Meredith Rogers and Davina Wright

Archive as Chamber of Infinite Recession:

How do we as Artists, Creators, and Performers contribute to a Living Archive?

Figure 1. *Seduction* (2019). Photographed by Pier Carthew.

You women here, listen to me.
Often in night's empty spaces
I have thought how our lives are wrecked.
— Phaedra in Euripides' *Hippolytus*.

It feels like a large claim to say that leaving the theatre building can change the way we make theatre, but perhaps it gives us another way to show how we move through our lives and deal with our loneliness.

Figure 2. Bunjil's Cave Road, 1995.

Davina

I grew up in rural and regional towns in country Victoria but spent most of my childhood on 40 acres near the Black Ranges in the Wimmera on Djab Wurrung and Jardwadjali Country, on Bunjil's Cave Road, just a kilometre from the only known rock painting of Bunjil. There was a drought in the Wimmera in the 90s. I watched our dams dry up, the farms neighbouring us left their lambs to die in bare paddocks.

Within this landscape I have a memory of seeing a TV show, my sister and I changing channels and then arriving on a woman, standing on the side of the road, the rain making her clothes wet. She was wearing a white t-shirt and jeans. And then it cut — to her lying in a wheatfield, naked, dead, in the heat, with police officers around her.

The body I saw as a child became the first of many bodies I would see on TV, in film, and later in theatre. But it is her haunting through my work. I have tried to find her; searched 90s crime shows for the right woman. I have wondered, have I reshaped this memory so drastically that I can't recognise her anymore? Within my work I have felt as if I am in constant rehearsal to be her.

Figure 3. Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield — a confrontation* (1982). Photograph by John McGrail.

I replace her with Agnes Denes, alive, standing in a field she has planted and grown in lower Manhattan. It is an image that works as a resurrection of an image I saw as a girl, one which skewed my understanding of what a woman's body can represent. Denes planted *Wheatfield — a confrontation*, in the landfill at Battery Park, into the soil removed to build the Twin Towers. However, it works here in confrontation with this original image of mine, a counterpoint, a corruption.

Maaike Bleeker explores "how visuality consists of an intricate intertwining of the one seeing and what is seen" (2002, 7), acknowledging "that this one seeing is always necessarily a body" (2002, 7). We bring our own lived histories, family homes and first memories, and "as a result of which we always see more, and always see less, than what is there to be seen" (2002, 7). In the work, the 'always more' was violence and grief, and suburbia became the set for an archive of memories that were repeating throughout my work.

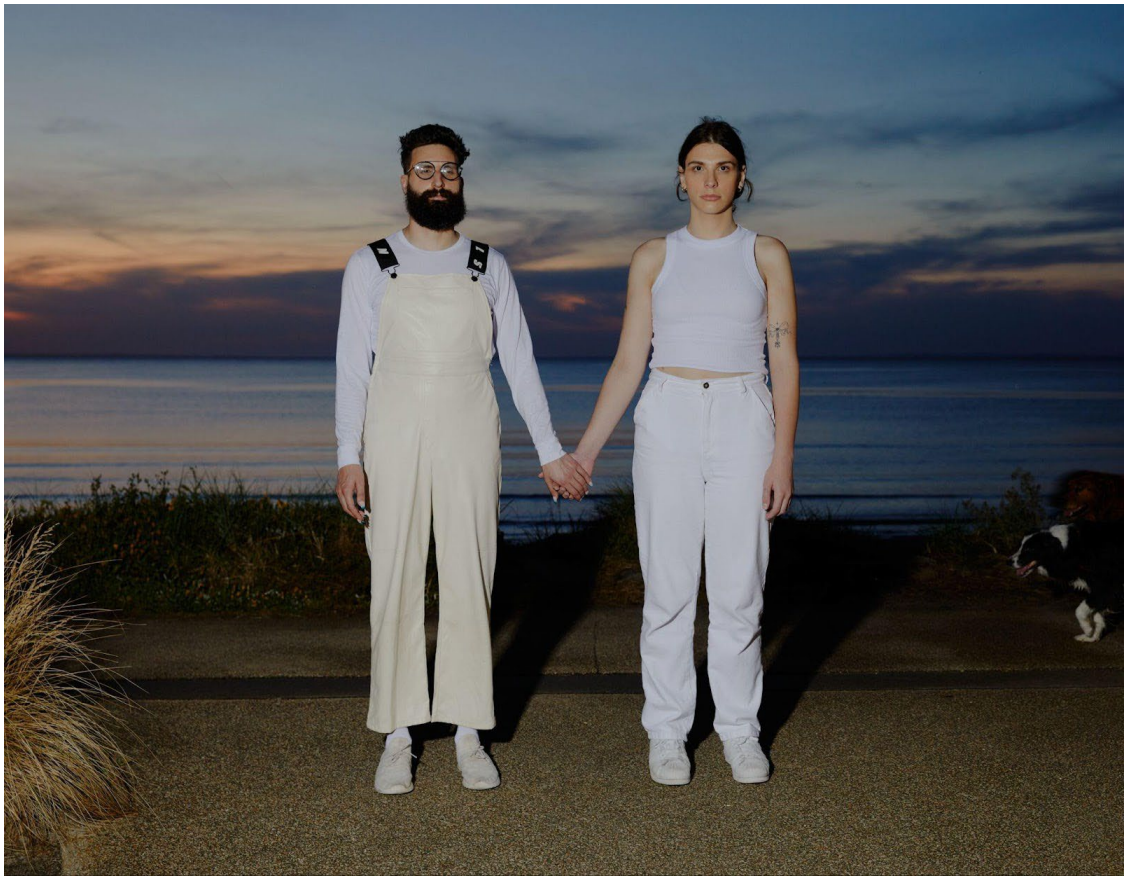

Figure 4. *Ruthless* (2022), photographed by Pier Carthew.

Our voices in unison

In September 2019 we wrote and directed *Seduction*, which was a continuation of our exploration of violence. *Seduction* explored the way women talk with each other, and the seductive power of images, and how frail and angry we humans are. As queer and feminist theatre makers we wanted to radically recontextualise the images the archive had given us, images of women in distress. How can we adapt our tragedies and our rage into performance, how can we come to understand them? How can we recede into the archive to pull forth the women and queers who have been left there, or brutalised over and over again without question?

The task of performing in urban and nocturnal settings is experienced in varied ways depending on performers identities and the way they are read by the people in the sites where they are performing. Over 10 years of practice we have refined our processes to try to keep performers safe, both from threatened physical harm and verbal abuse. Putting queer and female bodies into dark landscapes amplifies known threats and has meant we now have rules. For example, performers are never left alone, cars are always close by, and we communicate with each other throughout performances. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed writes "you have to affirm that some lives matter when a world is invested in saying they do not" (2017, 240). For the 'body presence' in site specific performance, this can be a cathartic and sometimes dangerous reality.

Figure 5. *Ruthless* (2022). Photographed by Pier Carthew.

Meredith

Standing in the Mount Martha carpark, waiting for the bus to arrive for the last scene in *Ruthless,* I can feel the cool damp air on my face and the distance between each of us spread out across the gentle rise of the tarmac. Beyond this space bounded by a strip of grass and then another of roadway with sheds beyond on one side and, on the other, a further, steeper slope of grass, vividly lit by the streetlights along its boundary. A thunderstorm is threatening as it has been all afternoon, so the air is supercharged with negative ions.

We performers arrived only moments ago in three separate cars, parked now a short distance from our site. We have run to change our costumes, collect and place our lights, and now we're in our standby positions. I look up at the green hill and watch a fox, vibrantly, foxily orange as she saunters across our backdrop on the margin between the green hill and the dark, electric blue of the night sky. I inhale sharply, Xavier calls in a low voice "bus is coming" and we begin.

My part is to hold a hunting torch to light the approach of Xavier carrying Claudia on his back like a carcass. When they arrive, he puts her down; she and I have a brief chat (unheard by the audience who have their own soundtrack playing through the bus speakers). We discuss whether she should keep her glasses on or take them off and whether the singlet looks okay. Then Xavier carries her to a spot further up in the empty car park and lays her out on the ground; he rearranges her limbs and takes off her glasses leaving them beside her face; Glynn places lights around her and I move away but keep the hunting torch trained on her body. All the time the bus has been approaching and very slowly circling the car park through and around the other performers engaged in a running and placing dance across the space. The bus stops just long enough to

complete the text on the soundtrack. I can hear it from my position about 10 metres away; and then it slowly departs and we, equally slowly, turn to watch it leave. Tonight, as the bus climbs up out of the car park towards the arrival/departure point the lightning arrives at last over the sea; the thunder follows. And I find I am remembering lines from another long-ago performance…

Figure 6. *Dion* (2016). Photographed by Pier Carthew.

Davina

I've seen my body so many times. I don't have anyone else to blame but myself. I cast myself as dead for years. Perhaps as a way of unpacking fear. I have 100 memories, all the same.

Run out into the wetlands.
Take all your clothes off.
Run 5 metres away from clothes.
Lie down.
Look at the grass.
Shallow breathe.
Wait for the audience.

It's a collection of jobs, but it became a feeling. One night I remember, as I stripped down in the park, I saw a man on the horizon holding white plastic shopping bags in each hand. He saw me too, so much pink skin in a dark park makes you hard to miss. And as we saw each other he slowly, so slowly, crouched down. Till he disappeared into the grass.

Then I finished my jobs, lay on my side facing the grass he hid in, and waited for the audience. Or him. Whoever came first.

Another night I am standing on the bank of the Maribyrnong in 2016, where days before, armed police had taken our whole cast and lined us up against a wall, thinking we were murderers. They split us up by the genders they perceived we had, while the lead detective made a speech about how "the arts matter, but please don't do illegal things." Days later, back on that same riverbank, I am waiting with Xavier O'Shannessy for the audience to come. When they do, Xavier will pick me up and drop me over and over again. This particular night, there is a man walking towards me. I have a gentle scratch/worry/angst that we are perpetuating those images of violence. I worry about other seeing us who have not chosen to be spectators. So, when I see this man, moments before the audience arrives, I start running towards him straight away. Xavier would have, but he's 6'5", and though Femme and Queer, he's an imposing presence on a dark riverbank at night.

When I reach the man, I enter another repeated interaction — I say this is a performance, and we're both okay and not to be afraid. He laughs and says, 'people aren't normally telling me not to be afraid'. I realise I am not afraid of him, my performer body has taken over, taking care of the show, taking care of others, forgetting learned fears. He is eating popcorn out of a huge cinema popcorn box. And then the audience is there, and we are doing our scene. These moments within performances become embedded in place, archives of interactions that recede into our memories after we have performed show after show. But they build the questions of future works, for all our audiences. There is an audience who has paid, an audience who lives in the spaces we enter, and another audience who have existed in the sites we move through, ghosts who watch from the shadows. I see my woman in a wheatfield, changing location, her backdrop shifting but her body remaining the same. If I try this here – will it change her fate?

Meredith

…Infinitely receding to the Back Theatre of The Pram Factory in 1977.

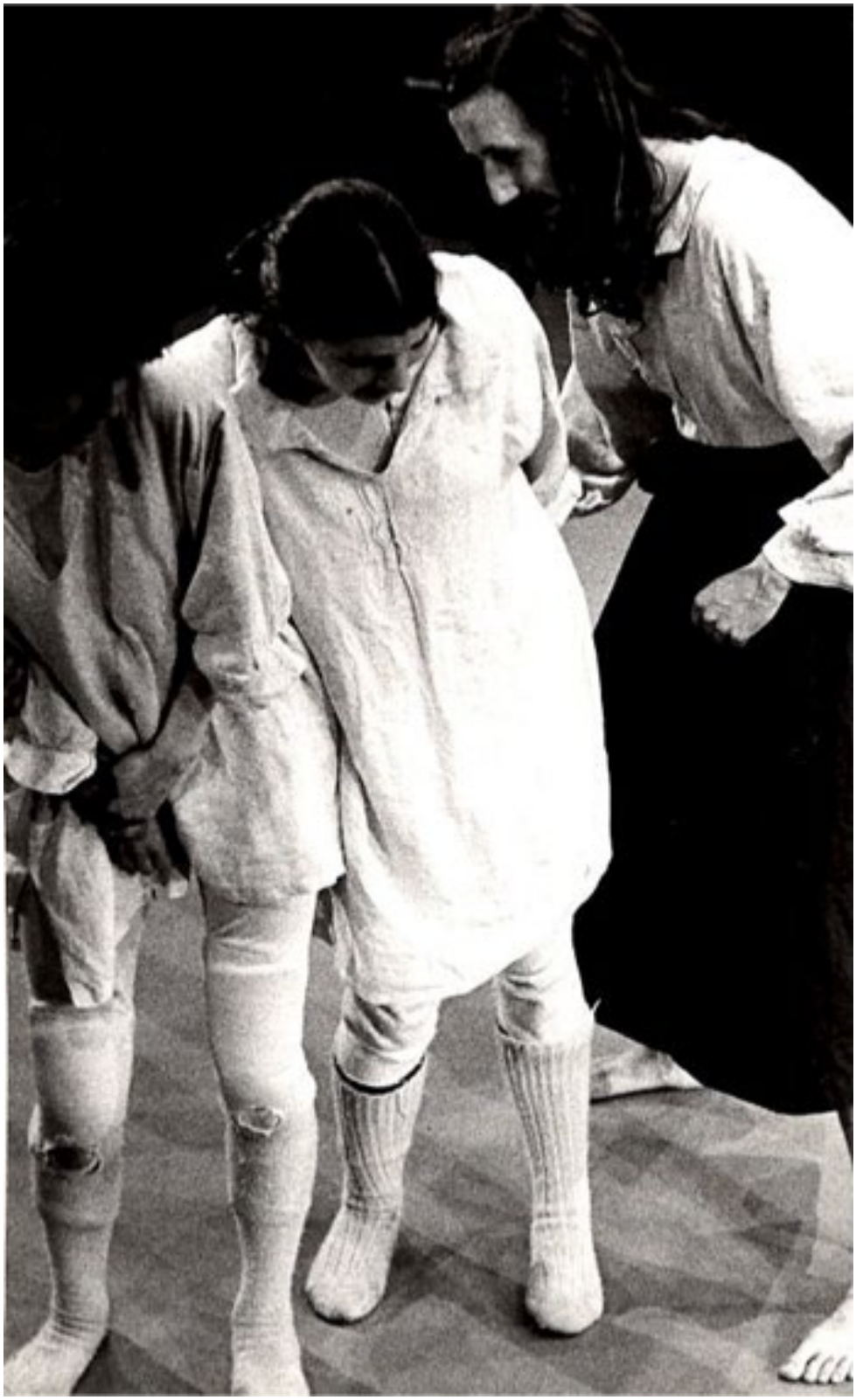

Figure 7. *Baal,* Back Theatre at The Pram Factory, 1977.

> When she had drowned, and started her slow descent
> Down the streams to where the rivers broaden
> The opal sky shone most magnificent
> As if it had to be her body's guardian.
> Wrack and seaweed cling to her as she swims
> Slowly their burden adds to her weight.
> Coolly fishes play about her limbs
> Creatures and growth encumber her in her final state.
> (Brecht 1970, 47)

It's a song from *Baal*, Brecht's first play, written when he was 19, and yes, it carries all the usual hallmarks of the celebrated youthful genius — I'm thinking of Alfred Jarry and Georg Buchner who each died before they redeemed themselves (Jarry at 34 and Buchner at 23) — casual unremarkable misogyny and a kind of festive brutality. But in *Baal*, there are also all the signs of the mature poet of all humanity that Brecht would become.

If you Google the play you get:

> *Baal* was the first full-length play written by the German modernist playwright Bertolt Brecht. It concerns a wastrel youth who becomes involved in several sexual affairs and at least one murder. (Wikipedia)

The character of Baal is a spectacularly grotesque amplification of a particular type of the male poet that is always with us. But the play's real preoccupation is weather — wind and rain and skies of all colours and complexions — "Several sexual affairs and at least one murder" are undeniably events that make up the 'story' of the play, but its substance and subject are language and ungovernable human desire/rage/love/death, within and against a rich natural world of dark forests, deep rivers and wide skies. The play has 22 scenes, each numbered and titled, half of which refer to the natural world:

> Spring Night Beneath Trees
> Green Fields. Blue Plum Trees
> Trees In the Evening
> A Plain Sky
> Green Thicket. River Beyond
> Country Road. Willows.
> Young Hazel Shrubs
> Maple Trees in the Wind

and an equal number of the stage directions begin with the weather – "Evening, Wind, Rain", "Night, Wind", "Clouded Sky", "Starlit Night."

I may be over-correcting here. There is real horror everywhere in the play and we were not oblivious to this at the time. One reviewer noted that the physical style of

performance and the casting of three women and three men each of whom played Baal in different scenes "highlighted the psycho-sexual aspect of the sexism" (Suzanne Spunner, cited in Rogers 2016, 56). "Young Hazel Shrubs" for example, gives us Baal's casual rape of the young woman whose bodily disintegration could easily be the subject of the song quoted above. But the thing I remember after 48 years is the human evocation of the natural world. Opening the text at random just now, I found Ekart saying, "There's a kind of sky in my head, very green and vast, where my thoughts drift like featherweight clouds in the wind…" (1970, 38). Even when Baal is dying a woodcutter says "I asked him, as the death rattle was in his throat, what are you thinking about? . . . I'm still listening to the rain, he said. It gives me goosebumps. I'm still listening to the rain…" (1970, 61).

The song about the drowned girl ends:

> As her pale body decayed in the water there
> It happened (very slowly) that God gradually forgot it
> First her face, then her hands, and right at the last her hair
> Then she rotted in rivers where much else rotted.
> (Brecht 1970, 48)

And I think, why wouldn't God forget this poor body and leave it to the river? And why does being forgotten by God seem such a comfort?

Davina

Most recently I saw *Cardela Força Trilogy Chapter 1, The Bride and the Goodnight Cinderally* (Bianchi & de Cavalo 2024) at Rising Melbourne. It was widely discussed mainly for its one shocking fact: that the performer Carolina Bianchi takes a date rape drug, known in Brazil as 'Goodnight Cinderella' every night in front of the audience. I understood other women's horror at the idea of witnessing this kind of trauma. One friend said to me, "I already know it, I don't need to see it." However, I didn't feel reluctant to go; over the last decade I have become stricter with what horror I allow myself to watch, but when women tell these stories, and push these limits, I want to know why, how and in what forms. In *Cardela Força*, Bianchi (who performs a monologue in the opening scenes) expertly intertwines her own personal story of violence with that of Pippa Bacca, an Italian performance artist who was raped and murdered in 2008 while hitchhiking across Turkey. Bacca was in the middle of a travelling performance work she hoped would affirm her belief that there is good in the world, and that believing will only strengthen the power of that good. Bianchi is simultaneously in conversation with Bacca and slowly becoming her, she is in grief and rage and her performance embodies a kind of wild séance that the audience are implicated in.

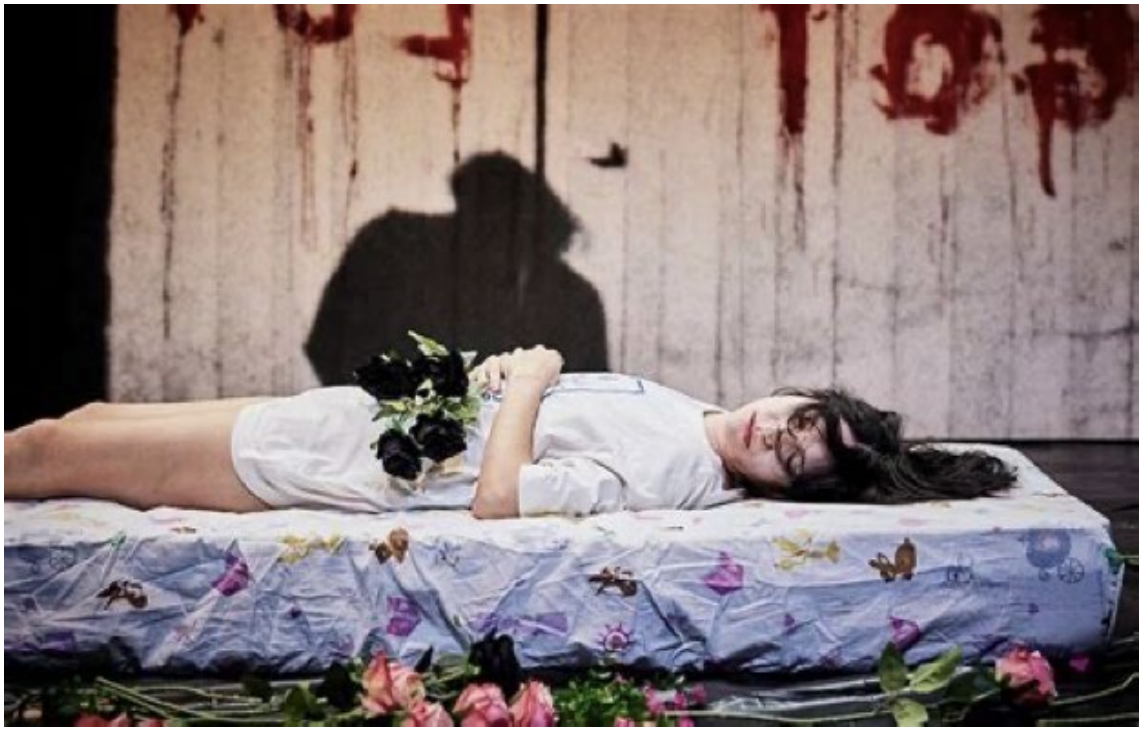

Figure 8. *Cardela Força Trilogy Chapter I* (2024), photographed by Cristoph Reynauld De Lage.

In closing, one of the performers, Alitta, a trans woman, stands with a bunch of flowers at the graves of women murdered in gendered violence, the other body on stage is Bianchi, unconscious lying in her own new grave. Alitta's presence is powerful, as is Bianchi's corpse. Together they are sisters, their bodies acknowledging the multitudes of women lost to violence perpetrated by men. In *Cardela Força* there is a warning to the archive, that sometimes the thing we are too in grief to see, or too warned about, is the performance we need the most. Bianchi names so many women in her work, but in doing so she pulls forward the ghosts of our own city, the women whose names we know, and those who remain unnamed. This intricate intertwining of the spectator "seeing" and performers who are there to be "seen" (Bleeker 2002, 7), allows the performance to pull in these bodies of women from the archive, from the spectators' memories and from the sites where the performances take place. The *Cardela Força Trilogy* here honours these bodies, refuses to forget them, even when the archive tries to bury them.

Our voices in union

Performing in Naarm, Melbourne has been altered irreparably by violence committed against women on the streets and in the city where our works were located. The murders of Jill Meagher, Renea Lau, Aiia Maasarwe and Eurydice Dixon formed foundations of grief that affected me and my colleagues and informed my own understanding of the amount of violent crime that is committed against women. How does site specific queer and feminist work acknowledge grief as part of the backdrop of urban and suburban sites? How does it recede into the gaps, alley ways, back streets and concrete factories of the archive?

When we collaborated on *Seduction* (2019), Meredith read Anne Carson's opening text from *Grief Lessons* (a collection of four of Euripides' most confronting plays) in the opening scene of our play. Carson asks:

> Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief. Ask a headhunter why he cuts off human heads. He'll say that rage impels him and rage is born of grief. The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him to throw away the anger of all his bereavements. Perhaps you think this does not apply to you. Yet you recall the day your wife, driving you to your mother's funeral, turned left instead of right at the intersection and you had to scream at her so loud other drivers turned to look. When you tore off her head and threw it out the window, they nodded, changed gears, drove away. (2006, 7)

In *Ruthless* (2022), the bus pulled into a grassy patch beside a dark road to find Claudia Nugent and Glynn Urquhart dancing to the following track (click below to play). Once the bus had parked, they hit a huge ripe watermelon with a golf club, and then, once it was all smashed, stillness, and then slowly they danced again, as the bus drove away.


Urquhart, Headhunter.mp3

Queer people and women are no strangers to tragedy. Our stories have been told again and again through this genre. At their most extreme, they teach us that we are disposable or disturbed. At their best, tragic modes of storytelling explore our grief, or as Carson says, ensure that we or our kin don't die by trying to figure out or navigate or negotiate or imagine a way out of the violence.

In *Living a Feminist Life* Sara Ahmed describes feminism "as a fragile archive, a body assembled from shattering, from splattering, an archive whose fragility gives us responsibility: to take care" (2017, 17). How, then, as artist researchers, can we take care of a fragile archive; how do we honour and preserve the shattered and splattered pieces?

At the end of *Seduction* (2019) and *Ruthless* (2022), the audience arrived at a body. In *Ruthless*, we were set in a large, levelled carpark beside a dock where yachts and small boats on the back of huge SUV's came in and out. In the opening of this scene Meredith waits for Xavier to bring Claudia's body in, they discuss something the audience can't hear, Meredith takes Claudia's glasses, fixes her singlet and Claudia lies down in the middle of the car park. The other actors, dressed in hazmat suits run back and forth moving lights around her, the following audio played on the bus:

> But it doesn't really look like this. It looks decomposed. It looks smashed up. It looks like a piece of meat and some hair. Something a police officer wakes up in the middle of the night and remembers.

And that's when you see her. You're 8 (you're not supposed to be watching this) and she's on the side of the road. It's raining. And the rain makes her t-shirt wet and her nipples hard and you think. She's beautiful. And you watch her try to call someone. But that stupid phone is broken. And then it pans out from her. Till you see her from above; how beautiful and perfect she is. Maybe she's when you first knew you were gay. You want to touch her. And I know her. And then it fades out. And you're back on the side of the road. And it's daytime and it's hot. And there is a man there in a police uniform.

Learning shame. Learning pleasure, learning to braid each other's hair. Learning to sleep. Learning to sleep with shame, one hand on a thigh. Dreaming. But never unconscious. Until.

Step back. Arms out. Jump off that tall building. Free fall back down to nonsense. To nothing. To all the Asphalt and wide open mouths and words and micromanaging and loneliness and that outwards pushing knowing.

It's a slow erosion. Children's arms skimming water, a sick feeling in your stomach, feet cut on rough floors. And then the ground cracks open and it's just lava.

To slow growing old. To the tits sagging and the skin dying and the stopping being seen.

And this. This body here. This woman. Her name is Claudia Yenathie or Caroline Bainbridge. But you could call her Antigone, Andromache, Clytemnestra, Helen, Iphigenia, Cassandra, Hecuba, Eurydice, Agave, Electra or any of the others. She's lying. She's hated or put upon. She's angry. And limp. And alone. And powerless. And powerful. But every time, she's written by a man. Telling us how we lived and loved and died. And how we talked. Just the two of us. Just women. About families and bodies. About what to do. How to die. About how not to die before our bodies. How to survive the not falling. The not jumping. The not wanting.

Look at her. She gets up at the end of this scene every night and goes home. And when she lies down she remembers what it feels like to be a corpse - the way her feet fall, the way her hair sits. The way she breathes. Shallow.

This is where you go as a child to relax. Zoom out, zoom out, zoom out. Above this body. This woman you loved. Above this country and planet and out into the solar system. Further back. Watch an extinction and then silence. Watch the world be born. Feel that lump in your throat. Feel that thick breath on the back of your neck and then

A ringing sound

Nothing. And then.

Nothing. (*Ruthless*, 2022)

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MEREDITH ROGERS *works in theatre and performance as a director, designer, dramaturg and sometimes as a performer: recently in* Marvellous *with Hester Joyce and Maude Davey (2021), with Davina Wright and Gold Satino in* This is Grayson, Seduction *and* Ruthless. *She directed and designed* Not Now Not Ever *by Lara Stevens (2019) and played Maria in Bagryana Popov's site and time specific* Uncle Vanya *over five seasons including in Hans Heysen's House in the Adelaide Hills as part of the Adelaide Festival 2019. She lectured in Theatre and Performance at La Trobe University for more than twenty years and is a past editor of* Australasian Drama Studies. *Her book* The Mill: Experiments in Theatre and Community *was published in 2016 by Australian Scholarly Publishing.*

DAVINA WRIGHT *is a performance maker and director who has worked primarily within non-traditional performance. She is artistic director of the award-winning queer feminist performance collective Gold Satino. Her 2017 production* This is Grayson *won two Green Room Awards for Innovation in Site Responsive Performance and for Outstanding Work for Young Audiences. In 2021, she co- wrote and directed* Ruthless *with Meredith Rogers and* Gold Satino *for Front Beach Back*

Beach in Mornington Peninsula. The intercultural production of My House is a Wild World *premiered in Singapore in 2022, which was the first collaboration between Gold Satino and Singaporean puppetry company The Finger Players. She is a lecturer in Theatre and Performance at the University of Tasmania.*