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Feminist Live Art in Aotearoa New Zealand:

Bound and Unbound Tensions in the Work of Julia Croft, Virginia Frankovich, and Nisha Madhan

We met this guy in Edinburgh who turned out to be the lighting designer for Forced Entertainment. He came to see *Power Ballad* and he said to me afterwards that, "There's this fierceness with Female Antipodean performers… there's something that Antipodean women do that other women don't, there's some kind of directness, and fierceness."

—Julia Croft[1]

This special issue of *Performance Paradigm* asks, what might Southern feminist performance look like? I consider this question by examining the work of three contemporary performance makers from Aotearoa New Zealand whose work, as suggested in the epigraph above, has been characterised as "direct" and "fierce": Julia Croft, Virginia Frankovich, and Nisha Madhan. In the first instance, my discussion of their work is intended to contribute to the body of data on feminist works produced in the global South, and in this sense responds to Celia Roberts and Raewyn Connell's call for greater emphasis on the theories and praxis of this "other half" of the world (2016, 135). Secondly, I explore the somewhat troubling identification in the epigraph above, of essentialised "fierceness" in the work of Antipodean women. New Zealand does indeed have a long lineage of women making performance that could be described as direct, fierce, feminist, and political. But the work that emerges from this country cannot be so easily defined; it cannot all be placed into the same fierce-and-feminist box. As a descriptor, fierceness can be both celebrated and derided in mainstream society and pop culture depending on one's political views; it can be understood as a celebration of empowerment while also playing into the overused stereotype of the angry feminist, and therefore may be enthusiastically claimed or cautiously set aside. I suggest that a better way to understand what was observed by the "guy in Edinburgh," is a complicated tension at work in the processes and practices of female experimental makers in New Zealand, a tension that I characterise as being both

unbound and *bound*, often with a "scrappy" aesthetic quality. I suggest that this tension works both within and in response to transnational developments in performance practice, and at the same time challenges some of the assumptions and legacies of both local and international methodologies and aesthetics.

In looking at the work of Croft, Frankovich, and Madhan, I will focus on three key case studies: *If There's Not Dancing at the Revolution, I'm Not Coming* (2015), performed by Croft and directed by Frankovich (hereafter referred to as *If There's Not Dancing*); *Power Ballad* (2017), again performed by Croft but directed by Madhan; and *Medusa* (2018), created and performed by all three. My analysis relies upon a methodology of close readings of the performances discussed, based on my own personal viewing, supplemented by interviews with the artists. As I was not present during the development of these works, I weave back and forward between my own analyses of the works and the artists' own reflections upon them in order to give space to the creative processes underpinning the development of the works. I will also draw from relevant elements of my doctoral thesis, "A Stage of Our Own: Women Devising Theatre in Aoteaora New Zealand" (Banks 2018), in which I trace the lineage of women's devising practices in New Zealand and explore contemporary practitioners who are leading examples of feminist devising. This body of material—interviews, questionnaires, and case studies—helps to explain some of the specificities of the theatre industry for female makers engaged in experimental practice in New Zealand.

While at the time of interviewing Croft and Madhan they did not explicitly refer to their work as *live art*, it is now a term they have embraced, and I move interchangeably between live art and *devised theatre* in this article to reflect the artists' own ways of situating their work. However, live art provides a useful frame through which to view the performances discussed, particularly because of the artists' affiliations to UK and European contemporary performance makers. This change in terminology was brought to my attention in my interview with design collaborator Meg Rollandi, in which Rollandi expressed frustration at the general lack of live art or performance art in New Zealand and told me that the work that she, Croft, Frankovich, and Madhan create together is absolutely in response to this dearth.[2] The characteristics of live art that RoseLee Goldberg (2018, 7) identifies are undoubtedly present in their work—the performances all create moments of communal electricity dependent on the live experience; they incorporate technology that is essential to the dramaturgy; and there are always layers of ideas and political commentary. Stylistically, each work contains powerful imagery and favours complex visual and aural communication over straight delivery of text. However, the subject matter of each work addresses different themes: the unpacking and dissection of mediatised images of women (*If There's Not Dancing at the Revolution, I'm Not Coming*); the struggle against the systemic hold of language (*Power Ballad*); and the visceral demonstration of a monstrous yet beautiful rage against the power structures that are all around us (*Medusa*).

It was in my interview with Rollandi that the notion of a bound/unbound quality to feminist performance in New Zealand arose. She said, "there is a tension in feminist work in New Zealand, we are so restricted by resources, funding, and the lack of artist support structures, but at the same time there's also a freedom in how we make together." This unbound or

free aspect is perhaps the result of New Zealand being a relatively young country. In terms of Westernised theatrical traditions, New Zealand does not have a theatre history or a canon of our own that stretches back for centuries, though of course our settler status provides us with a canon to draw from as do indigenous traditions.[3] As a group of islands, international performance practices and processes of influence must travel to New Zealand; and ways of making are then passed down and consequently evolve and change through their teaching. This process of adaptation, this unbounded feeling that things can be changed, is potentially why there is a huge amount of devised collaborative work made in New Zealand. In an article for *Theatre Topics,* "Why Devise? Why now? Why New Zealand?" (2005), Peter Falkenberg writes that "devising theatre acknowledges an ongoing process of coming to understand where one lives," and that "a country built upon colonization must be seen in the act of continually devising an identity for itself. How else to represent such acts if not by following the same provisional path?" (40). Indeed, rather than looking to existing traditional playscripts, a lot of practitioners create new work themselves; that is, the can-do attitude of Kiwis, and the do-it-yourself platitudes that are deeply embedded in our national identity, can also be found within the performance work that is made here. Falkenberg also argues that devised theatre processes, as opposed to traditional scripted theatre, are a better way to examine our national identity, remarking that "perhaps instead of conforming to a fixed script which is always in danger of being frozen in some other place, time, and ideology, it is better to look for identity through a provisional art, where texts and participants become the material of performance in a dialectical process" (ibid.).

However, Rollandi and I also discussed how performance in New Zealand can still feel bound by multiple issues; in particular, that New Zealand is a colonised nation and therefore carries all the weight and trappings of imperial influence and power. Despite efforts to decolonise our stages and the disciplinary instruments we use to study them,[4] we still consume a Westernised theatre history and canon of traditional classics. Practitioners can also feel bound by the politics of production or the trappings of the industry landscape in New Zealand. David Carnegie's description of the industry given some twenty years ago still holds:

> Subsidized professional theatre in New Zealand divides into three main categories: producer theatres (with their own buildings), producer companies (with no venue), and mixed producer/presenter venues (companies with their own building which mount some plays themselves as well as making their theatre available to outside shows) […]. Artistic personnel often move from one theatre to another, sometimes being hired just for an individual show. A loose company may be created from time to time, since the professional theatre population is very small […]. Non-venue producer companies tend to be small and are more likely to rely on project funding than annual funding from the Arts Council.[5] (Carnegie 1998, 336)

The performance industry here is small and the pools of available funding are even smaller. A lack of government funding for arts and culture is not unique to New Zealand, and in

many other neoliberal States the situation is worse; for example, the controversial public sector restructuring by the Morrison government in Australia in late 2019, which resulted in the country no longer having a named federal arts department (Baker 2019). As New Zealand is a small nation, there is far less philanthropic support or corporate sponsorship to make up for a lack in public funds. This means that artists often have to rely on what little government funding there is, breeding an air of competition and a constant scramble for funding. Many makers also speak about the risk of burn out, especially as there is always a drive to create new work, to be eligible for more funding, in order to survive, rather than pausing for reflection or spending years developing a single project. In our interview, Julia Croft also spoke about this, saying, "that's the biggest concern I have at this point in my life… because I'm really tired and I've been working a lot in the past couple of years, and if I keep this pace up I'm just going to end up churning out the same shit […]. There's this industry pressure [in New Zealand] to be generating all the time […]. So how do you manage your output to keep it new without burning out?"

I argue that the feeling of being unbound and bound arises from the industry conditions that I have very briefly sketched out, and that the tension between these two contexts crosses into creative development strategies and performance aesthetics that are particularly evident in the work of Croft, Frankovich, and Madhan. There is a duality to all their work; they are always working in multiple modes—with feminist politics and a consideration of the marginality of female experience and practitioners at the forefront. The energy created by this tension means that the work is fast, tourable, and dynamic, often with a scrappy quality. By scrappy I mean that the work has tangibility, it is a sensory, physical experience. The audience can often see just how hard the performer is working; the mechanics of the form are regularly laid bare. These are claims that have been made before on behalf of the mid-twentieth-century American avant-garde and European postdramatic theatre movements, but as my interviews with the artists make evident, in New Zealand these performance characteristics arise in large part out of local social conditions: life and work in the margins of society is hard and often you must scrappily fight your way through to make your voice heard. None of this means that the work created is messy (although sometimes there is intentional mess)—it is still dramaturgically crafted—but this scrappiness often means that the work can be interpreted as fierce and unapologetic. Each of the performance works by Croft, Frankovich, and Madhan discussed below has this scrappy magnetic energy and demands something from its audience. Whether it is to look at a woman's body and analyse the juxtapositions being created with it, or to cathartically scream with a performer and feel their rage, these works are raw, and they are alive.

The Artists

Julia Croft trained as a performer at Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School, graduating in 2008. In 2011 she followed in the footsteps of many other New Zealand performers by undertaking further training at L'Ecole Philippe Gaulier in Paris, and then with Anne Bogart's SITI Company in New York City in 2014-2015. Croft is based in Auckland and in the past few years, has started creating her own work using devising techniques, often in collaboration with other women. I believe there was a clear shift in her work during this

period as she sought to throw off the restrictive hierarchical theatre structures and embrace the freedom of making her own work. According to the artist statement on her website, she creates "performances that sit between disciplines," and her work is "part theatre, part dance, part performance art" (Croft 2018a).

Virginia Frankovich is an actor, director, and theatre-maker who smashes the "boundaries of form and storytelling" (Basement Theatre 2018). Like Croft, Frankovich has trained with Philippe Gaulier, and she has also studied with John Bolton. Frankovich's work has been described as rallying against "the safe, the polite and the conventional […,] throwing food around a community hall, leading a magical performance around Auckland in moving cars, pushing actors to the realms of absurdity in a giant bed" (ibid.).

Nisha Madhan is a performer, director, producer, and dramaturg. She is also the artistic director of The Town Centre, a company described as "a cult of deconstructionist theatre makers" (The Town Centre 2016). Madhan has had a long career in various aspects of entertainment in New Zealand covering a huge range of styles. Madhan is originally from New Delhi, India, and arrived in New Zealand in 1995. She trained as an actor at Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland before performing in mainstream theatre and television, including a three-year stint on the popular television soap opera *Shortland Street*. Perhaps as a reaction to this experience, Madhan then went to Paris, and like Croft and Frankovich, trained with Philippe Gaulier. Since then Madhan has toured nationally and internationally with her own work and with companies like Indian Ink, while also working as a producer and dramaturg for The Dust Palace, Theatre Beating, The Playground Collective, Pressure Point Collective, and Vibracorp Productions. There is also a clear shift in Madhan's career as she began to create and lead new work on her own terms. In my interview with her she spoke about *Power Ballad*:

> [The show] has undone a myth that I had in my head. That I needed the influence of someone older, wiser, greater, with the confidence of the patriarchy behind them to make brave work […]. This work has, in many ways kickstarted *my* career. One that is mine and mine alone. Not dependent on anyone else.[6]

There are notable commonalities between these practitioners: they have all undertaken formalised performance training, and all three have studied clowning at L'Ecole Philippe Gaulier. They have then taken the skills they learnt from these (arguably patriarchal) institutions, deconstructed them, and transformed them towards their own feminist live art. In my interview with Julia Croft we spent a lot of time talking about the politics of her process, specifically during the making of *If There's Not Dancing* with Frankovich, and *Power Ballad* with Madhan. Croft told me that, "I'm not just going to put on a play and put myself in it or make myself the lead […]. I want to re-write the script." She continued, "I'm not interested in more women on boards or me having a great character in a well-made play. It's more like, how do you smash the system and start again?"

Talking to Croft about the work she makes with Madhan and Frankovich, it is clear that she is conscious of a revolutionary impulse in their work: she describes devised theatre as "a

disruption of established theatrical hierarchies" while retaining reservations about the terms "devising" and "theatre" to delimit her work. Croft and I discussed that in our professional experience in New Zealand, there can be a tendency for professional theatre to get locked into established methods of making and rehearsing: "this is how we do theatre: we rehearse from nine to five, there is a rehearsal report at the end of the day, there is a production meeting." While we both acknowledged that for some theatre making processes those are necessary structures to put in place, they can make it difficult to maintain "a sense of play, lightness and listening," and that devised theatre or live art can be a way to disrupt this mould and to "question all those structures that we've inherited and so easily default to, and really examine whether this is the best thing for the work."

Croft noted that it is interesting just how much live art, performance art, and devised theatre "attract women, marginalised bodies, and people of colour." She noted that particularly in New Zealand, "there are so many women making awesome live art or experimental theatre […]. The people I look up to are almost exclusively women, there is some sense of women having a natural affinity with those ways of working." Madhan drew the same connection between women and collaboration. She said:

> I think that it's interesting to see that many female theatre practitioners are drawn to contemporary theatre devising/making as a way to express, observe, mirror and challenge their position in the world. I think that choosing to make in a situation that lends itself to egalitarian values while embracing uncertainty and risk is a volatile political position to take and I am fascinated to see that women are largely unafraid of that position.

Croft, Frankovich, and Madhan all define themselves as feminist artists. On Croft's website, her artist statement says that, while her work may or may not directly deal with feminist content (and often it is explicitly feminist), being a feminist artist means that she "seeks to find a feminist process, which is equitable, collective and horizontal," and which "challenge[s] patriarchal structures of power, dominance and influence." Croft and I spoke about the difficulty of creating a process that is entirely feminist, and we discussed processes we have experienced in which the content may be feminist, "but if you're not looking after people's emotional health or not listening to people, then all you're doing is putting it [a feminist process] on"; it is necessary to discuss pay rates, the importance of multiple and intersectional voices, deal with panic attacks, examine different ways of working, and ideally to find a way "for the [feminist] politics to be present in all of it, not just the final product." This sentiment, the politics of process, was echoed by many of the women that I interviewed as part of my doctoral research (Banks 2018). These Southern feminist performance makers all acknowledged how important it was for both the content and the method of making to be feminist and politically engaged.

Figure 1. Julia Croft performs in *If There's Not Dancing at the Revolution, I'm Not Coming*, Basement Theatre, Auckland, 2015. Image: Julia Croft.

If There's Not Dancing at the Revolution, I'm Not Coming

If There's Not Dancing at the Revolution, I'm Not Coming by Croft and Frankovich premiered at the Basement Theatre in Auckland in 2015 and has now had seasons in Auckland, Wellington (where I saw it at BATS Theatre in 2016), Nelson, Perth, Singapore, and Edinburgh. Croft's own artist statement of this work is an accurate description:

> a rich contemporary performance collage of film scripts, pop songs, elaborate costumes, comedy, dance and live art, all stretched, teased, shattered and reassembled in order to challenge the treatment of women's bodies in popular culture. *If There's Not Dancing* uncovers the collective fantasies underneath these bodies, intervenes and explodes them into feminist confetti. (Croft 2018b)

Croft begins *If There's Not Dancing* wearing every single costume that the show requires (see fig. 1); all the props are also hidden within her clothing. Her body has become misshapen with the multiple layers; leotards, t-shirts, pants, a jumpsuit and a tutu, shirts, dresses, and a silk robe, all covered with a pink taffeta princess ball gown. As Croft becomes each new character, she strips away another layer, and begins dissecting a new persona. There is inherent comedy in this, as the stage becomes messily littered with all the discarded "characters." The audience feels for Croft as she runs from scene to scene attempting to embody every expectation. Mirrors of different shapes and sizes dotted all

around the stage reflect multiple Crofts and her actions, but they also occasionally reflect the audience, encouraging us to question our own response, our own biases. Scenes from films such as *Titanic*, *Pretty Woman*, *Psycho,* and *Basic Instinct* play out behind her while she creates theatrical vignettes highlighting the objectification of women and caricaturing stereotypical depictions of women on screen. The most powerful of these juxtapositions follows the joyful climax of Croft dancing to "Chandelier" by Sia, complete with vulva-like pompoms and confetti cannons. Croft exits and leaves the audience alone to listen to "Love Story," a sweetly naive pop song by Taylor Swift that reimagines the story of Romeo and Juliet without the double suicide at the end. While we listen to Swift's music, the disturbing lyrics for "Wait (The Whisper Song)" by the Ying Yang Twins flicker across the screen: "*Ay bitch! Wait till you see my dick. Imma beat dat pussy up*." The juxtaposition of the saccharine pop music with explicit, violent, and derogatory lyrics forces the audience to confront the uncomfortable difference between these two portrayals of women. The silence that follows is full of tension before Croft returns wearing all the costumes wrapped around her head. The weight of all these characters is piled onto her own personal identity while she stands naked and vulnerable before her audience.

If There's Not Dancing's feminist dramaturgy is grounded in a duality: it exposes the male gaze and critiques it as the assumed "way of looking," before exploring what the female gaze might look like on stage. Croft, as the performer, invites a typical male gaze at times, asking the audience to be the voyeur as she re-enacts a horror film sequence while wearing red underwear. But there are also multiple sequences where Croft herself controls the gaze and promotes a "feeling of being in feeling" (Soloway 2016). In her keynote speech at the Toronto International Film Festival Masterclass in 2016, Jill Soloway said:

> The female gaze is not a camera trick, it is a privilege generator. It is storytelling to get you on somebody's side […]. I want people to see the female gaze as a conscious effort to create empathy as a political tool. It is a wresting away of the point of view, of changing the way the world feels for women when they move their bodies through the world, feeling themselves as the subject. (ibid.)

Sue Ellen-Case describes feminist dramaturgy as being "elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, and interrupted rather than complete" (in Gale and Deeney 2010, 514); and this structure mirrors American director and writer Deborah Randall's description of women's artistic expression as a "swirling spiral of contraction and release […]. Everything is in motion" (Randall 2016). *If There's Not Dancing* presents a layered collage revealed through costume; but the performance digs down in a circular motion rather than progressing in a linear narrative. Each scene employs a female gaze in which, in Soloway's terms, "emotions are […] prioritised over the actions" (Soloway 2016), and in which women's subjectivity becomes the focus.

However, there is also a potentially problematic tension within the dramaturgy of this work. Croft's body is also the art object; as she reveals layer upon layer, she invites the audience to gaze upon her body and consider it against mediatised depictions of women and what they put her body through. She is claiming new space with her body and her voice; but

also, by virtue of it being a solo work, *If There's Not Dancing* puts centre stage Croft's body, the body of a straight, white, able-bodied cisgender woman. There could be a disconnect here for anyone in the audience who relates to the content of the performance but does not see their own body reflected on stage. It is a difficult tension to reconcile, especially in a performance that focusses on the stripping bare of the body of the performer.

The final moments of the work become weighted with these tensions and layers of meaning, as Croft stands before the audience, completely naked except for the costumes piled on her head (see fig. 2). There is something striking about this image in its transformation of how the show begins, again with the pile of costumes but with Croft comically overdressed. There is also restriction in these two images; Croft is bound by the multiple clothes, roles, and images that women are expected to fulfil. In the final moment of the performance these restrictions are wrapped around her head and her body is freed but gazed upon. She forces the audience to sit in this uncomfortable tension, reckoning with our own thoughts, refusing to give us an answer. Even if we cannot see our own body reflected in hers, I found an inherent radical honesty in this moment which felt empowering. Especially when Croft returns for the curtain call, still naked but with her face revealed, skipping with joy as she takes her final bow unbound and free.

Figure 2. The final scene from *If There's Not Dancing at the Revolution, I'm Not Coming*, Basement Theatre, Auckland, 2015. Image: Julia Croft.

Power Ballad

While one of the goals of *If There's Not Dancing* was to unapologetically create a mess, *Power Ballad*, which premiered in 2017, sits in direct contrast and is far simpler, almost stark in its staging. It is part performance lecture, part karaoke party. Armed with a voice manipulator and a karaoke machine, "*Power Ballad* deconstructs gendered linguistic histories and rips apart contemporary language to find a new articulation of pleasure, anger and femaleness" (Croft 2018c). In his review for *The Spinoff* Sam Brooks compares *Power Ballad* to *If There's Not Dancing* and emphasises that both of these productions are actually about the lived experience of women: "Even when it's about the ideas, when *If There's Not Dancing* is about women who have to live with what pop culture puts on them, when *Power Ballad* is on our current language's insufficiencies, Croft makes them about the women who have to actually live through these concepts in their everyday lives" (Brooks 2017).

In my interview with Croft, we spoke about the inspiration behind *Power Ballad*, and she told me that, after she had made *If There's Not Dancing* with Frankovich, a work all about image, she started to think about language. Croft said that, "this was around the time of the [2016] US election. I thought about how there are ideologies that are hidden in our language […] and sometimes it's really clear, but sometimes it's so insidious that you can't quite put your finger on it." Inspired by feminist linguistics, Croft began thinking about language as a patriarchal structure and as metaphor; "it's this seemingly immovable system, that can move." *Power Ballad* shows that language, like any system that we assume is permanent (for example gender binaries or capitalism), can actually change. Croft says that she began to see language as a kind of power, and that if "he who holds the power, holds the narrative," then she wanted to "gently, or not so gently sometimes, disrupt that."

I saw *Power Ballad* on the opening night at the Basement Theatre during the 2017 Auckland Fringe Festival. The show begins slowly, the lights fading down, and Croft enters, walking backwards. Her long hair is spilling over her face and body. She bumps into a light and stops; we laugh. She adjusts her course and continues walking backwards to the centre of the stage. She reaches the microphone stand and takes the microphone, moving it around her body without her hands ever touching it. The microphone swings, slides, and bumps into her, as we hear each collision through the speakers. As she struggles, there is an incredible amount of tonic tension within her body; wrestling with the microphone, she is bound by her own limitations of not using her hands, forced to find another way. We watch as she reclaims her body, reclaims the space around her body, exploring it with sound. After several minutes she wriggles the mic up between her legs and grasps it with both hands. She now holds the power. She put on a black blazer, takes off her wig, and brings a voice manipulator/loop pedal forward. She starts making sounds. She distorts them, pushing her voice lower with the machine. Eventually the sounds turn into a word, the first word she has spoken: "Language."

Figure 3. Croft works with her microphone in *Power Ballad*, Basement Theatre, Auckland, 2017. Image: Robin Kerr.

In my interview with Croft, she described the process for *Power Ballad* with director Madhan and dramaturg Kate Prior as being very loose: "Our process came out of both of us [Croft and Madhan] having that need for it to be playful. We were constantly searching for what the game is, where the fun is, and if it doesn't feel fun, we would just stop doing it." To create this playful room, Croft says that they began the process by creating strong offers to provide a structure. Before they began, they knew that they had a loop pedal that could modify voices, a microphone, and a karaoke machine. They set themselves certain rules; such as, all the text will be said into a microphone, and, discover everything that the pedal and microphone can do. This meant that once they got into the room they could just play together. Their feminist process made sure that the power in the room was shared, and sometimes this included swapping roles. Croft said, "to show me what a certain bit looked like she [Madhan] would get up and perform and I would direct her. So, there was a fluidity around those roles."

The voice Croft uses in the second section of the show, dubbed by the makers as the "Deep Talker" voice (her own voice modulated much lower), was discovered while trying to make Madhan laugh. The Deep Talker section has three games in it, all of which deconstruct different parts of our language. After the word "language," Croft moves on to "feminism," "patriarchy," "intersectionality," "oppression," each word stretched out, low and guttural, distorted but so the audience can feel the full weight of its sound and meaning. As she slowly eases into sentences, Croft begins the Binaries game, wherein a typically masculine narrative phrase is juxtaposed against the words "feminist theatre"; for example, "One-man triumphs against the odds! Feminist theatre!" In the following Just Words game, Croft plays

with different phrases, repeating "Just words!" in a causal and light-hearted tone after each. Gradually the phrases turn into insults culminating in, "You dumb fucking slut! Just words...." The final game is Fact or Feeling: "Ham. Fact. Turkey. Fact. Christmas dinner… it's a feeling." Here, the game shows us that language has much more meaning than perhaps we realise; language can never be dismissed as "just words."

In a departure from the image-focused process for *If There's Not Dancing*, some of the text for these games came from an early part of the rehearsal process at which time Croft wrote a huge amount of the script, intending for part of *Power Ballad* to be a performance lecture. In my interview with her, Croft said that halfway through the process she discovered she did not like using text and that it kept shutting down the creativity in the room. She was bound and restricted by the very thing she wanted to explore. She said, "I was freaking out and Nisha said, 'Isn't this beautiful, you made a show about how language is problematic and you're discovering that language is problematic.' [… A] lot of that process was us trying to figure out how to give language enough space to mean multiple things." In his review for *The Spinoff*, Sam Brooks articulates how the space that Croft and Madhan created around language made these ideas comprehensible and applicable for the audience, arguing that one of the successes of *Power Ballad* is how the show,

> act[s] as a conduit for the kinds of ideas that live in textbooks and lectures and makes them into something easily understood and relatable. It's not particularly engaging to have someone explain why spoken and verbal language might be a construct of the patriarchy that values masculine expression (or repression) over any other kind of expression, but when you see Croft literally embody the difficulty of a woman trying to fit into masculine expression, see her writhing around trying to talk into a microphone, you get it. You understand it. (Brooks 2017)

There are many moments in *Power Ballad* that linger in the mind; for me, it was the sections of karaoke. The screen behind Croft blinks into life with "Karo-fun!" written on it, and "We Belong" by Pat Benatar starts to play. Croft approaches the mic and opens her mouth to launch into this classic 1980s ballad, but no sound comes out. The lyrics continue to blink up on the screen while she sings silently, mouth open wide the whole time, calling attention to my expectation and desire for words along with the synthesisers and drumbeat. On opening night of the Auckland Fringe Festival season, a man in the audience began singing. I felt the women beside me shudder. At first, I felt anger towards this audience member supplying a male voice for the mute woman on stage. But then, almost as one, the entire audience joined in, the whole theatre now singing in an incredible moment of spontaneous community. Croft kept her eyes closed and mouth open the whole time, but the joy on her face was undeniable. In my interview with her, Croft said:

> That's one of my favourite memories of *Power Ballad*, because we had kind of hoped that maybe people would sing, but New Zealand audiences often don't participate. But when you did, like I was crying behind my closed eyes, because it was just so beautiful […]. And that's I guess how the

> karaoke functions now, or what it's trying to do in a gentle way. Going, hey collective voices, I'm not going to talk… you can.

Like *If There's Not Dancing*, *Power Ballad* has now had seasons at the Edinburgh and Perth Fringe Festivals, and Croft and Madhan have continued to develop the work. For example, Croft now points the microphone towards the audience during the karaoke encouraging them to have their moment. Another addition is when she sings the 1980s hard rock power ballad "Alone" by Heart in the Deep Talker voice. Croft says that now, when she is halfway through, she just starts screaming. She then gives the microphone to three different audience members (she always tries to choose women) and lets them scream, before turning the microphone towards the whole audience. Croft said:

> I love that bit, watching everyone in the audience, but especially I love watching women who really get into it, just screaming their lungs out. It feels like this great exorcism, this big "fuck you" to have a room of different women just screaming […]. And that's such a memorable moment, that communal experience, this public airing of anger feels like a great action, something we all need right now.

Figure 4. Croft inviting the audience to scream in the karaoke section from *Power Ballad*, Basement Theatre, Auckland, 2017. Image: Robin Kerr.

One of the key complexities Croft and Madhan are working with is the presentation and invocation of a justified and righteous anger, while also holding space for an intense vulnerability on the part of the performers. In our interview together, Croft and I spoke a lot about vulnerability and doubt and how they are often serious challenges in her process. Croft said that, "It's really hard to put on new work […]. You just don't know how it's going to land, it's scary. It's very vulnerable […] but I think you've just got to hold your nerve, and that's hard."

In a section following the Deep Talker games, called I Don't Know, Croft begins lying on the ground. In the only part of *Power Ballad* in which she uses her own unaltered voice, she starts saying "I don't know" into the microphone repeatedly. Each one is a little different. Croft says that this section was inspired by an article she read in the early 2000s about how surety can be problematic and perhaps the "most feminist statement you can say is 'I don't know.' How do you make theatrically, intelligently satisfying stuff that still admits that you don't have the answers?" Depending on how she is feeling at the time of performance, each "I don't know" has a different meaning. For example, "I don't know what I'm doing with my life" or "I don't know how the song bit will go tonight," or "I don't know how to make theatre." But Croft feels immense power in displaying that vulnerability on stage. Madhan told me that the creation of this moment was also a hugely important and emotional moment in their process:

> there was suddenly space to breathe and let the white-hot rage go, and sometimes it felt like we were falling into this deep dark well. But in a hopeful way. At times it was exhausting. As a director I have never felt so corporeally sensitive and active than in this moment. I would often stand, as if performing with her. Perched on the seats like some protective, predatory bird. This was very much our moment where we got to say everything by saying nothing.

Where *If There's Not Dancing* explores the concept of being bound and unbound through image and a focus on the body/gaze, *Power Ballad* does this through language and voice. In her review for *Theatrescenes*, Rachael Longshaw-Park (2017) writes that, "this focus on words is key to the show. Madhan and Croft manage to manipulate and crack open language, casting a critical lens over its power." *Power Ballad* explores the inadequacies of a patriarchal language that we have inherited and Madhan and Croft illustrate how restrictive such language can be, especially for those who are marginalised by society. As mentioned above, Croft felt bound by trying to use language in the show, stifled by the very thing they wanted to explore. But through the sections of karaoke and the audience participation, Croft and Madhan broke through these restrictions, found freedom in the collective and celebration with a shared voice.

Medusa

The combination of rage and vulnerability that Madhan referred to in relation to *Power Ballad* was developed even further in *Medusa* (2018). Created and performed by Croft, Madhan, and Frankovich with performance design by Meg Rollandi and sound design by Claire Duncan, *Medusa* premiered in 2018 at Circa Theatre in Wellington as part of the WTF! Women's Theatre Festival. In the program for the Circa season the performance was described as:

> a kind of theatre poem; an ode to the monster within us all; a calling; an uprising; an awakening; a destructive use of staging; a multidisciplinary collage of theatricality and Live Art. It may be challenging. But then, life is challenging when you live in a margin. (Frankovich, Croft, and Madhan 2018)

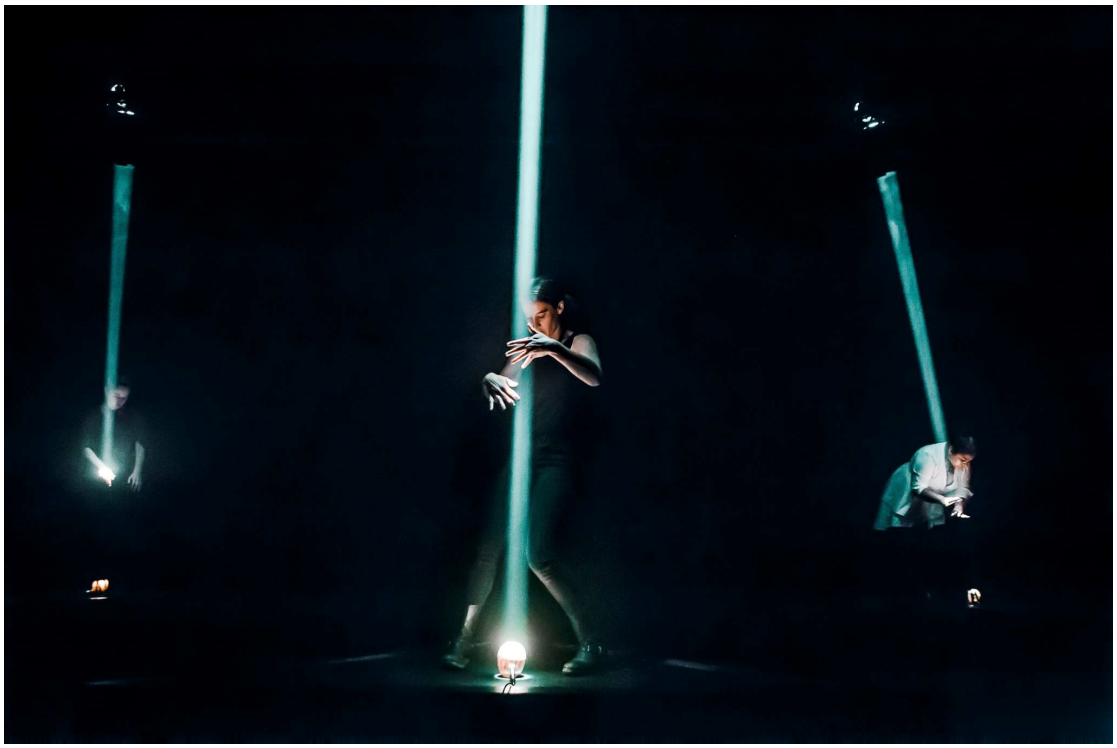

Figure 5. Production image from *Medusa*, Q Theatre, Auckland, 2018. Image: Julie Zhu.

While *If There's Not Dancing* emphasises image and gaze, and *Power Ballad* explores language/voice, *Medusa* is far more explicit and visceral in its dissection of the power of women's presence and rage. The performance begins with all three performers seated and silent, gazing at the audience. This moment of silence stretches out until pockets of the audience let out sporadic bursts of uncomfortable laughter to release tension. This is met with the hard stare of the performers, daring us to question their choice of silence, daring us to return their gaze. During this extended period of silence on opening night at Circa,

an actor from a different show walked around on the second floor above the theatre space, the ceiling creaked, and the performers eyes flashed upwards to the sound, while the distant rumbling of a machine continued to build. There was suspense and anticipation as the audience waited for something to happen, wondering if maybe this was it? The silence is eventually broken by sudden glaring lights and incredibly loud noise, the seating block itself vibrating as three microphones descend from the ceiling and the three women, this Medusa, begin chanting a long poem. The chant begins in the cosmos and circles down through the elements of earth to a description of Medusa: "At the top of the mountain is Medusa. At the bottom of the ocean is a snake" (Frankovich, Croft, and Madhan, n.d.). From here they begin to establish some of their contradictory framework; this piece is everything and nothing; they hold all of the power and none of the power:

> Inside these eyes is a monster. I am the anticipated image. I am the thing. The thing itself is a thing. Itself is not the thing. It exists, it doesn't exist. It is illusion. I am illusion. From my body might come a wave of shit, or vomit, or blood or some dysfunctional mother element or the entire Pacific Ocean. (ibid.)

Medusa is a critique of Western theatre; it speaks back to European traditions of traditional theatre and the avant-garde, drawing on spoken word poetry. Croft, Frankovich, and Madhan are self-aware in their attack as they state, "It is never everything you hoped. It's sometimes worse than you think. It is sometimes a metaphor / It is sometimes not for you. You don't want to see it / Run away / Far Away" (ibid.). They dare the audience to disengage if they cannot handle this rage. At several points the three of them call for an intermission, intoning, "Intermission: you may leave if you want." They wait for a few moments—no one in the audience dares to move—so they continue with the next part of their chant. *Medusa* explores a feminine rage that is rarely depicted using a clear female gaze: look at us, looking at you. At the beginning they set up these themes and their takedown of theatre clearly in the chant:

> Films / Stories / Myths have led me to believe my anger is destructive, e.g. Carrie.
> I don't agree.
> The three act structure
> Act 1: Exposition. Act 2: Rising Action. Act 3: Climax / Resolution.
> I am trolling "The Hero's" journey, the three act structure and the 7 basic plots by rewriting them / I never got to see what I look like through my own eyes / I never got to build things in my own image / All I have left is to steal your structures in order to write my own. (ibid.)

This chant has now been published and stands as a sort of manifesto for both the work and the makers behind it. The concept of being bound and unbound occurs regularly throughout the chant. Both in the way the text is structured—often reeling from big freeing concepts before focusing in again to the specificities of "bums on seats. Anus on threads. The black hole floating in the cosmos. Full of shit" (ibid.)—and also in the subject matter.

The text is reacting to the Western canon, to traditional hierarchical theatre structures that these practitioners have felt bound and restricted by. It dissects them and suggests an alternative feminist way of making with freedom and empathy:

> I am finally tackling the classic texts. You don't know this but I had a bloody neat process making this. There was a moment in the middle that was tricky but I held it together with care and love and empathy and forgiveness and self-care and long walks and good food and the odd glass of fine wine.
> This is my great work. This is my Rite of Spring. This is my Thousand Faces. My power of myth, my mask of God. (Frankovich, Croft, and Madhan, n.d.)

The poem eventually fractures from one voice into three. There are three triangle plinths on stage that they stand on; three orbs of light that they hold. The microphones swing and the soundscape builds into blood curdling screams of rage. While this may sound chaotic it is in fact incredibly restrained, especially when compared to *If There's Not Dancing* and *Power Ballad*. The performance is tight—even when they let emotion and anger escape, they suck it back in; and the space is controlled and clinical—until they smash it all down at the end. In his review of *Medusa*, performance designer Sam Trubridge assesses this final moment as a "real coup for the meticulous and incredibly restrained design by Meg Rollandi, providing perfect pay-off for the stark minimalism shown earlier" (Trubridge 2018). This pay-off comes when the performers return with sledgehammers and crowbars and hurl themselves at the three triangular plinths that held them before. The moment depicts some of the incredible violence that is implicit in the language of the chant—"We are boiling down violence until there are just bones and rage and grit" (Frankovich, Croft, and Madhan, n.d.).

> Chips of polystyrene fly everywhere as they each swing and hack with raw abandon. As they claw deeper into the wreckage, a layer of muddy clay is revealed. Climbing or jumping in, they begin to pile it onto their bodies, clawing the flesh of it, piling it high on their own flesh like tumescent growths or drooping rolls of fat […]. In the last image they melt together in the half-light. (Trubridge 2018)

These women are indeed fierce, but it is not the fierceness that is accepted by pop cultural representations of women; this is not a commercially palatable package of rage.

Witnessing this moment felt like an extension of the artists' previous work in *If There's Not Dancing* and *Power Ballad*: while those two solo performances also created mess or exploded with feminist rage, the visceral and physical creation of these three monstrous and beautiful Medusas created something closer to a cathartic experience for me. The rage and effort required to destroy the plinths is extreme, but this frenetic section subsides into quiet as each performer starts to relax inside the clay, inside this new world that they have created. This duality of rage and vulnerability is a distinct part of the work that Croft, Frankovich, and Madhan make with their collaborators. It is also so much more than fierce.

Figure 6. Nisha Madhan (foreground) performing in *Medusa,* Q Theatre, Auckland, 2018. Image: Julie Zhu.

Conclusion

For at least the past fifty years, feminist performance makers in New Zealand have been creating their own work, telling their own stories. Often, as I have outlined in this article, they have done so in the face of difficult industry conditions. The three practitioners that I have focused on—Julia Croft, Virginia Frankovich, and Nisha Madhan—have all worked within dominant training pedagogies, whether in formalised conservatory-style drama schools or, more specifically, all three of them having studied at L'Ecole Philippe Gaulier. They have taken this training and their industry experience and have fused this with transnational influences in live art and performance, and their own scrappy feminist attitude. Perhaps this could be simplified down into their work being described as fierce and direct, but as I have argued, I believe there is a much more complex tension between process and practice for these feminist practitioners in New Zealand, and this tension creates a unique kind of Southern feminist performance.

If There's Not Dancing at the Revolution, I'm Not Coming, Power Ballad, and *Medusa*, illustrate different aspects and modes of Southern feminist performance. *If There's Not Dancing* is a party that tackles image, *Power Ballad* struggles and rages against the restrictions of language that trip us up every day, and *Medusa* launches an attack on performance itself. All of these performance works hold a complicated tension, the feeling of being bound and restricted by the industry landscape, patriarchal hierarchies and texts, and the lack of funding or artistic resources in New Zealand. At the same time, they can

feel unbound and scrappy; there is a freedom in these performances. Croft, Frankovich, and Madhan, are always expanding with their work; they create new spaces in performance that they then occupy with their bodies and voices. It does not ever seem to be about taking space from anyone; rather, they make new space and ask their audience to stand alongside them.

Croft, Frankovich, and Madhan's work is charged, full of rage and emotion, all the while pushing their audience towards change. They wear their feminist politics proudly on their sleeves and, as Croft says, "the moment has passed when any festival, theatre, or institution should be doing anything other than championing self-generated work, the work of everyone who has been historically othered." *If There's Not Dancing at the Revolution, I'm Not Coming*, *Power Ballad,* and *Medusa* are engaging, funny, intellectual, and insightful pieces of Southern feminist performance. In his review for *The Spinoff* Sam Brooks wrote that the two solo works specifically "speak to your brain while they hit you in the gut" (Brook 2017). These works demonstrate a hopeful feminist attitude for the future. At the end of my interview with her, Croft offered some simple but inspiring words about how we are all capable of creating change, especially with the art and theatre that we make. I can see this sentiment in the work of all the Southern women that I've interviewed and written about for my research. They are pushing for change; for a revolution. Croft said:

> I think about how we're all just adding our little drop of water, and I just want to put something great into the world. Even if it's flawed, even if it's problematic in ways I don't realise, even if it sucks sometimes, you're doing something. Some action towards something changing, and that's your little drop of water. It's all anyone can do.

Of the three works I have discussed *Medusa* is the work pushing the hardest for this revolution; it is deliberately designed to make the audience feel uncomfortable. Stepping into the unknown and creating something new like this performance is always going to be full of uncertainty. In my interview with Madhan she discussed how their work is always searching for an alternative structure. While she feels that they cannot "perfectly emulate a feminist dramaturgy," because "in order to do that we'd have to burn down all the theatres and start again," these three works of performance are all moving towards something new. Madhan describes this as trying "to undo small things." She told me that their performance goals are:

> To subvert the want from the audience to move forward in a clockwise fashion by doing the opposite. Moving backwards, in spirals, returning again and again to the point, looping in on ourselves, and yes, stopping. And lying down. This was our protest […]. This was, for us, an undoing of the patriarchal pressures upon us as theatre makers and as artists. We refuse to make sense just because someone (that someone being in and of a grossly unequal position of historical privilege and power) wants us to.

This refusal to make sense or move out of the way for those people who historically have more privilege and power than you, are notions that I find truly inspiring. Croft, Frankovich,

Madhan, and their collaborators stand firmly and confidently within their complicated tensions and keep making innovative and challenging work. While we could flippantly dismiss the observation by the "guy in Edinburgh" that all Antipodean women are direct and fierce as an essentialising and limiting statement, perhaps there is truth to it. The words direct and fierce are just not nearly complex and rich enough to do these Southern feminists and the performance work that they create justice.

Notes

1. This and all other unattributed quotes in this article from Julia Croft are from an unpublished interview with me, in Wellington, NZ on 24 October 2017.

2. This and all other unattributed quotes in this article from Meg Rollandi are from an unpublished interview with me, in Wellington, NZ on 11 November 2019.

3. See, for example, the work of Charles Royal on Te Whare Tapere. Royal is an independent researcher, teacher, and consultant of indigenous knowledge and development. He is also a freelance composer, musician, and storyteller. His doctoral dissertation "Te Whare Tapere: Towards a New Model for Māori Performance Art" (Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, 1998) is available from his website: https://charles-royal.myshopify.com/.

4. See Linda Tuhiwai Smith's trailblazing book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Books, 2012), in which issues a challenge to decolonize research methods and reclaim control over indigenous ways of knowing and being. She argues that "the term 'research' is inextricable linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (30).

5. The Arts Council is now known as Creative New Zealand (CNZ).

6. This and all other unattributed quotes in this article from Nisha Madhan are from an unpublished interview with me, in Auckland, NZ on 23 October 2017.

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