEASE, DON'T ASK ME TO

Appendix E: Ethics Approval

Faculty of Arts: Ethics Committee
George Wallis Building
Wulfruna Street
Wolverhampton
WV1 1DT

Date 18 March 2019

Ethics Approval Application Number. 2018/19: 11

Researcher. Gus Gowland

Level of Research. PhD

Director of Studies. Dr Sarah Whitfield

Title of Research. 'Standing in the Shadows?': Reframing Homosexuality in Musical Theatre

Decision. Approved

Dear Gus

The Faculty of Arts Ethics Committee has approved your application for Ethical Approval for the above named research.

Please ensure that you are conversant with the latest guidelines on recruiting research participants and data security. See the Ethics Guidance web pages <https://www.wlv.ac.uk/research/research-policies-procedures--guidelines/ethics-guidance/>

If you make any substantial changes to your research, you will have to complete a new request for ethical approval. This letter only relates to ethical issues, and has no bearing on other aspects of your research, such as methodology and theoretical framework.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Faculty Ethics Committee if you have any questions.

We wish you the very best with your research.

Dr Stephen Jacobs

Chair of the Faculty of Arts Ethics Committee
MK507, George Wallis Building

Appendix F: Queer *Evan Hansen*: Is anybody waving back at me?

(Conference paper delivered at Song, Stage and Screen XIV, University of Leeds, June 2019)

***Queer Evan Hansen: Is anybody waving back at me?*
Gus Gowland**

Dear Evan Hansen is something of a cultural phenomenon. Arriving on Broadway in 2016, it went on to win six Tony awards including the coveted Best Musical prize. The show tells the story of a high school senior, the eponymous Evan, who suffers from depression and severe social anxiety. After one of his classmates, Connor Murphy, kills himself, a misunderstanding finds Evan erroneously positioned as Connor's best friend. Evan perpetuates the myths about his relationship with Connor, and further, fabricates a close friendship between them, faking emails and stories that he almost starts to believe himself. Evan's lie spirals, goes viral, and has a devastating effect on Evan and the people around him.

When I saw *Dear Evan Hansen* on Broadway I felt like I was seeing my story on stage. Of course, the details differed (I've never invented a friendship with a dead peer), but Evan's loneliness and desperation to find his place in the world, a world which seems frightening and unwelcoming, felt all too familiar to me as a gay man. As such, watching the show was an overwhelming experience for me. My partner, despite there being a decade between us and having had very different experiences and upbringings, had responded to the show in a similar way. What was it about this heterosexual character and narrative that spoke so directly to us as gay men? My boyfriend and I were not unique in our responses.

Dear Evan Hansen, it seems, has been co-opted by a queer audience who have claimed it as their own.

Queer representation in musicals is getting better. Slowly. Until recently, the only non-heterosexual characters to be found in a musical were typically gay men, and these were reduced to what James Lovelock identified as either the dancing queen, the drama queen, or the drag queen. The other identities that form the acronym LGBTQ+ barely even existed. More recently, however, there has been an increase in queer characters in musicals and the quality of that representation is improving. Male homosexuality is being presented in more nuanced ways, which I hope my own musical *Pieces of String* contributes to, and lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender characters, though still underrepresented, are increasing.

In the West End there are non-heterosexual characters to be found in *Come From Away*, *Mamma Mia*, *The Book of Mormon*, all of which are also playing on Broadway, and *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie*. On Broadway, *The Prom* and *Be More Chill* are still running (just about) as is *Mean Girls*. Whilst *Falsettos* is currently on a U.S. national tour and is also due to arrive in London later this year.

Alongside this burgeoning LGBTQ+ representation, there has been a move towards revisioning older shows, in order to better reflect contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality. Marianne Elliott’s recent production of Sondheim’s *Company* reframed Amy as Jamie, and turned ‘Not Getting Married Today’ into an hilarious panic attack about gay marriage. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival enjoyed success with their queered version of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*, making the both the lead and secondary

couples same-sex. So, in an era when we are becoming more and more representative in new work, and adjusting the existing canon to include previously excluded identities, why did *Dear Evan Hansen*, the story of a straight teenager, come to speak so directly to a queer audience?

In more closeted times, the gay spectator had to recode ‘the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded’ in cultural objects, so that they came to function as vehicles of queer meaning. Despite an increase in representation, this action of recoding is still necessary; partly as a cultural hangover from a less inclusive time, partly due to the quality of LGBTQ+ representation, and partly because a minority will always be underrepresented.

Judith Fetterley describes the concept of a ‘resisting reader’, asserting that re-reading through one’s own specific political lens is necessary as an ‘act of survival’. Grace Barnes applies this to musical theatre and gay men, noting that ‘the world they are viewing onstage is heterosexual, but they resist this reading and transform it into a homosexual one’ thus suggesting that all gay spectators are resisting readers. So, in Barnes’ interpretation, gay men repeatedly insert their homosexual-selves into narratives that are heterosexual, and out of necessity, are well versed in reading gay stories where there are none, at least not overtly.

Whilst it may be true that a queer audience member has developed a skill for placing themselves into a narrative that ostensibly excludes them, the leap for a queer reader watching *Dear Evan Hansen* is a small one. There are striking similarities between Evan’s experience and that of LGBTQ+ youth in areas including mental health, self-esteem and identity.

The show’s bookwriter Steven Levenson feels that queer youth especially can identify with “the voices of negativity” Evan hears in his head. The Connor Project, the charity Evan co-founds in Connor’s memory, is a further allusion to LGBTQ+ struggles with mental health, being a direct reference to The Trevor Project, a crisis intervention and suicide prevention service for young LGBTQ+ people.

Co-writer Benj Pasek, himself a gay man, states that part of “the gay identity” is “living in a world [that] is basically telling you that you’re not enough”, a sentiment keenly felt by Evan. Pasek describes the show as being ‘about a boy who feels alone and invisible [and] the need to be seen and be heard’. Throughout Evan’s introductory number ‘Waving Through a Window’, he sings about how he feels excluded from the world, about how everyone else is on one side of the glass and he is left tap, tap, tapping on it from the other. In this song, Evan’s sense of Otherness acts as a mirror to that of the queer person, and introduces him to us as a substitute for the queer spectator, who may themselves be tap, tap tapping on the glass window of a heterosexual, heteronormative world.

The song’s opening lines – ‘I’ve learned to slam on the brake, before I even turn the key, before I make the mistake, before I lead with the worst of me’ – show Evan’s lack of self-esteem and expectations of failure, and reflect the self-editing often undertaken by members of the LGBTQ+ community.

The internet is integral in the development and understanding of young queer people’s identity, as evidenced in the Stonewall School Report.

Evan also uses the internet to construct – and manipulate – his identity. However, like the 40% of young LGBT people who have experienced homophobic, biphobic or transphobic abuse online, the internet also proves a dangerous place for Evan, ultimately unravelling his lies. In the musical, as in real life, the online community is a two-sided coin; offering both a refuge, literally a community, or a place for hatred and misunderstanding.

The set design’s multiple screens, which display the rapid spread of Evan’s lie, both perpetuates the concept of living behind a pane of glass and solidifies the connection with queer digital natives in the audience and their dual personalities, online and IRL.

‘You Will Be Found’ closes the first act and, along with ‘Waving Through A Window’ has come to represent the show. It is very portable as a song, the lyrics being unspecific enough to speak to a mass audience. The writers have stated that they very deliberately wanted to write about finding a community, both in real life and online. In that way, this song says to the queer audience; there is a community waiting for you, and even better – they will find you. Rather than having to seek it out, the reversing of this sentiment adds weight to the notion that the audience member, upon hearing this song, will feel seen, and indeed, found. Towards the ending of the song, the line ‘You are not alone’ is repeated without variation, and becomes anthemic, echoing queer-centric mantras such as ‘it gets better’ and ‘love is love’. ‘You Will Be Found’ proved to be prophetic too, as a number of fans, or ‘Fansens’, are now featured in the musical via home-recorded videos they submitted to be projected onto the stage during the song’s performance. In this meta move of inclusivity, the musical has ‘found’ its audience.

Aside from the narrative links to the queer experience, the way the role of Evan is performed, and the demands upon the actor playing the role, also impact the how a queer audience receives him. The actor who plays Evan is required to push his voice to the limits. Evan’s register is consistently sent into the upper echelons, moving between belt and falsetto. He utilises falsetto in all of his big numbers, *Waving Through A Window*, *For Forever*, and *Words Fail*. If we take the etymology of the word, falsetto is the diminutive of the Italian for false; falso. So, by using this vocal technique, Evan’s ‘false’ voice acts as a literal expression of one of the key themes of the musical; namely that Evan struggles to be truthful, and is a vocal embodiment of the closeted queer, who feels unable to reveal their true self.

This higher register may be used to show vulnerability and reflect Evan’s youth, locating his voice in that transitional state between childhood and adulthood. However I would argue that the use of falsetto plays with gender normatives, as it pushes the actor’s range closer to a traditionally ‘female’ register. If ‘the falsetto voice challenges the authenticity of gender-assigned voices’, then the vocal placement of much of Evan’s music places him into a sort of vocal masquerade that encourages us to view him as separate from the other men in the show. It places Evan in a liminal space between genders, positioning him as vocally different from the traditional male juvenile lead.

In her work investigating how the black female voice resists within performance, Daphne A. Brooks suggests that a performer can ‘occupy’ a song. I would argue this can be applied to characters too. For example, the

drag queen character of Lola in *Kinky Boots* is specifically referenced by the author Harvey Fierstein as a ‘heterosexual transvestite’. Fierstein’s position deliberately challenges the audience perception of the character, who may assume Lola is homosexual, in part because of the large amount of gay men who perform drag, but also because Fierstein’s openness about his own sexuality and his oeuvre provide a tacit expectation of gayness. However, Billy Porter – the role’s originator and an openly gay black man – opts to implant the character with his own sexual identity: ‘Do you think after 25 years of being out, and now wearing a dress and playing the character the way I do, that I’m gonna be straight in it? Nobody’s gonna believe my version of the character is straight! That’s not how I play it!’. This is made easier because there is no love story for Lola, unlike the more typically heterosexual character Charlie, who is given a straight romance narrative. Similarly, in *Dear Evan Hansen* the first three actors to play the role - Ben Platt, Noah Galvin and Taylor Trensch - are gay men. I would argue they imbue the character, through their performances, with a tacit understanding of the queer struggle of identity. Whilst they may not be consciously occupying Evan, as Porter does with Lola, their lived experience as gay men, I would argue, cannot help but influence their understanding of the character.

Despite an overwhelming response from fans who feel ‘seen’ by the show, there are a number of dissenting voices. Some find Evan’s behaviour reprehensible and consider the musical to be ‘a toxic piece of theatre, a morally bankrupt exploitation of the experience of mental illness’. The show has come under scrutiny for trading on mental health issues as entertainment,

and minimising the scope and specificity of anxiety, particularly as Evan's anxiety appears to dissipate the more popular he becomes.

The musical also uses homophobia as a punchline, particularly within one song, 'Sincerely Me', which depicts the first moment that Evan and his school friend Jared, fake emails from Connor. Jared teases Evan for being romantically interested in Connor, which positions the closeted queer teen, and the idea of gay sex, as inherently hilarious. This should act to distance the queer spectator from the piece, as it so directly and negatively addresses them, and indeed these articles show that for a great many viewers it does. However, for many queer audience members the comedic value in homophobia is an everyday occurrence and so rather than separating us from the narrative it simply makes it more recognisable.

Evan Hansen is straight. Almost aggressively so. Indeed, he uses his dishonesty as a tool to infiltrate the Murphy family and build a romantic relationship with Connor's sister, Zoe. I would argue that rather than his heterosexuality being a force to distance the character from the spectator, Evan's initially unrequited love only adds to his feelings of exclusion and of being not-good-enough. A feeling that is repeated ad infinitum in the lives of many queer people.

Where *Evan Hansen* truly shows its heterosexuality is in the fate of the eponymous hero. Evan is gifted as happy an ending as the plot will allow. He does not get publicly shamed for his lies, nor does the family he has tricked react with much more than sadness and disappointment. Indeed, in an epilogue, Zoe and Evan meet a year later and she thanks him for helping her family to grieve. This is straight, white male privilege and you can sure as hell

bet that if he were queer, there would have been a greater comeuppance for his actions. However, the lack of a ‘hollywood ending’, where the guy gets the girl, enables the queer spectator to still identify with Evan, even in these final moments. What’s more, the very last lines of the show reinforce the queer sentiment;

Evan speaks aloud a letter to himself and claims his own identity. For the queer audience member, for whom simply being themselves can be a dangerous act, this final statement has a huge resonance.

Interestingly, there seems to have been a process of queering that has occurred in response to the show’s success with a queer audience. The Young Adult novelisation, written by Val Emmich in collaboration with the show’s authors, makes the character of Connor gay. He is given a relationship with Miguel, a character that doesn’t appear in the musical, and thus his suicide is reframed as that of an LGBTQ+ youth. It could be argued that this move is trying to speak to a disenfranchised demographic and raise awareness of the queer young people who are statistically at a higher risk of suicide. Conversely, it may be that this is simply an attempt to capitalise on the queer response to the show.

Similarly, a video was recently shared online which featured the song ‘Only Us’, a love duet between Evan and Zoe Murphy in the musical. In this version, the song was performed by two of the actors who play Evan, Broadway’s Taylor Trench, and Ben Levi Ross from the national tour. To add additional layers to this video, Trench and Ross are partners in real-life. Thus, a heterosexual love song has been repurposed as a gay love song. It again pushes Evan’s credentials as a queer character.

However, Evan is not a queer character and *Dear Evan Hansen* is not a queer show. The retroactive queering of the story through side-projects allows the writers to engage with a queer audience without compromising the heterosexuality and profitability of the main stage production. Despite this, Evan shares enough traits identifiable to a queer audience member to act as a more than convincing cipher for the queers like me. When Evan Hansen is waving through the window, myself, my partner, and many other queer viewers will be found, waving back at him.

Appendix G - H: Multimedia appendices

All multimedia appendices are included on the accompanying USB.

Appendix G – 'Standing in the Shadows' – V2 – demo recording

Appendix H – 'Turning Stones' – demo recording

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