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Spoken Word Theatre in the UK: Origin, Development,
Influences

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Abstract

Deutsch:

Diese Doktorarbeit untersucht die Entstehung und Entwicklung des *Spoken Word Theatre* im Vereinigten Königreich. Dieser Langform der Gedicht-Performance kam im UK in den 1990er Jahren auf; sie umfasst Shows, die in der Regel eine Stunde dauern und von den Dichter*innen selbst in ihrem gewohnten Spoken Word-Stil geschrieben und vorgetragen werden. Im Laufe der Jahre wurden diese Shows oft als eine Form des kulturellen Aktivismus eingesetzt, als wichtiges Medium für Dichter*innen, um Themen wie Identität und Zugehörigkeit zu verhandeln, vorherrschende soziale Strukturen zu kritisieren und Gemeinschaften zu schmieden. Während sich Dichter*innen und Kulturorganisationen seit über drei Jahrzehnten kreativ mit Spoken Word Theatre befassen, hat es bisher nur wenige kritische Auseinandersetzungen mit dieser Form gegeben.

Meine Dissertation ist die erste umfassende Untersuchung zur Geschichte, Ästhetik und dem politischen Anspruch des Spoken Word Theatre im Vereinigten Königreich. Ich zeichne die Entwicklung dieser Form anhand eines Korpus von 36 Shows nach und liefere eingehende Analysen von 13 Shows aus einem Zeitraum von 25 Jahren (2001 bis 2026), gestützt auf audiovisuelle Aufzeichnungen und 30 Interviews mit Dichter*innen, Programmgestalter*innen und Theaterinstitutionen. Ich untersuche thematische Attribute und formale Ästhetik, intermediales Performance-Design (sowohl hinsichtlich der in der Shows beobachtbaren Konvergenz von Kunstformen als auch hinsichtlich des Einsatzes digitaler Technologien), transkulturelle und transnationale Einflüsse sowie die Politik der Performance von Identität (ein wesentliches thematisches Element, das viele der Shows verbindet); einzelne Shows und Strömungen werden dabei zum Makrokosmos der britischen Spoken-Word-Szene in Beziehung gesetzt. Zu diesem Zweck wende ich Methoden aus der Literatur-, Kultur-, Theater- und Performancewissenschaft an. Obwohl es im Rahmen dieser Praxis gelegentlich auch Shows mit mehreren Dichter*innen gibt, konzentriere ich mich in dieser Studie auf die prominentere Form der One-Person-Show, die jedoch auch Kollaborationen mit anderen Künstler*innen beinhalten kann. Ziel dieses Projekts ist es, das bisher kaum erforschte Feld des Spoken Word Theatre im Vereinigten Königreich als eine lebendige kulturelle Praxis zu beleuchten, die ihren Platz in der Welt des Theaters wie auch der Spoken Word Poetry hat und beide bereichert.

English:

This doctoral dissertation investigates the emergence and evolution of spoken word theatre — long-form poetry performances — in the UK. Spoken word theatre, arriving upon the scene in the 1990s, encompasses shows that are typically hour-long, written and performed by poets themselves in their customary spoken word styles. Over the years, these shows have often been deployed as a form of cultural activism, as a vital medium for poets to address themes of identity and belonging, to critique dominant social structures and to forge communities. While poets and cultural organisations have been engaging creatively with spoken word theatre for over three decades, critical engagement with the form has been sparse.

This dissertation is the first comprehensive study of the history, aesthetics, and political work of spoken word theatre in the UK. I chart the form's trajectory with reference to a corpus of 36 shows, providing close analyses of 13 shows across twenty-five years, spanning from 2001 to 2026, based on audio/visual recordings and 30 interviews conducted with poets, programmers and theatre companies. I investigate thematic attributes and formal aesthetics, intermedial performance design (in both the convergence of art forms observable in the show and use of digital technologies), transcultural and transnational influences, and the politics of performing identity (a substantial thematic link in many of the shows), while situating individual shows and currents within the macrocosm of the UK spoken word scene. For this purpose, I employ methods from literary, cultural, theatre and performance studies. Although multi-poet shows have also been staged within the practice, I focus on the more prominent one-poet performances in this study, which may include collaborations with other artists. The aim of this project is to shed light on the underexamined field of spoken word theatre in the UK as a vital cultural practice that has its place in the worlds of theatre and spoken word poetry, extending the reach of both.

Note on Publication

In various parts of this dissertation, I have built upon four recent publications which I wrote in the course of this doctoral project, three published in 2025, one forthcoming in December 2026. The extract on archival research in the Methods section of the Introduction abridges “Spoken Word Poetry and the Problem Wonder of the Archive”, published on the *Poetry Off the Page* blog, where I engage with archival research for poetry performance in detail. The discussion of Jasmine Gardosi’s show *Dancing to Music You Hate* in Chapter 3 consolidates my analysis from “Staging Intermediality and Queerness in Jasmine Gardosi’s *Dancing to Music You Hate*” published in *Open Library of Humanities*, vol. 11, no. 1. In Chapter 5, I adapt my analysis of Rose Condo’s *The Geography of Me* from “Digital Spoken Word Theatre in the UK: Navigating the Theatre Screen with Rose Condo’s *The Geography of Me*” published in the *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, vol. 13, no. 1; in this chapter, I also expand my analysis of Condo’s *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*, originally written for “Spoken Word Theatre and its DIY Potential: Rose Condo’s *The Empathy Experiment* and In the Works’ *The 900 Club*”, forthcoming in the co-authored book *Contemporary British Poetry Performance in Context — The Event of Poetry*, to respond to the chapter’s central concern of online adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic. These instances are marked with corresponding footnotes directing readers to these sources, and the citations are also listed in the Works Cited section.

Acknowledgments

It takes a village...

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Introduction

We want spoken word theatre to go global, so we have to be the force making that happen.

Sophia Walker (Interview with Claire Trévien)

About a decade ago, 2013 BBC Slam winner Sophia Walker championed the case of spoken word theatre in a *Sabotage Review* interview with Claire Trévien — beseeching infrastructures to support the art form transnationally. In detailing her exposure to spoken word theatre productions in Nigeria and Malaysia, Walker further proclaimed that the art form is “bubbling up all over the world” (Trévien). Walker was not wrong in her assertion. Spoken word theatre has gone global¹. Academic attention to the art form, though sparse and scattered, has been in evidence for about two decades. By 2007, poet and scholar Trish Salah had written about Mirha-Soleil Ross’s experimentations with spoken word, dramatic monologue and multi-media performance in *Yapping Out Loud: Contagious Thoughts of an Unrepentant Whore* in the *Canadian Theatre Review*’s issue 130 on spoken word poetry. From 2008 onwards, scholars such as Lauri Ramey, Deirdre Osborne, Julia Novak, Hannah Silva, Michael Gratzke and Claire Palzer² have also explored the art form through their analyses of individual spoken word theatre shows in the UK. At the 2025 Poetry Off the Page, Around the Globe conference in Vienna, at least two international speakers presented their research on spoken word theatre and its different cultural manifestations³. In the UK’s context, recent developments in the cultural sector have begun to redress the art form’s neglect to some degree. Bristol Old Vic’s Ferment programme which enabled poets like Vanessa Kissule, Malaika Kegode, Anna Freeman and Chris Redmond to develop long-form poetry shows; alliances between poets and theatre companies as well as institutions to stage spoken word theatre productions, as in the case of Kae Tempest’s partnership with Battersea Arts Centre on *Brand New Ancients* (2012), Caleb Femi’s collaboration with The Paper Birds theatre company for *Goldfish Bowl* (2018), and Imogen

¹ Recent international spoken word theatre that I have come across includes New Zealand-based Dominic Hoey’s *45 Cents An Hour* (2021), Kommune India’s *Coping Hearts* (2023), Ben Kassoy’s *The Funny Thing About A Panic Attack* in the US (2024) (I also attended a performance of the show at the 2024 Edinburgh Festival Fringe), among others.

² See Literature Review for an overview of these publications.

³ I discuss both works in the Conclusion of this dissertation.

Stirling's work with Vanishing Point theatre company on *Love the Sinner* (2023), for instance; competitive funding opportunities for staging spoken word productions through state subsidised entities such as Arts Council England and Creative Scotland, evidence this. Yet, Walker's complaint from 2017 still rings true. For many poets, especially those unacknowledged by mainstream establishments, there is still largely "no links, no support, no infrastructure" (Trévien) within the ecosystem. Even in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak, where poets demonstrated their resilience by creatively adapting their shows to online modes of performance, widespread institutional recognition and support of spoken word theatre is still absent.

This absence of infrastructure that Walker underscored is further exacerbated by the paucity of sustained critical engagement with the art form, beyond discussions of individual productions, despite the remarkable development of spoken word theatre in recent decades, as will be explored in this thesis, and the art form's vital cultural function. In the UK, spoken word theatre has often taken the form of cultural activism, emerging as a channel for poets to address themes of identity and belonging, and other socio-political topics. Poet-performers like Kae Tempest and Joshua Idehen have risen to fame not just in the UK but globally, with the success of their long-form poetry-music concert shows that straddle the conceptual boundaries of spoken word theatre.⁴ However, within the emerging field of British spoken word scholarship, spoken word theatre remains underexamined. With an increasing number of theatre companies and poet-performers in the UK experimenting with spoken word theatre, albeit not always under this cultural category, and making the art form a recurrent feature of their repertoire, it is high time to engage in-depth critically with the form. This dissertation is the first full-length scholarly study of spoken word theatre in the UK. In the chapters that follow, I undertake the task of defining and contextualising the art form and delineating its thematic and formal attributes.

i. Defining Spoken Word Theatre

In theatre and performance studies, spoken word theatre has come to denote theatre which employs the verbal medium of speech, or, to put it succinctly, theatre that is spoken, where

⁴ A recent review of Idehen's debut solo EP tour remarks: "Idehen demonstrated a remarkable ability to pivot between the rhythmic precision of high-tempo house and the raw, unvarnished intimacy of a poetry slam" (Manthorpe). Similarly, in reviews of Tempest's show last year, the authors noted the poet-singer's impeccable skill of weaving spoken word poetry and songs together (see Block; English).

acting is involved. Most recently, in his 2025 doctoral dissertation, *An Investigation into the Role and Potential of Audio Manipulation in Enhancing Emotional Intensity Perception in Spoken Word Theatre*, Thomas Stevenson defines spoken word theatre as

text-led performance in which dialogue and vocal expression drive storytelling and emotional communication. Spoken-word theatre primarily consists of ‘straight plays’— non-musical theatrical works where meaning is conveyed through speech rather than song, choreography, or other mediated forms. (16)

While Stevenson deploys the term to imply a standard category within traditional theatre, namely one employing speech and employing acting, my usage of “spoken word theatre” more emphatically refers to a distinct art form with close ties to the genre of spoken word poetry, a form of poetry performance which exhibits

roots in oral traditions and performance. Spoken word can encompass or contain elements of rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater, and jazz, rock, blues, and folk music. Characterized by rhyme, repetition, improvisation, and word play, spoken word poems frequently refer to issues of social justice, politics, race, and community. (Poetry Foundation)

The remit of my study thus includes establishing the term ‘spoken word theatre’ more firmly in this latter, more specific context of poetry performance, following its use by spoken word poetry practitioners. So, what does the term “spoken word theatre” mean in the scope of this study?

In 2009, Lemn Sissay, a key figure in the history of British spoken word theatre, defined the form in a blog entry: “Spoken Word Theatre is a piece of theatre by a spoken word artist, more likely a poet. It is scripted and directed with theatrical sensibility maintaining the poet’s integrity” (“Spoken Word Theatre”). The insistence on maintaining “the poet’s integrity”, which I take to mean acknowledging the poet’s role in performance (that he is not an actor) as well as engaging with writing and performance styles along with other artistic attributes of spoken word poetry, sums up spoken word theatre’s key consideration: that it invites the poet to step into the role of the performer. However, the definition does not address where the formal parameters of spoken word theatre lie. Poets have, in fact, advanced conflicting opinions as regards the ambit — and limits — of spoken word theatre. Welsh poet Clare E. Potter in our interview expresses discomfort about the theatrical terminology: “I wouldn’t use the word ‘theatre’” (0:04:47–0:04:49) elaborating, “to me, theatre sounds big and grand and staged” (0:04:59–0:05:02). Potter seems to be apprehensive about the merging of spoken word poetry and theatre, where it

seems to invoke a sense of inauthenticity (“staged”) which is at odds with the typical practice of spoken word poetry.

The former Poet Laureate of Birmingham Jasmine Gardosi, however, has no trouble with the suffix of ‘theatre’, on the other hand. For them, the label spoken word theatre still implies DIY (do-it-yourself) underground poetry shows. When I asked Gardosi about their understanding of spoken word theatre in our interview, they explained that for them spoken word theatre comprises of shows that are performed by a single poet at top of bars or other understated venues, declaiming “a set of poems strung together by a concept and a theme” (0:22:36–0:22:40). This definition thus invokes the picture of a DIY, bare stage performance; more fringe and grassroot than mainstream or institutional; more loosely arranged in its composition and execution.

However, Scottish spoken word theatre company In the Works classifies spoken word theatre in a way that contradicts Gardosi’s definition. In our interview, Ross McFarlane, one of the founders and performing poets of the company, defines spoken word theatre as “largely long-form, and for us specifically, narratively driven poetry performances” (0:03:56–0:04:03). In elaborating on this definition, McFarlane clarifies that the shows conceived under this label by their company are “written as theatre in the first instance”, “narratively plotted out before a single word is written — a single line of poetry. [...] closer to Shakespeare than a one person show” (0:05:19–0:05:40). What this implies is that while In the Works compose their spoken word theatre shows as poets — their practice of writing in dialogue for several performers renders their shows “closer to Shakespeare”. In defining their approach in this way, McFarlane insists on the tightly woven narrative structure of a show and the importance of poetry performance to it. McFarlane also differentiates this form of spoken word theatre from “poetry shows” by single poets which tie in already existing poems into a loose narrative and tend to be autobiographical. Therefore, what Gardosi terms spoken word theatre, McFarlane considers poetry shows. Here, Potter’s reference to a staged show is also instructive. In The Works categorically consider their “spoken word theatre” shows as staged pieces of theatre (McFarlane).

Not every poet has a clear-cut definition of spoken word theatre. When I asked Stephen Durkan in our interview if he would consider his debut show *Why Am I Doing This?* as spoken word theatre, he explained:

It could be, and I think on the form for the Free Fringe [PBH’s Free Fringe at Edinburgh], I put it down as spoken word theatre. Not because I have a sense of

what spoken word theatre is, or I know that of a tradition called spoken word theatre, but more because, a) I did spoken words, I had done spoken word nights, I consider myself a spoken word artist, but also, I wanted to do something that was a bit more theatrical and had sort of theatrical elements to it. So, putting those two words together to say this isn't necessarily a play, but it's not necessarily just a spoken word performance, I guess that was the idea, and branding it, which is what this is all about, isn't it? (0:03:34–0:4:17)

These varying layers, understandings and practices surrounding the term “spoken word theatre” arise from the fact that a generally agreed and understood definition of spoken word theatre has not been established, perhaps due to its hybrid poetic performance origins. The definition that comes closest to charting the expanse of spoken word theatre to date has been offered by Pete Bearder in *Stage Invasion*, where he defines the art form as comprising:

theatre shows (usually lasting an hour) performed through spoken word poetry. Spoken word theatre blends theatrical staging with the conversational and intimate delivery of spoken word. Typically, these shows are low-tech though they are now evolving into more complex multimedia orchestrations. The shows are almost always one-person shows that break the fourth wall to address audiences directly with stories told in the first-person or in character, by the authors themselves. (56)

This productive definition informs the starting point for my inquiry. There are, certainly, other works that help chart the scope of spoken word theatre. Sharon Clark elaborates on spoken word theatre productions she witnessed as the Literary Producer (2007–2016) at Bristol Old Vic in her conversational piece with Ruth Stacey, “More Show, Less Tell?”, published in *Spoken Word in the UK*. By detailing her work as a producer for “both theatre and spoken word disciplines” in this piece, Clark claims that she “began to witness an ever increasing shift as spoken word artists began to explore the construction of work that was more narrative focused, heavily structured, a longer running time (around 55 minutes) and was often performed solo” (438). Outlining the Ferment programme at Bristol Old Vic, she notes:

During this time poets/ spoken word artists were given space and time to explore and develop new one hour shows that often had a more narrative approach. They were introduced to members of the theatre community who could collaborate with them on the staging of this new work — that might be a director, composer,

set designer, filmmaker or lighting designer. Shows that were in some way developed with the Bristol Old Vic under its Ferment programme included Amy Mason's *The Islanders*, *Animal (Are You A Proper Person?)* by Anna Freeman and Chris Redmond, *Sexy* by Vanessa Kissule and Malaika Kegode with *Outlier*. (438)

What Clark's observation signals is that spoken word theatre is increasingly becoming a collaborative art form, which facilitates the making of what Bearder calls, complex multimedia orchestrations.

With reference to Bearder's definition, Clark and Stacey's observations, and based on my experience of attending, viewing and analysing a broad range of shows, in this dissertation I define spoken word theatre as an art form arising out of the convergence of spoken word poetry and theatre. It can be differentiated from other theatrical traditions by its stylistic connection to existing and emerging poetry performance practices, where the performances remain distinctly recognisable as spoken word poetry through their oral delivery and body communication. Styles of performance poets adopt can range across the monologue form, rap, slam-style, jazz, punk, dub, and more. Each poet is usually situated in one of these practices. The form's flexibility in spatial design makes it possible to employ both minimal props and devices as well as more complex staging technologies. Spoken word theatre's commitment to the idea of the poet as a performer, performing their own text, as well as the element of audience engagement, where the audience may be invited into the performance through varying degrees of participation, are vital features of spoken word theatre. Furthermore, cross-arts experimentation is a recurrent feature of spoken word theatre. Finally, regardless of the complexity of its design, spoken word theatre espouses a DIY ethos, in the spirit of spoken word poetry's origin as a grassroots practice, and has a fundamentally collaborative proclivity (even in one-person performances). The elements of this definition and scope of spoken word theatre will be illuminated throughout my study.

In general, two forms of spoken word theatre exist. Firstly, the theatrically conceptualised show, which approximates conventional theatre practices in terms of narrative structure and setting, where the script is written from scratch, during the conceptualisation of the show, as is demonstrated by spoken word theatre company In the Works's productions; secondly, shows that consist of a set of priorly written poems that are paratextually linked, where the poems had already been composed at different junctures of the poets' career, and the poet brings them together through a loose thematic thread and the device of storytelling.

Interestingly, McFarlane terms such performances “poetry shows” and differentiates them from spoken word theatre. However, based on my attendance and analyses of several such shows, I consider these types of performances spoken word theatre as well. These shows, then, are emblematic of what Jerzy Grotowski called “Poor Theatre” in 2002. Grotowski’s vision allows for theatre to be staged without a script; theatre only requires an actor and a spectator. He notes:

In the evolution of the theatrical art the text was one of the last elements to be added. If we place some people on a stage with a scenario they themselves have put together and let them improvise their parts as in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, the performance will be equally good even if the words are not articulated but simply muttered. (32)

Following Grotowski’s proposition, I consider shows where poets perform a set of poems thematically threaded together spoken word theatre. Furthermore, such poetry shows often adopt minimal, if any, stage design and technological setup, which once again aligns with Grotowski’s conception of “poor theatre”:

By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion. (19)

Hence, considering McFarlane’s “poetry shows” as a form of “poor theatre”, I categorise such shows under spoken word theatre as well. I am not alone in considering poetry shows as spoken word theatre. Poets Luke Wright and Jasmine Gardosi in their respective interviews with me also defined spoken word theatre as those shows which take the form of a long set of poems tied together into a plot through storytelling devices.

Owing to these two forms of spoken word theatre, in this dissertation, I label performances as ‘spoken word theatre show’, in lieu of ‘spoken word play’ or ‘spoken word show’. Indeed, the terminology is unusual, but so is the art form. Many of the shows I study in this dissertation are structured like a standard play. Others, demonstrate the qualities of a long form set, what McFarlane calls poetry show. However, despite their set-like quality, the theatricality of the performance cannot be ignored. Hence, I choose to refer to all as ‘spoken word theatre show’ to reflect the hybrid quality the art form displays — that of theatre play and poetry show — in its form. This choice is also informed by the term’s popularity with poets.

Similarly, I also consistently deploy ‘spoken word theatre’ and ‘spoken word poetry’ instead of the hyphenated ‘spoken-word theatre’ and ‘spoken-word poetry’ in keeping with the former’s predominance in both critical and popular discourse.

Finally, I must also make a distinction between spoken word theatre and what Ruth Stacey has termed poetry plays. In “More Show, Less Tell?”, she defines the poetry play as an art form that has “the option of using professional actors to voice the poems, which, for example, Sarah James did in her poetry play *The Magnetic Diaries*” (442). While a poet-playwright may compose a “poetry play” in poetic language that is then performed by a professional actor (distinct from the writer), spoken word theatre, by definition, is performed by the poets themselves. Mick Wood, Artistic Director of the experimental theatre company Théâtre Volière, who established the Poetry Plays Festival in collaboration with Zerlina Mastin, editor of *The Pomegranate Magazine*, further clarifies the remit of poetry plays in our interview. For Wood, poetry plays have a more abstract remit in which the play does not explicitly have to perform verse. However, if the artist responds to poetry or a poetic work in the broadest sense in their play, even if through the genre of prose, the director considers it a poetry play. The repertoire of works performed in the Poetry Plays Festival⁵ over the past years establishes this — poetry is not necessarily a feature of every performance. For instance, in their play *Daughters of Sappho*, the artists — soprano Theano Papadaki, violist Alkatis Misouli, dancer Sofia Filippou and accordionist Alisa Silina — respond to Sappho’s poetry through a composition of Greek music and improvisation. However, in spoken word theatre, poetry and its performance is the defining attribute. Long-form poetry performance by poets themselves makes the art form.

ii. Spoken Word Theatre as an Art Form

I have till now, and throughout the dissertation, consistently referred to spoken word theatre as an art form. At this point, it is important to clarify the use of this term. The Oxford English Dictionary defines art form as “a medium of artistic expression” (OED). Longman defines it as “a way of expressing ideas, for example in a painting, dance, piece of writing etc.” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). Broadly then, an art form comprises a style or medium of artistic expression that demonstrates few intrinsic attributes that resonate across a body of

⁵ Poetry Plays Festival is a “three-day festival of interdisciplinary performances” based in London and founded in 2024, featuring work with “a particular focus on the role of poetry within the wider arts” (“About Poetry Plays”).

work. To categorise a work of art as a specific art form then, it needs to exhibit the intrinsic attributes of the art form. My project in this study is to define the intrinsic attributes of spoken word theatre. As a first step, I categorise the practice as an art form, to undertake this project.

In his article, “Hybrid Art Forms” (1984), Jerrold Levinson defines hybrid art forms as “*art forms arising from the actual combination or interpenetration of earlier art forms*” (6, emphasis original) or one “displaying a complex character in virtue of derivation from two or more earlier forms” (8). Spoken word theatre, as will be discussed in Chapter 1, is firstly, derived from the confluence of the (super-) genre of poetry and medium of theatre, and secondly, in its present-day manifestations, often also meddles with other art forms, ranging across music, dance, illustrations, and more. Thus, spoken word theatre displays attributes of a hybrid art form, as conceptualised by Levinson. It can be situated between Levinson’s categories of synthesis and transformational art forms. In synthesis art forms, “the objects or products of two (or more) arts are brought together in such a way that the individual components to some extent lose their original identities and are present in the hybrid in a form significantly different from that assumed in the pure state” (9). In a transformational hybrid, “arts combined do not contribute to the result in roughly the same degree. A transformational hybrid of A with B is not halfway between A and B; it is basically A transformed in a B-ish direction” (10). In this sense, spoken word theatre shows demonstrate varying degree of merging of art forms — such that it may either be halfway between two art forms, or one art form transformed by the other. Many of the shows discussed in this dissertation, owing to their compositional attributes and intermedial design exhibit both synthesis and transformational features. For example, in Jasmine Gardosi’s *Dancing to Music You Hate*, the merging of spoken word poetry and song may be considered a synthesis type (hence I call it song-poem in my analysis), but the merging of the song-poem with beatboxing may be deemed transformational. Following Levinson’s definition and typology then, spoken word theatre can indeed be called a hybrid art form. However, I drop the prefix “hybrid” here for a) reasons of practicality, and b) in order to not invoke the “hybrid” vs. “pure” art forms debate, since the distinction belies the fact that all art forms are constantly evolving. No art form remains static in its aesthetic properties, and hence, there is no pure art form whatsoever; spoken word theatre being no exception here.

iii. Examining Spoken Word Theatre: Project Aim

As the title suggests, this dissertation investigates the origins, developments and influences of spoken word theatre in the UK. It historicises spoken word theatre within the broader UK spoken word scene, situating it in both literary and theatrical traditions, and examines the art form's scope and generic boundaries. The key questions this study addresses are:

- » When did spoken word theatre emerge in the UK? What are its aesthetic inheritances?

In drawing on critical approaches from literary as well as theatre and performance studies, I will develop a discursive space for exploring spoken word theatre, mapping how it both borrows and differentiates itself from various traditions and art forms. In turning to theatre scholarship, I will examine types of underground and experimental theatre in the UK, to investigate the connective tissue between these different forms and spoken word theatre. Through literary analysis, I will investigate the place of poetry in spoken word theatre and study how the art form evolved in relation to dramatic monologue, verse drama and live poetry/poetry in performance. Throughout the dissertation, I will then pay close attention to themes, poetic forms and idioms at work.

- » What role does social and cultural identity play in the performance of spoken word theatre?

Spoken word theatre has been an important outlet for minoritised groups in the UK to have their voices heard and life experiences recorded through performance. Through employing a range of techniques to produce satire, pathos, and humour in their storytelling, many of the shows while often auto/biographical, bring to light the stark realities of peripheral living. Hence, this study examines the performance of identity in the scope of the art form. Since performance of identity is a persistent trope in poetry performance, generally, and spoken word theatre, in particular, I am interested in both the politics of such performance and its aesthetic. I study the creative strategies poets deploy in their performances to not only perform identity but also to play with expectations of identity-related work.

- » Finally, what are the textual and performance-oriented characteristic attributes of spoken word theatre?

Spoken word theatre has intrinsic attributes that are revealed in every show and performance, but which have not been studied yet. Most scholarship on spoken word theatre has examined individual shows without contextualising the composite art form. The key

defining feature of spoken word theatre is the performance of poetry in a long-form fashion by the poet themselves. This performance comprises of several poems linked together by an overarching thematic thread, whether they be pre-written or composed from scratch during the conceptualisation of the show. However, beyond this central condition of performance, what other aspects can critically characterise the scope of spoken word theatre? This question is explored in all the chapters and through the 13 case studies.

iv. Charting Spoken Word Theatre: Scope of Study

In this dissertation, I study the emergence and developments of spoken word theatre in the UK. The corpus consists of 36 audiovisual recordings of shows covering a diverse demographic range with respect to geographical location, age, race, gender identity, class, year of performance, and a broad range of cross-arts experimentations, with art forms such as dance, music, comedy, storytelling. I engage with shows from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Although I do not analyse any work from Wales in the 14 analyses undertaken of the 13 shows⁶ studied in this dissertation, owing to limitations of archival material (which will be further explained in the Methods section), I do include perspectives from the Welsh scene, in the form of extracts from interviews and promotional material, and had the opportunity to attend Welsh artist Phil Okwedy's *The Gods Are All Here* at Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton in 2023. Moreover, while I trace the origins of spoken word theatre in the UK in the 1990s, most of the shows I analyse here are from post-2010, again, owing to the availability of audiovisual recordings of later performances. I include one case study from 2000–01 — Roger Robinson's *Shadow Boxer*, a recording of which I obtained from Apples and Snakes' Spoken Word Archive. In Chapter 2, I also engage briefly with SuAndi's *The Story of M* (1994), the complete video recording of which has been uploaded to YouTube by the National Black Arts Alliance channel. While the details and year of performance are not listed in the video caption on YouTube, the recording appears to be from the 1994 performance. I base this assumption on Nicola Abram's archival work in *Black British Women's Theatre: Intersectionality, Archives, Aesthetics* (2020). In her analysis of SuAndi's *The Story of M*, Abram incorporates a colour screenshot from a VHS recording of a 1994 performance archived at the Live Art Development Agency, London.

⁶ While I study in detail 13 shows in total, Malaika Kegode's *Outlier* has been analysed in two chapters: first, to study its spatial potential in Chapter 4, and secondly, to examine its online adaptation strategies. Since both analyses focus on two separate attributes of the show, I consider them distinct.

The screenshot reveals not only similarity in costume, stage design, and spatial configuration to the YouTube archival video, but also an uncanny resemblance in camera angles and grainy textures. In fact, I was able to locate the exact moment in the recording of the performance that the screenshot was made and hence can say with conviction that the recording I analyse is from 1994. A form of detective work is necessary to map non-institutional or rogue archival material pertaining to poetry performance and spoken word theatre — often found in informal physical archives as well as scattered across the internet, as Julia Novak et al. also suggest in their Introduction to *Contemporary British Poetry Performance in Context — The Event of Poetry* (2026). Broadly, then, the temporal range of case studies studied in this dissertation is twenty-five years, from 2001 to 2026.

As mentioned earlier, the type of shows studied fall in two categories: firstly, the theatrically conceptualised show, which follows the stage devices of theatre more closely in terms of narrative structure and setting, and secondly, shows comprising of a set of poems that are paratextually connected, where the poems may have been composed before the conceptualisation of the show, but are tied together thematically through storytelling and other devices. Further, my corpus is limited to one-poet performances. While I analyse multi-performer shows throughout the dissertation and pay especial attention to collaborations between artists, the works are categorically conceived by a single poet. To put it more explicitly, many shows I study constitute collaborations of a poet with other artists, but the concept and poetic script will stem from a single poet-performer, who then brings in other collaborators to realise the performance. For instance, shows such as John Berkavitch's *Shame*, Malaika Kegode's *Outlier* and Adam Kammerling's *Seder* are profoundly collaborative, involving illustrators, dancers, musicians, directors and choreographers (though the constellation of artists involved for each of these shows may vary slightly). Yet, there is only one poet at the helm of these productions. It is important to make this distinction because multi-poet shows also exist. For instance, the founding poets of In the Works spoken word theatre company frequently write and perform their shows collaboratively. However, in general, multi-poet shows are a rare manifestation of spoken word theatre and have not been studied in this dissertation.⁷

⁷ I have analysed In the Works' *The 900 Club* co-written and performed by Ross McFarlane, Ellen Renton, Shannon O'Neill and Bibi June in the chapter "Spoken Word Theatre and its DIY Potential: Rose Condo's *The Empathy Experiment* and In the Works' *The 900 Club*", forthcoming in the co-authored collection *Contemporary British Poetry Performance in Context – The Event of Poetry* by Julia Novak et al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2026).

v. Literature Review

Critical work engaging with spoken word theatre is sparse, in the UK and elsewhere. The art form does not, however, exist in a vacuum. Spoken word theatre has emerged responding to historic continuities in poetry performance and theatre. In this section, I review critical works that have informed my investigation of the origins, developments and influences of spoken word theatre. The various sub-sections offer an overview of scholarship on spoken word theatre as well as critical work relevant to the art form's formal and thematic foundation. The first sub-section examines scholarship engaging directly with spoken word theatre, in the UK and internationally. As one-poet performances are the focus of this study, the second sub-section, then, engages with critical works on the format of solo performances that are particularly relevant to my study. The third sub-section subsequently engages with studies on dramatic monologue in performance, verse drama and sonic experimentations in theatre, specifically those that are relevant to my analysis and definition of spoken word theatre. Some of these works have also examined spoken word theatre shows, albeit under a different label.

Many of the case studies undertaken in this dissertation are auto/biographical. As spoken word theatre has been a medium for cultural activism, poets, especially those belonging to historically marginalised communities, regularly share their life narratives on stage for the political function of 'speaking out' and making the voices of their communities heard. There is of course the politics of authenticity associated with it, where auto/biographical performances are received largely in relation to the perceived authenticity of the stories. Therefore, in the final section, I engage with scholarship relevant to these strands which are vital for my dissertation.

On spoken word theatre

Spoken word theatre is a comparatively young art form, that has had an innovative and grassroots impulse from its very beginning. As the art form has been relegated to a marginal status, owing to its hybrid nature, it remains mostly unacknowledged in literary and theatre scholarship. Moreover, even when scholars engage with works that fall within the scope of spoken word theatre, they do not always label them as such. Regardless, these critical works have been pivotal in shaping scholarship on spoken word theatre. Since book-length engagement with the art form has not been attempted yet, I review, here, articles and chapters that have critically engaged with spoken word theatre in the UK by examining specific productions or poets. I then explore scholarship that surveys spoken word theatre in the UK more broadly, before drawing on critical work on international spoken word theatre.

There are a few individual articles and book chapters within literary and theatre studies that examine spoken word theatre through engagement with specific shows. Notably, most scholarship on spoken word theatre engages with Black British productions, which may be linked to Black British poets' pivotal role in experimenting with the art form. Lauri Ramey's "Performing Contemporary Poetics: The Art of SuAndi and Patience Agbabi" (2009) engages briefly with SuAndi's *The Story of M* while discussing both poets' oeuvre, but does not attempt a detailed analysis, since the broader aim is to situate these poets' work within contemporary British poetic tradition. An in-depth analysis of *The Story of M* can be found in the work of Deirdre Osborne, who has been one of the leading scholars to engage with early manifestations of spoken word theatre in the UK. While she does not categorise the performance as "spoken word theatre" but rather invokes the label of "monodrama", her analyses demonstrate the productiveness of reading the form through a dual lens and thus prepares the grounds for conceptualising spoken word theatre as a distinct form. "The Body of Text Meets the Body as Text: Staging (I)dentify in the Work of SuAndi and Lemn Sissay" (2010) engages with the aesthetic and political choices SuAndi and Sissay make in their auto/biographical long-form works, *The Story of M* and *Something Dark* respectively, that "spans written and spoken-word genres (poetry, monodrama) and presents a challenge to existing critical methodologies" (230). Emphasising the experimental strategies deployed by both poets in their work and complicating the shows' relationship with the poets' dual heritages, Osborne calls attention not only to new innovative forms of Black British writing, but also to the emergent art form of spoken word theatre, produced overwhelmingly by Black and Asian British poets in its early years. Similarly, in "Skin Deep, a Self-Revealing Act: Monologue, Monodrama, and Mixedness in the Work of SuAndi and Mojisola Adebayo" (2013), Osborne illustrates the "polyphonic and transgeneric techniques" that Black British women poets employ "to articulate perspectives and experiences of mixedness" (54). Engaging with SuAndi's *The Story of M* once again, alongside her monologue *Passing* and Mojisola Adebayo's *Moj of the Antarctic*, she illuminates the way these poets weave together the personal and political to "assert a self-naming clarity" (67). In so doing, the poets adopt performance strategies which reveal poetry's potential to transgress generic boundaries. Osborne's work has been influential in my framing of spoken word theatre, especially when it adopts the medium of auto/biography. A focus on the transgeneric quality of these individual productions helps situate spoken word theatre in the dual heritage of poetry and theatre.

Julia Novak in "Performing Black British memory: Kat François's Spoken-Word Show *Raising Lazarus* as Embodied Auto/biography" (2020) frames the poet's one person show

through the lenses of auto/biography and authenticity, again highlighting the aspect of self-narratives that many of these shows share. Acknowledging spoken word theatre's effectiveness as a medium to perform cultural identities, Novak analyses the aesthetic and political dimensions of François's embodied performance which makes room for an "authentic" staging of auto/biographical narratives, allowing for what Osborne has previously termed as the assertion of a "self-naming clarity". She situates the show in the broader remit of "spoken word play" and records the art form's emergence in the 1990s. Novak's work is also instructive in studying the politics of authenticity present in auto/biographical spoken word theatre. She claims that "the perceived authenticity of poetry performances is frequently an effect of the chosen performance style" (327), drawing attention to the aesthetics and craft of performing seemingly authentic narratives. This link between perceived authenticity and poets' performance strategies is vital to this dissertation and is investigated especially when I study the performance of identity in spoken word theatre.

In "Lemn Sissay: Defamiliarisation and Performed Palimpsests" (2020), Hannah Silva introduces the term "performed palimpsests" to "describe the introductions, interruptions and splicing together of observation, aside, commentary and self-critique that play a prominent role in Sissay's poetic practice" (1). Through their reading of two of Sissay's autobiographical long-form works, *Something Dark* and *The Report*, alongside other poems, Silva suggests that the poet defamiliarises his performance in order to "write and re-write his own (a)liveness" and argues that his "performances demonstrate that, at least while alive, the writer's presence, their '(a)liveness' is always part of their writing" (29). Silva's work, then, resonates with Novak's proposition of paying attention to poets' aesthetic strategies in their performance of autobiography. Silva's work also builds on Cornelia Gräbner's earlier work on Sissay. In her 2007 doctoral thesis, Gräbner had studied "[s]taging as a means to the address of performative speech acts" as well as "their failure" (*Off the Page* 149) in Sissay's performance. Gräbner, in her discussion on Sissay's performance, does critical work of examining performativity and its implications in identity-related work. Her intervention informs my own investigation of identity performance in spoken word theatre later in this dissertation. Returning to Silva, their work on Sissay's use of defamiliarisation reveals one of the strategies poets employ to perform auto/biographical work. By embodying and performing defamiliarisation, or what Gräbner has called the failure of performative speech acts, Sissay disrupts audience's expectations of linearity or familiarity through identification in auto/biographical work. Silva suggests: "Sissay uses performance not only to prove his own existence, but also to test, check, amplify, write and re-write it, questioning how different contexts and audiences change how his presence is

perceived and the ways he behaves on stage” (6) In this dissertation, I explore similar strategies employed by other poets in auto/biographical (and autofictional) spoken word theatre.

Spoken word theatre scholarship has also engaged with non-Black poets. Michael Gratzke’s “Ethical Performance of Autobiography in Vicky Foster’s *Bathwater* on Stage, on Air, and in Print” (2022) analyses three different manifestations of the work: as a book, a radio play and a spoken word theatre production. In his comparative study, he outlines the features of each of these formats, thereby revealing *Bathwater*’s cross-generic potential. Gratzke also examines Foster’s ethical reframing of the autobiographical through the device of fictionalisation, in view of the difficult topics of abuse, violence and murder. Furthermore, Foster performs the show collaboratively, with Finlay McGuigan playing the fictionalised character of Joseph, the protagonist’s son. “Where Foster’s physical presence established an authentication effect regarding the fidelity of the narrative, the co-presence of McGuigan signalled the skilfulness associated with theatre performances which was in keeping with the venue and the situated behaviours it solicited” (412). Gratzke’s work informs my study of fictionalisation in auto/biographical spoken word theatre. This working of the fictional and staged/enacted aspects into auto/biographical material is a strategy poets have begun to experiment with in recent years, which I explore later in this dissertation. In fact, all of the studies listed till now are instructive in shaping my own arguments on performing identity in auto/biographical, and by extension, autofictional spoken word theatre

Recent scholarship in poetry performance is moving beyond the examination of self-narratives to engage with the aesthetics of fictional. What is more, such critical work engages in-depth with formal and artistic attributes of such performances. In the context of spoken word theatre specifically, “‘All Your Disembodied Little Heads Floating on a Screen’: Liveness During the Pandemic in Mel Bradley’s *Ms Noir’s Seven Deadly Sins* (2020)” (2025) by Claire Palzer complicates notions of liveness with respect to online spoken word theatre produced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus highlights the form’s potential to adapt to, and innovate via new media technologies. In examining *Ms Noir’s Seven Deadly Sins*, Palzer, firstly, outlines spoken word theatre’s intrinsic adaptability, a key feature that foregrounds my analysis in this dissertation; and secondly, engages with the creative potential of fiction in the art form. What is more, by demonstrating the potential for liveness in online spoken word theatre, Palzer extends Philip Auslander’s conceptions of liveness and further blurs the live/online divide. Palzer’s work has informed my understanding of online spoken word theatre, and I draw from the poet extensively in my discussions on the same.

Having reviewed literature that engages directly with the art form, I turn to scholarship which addresses spoken word theatre to some degree. Lucy English and Jack McGowan's *Spoken Word in the UK* (2021) is a breakthrough collection on poetry performance in the UK. Often written as personal, first-person accounts, the individual chapters come from spoken word researchers, programmers, and poets themselves. While the volume touches upon several salient aspects of the British spoken word scene like its countercultural background, its styles and techniques, its pedagogical potential, it does not offer sustained engagement with spoken word theatre. Four contributions in this collection inform my investigation of spoken word theatre, for they engage, in parts or entirely, with aspects or specific manifestations of the art form. David Hubble's "Style and Technique in Spoken Word" deals with experimentations in spoken word performances, including spoken word theatre shows, that have been staged in recent years and the intersections of various performance traditions that find a place in these shows, offering a cursory survey of spoken word theatre's scope. This chapter served supported the preliminary stage of my research, where I was attempting to identify spoken word theatre shows. Rose Condo's "I Thought I Was Coming to Watch: Audience Performance in Spoken Word Performance" is an in-depth experiential account of the poet's engagement with audiences in two of her shows and gives an insight into the shows' genesis. I consult this chapter when I engage with two of Condo's shows and their adaptation to the online mode. My understanding of the scope of digital poetry performance was also aided by David Devanny's "Speaking with Machines and Machines that Speak: Spoken Word and Digital Performance Poetry". Devanny, in this chapter, distinguishes between "digital spoken word" and "digitally augmented spoken word", noting that merely using online platforms for dissemination does not characterise a performance as digital spoken word. While I do not use these two categories in my study, I do distinguish between digital and online spoken word theatre. Finally, Sharon Clark and Ruth Stacey's "More Show, Less Tell? How Do We Talk About Spoken Word Now That It Is Working on A Theatre Stage?", framed in the format of a conversation, brings forth the important issue of "labelling" (437), which informs my own discussion of labels above. In this article, Ruth Stacey uses the term "poetry play" (440) to reference her work, where she involves actors for the performance of her forthcoming collection. Sharon Clark, on the other hand, offers valuable insight into the post-2010s development of spoken word theatre, which I consider as the second wave of the art form in my dissertation.

Pete Bearder's book *Stage Invasion* (2019) offers a study of spoken word poetry in the UK that is autoethnographically inflected and includes a historical overview of developments in UK's poetry performance scene, including spoken word theatre. Bearder is one of the first

poet-scholars to advance a comprehensive definition of spoken word theatre. In his book, Bearder deals with the topic of spoken word theatre only briefly. Yet, he provides insider knowledge and a rough survey of existing shows, which also supported my identification process in the preliminary stage of research. What is more, Bearder's in-depth engagement with the poetry performance scene's DIY ethos has also informed my own understanding of DIY as a guiding principle for this thesis.

As far as scholarship on international spoken word theatre is concerned, issue 130 of *The Canadian Theatre Review* (2007) — dedicated to “Spoken Word Performance” — constitutes a landmark publication of theatre scholarship that engages with spoken word poetry. In this pivotal issue, Trish Salah's “What's All the Yap? Reading Mirha-Soleil Ross's Performance of Activist Pedagogy” engages with Toronto-based Mirha-Soleil Ross's early experimental piece *Yapping Out Loud: Contagious Thoughts of an Unrepentant Whore* (2002) featuring spoken word, dramatic monologue, and multi-media performance. Salah investigates Ross's strategies of disidentification in a performance informed by the artist's life history; in this context, the scholar notes: “Though Ross employs direct address and speaking as herself, these monologues are not simple experiential or ‘autobiographical’”, elaborating further that “they function less as personal disclosure than as a discourse that intermingles and interrupts individual history with critical analysis, epic storytelling and lessons in the politics and practicalities of sex work” (66). Like several other articles discussed above, Salah's work has been instructive in my study of the strategies poets deploy to perform life narratives. Further, Salah's framework of ‘transgenre’ informs my own analysis of ‘transgenre’ spoken word theatre.

Jorge Huerta and Ashley Lucas's “Framing the Macho: Gender, Identity, & Sexuality in Three Chicana/o Solo Performances” in Claire Wallace's edited volume *Monologues: Theatre, Performance, Subjectivity* (2006) offers an analysis of Los Angeles-based artist Luis Alfaro's solo spoken word theatre show *Downtown*, focusing on the motifs of queerness and sexuality. In *Downtown*, Alfaro “uses a combination of storytelling, cross-dressing, spoken word poetry, and eating on stage to talk about his feelings of rejection in both white gay culture and Latina/o culture” (Huerta and Lucas 241). The authors further note that the poet deploys a series of monologues in his performance “as strategic contributions to this activist struggle, enabling queer Latina/os in his audiences to see an aspect of their identity represented on stage and educating other spectators about the particularities of this doubly (and even multiply) marginalised group” (246). This activist potential and cultural function of spoken word theatre

is also examined in my study. Both Salah's as well as Huerta and Lucas's works not only inform my thematic engagement with spoken word theatre shows but also affirm the relevance of the art form in the North American context.

On solo performances

While the chapter listed above has been particularly instructive, Clare Wallace's edited collection *Monologues: Theatre, Performance, Subjectivity* (2006), in general, has been generative in understanding the potential of monologues and solo performances, and how this potential is realised in one-poet (one-person) spoken word theatre. Wallace's introductory chapter "Monologue Theatre, Solo Performance and Self as Spectacle" distinguishes two strands of monologues: the monologue drama and solo performance. While the strategies of performance in both can be similar, a key distinction remains — in monologue drama, a playwright writes a text about a character which is potentially performed by an actor. In solo performances, the playwright, performer and performed subject coalesce into one. For the purpose of my dissertation, the second category is useful, owing to the unity of poet and performer (and often also the performed subject). Another chapter that has been of interest is Dee Heddon's "Beyond the Self: Autobiography as Dialogue", in which the author argues that auto/biographical performances include multiplicity of selves. She further remarks that auto/biographical performance is also always collaborative even in solo performances. I agree with Heddon on both grounds and also demonstrate how these multiplicities of selves and collaborative impulses manifest in one-poet spoken word theatre.

Stephen Greer's *Queer Exceptions: Solo Performances in Neoliberal Times* (2019) studies "the contentious relationship between identity, individuality and the singular subject in neoliberal times" (2). While the monograph does not engage with any spoken word theatre productions per se, and centres queer solo performances, its focus on complicating the performance of identity responds to a central concern of my study. Further, the book's first chapter "Locating Solo Performance" significantly informed my understanding and study of the politics of Fringe economics. Understanding the financial and logistical considerations of fringe performances is important to the study of spoken word theatre's spatial negotiations and adaptability, and hence, Greer's work, alongside Bearder's, has been instrumental on that front.

On dramatic monologue, verse drama and sonic experimentations in theatre

Laura Severin's *Poetry Off the Page: Twentieth-Century British Women Poets in Performance* (2004) engages with women poet's performance practice as an alternative radical

tradition of British poetry. While Severin examines the works of six twentieth-century women poets, her study of Liz Lochhead and Jackie Kay is of particular interest, since both poets are situated in the tradition of contemporary poetry performance. In her analysis, she employs the triple framing devices of the dramatic monologue, performance and persona work. Through this frame, she studies how these women performed their agency on stage, while maintaining creative distance through the deployment of the dramatic monologue. Since spoken word theatre can be said to draw its literary heritage from the dramatic monologue form, among other traditions, this study supports my aim of tracing these historical continuities.

Kasia Lech's *Dramaturgy of Form: Performing Verse in Contemporary Theatre* (2021) studies the potential of verse to innovate theatre through the productive lens of heteroglossia. Studying a range of practices across verse theatre, Lech also engages with two spoken word theatre productions, albeit not under spoken word's categorisation. The monograph, therefore, is crucial for the present study's project of defining spoken word theatre's intrinsic attributes and distinguishing it from other adjacent forms. As I will elaborate later in this dissertation, while spoken word theatre shares many distinct characteristics of verse drama and is situated in its historic continuity of staging poetry in theatre, it is important to also identify how spoken word theatre frames itself as a distinct art form.

Duška Radosavljević's *Aural/Oral Dramaturgies: Theatre in the Digital Age* (2022) engages with the interplay of text and performance through the framework of sound studies. The study foregrounds contemporary experimentations with speech and sound in performance, responding to theatre's aural turn. Radosavljević considers a range of practices for analyses. Of these, gig theatre is the most relevant for the present study. As with verse drama, gig theatre and spoken word theatre have formal overlaps, which has led to poets situating their work in both forms. It is therefore necessary for this study to investigate the overlaps and differences. For this purpose, Radosavljević's work is valuable.

On auto/biography and authenticity

As explained earlier, the study of auto/biographical performance is a key consideration in this dissertation since it is the predominant mode of performance in spoken word theatre. For this purpose, Deidre Heddon's *Autobiography and Performance* (2008), which investigates the performance of self-narratives, agency and identity in both solo and collaborative work while complicating notions of 'truth' and 'authenticity' is a key resource. Heddon's investigation of the many functions of auto/biography in performance — from staging selves to bearing witness — informs my critical framework for analysing auto/biographical work. Heddon's insistence

on complicating notions of truth-telling and authenticity is also vital to my investigation of self-narratives in spoken word theatre.

Poets also complicate expectations and perceptions of auto/biographical material in their shows by the deployment of fiction. Lianna Mark's pivotal monograph *Theatres of Autofiction* (2024) in this context offers essential frameworks which I deploy to analyse strategies of fictionalisation in auto/biographical spoken word theatre. Mark considers both markedly auto/biographical work with some fictional elements and fictional narratives informed by true stories and/or life experiences of the author within the scope of the 'autofictional' in theatre. Through my case studies, I demonstrate, using Mark's framework, the strategies poets deploy to stage autofictional work. That Mark analyses Selina Thompson's *salt.* (2016), a performance I consider as spoken word theatre, is of interest. Spoken word theatre, owing to its unity of poet and performer, and associations with "truth-telling", authenticity and performance of auto/biographical work, provides fertile ground for experimenting with the autofictional. This is true of both *salt.* and few of the case studies I undertake in this dissertation.

Finally, since aesthetics and perceptions of authenticity are important strands of investigation in the study of spoken word theatre, Katie Ailes's unpublished doctoral dissertation, *The Performance and Perception of Authenticity in Contemporary U.K. Spoken Word Poetry* (2020), must be listed in this review. Ailes proposes a "genre-specific taxonomy of ten strains of authenticity which are commonly performed, framed, and perceived" (3) in spoken word poetry, which informs my approach to auto/biographical spoken word shows. Ailes's study of "Authenticity of Autobiographical Self" and "Authenticity of Identity" are particularly instructive for my analysis of auto/biographical spoken word theatre. While the former complicates the common reception practice of conflating the person of the poet to the lyric 'I', the latter investigates how the embodied presence of a poet, and the hyper-visibility of their visual identity markers, colour the audience's reception of their work. Both these forms of expectations of authenticity are closely linked and manifest frequently in reception of spoken word theatre, which I investigate in some of the case studies.

The literature reviewed in this section show that critical interest in spoken word productions is slowly developing, even though scholars do not always label the works as spoken word theatre or acknowledge the production's rootedness in spoken word poetry. The review has also demonstrated that to undertake an extensive study of spoken word theatre as an art form, it is vital to study its multiple heritages and inherent properties. This dissertation takes on both these tasks. In the next section, I outline the analytical framework that I employ to

undertake these tasks and the broader project of studying the emergence and development of spoken word theatre.

vi. Analytical Framework

In response to the hybrid scope of spoken word theatre, this dissertation adopts a qualitative interdisciplinary approach. Below, I expand upon the analytical framework and methods employed in my investigation.

vi.i DIY as a Guiding Principle

Since the object of this dissertation is to define spoken word theatre and investigate its formal and thematic attributes, I employ critical lenses from literary, cultural, as well as theatre and performance studies. While individual chapters focus on different aspects of spoken word theatre and examine these through specific theoretical lenses, the overarching theme that ties the dissertation together is that of **DIY (do-it-yourself)**. In my investigation of spoken word theatre's aesthetic and political origins, I situate my analysis in spoken word poetry's grassroots origins. In my study of the 13 spoken word theatre shows, I analyse audiovisual recordings to contextualise them in both individual artists' practice as well as the broader scene, drawing on my interviews with poets, organisers and other participants (directors, producers, theatre companies, etc.) of the UK spoken word scene. These materials demonstrate spoken word theatre's rootedness in alternative modes of cultural production (i.e. beyond the ambit of mainstream cultural sector and institutionalised forms of performance practices) and its commitment to self-sufficiency, both hallmarks of DIY culture. Hence, the guiding principle for my investigation is the lens of DIY. At this point, it is important to define DIY.

The term DIY, an abbreviation for do-it-yourself, first gained prominence in the context of home improvement strategies in the early twentieth century and later made its way into the arts and cultural scene by the 1950s and 1960s to denote the self-sufficiency associated with various countercultural movements, as Andy Bennett and Paula Guerra note in "Rethinking DIY Culture in a Post-Industrial and Global Context" (7–8). Later, in the inaugural issue of the journal *DIY, Alternative Cultures and Society*, Bennett and Guerra also relate DIY's present-day cultural currency to punk in the Introduction, noting that the term

gained critical *momentum* during the late 1970s with the emergence of punk (an initially Anglo-American but latterly global form of oppositional culture). Punk established the blueprint for many forms of contemporary DIY cultural production, notably in relation to music production, fanzine culture and fashion design. (4)

More recently, punk scholar (and musician) George McKay contends that we must “liberate DIY from the straitjacket of punk” to allow for “greater consideration of common methodologies across different cultural practices, of a wider range of historical contexts, or of questions of gender or technology” (“Was Punk DIY?” 106). Responding to this call, it is important to determine a few basic tenets of DIY culture that surface in different cultural practices, to then explore how they specifically manifest in spoken word theatre. Writing on the DIY aesthetic of punk fanzine culture, Teal Triggs remarks that “the DIY process critiques mass production through the very handmade quality it embraces, but also in the process of appropriating the images and words of mainstream media and popular culture” (69), a quality that has seeped into DIY zine cultures beyond punk. Nick Crossley further illuminates DIY’s fraught relationship with mainstream culture in the realm of music, defining the term thus:

‘DIY’ is a form of collective action, largely within ‘the industry’ but characterised by opposition and/or an attempt to carve out an alternative to it. There are three parts to this claim. First, DIY is collective action. Second, DIY actively opposes ‘the industry’ and/or seeks to create alternatives to its practices. [...] Third, the parallels between ‘industry’ and ‘DIY’ activities are such that they are seldom completely independent of one another, such that the latter can usually be regarded as a part of the former. (“Doing It with Others” 81)

Thus, rather than juxtaposing DIY against mainstream culture (whether it be in music, or in our case, literature), DIY can be better understood as a cultural phenomenon in which both the mainstream and the alternative are its elements demonstrating a potential to intersect where interests meet. This contention is also supported by Triggs’ claim that DIY appropriates elements of the mainstream, if only to subvert them. The other central idea reflected in the above studies is that of collaborative impulse and collective action in DIY. These attributes also apply to spoken word theatre as my attendance of live performances, my study of archival material and my interviews with practitioners have confirmed.

Taking a long view of the DIY ethos of the spoken word scene in the UK, Pete Bearder traces “a number of *horizontal* links (between peers) and *vertical* links (between the grass roots and institutions) through which this network negotiates and cultivates its power” (130, emphasis original) in *Stage Invasion*. His examination has been instructive in understanding the DIY scope of spoken word poetry at large. However, I am particularly interested in how spoken word theatre as an art form espouses a DIY ethos.

While spoken word theatre has gained popularity amongst poet-performers and is slowly attaining recognised as an art form from cultural institutions as well as funding bodies, it remains rooted in a self-sufficient philosophy in its stages of creation, performance, and post-production archiving or dissemination. What is necessary here, then, is to unpack this DIY ethos to study how it manifests in these stages across the art form. Here, my observations are informed by my critical engagement with spoken word theatre in the UK as well as with the broader UK spoken word circuit.

In the creation or conceptualisation stage, spoken word theatre exhibits formal fluidity and thematic adaptability, which allows the art form to constantly respond to changing circumstances. Poets often have strategies in place to adapt their performance to a specific setting, environment or context, and these are not plans of contingency but a feature of the art form and spoken word poetry more broadly. By formal fluidity and thematic adaptability, I mean a malleability of performance style and a flexibility of poetic content. These features can be observed in multiple case studies across this dissertation. For instance, Adam Kammerling’s *Seder* has been constantly evolving as a show since its conceptualisation in 2018–19. While earlier versions were adapted to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the show has been recently updated to respond to present-day global political upheaval and war crimes committed by nation-states. *Seder* is an auto/biographical piece tied to Kammerling’s family history and tells the story of the poet’s grandfather, a Holocaust survivor. In its current version, the poet delicately connects the atrocities of the Holocaust to the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, to caution against using historical trauma to justify the annihilation of a people and repeat past atrocities.

Rose Condo’s *The Empathy Experiment 2.0* is also a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and an adaptation of an earlier version, *The Empathy Experiment*. In *The Empathy Experiment*, performed on-site at various theatres and festivals, the poet problematises our extreme reliance on smartphones, suggesting that it leads to a loss of empathy. After the outbreak of the COVID-19, when smartphones became an important tool to stay connected to

people in times of social isolation as well as to procure the latest news and updates on the pandemic, the poet revised her show both in content — to reflect on the utility of mobile technologies — and form, to adapt it to a Zoom performance. What is more, in my interviews with them, both poets highlight the minimal stage design they work with to facilitate easy touring of their shows. Condo notes that she uses minimal props so that they can all fit in a red box (which is also a prop in the show) and can be carried around easily when she performs in different cities. Similarly, when asked about design considerations for his show, Kammerling responds half-jokingly, “What fits in the van?” (00:32:00–00:32:04), once again signalling ease of mobility to be an important concern.

Poets and other artists associated with the spoken word scene, such as photographers, musicians, illustrators who specifically work in the scene, come together to make spoken word theatre happen. This is what Bearder calls horizontal links, that is, between peers. In this way, spoken word theatre is both do-it-yourself, and — to borrow from music scholar John Richards — “doing-it-together” (“Beyond DIY” 274). Examining DIY in electronic music, Richards argues that the “notion of DIY is an oxymoron, since those who share a DIY aesthetic rely on each other to exchange ideas and work together as a form of counterculture. There is a focus on DIT, doing-it-together, rather than doing-it-yourself” (274). This collaborative spirit within the spoken word community allows artists to pool their resources and skills in order to support each other without relying heavily on mainstream cultural institutions. Of course, theatre itself is a collaborative medium. However, what makes spoken word theatre DIY and DIT is the way community members (poets and other artists) pool in their resources to make shows in a grassroots fashion. Poets regularly collaborate with each other not only by writing together, but also by offering other forms of artistic support. Kat Lyon’s spoken word theatre show, *Dry Season*, for example, included a poetry film titled “Duvet Days”, for which Lyon’s poetry was animated by fellow poet-performer Edalia Day. In Kammerling’s *Seder*, poet-performer Antosh Wojcik joins the production as a drummer. For independent shows, poets also sometimes crowdfund their projects: in such scenarios, community members come together via mutual aid drives or through crowdfunding platforms to help poets stage their work. Poet-performer Dean Atta, at the time of writing this dissertation, is crowdfunding for the research and development phase of his new show *I Don’t March to That Drum*. The show works with poems from Atta’s “forthcoming collection of the same name and sets them to music composed by Antosh Wojcik” (“I Don’t March”).

Adaptability is also a significant feature when it comes to staging of a show. For instance, John Berkavitch in *Shame* kept the framework of the physical performance flexible as he worked with different dancers in different venues. In each performance, dancers offered their own interpretation of the script in their choreography. Another example of this adaptability can be found in Mel Bradley's *Ms. Noir's Seven Deadly Sins*. Bradley adapted her previously on-site show for a virtual performance in 2020, owing to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the show was originally designed to be performed on Zoom for the Derry Halloween Festival, on the day of the performance, due to technical difficulties with the platform, the poet managed to livestream it via YouTube instead (Palzer, "Liveness During the Pandemic"). Another form of adaptability apparent in spoken word theatre is one related to space. For example, a show like Luke Wright's currently touring *Later Life Letters* has been staged in conventional theatre and performance spaces as well as parks, breweries, fringe and festival stages (Wright, "Gigs"), which attests to the spatial malleability of spoken word theatre. This also brings us back to the earlier discussions on Condo's and Kammerling's shows. As has been previously established, the stage design of spoken word theatre is often flexible enough to scale up or down the performance according to the venue it inhabits. This pliability is a hallmark of the art form.

Lastly, beyond production, a DIY ethos also informs the way spoken word theatre is recorded and disseminated. Spoken word theatre's afterlife largely exists in non-institutional forms of archives, as I have discussed elsewhere⁸. These alternative forms of archives include community archives, self-archives and rogue archives, which will be explored more fully in the Research Methods section below. Community archives emerge to address archival gaps in traditional memory institutions. They are often initiated by practitioners of art forms or groups which are usually considered marginalised, alternative or subversive. Self-archives are created by poets to maintain a record of their own performance journey, through photographs, video recordings, ephemera and more. Rogue archives comprise of rogue or chance material found on the internet. Ephemeral traces of performances surface all over the internet in the form of audio and video snippets, reviews, social media posts and comments, and on occasion, as full-length recordings, thereby creating autonomous (sometimes ephemeral) archives. All three forms of archives maintain a record or history of a practice that is yet to be instituted into the formal architecture of an archive.

⁸ See "Spoken Word Poetry and the Wonder of the Archive." *Poetry Off the Page*, 28 August 2025, <https://poetryoffthepage.net/spoken-word-poetry-and-the-problem-wonder-of-the-archive/>

Thus, DIY constitutes a central principle of spoken word theatre that is addressed across the chapters of my thesis. However, beyond this thread, individual chapters adopt different critical lenses and are not married to a single theoretical approach. The first chapter sounds out the origins of spoken word theatre, situating it in historic continuities of poetry and theatre. Chapter 2 engages with theories of auto/biography (Heddon), the autofictional (Mark) and, identity and its performance (Butler, Puar). Chapter 3 engages with critical perspectives on intermediality, drawing on both literary (Rajewsky, Wolf) and theatre studies (Chapple and Kattenbelt). Chapter 4 revolves around spatial politics. It builds on theories of heterotopia (Foucault vis-à-vis Tompkins, McGowan) and spatiality (McAuley) in theatre and poetry performance scholarship, unpacking spoken word theatre's manipulation and negotiations of space. Finally, Chapter 5 expands upon spoken word theatre's adaptation to online modes of performances in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, building on concepts of digital performance (Dixon) and online theatre (Fuchs, Chen). This analytical framework is supported by the methods outlined below.

vi.ii Methods

My project followed a three-pronged approach. The first element was **archival research**⁹. I acquired audiovisual recordings of shows from repositories such as Apples and Snakes' Spoken Word Archive and video hosting platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. The Apples and Snakes archive was a foundational resource for my dissertation. However, owing to its organisational confines (understandably, only Apples and Snakes events have been recorded) and geographical limitations (the archive is principally London-centric), I had to broaden my corpus. In January and February 2023, I undertook archival visits to the British Library, the Scottish Poetry Library and the National Library of Wales in search for recordings of spoken word theatre. I was unable to procure any from these resources but acquired recordings of other important poetry performance events from these archives, which informed my understanding of the scene. Most of the audio-visual material for my research, then, came from two forms of alternative archives: *self-archives* of poets, and *rogue archives*, that is, chance found material on the internet.

⁹ This section on archives has been adapted from "Spoken Word Poetry and the Wonder of the Archive." *Poetry Off the Page*, 28 August 2025, <https://poetryoffthepage.net/spoken-word-poetry-and-the-problem-wonder-of-the-archive/>

On self-archives:

Most poets and practitioners have a detailed record of their own performance journey. On the one hand, this aids them in tracing their own development as an artist. On the other, it builds a record of their work within a practice that is yet to be instituted into the formal architecture of an archive. “[I]n absence of any sustained attention or critical dialogue with the dominant institutions of the art world and given a systematic marginalisation over the years [...] practitioners themselves have been obliged to act first as curators, and now as archivists” (264), observes Stuart Hall in “Constituting an Archive” on the establishment of the African and Asian Visual Artists’ Archive in the UK. While said in the context of a community archive, this statement not only holds true for self-archives but also the case of spoken word theatre, and poetry performance at large, since a) both the art form and the genre have been marginalised within the literary and performance establishments, and b) both have been hugely shaped and advanced by minoritised communities in the UK.

In terms of strategies of recording, many contemporary poets have their performance work saved as audio/visual files in digital storage systems, whether it be cloud servers or their own devices. Poets such as Imogen Stirling, Mick Wood and Ross McFarlane, were kind enough to share these recordings with me using file sharing systems before or after our interviews. Other poets also upload their work to YouTube or Vimeo and grant access only to specific people via a link. Poets Luke Wright, Kevin P Gilday, Laura Thurlow and Antosh Wojcik, among others, shared their work with me through this mode. Entering into dialogue with poets was, hence, of utmost importance for my project.

On rogue archives:

Ephemeral traces of spoken word theatre shows surface all over the internet in the form of photographs, video snippets, reviews, social media posts and comments, and in some opportune instances, as full-length audio-visual recordings. These traces demonstrate the archival impulse of audience and community members of the art form. I borrow the term “archival impulse” from Hal Foster (2004) who uses it to refer to archival art created by artists out of fragmentary bits of history and creative work, where “these artists are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects – in art and in history alike – that might offer points of departure again” (5). While Foster uses the phrase to describe the conscious work of an artist, I use it to denote both the conscious and unconscious impulse of audiences and spoken word community members to weave traces of the performance, its existence, and their experience of it into public memory. Whereas community archives are driven by the desire to

constitute an archive, to build a record of the art form's history, rogue archives are born reflexively out of an enthusiastic impulse to record a specific work of art or an individual poet's oeuvre. This impulse takes over enthusiasts of the art form, who then act as what media and fan studies scholar Abigail De Kosnik (2016) calls "techno-volunteers" (46) and create rogue digital archives. According to De Kosnik, rogue archives are defined by:

constant (24/7) availability; zero barriers to entry for all who can connect to the Internet; content that can be streamed or downloaded in full, with no required payment, and no regard for copyright restrictions (some rogue archivists digitize only what is already in the public domain); and content that has never been, and would likely never be, contained in a traditional memory institution. (*Rogue Archives* 10)

While De Kosnik considers specific websites that collate different records of a specific subculture as rogue archives, to me, social media websites and video streaming platforms too can host rogue archives through their various features like playlists, dedicated accounts, story highlights, tags and so on. The audio version of Kae Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* and the video recording of the poet's *Let Them Eat Chaos*, both available on YouTube (see Appendix), constitute this form of rogue archive, having been uploaded to the platform not by the proprietors of the audio/visual material but by "techno-volunteers" active on the platform.

It is of note that while it was easy to find audio-visual material pertaining to post-2010 performances, videos of early instances of spoken word theatre were difficult to come by. As Roger Robinson explained in our interview, when poets were first producing these shows, no one had archiving and posterity in mind, which is why many shows from the early 2000s have not been recorded and can be engaged with only through ephemeral traces and personal memories. A case in point is Jonzi D's *Aeroplane Man*: while audio/video recordings of early performances of the show could not be procured, a 20-minute excerpt performed and recorded on video at a 2015 Jawdance event was obtained from the Apples and Snakes archive. To date, I have identified 105 spoken word theatre shows and have procured full-length audio/visual recordings of 36 of these. Additionally, I attended 10 shows in person during my research trips to the UK, several of them during my visit to the Edinburgh Fringe in 2024, which helped me establish contact with the poets to obtain recordings of some of the shows.

Analysing archival material, mainly audiovisual recordings of performances, is central to this study. I define spoken word theatre and outline its scope based on my viewing of archival

material, especially analysis of the 13 case studies, and attendance of live performances. The archival research, in this sense, has been the most important element of my methodology.

This brings me to the second element of my methodology: **semi-structured interviews** with poets, practitioners, producers/promoters, (spoken word) theatre companies, and in some cases directors and other theatre professionals. The questionnaire for these interviews was collaboratively devised by the Poetry Off the Page project team, based on interview theory and methodology (Flick; Holstein and Gubrium) and in consultation with poets Patience Agbabi, Kat François, Amerah Saleh, Benjamin Zephaniah, and Russell Thompson.¹⁰ The interviews I conducted have informed my understanding of the production of shows and given me insight into the work behind the scenes. Often, the recordings of shows acquired during the archival phase were also discussed in interviews, which offered me a better understanding of the conceptual process of the shows. The case studies undertaken in this dissertation reveal the importance of these interviews; conversations with the poets helped me understand the performance design and key considerations of a production. In total, I conducted 30 interviews between 2023 and 2026 in person or on Zoom with poets from England, Scotland and Wales. In the case of Northern Ireland, I drew from interviews conducted by Claire Palzer, a fellow researcher in the Poetry Off the Page project whose work focuses on the Irish spoken word scene. Her interviews were greatly instructive in shaping my understanding of the Northern Irish context. The interview process for the project on the whole was developed to offer interviewees choice and control over what gets discussed and recorded, as Palzer outlines in a blog entry on Poetry Off the Page project's interview process:

In accordance with the GDPR, we were transparent about the data we collected and its uses, and in alignment with the data minimization principle, we ensured that the data collected was related to the stated purpose (meaning, directly connected to the interview subject) (see also “GDPR” art. 5). To ensure participant control, we provided the opportunity to approve the recording without additional changes (aside from those we deemed appropriate); they could have certain passages anonymised, allowing us to refer to them in

¹⁰ For a detailed overview of the Poetry Off the Page team's interview methodology, see Claire Palzer's blog entries on the *Poetry Off the Page* blog: “Developing the Poetry Off the Page Interviews” published on 15 April 2025, <https://poetryoffthepage.net/developing-the-poetry-off-the-page-interviews/>; and “Implementing the Poetry Off the Page Interviews” published on 3 July 2025, <https://poetryoffthepage.net/implementing-the-poetry-off-the-page-interviews/>.

publications without including those passages in the final public recording; they could have passages removed from the public files, and these would not be referenced by the PoP team in any publications; and, of course, they could withdraw their recording entirely. (“Implementing”)

Since the interviews will be permanently archived, offering participants these choices were imperative. The collection of my interviews along with most others from the project, will be permanently archived in the University of Vienna’s Phaidra archive, as well as in Apples and Snakes’ Spoken Word Archive, both open-access platforms accessible to researchers of spoken word¹¹. The interviews are archived exclusively as audio recordings. This strategy is consistent with Poetry Off the Page project’s aim of “making a contribution to a ‘historiophony’ of poetry performance” (Poetry Off the Page 8). Seven of my interviews have already been uploaded to Phaidra while the archiving of the rest is in progress and will be completed by September 2026. The interview process has been generative for my understanding of the UK spoken word scene, and instructive in learning to make space for complex and conflicting opinions.

The analysis of the 13 case studies undertaken in this dissertation are greatly shaped by these interviews. My examination of spoken word theatre’s intermedial impulse, spatial adaptability, and the prevalence of auto/biographical work in the art form, for instance, are founded on theoretical lenses from literary and theatre studies, on the one hand, and informed by the conversations I had with poets and other practitioners during interviews, on the other.

The third element of my method entailed **textual and performance analyses** of spoken word theatre shows. My examination of the 36 audiovisual recordings of shows enabled me to contextualise the 13 case studies undertaken in this dissertation in relation to broader trends and developments in spoken word theatre. The textual analysis of the 13 shows attends to elements such as structure, form, meter, rhythm, and use of language. My analysis of overt and implicit themes, especially in the case of identity performance, further draw on cultural studies to shed light on issues pertaining to race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and more. Additionally, I also engage with concepts such as intermediality and spatiality in my analysis.

The performance analyses of archival recordings follow the landmark model proposed by Julia Novak in *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (2011). In

¹¹ Claire Palzer’s interviews with Irish poets are archived in the National Library of Ireland’s Born Digital Collection.

Live Poetry, Novak offers a methodological toolkit for scholars to engage comprehensively with performed poetries, beyond their textual and thematic properties. Combining modes of literary and performance analyses, the framework studies aspects such as a) audiotext, building upon Charles Bernstein's conceptualisation as the oral realisation of the text rather than the implicit tone of the written text; b) body communication, as "an additional visual level of communication" unfolding in the "physical co-presence of performer and audience" (145), and c) the context of performance. In this dissertation, I deliberately focus on shows which have as yet received little critical attention. I have tried to engage with a balanced mix of emerging and established poets in order to demonstrate the art form's growing appeal to both. Further, while the case studies exhibit multiplicity of experiences, performance styles and perspectives that constitute the UK spoken word scene, the performances studied here are overwhelmingly left leaning in their political intent, which is indeed the dominant ideology in spoken word (Bearder 75). Finally, owing to the prominent role of body communication in spoken word theatre, I have only analysed shows with full-length audiovisual recordings. While shows with audio-only recordings are available as well, my study is situated in the examination of both the sonic and the visual in performance and hence requires engagement with material containing audio *and* video.

Note on textual analysis:

In this dissertation, "spoken word poetry", "poetry performance", "poetry in performance" and "live poetry" have been employed interchangeably to refer to a poem performed (and not merely read in the style or convention of a "poetry reading") by the poet themselves, usually at a spoken word or poetry performance event. Secondly, unless stated otherwise, the poems and prose were transcribed by me, based on the audio of the recorded performance. Finally, slashes (/) indicate pauses in the performed text whereas line breaks are deployed to demonstrate rhyme scheme and verse structure of the performed text.

vii. Chapter Outline

In this Introduction, I have endeavoured to define spoken word theatre, outlining how the dissertation engages with the origins, aesthetics and politics of spoken word theatre. The following chapters delineate the art form's thematic and formal scope.

Chapter One, **The Emergence of Spoken Word Theatre in the UK**, traces the historic continuities and influences of spoken word theatre in order to distinguish its artistic boundaries

and outline its scope. The chapter defines four key attributes of spoken word theatre and studies them in relation to their manifestation in other art forms. To this end, considering the art form's theatrical and literary inheritances, the chapter engages with a range of practices — from happenings, fringe theatre and verse drama to punk poetry, dub poetry, hip-hop theatre and gig theatre, in order to situate spoken word theatre in the context of these genres and practices. Placing its emergence in the UK around 1990s, the chapter then charts the developments of spoken word theatre in the past three decades.

In Chapters Two to Five, I examine characteristic features and devices of spoken word theatre. In Chapter Two, **Performing Identity in Spoken Word Theatre**, I engage with the prevalent practices of the auto/biographical and the autofictional in the art form. To this end, I focus on the aesthetic strategies poets incorporate in their performance of identity. While the first two case studies, Kevin P Gilday's *Spam Valley* and Adam Kammerling's *Seder*, illustrate the explicit representation of identity through auto/biography, the subsequent two case studies, Ellen Renton's *Within Sight* and afshan d'souza's *How to Eat Mangoes*, explore how poets subvert tropes, stereotypes and expectations associated with minoritised subjecthood through the autofictional. These four analyses thus reveal how expectations of identity performance are built, rebuilt, and also dismantled in spoken word theatre. I also briefly engage with SuAndi's *The Story of M* and Lemn Sissay's *Something Dark* in this chapter. Discussing a total of six shows in this chapter enables me to represent the breadth of performance strategies deployed by poets in performing identity, and also to engage with a topic with nuance. The performance of identity, especially by minoritised subjects, is a complex and sensitive subject that has been often flattened in critical discourse. To avoid reproducing essentialising discourses or broad claims from either side of the critical spectrum (the scale ranging from outright disavowal to uncritical reverence), I bring in a range of performances, thus demonstrating the possibilities inherent in spoken word theatre for performing narratives of identity.

Theatre functions as a hypermedium and hence is integrally intermedial. However, while spoken word theatre can be situated in theatre, the art form does not inherit theatre's spatial, logistical, economic or aesthetic affordances. Chapter Three, **Intermediality in Spoken Word Theatre**, explores the workings of intermediality in the art form with a focus on its DIY manifestations. As has been established in this Introduction, spoken word theatre boasts a DIY ethos with often, though not always, one person at the helm of all conceptual, logistical, performative decisions and executions. Regardless, intermedial experimentation which frequently requires collaboration is a recurrent feature of the art form. It occurs at both the

cross-section of poetry with other art forms, such as the inclusion of dance, music, puppetry, alongside spoken word; as well as the integration of visual and sonic digital technologies. To this end, I follow both literary and theatre scholarship on intermediality. The case studies analysed in this chapter range across visual and sonic experimentations and include Roger Robinson's *Shadow Boxer*, John Berkavitch's *Shame*, and Jasmine Gardosi's *Dancing to Music You Hate*.

In Chapter Four, **Space in Spoken Word Theatre**, I examine the spatial negotiations and appropriations of spoken word theatre, continuing the investigation of the art form's DIY ethos. The chapter comprises of three case studies, which demonstrate the breadth of spatial possibilities afforded to the art form, namely, Laura Thurlow's *River Time!* at Pickle Studio, Riddle's Court for Edinburgh Fringe, Stephen Durkan's *Why Am I Doing This?* at one of the party 'caves' at Whistlebinkies for PBH's Free Fringe and Malaika Kegode's *Outlier* at Bristol Old Vic. Using these case studies, I explore the politics of space that informs the staging of spoken word theatre. I take into account the economic and logistical considerations of staging, as well as the more aesthetic choices poets make to negotiate these considerations.

Spoken Word Theatre Online: After COVID-19, the fifth and final chapter, studies the phenomenon of online spoken word theatre shows, analysing four one-poet spoken word shows that were stage in the early stages (2020–21) of the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter examines how virtual performances emerged as an alternative to physical shows in the aftermath of the pandemic. It offers a typology of pandemic online performances. Here, I elaborate the four strategies deployed by poets to adapt their shows to the conditions of the 'new normal' by undertaking the case studies of Mel Bradley's *Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins*, Rose Condo's *The Geography of Me* and *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*, and Malaika Kegode's *Outlier*. *Outlier* is analysed again in this chapter as it was unique in its hybrid performance model for both on-site and online audiences. Additionally, the recordings of the live performance were also turned into a film available for purchase as video-on-demand on Bristol Old Vic's website.

The short **Conclusion** recapitulates the findings of my study, offering a provisional overall assessment of the aesthetics and politics of spoken word theatre in the UK. Here, I further engage with a few spoken word shows outside of the UK as well as international scholarship around the same, to substantiate the claim I made in this Introduction — that spoken word theatre has gone global. While a full-scale study of the art form in international contexts

is yet to be made, it is vital to acknowledge the art form's global presence. Finally, the Conclusion outlines what has not been covered in this dissertation, pointing out a range of avenues for future scholarship in this field.

1. The Emergence of Spoken Word Theatre in the UK

Spoken word theatre emerged as a performance practice in the UK in the 1990s. Within this art form, poets began conceptualising long-form one-person shows, which they performed in their customary spoken word style, ranging across rap, dub, punk, and more, presenting the poems through elocution and body communication. Over time, these shows became one-poet shows, meaning that while the poet began collaborating with other artists in these productions, the poet was still at the helm of artistic and performance design. The form has since exhibited a confluence of theatrical stagecraft, storytelling devices, and spoken word poetry typically addressed directly to the audience, forgoing the so-called “fourth wall”. From its very beginning, spoken word theatre has often been auto/biographical, though how these life narratives are framed across performances have vastly differed.

While the form is closely tied to literary lineages, and specifically to the traditions of poetry performance, it also draws on a wide range of theatrical practices and frequently incorporates other art forms, such as music, dance, and visual media. At the same time, it is rooted in innovative, alternative, and often radical forms of performance culture, embracing a strong DIY ethos. A gap in previous critical engagement with spoken word theatre has been that the art form’s aesthetic features have not been defined. Even as scholars engage with individual performances and delineate their aesthetic attributes, an extensive attempt to trace the intrinsic features of the art form has not yet been made. This concern is further exacerbated by the ahistorical reception of the art form. While Katie Ailes acknowledges in her dissertation briefly that spoken word theatre emerged at the turn of the millennium — though I dispute this claim in mine by placing its emergence in the 1990s — the historical continuities of its aesthetics and formal design have not been studied. Such an intervention is required to ground the art form in its multiple heritages, and in both literary and theatrical traditions. This chapter endeavours to do the same.

Even though spoken word theatre is a comparatively new art form, about three decades old, it is situated in the historic interplay of innovations in poetic practices and alternative theatrical forms. To establish the art form’s critical currency, it is important to study it in relation to artistic traditions that preceded spoken word theatre and contributed to its defining properties.

Locating spoken word theatre in a continuous dialogue between poetry and theatre, this strategy will help to delineate the art form's composite aesthetic. My objective in this chapter, therefore, is to probe into the generic boundaries of spoken word theatre and elaborate upon its fundamental attributes. What I am particularly interested in, then, are the characteristic formal and aesthetic features of spoken word theatre and their resonance in other emergent and established forms and movements. To examine the art form's defining properties, I trace their earlier manifestations in different artistic practices, in order to chart spoken word theatre's artistic continuities while also examining what differentiates the art form from traditions that came before. I further study these artistic continuities against newer developments in theatre, to throw into the relief the specificity of spoken word theatre as a contemporary theatrical form. To this end, I engage with traditions and practices within poetry, drama, theatre and performance art to identify such features which inform or influence spoken word theatre's formal design and thematic properties. The project for this chapter, therefore, is to outline the emergence of spoken word theatre in the UK, situating its genealogy within the context of multiple developments in poetry and theatre, without attempting to construct a linear history of its origins.

As noted in the Introduction, I have identified 105 spoken word theatre shows to date. I have procured archival recordings of 36 of these shows and attended 10 live performances. My engagement with the art form has led me to identify the following four key features that characterise spoken word theatre, all of which are rooted in a DIY aesthetic: a) the form of one-poet performance (including collaborative work with one poet at the helm) that is usually a self-referential performance of identity ranging from auto/biography to autofiction; b) cross-arts experimentation or an intermedial performance design; c) strategic adaptability in both formal and spatial design; and finally, and obviously, d) poetry as the principal instrument of narrative. These four attributes form the foundations of the subsequent chapters. In Chapter 2, I study the performance of identity in one-poet shows through the modes of auto/biography and autofiction. In Chapter 3, I study the cross-arts experimentations in the art form. In Chapter 4 and 5, I engage with topics of spatial and formal adaptability, including the art form's adaptation to the online mode. In all analytical chapters, across the 13 case studies, poetry and its performance is extensively examined.

As none of these attributes are exclusive to spoken word theatre, and since they have existed longer than the art form itself, it is productive to study their manifestation in earlier genres and art forms to clarify how they specifically converge in spoken word theatre. I begin my examination by first tracing historical continuities evident in spoken word theatre's

performance design. These attributes have emerged cyclically in different theatrical forms throughout history. For instance, one-person shows in the UK, in which a performer not only declaims a text but also engages with other art forms ranging across puppetry, painting, lyric and more, was in evidence in the eighteenth century, under the label of ‘solos’ after the Licensing Act of 1737¹². More recently, another wave of one-person shows can be traced to the shift towards experimental forms of performance in the 1960s, specifically the emergence of auto/biographical work on stage. Cross-art aesthetics have also appeared on the British stage in successive waves, shaping diverse theatrical movements from nineteenth-century melodrama to the visual theatre of the 1990s. The next sections of this chapter trace the genealogy of the four key attributes identified above, in their historical and contemporary manifestations, to examine their continuities in spoken word theatre. Except for the dramatic monologue, many of these traditions are linked to the countercultural impetus of the postwar period, to which the emergence of spoken word poetry is also generally linked. However, even the established form of the dramatic monologue manifested in the politically radical forms of the late twentieth century, to which spoken word theatre can be related.

1.1 Unpacking the ‘Theatre’: Continuities in Performance Aesthetics

Three of the four intrinsic features of spoken word theatre identified in this chapter relate to strategies and aesthetics of performance. It is pertinent, therefore, to begin my investigation with continuities in performance aesthetics between various theatrical traditions and spoken word theatre. First, I examine the prevalence of one-person shows in theatre and their thematic link to the auto/biographical (and hence also, the autofictional). I then engage with cross-arts aesthetics and spatial adaptability across performance traditions to study their manifestation in spoken word theatre. By the end of this section, I will have traced the historical continuities of spoken word theatre’s intrinsic performance attributes and also demonstrated how spoken word theatre sets itself apart as an art form.

¹² The Licensing Act of 1737 required playwrights to submit their work to the Lord Chamberlain for review in order to obtain the license for performance. However, playwrights “soon developed strategies to escape the censor’s pen, turning to allegory, historical drama, and mythology to veil their intent. Others borrowed from caricaturists and visual satirists, employing puppets, heads, paintings, wax figures, and related performing objects. In these performances, satirical commentary was ‘deverbalized,’ meaning that libelous words were excised in favor of sophisticated, and still potent, visual language” (Cairney 301).

1.1.1 Going Solo with the Auto/biographical

While one-person shows have an extensive history dating back to at least the Licensing Act of 1737¹³, **auto/biographical one-person performances** specifically became a prominent form in the second half of the twentieth century. In using the slashed term “auto/biography,” I follow Liz Stanley (1994), who observed that “accounts of other lives influence how we see and understand our own and that our understandings of our own lives will impact on how we interpret other lives” (Stanley, “Introduction” i). This usage, as Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey note, is informed by an approach to life writing “which not only embraces a hybrid version of generic categorization but also recognizes the intersubjective, reflexive potency of self-inscription” (*Representing Lives* xxii). Auto/biographical solo performance, in the context Donnell and Polkey highlight, was linked to making heard the voices of minoritised communities. Over time, performers from marginalised communities, such as BIPOC (or its British counterpart BAME) artists, queer artists, working-class artists, and artists situated on multiple axes of disenfranchisement, adopted the auto/biographical mode of performance to “‘speak out’, attempting to make visible denied or marginalised subjects, or to ‘talk back’, aiming to challenge, contest and problematise dominant representations and assumptions about those subjects” (*Autobiography and Performance* 20), as Deirdre Heddon notes. Heddon, in her seminal book, studies auto/biographical performances by UK and US-based artists and collectives, mostly from the 1990s and early 2000s. Documenting the thematic prevalence of auto/biography in solo performances of the late nineties and the early 2000s in the UK, Heddon writes:

Solo autobiographical performance in the UK is also well-recognised as a mode, and performers here include Bobby Baker, Ursula Martinez, SuAndi, Mem Morrison, Donna Rutherford, Joey Hateley, Adrian Howells, Marisa Carnesky, Leslie Hill and Helen Paris. [...] many of these performers are lesbian, gay and/or black and/or transgender, and their work also addresses explicitly their particular location(s) and the experiences that are inscribed there. (*Autobiography and Performance* 2)

That Heddon mentions SuAndi in this list is of particular relevance. The poet can be considered one of the earliest proponents of spoken word theatre. SuAndi’s *The Story of M* set the stage for

¹³ The Licensing Act of 1737 led to one of the most popular one-person shows of the times, George Alexander Stevens’s *Lecture on Heads* (1764), written and performed by Stevens himself at the Little Hay Market Theatre. (For a discussion, see Cairney.)

more performances merging poetry, auto/biography and the one-person format in the early stages of spoken word theatre's development. Her performance employs a storytelling mode of delivery, supported by a theatrical stage design. The performed poetry has a colloquial, conversational register that seems like a direct address to the audience. In playing her mother, SuAndi also relays to the audience parts of her own history. Deirdre Osborne terms the show "a bio-autobiographical self-history" as SuAndi "threads herself into the subject literally (she plays her mother) and literarily as she fashions an account of her mother's life in the form of a monodrama" ("Skin Deep" 57). Indeed, Osborne considers the show a monodrama. While applicable, *The Story of M* demonstrates several aesthetic attributes of spoken word theatre. The style of poetry is akin to that performed in spoken word theatre, and the poet-performer SuAndi herself has been involved in the British poetry performance scene. The format of the show is a one-poet performance, espousing a cross-arts aesthetic. Owing to its minimal design, the element of spatial adaptability is also latent in the show. I therefore contend that the play, owing to its writing and staging strategies, is also the earliest instance of spoken word theatre. That it can also be classified as monodrama in relation to a longstanding British tradition highlights the multiple heritages to which spoken word theatre can lay claim.

Heddon's study of the political function of auto/biographical performance, such as the politics of self-representation, especially for marginalised subjects, and the testimonial work of performances responding to catastrophic historical events, is instructive. In its auto/biographical one-poet format, spoken word theatre has prominently engaged in such political and cultural work and thus continued auto/biographical solo performance's political function. It is also worth noting that it was predominantly Black British poets who were experimenting with the auto/biographical one-poet (mostly one-person) format in early spoken word theatre. As Julia Novak observes:

From the 1990s onwards — and particularly since the turn of the millennium — the one-person show has become an established spoken-word format in the UK. Renowned exponents such as SuAndi ([1994] 2002; *The Story of M*, first performed 1994), Sissay ([2004] 2017; *Something Dark*, first performed in 2004), and Jonzi (2013; *The Letter*, first performed 2013) have demonstrated how the one-person show can literally lend a voice and visibility to the work of Black British poets, in their customary spoken-word idiom and performance style, and be used to negotiate diasporic history and cultural memory in a public arena. ("Performing Black British Memory" 325)

Indeed, the autobiographical mode has consistently facilitated the work of cultural memory in spoken word theatre, in the solo works of Black British artists as well as artists from other minoritised groups.

Not all solo performances take the form of an auto/biography, however. Autofiction is also gaining popularity in spoken word theatre, as will be explored in the next chapter. The autofictional allows poets to creatively alter their life narratives and play with the expectations raised by the first-person 'I'. Additionally, the autofictional allows poets to work their lived experience into fictional stories with fictional characters. The (auto) prefix remains vital, nevertheless, since poets' lived experiences and/or social and cultural identities inform the shows, and are enacted through poets' embodied presentation of their work. Poet afshan d'souza-lodhi's latest spoken word theatre show, *How to Eat Mangoes*, studied in detail in the next chapter, adopts the autofictional to "question how we love, how we heal and most importantly how we eat mangoes" ("How to Eat Mangoes"). The show is framed as a lecture performance, which empowers the poet to experiment with motifs from her cultural identity, without having to explicitly perform auto/biography.



Figure 1 Promotional poster for *How to Eat Mangoes*. (Courtesy: afshan d'souza-lodhi)

While spoken word theatre responds to a history of staging auto/biography in a one-person format, two factors distinguish spoken word theatre from its predecessors: its deployment of verse, or, what Novak calls poets' "customary spoken-word idiom", and its commitment to maintaining the unity of poet and performer, both traits relating to spoken word theatre. Hence, while establishing itself in a history of theatrical auto/biographical solo performances, spoken word theatre has managed to carve a niche for itself by incorporating the medium of spoken word poetry in its design.

In recent years, due to the growing collaborative and intermedial nature of spoken word theatre productions, one-person shows frequently give way to one-poet shows. I introduce this term to categorise performances where one poet writes the show and collaborates with other artists to realise the show, while remaining at the helm of most performance decisions. A poet will often write a spoken word show from scratch or create a set of poems for a longform performance, and then invite musicians, choreographer, animators, or a director, to help bring the show to life in a joint performance. Examples of such work include Kae Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* (2012) and John Berkavitch's *Shame* (2014), to name two. The collaborative intermedial aspect of spoken word theatre is studied in detail in Chapter 3. In the next section, I study the historical continuities of cross-arts or intermedial performance work.

1.1.2 Cross-Arts Experimentations

Theatre has facilitated the blending of different art forms throughout history, merging music, movement and drama, along with other non-performative arts, in new theatrical practices. Christopher B. Balme records early experiments in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*:

There are countless historical genres that mixed, in various combinations, speech, song and dance. Forms such as the opéra comique, the operetta and the musical employ the acting and dancing singer. The strict licensing of dramatic theatres in the eighteenth century (only a few theatres in Paris and London were permitted to perform "straight plays") encouraged mixed genres such as pantomimes and melodramas, which emphasized singing, dancing, mime and even occasionally puppetry. (3)

While these genres are fascinating in their scope of mixed-genre work, for this section, it is important to turn to specific practices in twentieth-century British theatre and performance art that have a role to play in the design of spoken word theatre.

Helen Taylor observes that Adrian Henri and the Liverpool poets' **happenings** merged poetry performance with other art forms, especially music and painting ("Adrian Henri and 1960s" 110). The first such happening was organised by Henri in Liverpool in 1962. As Taylor notes:

Their work uses poetry as "total art", combining words with music, visual art, and the live event, deliberately mixing genre, media, and register in order to forge the most direct connection with their audience. A strong musical tradition exists in Liverpool, from Celtic Folk through Country & Western to American Blues and Jazz. The music scene of the 1960s was a particularly important time for music in the city (the Beatles being the most famous export) and Henri's poems clearly reflect his city's "Liverpool Sound," both in form and content. (110)

Each art form incorporated in such happenings not only complemented another but informed the other's form and content; the poetry performance, therefore, was deeply influenced by the accompanying music and art, and vice versa. The coming together of art forms also marked their blending, hence the conception of "total art." As Robert Sheppard observes in *The Poetry of Saying*, poets were "able to mix avant-garde and popular culture in an accessible (and saleable) form, and extended their work, not just through a Liverpoolian association with the Beatles, into performance, which lay somewhere between stand-up comedy and the happening" (42). Cross-arts experimentation was thus intrinsic to the scene. On this mingling of art forms, Bearder elaborates,

At Liverpool Happenings, Henri (who was also a painter) performed live on canvas alongside dance, poetry, and recorded jazz music. Within this scene, stagecraft and crowd engagement became a big part of the poetic. In his 1967 book on the scene, Edward Lucie-Smith characterises the poetry as "an agent rather than an artifact" and a "service" rather than a "commodity". (*Stage Invasion* 111)

In spoken word theatre, this cross-arts impulse is demonstrated by intermedial productions such as John Berkavitch's *Shame* (2014), which merges spoken word poetry, storytelling, hip hop

dance, physical theatre, music, animation, projections, involving multiple artists; and Jasmine Gardosi's *Dancing to Music You Hate* (2021), which features spoken word poetry fused with beatboxing and Celtic dubstep, performed by a live band. Collaborations between poets on different projects are also frequent: for instance, poet Antosh Wojcik played the drums in Adam Kammerling's spoken word theatre show *Seder*. Poet Edalia Day illustrated and animated the poem "Duvet Days" for Kat Lyon's *Dry Season*.

Significantly, the collaborative impulse of the earlier happenings extended beyond the artists themselves. As Adrian Henri stresses in *Total Art: Environments, Happenings and Performance* (1974), happenings turned the audience into active participants, through various activities, and the artists involved attempted to be in community with the spectators through their performance. This dialogic impulse can also be observed in spoken word theatre, which regularly involves audience participation. For instance, in Rose Condo's *The Empathy Experiment*, the poet invites an audience member on stage and swaps shoes with him, while engaging in a dialogue (see Chapter 5 for more details).

Happenings may not have exerted a direct influence on spoken word theatre, though they done so indirectly, through the performance practices of the Liverpool poets, who have significantly shaped British poetry performance. At any rate, they demonstrate early cross-arts experimentations within poetry performance, which resonate with spoken word theatre today. However, the chief reason why I discuss happenings in this section is their performance design, specifically cross-arts but also spatial adaptability to an extent, which can be linked to spoken word theatre's intrinsic attributes. Recent developments in theatre practices (mostly experimental theatre) also demonstrate a focus on cross-arts design. Many of these developments emerged around the same time as spoken word theatre, in the late nineties or the turn of the millennium. These developments also demonstrate aesthetic overlaps with spoken word theatre, and many spoken word theatre shows have also been categorised under these forms. Hence, it is important to discuss them here in order to clarify the contours of spoken word theatre.

An art form that is of interest in this context is **visual theatre**, which emerged in the 1990s. Baz Kershaw places visual theatre, alongside different practices such as prison theatre, environmental theatre, women's theatre, and disability theatre, under the broad category of "innovative practices" developed at the end of the twentieth century to establish a theatrical space "beyond the cultural mainstream, often against intense opposition from traditionally-minded theatre critics and historians" (*Politics of Performance* 59). In his 2009 doctoral thesis,

The Puppet, the Cinematic and Contemporary Visual Theatre, scholar and puppetry practitioner Thomas Butler Garrett, traces the form's "emergence, recognition and refinement" in the UK, suggesting:

Visual Theatre is a theatre which deals in images, manipulated, controlled, (puppetised) moving images. [...] The influence of the cinematic in Visual Theatre practice can be seen both in the sensibility at play in the creation of the work, and from the image received by the audience. Visual Theatre revels in the liveness of what it presents, but it also plays with notions of the recorded, of cutting, splicing, montage and mise-en-scène. It speaks the language of theatre, yet it also speaks the language of film with its meticulously planned shots and camera angles, and integration of elements such as light, sound and music with the image presented on screen. [...] Visual Theatre could be seen at least in part as a theatrical response to audiences' greater cinematic literacy and appetite for the techniques of film and multimedia. (78–79)

An example of visual theatre Garrett discusses in his dissertation is *The Far Side of the Moon* (2000), written, designed, directed and performed by Robert Lepage, which has toured all around the world in the past two and a half decades. The plot revolves around the dual threads of US and Soviet space programmes and the story of twin brothers in 1990s Quebec. Lepage plays both brothers, while other figures are depicted through puppets and using video projections. The performance displays a montage-like cinematic quality. Visual theatre, in this way, is not only co-temporal in its emergence, but it also displays an overlap in aesthetic attributes with spoken word theatre. It is no surprise that one of the early spoken word productions was also a visual theatre performance.

Roger Robinson's *Shadow Boxer* (2000) has been categorised as both visual theatre and spoken word theatre. A one-man show tracing the poet's life journey from Trinidad to England, *Shadow Boxer* premiered at Battersea Arts Centre as part of The British Festival of Visual Theatre on October 6, 2000. The festival was jointly inaugurated by the Battersea Arts Centre and Young Vic in 1995. *Shadow Boxer*, presented by Apples & Snakes, was promoted as an "astonishing new piece of theatre which uses storytelling and movement against a startling backdrop of Kung Fu shadow-puppetry" (Spoken Word Archive). After its initial run, London Metro declared the show to be "visual theatre of the most inventive and imaginative kind" (fig. 2; Spoken Word Archive). A significant attribute of the show was its blending of poetry performance and storytelling with physical theatre and object manipulation. Some of the poems

from the show were later published in Robinson's poetry collection *Suitcase* (2004). In retrospect, *Shadow Boxer* has also been acknowledged as an early instance of spoken word theatre by Apples and Snakes archivist Russel Thompson ("2,500 Poets and Counting"); the show's experimentations with cross-arts are explored in Chapter 3.

As noted above, visual theatre has aesthetic overlaps with spoken word theatre. Moving image, puppetry, illustration, and more, are recurrent features of spoken word theatre. However, spoken word theatre is equally invested in the sonic, given its ties with poetry performance. Hence, while there is considerable correspondence between the two forms, given their experimentations with visual arts and aesthetics, spoken word theatre's foregrounding of sound and orality distinguishes it as an art form.

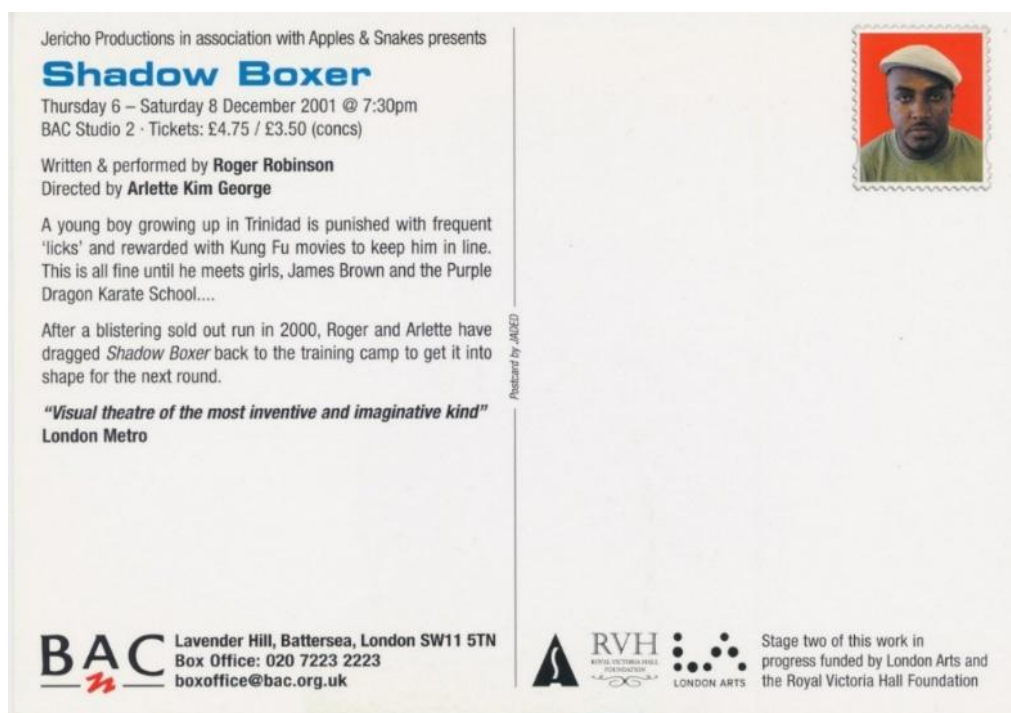


Figure 2 *Shadow Boxer* promotional postcard. (Courtesy: Spoken Word Archive)

Another development of note is **hip hop theatre**. Developed by London-based poet-dancer-emcee Jonzi D in the 1990s, this performance practice catalysed the blending of hip hop dance with spoken word poetry and theatre. As American hip hop practitioner and scholar Daniel Banks remarks, "Jonzi D fused the full range of his art practices and did not compartmentalize them, as the traditional dance and theater worlds demanded he do at the time" (1). Jonzi D himself defines hip hop theatre as "the culture of hip hop in a theatrical context

[...] So, all of the disciplines of hip hop in a theatrical way” (28:30–28:37) during the performance of an extract of *Aeroplane Man* at a 2015 Apples and Snakes Jawdance event. The “culture of hip hop” can be said to include both spoken word poetry and rap. Jonzi D created hip hop theatre shows such as *Lyrikal Fearta* (1995), *Aeroplane Man* (1999), and *The Letter: To Be Or To MBE?* (2013), to list a few. Inspired by Jonzi D, artists such as Will Powers, Danny Hoch, Sarah Jones, and more, popularised hip-hop theatre in the US (Banks). In fact, during its early phase, poet-practitioners performed their hip hop theatre shows between the UK and the US, facilitating a transnational cultural exchange. Will Power visited the UK on multiple occasions as part of Apples & Snakes’ programming to present his hip hop theatre work, first, as part of the *Urban Solos* showcase (1999), and then to perform his full-length show *The Gathering* (2001) (Spoken Word Archive). The form of hip hop theatre emerged to be “youth driven and proposed a unique alchemy of Hip Hop aesthetics and sociopolitical content” (1), as Banks observes. Nicole Hodges Persley enumerates the evolving aesthetic features in the multidisciplinary scope of hip hop theatre:

Varieties of performance styles reflect the varied modes of artistic expression under the rubric of hip-hop theater, such as dance theater, spoken word, solo performance, performance art, and ensemble theater. In its early stages, hip-hop theater attempted to incorporate the sounds and practices of the hip-hop generation that were literally connected to the four core elements of hip-hop: DJing, MCing, breaking, and graffiti. As the theater practice has evolved over almost twenty years, the musical and cultural deposits contain both literal and abstract acknowledgments of the practices, concerns, and politics of an ever-expanding group of artists inspired by hip-hop around the world. (“Hip-hop Theater” 85)

In the UK, Jonzi D’s Breakin’ Convention, an international hip hop theatre festival established in 2004 and later expanded to offer professional development opportunities and education programmes from 2008 onward, remains “at the vanguard of the global development of the hip hop theatre genre” (Breakin’ Convention). Jonzi D’s mentee Kwame Asafo-Adjei’s hip hop theatre company Spoken Movement is now a prominent player in the scene as well. While Daniel Banks categorises spoken word theatre as a type of hip hop theatre, the breadth of spoken word theatre shows in my corpus make it clear that its scope and performative potential cannot be contained within the bounds of hip hop theatre. I contend, rather, that both hip-hop theatre and spoken word theatre are art forms in their own right, and where their aesthetic attributes

intersect, it is better to adopt a hyphenated approach than to subsume one under the other. Shows such as Jonzi D's *Aeroplane Man* can thus be classified as 'spoken word-hip-hop theatre'.

Finally, it is worth bringing into the discussion a practice that emerged in the British music scene in the 2000s: **gig theatre**. Duška Radosavljević traces the first recorded use of the term back to 2002 to describe Donal O'Kelly's *The Hand* performed at the Dublin Festival. Radosavljević summarises the practice as "the kind of theatre that assumes the stage aesthetic of a rock music gig" (121), further expanding that

In gig theatre, in addition to multiple microphones, the set often contains the drum kit, synthesisers, guitar amplifiers, and other electronic music-making tools associated with live performances of popular music. The performers in gig theatre simultaneously fulfil the roles of actors and musicians and engage in complex code-switching between the two registers of performance throughout the duration of the show. (*Aural/Oral Dramaturgies* 121)

While it is often subsumed under the category of alternative theatre, Radosavljević places gig theatre in conversation with the musical genres of rock and punk. She also highlights the multidisciplinary of the form, noting the multiple roles performers take on:

individuals involved in making gig theatre in the United Kingdom are often working in contexts where the 19th-century division of labour into acting, directing, playwriting, and design does not necessarily apply, involving instead DIY ensemble work, playing in a band or as a band, and — when they found their calling as a writer — writing, not as a profession but as an expression of these cumulative creative endeavours. (121–122)

Several characteristics that Radosavljević lists as relating to gig theatre apply to spoken word theatre as well. For instance, embracing a DIY ethos, artists often adopt multiple roles in spoken word theatre, especially for shows that have a more grassroots approach and are self-funded. Julia Novak's observation that in live poetry, poets are "cast in a triple role of writer, actor, and director of their own performance" (*Live Poetry* 59–60) thus also applies to spoken word theatre. Poets habitually also engage with other forms in the show, displaying their multidisciplinary skill. In view of the aesthetic similarities between gig theatre and spoken word theatre, it is unsurprising that spoken word poets often produce shows that straddle the generic boundaries of both forms, Kae Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* (2012), which Radosavljević mentions briefly in her discussion of gig theatre, can be cited here, as well as shows such as

Jasmine Gardosi's *Dancing to Music You Hate* (2021) and Malaika Kegode's *Outlier* (2021). In fact, Kegode confirms in our interview that the description she employs for her show is "spoken word-gig theatre" where asked about a suitable label for the show. She further explains: "I think the heart of it is in spoken word theatre. And the approach to writing it has always been like, from a spoken word perspective. Just attaching those gig mentalities and the narrative theatrical mentalities to it" (Kegode 05:40–05:53). Thus, the fusing of gig theatre with spoken word poetry is a prevalent practice with contemporary poets. While gig theatre highlights a show's association with music, spoken word theatre foregrounds poetry.

It is important to note, however, that while the term "gig theatre" is fairly new, the melding of spoken word poetry with music in a long-form live gig/show is not. The work of the African American poetry collective and musical group The Last Poets from the 1960s demonstrates this. Amiri Baraka in his foreword to *On A Mission: Selected Poems and a History of The Last Poets* (1996) describes the group thus: "The Last Poets are the prototype Rappers, the transmitters of the mass poetry style of the Black Arts sixties [...] A Jazz-linked rhythm and Blues feeling the Rappers copped forms a direct connection with content" (xiv). Similarly, scholar Rachel Bolle-Debessay, reminiscing on her attendance of a Last Poets concert, observes:

The way music and voice combined, the presence of poets and musicians together onstage, the use of poetry to deliver uncompromising political messages and the audience's attentive listening were [...] creating an intertextual and interperformative space that dismantled national boundaries. (*Dub Poetry* 12)

The Last Poets' musical style of poetry performance and their genre-bending gig-styled long-form shows find resonance in the work of contemporary spoken word-gig theatre practitioners, who meld poetry performance with different musical genres. Examples include the rhythmic accompaniment of Celtic dubstep in Gardosi's *Dancing to Music You Hate* or Kegode's collaboration with prog-rock band Jakabol in *Outlier*. The Last Poets, in a way, set the stage for the emergence of spoken word theatre which employs gig aesthetics.

The discussions of the above-mentioned art forms and genres reveal that spoken word theatre is both situated in performance continuities of early cross-arts experimentations with poetry, and that it has developed alongside and borrowed from art forms exhibiting similar intermedial proclivities. In fact, spoken word theatre coalesces with several art forms, as the

examples have demonstrated, and yet it can be distinguished from all by its foregrounding of spoken word poetry.

1.1.3 Spatial Adaptability

In the mid-twentieth century, the increasing politicisation of art and its turn toward mass audiences fostered the emergence of different forms of alternative drama, and a move to stages outside the theatre¹⁴. One such intervention in British theatrical history is the fringe theatre. Alongside underground, alternative, and experimental theatre, **fringe theatre** is a term “applied to types of non-mainstream or non-commercial theatre production in Britain across the twentieth century”, Sara Freeman explains (“Towards a Genealogy” 364). Dan Rebellato and Jen Harvie distinguish the scopes of fringe and alternative, noting that for some practitioners “the term ‘fringe’ entails an implicit deference to a mainstream, while ‘alternative’ suggests a rival, even critical rejection, of the mainstream” (“The Fringe” 131). Regardless, the philosophy governing both was the desire to move beyond mainstream cultural institutions, into informal, non-traditional public spaces, to produce radical, innovative, politically charged work. The term came into popular use around 1947 at the inception of Edinburgh fringe as a response to the Edinburgh International Festival, when eight groups, not programmed in the festival, staged productions in theatre and performance spaces at the fringe of the festival area. Freeman posits that over the years, as the movement retained a counter-cultural impulse,

“fringe” subsequently became a banner for the 1968 generation intent on shaking up the theatre scene. *Time Out*, the pioneering London alternative magazine, was first published in that year; and John Ashford, its first theatre editor, confirms that he introduced the category “fringe” to the magazine’s theatre listings in the late sixties. (367)

¹⁴ An early form of such experimentation is the Workers’ Theatre Movement. Established in 1926 by socialist artist-poet Christina Walshe, Workers’ Theatre settled on the form of agitprop dramas, “a theatre without a stage, a theatre which would use music and song and cabaret, and which could improvise its own material instead of going in for full-length set pieces, a theatre in which the audience could take part” (Samuel and Thomas 119-120), to embody the aspirations of a new kind of political theatre. In the spirit of public art and aligning themselves to the “democratic culture of the streets”, the Workers Theatre Movement groups, which proliferated in the UK, rejected the traditional theatre stage in lieu of “informal stages and irregular schedules, taking their shows to where their audiences were” (94), Robert Leach notes. While a link between Workers’ Theatre and spoken word theatre cannot be established, it is vital to mark their resonances in spatial adaptability and a bare stage aesthetic here.

Rebellato and Harvie link this development to the relaxation of censorship and regulation imposed by the state through the dissolution of the Lord Chamberlain's control of productions. The Theatres Act of 1968:

ended the Lord Chamberlain's role in approving (or not) plays for production. The abolition of this system crucially both displaced the assumption that a theatre show had to begin with a script and also, for the first time, ended the prohibitions on nudity, violence, blasphemy, and strong language, all of which became important tools of alternative theatre. ("The Fringe" 125)

This development led to experimentation and innovation in form, content and spatial aesthetics. The fringe movement included the work of "avowedly political countercultural groups like CAST but also comedy troupes (Low Moan Spectacular), [...] street and environmental theatre (Welfare State), community and applied theatre (InterAction)" (125), Rebellato and Harvie note. One-person shows in general, which would subsequently come to include spoken word theatre, also became a prominent mode of performance, not only within the scope of "fringe" as an artistic movement, but also specifically at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, where new and emerging artists showcased their non-traditional work. Since spoken word theatre's emergence, one-person (or one-poet) shows have often featured on the festival's programme, albeit under different labels (see Bearder). The spatial adaptability of spoken word theatre and the range of venues at the Edinburgh Fringe allows poets to perform their shows in both established venues, such as the Pleasance Dome, and more makeshift spaces, such as Riddle's Court. It is common to see names of established poets like Luke Wright and Tim Clare with multi-day runs of their one-person shows in the Fringe brochures every year. However, today, the political principles of Edinburgh Fringe drastically differ from what they were at its inception, which is explored in detail in Chapter 4.

While fringe theatre is a broad movement, I discuss it here to relate spoken word theatre to the movement's continuous emphasis of spatial adaptability. Fringe theatre can be said to have framed spoken word theatre's experimentation and flexible adaptation of space. That today spoken word theatre regularly finds itself in fringe settings and alternative venues across the UK places the art form in the economics and aesthetics of fringe theatre. The format allows poets to tour their shows and introduce their work to broader audiences. In turn, poets have learnt to adapt their shows to a variety of spaces owing to their induction into the ethos of fringe theatre. A survey of Lucy English and Jack McGowan's edited collection *Spoken Word in the UK* reveals the importance of fringe festivals to poet's artistic practice. Contributions to the

volume take us from Edinburgh Fringe to Vancouver Fringe and Sweden's Tranås at the Fringe — demonstrating Fringe's significance to both spoken word poetry and spoken word theatre.

1.2 Unpacking the 'Spoken Word': Stylistic Inheritances of the Poetic

Alongside innovation in theatrical practices, there were calls to reimagine the craft and aesthetics of poetry in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. As a result, experimentations with verse and its dramatic potential appeared in a variety of forms and innovative practices. Of these, dramatic monologue, verse drama and live poetry are the most relevant to my inquiry. Whereas dramatic monologue turned to the theatricality¹⁵ of poetry, in presuming the existence of speaker and audience within the text, verse drama attempted to address the dual calls of invigorating theatre and poetry by employing poetry exclusively in the dramatic script. Live poetry, on the other hand, embraced the declamation of poetry addressed to publics at live events. This advent of poetry in performance set the stage for the emergence of spoken word theatre. This section explores these developments and how they inform spoken word theatre's aesthetic attributes: I divide the section into two parts, discussing first the more critically recognised forms of dramatic monologue and verse drama, before engaging with the underexamined practice of live poetry or poetry in performance.

1.2.1 Dramatic Monologue and Verse Drama

Dramatic monologue came to prominence in the nineteenth century as a monologic form of verse that evoked the presence of a speaker and audience and an interplay between them, influenced by an occasion and dramatic action which takes place in the present (Sessions 508; Byron 20). With poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning and Alfred Lord

¹⁵ My use of the term theatricality follows Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis, who, referencing Willmar Sauter's definition, suggest that theatricality is "a way of describing what performers and what spectators do together in the making of the 'theatrical event'" (23). The authors further observe that the dramatic text is "a source of potential performance codes, and each production is an articulation of the full theatricality of both the dramatic text and performance text" (23). This definition implies that the dramatic text itself has the potential for theatricality. In a dramatic monologue, where the verse is framed as a speaker's address to a perceived audience, the theatricality of the text becomes apparent on page and stage.

Tennyson at its helm, the dramatic monologue emerged primarily in reaction to Romantic lyricism and Romantic theories of poetry. (Byron 13).

The link between dramatic monologue as a written form and the appearance of monologues on the theatre stage in the nineteenth century also merits emphasis. The cross-influence of literary and theatrical developments led to the prominence of the monologue form on page and stage. While the figures of the poet and the performer do not necessarily coalesce in either of these forms, these traditions suggest the physical embodiment of the text or enact its performativity. In dramatic monologue, the verse is written such that it demands recitation and performance. As Carrie J. Preston remarks in *Modernism's Mythic Pose*, “[s]peech, especially when framed as the extemporaneous speech of a dramatic event, invokes a body to say, as well as another to hear; a second body implicates the capacity of bodies to touch, love, or damage each other” (27). This is the remit of the dramatic monologue, which is indeed framed as a speech in those terms.

The potential of the dramatic monologue has been studied by Laura Severin, who investigated its employment by women poets of the twentieth century, in *Poetry Off the Page* (2004). Of special interest is her examination of the works of Liz Lochhead and Jackie Kay — both of whom are avid performers of their work. Severin reads twentieth-century British women poets’ inventiveness against three framing devices: dramatic monologue, performance and the use of a public persona, noting:

Though twentieth-century poetry has been most noted for its fractured lyrics, these women poets continued to breathe life into what has been seen as an outmoded nineteenth-century vehicle, the dramatic monologue. Hardly a spent poetic form, however, it has proved remarkably flexible for these women poets in their attempts to both present themselves as poets in a masculinist tradition and to re-present women’s image. [...] / One of its unique features is that it allows the woman poet to locate her voice in that of another’s, thereby offering a way around the British lyric tradition’s conflation of the poetic speaker with a male poet. (4–5)

The dramatic monologue form, then, through its declamatory potential, offered women poets the space to voice their concerns. Severin proposes that the form both “acts as a protective mask, enabling woman to speak as poet” and “allows for self-revelation, even if veiled” (6). This is particularly relevant for Lochhead and Kay, who “work across the poetic to dramatic

continuum, sometimes producing poetry, sometimes drama, and sometimes unnamed hybrids” (71). Severin further argues that both poets’ situatedness in the Scottish ballad tradition inspired their experimentation with dramatic monologue and performance.

Experimentation with the dramatic monologue form, especially by women poets, continues well into the twenty-first century. Patience Agbabi’s *Telling Tales* (2014), a twenty-first century retelling of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, demonstrates this. In performance, Agbabi enacts and differentiates the individual voices of the various speakers. Another example is Mel Bradley’s *Ms. Noir’s Seven Deadly Sins* (2020), where the poet performs seven monologues in the voice of Ms. Noir, the Keeper of Keys at Hotel Hell, to narrate tales about the seven deadly sins. In both shows, the practice of enacting voices other than the poets’ is drawn from the tradition of dramatic monologue, and points to the marginal strand of fictional narratives not drawn from auto/biography in spoken word theatre.

Alongside the dramatic monologue, **verse drama** also gained momentum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Discussing its emergence in *Verse Drama in England*, Irene Morra writes,

the beginnings of modern verse drama can be traced to two aesthetic movements, at times distinct from each other and at times complementary. Where some verse drama was bent primarily upon the reform of the contemporary stage, other manifestations were much more focused on the revitalization of contemporary poetry through an essentially literary dramatic form. (6)

Thus, verse drama emerged to revitalise both poetry and the theatre stage. While the nineteenth century inspired experiments with verse drama, it was in the twentieth century that the form can be said to have flourished. Here, it is important to define both verse and verse drama. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines verse as “a line of metrical writing”. Going back to its Middle English roots, Kasia Lech considers verse as a reinforcing agent, which suggests a strict adherence to structure. (5) Lech elaborates on this structural arrangement: “Verse structure is a pattern of verse lines and formal elements that support the line arrangement like rhyme, enjambment, metre, and so on, and is a defining feature of verse that differentiates it from other modes of language” (5). Verse drama, then, can be said to a dramatic text that consistently adheres to patterns and structures of verse in its form. However, as Lech observes, “[i]n verse drama, the search for patterns goes beyond the lines’ arrangements. It needs to consider theatre-specific elements such as the verse of a single character or a group of characters, various

dramatic spaces or temporal periods” (9). This is important to consider when situating spoken word theatre in relation to verse drama.

Midway into the twentieth century, verse drama achieved “prominent mainstream status” (Morra 11) on the English stage, with the success of T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*.¹⁶ Experimentation with verse in drama was, however, not limited to the English stage. Poets’ and playwrights’ turn towards modern verse drama was strongly reflected on the Irish stage too, most notably in the works of William Butler Yeats and George Bernard Shaw. Denis Donoghue in *The Third Voice* (1959) remarks, “Shaw found Shakespearean blank verse ‘as natural a form of literary expression as the Augustan English’ of Dublin or ‘the latest London fashion in dialogue’” and that he emphasised “the ‘naturalness’ of verse speech” (16). Furthermore, Morra states that both Scottish drama and Scottish verse-speaking were more receptive to the idea of their melding with each other in the modern verse play, noting that

[the] development of Scottish theatre (and the Edinburgh Festival) has characteristically continued to accommodate and encourage a variety of expressive idioms — and the continuous, contemporary vitality of verse drama is today clearly evident in performance and in the works of such dramatists as Liz Lochhead, Edwin Morgan, Douglas Maxwell and David Greig. (Morra 13)

The inclusion of Liz Lochhead and Edwin Morgan demonstrates that the poets who have based their practice in performance have substantially experimented with the theatrical potential of verse. This trend has continued well into the twenty-first century with many contemporary spoken word theatre productions exploring the potential of verse on stage.

¹⁶ It is important to also mention Poets’ Theatre here. Poets’ Theatre emerged in the 1950s in the United States as an experimental form of performance, frequently linked with poetic movements such as Black Mountain, the Beats, and the New York School. The form strived to bring audiences out of their passivity by actively engaging them; sometimes through direct address and other times, by blurring the boundaries of fiction, performance and real life (Bean, *Acts of Poetry* 24). Poets’ theatre was also inherently intermedial in its design, incorporating a cross-arts aesthetic with dance and music as intrinsic features of its performance, and countercultural in philosophy. Peter Howarth writes: “the Poets’ Theatres were not interested in poetic drama in the sense of actors representing a dramatic situation through characters speaking in verse. Poets’ Theatre was an experimental genre and a theatrical culture, pushing against delineated character, resolved plot, and stage boundaries” (*The Poetry Circuit* 240). All of these attributes once again resonate with practices of poetry performance and spoken word theatre. This is not a coincidence, for Poets’ Theatre “emerged from the arts scene that also gave rise to communal, improvisatory theatre and to performative, and often participatory, poetry readings” (*Acts of Poetry* 10), as Heidi Bean establishes. Hence, some of the inherent traits of poets’ theatre can also be found in forms emerging out of poetry performance, as in the case of spoken word theatre. However, because there is no direct association to be found between poets’ theatre in the US and spoken word theatre in the UK, I discuss the form in this footnote.

Kasia Lech's influential work *Dramaturgy of Form: Performing Verse in Contemporary Theatre* (2021) substantiates this claim. Lech examines "how contemporary theatre has used verse and verse-like forms to create a platform for individual, generational, and class stories; for responses to local and global politics; and for artistic searches for new aesthetics" (1) in her study, analysing a diverse range of works across "new writings, musicals, devised performances, multilingual theatre, gigs, media projects, innovative stagings and translations of classics, and new theatre forms" (1). Lech particularly employs the framework of heteroglossia in her analysis of verse drama. About the theatrical potential of verse, she concludes that

verse has a unique ability to simultaneously stage, investigate, and redefine existing relationships and structures, so that they correspond with diverse socio-political contexts and ecologies of theatre-making. Verse also supports the artists' claims to their agencies over these ecologies. (111)

Verse's ability to invigorate theatre is evident in spoken word theatre, which continues the staging of poetry in a dramatic form. Hence, spoken word theatre can be said to have several formal overlaps with verse drama. Significantly, Lech includes a few shows that I also consider spoken word theatre in her study of verse drama, such as Inua Ellams's *The 14th Tale* (2009) and Antosh Wojcik's *How to Keep Time: A Drum Solo for Dementia* (2019). In our 2026 interview, Wojcik also confirmed that 'spoken word theatre' is a useful categorisation for his show:

Spoken word theatre is a useful term, because it's sort of... the label of spoken word gives it that slightly broader thing of, like, oh, I'm not necessarily here to see, like, an actor's monologue, or a, you know, full dramatization of something, but I'm still going into a theatre space to experience storytelling (0:46:55–0:47:25)

Spoken word theatre, then, shares verse drama's distinctive potential to reimagine storytelling through poetry. It often incorporates, like verse drama, the rhythms, grammar, syntax and structure of poetry, employing speech patterns different from those of prosaic performances, while also implementing the monologic or dialogic form. However, not all spoken word theatre is verse drama. Spoken word theatre often straddles generic boundaries where the poetic transcends into other forms of speech acts, as well as non-verbal modes of communication. We can also say that spoken word theatre often tends to disrupt patterns and structures so intrinsic

to the performance of verse — think Sissay’s strategies of defamiliarisation or Gardosi’s experiments with beatboxing or Silva’s experimentations with sound poetry, each of which disrupts perceived patterns of poetic performance. What is more, what distinguishes spoken word theatre from most other forms of verse drama Lech discusses in her study is its commitment to maintaining the unity of poet and performer, as well as the poet’s customary spoken word performance style, presented through oral delivery and body communication¹⁷. Finally, categorising spoken word theatre as a form of verse drama poses the danger of erasing spoken word theatre’s rootedness in poetry performance traditions in the UK. Thus, while it can be said that verse drama and spoken word theatre have several fundamental overlaps, spoken word theatre cannot be completely subsumed as a type of verse drama.

1.2.2 Poetry in Performance

The latter half of the twentieth century, after the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s, brought about a change in the writing and presentation of poetry. It also marked the advent of modern-day poetry in performance. While there are studies surveying these developments, charting poetry performance’s cultural influences and analysing its craft (Novak; Bearder; English and McGowan), I will be looking at select practices in live poetry that appear to have shaped the aesthetics and formal attributes of spoken word theatre. I begin my examination with dub poetry.

Dub poetry arrived in the UK in the 1970s. The term “refers to a type of Afro-Caribbean poetry with the particular ability to present poems in different formats” (Bolle-Debessay, “Dub Poetry and Theatre” 28). The significance of “dub” in the term arises from recording technology used by DJs and the associated “activity of adding and/or removing sounds” (“‘Dub Poetry’?” 1), as Mervyn Morris notes. Performances usually incorporate a reggae beat, where the rhythm is an intrinsic feature of the poem. As Jamaican poet Oku Onuora puts it, dub poetry “is not merely putting a piece of poem pon a reggae rhythm — hence when the poem is read without any reggae rhythm (so to speak) backing, one can distinctly hear the reggae rhythm coming out of the poem” (qtd. in Morris 2).

¹⁷ While slam is a form of event and not necessarily a style of performance, several poets have adopted the specific inflections they developed and adapted at poetry slam events into their customary poetic idiom.

Dub poetry, as an art form, has activist origins and arose out of a political consciousness, as Rachel Bolle-Debessay further elucidates in “Dub Poetry and Theatre in Conversation”:

Dub poetry emerged within a Caribbean community where social injustices shaped a consciousness and a militancy expressed in a variety of artistic forms such as literature, music, and visual arts, and found its roots in the style of the Jamaican DJs from the 1950s, who were referred to as “the dub-lyricists” by Linton Kwesi Johnson”. (28)

Dub poetry is a stylised performance form that is also rooted in theatrical performance practices. Its expressive performance style is embedded in an innate understanding of the potential of not only embodying but enacting the word, incorporating gestures and staging aesthetics emergent from theatre. Dub poetry thus induced a conversation with theatre, as remarked by Bolle-Debessay:

The majority of the poets have theatrical training and have experimented with staging texts. Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, Oku Onuora, Mutabaruka, and Michael ‘Mikey’ Smith, to name just a few, studied at the Jamaican School of Drama. Their training helped them to develop an aesthetic that is highly expressive. (29)

Today, dub poetry finds its echoes in spoken word theatre produced by poets such as Roger Robinson. Robinson’s *Shadow Boxer* (2000) demonstrates his dub sensibilities in his performance style, even as the show situates itself in theatre.

Another tradition of note is **punk poetry**. Also emerging in the 1970s, “punk was *the* street culture in the UK and poetry was part of its articulation” (118), remarks Bearder. Matthew Worley writes, “punk married social commentary with stylistic innovation to forge a populist but subversive cultural force that dramatized, reflected, and commented on the wider socio-economic and political climate of its time” (“British Punk” 612). A new form of stylised poetry thus appeared on the scene — poetry that was unapologetically anarchist and unabashedly anti-canon, harbouring a DIY ethos, with poets such as John Cooper Clark and Atilla the Stockbroker leading the charge. While Cooper Carke “hybridised poetry with the dry, sardonic wit of punk bravado and his own gritty Northern realism”, Atilla the Stockbroker’s shows “often involved fist fights with fascists in the back rooms of the pubs” (Bearder 118). Noting the prominence of “ranting” in punk poetry, Tony Lidington writes:

People such as John Cooper-Clark or Attila the Stockbroker performed a kind of protest poetry in which words, sounds, and images clashed violently in a paean of dissent. Although non-musical, the ranters' poetry was closely associated with the punk movement — playing the same venues and often on the same bill. The poets wanted to reach a new audience with their verse, and used the spontaneous, open platform of punk music to reach it; they moved easily from a musical context to cabaret slots, and in the process made experimental poetry accessible to a far wider audience. (“Alternative Cabaret” 108–110)

John Cooper Clarke’s style of punk poetry has also had its influence on spoken word theatre. Luke Wright has named Cooper Clarke as his inspiration repeatedly, including in our interview. He notes that Cooper Clarke’s long sets stimulated him, which led to his own first show, *Poet Laureate* in 2006. Luke Wright has been consistently placed in the punk tradition, with his ranting style of poetry. An emerging poet who situates his artistic practice in punk is Stephen Durkan, whose debut show *Why Am I Doing This?* also exhibits punk aesthetics. Punk poetry thus clearly constitutes a significant root of spoken word theatre.

A final performance practice which spoken word theatre can be related to is **choreopoetry**, a hybrid form conceived by Ntozake Shange, which emerged in the US in the 1970s. Neal A. Lester defines the form thus:

The choreopoem is a theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance and music — those elements that, according to Shange, outline a distinctly African American heritage — to arouse an emotional response in an audience. As a theatrical expression, the choreopoem emerges from an African tradition of storytelling, rhythm, physical movement, and emotional catharsis. (*Ntozake Shange* 3)

The emotional response in an audience may result from both the form’s cross-arts aesthetics and its situatedness in poetry. As Richard Andrews remarks, poetry “always consciously frames itself on a page or in performance. Its highly framed nature makes for an intensity of intention, and an intensity of reception” (*Multimodality, Poetry and Poetics* 68). By deploying the frame of poetry in a confluence of multiple art forms, a performance invites audiences to pay close attention to both the poetic and the performative.

The combination of poetry, prose, song, dance, and storytelling is a resonant feature of spoken word theatre as well. Although choreopoetry emerged in the United States under the

influence of the Black Arts Movement, the form found recognition in the Black British performance scene as well. Shange toured her seminal work, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, for instance, across the UK in October 1988 (Thomas, “Decolonising the Archive”). Shange’s performance practice also inspired the creation of choreopoetry troupes such as Munirah in the UK. Munirah was formed in 1983 and billed as a “Black British Choreo-Poetry Troupe” in Shange’s Apples and Snakes event in 1988, Helen Thomas documents in “Decolonising the Archive” (2026). Ntozake Shange’s choreopoetry provided a blueprint for spoken word theatre, or as Apples and Snakes’ spoken word archivist Russell Thompson remarks in a 2024 blog entry, the form “acted as catalysts for the UK’s own spoken-word theatre scene” (“2,500 Poets and Counting”). It is no surprise, then, that the first programming of spoken word theatre in the UK began in the 1990s.

1.3 The Emergence of Spoken Word Theatre

Around the 1990s, poets began to engage in long-form spoken word poetry shows that were staged in the poets’ distinctive performance style but informed by strategies such as storytelling, cross-arts experimentation, and use of (minimal) props and stage design. Notable early examples of this form include SuAndi’s *The Story of M* (1994), Jonzi D’s *Aeroplane Man* (1999), Roger Robinson’s *Shadow Boxer* (2000), Francesca Beard’s *Chinese Whispers* (2002), and Lemn Sissay’s *Something Dark* (2004). It is Lemn Sissay, amidst the other poets listed here, who explicitly labels his show “spoken word theatre” in a 2009 blog entry, defining this form as “a piece of theatre by a spoken word artist more likely a poet. It is scripted and directed with theatrical sensibility maintaining the poet’s integrity” (“Spoken Word Theatre”).

At their inception, these shows were more commonly referred to as one-person or solo shows, since they featured only one performer on stage. Over the years, the art form has developed to also include shows with multiple performers in various roles, albeit with one poet at the helm, and occasionally, shows with multiple poets. As has been noted in the Introduction, Pete Bearder has recently offered a comprehensive definition of spoken word theatre as: “theatre shows (usually lasting an hour) performed through spoken word poetry. Spoken word theatre blends theatrical staging with the conversational and intimate delivery of spoken word” (*Stage Invasion* 56). He further adds that these shows often combine minimalist stage design with more elaborate technological elements. Today, such productions range from solo performances to collaborative theatrical pieces featuring multiple poets performing their own

work. Examples of the latter are the works of England-based, early 2000s “poetry boyband” Aisle 16, comprising of Luke Wright, Joel Stickley, Chris Hicks, Ross Sutherland, John Osborne, Joe Dunthorne and Tim Clare; or the productions of contemporary Scottish spoken word theatre company In the Works, with poets Bibi June, Ross McFarlane and Ellen Renton leading the initiative¹⁸. However, my research focuses exclusively on the development of the one-poet spoken word theatre show in the UK, because such shows are far more common than multi-poet productions. In this dominant form, poets may collaborate with musicians, bands, choreographers, and artists in their shows, but the poet is at the helm of all poetic writing and poetry performance. In my conception of one-poet shows, I follow Stephen Greer’s approach to solo performances. Greer includes collaborative work in his study of solo performances because,

each [performance] involves the creative labour of more than one person. Several notionally ‘solo’ works examined here have more than one performer, not least in the case of one-to-one performances which require an audience-participant to play an active role. (*Queer Exceptions* 3)

Greer’s words echo Heddon’s contention in *Autobiography and Performance* that “most theatrical events, including solo performances, involve some form of collaboration. The vast majority of performers work with producers, directors, designers and production managers” (9). With the significance of collaboration in theatrical practice in mind, and in view of the fact that spoken word theatre is anchored into spoken word poetry, I focus on shows written and performed by a single poet, which may involve collaborations with other artists and theatre professionals. In conversation with Bearder’s definition of spoken word theatre, I thus posit: spoken word theatre can be differentiated from other theatrical traditions by its stylistic connection to existing and emerging poetry performance practices, where the performances remain distinctly recognisable as spoken word poetry due to their oral delivery and body communication, and rootedness in traditions such as punk, dub or rap. The form’s flexibility in spatial design makes it possible to employ both minimal props and technological setups as well as more complex staging technologies. Its commitment to the idea of the poet as performer, presenting their own text, as well as the element of audience engagement, where the audience is addressed directly and may be involved in the performance in varying degrees, are vital

¹⁸ As noted earlier, I analyse In the Works’ multi-poet show *The 900 Club* in “Spoken Word Theatre and its DIY Potential: Rose Condo’s *The Empathy Experiment* and In the Works’ *The 900 Club*.”

features of spoken word theatre. Other key attributes of spoken word theatre, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter, include its cross-arts aesthetics and DIY philosophy.

Structurally, spoken word theatre tends to manifest in two distinct forms: firstly, shows that loosely string together existing poems into a narrative by way of paratextual linking, resembling the serial design of stand-up comedy. When talking about the scope of spoken word theatre in our interview, Luke Wright, who has produced 15 solo shows till date, confirms that one of the first spoken word theatre shows he attended, Francesca Beard's *Chinese Whispers* (2002), had the format of a string of poems tied together with a narrative (see also, fig. 3), a style he too later adopted in his first show, *Poet Laureate* (2006):

so like the first thing I remember seeing that I think you'd call spoken word theatre was Francesca Beard's *Chinese Whispers* [...] when I saw Francesca do her show, it was like, that was someone who was taking poetry and taking individual pieces that kind of existed, and weaving it into, you know, a show, and that is also what, I guess, to an extent, what John Cooper Clarke does in his shows [...] so when I made my show, I basically knew I wanted to do a long set of poems, but I knew that it had to have like an overarching sort of narrative, or a hook (0:14:27–0:15:28)



Figure 3 Flyer for Francesca Beard's *Chinese Whispers*. (Courtesy: Spoken Word Archive)

Nathan Penlington informs me in our interview that the first spoken word theatre show he ever performed was at Edinburgh Fringe in 2005. This show too had a set-like quality, owing to the influence of stand-up comedy:

back then, the shows that you would see that were one-person shows were stand-up comedy. You know, very rare to see anyone who would build themselves a spoken word performing an hour show. Spoken word wasn't a category in the programme back then. [...] But by 2005, I took my first solo show to Edinburgh [...] and I just felt that I had to push myself in terms of the things I was making. I was like, well, you can you can compete with stand-up comedy shows through spoken word. And I also had the pieces that felt like they would go together. And there was a kind of narrative, there was a structure that I could build in. It could still be playful. We could talk about some of these issues. But again, not overtly, but kind of weave some of these things into the show. (0:08:42–0:10:07)

Both Wright's and Penlington's experience with one-person spoken word shows, as highlighted through these quotes, exemplify the first category of spoken word theatre.

For the second kind of spoken word theatre shows, poets first devise a theme and an overarching plot; then they write a script of poems to bring the plot to life. This type of performance aligns with verse drama in its poetic design and delivery. Many spoken word theatre shows from the 2000s follow this approach. Of these, some are one-person performances, which lends them a monologic quality. An example of this is Zena Edward's *Security* (2008).

In our interview, Luke Wright classifies Lemn Sissay's *Something Dark* (2004) in this category, while separating it from spoken word theatre: "Lemn did *Something Dark* [...] but that was a theatre show, really, I mean, that was a monologue, it was a one-man theatre show" (0:14:35–0:14:45). It is intriguing that Wright does not consider *Something Dark* spoken word theatre when Sissay himself has called it such. This highlights once again, the conflicting definitions of spoken word theatre circulating in the UK scene, which I discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. Scottish poet Ross McFarlane, as noted earlier, classifies works produced by his spoken word theatre company, In the Works, in the category of performances where the script comes first: "so spoken word theatre is largely long-form and for us specifically narratively driven poetry performances [...] So, it is narratively plotted out before a single word is written — a single line of poetry" (0:03:52–0:05:28).



Figure 4 Flyer for Lemn Sissay's *Something Dark*. (Courtesy: Spoken Word Archive)



Figure 5 Flyer for In the Works' *Make/Shift*. (Courtesy: In the Works)

For McFarlane, shows which weave existing poems into a story through paratext, which Wright defines as spoken word theatre, fall under the remit of poetry shows. In this thesis, both kinds of shows are discussed, and they represent the two major kinds of spoken word theatre in existence.

The emergence of spoken word theatre can be roughly divided into two waves. My research reveals that a large number of shows between the 1990s and the 2010s were more theatrical and narratively driven one-poet shows. There were indeed exceptions like Francesca Beard, Luke Wright, and Nathan Penlington. In our interview, Roger Robinson reminisces about his introduction to spoken word theatre and the conversations he was having with other poets in the late 1990s about one-man shows:

I had connected with a lot of Americans who were doing spoken word theatre, people like Will Power. [...] And there was other people in Urban Poetry Society. A few of us was doing theatre. So Urban Poetry Society at one point was about 11 people. And one of those people was Jonzi D. So, he had a show called

Aeroplane Man. So, me and Jonzi D had started talking about one-man shows [...] one-man shows was very much a conversation. (0:06:54–0:07:30)

However, after the 2010s, a series of gig-like musically inflected shows appeared on the scene, performed in collaboration with live musicians and bands, that expanded the scope of spoken word theatre. Kae Tempest's award-winning show *Brand New Ancients* (2012), in which Tempest is accompanied by a live band, can be said to have propagated this phenomenon. Lyn Gardner, who classifies the performance as spoken word theatre, writes in her 2012 review for *The Guardian*:

Spoken-word theatre is often heavy on words and light on theatre. Tempest's piece follows these conventions, but transcends them. Just as in her narrative, the ordinary is lifted into the extraordinary; score, writing, band and voice come together to create a package that never makes you question why you aren't just reading or listening to this.

Tempest's intervention in spoken word theatre was followed by more cross-arts experiments in shows, where poets increasingly teamed up with artists, musicians, and dancers to collaboratively perform on stage. Indeed, this cross-arts practice, which brings poetry performance into conversation with other art forms in a blended "total art" aesthetic, not only characterises *Brand New Ancients*; the attribute also can be observed in other forms of spoken word theatre over the years. Moreover, as noted earlier, the cooperative nature of performance has evolved beyond collaborations between individuals to include collaborations with theatre companies, as in the case of Caleb Femi's *Goldfish Bowl* (2018), which he created with The Paper Birds theatre company, and Imogen Stirling's *Love the Sinner* (2023), where the poet worked with the theatre company Vanishing Point.

The increasingly collaborative nature of spoken word theatre and its intersections with forms such as visual theatre, gig theatre and hip-hop theatre have enabled formal and textual experimentation within the practice. However, while the cross-art aesthetic of spoken word theatre illuminates its performance potential in new and exciting ways, it does not diminish the centrality of spoken word poetry to its performance ethos. Spoken word performance remains at the core of all experimentation into which other art forms meld. Even as productions become more complex in their performance design and use of staging technologies, spoken word theatre is informed by the DIY ethos that guides spoken word poetry.

1.4 Chapter Summary

To trace the history of spoken word theatre, illuminate its multiple formal and aesthetic influences, and delineate the contours of this hybrid form, I began by highlighting four central attributes of spoken word theatre that I have observed across my corpus: the format of one-poet performance; cross-arts experimentation; formal and aesthetic adaptability; and, finally, the integral role of poetry performance within the art form. I then charted these attributes by way of their historic continuities in performance and poetry, while also distinguishing spoken word theatre from adjacent art forms. I then elaborated the origins and early trends of spoken word theatre, further defining its intrinsic qualities and outlining its development over the past three decades. In order to examine its artistic scope more closely, subsequent chapters will centre specific thematic and aesthetic characteristics of spoken word theatre through selected case studies. I first engage with the prevalence of performance of identity through auto/biography or the autofictional in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I explore the cross-arts aesthetic of the art form in depth. While cross-arts experimentation was always prominent in spoken word theatre, the form has evolved to harness the affordances of digital technologies in the past decade, which is studied in the chapter as well. In Chapter 4, I investigate the spatial potential of spoken word theatre by analysing its staging strategies in both fringe venues and conventional theatre institutions. In Chapter 5 finally, I examine the impact of COVID-19 on spoken word theatre in the UK, and poets' move to online modes of performance.

2. Performing Identity in Spoken Word Theatre

[I]dentity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation.

Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities,
Old and New Ethnicities”

[T]he self that is the center of all auto-biographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure.

Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*

Since its inception, spoken word theatre as an art form has been concerned with the performance of social and cultural identity, often through auto/biography. In the 36 audiovisual recordings of shows that I viewed or listened, the performance of identity¹⁹ using the self-referential ‘I’ and the mode of auto/biography emerged in 27 works. This corroborates Katie Ailes’s observations about the genre of spoken word poetry overall. Ailes notes that spoken word poets often have a tendency of “composing (seemingly) autobiographical and true material” (*Performance and Perception* 33) which she links to the performance of authenticity. In discussing on the role of audience perception in this performance of authenticity, Ailes later adds that, “the extent to which a poet is perceived as ‘authentic’ is affected by how their identity is perceived and how they engage with their identity onstage” (182). This seems to indicate the politics of performing identity through auto/biography as well as the associated politics of audience expectations and perceptions.

The performance of social and cultural identity in spoken word theatre mostly pertains to experiences of marginalisation, echoing the wider practice of identity-work in spoken word poetry. “[M]any poets with marginalised identities find agency and empowerment through asserting their identities onstage, leading in part to the commonality of these performances in the U.K. spoken word genre” (183), Ailes states. In spoken word theatre, the ‘I’ of the performed text allows poets to stage self-identity and agency more extensively. As Kasia Lech notes of

¹⁹ In this chapter, I use “performance of identity” and “identity performance” interchangeably.

verse drama: “Verse, through its heteroglossia, suits artists who want to dramatize tensions and multiple contradictions within their identities in relation to their individual experiences as well as broader political, linguistic, social, and cultural contexts” (58). This also applies to spoken word theatre. While auto/biographical performance is common in this context, there are also instances where poets employ strategies of fictionalising to perform their social and cultural identity and/or lived experience. This falls within the remit of the autofictional. The predominance of identity performance in spoken word theatre invites critical examination. This chapter undertakes the project of studying identity-work in the art form by engaging with two modes of identity performance: the auto/biographical and the autofictional.

In using the slashed term “auto/biography” I follow Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey (2000), as noted previously, who characterise this as work “which not only embraces a hybrid version of generic categorization but also recognizes the intersubjective, reflexive potency of self-inscription” (xxii).²⁰ Thus auto/biographical work is potentially informed by multiple versions and narratives about the self. What is more, how we perceive others and how others perceive us can very well inform the way we perceive ourselves and tell our stories. In performance, how we want the audience to perceive us also shapes the narrative we perform (indeed, this also occurs in everyday situations; see Goffman²¹). Hence, auto/biography is deployed to attend to these nuances of performing self-narratives. This chapter also engages with the autofictional. I employ the label “autofictional” following Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor (2022), who consider the term more productive than autofiction, as it denotes “a mode, moment, and strategy that can appear in a variety of texts across time” (*The Autofictional* 4), rather than a specific genre. Effe and Lawlor further elaborate:

²⁰ Here I am also mindful of the term “auto-theatre” introduced by Polish theatre scholar Joanna Krakkowska (2018), which refers to “the kind of theatre in which artists speak from the stage on their own behalf and under their own names, not the names of characters. They speak in their own words and about themselves. They refer to their own experiences, explore their personal limitations, reveal their weaknesses, problematize the situation in which they speak, define and question their identities, disclose the backstage of theatrical process, relations inside the team, institutional restrictions, economic conditions, ideological uneasiness. Auto-theatre is not necessarily a theatrical convention, but rather a formula for initiating communication with the audience under new principles: honesty, revelation, disclosure, speaking on one’s own behalf, responsibility for one’s words, testing democratic procedures” (2). While relevant to some spoken word shows, the term “auto-theatre” does not broadly apply to the practice of spoken word theatre as many poets incorporate theatrical narrative styles and a persona (an elevated/exaggerated/dramatised self) within their performance, even while staging the self. Further, some poets use a universal and non-specific or fictionalised “I” in their work while others enact the stories of fictional or real characters in their spoken word show.

²¹ Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) writes: “when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey” (3).

This approach allows us to bring into view texts, forms, and media that have not traditionally been considered in the light of their autofictional dimensions, to illustrate the many affordances of autofiction as theoretical lens and aesthetic strategy, and to propose new ways of exploring autofictional writing and its surrounding structures. (4)

As a mode, the autofictional allows for the blending of fact, fiction and everything in-between. Effe and Lawlor's terminology is thus instructive. However, in my deployment of the critical lens of the autofictional, I go beyond Effe and Lawlor and specifically follow Lianna Mark's reading of the autofictional in theatre. Mark's *Theatres of Autofiction* (2024) is the first monograph to draw attention to the presence and workings of the autofictional in theatre where the author advocates for "the acknowledgement of a broader and more diverse range of theatrical works as autofictional or as working autofictionally, attending to what they share across cultural contexts and to the political affordances of the mode's deployment on stage" (5). Hence, Mark's deployment of the term for theatre has a broader remit than what is applied in literary studies.

In the theatrical context, the autofictional can sometimes complicate associations between the self-referential 'I' of the performed text and the person of the poet. In such performances, the autobiographical pact (Lejeune) is often invoked only to be problematised. In other cases, it fictionalises the self or creates a fictional character based on the poet's lived experiences. Here, even when the work is expressly labelled fictional, the correspondence between the identities of the character and that of the poet-performer inspires associations in audience's reception of the work. The autofictional can also then decidedly employ fiction to complicate notions of self-narratives and identity performance.

Finally, it must be noted that there are indeed spoken word theatre shows that do not revolve around identity performance, and where the central concern is not the poet's lived experience and/or social or cultural identity. For instance, in Mel Bradley's Ms. Noir's *Seven Deadly Sins* (2020), also discussed in Chapter 5, the poet adopts the persona of a fictional character, Ms. Noir, who is the keeper of keys in "Hotel Hell". In this show, the poet narrates seven tales about people falling prey to the seven deadly sins, using poetry, storytelling and elements of burlesque to address the theme of modern-day vices. In Kae Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* (2012), the poet plays with the form of epic poetry to narrate the story of two families in present-day London. Here, Tempest adopts the role of an omniscient narrator and reworks ancient myths into contemporary tales of heroism, tragedy and more. Hannah Silva's *Total Man*

(2014) is more abstractly poetic, responding to Stan Gooch's 1976 book *Total Man* on theories of personality through "musical layering of speech, sound, automatic writing, quotations and virtuosic vocal play" (Penned in the Margins). These shows present fictional narratives and do not centre the poet's identity in the plot. While exciting in their scope, such works are not as prevalent in spoken word theatre as those featuring performance of identity. Hence, in this chapter, I exclusively focus on the performance of identity in spoken word theatre, which has gained most traction in the art form, and which is often subject to critiques of "identity-politicking".

In the next sections, I discuss identity performance in spoken word theatre and delineate the frameworks of auto/biography and the autofictional employed in my analyses. After briefly examining early experimentations with the auto/biographical mode in spoken word theatre, I analyse four contemporary shows, Kevin P Gilday's *Spam Valley* (2022), Adam Kammerling's *Seder* (2026), Ellen Renton's *Within Sight* (2020) and afshan d'souza-lodhi's *How to Eat Mangoes* (2022). Rather than examine these shows in chronological order, I move from obvious performance of auto/biography — as in the case of *Spam Valley* and *Seder* — to the deployment of autofiction through firstly, the un-named self-referential "I" in *Within Sight*, and secondly, a fictional character who is conspicuously informed by the poet's identity in *How to Eat Mangoes*. Before engaging with this interplay of auto/biography and fiction, I unpack the role of identity performance, especially when it pertains to social and cultural identities, in spoken word theatre.

2.1 Identity in Poetry Performance and Spoken Word Theatre

As mentioned before, the performance of identity is prevalent in both spoken word theatre and spoken word poetry more generally, with the performance of auto/biography being particularly prominent in this context. As poets embody their text and vocalise the first-person pronoun "I", their perceived identity comes to resonate with that of the textual speaker. As Julia Novak argues in "Staging the Self in Spoken-Word Poetry" (2025):

As the "poet-performer" is physically present on stage (Novak 2011, 62), or visible and/or audible in recordings, their identity is incorporated into the poem in the act of speaking. This creates unique possibilities for poetry that emphasizes that identity. As media philosopher Sybille Krämer notes, the spoken word seems so entangled with the speaker's person as to appear to be an attribute

of that person (cf. 2002, 340). This is especially true in first-person texts, where the audience is more likely to credit utterances to the person of the poet than to an abstract, intratextual speaker function, due to the perceived connection between the flesh-and-blood speaker and the pronoun “I.” The meta-message projected by poet-performers in such instances is, “I am saying this, and I really mean it.” (468)

The vocalisation and embodiment of a first-person text by a poet leads to the assumption that the experience treated in the text can be aligned with the poet’s biography. This, in turn, creates the perception of an auto/biographical performance of identity. The presence of the poet as performer on stage and the resultant entanglement of the poet’s social and cultural identity with the performance in the audience’s perception can also be observed in spoken word theatre. Likewise, in long-form performances of first-person texts too, audiences are “more likely to credit utterances to the person of the poet”. The projection of the message of “I am saying this, and I really mean it” gets amplified with recurrence in long-form performances. The poet then has the opportunity to either perform their life narrative, in the auto/biographical mode or to manipulate perceptions of auto/biography and trouble associations of their identity with the lyric “I” through fiction, in the autofictional mode.

A factor that has arguably contributed to the ubiquity of identity-work is the popularity of spoken word poetry and spoken word theatre as a mode of cultural activism. Harnessing the political potential inherent in acts of embodiment, poets from disenfranchised backgrounds have been able to use the avenue to perform work pertaining to their lived experiences on stage. Katie Ailes remarks upon the affordances of auto/biographical spoken word poetry: “From these stages activists protest social inequality, marginalised and oppressed people assert the legitimacy of their identities, and those who have experienced trauma share their stories and are witnessed as survivors” (“Speak Your Truth” 142). With regards to the work of Black British poets specifically, Deirdre Osborne has noted that “[p]oetry as spoken-word has in particular been associated with black poets in Britain and is a means whereby many poets writing from marginality have found their most strident poetic voice” (“Body of Text” 231). While Osborne remarks upon the poetic voice, poets have also been empowered to speak out through the practice of spoken word poetry, as is demonstrated by Ailes’ assertion. The potential of spoken word poetry to challenge dominant narratives is not merely demonstrated but also strengthened when the performed verse is expanded into a long-form show by poets. Writing about Kat

François's show *Raising Lazarus* and spoken word theatre shows with similar thematic proclivities, Julia Novak observes that

many of these one-person poetry shows strategically challenge hegemonic notions of national identity through the lens of autobiography. As the format allows for more extensive treatments of a theme than individual poems, it lends itself well to creatively staging the poets' personal histories and lived experiences to address broader political questions. ("Performing Black British Memory" 325)

Indeed, the longer format allows poets to stage personal histories in depth and with nuance. However, such performances are also susceptible to stereotyped perceptions of identity-work, as I will elaborate below.

2.1.1 Perceptions and Expectations of Identity Performance

Scholars of spoken word poetry have critiqued audience perceptions and expectations of identity performance in spoken word poetry. One of the most impactful criticisms of "identity poems" — poems that thematise marginalised identities and poets' lived experiences of marginalisation — in the context of poetry slam has been levelled by Susan Somers-Willett (2009), who writes:

As individual political statements, identity poems can often be inspiring, enlightening, and empowering to their authors and audiences. But in a genre in which audiences reward identities they deem the most authentic, some poets may seek to write and perform poems that display their identities in ways that have proven most successful (i.e., as marginalized). (94)

The danger Somers-Willett evokes here is the reification of marginalised identity performance in slam as poets cater to the audience's pre-conceived ideas. Certainly, in a poetry slam, where audience approval is tied into the very format of the event, performing one's identity in a three-minute poem may in some cases seem formulaic. Even so, such criticisms are rarely levelled at poets belonging to dominant groups who perform about their own lived experience. Identity markers such as whiteness or heterosexuality undoubtedly permeate works of poets belonging to these groups, but auto/biographical poems coming out of such lived experience are usually treated neutrally. Herein lie the dual problems of equating a poem's merit or success to audience

perception as well as stereotypical or biased expectations of dominant group audiences colouring the reception of identity performance in auto/biographical work. Dominant identities, such as whiteness, become invisible and imperceptible, and thus do not stand out. Hence, they remain outside the critique of “identity politicking”, or as Richard Dyer aptly puts it: “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people” (1). In light of Dyer’s powerful observation about whiteness and race, it is worth noting that Somers-Willett’s critique relies heavily on her reading of audience perceptions of identity work in poetry slam, sidelining the craft and creativity of the poets studied. Javon Johnson takes issue with Somers-Willett’s claims, highlighting the fact that most of her critique is levelled at the reception of identity poems performed by “black male poets” and their success. Johnson remarks: “Given that she never offers the possibility that the black poets who won, and win, are simply better, her book at times reads less like a critical inquiry into why black poets are highly rewarded and more like a troubling racial apologia for the lack of white success” (23). Johnson’s frustrations of reducing minoritised artists’ work to “identity politicking” without engaging with the poets’ craft and artistic choices is understandable and echoes general views of BIPOC artists around the reception of their identity work.

When it comes to minoritised subjects, the conflation of their art with their identity and auto/biography is a pervasive trend of perception and reception. For example, in my interview with Bristol-based Malaika Kegode, the poet discussed audience expectations of her show *Outlier*, which deals with sobering themes of mental health, drug addiction and suicide against the backdrop of working-class rural living. Kegode remembered that an audience member expressed surprise at the absence of an explicit mention of race in the performance. Kegode is a Black British poet of mixed heritage. By not addressing her race, a visible identity marker, in an overtly auto/biographical narrative, Kegode seems to have broken a tacit contract of identity representation in public work of minoritised subject. While this expectation materialises as a demand for centring marginal identity on the one hand, it also leads to the dismissal of such identity-focused work as “identity-politicking” on the other. Both attitudes, while seemingly contradictory, are symptomatic of the same problem: the essentialist and reductive perception of identities deemed marginal, which leads to expectations around how these identities must make themselves legible in public art.

Poets from marginalised backgrounds thus must always contend with these conflicting expectations and judgments of their work. If they perform blatantly about their identity, it is

considered formulaic; and if they do not, they are seen as missing their true purpose. These perceptions do a disservice to the craft of poets. As Julia Novak has noted in her study of *Raising Lazarus*: “Much as poets may choose to play with their identity in performance, however, a poem’s quality cannot be reduced to the poet’s identity” (“Performing Black British Memory” 327). A “productive approach that takes into account both the identity politics and poetics of the spoken word is to focus on the *aesthetic* of authenticity that poet-performers such as Kat François enact” (327, emphasis original), Novak proposes. Ailes echoes this assertion, drawing attention to the strategies poets employ to perform their identities as well as the significance of performing such work for poets’ self-perception:

I believe it is possible to simultaneously be aware of the potential for one’s identity to be fetishised and to benefit from the process of creative self-expression. While poets are unable to control how they are perceived, through their work they are able to control the way in which they articulate self, which can be a deeply empowering act for those whose identities have been consistently Othered. The way in which individuals craft identity through performing life narratives fundamentally influences the way in which they perceive self ... (*Performance and Perception* 185)

I agree with Novak and Ailes and engage with the aesthetics and craft of identity performance through the lens of auto/biography and the autofictional, also addressing the political function of these strategies. In my analysis, thus, I engage with both the aesthetic of self-representation adopted by poets and the politics of staging identity work. Undertaking such an inquiry requires us, however, to complicate notions of identity performance in spoken word itself.

2.1.2 Constructing Identities in Performance

When we, as audiences, forge a relationship between the social and cultural identities of a poet and the identities inscribed in their text, it comes with its own dangers, namely, essentialisation, or fetishisation. These dangers arise from audience expectations and perceptions of identity performance rather than the performed text itself, as has been argued earlier.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler unpacks the performativity of identities, in relation to gender and sexuality. They consider acts of identification as “an enacted fantasy or incorporation” (185) through a “disciplinary production of gender” (184). We understand gender, and other identities, through significations ascribed to bodies that regulate our

understanding of identities and fix them in grids through the performance of acts and gestures. As Butler clarifies for the performance of gendered acts and signifiers: “Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (185). Thus, identity does not exist without the performance of associated identity markers. This is also true for other forms of identification. When the performativity of identity, social and cultural, is transposed to an actual performance, the enactment is doubled and intensified. This leads to further attempts at fixing identities into a grid, and prescribing how these identities should act and enact themselves on stage.

Cornelia Gräbner in her doctoral thesis applies the concept of performativity to Lemn Sissay’s performance style, claiming that “[p]erformativity is the key link between the act of enunciation and the effects it takes” (*Off the Page* 149). Gräbner employs performativity to analyse Sissay’s “alternative” national anthem performed at a Birmingham trance club in 2004. The poem was accompanied by a track from DJ Nick Rafferty. This performance was recorded for the TV programme *New Brit*, broadcast by BBC Choice. The audience was all-white.

Gräbner applies the concept not only to the poem’s reception by white audiences at the performance but also to the mediated version’s reception by scholars. She details an anecdote about her presentation of this poem and its analysis at a conference. She notes several conference participants argued that Sissay was acting as a token by performing to all-white audiences and using white trance music; they suggested the use of jazz music or another musical tradition closer to Sissay’s heritage as an alternative. Gräbner contends that this reaction arises from the performativity at play, elaborating that

the idea that performance can have an empowering effect only if it is performed in the “right”, that is, same, identity-based, context. Sissay being in the wrong place raises the uncomfortable question of what happens when a performance takes place in the “wrong” environment. (153)

Gräbner’s analysis and anecdote further demonstrate how the perception of identity performance and its context is fixed in audience’s reception of a work, which further influences how they engage with such work. Gräbner’s argument also reveals the politics of identity performance and the strategies poets deploy to mitigate this politics, an issue I have been discussing throughout this chapter. It is important here, then, to contextualise the performance

of identity further by examining how identities inform artistic work — to look closely at constructions of identities in performance.

Identities do not exist in a vacuum, nor does any one marker of identity define our being. Identities are always in flux, depending on geographical, cultural and sociopolitical contexts. They are also always relational. The constellation of identities that defines a person in a certain context may change with shifting circumstances. For instance, a South Asian person considered light-skinned in their own country may identify as “brown” in a white majority context. Therefore, an attempt to fix a person’s social and cultural identity under one category or label is rife with dangers of essentialising. However, identity markers such as race, class or gender, are also helpful in fostering community and solidarity, especially for minoritised subjects. Going back to the example of the South Asian person, identifying as brown offers them space to be in community with people from different ethnic groups who also identify as brown, in the sociopolitical context of whiteness. Such community-based contextually informed identity markers play an important role in spoken word poetry, where poets negotiate the performance of their identities on stage. These performed identities are also dependent on the locational and social context of the event or performance. UK-based Indian poet Bhumika Billa’s poem “Sixteen” may serve as an example here. An award-winning poem that narrates her journey from India to the UK, “Sixteen” has been performed at multiple UK events, including the 2023 Out-Spoken Prize for Poetry finals at Southbank Centre London. The filmed version of the Out-Spoken performance won the Button Poetry Video Contest in 2023. In the video, Billa performs the following excerpt: “I came to a white country to be a part of a different breed / a breed that would frown upon anything that was brown” (Button Poetry 01:18-01:23). In invoking brownness, the poet contextualises the otherness imposed upon her in a white majoritarian setting. The context resonates with both the UK and the US audiences. However, this racialised context will not reproduce itself if Billa performs the poem in her home country India where brownness may have a different implication (not that of racism, but colourism)²². The audiences will be aware of the racial context, but it may not have the same effect.

Identities, especially marginalised ones, are regularly invoked in spoken word poetry and theatre, and it is important to keep their relational nature in mind when analysing poetry

²² In India, caste and religion are the dominant hegemonies along with gender and sexuality, while racial distinctions, as we know them in the west, do not have as much systemic hold. It is important to note, however, that anti-blackness and colourism are prevalent in India, as is the reverence of whiteness, in part due to a colonial hangover.

performance. Here, Stuart Hall's theorisation of cultural identities becomes instructive. Remarking upon "the politics of living identity through difference", Hall writes:

It is the politics of recognizing that all of us are composed of multiple social identities, not of one. That we are all complexly constructed through different categories, of different antagonisms, and these may have the effect of locating us socially in multiple positions of marginality and subordination, but positions which do not yet operate on us in exactly the same way. (1991, reprint 2018, 78)

Indeed, different identity markers may locate us across multiple axes of marginality as well as privilege. An identity, that is marginalised in one context may be privileged in another, and hence these positions "operate on us" differently. Frictions between identity-markers resulting from the co-existence of "multiple positions of marginality and subordination" must also be explored in performances of auto/biography and the autofictional in spoken word theatre. In this context, Jasbir Puar's examination of intersectionality of identities using the framework of assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari) is also generative. In "'I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory" (2012), Puar complicates Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, reading Crenshaw's traffic model against the less static or rigid model of assemblage. Puar suggests that intersectionality and assemblage should not be considered oppositional, but rather as frictional, possessing the potential to work in tandem. Where intersectionality fixates on the grid of intersecting identities, assemblage considers the temporal and spatial movements that inform identities, as well as their convergence. In Puar's model, identities are not fixed or locked in a grid irrespective of their context but are established in a relational framework. The relation of movement, time, geopolitics, and other contextual forces gives rise to the intersectional grids of identity, leading to identity formation. As context and circumstances precede identity, identities are considered to be always in motion and may alter in response to one's circumstances. Given the frictions and fluxes within identity, analyses of identity performance become laced with productive tensions.

In the subsequent case studies, I examine the performance of identity through auto/biography and the autofictional in spoken word theatre, attending to these tensions and complex constructions of identity they can render visible. This approach becomes especially generative in the analysis of Kammerling's *Seder* and d'souza-lodhi's *How to Eat Mangoes*. These readings of identity performance also inform the frameworks of auto/biography and the autofictional that I employ to analyse the subsequent case studies; these frameworks are outlined in the next section.

2.3 Analysing the Auto/biographical and the Autofictional

When self-referential spoken word poetry appears within a theatrical long-form structure, the resultant work creates conditions for both staging and complicating notions of identity performance. Holding on to the unity of the author and performer, the poet has the space to play with the lyric “I” of the performed text, which is often perceived to be in accord with the author and performer. In auto/biographical performance, the poet may generate narratives about the self and weave their multiple selves/histories/versions into the plot, some of which may contradict each other. In other instances, they may fictionalise parts of the plot. In such cases, the autofictional materialises. The text of a poem offers the poet a chance to bring the intersections and contradictions of their identities in conversation with each other in auto/biographical and autofictional work. The interstices of social and cultural identities become key thematic tropes in spoken word theatre and represent the scope of auto/biography and the autofictional. For the analysis of the four case studies in this chapter, I engage with both auto/biography and the autofictional to demonstrate the breadth and potential of identity performance in spoken word theatre. While most spoken word theatre shows work with the auto/biographical mode, the autofictional is an approach increasingly adopted by poets to perform identity-related work. I discuss each of these approaches below.

To analyse spoken word theatre through the lens of auto/biography requires us to acknowledge that “there are a multiplicity of ways in which the auto/bio of the ‘self’ is represented in performance” (Heddon 10). Once we take cognisance of the multiplicity of selves in auto/biography and the multiplicity of forms that represent the self in auto/biographical performance, it becomes possible to engage with the aesthetics of individual shows beyond the expectations and perceptions of authenticity. In this chapter, I draw on Deirdre Heddon’s framework for analysing auto/biography in spoken word theatre. Heddon’s analysis of auto/biographical work through the lenses of self-representation and testimony are particularly instructive. Discussing self-narration and self-representation on stage, Heddon notes: “in the act of representing the self, there is always more than one self to contend with; the self is unavoidably split. There is the self who was and the self who is. There is the self who is performed, and the performing self” (27). While this observation already unhinges the notion of a fixed, unified identity in auto/biographical performance, Heddon further sheds doubt on the authenticity of self-performance: “We need to remember that the presentation of self (in performance particularly) is a re-presentation, and often a strategic one” (27). The

representation of social and cultural identities through auto/biography in spoken word theatre thus entails certain aesthetic choices on the poet's part that require scrutiny. In following Heddon, I examine these choices and the politics of self-representation, paying especial attention to the ways in which they challenge audience perceptions and expectations of identity performance. This approach is particularly instructive for the case study of Gilday's *Spam Valley*.

In her work, Heddon also engages with auto/biographical performances that “engage with public ‘cataclysmic’ historical events” (53), focusing on

public performances that bear witness to specific historically located traumatic events, but traumas that necessarily transcend their ‘histories’. These global histories are domesticated and brought home; history is named and here, again, the personal is transformed into the tangibly political. (60)

Owing to its popularity as a medium of cultural activism, spoken word theatre has included performances that bear witness to specific historical incidents of oppression and marginalisation. Thus, the art form tells stories from the margin and also bears witness to histories of the marginalised. This memory function of the art form becomes an important thread to examine in the study of auto/biography. That such performances of memory can paradoxically be forward-looking is again illuminated by Heddon's work, who states: “testimony is intended as a prompt to movement; though the head turns to look back at the past, the feet stay resolutely pointing forwards, waiting for the heart to lead us towards other possible futures” (87). Testimonial performances thus also prompt audiences to imagine different futures that do not repeat past atrocities. Kammerling's *Seder* represents this form of testimonial performance, recording “‘cataclysmic’ historical events”, bearing witness to present catastrophes, engaging in memory work, with a view to the future.

Even though auto/biography is a powerful mode of performance, it comes with its own dangers. The auto/biographical mode engenders a certain sense of vulnerability, especially for minoritised groups or poets dealing with difficult subjects. Poets sharing their lived experience on stage are exposed to the risk of constantly having to relive their trauma or unintentionally disclosing harm caused to others. This is where the deployment of the autofiction becomes useful. Michael Gratzke, while not explicitly evoking the term “autofictional”, examines the deployment of fictionality in Vicky Foster's *Bathwater*, a show presented on stage, on air and in print. As the performance includes difficult subjects of abuse, violence and murder, as well

the life narrative of the poet's children, the poet consolidates and fictionalises her children into the character of Joseph, played by actor Finlay McGuigan on stage. In his analysis, Gratzke notes that "Foster has made the ethical choice to let her fictionalised son as the placeholder for her actual child or children be a person in their own right with agency over disclosure of their life's experiences" (411). This choice helps the poet "negotiate truth and fidelity, with the composite, fictionalised character of Joseph" (415) and safeguard her children, their life stories and vulnerabilities against exposure. The fictionalisation of characters and parts of a narratives thus allow poets to have control over their self-narratives while mitigating risks of harm through absolute disclosure of truth.

Today, poets are increasingly engaging with the autofictional to perform social and cultural identities. The strategy of experimenting with fictionality in varying degrees safeguards poets from over-exposing their vulnerability and also allows them to manipulate audience expectations, while still performing parts of their identity on stage. In *Theatres of Autofiction* (2024), Lianna Mark foregrounds "the popularity of a theatrical mode that fictionalises the personal to politicised ends" (12). Mark further delineates several forms of interplay between the auto/biographical and the fictional. Of these, the device of 'authenticating people' is especially productive for spoken word theatre. The first form of authentication occurs through the deployment of the self-referential "I", without necessarily naming a character. In such a case, "[i]n the absence of onomastic correspondence, autofictionality might be suggested by similarities between the author (or a co-creator of the performance) and a character on several levels at once, including age, gender, class, ethnicity, idiolect, aspirations, and profession" (16). Onomastic correspondence denotes the correspondence between the name of the author/performer and that of the performed character. In spoken word theatre, poets sometimes deploy the self-referential 'I', without naming a character, to manipulate audience expectations and perform through the autofictional mode. This is true for Renton's *Within Sight*, where, in the deployment of the lyric "I" and the absence of a character name, autofictionality — rather than auto/biography or fictionality — emerges through the similarities of gender and disability, among other forms of identification. Autofictionality may also be invoked when there are certain resemblances between a performed persona, who is markedly fictional by name and characterisation, and the poet-performer. In this case, Mark proposes

Without correspondence of names, then, the referential ground is established through textual (or performative), paratextual, and/or contextual indicators that

encourage the assumption that one or more of the dramatis personae is a (version of a) real person involved in the production of the text or play. (16)

As an example, Mark cites Nicôle Lecky's play *Superhoe*, where the playwright-performer Lecky and the central character Sasha "share a range of identification operators" (16). Sasha's story is, however, based on a collective narrative (that of camgirls) even as her identity is informed by the playwright's. In this case, the play "is thus the 'authentic story' of one, collective subject told by the 'authentic voice' of another, with autofictionality smoothing over the disjunction between the two, united by their marginalisation" (17). In spoken word theatre, d'souza-lodhi's *How to Eat Mangoes* evidences this form of autofictionality, as the poet performs her social and cultural identity using a fictional narrative. Here, while a fictional plot is performed through the fictional persona of Rishta Aunty, the similarities between the poet and the character as regards gender, sexuality and ethnicity create resonance. The resonance is amplified by the sustained use of the lyric "I", where the poet embodies the character of Rishta Aunty and narrates the story in the first person.

In spoken word theatre, the varying degrees of interplay between self-narratives and fiction thus translate into different modes of auto/biography and the autofictional. To illuminate these, I analyse four contemporary shows staged in the past five years. It must be noted though that playful identity performances have existed in spoken word theatre from the very beginning. In the next section, then, I briefly examine early examples of identity performance in spoken word theatre. Even in its early manifestations, identities did not materialise in spoken word theatre as simple acts of truth-telling. Poets, from the art form's very inception, interrogated notions of identity performance and auto/biography in spoken word theatre, as is demonstrated by the examples of SuAndi's *The Story of M* (1994) and Lemn Sissay's *Something Dark* (2004).

2.4 Early Examples of Auto/biographical Work

The auto/biographical mode's early prevalence in spoken word theatre can be found in SuAndi's *The Story of M*, which is a solo performance that integrates visual projections and uses poetic language to tell auto/biographical stories of racism, poverty and sacrifice. The story is narrated from the perspective of SuAndi's mother. As the archival video of the performance on YouTube suggests, the stage design comprises a white screened hospital ward where slides of family photographs are projected around the poet. Against this backdrop, SuAndi, playing her mother, M, narrates her life story: from the multi-racial Liverpool of early-twentieth century to life in

the mid-nineties. The show is a tribute to the life and death of M, who raised her children in the face of frequent racism in 1960s, encouraging them to be proud of their African heritage. Embodying the figure of M, SuAndi places identity at the forefront of her performance: she performs her mother's biography and in turn her own becoming. (Osborne, "Body of Text") The poet narrates the tale of racialised living in simple, explicit verse, her language pruned and stripped down to its bare bones in a manner that resonates with the project of speaking the poet's (and her mother's) truth. Elaine Aston (2007) in her analysis of the work conjectures that the sonic and visual markers of SuAndi's identity as a Black woman prompt the audience to assume that the character of M is Black. When it is revealed at the end of the show through the projection of a photo that M was in fact white, audience assumptions about M's identity are challenged, on which Aston writes:

An audience 'sees' a black mother because the performer/daughter is black. In terms of feminist thinking this way of seeing is also compounded by the legacy of white feminism speaking *for* black women, or more recent preoccupations with how the 'other' speaks. Simply put, an audience listening to M's story hears black because it is exceptional for a black woman to speak a white woman's experience. In this way *M* is performed as a story that feels familiar, makes us feel 'at home', at the same time as it 'loosens' and makes strange. (135)

Indeed, relying solely on visual cues of identity can generate assumptions about the performed self's race. However, the plot of *The Story of M* is located at the interstices of multiple identities that circumscribe the auto/biographical narrative in the story: SuAndi's mother M is a working class Irish Catholic woman hailing from Liverpool. Her father, on the other hand, is of African heritage. He is a Nigerian man. These raced, classed and gendered layers of identity performance are also linked to the broader maternal (mother-daughter) bond. The maternal in this case espouses gendered similarities. The maternal is also rooted in racial difference. But any assumptions about the gendered or raced nature of their bond do disservice to SuAndi's identity as a mixed-race woman. If audiences expect SuAndi's mother to be black, it reveals how identity-work on stage is usually perceived by audiences. The stereotypical assumptions about identity performance and a binaristic logic of racial identities as perceived by audiences come into play. SuAndi, however, problematises these binary perceptions of race and gender in her show, where, as Deirdre Osborne observes: "SuAndi's monodrama restores an experience and perspective that has been too easily lost within this binaristic relentlessness" ("Body of Text" 235). The final revelation about M's identity, as performed by the poet, "[defies] the

oppressive constraints of value-laden categories of gender and race” (Osborne 235). As the first example of spoken word theatre, *The Story of M* demonstrates that poets were experimenting with auto/biographical performance, and manipulating or subverting assumptions about identity performance, from the start.

Another early example that plays on auto/biography is found in Lemn Sissay’s *Something Dark* (2004). Staging Sissay’s experiences in the care system and his journey to Gambia in search of his birth parents, the show, like SuAndi’s *The Story of M*, attempts to “resist and challenge the realities they [Sissay and SuAndi] are dealt, to carve paths of their [the poets’] own agency” (Osborne, “Body of Text” 244). In writing and performing his life story, Sissay undoubtedly asserts his identity on stage, inscribing himself into collective memory. However, even in his explicitly auto/biographical performance, his strategy defies expectations of identity-work. Rather than presenting a straight narrative of personal development, Sissay’s performance engages with the act of self-narration in innovative ways. As Hannah Silva observes, “Sissay uses performance not only to prove his own existence, but question it, check it, amplify it, ask of his audience who they see, and question how different contexts change how he is perceived and the ways he behaves on stage” (*Live Writing* 223). Sissay does this by employing what Silva terms “performed palimpsests” which comprise of “introductions, interruptions and splicing together of observation, aside, commentary and self-critique” (“Defamiliarisation and Performed Palimpsests” 1) — a strategy that works to interrogate and de-naturalise auto/biographical self.

These two examples, then, demonstrate that in early instances of spoken word theatre, poets were already creatively experimenting with the possibilities of embodied auto/biography, complicating and sometimes frustrating audience expectations with their artistic and narratorial choices. They invite us to examine the performance of identity in auto/biography differently, privileging poet’s writing and staging strategies. These examples also prompt us to engage with the autofictional in performance.

In the next section, I analyse four shows in detail to demonstrate the scale of creative strategies poets deploy in their work in the explicit performance of identity through auto/biography or the autofictional. All of these case studies deal with marginalised identities to some degree owing to the fact that firstly, as noted earlier, the genre of poetry performance and the art form of spoken word theatre have been a medium of cultural activism for poets from minoritised communities. Secondly, since the critique of identity politicking is often levelled at poets belonging to marginalised groups, the analyses here attempt to contest these perceptions

and reveal the variety of creative strategies minoritised poets deploy to perform (the politics of) their identity.

2.5 Contemporary Case Studies

Poets regularly perform their life narratives, tied to their social and cultural identities, on stage. While some poets perform their auto/biography explicitly on stage, others perform implicit identity markers, without claiming the label of auto/biography. Some poets play with the autofictional in their identity performance. A few use their identity as performance material to question the state of the world; others use their visible identity traits to play with and question audience assumptions. The following case studies, Kevin P Gilday's *Spam Valley*, Adam Kammerling's *Seder*, Ellen Renton's *Within Sight* and afshan d'souza-lodhi's *How to Eat Mangoes*, demonstrate the scale of this play and the individual attributes listed above. In these shows, through their craft and aesthetic choices, poets complicate identity performance in auto/biography and the autofictional.

2.5.1 Kevin P Gilday's *Spam Valley*

Kevin P Gilday's *Spam Valley* is an "autobiographical monologue exploring what happens when a working-class upbringing gives way to a middle-class career path" ("Spam Valley"). The show blends the theatrical form with poetry performance and comedy. In this chapter, I analyse the 2022 performance of the show at The Stand New Town Theatre performed on August 13th as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The video recording was published by Gilday to YouTube on 5th January 2024, but shared privately with me before, in 2023. I also had the opportunity to attend a live performance at Etcetera Theatre, a pub-theatre in Camden London, on 21st October 2023. Kevin P Gilday is an award-winning poet from Glasgow who is "a National Theatre of Scotland Associate Artist, a BBC Writers room Scottish Voice, a UNESCO City of Literature Writer in Residence" (Gilday, "About"). The phrase "spam valley", as the poet explains in the show, is an insult directed at poor people: "when poor people move to a posh estate, but they couldn't afford to pay for it. So, they had to eat spam for their dinner instead" (*Spam Valley* 20:05–20:15).

The recording of the show begins with Gilday sitting on a chair against the backdrop of a rack of jackets (fig. 6). The rack of jackets and the chair (aside from the microphone and its

stand) are the only props used in the performance. This minimal stage design is deliberate, as the poet informs me in our interview:

It was just an idea but the concept with that was always going to be ‘let's make a really simple show’. Something that was really stripped back that could be performed anywhere with really simple staging. So, [...] that's why, you know, the only set in the whole show is a clothes rack and five jackets. That's it. [...] There's, like, a few lighting changes but nothing crazy. There's a few kind of music cues but, you know, nothing big. (Gilday 0:53:48–0:54:29)



Figure 6 Gilday sits against a rack of five jackets. *Spam Valley*, 2022. (Screenshot)

Gilday opens the show with his popular poem “The Old Men in Wetherspoons Are Angry About the Politics”, which comments on the mounting discontent amongst old working-class men and their growing bigotry shaped by their exposure to the divisive politics propagated by media. As he finishes the poem, the poet talks about his own working-class background, remarking on how he does not always fit the picture: “my clothes, my voice, my general fucking existence is incongruous with working-class culture. Even saying the word incongruous is incongruous with working-class culture” (*Spam Valley* 05:39–05:56). The transition between poetry and storytelling is seamless in this part, as it is throughout the show. *Spam Valley* is also laden with asides and meta-commentary, where the poet digresses from the main plot to comment on the

context or place of performance. This happens early on in the show when the poet performs the following extract:

I have some questions about class /
namely, at what point are you no longer allowed to be working class? /
And who the fuck gets to decide anyway? (06:13–06:25)

Gilday's tone and pitch alter after this; his demeanour changes to indicate a direct address to the audience:

And that's the show, you can all fuck off now. How was that show at the Fringe?
No, it was brilliant. It came out. [...] Got to the conclusion very quickly. Five
stars. (06:29–06:43)

The aside is followed instantly by the poet returning to the performance script: "Class isn't chosen, it is assigned at birth" (06:46–06:51). The theme of the show is thus established straight away: it revolves around the poet's working-class past and his ascent to the rank of a middle-class poet with a university degree, with an explicitly critique of the expectations of identity performance and assumptions about working class artists. Halfway through the show, Gilday informs the audience that when he was a child, his aunt told him he was going to spam valley at which point he delivers the explanation quoted above. His memory pinpoints the instance where the poet first became conscious about his class, the audience is told. Gilday, in the show, follows the various stages of his life, representing them with different jackets. The poet informs the audience that as a young person, to evade scrutiny for being poor, he bought a Helly Hansen jacket (fig. 7). He takes out the jacket from the rack behind him and puts it on to mark the first instance of his class mobility. This pivotal moment in the show does not signify actual mobility, but an aspirational move.

The next stage of the poet's ascent to middle-class arrives when he enters university. This phase is symbolised by the "new uniform", as the poet calls it, of a denim jacket. Coming into contact with middle-class friends and love interests, the poet further becomes aware of class disparity as well as his own aspirational choices. He follows the university episode with his stint at a call centre and shares humorous anecdotes about the job.



Figure 7 The poet in a Helly Hansen jacket signalling class mobility. *Spam Valley*, 2022. (Screenshot)

Humour seems to be a strategy to soften the stark reality of class disparity that he illuminates in the show. The final stage of his ascent is marked by Gilday’s introduction to poetry; his journey successfully transitioning from “working-class misfit to petty bourgeois wannabe” (36:41–36:45). The poet puts on a new jacket made of tweed (fig. 8), which, he states, suggests an academic dress sense. His upward move is accomplished when the poet is able to “successfully negotiate the superior jargon of a Creative Scotland funding form” (37:04–37:11). The sarcasm in this segment is palpable; the meta-commentary critical. The poet continues:

So I stand in front of you today /
 a working class traitor /
 or a middle class failure /
 or most likely both /
 to ask that your labels could perhaps be /
 a little more accurate /
 or at least a little less adhesive /
 [aside] leaves a mark on my tweed jacket, you see (37:19–37:45)



Figure 8 Kevin P. Gilday performs in a tweed jacket, endorsing an “academic” look. *Spam Valley*, 2022. (Screenshot)

Subsequently, Gilday relates his experience in the Scottish poetry scene, remarking that for the most part, he felt like he did not belong and would be asked to leave. The cause of his disorientation is the class politics he perceives: “But the big thing about poetry is, for the most part it’s played out in middle class spaces by middle class people.” (39:04–39:14) Gilday later informs the audience: “Do you know that only 12.4% of people working in the arts are from a low-income background? / 12.4% / Why do you think that is?” (40:32–40:45)

The poet further observes that he was often the only working-class person in the room at poetry events. This commentary on the class dynamics of the Scottish poetry scene is vital. Here, the poet performs his working-class identity through clothes and his accent in an explicitly auto/biographical performance about class in order to meet audience expectations and then problematises the politics of said expectations and perceptions. His critique of the expectations around working-class poet-performers is two-layered; while the poet recalls his experience across poetry events, he is also making astute observations about the current performance and the demographic of the audience in attendance:

And now suddenly, I found myself in a space where I was selling a working classness that I didn’t own to a middle-class audience who wouldn’t know the

difference if it hit them over the head with a summons from Scott and Co.²³

[Aside] That's a niche reference. (45:11–45:28)

Performing class identity and class mobility also comes with the caveat of code-switching, which the poet reflects on in his performance:

Have you heard this term before? Code switching? Yeah. So that's the art of tailoring your voice to suit a specific audience. So that A, they can understand you. Fair enough. But also B, to make them feel comfortable, to make sure that they don't perceive you as a threat. Pretty much what I've been trying to do for the duration of this show so far. (42:53–43:20)

Here, the poet's direct address of the audience and his remark on the context of the performance makes for an intriguing intervention. Certainly, the show is about class identity. But it does not cater to expectations of identity by the poet's own admission during the show. In a way, the poet flips the gaze on the audience, encouraging them to interrogate their own perceptions and biases. Even in the explicit staging of identity and auto/biography, the performance text brings the audience into scrutiny, consistently questioning their expectations, subverting these expectations, with asides and meta-commentary, the poet always in control of the narrative. Gilday never steers too close to the confessional mode of poetry, that is supposedly a feature of spoken word culture, and which audiences have purportedly come to expect. He remarks in our interview that:

I think, to be honest, the autobiographical thing, the reason that is so much a part of poetry is because, I think, now it's expected. I feel like people just, people go to poetry night, and they really want to watch people bleed a lot of the time. [...] And I'm like, what a mad night out to have. To [be] like, I can't wait to go and have a pint and for someone to tell me about, you know, their dead dad or whatever. It's like, that is such a weird night out. But that's what we do. And that, that's actually become part of the language of spoken word, and specifically of kind of slam culture. [...] I feel like I share what I want to share. And I'm very kind of particular, and specific. If I want to share it, it will be shared. But if I don't, then you'll never know about it. (Gilday 1:11:53–1:13:54)

²³ Scott and Co. is the largest debt-recovery firm in Scotland

This controlled performance of identity is further enhanced by the deployment of humour in *Spam Valley*. Every serious anecdote about class disparity is accompanied by a joke to diffuse the moment, except in the concluding segment. The show arrives full circle when the poet details about his experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Having lost gig commitments and a huge part of his livelihood, Gilday finds himself back in his childhood neighbourhood. Despite acquiring material tastes and possessions identifiable as middle-class, symbolised by the jacket he slips on during this segment, these new circumstances make him circle back to his working-class childhood. This, the poet informs the audience, is why he wrote the show. The poet wishes to confront perceptions of working-class living and cautions against treating working-class people as an aesthetic. The final minutes of the show are sombre and directly question audience's perceptions of working-class artists:

When you came in here tonight /
every single one of you made a judgement /
you all made a decision /
you decided if I was authentically working class /
or if I was just an actor playing the part /
you decided if what I was about to say was worthy of being heard /
You all decided if I was worthy of belonging (*Spam Valley* 57:33–58:02)

Here, the poet pauses, puts on an Umbro jacket that were a staple of the 1990s, and asks the audience:

Do I belong now? /
there are things in this life that only the poor see /
whole constellations of existence that can only be viewed from the cheap seats /
we are not a monolith /
there is not a one size fits all working-class experience (58:12–58:39)

The defiance of audience expectation flips the script even in the explicit auto/biographical performance of identity in *Spam Valley*. It is of interest that COVID-19 became the tipping point for this inquiry into identity and perceptions. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, these forms of meta-commentary about the altered conditions of the pandemic have had a mainstay in lockdown and post-pandemic performances.

The performance design of *Spam Valley* is intriguing in its minimalism. As noted earlier, a rack of jackets and a chair are the only props in the show. Moreover, the stage space itself is

limited. The elevated small square stage allows the poet barely any movement and yet he has complete control of the performance area. Gilday utilises the stage for maximum effect. The jackets become a central motif of his working-class identity while his characteristic accent identifies him as a Glaswegian. The poet uses both to perform auto/biography and his class identity explicitly. Yet other markers of his identity, such as gender and race, are also brought implicitly into context. Ultimately, Gilday's manifestly auto/biographical identity performance confronts the audience to question their perceptions about such performance. The formal attributes and performance design of the show, revealed in Gilday's poetic style and stand-up like interjections, enable the performance of identity and auto/biography, while simultaneously problematising expectations of such performance.

2.5.2 Adam Kammerling's *Seder*

Seder by Adam Kammerling is an auto/biographical story of intergenerational Holocaust trauma, also responding to the ongoing genocide²⁴ of Palestinians in Gaza by the state of Israel. The show's cross-arts aesthetic combines spoken word poetry with dance, physical theatre and live music. The plot revolves around the Jewish tradition of Seder, which is "the traditional Passover meal that includes reading, drinking 4 cups of wine, telling stories, eating special foods, singing, and other Passover traditions" (Chabad). The backdrop of the plot is preparation for Seder. While preparing for Seder, Kammerling narrates personal anecdotes about his own life and that of his grandfather's, a Holocaust survivor who escaped Nazi-occupied Austria at the age of 15 on the Kindertransport. The poet alternates between these two narrative threads throughout the performance.

Adam Kammerling is an award-winning poet, interdisciplinary artist and educator. He won the UK Hammer and Tongue Slam in 2012. His debut poetry collection *Seder* was

²⁴ The use of the term "genocide" for the mass-killing of Palestinians in Gaza by the state of Israel goes back to 2023. In December 2023, The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention released a statement entitled "Why We Call the Israeli Attack on Gaza Genocide". In September 2024, the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories declared in its 27-page report to the UN General Assembly: "The developments in this report lead the Special Committee to conclude that the policies and practices of Israel during the reporting period are consistent with the characteristics of genocide" (25). The International Association of Genocide Scholars passed a resolution in August 2025 which "[d]eclares that Israel's policies and actions in Gaza meet the legal definition of genocide in Article II of the United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948)". The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel confirmed in a 72-page legal analysis for the Human Rights Council in September 2025 that "the Israeli authorities and Israeli security forces have the genocidal intent to destroy, in whole or in part, the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip" (64).

published by Outspoken Press in 2020 and was a finalist in the National Jewish Book Awards. The show was developed in conjunction with the poetry collection, and both works were designed to complement each other. The development of both was supported by an Arts Council England grant. As Kammerling informs me in our interview, developing the show and working with dancers helped him shape the book: “There wasn’t like a connective aesthetic for the poems. And I found that connective aesthetic through working with the dancers and the musicians [...] So, I was able to transpose some of that physicality onto the page” (Kammerling 0:19:34–0:19:49). The show was conceptualised and performed in collaboration with dancers Si Rawlinson, Elisabeth Mulenga, Jay Yule, with musician Marysia Osu on harp and poet-musician Antosh Wojcik²⁵ on drums. The stage design is simple with only a long table and four chairs as props. The most recent rendition of the show was on tour across England in January–February 2026. The recording I analyse here is from a performance at Bristol Tobacco Factory Theatres in January 2026, which the poet shared with me.

A cross-arts aesthetics is noticeable throughout the show. Kammerling switches registers between matter-of-fact storytelling and poetry, marked by a musical lilt and a soft pace. The accompaniment of harp and drums, along with guitar segments by the poet, add to the mosaic impression of the performance. Music not only harmonises the poetry but in certain instances disrupts it, especially in segments where the musicians, along with the poet on an electric guitar, engage in death metal beats and rhythms. While Kammerling usually, though not always, performs the text with a non-emotive inflection, the dancers embody the emotions latent in the text (fig. 9). Their movement across the stage aids, unifies, disrupts, and add layers to the performance. The dancers oscillate between the role of active listeners, props, characters and enforcers in the performance.

²⁵ I briefly discuss Antosh Wojcik’s spoken word theatre show *How to Keep Time*, where the poet experiments with spoken word poetry and drumming, in the next chapter.



Figure 9 Dancers take centre stage as Kammerling performs a poem on the right. *Seder*, 2026. (Screenshot)

The recording of the show opens with Kammerling and the dancers setting the stage for a Seder meal. As the poet explains the context of a Seder meal, he informs the audience:

This year there is some ... uh, there's dissonance /
 we are making symbolic cement from apples /
 while neighbourhoods have been bulldozed in Khan Younis and Rafah and Gaza
 City /
 we are about to do Passover /
 the festival in which we celebrate our people's survival story²⁶ /
 and we are being told that our survival depends on the systematic oppression and
 destruction of another /
 the ritual is broken /
 or the story is broken /
 something is broken /
 and I don't know if we are supposed to fix it (*Seder* 0:02:27–0:03:07)

By recording the oppression of Palestinians alongside the tale of liberation of the Israelites from the Torah, Kammerling sets current world events against religious narratives, highlighting the

²⁶ This refers to the tale of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt, taken from the Book of Exodus in the Torah.

parallels between these two liberation struggles and the dissonance that arises in the act of celebrating a community's survival while another is made to disappear. This twofold mode of narration is sustained throughout the show. Poems from his collection *Seder* are interspersed with storytelling about self and family as well as tales from the Torah. These are then juxtaposed against war crimes committed in Gaza. The show's non-linear progression gives the performance a montage-like quality. The segment quoted above is followed by the performance of the poems "before the kilning of the planets" and "swimming" from the poet's collection, which are supplemented by a soft instrumental harp melody. What ensues next is the incantation of "September 1944 October 1944 January 1945 / October 2023 November 2023 January 2024" by all performers. The two sets of dates represent the Holocaust and the genocide of Palestinians respectively, whose significance is explained later in the show.

Auto/biography and the performance of identity transcend the neoliberal logics of representation in *Seder*. The poet invokes his Jewish identity to interrogate the misappropriation of his (and others') generational trauma for geopolitical ends. Identity performance, then, is an act of solidarity in *Seder*. The show went through significant changes in the course of some years, as the poet tells me in our interview. The present version, analysed in this chapter, required a lot of re-consideration and revision in how the poet framed his auto/biography:

It's been constantly changing because of the world, um, the pandemic, it was born in the pandemic. Then we were working just out of the pandemic, made something, but it still felt quite isolated. So, we found a way to bring it back together and make a kind of, a post- and like a beyond the pandemic version. And that was all part of the same run of money. And then we got some money to tour that show. And then I got the money one week before October the 7th²⁷. And then [...] the way that Jewish stories were being received in the world was totally different. And actually, I didn't feel like it was the right story to be telling. So, we rejigged it. The Arts Council was very understanding. We had to cancel the tour because of safety concerns. And then on the most recent iteration, when we

²⁷ This refers to the date of Hamas's coordinated attack on Israel. In June 2024, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel recorded in its findings for the Human Rights Council: "On 7 October 2023, members of Hamas armed wing, called the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and other Palestinian armed groups, accompanied by Palestinian civilians, numbering at least 1,000 persons, carried out a coordinated, complex attack on Israeli civilian communities, civilian locations and military bases in southern Israel, near the border with Gaza. Attackers entered Israel by land, sea and air in conjunction with the launch of a large-scale rocket and mortar attack towards cities, towns and villages and military bases in southern and central Israel" (6).

went back, I spent a lot, a lot, a lot of time working on the script, figuring out what I wanted to say. And it was quite a personal journey as well, figuring out what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it for this show. (Kammerling 0:20:54–0:22:07)

The version of the show analysed here, which responds to the current geopolitical situation in Gaza, had thus undergone considerable revision on the poet's part.

After the invocation of the dates “September 1944 October 1944 January 1945 / October 2023 November 2023 January 2024”, the performance moves to an anecdote about Kammerling's son's third birthday party. He juxtaposes the moment against the bombardments in Gaza and the killing of children, expressing both unrest and dissociation that the conflicting realities generate, which also remind him of his grandfather's childhood during the Holocaust: “It's the bombs / it's the blood / it's the dust / it's the children / it's the Holocaust / it's Gaza / it's shame” (*Seder* 0:14:59–0:15:12). This extract represents the poet's internal conflict — in the face of the continuous use of Holocaust trauma by political entities as a justification to commit a genocide in Gaza. This extract also echoes the list form as a poetic device, emphasising a catalogue of catastrophic events, their causes, their victims, their emotional aftermath. The pauses between each phrase draws attention to the severity of the phrase's implication. The sequence of syllables at the end of each phrase has a palindromic effect. The last word of each of the phrases goes from monosyllabic to disyllabic to trisyllabic, only to return to the disyllabic “Gaza” and monosyllabic “shame”. The verse, then, demonstrates a cyclical quality emblematic of the broader theme of recurring crimes against humanity. As Kammerling declaims these lines, the stress always, understandably, falls on the last word uttered. His pitch is neutral, so is his body language. He performs this extract sitting on stage, relaxed, with his arms over his knees. The dancers crouch on a single chair behind him. The enunciation of “shame” at the end of the extract suggests a lingering guilt through the audio text, also replicated in the posture of the dancers (fig 10).



Figure 10 Kammerling sits on the stage floor, while dancers behind him crouch on a chair. *Seder*, 2026. (Screenshot)

It is important, however, to distinguish the actions of a nation-state from those of a marginalised religious group, to not fault a persecuted religious group for the actions of a nation-state, as the poet emphasises in the show by familiarising the audience with Jewish practices. During the performance, Kammerling introduces the audience to more Seder rituals. He notes that usually there are six key items on the Seder table²⁸, where each item represents an aspect of “ancient Hebrew experience” (0:18:37). Later in the show, Wojcik, who as noted earlier is on drums, is invited to offer additional context. The drummer informs the audience that often, people add an extra item on the Seder table to represent solidarity with a specific group:

Some place an orange to represent LGBTQ+ communities /
and other groups marginalised within wider Jewish life /
some place an olive to express solidarity with Palestinians /
if there is an idea or object that holds importance for you /
you can make space for it at the Seder table (0:21:08–0:21:26)

²⁸ As Rabbi Jill Jacobs writes: “During the Seder, we don’t just tell the story of the Exodus, we see, smell, feel, and taste liberation. // Many of the elements of this sensory experience appear on the seder plate (*k’arah*), which serves as the centerpiece of the seder table. The seder plate traditionally holds five or six items, each of which symbolizes a part (or multiple parts) of the Passover story” (The Seder Plate).

At this moment, Kammerling notes that on his table, a goldfish is placed. The goldfish is a vital symbol not only in the show but also his poetry collection. In an anecdotal segment, the poet recounts the research trip through Eastern Europe he undertook in 2017 for the writing of his poetry book. He visited Prague, Theresienstadt, Krakow, Oświęcim and finally Auschwitz, in what he would later consider the most harrowing experience of his life. On this trip, he found goldfish — a symbol of life — at the pond in Auschwitz, a site of gruesome mass murder. The goldfish henceforth became a symbol of hope for him.

The trip to Auschwitz also anchors the story of Kammerling's grandfather. Kammerling informs the audience that when his grandfather reached his late eighties, he started repeating himself. When conversations about family were brought on, the poet's grandfather would repeat:

My father went to the camps in September 1944 / my mother and Ruthie October
1944 / liberation was January 1945 / just three months after / Ruthie was 23 / my
father went to the camps in September 1944 / my mother and Ruthie October
1944 / liberation was January 1945 / just three months after / Ruthie was 23
(0:46:20–0:47:01)

This recitation establishes the context of the earlier incantation of dates in the performance. Kammerling discloses that his grandfather escaped from Nazi-occupied Austria at the age of 15 on the Kindertransport. His older sister, Erica, who was 18, left on a work permit to London. However, the grandfather's parents and his sister Ruthie, who was 17 at the time, were sent to Theresienstadt and later Auschwitz, where they were murdered. His own identity has thus been informed by his grandfather's trauma, in what Marianne-Hirsch would term 'post-memory'.

The poet connects this sombre moment in the show to the present-day mass murder of Palestinians in Gaza. Here, the slogan of "Never Again", a staple of Holocaust remembrance, is raised:

When two adverbs are combined in the phrase "Never Again" /
the active verbs required to carry meaning are unsaid but they are present /
never dehumanised again /
never displaced again /
never ghettoised again /
never starved again /
never murdered again /

the phrase “Never Again” in its efficiency holds all the pain of the Shoah /
 [...]

 “Never Again” has failed /

 those active verbs unsaid but present in the statement /

 they were — dehumanised, displaced, ghettoised, starved, murdered /

 never again has become again in Palestine /

 never again has become again in Palestine (0:39:40–0:41:08)

The poet once again employs the poetic device of a list and repetition to emphasise his point. In the first half, the poet declaims the extract matter-of-factly. The register is conversational. His pitch is slightly higher, but his tempo remains measured. He emphasises “Never Again” in every utterance. In the second half of the extract, his pitch drops. So does his volume. When the poet states “Never Again has failed”, his tone has an affectation of remorse. Through both audio text and gestures, Kammerling embodies the testimonial act. He bears witness to the persecution of Palestinians through his poetry, the tragedy of tens of thousands of lives lost in Gaza weighing heavy on his words.

Over the course of the performance, shame is transformed into solidarity. The evocation of solidarity between Jewish and Palestinian people in the context of a Seder meal and the Passover story is founded on the macabre parallels between the Holocaust and the genocide of Palestinians. Identity and auto/biography are deployed as agents of memory culture; remembrance is evoked to caution against repeating crimes against humanity. The personal is indeed the political in *Seder*, where auto/biography serves as both a form of political activism and of bearing witness. Heddon, writing on the proliferation of testimonial auto/biographical performances at the end of twentieth century, suggests one of its contexts to be that of

geopolitical upheavals which include wars and genocide and have their related human costs such as displacement, mass-migration and the need for asylum. The persistent presence of crimes against humanity [...] arguably positions each of us as ‘witnesses’, compelling ‘an ethical responsibility to testify’.
(Autobiography and Performance 53)

This testimonial culture has also spilled into the first three decades of the twenty-first century. Indeed, the increasing crimes against humanity have prompted artists to bear witness, including in spoken word poetry, which has been a mode of activism since its inception. In Kammerling’s show, the dual purpose of bearing witness and sounding caution is evident. The poet ends the

show with the following lines: “We need olives on our Seder table and goldfish in our darkest waters / the story is broken and I don’t think we are supposed to fix it” (1:07:40–1:07:55). His closing invites acknowledgment of the present atrocities against Palestinians and warns against weaponizing Jewish trauma.

The design of the show is decidedly non-linear and hence non-confessional. Due to this design, the show deviates from the prominent confessional mode of spoken word. Additionally, while auto/biography and the performance of identity are key features of the show, the performance strategy is a far cry from “identity politicking”. Kammerling neither presents himself as a victim of discrimination on accounts of his ethnic/religious identity, nor he demands that he and his community be treated differently. He acknowledges how identities can be situated on axes of marginalisation and privilege simultaneously, thus drawing attention to their relational nature. If anything, *Seder* invites us to question our own assumptions about identity performance and cultural memory. Through the auto/biographical mode, the story both represents self and community. It asks us to bear witness to both past and present atrocities. It encourages us to confront the politics of testimony and remembrance by drawing parallels and solidarities between two cataclysmic events often juxtaposed against each other in divisive political discourse. These attributes demonstrate the potential for performing identity through auto/biography in spoken word theatre. However, poets also employ the autofictional to raise political awareness, as is demonstrated by the next case study.

2.5.3 Ellen Renton’s *Within Sight*

Ellen Renton’s *Within Sight* is a 49-minute one person show that explores the personal narrative of living with albinism in an ableist society. The show revolves around the themes of running as a sport, the Great Britain Paralympics, and disability. It “uses video to give the non-disabled audience a sense of what it’s like to inhabit a world that wasn’t made for you” (In the Works), as the promotional material on the show’s website states. The show was produced by In the Works spoken word theatre company and incorporates original score by Jack Hinks and Tin Can Studio. The show first toured the UK in early 2020, only to return later in 2021, with a final run at the Roundhouse in 2023. The show was commissioned and supported by Unlimited, which celebrates disabled artists’ works, and received supplementary funding from Spirit of 2012, the London 2012 legacy funder investing in inclusive events. Additionally, the development and touring process was supported by the National Lottery through Creative Scotland. The video recording I analyse here is the filmed version, recorded and edited by poet

and director Sarah Grant in December 2020. The film was made for a digital festival during lockdown in an empty contemporary arts venue — Tramway — in Glasgow. Only four individuals involved with the filming process, including the poet, were present. However, the performance aesthetics of the live, in-person version were retained, as Renton states in our interview. As Renton informs me, the process of filming was unfamiliar for her: “It was very unusual, in a way, for me to be performing to nobody [...] I remember thinking, this is the difference between a performer and an actor, and I’m not an actor” (Renton 0:53:10–0:53:24). Ellen Renton is an Edinburgh-based Scottish poet, performer and theatre-maker, who first started performing in 2015 and has widely staged her poetry, including at The Scottish Parliament, The Roundhouse, Verve Poetry Festival and the Edinburgh International Book Festival. The filmed version of *Within Sight* was offered to me by In the Works during my interview with co-founder Ross McFarlane.

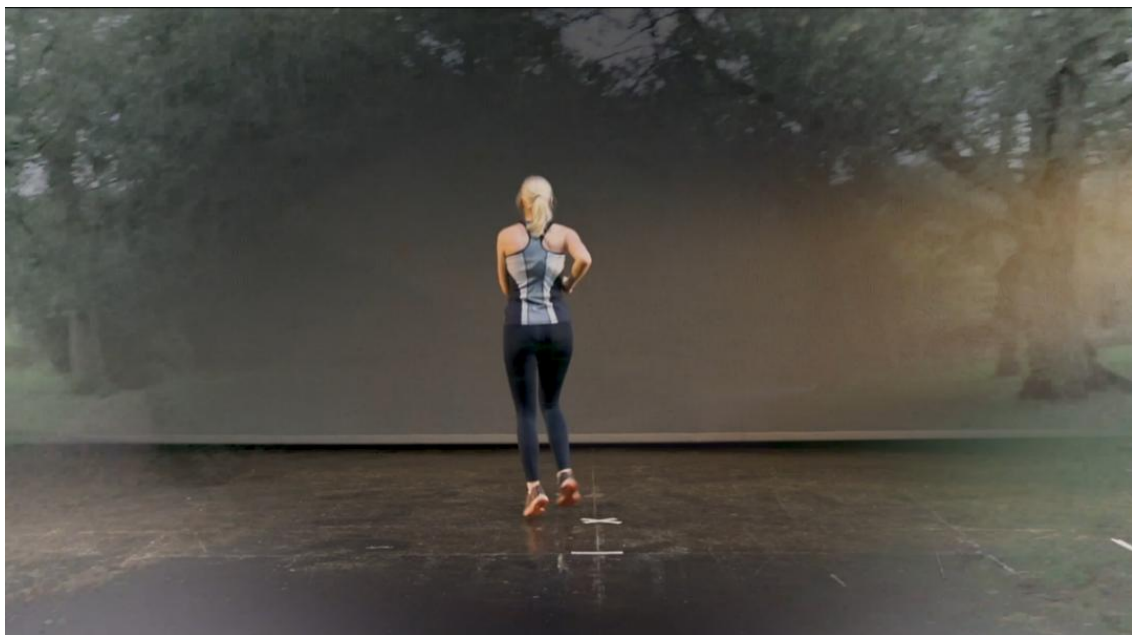


Figure 11 Renton jogs against the backdrop of a forest with her back to the audience. *Within Sight*, 2020. (Screenshot)

Within Sight deploys an intermedial aesthetic through the use of video and sound projections. Most of the poems are performed live by the poet in the film while audio recordings of a few are also incorporated against the backdrop of video material. The recorded audiotext is played in the background while the poet jogs or warms up on stage. When the poet pauses her exercising or jogging routine and faces the camera, she narrates the plot through storytelling and poetry. The projections behind the poet are set to visuals of forests, parks or pavements —

habitual haunts for runners training daily. The scene opens with the recorded audiotext of a poem playing, as the poet jogs in place, her back to the camera, against the projection of a park (fig. 11):

I run to catch my breath /
and feel awake /
I am tired when I begin /
arms heavy with the weights of another week /
hamstrings wrapped tight enrage /
I ache with all of it /
but pain gives way as the pavements do /
and as I pound them /
the clouds in my head make their move (00:21–00:51)

As the poet stops and turns to face the camera, the recorded voice pauses, the projection fades and disappears, the poet remarks: “I shouldn’t start without warming up.” While the poet prepares herself for halfway sit-ups, the recorded voice returns:

Albinism is a circuit /
I get motion sick from swinging between symptoms /
low vision (01:09–01:19)

The recorded voice details through vivid poetic imagery the everyday symptoms of Albinism that the performing ‘I’ experiences. Intimate details about the narrator’s conditions and related struggles (structural and personal) are disclosed through verse. We are never given a character or a name. The first-person pronoun “I” prevails, prompting the viewer to enter the autobiographical pact inherent in the show through the unity of poet, performer and the performed self. Once the pact is established, the story is assumed to be true, authentic, detailing the story of a woman with Albinism training for the Great Britain Paralympics. The story follows the protagonist’s journey through a running route, as she copes with the news of “narrowly miss[ing] out on making the GB Paralympics team” (In the Works). The visual aesthetic of the film oscillates between the poet jogging on stage against the backdrop of trees and concrete and her turning to the camera to perform poetry against a blank background. The sonic text alternates between recorded segments and poetry performed live (for viewers of the film, this would be pre-recorded audio vs. audio recorded onstage). The poet speaks in a Scottish accent. The audiotext of the poems have the lilt and mannerisms of a customary Scottish

speaking voice. Her enunciation is also marked by her cultural/national identity. Visually, one can perceive her gender identity as well as disability. The poet lives with Albinism which is discernible to audiences visually. While these characteristics remain largely un(re)marked (upon) in the performed text of the show, except for her disability, they nonetheless inform the poet's lived experience and the performance of identity.

Three quarters into the show (37:15), a video is stitched into the film that reflects the outdoors through a distorted, narrowed, blacked and blurred lens (fig. 12). This obscure vision supposedly represents the poet's point of view to give the audience a glimpse into her view of the world, literally. This unsettling imagery has a sensorial effect upon the viewer. The strategy deployed here seems to be geared towards generating empathy in able-bodied individuals through vicarious experience of disability. As Ailes observes in her doctoral thesis, "through the act of composition and performance, [poets] can actively shape and express their identities as they experience them" (*Performance and Perception* 186). While Ailes refers to the performance of poetic text, the example of *Within Sight* demonstrates that spoken word theatre allows for this identity work to be carried out at different levels of the show. In composing a video through her eyes for the audience, the poet creates awareness about her disability. Additionally, this strategy also gives rise to the effect of authenticity (Ailes; Novak) as it heightens expectations and perceptions of truth telling through this creative approach.



Figure 12 The projected video replicating the poet's blurred and imperfect vision. *Within Sight*, 2020. (Screenshot)



Figure 13 Renton making a direct address to the audience/viewer. *Within Sight*, 2020. (Screenshot)

Having suggested the authenticity of auto/biography through the explicit performance of a first-person narrative, Renton problematises the perceptions of authenticity at the end of the show. This is where the autofictional materialises. Stepping out of character, putting on a jacket and untying her hair, against a black backdrop and in the absence of recorded audiotext and music, the poet, staring straight into the camera (fig. 13), questions the audience on their expectation of authenticity, their perception of a true story:

Paralympians get three weeks every four years /
 my time's up in two minutes /
 when I take off this costume /
 and next time our paths cross /
 maybe you'll be the one who stares /
 the one who huffs at my pace as I gauge the pavement /
 the one whose joke belongs post watershed /
 and even then /
 or maybe you'll be the one who watched a poetry show about disability /
 Who clicked on this to be moved, inspired /
 just to see what it was like on the other side of things /
 what were you expecting? /
 Were you grateful for the odd joke thrown in? /
 'It wasn't all heavy actually!' You'll tell friends tomorrow /
 and you will tell them /

because buying a ticket to a show like this alone feels like you're good deep
 down /
 you, who taught me that ignorance is not bliss /
 it is complicity /
 maybe you'll be the one who assumed all that was a true story /
 Can I ask why? /
 Is it because I am only worth my autobiography? /
 When you look at me, you await a struggle, a triumph, a weepy ending /
 you don't see a writer who is capable of choosing her own /
 I can only hope maybe you'll be the one who'll prove me wrong /
 [...]

so, did you watch me or did you see me? /
 Because you can take it from someone who knows /
 The two are not the same (45:22–48:20)

Instantaneously, the effect of authenticity vanishes. The audience, or rather, the viewer is called out — for their voyeuristic fetishisation of a disabled body. As the fourth wall breaks, they are forced to admit their complicity in ignoring the lived reality of disabled people; their pre-conceived notions about what a spoken word show by a disabled poet looks like are challenged. By complicating the associations between deployment of first-person pronoun, authentic life narrative and visual markers of identity, the poet manipulates the explicit performance of identity, which demonstrates the workings of the autofictional. This moment also recalls Gilday's confrontation of the audience discussed earlier in the chapter, although in Gilday's case, the show is patently auto/biographical. Both poets subvert audience expectations. Gilday challenges stereotypical assumptions about working-class identity by performing his auto/biography. Renton challenges audience's expectations of identity performance of disability by staging a formulaic story and deploying the autofictional. While Renton draws attention to identity markers like gender and disability which inform her lived experience in the performance, she fictionalises the narrative to play with the poetic content.

Building on Alison James's work on fiction in the autofictional, Mark posits that in theatre, "it is in the 'referential ground of the I' that 'sites of fictionalization'" (*Theatres of Autofiction* 14) find their roots. "The more the referential ground is insisted upon and the fictionalisation hidden or naturalised, the closer one is to the autobiographical; conversely, the more marked the fictionalisation, the more the autofictional shines through" (14), Mark further

explains. Renton's show, owing to the fictional being hidden within the referential grounds of 'I', and because the similarities between the poet and the protagonist is drawn on several layers such as race, gender, disability, nationality, and so on, appears to be auto/biographical. Renton's intervention in the end, therefore, ruptures the impression of authenticity rather abruptly, allowing the autofictional to shine through only in the final moments.

Renton also challenges the general view of disability in *Within Sight*. Carrie Sandahl notes the discrepancy in perceptions of disability, observing that while it is "often discussed in terms of lack or as a necessary foil to understanding normalcy", disability is rarely "described in generative terms" (18). In writing about the role of disability in theatre, Sandahl further suggests:

Disability, though, can be considered differently. Disabilities are states of being that are in themselves generative and, once de-stigmatized, allow us to envision an enormous range of human variety — in terms of bodily, spatial, and social configurations. (19)

Renton's subversion of stereotypical disability narratives at the end of her performance appears to be a step in this direction. Through the poet's direct interrogation of audience perceptions, her unflinching critique of prescriptive narratives around Albinism and disability, we are obliged to consider disability differently, generatively. This represents the potential of performing identity through the autofictional in spoken word theatre.

2.5.4 afshan d'souza-lodhi's *How to Eat Mangoes*

How to Eat Mangoes by afshan d'souza-lodhi is a 42-minute narrative of sensuality, sexuality and the poet's personal and cultural preoccupation with mangoes. Generally promoted as a performative lecture, the show comprises of spoken word poetry, storytelling and a lecture-styled presentation (fig. 14). Taking its cues from the poet's South Asian heritage, the show

takes stories about rishta aunties (matchmaking aunties), erotic fiction and the exotic mango to question how we love, how we heal and most importantly how we eat mangoes. While a rishta aunty tells us who and how we should love, sounds of mangoes being eaten punctuate her every word. (d'souza-lodhi, "How to Eat")

afshan d'souza-lodhi is a Manchester based British South Asian artist. An established performance poet, d'souza-lodhi's debut collection *re:desire* was published by Burning Eye Books in 2020. The poet-performer has also worked with theatre companies and venues such as Tamasha theatre company and Royal Exchange Theatre. *How to Eat Mangoes* was produced in collaboration with Georgetown University's Lab for Global Performance and Politics and has been performed in Manchester as well as internationally in Washington DC, Hyderabad, Kampala, and elsewhere. The show was conceptualised to promote her latest poetry collection. It recently toured in Vietnam and d'souza-lodhi is also working on developing the performance into a feature film after receiving an Early Development grant from the British Film Institute. The video recording I analyse here is the one privately available on YouTube from the show's May 2022 performance at Georgetown, uploaded by the poet, the link for which the poet kindly shared with me.



Figure 14 Lecture-performance format of the show. *How to Eat Mangoes*, 2022. (Screenshot)

The video footage of the show begins with the poet already on stage engaging with the audience in a conversation about mangoes. The performance opens with the poet setting the premise and introducing herself as रिश्ता (“Rishta”) Aunty. Rishta, originally an Urdu word but also used in Hindi, means relationship. However, when suffixed with the term Aunty, the name usually denotes matchmaking, thereby implying an older woman who helps with matchmaking.

The poet explains this to contextualise the name. The term of respect for the elderly, “Aunty”, is used because “any woman who is single, unmarried, and over the age of 25 gets upgraded to Aunty status” (*How to Eat* 0:43–0:50). Within the South Asian context, the name “Rishta Aunty” is familiar and requires no explication. However, as the performance takes place in a different context, the poet offers all relevant information pertaining to cultural nomenclature in the paratext. Through humour and innuendos, the poet proceeds to deliver a lecture on the South Asian origins and history of the mango fruit, the varieties of mangoes available in the region, as well as the proper way of eating a mango, invoking in the process the innuendo of female sensuality and pleasure. The lecture is also interspersed with anecdotes about the protagonist’s family history of migration, the colonial “discovery” of mangoes and the importance of cultural artefacts (even edible ones) to one’s personal history. The show effortlessly oscillates between storytelling, poetry, conversations with audience members, and lecture-like inflections in tone and body communication, where each element blends into the other. This in-betweenness of form also reflects the intersections of social and cultural identities that inform the content. When the poet introduces Rishta Aunty to us, the language promptly turns from prosaic to poetic:

But really /
 I just teach the young ones how to eat mangoes /
 I teach them to blow *Masha’Allahs*²⁹ as they watch sunsets rise /
 I teach them to grind their ginger properly /
 Soak it into turmeric and milk to make their skin glow /
 And bankrupt all of the hipster golden milk cafes /
 //
 Sorry, yeah, now how to eat mangoes 101 (01:00–01:26)

Here, the lilt and affectation in the poet’s voice as well as the loose rhyme scheme distinguish the poetry from the prose. The transition between poetry and storytelling is seamless. When d’souza-lodhi performs poetry, her pace slows down, pitch rises and she accentuates every word. When the poet switches to the storytelling mode, her delivery is fast paced, the pitch neutral. After delivering the poetic extract quoted above, the protagonist reveals lessons her mother taught her about finding out the compatibility of a man; her mother based it on how a man held and ate a mango. The story progresses to Rishta Aunty inheriting the family business of smuggling mangoes from India and selling them “cheaper than the Bodegas” after her

²⁹ An Arabic phrase of appreciation, admiration or joy, also used by South Asian Muslim communities

mother's death. Through this inheritance, the character also develops a superpower of knowing a person's story if both their hands touched the same mango at the same time. The show thus fragments the symbolism of mango to deploy it, borrowing Stuart Hall's pronouncement on Caribbean cinema in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", "in a series of metaphors, to put in play a different sense of our relationship to the past, and thus a different way of thinking about cultural identity" (402). The mango is a multilayered signifier unravelling through its skin and flesh the intersections of identities at play. The narrative informs us explicitly that mangoes represent cultural identity, postcolonial histories, gendered sensuality and also the exploration of sexuality. Implicitly, we discern that mangoes also represent family and interpersonal relationships, as in when the poet's mother tells her how to know a man is the right one by observing how he handles a mango. Inscribed in this metaphor is also the identification of the maternal, the mother becomes a memory made tangible through inherited wisdom and tactile contact with mangoes.

While the overarching identity at play in *How to Eat Mangoes*, that of a British South Asian queer Muslim woman, belongs to the poet, the story is not auto/biographical. It is fictional. The plot is obviously a work of fiction and imagination; it cannot, realistically, be true. Moreover, the play on identity performance and the autofictional is evident from the very beginning when the poet introduces herself as a fictional character — "Rishta Auntie". Regardless of this deployment of a fictional character, it is easy to assume auto/biographical resonance. This happens because firstly, the poet deploys the first-person self-referential pronoun 'I' in the performance; and secondly, the poet's and protagonist's social and cultural identities overlap. On this overlap, d'souza-lodhi informs me in our interview:

People will see themselves in anything that I write. They will see me in everything that I write, because they want to... they want to know where I got the ideas from, and the only place that they think that I could get those ideas from is real life, which is partially true. And so they will try and figure out who each of these characters is that I've written about. And so no matter how hard I try, even if it's not autobiographical, people will be like, oh, that's about you, and you've used this as symbolism [...] And they'll make up this story because they want to make meaning behind it and simplify where I've got the idea from. And so for me, it's something that I've never wanted to write autobiographical work as me [...] The poetry for me is about taking a moment that's happened that might be true or it might be exaggerated, or it might be something that I've

heard about, or heard a conversation in passing, and I've misheard something, and then there's a feeling or a moment that I want to explore, and that's what poetry does for me. You know, my plays are also like that. They are taken from an element of truth from myself. But it's either exaggerated or pulled, you know? I don't smuggle mangoes. I don't have superpowers linked to mangoes. I'm not Rishta Aunty. I'm none of these things but maybe the personality of that character is a bit like me. (d'souza-lodhi 1:32:37–1:34:05)

The poet hints at the frustrations associated with the expectation and perception of authenticity that is inherent in spoken word. As the poet notes, the plot is fictional. The personality is somewhat based on her. In this case, the autofictional is instructive, as it allows for “an element of truth” from the poet's life to be “exaggerated” and fictionalised. d'souza-lodhi, even as she takes certain episodes or anecdotes from her life, refuses to perform auto/biography. She instead performs the self through the autofictional while working with the cultural and social identity markers that inform her lived experience. The poet's personal is obscured by the fictive, the exaggerated, the hyperbolic, and it is often difficult to gauge the boundaries between them. Rishta Aunty's mother has passed away. The poet's mother is alive and well. This information was only ascertained when I interviewed the poet. However, Rishta Aunty's exploration of sensuality and sexuality or queerness is informed by the poet's own. The framework of the autofictional here allows us to “recognise the author/performer's agency in deploying aspects of their own lived experience to authenticate a fictional story, facilitating a critical discussion thereof” (Mark 18). The poet stages her social and cultural identities without invoking auto/biography.

The performance of identity also becomes evident in the poet's interactions with the audience, where she positions herself as an expert on mangoes owing to her South Asian heritage. During the show, the poet converses with the audience at several junctures. In the beginning, the poet asks members of the audience about their relationship status and goes on to engage with an individual on his preferred way of eating mangoes, offering him a series of tools to choose from. When the audience member notes that he would rather use his hands, the poet responds with a witty rejoinder: that the man in question not only knows how to eat a mango the right way, but also, this implies that he is knowledgeable about female pleasure. This form of engagement with the audience is present throughout the show, making the audience an active participant in the performance. At the end of the performance, the poet unfolds a blanket, grabs a mango and sits down to eat it, while opening the floor to audience questions (fig. 15). As

various audience members ask questions about mangoes, the poet takes leisurely bites in between responding, truly savouring the moment. The performative, embodied act of eating the mango fulfils the promise set earlier in the show — that of instructing the audience on the correct way to eat a mango — through this demonstration. In the course of the performance, even as identity is performed explicitly, the poet strategically deploys a fictional narrative to perform it. This represents a second strategy of deploying the autofictional in spoken word theatre.



Figure 15 The poet eats a mango on stage at the end of the show. *How to Eat Mangoes*, 2022. (Screenshot)

2.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have analysed the performance of identity through auto/biography and the autofictional in spoken word theatre. I began by exploring the role of identity in spoken word theatre, engaging with critique of such performance, as well as examining constructions of identity performance. I then outlined the frameworks of auto/biography and the autofictional which inform my analysis. Through the examples of SuAndi's *The Story of M* and Lemn Sissay's *Something Dark*, I demonstrated that poets have problematised the performance of auto/biography from the very beginning in spoken word theatre. I proceeded to analyse contemporary spoken word theatre shows and manifestations of auto/biography, the autofictional and identity performance in their design. I examined four shows, namely Kevin P Gilday's *Spam Valley*, Adam Kammerling's *Seder*, Ellen Renton's *Within Sight* and afshan

d'souza-lodhi's *How to Eat Mangoes* to establish the breadth and scope of auto/biographical and the autofictional in present-day spoken word theatre. Each of the shows reveal poets' craft and aesthetics of performing identities as well as their strategies of negotiating or subverting audience expectations of authenticity through auto/biography, especially when it comes to work by minoritised subjects. While I have engaged with only six spoken word theatre shows in this chapter, with detailed analyses of four, there are many more productions which exhibit similar interplay of identity performance and auto/biography or the autofictional. The select examples studied here demonstrate that the performance of identity cannot be merely reduced to confessional forms of "identity politicking" in spoken word theatre. Both criticisms and expectations pertaining to (overt) performance of identity do not influence poets' textual and performance strategies in the art form. In fact, poets often critique or manipulate both criticisms and expectations to frustrate perceptions and preconceived notions. Spoken word poetry here not only works to perform identity, to manifest the personal in political; it also functions as a strategy to manipulate and problematise expectations, especially of authenticity, in spoken word theatre.

3. Intermediality in Spoken Word Theatre

Theatre functions as a hypermedium, and hence is inherently intermedial, establish Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt in *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance* (24). If theatre by its very constitution is intermedial, why must we focus our attention on intermediality's manifestation in spoken word theatre? The answer lies in spoken word theatre's divergence from traditional theatrical practices and formal features. While the art form situates itself in theatre, it does not necessarily always partake in theatre's spatial, logistical, economic or aesthetic affordances. As already established in the Introduction, the art form boasts a DIY ethos with often, though not always, one person at the helm of all conceptual, logistical, performative decisions and executions. This performance ethos arises from spoken word theatre's situatedness in poetry performance, and more broadly, in its dual heritage in literature and performing arts. As Julia Novak in *Live Poetry* writes: "While a theatrical performance is generally shaped collectively by the playwright, director and leading actors — with the director often holding a prominent role as decision maker — *live poetry will predominantly be performed by the writer* him- or herself, who is thus cast in a triple role of writer, actor and director of their own performance"³⁰ (59–60, emphasis original). The poet thus must devise strategies of both poetry and performance in his work. This situatedness of poetry performance and hence spoken word theatre within literary and performance practices demands an investigation of the latter's intermedial impulse using analytical frameworks from both disciplines. The current chapter takes on this project. By bringing together analytical lenses from literary, theatre and performance studies, the chapter proposes a comprehensive theoretical framework most-suited for examining the cross-arts potential of spoken word theatre. The productiveness of this interdisciplinary framework is substantiated by the analyses of three case studies undertaken in this chapter, namely, *Shadow Boxer* by Roger Robinson, *Shame* by John Berkavitch and *Dancing to Music You Hate*³¹ by Jasmine Gardosi, where the three shows not

³⁰ It is important to note here that in the case of spoken word theatre, poets have frequently worked with directors, dramaturgs, and other artists, since the inception of the art form. For instance, Arlette Kim George directed both the 2001 performance of Roger Robinson's *Shadow Boxer* and the 2002 performance of Francesca Beard's *Chinese Whispers* (Spoken Word Archive). Hence, poets do not necessarily adopt all three roles of poet, performer and director, as proposed by Novak. However, they always don the dual hats of poet and performer. In fact, this attribute of "poet as performer" is a requisite for a work to be considered spoken word theatre, as has been stipulated earlier.

³¹ The analysis of *Dancing to Music You Hate* is taken from an earlier publication.

only demonstrate an intermedial approach in their performance design but also in their poetic conceptualisation. All three shows benefit not only from an analysis employing intermedial frameworks from theatre and performance studies, but the embodied, visual, sonic attributes of the spoken word poetry involved can be studied much more incisively by undertaking an intermedial literary examination. But first, what is intermediality? Subsequently, how may we engage with it in the wake of the related concept of multimodality?

3.1 Multimodality and Intermediality

While intermediality is the focus of this chapter, it is vital to first unpack multimodality briefly in order to fully understand the mechanisms of cross arts aesthetics and intermediality in spoken word theatre. Richard Andrews, in his groundbreaking work on the multimodal dimensions of poetry, distinguishes between modes and media thus: “modes constitute the message and media the vehicle via which the message is delivered” (*Multimodality, Poetry and Poetics* 13). In analysing the workings of multimodality in written poetry, he considers the white space as generative, asserting that “the white space or ground of the poem partly contributes to its meaning: by defining the poetic line as a unit of meaning and presenting the ground of the poem as a visual white space that suggests other modes” (96). This exemplifies how modalities converge in print, where framing of the text, alignment, line breaks and white space inform the multimodal potential of a poem. Andrews further remarks that multimodality functions differently in poetry performance:

Regarding the *spoken* or *performed* poem, multimodality plays a different role. To begin with, the act of speaking, reciting or performing poetry is already, ostensibly, more multimodal. Speech/voice, gesture and physicality are (potentially) present. The experience is more obviously three-dimensional. (96, emphasis original)

The orality and physicality invoked in a performed poem, when merged with other modes of communication, demonstrate a much more complex multimodal potential, engaging, what Andrews classifies as, the visual, spatial, gestural and aural modes. The arrangement of these modes, I argue, then both constitute and are influenced by a poem’s intermedial constellation. Andrews’s work shapes our understanding of multimodality latent in the poetic genre, in both print and performance. For the study of spoken word theatre, it is also crucial to study the

multimodal attributes of theatre and performance, which Maria Grazia Sindoni, Janina Wildfeuer and Kay L. O'Halloran undertake:

Traditional performing arts, such as theater, dance, and opera, are multimodal meaning-making events, as they incorporate a wide range of semiotic resources, such as language, music, and body movements, for example, which are orchestrated to produce meanings in specific contexts and cultures. ("Mapping Multimodal Performance", 1)

The authors further emphasise on the potential of performing arts to convey messages both verbally and non-verbally, as is demonstrated by the plethora of forms listed above, which arises out of "the interplay between semiotic resources, such as speech, music, lighting, proxemics, kinesics, vestemics (the clothes and outfit that is worn)" (Sindoni et al. 3), and more. Each of these elements becomes apparent in varying degrees in theatre and performance. Further, each of these elements consists of different multimodal configurations which make the composite media product that is the event of performance, in whatever form it arises, already complexly multimodal in its design.

However, beyond revisiting these multimodal configurations of poetry and performance, it is important to zoom in on defining aspects of multimodality to understand their significance to intermediality and hence, this chapter. For this purpose, I must consult Lars Elleström briefly. Elleström in his 2021 essay "The Modalities of Media II", which is an elaboration of his seminal 2010 essay "The Modalities of Media", remarks that "[all] media are multimodal and intermedial" (4), further elaborating that "modalities are the indispensable cornerstones of all forms of media" (43). He identifies four key modalities that define all forms of media products, namely: the material modality, the spatiotemporal modality, the sensorial modality and the semiotic modality:

All media products appear as specific combinations of particular modes of the four media modalities. A certain media product must be realised through at least one material mode (as, say, a solid or non-solid object), at least one spatiotemporal mode (as three-dimensionally spatial and/or temporal), at least one sensorial mode (as visual, auditory or audiovisual) and at least one semiotic mode (as mainly iconic, indexical or symbolic). Hence, the four media modalities form an indispensable skeleton upon which all media products are built. (46)

To explain these four modalities by way of an example, I shall take up the case of a live poetry performance. As Richard Andrews proclaims about the multimodal arrangements of a poetry performance: “[a] poet or reader may use gesture, modulation of voice, expressiveness (including facial expression), movement, sound/music to ‘deliver’ the poem. The very physical presence of the poet him/herself brings resonance” (100). The presence of these different modalities in poetry performance, then, creates fertile ground for understanding Elleström’s classification of modalities.

Defining material modality, Elleström observes that “[all] media products are material, or more broadly physical, which makes them perceptible and hence accessible to the perceiver’s mind in various ways” (47). Further, the material properties of media products can be differentiated based on their state such that a media product can be solid or in the form of liquid, gas or plasma (47). In a live spoken word performance, the poetic text is both conveyed through sound waves generated by vocal cords when the poet recites the poem and through bodily gestures. This, then, demonstrates the material modality of a live poetry performance. Spatiotemporal modality comprises the attributes of “width, height, depth and time”, where media products “must have at least one and may have up to four spatiotemporal modes” (48). A poem performed verbally has a duration, that is a beginning and end in time and hence, a temporal facet. Moreover, because of the bodily presence of a performer (and in fact, co-presence with the audience) and the wider context of space, where a performance takes place in a physical location, live spoken word poetry also has a spatial dimension, including both the body of a performer and the broader *mise-en-scène* of performance. Furthermore, all media products “must be perceived by one or more of our senses to reach the mind and trigger semiosis. Media products simply do not exist unless they are grasped by the senses” (49). This illustrates the category of sensorial modality. While spoken word poetry is mostly concerned with the sonic and the visual, that is, hearing and seeing, through oral and bodily communication, other faculties such as feeling, tasting and smelling may also be activated in the course of poetry performance. For instance, when a poet reaches out to an audience member or offers them a prop or artefact during a performance, the moment may invoke the mode of “feeling”, as Elleström calls it. On the other hand, if a poet offers audience members something to eat, as is the case with Rose Condo offering sandwiches to audience members in *How to Starve an Artist*, the modes of both tasting and feeling will be stimulated. Materiality, spatiotemporality and the sensorial constitute the presemiotic modalities.

The fourth modality then is the semiotic modality. As Elleström explains, all presemiotic modalities are meaningless unless “the perceiver’s mind comprehends them as signs” (50). Thus, unless there is a receiver perceiving the material, spatiotemporal and sensorial modalities, the communicative function does not happen, and meaning is not conveyed. Here, for a live spoken word performance, the audience is the perceiver, and without an audience, the performance does not happen. This reminds us of the opening lines of Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space*: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (9). The semiotic modality hence involves “the endeavours of an interpreting, meaning-seeking mind” (Elleström 50). These four media modalities converge to form the media product, which in our case is a live poetry performance.

Spoken word theatre consists of several media products, or rather, art forms. It involves spoken word poetry, indeed, but it also involves practices such as storytelling, music, singing, movement and in complex productions, animation, projection, digital technologies and more. In Elleström’s words, “intermediality is a result of constructed media borders being trespassed” (66), which in the case of spoken word theatre are the boundaries of different art forms involved. Interestingly, Elleström describes theatre “as a profoundly multimodal qualified medium that is susceptible to intermedial analysis” but considers Chapple and Kattenbelt’s contention of theatre being a hypermedium an “overstatement” (77). Here, I diverge from Elleström and align myself with Chapple and Kattenbelt’s proposition. Instead of treating the composite art forms as a configuration of different modalities that come together to form a single media product that is theatre, I consider and analyse various art forms and their medial borders as separate media products, to then investigate their confluence in the creation of a spoken word show. To achieve this, I implement dual frameworks of intermediality, taken from literary as well as theatre and performance studies, as a nod to the dual heritages of the art form. This framework is discussed below.

3.2 Frameworks of Intermediality

Before engaging with the theoretical models of intermediality that inform this chapter, it is imperative to expand upon the concept of “intermediality” and the very definition of “medium”, as I did earlier for the case of “mode” and “multimodality”. The roots of the term “medium” can be traced back to “the term ‘medius’”, which “in Latin means ‘middle’ and ‘intermediate’”

(6), observes Gabriele Rippl. The 9th edition of the *Dictionary of Media and Communication Studies* defines “medium” as the “physical or technical means of converting a communication message into a signal capable of being transmitted along a given channel” (184). Additionally, medium, “as used in literary and intermediality studies”, writes Werner Wolf, drawing partly on Marie-Laure Ryan,

is a conventionally and culturally distinct means of communication, specified not only by particular technical or institutional channels (or one channel) but primarily by the use of one or more semiotic systems in the public transmission of contents that include, but are not restricted to, referential ‘messages’” (“Relevance of Mediality” 130).

Wolf expands upon this by stating that comprehending these messages “not only in terms of referential contents but also in terms of other kinds of contents such as expressive contents is necessary in order to include, for instance, music into the definition of medium” (131). In summary, “medium” can thus be conceived not only as a channel of transmission incorporating multiple sign systems to transfer messages between producer(s) and receiver(s), but multiple forms of content that activate meaning making.

Drawing on these understandings of “medium”, scholars across disciplines have arrived at multiple, oft-contending definitions of “intermediality”. In literary studies, Irina O. Rajewsky applies intermediality firstly as a “a generic term for all those phenomena that (as indicated by the prefix *inter*) in some way take place *between* media” (46, emphasis original), further elaborating that these phenomena deal with the “crossing of borders between media” (46). Wolf, in a similar vein, defines intermediality as “any transgression of boundaries between what is conventionally perceived as distinct media of communication” (“Literature and Music” 460). In etymological terms, as was previously discussed, intermediality denotes the crossing of borders between media products. This takes us back to Elleström’s claim that “intermediality is a result of constructed media borders being trespassed” (66). These media products demonstrate multimodal configurations, that is, they are situated in four modalities and are comprised of multiple modes, as has been discussed above. Hence, Elleström’s remark that “intermediality is about the relationship between media having a multitude of vital traits, or modes” (41) is of importance in this chapter. Together, Rajewsky’s and Wolf’s frameworks of intermediality serve as the guiding principle for the textual and conceptual analysis of case studies in this chapter.

Within Rajewsky's and Wolf's frameworks of intermediality, I am particularly interested in specific configurations that more typically apply to spoken word theatre. Rajewsky's conception of intermediality as "media combination" (51) is of significance here, which, as she explains, "is determined by the medial constellation constituting a given media product, which is to say the result or the very process of combining at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation" (52). The confluence of these media products, or art forms, as in the case of spoken word theatre, is often orchestrated such that no single art form is "privileged" in the meaning making process. Rather, it is the final combination that generates all meaning. Poet Jasmine Gardosi, whose show *Dancing to Music You Hate* is discussed as one of the case studies in this chapter, notes in our interview that they prefer their poetry to be inseparable from the art form they experiment with. This contention helps us understand how different art forms are potentially employed by poets in spoken word theatre. Further, Rajewsky postulates that "the combination of different medial forms of articulation may lead to the formation of new, independent art or media genres, a formation wherein the genre's plurimedial foundation becomes its specificity" (52). Pluri- or multimedial constellations are categorised under "intracompositional intermediality" in Wolf's intermedial model ("Literature and Music" 462), which "applies whenever two or more media with their typical or conventional signifiers are overtly present in a given semiotic entity in at least one instance" (463). In Wolf's conceptualisation of plurimediality, "the individual or original media of a plurimedial mixture or hybrid appear to belong to heterogeneous semiotic systems" (463), implying that the constituent media and therefore the workings of intermediality are made apparent on the composite work's surface. This is a vital concept to remember for our case of spoken word theatre, where the constituent art forms are realised only in the final production or staging of a show.

Within the framework of theatre studies, conceptions of intermediality have taken a distinctive turn towards the digital. Having established theatre as a hypermedium, Chapple and Kattenbelt model intermediality as the point of interaction between performer and audience, composite art forms and digital technologies. Intermediality, they write:

provides a space where the art forms of theatre, opera and dance meet, interact and integrate with the media of cinema, television, video and the new technologies; creating profusions of texts, inter-texts, inter-media and spaces in-between. It is in the intersections and the spaces in-between the intersections that we locate intermediality. Our model [...] locates intermediality at a meeting

point in-between the performers, the observers, and the confluence of media involved in a performance at a particular moment in time, with theatre providing the staging space of intermediality. (24)

With the specificity of digital technology adding a layer of material, spatiotemporal, sensorial and semiotic complexity to intermedial constellations in theatre, the definition of intermediality itself becomes more exclusive. Kattenbelt limits the scope of the term, divorcing it from the concepts of multimodality and transmediality in both “Intermediality in Theatre and Performance” (2008) and his collaborative essay with Aneta Mancewicz “Intermediality in Performance” (2023), so as to frame intermediality in terms of “media reinforcing each other in their modalities, as a result of which meaningful frictions, contrasts, and differences might arise” (Kattenbelt and Mancewicz 383). Spoken word theatre indeed is a product of different media products situated in varying modal configurations that meet and merge in frictions, parallels, differences, affinities. To illustrate the varying frameworks of intermediality and hence, configurations of multimodality, that will be discussed in this chapter, I offer an example. Suppose a spoken word theatre show is situated in poetry performance, song, (electronic) music, dance, and animation, we recognise that the show has an intermedial concept, by way of merging of the different art forms listed above, but also through the involvement of digital technologies via projection and sound design. These then reflect both Rajewsky’s as well as Chapple and Kattenbelt’s contentions about intermediality. Furthermore, when we look closely at the multimodal framework of each media product or art form, we also observe the similarities and differences in their configurations. For instance, while poetry performance and song has similar configurations in terms of material, spatiotemporal (in that, both do not have an explicit spatial aspect but both have temporal attributes) and sensorial modalities, they may show some variance in their semiotic modality, in that, each may be perceived differently by the receiver, in this case the audience. Hence, both media products share similarities and differences in modal configurations. In the midst of these similarities and differences of media products, in their frictions and overlaps as they merge in a spoken word show, lies the scope of intermediality. In the overall multimodal constellation of a spoken word show where various art forms meet and converge, the workings of intermediality are revealed.

Each of the conceptualisations discussed above in this section of intermediality has affordances that will be brought up in my analyses to illuminate specific medial constellations in spoken word theatre. Therefore, I employ specific strands from Elleström’s, Rajewsky’s, Wolf’s and Chapple and Kattenbelt’s models based on their applicability to the different case

studies in this chapter. I look at both inter– and cross-sections of art forms and their interaction with digital technologies to clarify the multifaceted workings of intermediality in spoken word theatre. The analyses undertaken below, of Roger Robinson’s *Shadow Boxer*, John Berkavitch’s *Shame*, and Jasmine Gardosi’s *Dancing to Music You Hate* demonstrate the intricacies of an intermedial design in the art form.

3.3 Examining Intermediality in Spoken Word Theatre

Since its early manifestations, spoken word theatre combined various art forms within its artistic framework. In the early 1990s, poet and emcee Jonzi D conceptualised a form of spoken word theatre that combined hip hop movement with spoken word poetry in a theatrical design, which he popularised as hip-hop theatre (Daniel Banks 1), and which he first realised in the context of spoken word theatre through his performance of *Aeroplane Man* (1999). A similar confluence of dance and verse on the theatrical stage had already emerged in 1970s through Ntozake Shange’s conception of choreopoetry (see also, Chapter 1). However, in the instances of poet-led hip hop theatre, the poet’s adoption of the role of the performer, where the poet themselves take centre stage, became an intrinsic characteristic in the merging of dance and poetry, which was not always the case for choreopoetry. On the other hand, Roger Robinson combined movement with poetry, storytelling and puppetry (object theatre) in *Shadow Boxer* (2000), which was promoted as a form of visual theatre during its run. These early instances are examples of medial combination as conceived by Rajewsky in her framework. Over time, spoken word theatre adopted complex intermedial formulations adhering to both Rajewsky’s and Kattenbelt’s concepts of intermediality. The next decades saw Kae Tempest’s collaborations with live bands in *Brand New Ancients* (2012) and *Let Them Eat Chaos* (2016); Hannah Silva’s sound experimentations using a loop station and other sound technologies in *Total Man* (2014); John Berkavitch’s innovative intermedial approach to hip hop theatre in *Shame* (2013–15), combining spoken word poetry, storytelling, dance and movement, illustration, and music; and Jasmine Gardosi’s genre-blurring practice employing spoken word poetry, live music and beatboxing, in a form similar to gig theatre, in *Dancing to Music You Hate* (2021–25), to name but a few examples. For the aims of this chapter, therefore, it is fruitful to investigate the innovative intermedial connections between artforms, between modes, and between interfaces and material constituents of performance. In this section, therefore, I undertake three case studies that explore the workings of the various manifestations of intermediality that have been discussed thus far in this chapter. Roger Robinson’s experimentations with poetry performance,

storytelling, movement and object theatre, John Berkavitch's work with spoken word poetry, hip hop, illustration, digital technologies and music, and Jasmine Gardosi's blending of spoken word poetry, live music and beatboxing, are all informed by strategies that complicate verbal, sonic and visual generic boundaries, and play with the similarities and differences of medial constellations. They demonstrate explicitly not only the "in-between" attribute of intermediality, but also the similarities and differences of modal configurations of media products (art forms) that make intermedial relations possible, and which Robin Nelson calls the "both-and" approach of intermediality in the "Prospective Mapping" section of "Introduction: Prospective Mapping and Network of Terms", in the edited volume *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (15). I begin my examination with Roger Robinson's show below.

3.3.1 Roger Robinson's *Shadow Boxer*

Roger Robinson's *Shadow Boxer*, a one-man show tracing the poet's life journey from Trinidad to England, premiered at Battersea Arts Centre as part of The British Festival of Visual Theatre on October 6, 2000. The show, presented by Apples & Snakes, was promoted as an "astonishing new piece of theatre which uses storytelling and movement against a startling backdrop of Kung Fu shadow-puppetry" (Spoken Word Archive). After its first run, London Metro lauded the show as "visual theatre of the most inventive and imaginative kind" (Spoken Word Archive, see also figure 2 in Chapter 1). In retrospect, the show has been acknowledged as an early example of spoken word theatre, including by Apples & Snakes' archivist Russell Thompson ("2,500 Poets and Counting"). Roger Robinson FRSL is a British poet, musician and performer who lives between England and Trinidad. Winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize (2020) and the Ondaatje Prize (2020), Robinson works with music, storytelling, and dub poetry, a poetic form situated within the framework of the intermedial itself.

As an early instance of spoken word theatre, *Shadow Boxer*, in its confluence of movement, shadow puppetry and object theatre, poetry performance and the Trinidadian storytelling style³² inspired a new practice, situated between poetry performance and alternative theatre. The form of spoken word theatre, in its inherent melding of artforms and intermedial

³² When I asked about specific cultural influences in my interview with him, Robinson remarked how the Trinidadian way of storytelling feeds into his work: "It's a big oral storytelling tradition in Trinidad in general. And so that definitely feeds into it. That sense of address and that sense of kind of a... Instead of telling you the story, telling you everything around the story, you know?" (20:28-20:43), a characteristic also evident in the performance of *Shadow Boxer*.

constellation, effortlessly conveys the theme of home and belonging and the poet-performer's in-between existence between Trinidad and England. The archival video recording I analyse here has been taken from Apples and Snakes' Spoken Word Archive, the year of performance is presumed to be 2001. The Spoken Word Archive entry for the video recording of *Shadow Boxer* notes: "Mini-DV tape of Shadow Boxer show at BAC. Not dated, but presumed to be 2001 rather than 2000 performance" ("Video Recording of Shadow Boxer"). In our interview, while talking about the scope of memorising and improvising the show, Robinson remarks upon the existence of this archival video that *Shadow Boxer* "never got a long enough run for me to kind of tweak it, to be honest with you. So, it's kind of wild that they have a recording of it" (1:00:20–1:00:28). The video recording itself is quite a fascinating artefact. The first three minutes of the recording are video footages of paintings the context for which are missing, and which probably have nothing to do with the show. The footage of the show begins after this with Robinson already on stage, engaging with the audience. Most possibly, the person handling the camera had hit a pause button between the two events, which is why the start of the show seems rather abrupt, but this is merely a conjecture.

The performance proper begins with Robinson setting the stage by interacting with the audience, chatting about the weather and checking in with those attending in an emcee-like fashion, prompting the audience to be more involved with the performance. Robinson, in his performance, dispels the fourth wall, resulting in an engaged spectatorship. The conversation smoothly transitions into the opening line of "so where are you from?" (1:03:37) to activate the theme of diasporic belonging that runs through the show. The transition between the paratext and the performance proper is seamless. On listening to the studio recorded version of *Shadow Boxer* (2001), it becomes evident that the question "Where are you from?" serves as the scripted starting point of the performance. 'Where are you from?', 'Where are you really from?', 'And how did you come here?' are questions the poet addresses in the performance. The premise for the question is set by the acknowledgement of a difference in accent — the poet speaks English with a Trinidadian inflection. This leads to the poet-performer's narration of his childhood in Trinidad, through both storytelling and poetry. In describing Trinidad, Robinson begins by drawing a map in the air, gesturing to where Trinidad would be in relation to North America and South America. This play with an absent signifier, by gesturing in the air, is used to denote and substitute the material specificity of a map (see fig. 16).



Figure 16 Robinson draws a map in the air. *Shadow Boxer*, 2001. (Screenshot)

The geographical description of Trinidad soon shifts to a nostalgic verse relay:

Trinidad /
 is the last lost marble /
 it's the green cat's eye /
 that I win /
 from the two bulging pockets of my school friend Junior
 [...]
 Trinidad /
 is the bead of sticky mango juice /
 running down my naked chest /
 and it's the Indian girl /
 who lives next door /
 who wears the same two dresses all year round
 [...]
 Trinidad is the first drop /
 of warm rain in the wet season /
 and all the children strip off /
 down to their underwear /

and a bar of soap /

for a rain bath

[...]

It's where I am, where I was, and where I am going /

It's the knot in my throat when I had to leave (04:10–06:24)

The free verse pattern of the poem intensifies the sentimentality of the performance. As Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller suggest in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*: “The very definition of diaspora depends on attachments to a former home and, typically, on a fantasy of return” (3). Robinson’s diasporic verse affects this sense of attachment not only through the verbal text but also strategic pauses, breaks, and instances of stressed enunciation. The irregular pauses, marked here by line breaks in the extract, draw attention to certain words or phrases; the break after “Trinidad” (and the prolonged delivery of “Trinidad” itself) emphasises its importance to the story and encourages audience members to pay attention and practice attuned listening, the pause after “where I am going”, on the other hand, builds anticipation for what is to come next. The audio text is also accompanied by a hand gesture demonstrating a knot, which heightens the anticipation (see fig. 17).



Figure 17 Robinson gestures a “knot” in the air. *Shadow Boxer*, 2001. (Screenshot)

In the course of the performance, the explicit functionality of gestures and movement is further demonstrated through the deployment of shadow puppetry and object theatre. Object

theatre “describes a form of puppetry that utilises found, or *real*, objects in puppeteering, to create anthropomorphic characters or to symbolise figures, places, landscapes or metaphorical ideas” (Allen 6, emphasis original). A quarter into the show, Robinson recounts his fondness for Kung Fu growing up, detailing the account of his first encounter with martial arts. This sets the stage for engagement with shadow puppetry and object theatre. As the poet informs the audience, Robinson’s teacher took him to watch a Kung Fu movie at the age of 8. The movie first confused and then mesmerised him. When the poet looked to his teacher to explain the context, he found his teacher engrossed in the action instead, shadow boxing at his seat. This is the first time the title of the show is referenced in the performance text. Interestingly, while narrating this anecdote, Robinson goes to the first row of the audience and sits amidst them to demonstrate the movie-going experience³³. The poet continues, revisiting his memories of “playing Kung Fu” with his younger cousins. At this moment, the poet sits down on the stage, removes his shoes, picks one and attaches props to them. They appear to be two pieces of paper rolled into cylinders and put on the shoe to give the appearance of eyes and transform the shoe into a makeshift face. Robinson gets up, connects the back of the shoe to the collar of the shirt he had previously on, putting his hand through one of the sleeves to facilitate movement and gestures for this improvised puppet character. While the poet carries on these actions, he narrates the predictable plot of every Kung Fu movie he had ever watched — a young enthusiastic student looking for a “teacher of mythical proportions” (0:20:44–0:20:46). In the specific story he narrates, this mythical teacher is called Master Chen and is embodied by his makeshift puppet (see fig. 18 and 19). As Robinson relays the plot of the movie to audience members, his vocal register shifts to emulate that of an omnipresent narrator — a moderate pitch, a drop in pace and volume, a whisper-like manner is affected as the verse switches to the form of storytelling:

Once upon a time in a land far away /
 lived a young man named Wan Yu /
 Wan Yu wanted to learn ancient secrets of Kung Fu /
 He told his mother, his father and his two brothers /
 That he was going to look for Old Master Chen (0:21:12–0:21:37)

³³ He possibly sits lightly or hovers over the lap of a male audience member, for comedic effect, but it is difficult to gauge the exact details of the moment, since the camera is stationed several rows behind at an inconvenient angle.



Figure 18 Robinson's use of a shoe and shirt to represent the mythical Master Chen. *Shadow Boxer*, 2001. (Screenshot)



Figure 19 The combination of object theatre and movement in the performance. *Shadow Boxer*, 2001. (Screenshot)

A combination of shirt and sneaker when manipulated in shape and form to portray Master Chen becomes an act of object theatre. “In puppet-based object theatre”, writes Richard Allen,

“the reality of what the object *is* (for example a spoon, a roll of tape, a fire extinguisher) is transformed into a representation of something else (a farmer, a village, a dragon)” (6, emphasis original). This transformation, where “the object plays a part as an extension of the puppeteer” (6), leads to a split in characters embodied by Robinson. On one hand, he voices the narrator figure, on the other, through movement and gestures, he animates the makeshift puppet representing the mystical figure of Master Chen. To deploy this effectively, Robinson worked with a puppeteer to study puppetry during the making of the show, as he details in our interview:

The puppetry institute [Puppet Centre] was actually in Battersea Arts Centre. So, they allowed me to go in and just play with puppets and understand the history of puppetry. Because that's one of the things I wanted to learn, the history of puppetry. I performed pretty good, but I really didn't know puppetry at all, and I worked with a puppeteer... (Robinson 1:01:44–1:02:01)

Once the skit involving the narration of a typical Kung Fu film plot is over, the poet returns to his customary oratory style with a Trinidadian inflection. The split in the performance character is thus also resolved. For segments employing object theatre, there is a split in the body of the performer, as noted earlier, who embodies both the character and puppet. Further, the split also implies a shift in the intermedial constellation of performance, where puppetry adds another multimodal semiotic layer to the intersecting art forms. It is important to note here that meaning making in this segment is only possible through both puppetry and narration by the poet. If either of these elements, that is, audiotext or object theatre, are removed, discerning the context and meaning can become challenging.

Acts of audience engagement are also of importance here. During a later anecdote about joining Karate classes, Robinson declares: “I need some help here!” (*Shadow Boxer* 0:45:17) and pulls four audience members from the front row on stage, simultaneously also apologising to those picked for the activity, as an audience member in the back exclaims: “Uh oh!”. The poet eventually makes the four audience members shadow box to emulate a particular day of fighting at the Karate class he attended. This engaged performance strategy thus makes audience members active participants of the show’s intermedial design.

Storytelling in *Shadow Boxer*, on the other hand, oscillates between sentimentality and irony. Robinson’s fond, idyllic evocation of Trinidad, laced with notes of nostalgia and marked by a higher pitch and tone, is often sharply disrupted by satire or dry humour. The humour both masterfully attempts to conceal and highlight the pathos of the narrative. Incidents of crime,

fighting, failed robberies and corporal punishment (or “licks” as it is called in Trinidad) in early childhood are interspersed into the tale of Robinson’s journey from Trinidad to England. The poet’s move to England was thus arranged by his parents to keep him out of trouble, which he always seemed to find back home in Trinidad. However, irrespective of the problems that plagued the poet’s younger days in Trinidad, and that are invoked in the course of the performance, the text consistently echoes a yearning to return. Trinidad continues to remain home, and all objects of association take the poet back to the “good old days”. Despite its prospects of a calmer life, England fails to generate a sense of belonging. The reality of racialised othering is thinly masked in the question: “Where are you really from?”. The show ends on a cyclical note, reminiscent of Trinidad’s cyclical manner of storytelling. The poet ends with the verse he began, which also invokes the diasporic yearning to return:

That’s how I got here /
But I still remember /
Trinidad
[...]
It’s where I was, where I am, and where I’m going /
It’s the knot in my throat when I had to leave (1:00:03–1:00:36)

The phrase “knot in my throat” takes us back to the surge of emotions and sentimentality provoked by reminiscence of home and belonging. With its use of minimal props and spatial setup (a chair, a sneaker, a shirt), recorded music, and impeccable theatrical skills and movement across the stage, *Shadow Boxer* innovates a new hybrid “home” for poetry in/as performance, bringing artforms into a conversation with each other, in the form of spoken word theatre.

In view of the limitations of the archival recording of the show, a note on remediation is of significance here. Due to the filming angle, poor quality and unstable and shaky handling of the camera, subtleties of performance are often lost in the video. Moreover, the final thirteen minutes of the show are lost to the viewers of the archival video, as the camera is turned upwards to face the ceiling. The audiotext is present, body communication is not. While this frustrates a close engagement with the show’s intermedial design, demonstrating the limits and challenges of remediation, it also opens up alternate modes of engaging with performance. When the primacy of visuality is removed, one is forced to think of performance beyond the distinctions of verbal and visual. Ultimately, parts of the show, even in its remediation, remain ephemeral

in their representation, due to moments lost in the process of recording. These lost moments also complicate the analysis of intermedial relations at play in the performance of the show.

3.3.2 John Berkavitch's *Shame*

John Berkavitch's *Shame* is an hour-long spoken word show where the poet, in collaboration with a troupe of break-dancers, “explores the feeling of shame through a combination of narrative spoken-word, hip-hop and contemporary dance, illustration, animation and music”, as stated on the poet's website (“Shame”). The show premiered in 2013 and went on tour nationally and internationally between 2013 and 2015 with 88 performances in total. It incorporates original music by Jamie Woon and Royce Wood Junior, illustrations by Leigh Drummond, projection mapping by Liam d'Authreau and Tony Coleman, choreography by Mickael Riviere and movement direction by Katie Pearson. The show was directed by Leo Kay, Jonzi D, Lemn Sissay and Yaël Shavit. John Berkavitch is the stage name for Owen Craven-Griffiths. A former UK slam champion, poet, rapper, hip hop dancer, beatboxer, digital artist and theatre-maker, he was previously the Producer for the Midlands at Apples and Snakes. Having dabbled in multiple art forms over the course of his career, intermediality is a recurrent feature of his work, as he states in an interview with Ian Abbott:

I started as a graffiti artist, so everything came from graffiti. I started painting when I was about 12, started rapping at 15, I was about 17 when I started breaking and collecting records...and I beat boxed for a long time. The rapping became spoken word stuff [...] I found somewhere that you could do the same lyrics without a beat and everyone listened. Then I got a bit more serious in breaking and then I started to look for ways to combine the different things to make one thing (Hip Hop Dance Almanac).

In this chapter, I analyse the archival video of a July 2015 performance of *Shame* at 'Blahblablah', Bristol Old Vic's critically acclaimed monthly spoken-word event. The filmed version was uploaded to YouTube on 3 June 2016 by its videographer Darren Paul Johnson. *Shame* is an autobiographical performance that ties together five anecdotal stories revolving around the poet's experiences of growing up working class, living with hand-me-downs, and suffering loss, grief, and eponymously, shame. As Berkavitch details in his interview with Abbott: “The idea was to make five stories about the worst things I've ever done, with the real aim to get the audience — when they leave the show — to sit down with a friend and talk about

the worst thing they've ever done" (Hip Hop Dance Almanac), though ultimately, one of the stories were removed while the other four remained. The four anecdotes on shame revolve mostly around his younger self: his girlfriend from teen years whom he reconnected with seven years later; his friend Jack, also from teen years, whom he abandoned in a clash with a "group of lads" back during his graffiti days; and his six siblings, especially his adopted sister, whom he resented for getting "special treatment" as a child.

In the archival video, the performance proper begins with a loud instrumental riff, the scene opens with the poet performing push ups and counting along, verbalising "100" (*Shame* 0:00:40) to suggest we caught him mid-action. He then proceeds to interact with the audience, greeting and welcoming them, introducing himself, and contextualising the premise of the show. In this show too, the fourth wall is absent. The introduction is framed as a conversation between the poet and the audience, where the poet first instructs audience members to raise their hands and then proceeds: "Put your hand down if there's nothing in the world that you've ever done that you're ashamed of" (0:02:49–0:02:53). Instantly, Berkavitch is interrupted by a co-performer appearing on stage and loudly tapping an umbrella in an aggressive gesture that paradoxically elicits laughter from the audience. The interrupting performer is joined by two more, and the poet dismisses them as "just my imagination" (0:03:08), which provokes more laughter. The group of three, supposed to represent internal devils, proceeds to intimidate the poet, attacking him using intense, forceful movement approximating an assault, aggressive gestures, and umbrellas as props (fig. 20). They push the poet around, slap and threaten him, bully him. Silence ensues, the mood shifts, tension arises. The situation is no longer comical. No one is laughing. The instrumental riff returns, the lighting changes to intersecting streaks of pink and red (fig. 21), followed by Berkavitch exclaiming: "It's six months after my 25th birthday / and I awake with a pain in my teeth that you won't believe" (0:04:24–0:04:30), setting the stage for the first anecdote. The violence that precedes the narration suggests that the cause might be vicious. The tension, however, is quickly dissipated when Berkavitch informs the audience that the pain is induced by wisdom teeth. The setting of the first anecdote is the poet's mother's home, which is depicted through digital illustrations in the background.



Figure 20 Berkavitch 'attacked' by inner demons with umbrellas. *Shame*, 2015. (Screenshot)



Figure 21 Stage lighting changes during the performance. *Shame*, 2015. (Screenshot)

Emphasising the contributions of the dancers and other artists involved in the show, Berkavitch informs me in our 2025 interview:

So, I worked with 4 different directors — Jonzi D, Lemn Sissay, Leo Kay, Yael Shavit. They each took charge of one story. And then I had a choreographer, [Mickael] Marso Riviere. Marso stitched the stories together. So... there was lots happening. A lot of it came down to the actual dancers. So, the dancers in the show helped develop a lot of the choreography. We did a process where, because

it's about my life, they came and lived with my mum through the whole rehearsal period. So, they all stayed at my mum's house, which is around the corner from me. In the evenings, she'd get out photo albums and stuff, and show them: Oh, this is what he was like when he was five. So, they got a sense of who that character was from a different point of view, as opposed to me just telling them. (Berkavitch 00:33:41–00:34:33)

These different perspectives and collaborations are reflected in the way the anecdotes are framed and performed throughout *Shame*; each anecdote demonstrates a different rhythm and flow, the tempo fluctuates, the body communication and movement differ. Sketches depicting the setting of each anecdote are projected against the backdrop, sometimes also in an animated form, to indicate each anecdote's location. Over the course of the performance, the show's setting and subsequently, the illustrations projected on the background, oscillate between concrete locations such as the poet's mother's kitchen (fig. 22), their living room, the café he works at, and his father's car, to more abstract constellations such as an ex-lover's dream. This spatiotemporal switch between different locations and time periods with the use of illustrations is made possible through projection mapping technologies, which

is a technique that uses specialized software to map digital content onto physical objects or surfaces. In live performances and theater, projection mapping has revolutionized stage design by creating immersive and visually stunning environments [...] By seamlessly blending animated elements with real-world settings, projection mapping transports audiences to fantastical worlds and enhances the overall theatrical experience. ("Exploring Animation's Impact")

Projection mapping plays a vital role in *Shame* and significantly informs the narrative progression of the show. The illustrations are projected not only on the backwalls and onto the stage, but also on performers and the objects they use, namely umbrellas. Yellow umbrellas are the only physical objects in the show and is a recurring motif. It has both a metaphorical and practical use within the spatial design of the performance. Expanding on its dual purpose of assisting the dancers in their portrayal of the devil and aiding the spatial design of the show, Berkavitch tells Abbott: "I could give [the dancers] umbrellas for pitchforks and an open umbrella has a veiny structure which is kinda demonic. An umbrella is a great tool for building stuff because it's a circle and it's a line. With [...] the umbrellas, it's a surface to project onto" (Hip Hop Dance Almanac). Hence, the umbrellas carry a layered significance in the performance.



Figure 22 Berkavitch's mother's home illustrated in the backdrop. *Shame*, 2015. (Screenshot)

The sensorial and semiotic design of the show is framed not only by the deployment of digital technologies, but by corporeality as well. The accompanying dancers not only act as background agents enhancing the performance through movement, but also act as live props in the show, contorting their bodies to depict objects such as sofas, tables, a coffee machine (fig. 23), a bicycle (fig. 24), and more. As such, the performers' bodily presence facilitates worldbuilding, pushing the audience's imagination through their experimentation with material, sensorial, spatiotemporal and semiotic modalities within the intermedial framework of spoken word poetry, storytelling, hip hop, movement, illustration and projection.



Figure 23 Dancers contort their bodies to depict a coffee machine. *Shame*, 2015. (Screenshot)



Figure 24 Dancers use an umbrella to depict a bicycle. *Shame*, 2015. (Screenshot)

The second anecdote is of particular interest in my analysis. In this specific story, the setting is the café where Berkavitch works at. The dancers contort their bodies and vocalise sounds to depict a coffee machine. Berkavitch ‘takes orders’ from audience members in an act of engagement. He chats with individuals in a manner emulating the small talk usually

undertaken by a barista with a customer while preparing a takeaway coffee order. Several humorous moments are evoked when the dancers make silly noises mimicking a (sometimes faltering) coffee machines. Here, the lighting switches to greenish and yellow hues. Behind the performers, a café menu is projected on the screen. Berkavitch, while asking one of the ‘customers’ (audience members) their suggestions on a Christmas gift for his sister, jokes: “Obviously take your time! No one else needs serving” (0:14:07–0:14:10), when the audience member fails to respond promptly. The audience reacts with raucous laughter. Next, asking another audience member about their Christmas shopping, the poet offers further contextual details about his sister:

She's like a wannabe con artist /
Always trying to do people out of their money /
Always running scams /
I remember when I was 14 /
she used to get me to type up these fake competition letters /
I mean, I'd type them up on my mum's BBC computer /
and we'd letter a set winner across the front with a red felt pen /
and post them out to all our neighbours saying they won 250 quid /
they've just got to send £25 to our address and they can claim their prize /
And apparently, I'll get £5 from everyone that came back /
Now, I don't know if she ever made any money from it /
but I know that I definitely never did /
She's always been, um, troubled /
Do you know what I mean? /
And the worst part of it is /
I'm not even sure she's going to be there on Christmas (0:15:20–0:15:57)

The delivery is conversational, employing irregular rhymes indicated through pauses. The poet performs the motions of making coffee throughout the excerpt. The dancers continue to embody the movements of a coffee machine. The movements enhance the way the story is received. At one point, the poet lifts one of the dancers and moves others around to portray the motion of making a cappuccino – from grind to drip. The strategies of movement and artistic design classes the show within the remit of spoken word hip hop theatre. Jonzi D, Mickael Riviere, Katie Pearson and the changing troupe of dancers’ involvement in *Shame* demonstrates the importance of dance to the project of meaning-making in the show. Hip hop theatre involves

blending of verse and dance in such a way that they become intrinsic to each other. In *Shame*, hip hop further becomes a medium that combines with poetry, music, storytelling and animation to communicate the intermedial narrative. Maria Marcsek-Fuchs, in “Literature and Dance: Intermedial Encounters”, observes that “[t]he transposition of a work of literature into dance is necessarily a double transposition: once from verbal text to movement and once from literary genre to the medial structuring of dance” (568). In Berkavitch’s show, dance and movement become narrative tools that transmit messages through the visual sensorial mode, and together, dance, music, poetry, illustration, along with digital technologies constitute intermedial relations that inform the performance. These art forms not only contribute to the meaning-making process, but they also influence the reception of the show. Audiences encounter the plot through various multimodal constellations activated in the performance, which intensify the emotional resonance of each anecdote. Members of the audience make sense of the show not only by perceiving the poet’s verbal and body communication, but also illustrations projected in the backdrop, changing light design, other artists’ intervention, dance and body contortions, music and other sonic additions. Each of these elements require the audience to engage with several modes of communication, and also to practice attuned viewing and listening. This complex design is sharply contrasted by the final segments of each anecdote, when the background screen whites out, dance, music, illustration and other art forms are momentarily paused, and Berkavitch conveys either the climactic revelation or the moment of shame through simplified storytelling or verse. These moments of stillness accentuate the intermedial design of the show; the audience is confronted by the absence of the intermedial design and the attuned sensorial engagement they had gotten used to. They also affect the way the audiences perceive these particular moments and the respective emotions they are supposed to represent.

For instance, a key theme is envy, which is communicated both through verse and body communication. Berkavitch talks about his childhood envy against his siblings, who had both been adopted and hence received “special treatment” according to the poet’s younger self. Through these revelations, the motifs of shame and regret also unfold. Over the course of the show, while the poet narrates several shameful incidents of his life, the thread of family relationships unravels, where shame around childhood jealousy is transformed to regret upon the death of his sister, who loses her battle to mental health struggles and drug addiction. Death, in this case, arrives rather matter-of-factly, against a white background, on a bare stage, with no props, music, movement, illustrations or dancers. Berkavitch narrates this episode simply standing on stage:

Two days later /
when I get the call /
I already know that it is bad news /
The way my dad explains it is that /
on New Year's Eve she's been out with a load of people /
she knows through mental health and /
they've all mixed up their prescription drugs /
in a big bowl throw in some cocaine throw in some MDMA /
Crushed it all up /
[...]
The next morning broke /
Everyone's woken up /
Apart from her (0:32:27–0:33:14)

The white space of the stage along with the pauses and silence in Berkavitch's verbal performance and static body create fissures within the intermedial frame of the show. These fissures do not undermine but rather elevate intermediality's potential to create meaning. When the next anecdote then opens, with the deployment of an intermedial design, with light projections, dance and movement, and music, the drama intensifies. The next anecdote, in contrast to the previous one, opens with first the dancers, then Berkavitch, engaging in movement and rhythmic steps performed to a haunting electronic tune. The mood instantly shifts. The anecdote switches to Berkavitch revisiting his younger days, talking about his childhood friendships. Pathos is replaced by humour when the plot moves into Berkavitch's first encounter with making graffiti around town.

After four weeks /
of returning /
and working /
and touching up /
and finishing off /
our first ever graffiti pieces /
look awful (0:39:00–0:39:13)

The story builds around the poet's development as a graffiti artist and his growing friendship with his teenage buddy Jack, as both paint graffiti around the town. The high point arrives when they are confronted by a group of boys trying to stir up trouble, and this is when the poet leaves

his friend behind, to get help from his father. Jack gets beaten up in the interim. Shame once again arrives in the plot matter-of-factly, against a white background, with no prop, no animation, no accompanying dancers, just the poet confessing alone on stage. The intermedial makeup of the show, marked by a bare stage aesthetic during high points and transitions, sets the anticipation in the plot for shame to arrive. The climax always arrives after the tension between different art forms heighten, where the pace of the performance gets quicker only to lead up to the revelation being performed in stillness, sometimes being followed by silence. The gaps, silences and white spaces then work in tandem with the complex intermedial design to communicate the plot and heighten the audiences' sensorial and emotional engagement. A similar dynamic is also demonstrated in the following case study of *Dancing to Music You Hate*.

3.3.3 Jasmine Gardosi's *Dancing to Music You Hate*³⁴

Jasmine Gardosi's *Dancing to Music You Hate* is an "award-winning, debut show about gender identity, coming to terms with queerness, and finding the words" ("Dancing to Music"), originally commissioned by and performed at Warwick Arts Centre (henceforth WAC) in October 2021. I attended a live performance on 24 January 2023 at Symphony Hall in Birmingham. In this chapter, I analysis the video recording of the WAC premiere while also bringing in observations from my attendance at Symphony Hall. *Dancing to Music You Hate* won the Saboteur Award for the Best Spoken Word Show in 2023. In its incorporation of dubstep basslines and folk violin, the hour-long show expands our understanding of queer performance and transcends "the boundaries of gender and musical genre alike" ("Dancing to Music"). Jasmine Gardosi is an award-winning poet, transqueer activist and the former Birmingham Poet Laureate (2022–24).

Gardosi has experimented with different artforms as a conscious artistic strategy throughout their career. When asked about the blending of various art forms in *Dancing to Music You Hate*, Gardosi's response makes this clear: "My philosophy when it comes to working with any art form, or even just with poetry itself is that ... I want my poem to be impossible without the art form that I am playing with" (Gardosi 0:23:43–0:24:04). This philosophy is demonstrated through the deployment of both poetry and music as central components of performance in the show. While the inherently intermedial design of venues

³⁴ First published in "Staging Intermediality and Queerness in Jasmine Gardosi's *Dancing to Music You Hate*" in *Open Library of Humanities Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1.

such as Birmingham’s Symphony Hall and Warwick Arts Centre, institutions that patently stage multidisciplinary work, facilitate with ease the realisation of Gardosi’s artistic vision, the framework of intermediality remains intrinsic to *Dancing to Music You Hate* even in smaller venues and festival stages.

Dancing to Music You Hate comprises of nine distinct poetic pieces: “Dancing to Music You Hate”, “We Lived in Precedented Times”, “Silence Sounds Like”, “B or G”, “How to Beat Your Heart”, “I’ve Been Given a Platform”, “Say It Anyway”, “Be Poet”, and “Gender Euphoria”, which often exhibit a song-like quality (the poet refers to a few of them, such as “Dancing to Music You Hate” and “Gender Euphoria”, as songs), and mostly revolve around the many facets of a transqueer identity. The pieces are woven together using anecdotal narration by the poet, storytelling, dialogic segments in which the artist engages in conversations with band members and their instruments to further the narrative thread of the performance, and other paratextual elements. The performance proper begins with Gardosi taking a deep breath, then orally producing the beat of a “closed hi-hat” [tʃ]³⁵, first in pairs of two and then building up the count. A ‘closed hi-hat’ in beatboxing is an oral non-linguistic sound named after and mimicking the one produced by two cymbals in a drum kit. On a drum set, the sound is made when two cymbals closely facing each other depress together at the push of a pedal, the pedal being pressed gently yet swiftly by one’s foot. The “closed hi-hat” pattern performed by Gardosi, when repeated, becomes a rhythmic cue, which leads first the drummer, and then the other percussionists to join in. This medley of Gardosi’s sound poetics and the band’s instrumental music segues into Gardosi’s articulation of the words “take a breath, take it back” (0:01:53) repeatedly, which slowly transitions into the artist beatboxing more prominently. A pause ensues, following which the titular track begins.

³⁵ A ‘closed hi-hat’ is a drumming technique that is imitated in beatboxing. The following tutorial demonstrates the sound and technique: <https://youtu.be/hR-OwR2cFv8>. The IPA transcription here and in the subsequent sections is based on the IPA framework used by the ‘speech production and articulation knowledge’ (SPAN) research group at University of Southern California to notate their findings on ‘Real-time Magnetic Resonance Imaging’ of human beatboxing.



Figure 25 Gardosi gestures finger to lip, while performing “Pretending to be”. *Dancing to Music You Hate*, 2021. (Screenshot)

A fascinating characteristic of the performance of the song-poem³⁶, “Dancing to Music You Hate”, is that the theme of queerness is not made apparent immediately. For the most part of this song-poem, the refrain “pretending to be / it’s like dancing to music you hate” is repeated, without clarifying what the object of pretension is. The phrase “pretending to be” is followed by a short pause, during which Gardosi puts a finger to their lip (see fig. 25). This gesture, supplementing the actual verbal silence, establishes that the object of pretension is not yet to be disclosed. It is only in the final refrain of the song-poem, when the climactic moment ensues, that the poet reveals: “Pretending to be *straight* / is like dancing to music you hate” (0:07:22–0:07:26, my emphasis). Here, in this pivotal revelatory moment, when the music stops and the gesture of finger to lip is replaced by the articulation of the word “straight”, the theme of queerness is emphasised. This is not to say, however, that the audience is unaware of the theme until this point (seven-minutes) in the show. The promotional material for the show, and the performer’s open expression of queerness in their work and their activism, had already set the expectation for the performance (see fig. 26). The venue, the stakeholders, the attendees are already primed for a queer performance; the stage had been queered before it was set.

³⁶ I use the label song-poem due to the ambiguousness or liminality of form in this piece. Though performed as a poem in its earlier manifestations, as evidenced by a YouTube video from 2017, in the show, it exhibits a song-like quality.

Furthermore, the poetic pieces throughout the show consistently touch upon and delve into various aspects of queerness, ranging from gender identity and sexuality to performance of queerness.

The first poetic piece “Dancing to Music You Hate” concludes with a musical crescendo and flourish, which is juxtaposed by a nonchalant “Cool” (0:08:22) uttered by Gardosi, in order to signal the end, offering space to the audience to respond, which they do with a roaring applause and whooping. Live music is a significant element of the show, contributing to meaning making, merging with poetry in varying intensity to articulate the plot.

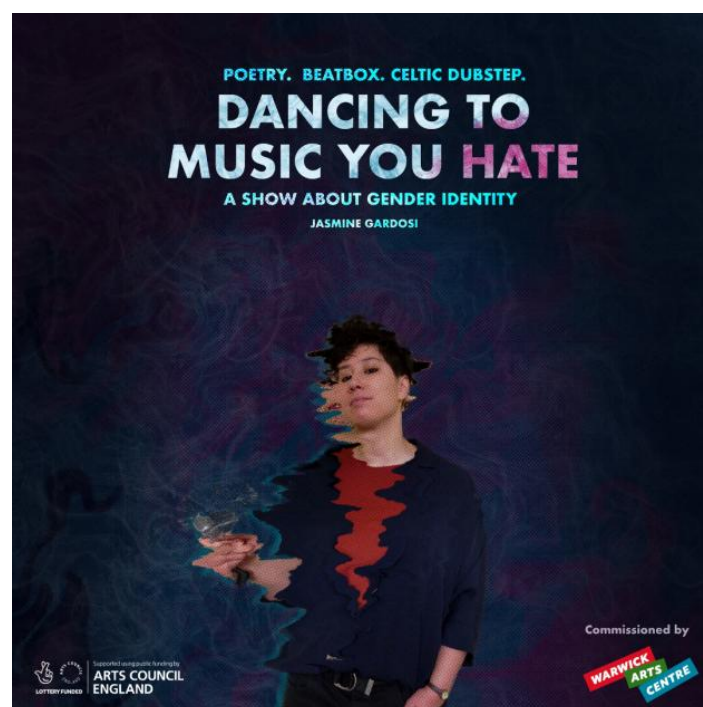


Figure 26 Digital poster for Gardosi's *Dancing to Music You Hate*. (Courtesy: Jasmine Gardosi)

The second piece privileges music over poetry where the poet makes certain exaggerated demands from members of the band: “Can you [drummer, Damon Wilding] give me raindrops on a summer night falling on a tap dancer in concentrated inspiration?” (0:10:22–0:10:29), and they oblige with spectacular tunes and rhythms, exhibiting their musical prowess. The result is the blurring of music and language, a confluence of sounds, a queering of communication, as the poet invites the musical instruments to speak. However, even as music takes precedence, Gardosi remains at the helm with poetic instructions. The musical interlude is immediately followed by a poetic piece inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic, titled “We Lived in

Precedented Times” — a scathing comment on an oft-recurring inference in our everyday discourse that the days before the pandemic were ‘normal’, which fails to take note of the systemic failures of life pre-pandemic. The poem is delivered in conjunction with music in a song-like fashion, employing simple rhymes such as in the passage cited below:

We lived in precedented times /
we lived in precedented times /
I could sit in a restaurant without fearing for my life /
I could kiss my mum without thinking I was going to kill her /
I could touch door handles without having to sanitise /
we could hug each other at open mic nights /
we lived in precedented times /
we lived in precedented times /
so why was my anxiety still so high? /
(music)
Why could my friend not get a job? /
Why could my sister not get out of bed? /
Why could my mate not pay their rent? /
Why were we still just trying to survive? (0:15:45–0:16:55)

Throughout the poem, Gardosi questions and problematises the conditions of ‘normality’ associated with pre-COVID-19 times and the supposed ease of living that preceded the pandemic. In the course of the show, Gardosi explains how the pandemic made them question several aspects of their life including their gender identity. The poetic piece “We Lived in Precedented Times” sets the stage for this disclosure, giving us a glimpse of the poet’s journey while also suggesting that queerness cannot be isolated from the socio-political environment that frames its manifestation. In this confluence of music, poetry and sound poetics, the piece questions the normative in both the external, as in pre-COVID-19 conditions, and the internal, as in Gardosi’s contemplation of their gender identity. This liminal line of the external and internal is traversed using an intermedial strategy, a transgenre approach, that responds to the in-betweenness of the poem’s form and theme.

Halfway through the show, Gardosi engages in dialogue with musical instruments. A piece ensues where the poet converses with the saxophone, played by critically acclaimed musician Xhosa Cole. When the poet asks, “Should I tell my students that I am gay?” (0:19:40–0:19:44), a tune emerging from the saxophone, rather than words, responds and sustains the

interaction. This enactment is clearly intentional, employed to locate music into the very structure and meaning of the show, as well as to keep the responses ambiguous and open-ended. The audience members, as onlookers, are provided with an opportunity to choose their own words or make their own meaning in the course of this paratextual performance. This dynamic is later reversed in an interlude piece where Xhosa Cole engages in a verbal dialogue with Gardosi and they respond with beatboxing and guttural, non-verbal sounds. Using sound poetics in this piece, Gardosi subverts the earlier equation with the musicians, while remaining rooted in the approach of keeping the meaning or response open-ended. In the deployment of this strategy, language itself is queered. Words are no longer required for meaning making and sounds become vehicles of disrupting all forms of binaries.

Music, however, is not only a part of the conversation but is also a disruptive catalyst in the performance. In a poem on censorship the poet is strategically interrupted by a musical harmony mimicking jingles used in traditional radio or television ads, every time the poet voices: “I’ve been given a platform” (0:39:28–0:39:34). The phrase is repeated over and over, while the poet attempts to perform a verse about the “uninterrupted time” (0:42:16) afforded to them through COVID-19 lockdowns, which ultimately led to an unprecedented questioning of their gender identity and the “channelling” of their “masculinity” over “femininity” (0:43:08–0:43:16). Over the course of the piece, the tension between words and music heightens where the poet is prevented from completing sentences and is overpowered by sounds from the flute, accordion, drums, and the scratching or scrubbing sound generated by the DJ on the turntable. The dominance of sound, or noise, drowning out the poet’s voice suggests the contemporary censorship of trans voices. The message on censorship is delivered by another poem in the show, titled “Say It Anyway”. In this poem, the verse and not music, comments on the censorship imposed upon trans identities, highlighting the politics of selective sanction of queer rights, as demonstrated by the excerpt below:

They’ve made our rights a foreign language /
then chose to lose us in translation /
or they called it vulgar /
not fit for publication /
they asked for our opinion /
and then ignored the consultation /
but they talk about being censored /

after Section 28³⁷ /

we say four letters of the alphabet — LGB /

and they take the T away (0:52:44–0:53:30)

The show's theme of queerness and gender identity is thus demonstrated through the cross-arts ethos of Gardosi's artistic strategy. In situating their poetry performance within multiple art forms, blurring generic boundaries, they queer the performance, and thereby also the concept of intermediality itself.

The performed poetry of *Dancing to Music You Hate* is enhanced by experimentations with vocal percussion. Beatboxing merges with language effortlessly to create a fluid sonic experience that reflects the queer trans subjectivity of the show. The personal, the autobiographical is emphasised through the medium of beatboxing, where one hears not only the sounds of a drum kit mimicked by the poet, but also, owing to the microphone being held close to the mouth, the internal smacking of lips and teeth as well as the poet's inhalation and exhalation. These sounds tied intimately to the poet's body bring the audience closer to the poet aurally. The skilful amalgamation of beats, words and the sonic workings of the poet's mouth enrich the cadence of the performed poems. Nowhere does this become more apparent than in the performance of "Be Poet". This poem incorporates simultaneous performance of verse alongside beatboxing by the poet, a technique typically called "beatrhyming". Beatrhyming is "a type of multi-vocalism in which an individual beatboxes and speaks (i.e., sings or raps) at the same time by interweaving beatboxing sounds and speech sounds within words and phrases" (Blaylock et al.). Here, the vocal agility with which Gardosi captures every beat while performing the verse and emphasising words with broadly the "kick drum" [p'] and "hi-hat" [ts] sounds to perform a beat, makes this poem an experiment in intermediality by itself. On this deployment of beatboxing in "Be Poet", Rebecka Dürr and Vadim Keylin observe:

Gardosi alternates between producing sound on exhalation, on inhalation or in either way. In this respect, her goal is not to merge speech and beatbox into a song-like performance, but to use both elements alongside each other in a way that foregrounds their similarities, resulting in a playful interaction with sound. Furthermore, her mixture of beatbox and speech serves as sonic illustration of

³⁷ Section 28 was "a law passed in 1988 by a Conservative government that stopped councils and schools 'promoting the teaching of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (Day).

the poem's content, reflecting the dynamic changes in the emotional state of the lyric subject. (245)

Indeed, as noted by Dürr and Keylin, Gardosi's distinct deployment of poetry/speech and beatboxing defamiliarises the generic boundaries of both forms while also emphasising the thematic and emotional trajectory of the verse. In the opening beatboxing segment of the piece, the beat mimics a heartbeat, symbolising the nervousness experienced by "anyone who has to / [p'ʊ][p'ʊ] / stand up and speak / [p'ʊ][p'ʊ] / for the first time / [p'ʊ][p'ʊ] / and then every time after that / [p'ʊ][p'ʊ]" (0:55:55–0:56:12). The mimicking of the beat soon transmutes into the word "beat" itself and is followed by beatrhyming in the refrain "be poet". Similarly, in the introductory segment to "Dancing to Music You Hate" (song-poem) discussed previously, beatboxing not only features in the performance of the closed hi-hat in the beginning, but it also merges with words in the refrain "take a breath, take it back". For instance, the closed hi-hat beat morphs into the "t" sound in "take" whereas an outward K morphs into the "k" sound in "take". The "b" sound in "breath" and "back" morph into the sound of a kick drum, such that beatrhyming within the refrain is performed as: "[t][K] [p'ʊ] reath / [t][K] [p'ʊ] ack" (0:01:52–0:02:14). This is one of the instances in *Dancing to Music You Hate* wherein sound and subject, beat and speech are merged in order to defy artistic and conceptual categories. The sound does not merely accompany sense, language, speech but blends with it. Language and acoustic create meaning together. The confluence of beatboxing and poetry, thus, creates and aurally communicates the project of dismantling gender and genre boundaries in *Dancing to Music You Hate*. The workings of intermediality in this show are categorically revealed through sonic experimentation. There are indeed other forms of such experimentations evident in spoken word theatre, as discussed below.

3.3.4 Other Cross Arts Experimentations

The intermedial play with the sonic manifests in several forms in spoken word theatre. For instance, in *How to Keep Time: A Drum Solo for Dementia*, Antosh Wojcik performs verse while simultaneously playing a Roland TD-4KP electric drumkit. While the scratch version was initially staged in 2015, the complete show was produced by Penned in the Margins and performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2018 (Wojcik). Kasia Lech analyses the show in *Dramaturgy of Form: Performing Verse in Contemporary Theatre*, observing that "Wojcik delivers verse-poetry to the beat that he creates live onstage as he tells the story of his Polish grandfather's dementia. As the show and his grandfather's sickness develop, the beat of the

drums begins distorting the speech” (100). The drumbeats therefore assume a communicative function, in conjunction with, and in some places instead of, speech to transmit the narrative in *How to Keep Time*. As Wojcik informed me in our recent interview, the show consisted of

three sections. The first section was, like, talking about what drumming meant to me, and sort of thinking about how drumming is quite cued in with memory [...] And then there was a section about my mum's mum and her passing, like... Where she goes, what happens if she still has dementia as this kind of imagined sort of thing, if it goes into the soul or spirit. [...] And then, finishing with the section that sort of illustrated my Jeddak, my dad's dad. Which was essentially, like, using the drums to [...] embody how dementia affected his physical self and his speech. (00:41:19–00:42:23)

The use of electronic drumbeats to depict speech patterns caused by dementia thus represents intermedial sonic experimentations that create meaning differently. Where imitating these patterns verbally potentially affects an element of authenticity, the use of the drum heightens the emotional effect of the plot. As Wojcik tells me about these patterns of drumming in the show: “the method of drumming in it is to sometimes actually, like, contest the speech. So rather than using the instrument to score, it's to design, and it's kind of treating the language like part of the sound design as well” (01:13:05–01:13:26). The rhythmic patterns of the drum come to represent dementia, where the intensity of the beats further reflect the increasing impact of dementia on the poet's grandfather's speech patterns. Conversely, speech and language become rhythm and sound design.

Sonic cross-arts experimentation thus allow new ways to relate a story in spoken word theatre. A final example for this form of performance design can be found in Clare E. Potter's show *Sucking on Sugarcane*, performed at Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff in July 2015. The show features a poetry and jazz collaboration with Gareth Roberts Quintet, and “explores how spoken word, music and silence intersect, allowing both performers and audience to be immersed in what has washed up from the Levee Disaster during Hurricane Katrina, reflecting on culture, people and place, loss and healing” (Potter, “Performance”). Like other shows discussed in this chapter, speech, music and silence blend to create meaning in *Sucking on Sugarcane*. Intermediality also manifests in other ways in spoken word theatre, beyond the sonic (or visual), through other sensory engagements. When Rose Condo prepares open sandwiches for audience members in *How to Starve an Artist*, the intermedial relations of the performance change.

Through this engaged form of spectatorship, the audiences' faculties of smell, touch and taste are activated, thereby demonstrating intermedial possibilities afforded to the art form.

3.4 Chapter Summary

Spoken word theatre performances tend to espouse an intermedial design, whether it be through a cross arts aesthetic or experimentation with digital technologies, or both. It can activate an attuned form of participation from audiences through various strategies of sensorial engagement. In this chapter, I first expand upon multimodalities of poetry and performance to then engage with their constellations within the frameworks of intermediality in spoken word theatre. Using literary scholar Irina Rajewsky's conception of intermediality as "media combination" as well as theatre scholars Chapple and Kattenbelt's model of intermediality as the point of interaction between performer and audience, composite art forms and digital technologies, I analysed three case studies, *Shadow Boxer* by Roger Robinson, *Shame* by John Berkavitch and *Dancing to Music You Hate* by Jasmine Gardosi. I unpicked the ways intermediality is deployed in all three shows, whether it be through the coalescence of poetry performance, storytelling, movement and puppetry in *Shadow Boxer*; the blending of poetry performance with hip hop dance and movement, music, illustrations and animations in *Shame*, or the blurring of generic boundaries through poetry performance, live music and beatboxing in *Dancing to Music You Hate*. Through the analyses, it becomes clear that an intermedial design also determines the way an audience receives a show and its message. Through this chapter, I demonstrated that intermediality is a vital feature of spoken word theatre, as I had earlier proposed in Chapter 1. I also concluded that the merging of different art forms is central to meaning making in spoken word theatre, and that each art form significantly contributes to communicating the message of a show, through different multimodal configurations.

4. Space in Spoken Word Theatre

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage.

A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.

Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

Spoken word theatre has, from its inception, adopted Brook's convention of a bare stage aesthetic and displayed a DIY ethos in its performance design. This DIY framework of the art form has been the guiding thread for this thesis. The physical presence of the poet and their embodied performance of their own poetry in a long-form structure is all that is required to label a performance spoken word theatre. Yet, the attributes of the art form cannot be summarised so simply. That would be a disservice to the craft of the poets. It is undeniable, however, that spoken word theatre boasts a malleability that has now become one of the intrinsic features of the art form. While in the previous chapter, I explored cross-arts experimentation and the workings of intermediality in spoken word theatre, in this chapter, I examine the spatial flexibility and negotiations of the art form. I begin by examining the spatial turn in theatre studies, in order to establish the context of spatiality. I then explain the theoretical framework guiding this chapter. I next engage with the spatial adaptability of spoken word theatre. In the subsequent sections, I undertake three case studies, which demonstrate the breadth of spatial possibilities afforded to the art form. In this regard, Laura Thurlow's *River Time!* (2024) at Edinburgh Fringe, Stephen Durkan's *Why Am I Doing This?* (2024) at PBH's Free Fringe, and Malaika Kegode's *Outlier* (2021) at Bristol Old Vic are analysed to investigate the spatial potential and politics of spoken word theatre. These three case studies have been analysed here due to their unique spatial design. While Thurlow's and Durkan's shows are purportedly fringe shows and therefore have the quality of independent, alternative work designed to have a flexible spatial orientation, Kegode's production is situated in the mainstream, owing to its staging at Bristol Old Vic's main stage as well as the funded nature of the performance. However, despite these characteristics, *Outlier* exhibits a DIY, alternative approach to the theatre space, which merits its inclusion in this chapter. The show will be discussed in the next chapter as well, owing to its curious mode of dissemination as a socially distanced hybrid

performance whose recording was later adapted to a film. But before engaging with the case studies, I must explore spatiality and the spatial turn in theatre.

4.1 The Spatial Turn in Theatre

The twentieth century marked a shift from the discourse of time to that of space. Foucault, signalling this shift, declared in his pivotal 1967 lecture, later published as “Of Other Spaces”:

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (22)

Foucault’s seminal injunction became one of those defining moments towards the heralding of the spatial turn in literary and cultural studies. In addition, Robert Tally in *Spatiality* contends: “Postmodernism allied to poststructuralism, along with other related discourses, have together been instrumental in effecting this spatial turn” (15–16). Tally in this case is referring to the spatial discourse in literature. In a rather belated conjunction with its sister disciplines, the arrival of the twenty-first century marked the spatial turn in theatre and performance studies. Foucault’s influential postulation on heterotopias (“Of Other Spaces”) and Lefebvre’s equally influential theorisation of the social production of space (*The Production of Space*) as well as the establishment of performance studies as a critical field shaped this turn to an extent. Gay McAuley’s pivotal taxonomy for examining the role of space in performance in *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (1999) further presaged a prominent intervention which informed subsequent enquiries into the potential and politics of space in theatre, inciting the above-mentioned spatial turn in the field. On this spatial turn in theatre, Kim Solga (2019) writes:

This turn — a shift toward a new subject as a focus of theory and criticism — made issues of space and place central to the investigation of meaning-making at the theatre, in acts of staged or curated performance outside traditional theatre spaces, and in performances of “everyday life” (*Space* 1)

Even though the spatial turn in theatre studies discourse arrived over the last three decades, the politics of stage and space was already informing theatre productions in the second half of the

twentieth century. Practitioners had begun staging performances outside traditional theatre spaces. Alternative theatre began appropriating public spaces or moved to underground spaces not purpose-built for performance in the UK and elsewhere in the west (Fischer-Lichte, “Spatial Appropriation” 219). This development emerged in conjunction with the development of subversive artistic practices. This was also the time Edinburgh Festival Fringe was established which gave way to further experimentation in theatre, both in the context of space and form. The changing spatial dynamics of theatre and its relationship to the changing sociopolitical contexts of performance invited scholarly examination of the politics of space and place, which, as has been outlined above, influenced the move towards spatiality. On this politics of space, Benjamin Wihstutz in his Introduction to *Performance and the Politics of Space: Theatre and Topology* writes:

In theatre, every production is inevitably linked to decisions that refer to a “politics of space”: Each staging of a performance divides the space into observers and those being observed, thus positing a performative space in relation to the public nature of the theatre and therefore at the same time to a societal “outside.” Although every performance is inscribed in a place and space within a specific social order, as an artistic event it can just as well distance itself from this order, reflect it, or even endow it with utopian qualities. (3)

Here, Wihstutz is specifically referring to the politics of the performance space that decides the conventions of how a performer interacts with the audience as well as makes use of the stage in their act. He also alludes to the place of performance, especially in how it dictates the social order. It is important to emphasise here the taxonomy of space proposed by Gay McAuley. The scholar, in her pivotal study, delineates five categories of spaces that she examines:

the physical places of performance as they exist in the wider social space of the community, the space of interaction between performers and spectators, the energized space of the stage when it is occupied and rendered meaningful by the presence of performers, the organization of stage and offstage, the fictional places that are represented or evoked within or in relation to all these physical areas, and, interacting with all of them, the space of verbal reference. (7)

In this chapter, while I am interested in all these manifestations: I am particularly interested in the physical *place* of performance, and the *space* of performance, which includes both the space of interaction between performers and spectators as well as the energised space of the stage.

For analysing the case studies presented in this chapter, I consider it sufficient to converge the two categories together. This is done especially keeping in mind the bare stage aesthetics of two of the shows studied here, which do not display any elaborate stage design in their performance, and where the performance area may as well bleed into the spectator arena, owing to the limits of the physical space. Finally, while the fictional place of performance is studied in the thematic context of the performance, it has not been engaged with in as much detail as the other two. For my analyses, Novak's proposed categories for the study of space in poetry performance are also instructive. Novak distinguishes three forms of spaces in her seminal 2011 study: firstly, performance space, which consists of not just the stage area but the whole physical space of performance, that is the venue; secondly, place of performance, which comprises the wider location of the event and venue, situating it in the sociocultural context and civic environment of the location; and thirdly, fictive space "that a poem evokes, and which is on a level with its fictive speaker and addressee" (*Live Poetry* 214). Given these categories, for the purposes of this chapter, the performance space and the place of performance are the dominant considerations, as I am concerned with the material conditions of the performances as well as the DIY strategies of spatial appropriation poets adopt. Fictive space, which corresponds to McAuley's fictional place of performance, therefore, is discussed to a lesser extent.

Having outlined the various classifications of space, I return to Wihstutz's conjecture on the politics of space. His observations on how an artistic event can distance itself from the conventions of a space is important for the case of poetry performance and spoken word theatre, where the practice often negotiates or deviates from conventions of traditional theatre spaces. In such a case, poetry performance and spoken word theatre's heterotopic potential comes into purview, since both the genre and the art form regularly question the social order of theatre/the performance space as well as society at large. Patrick Primavesi while discussing theatre's heterotopia and the public sphere distinguishes utopia from heterotopia thus:

Unlike the utopias of an ideal and perfect world, which is delegated, one might say, to illusory spaces, heterotopias are real places that question the rules governing hierarchical emplacements. Whereas utopias have a stabilizing effect, heterotopias are always a potential disruption to symbolic orders.
 ("Heterotopias" 167)

Indeed, heterotopias can disrupt social order and/or governing hierarchies of a place. Joanna Tompkins examines this potential in theatre when she proposes that "heterotopia rehearses the possibilities of something else, something beyond that which the theatrical art form generates"

(*Theatre's Heterotopia* 3). Further enumerating how heterotopia manifests in the specific case studies she discusses, Tompkins observes: “they demarcate locations that offer an alternative to the status quo. They present an opportunity for characters to inhabit a zone that has a relationship with the workings of the actual world, but that is distinguished from that world” (3). In Tompkins’s study, the performance text, performance design and place of performance together generate conditions for heterotopia. Here, using examples of both site-specific performances as well as those staged in traditional theatres, she conjectures:

A staged heterotopia enables audiences to discern some hint or inkling of another world, even one that is otherwise invisible. Heterotopia provides the potential for spatializing in performance both visible locations and, paradoxically, invisible locations (those which we know and those which we imagine). (6)

In Tompkins’s theorisation of heterotopia then, the audience is implicated into envisioning or perceiving traces of a different world. It would not be an overstatement, then, to say that the spatial negotiations of a performance thus lead audience members to become co-creators of heterotopia, for if audiences do not perceive the “hint or inking of another world”, the potential remains unfulfilled. “A crucial aspect of audience involvement”, writes Susan Bennett in *Theatre Audiences* (1997) “is the degree to which a performance is accessible through the codes audiences are accustomed to utilizing, the conventions they are used to recognizing, at a theatrical event” (104). Thus, if audiences are not able to perceive and experience what Tompkins calls the “zone that has a relationship with the workings of the actual world” in a performance, if the performance uses conventions that are not recognisable or legible to the audiences, heterotopia is not realised.

In poetry performance scholarship, Jack McGowan has explored the heterotopic potential of performance spaces in the context of spoken word poetry in his doctoral thesis, *Slam the Book: The Role of Performance in Contemporary UK Poetics* (2016). In his study, McGowan considers spaces of poetry performance, generally non-theatrical social spaces, to be “impermanent sites of social engagement which can adapt to function under a varied spectra of explorative social encounters delineated by the emotional contexts or the assumed affective purposes of the performances” (268). In this sense, McGowan connects the heterotopic scope of performance spaces to the affective potential of poetry performance, where he deploys affect to “explore the feelings generated by spoken word performances in the context of both the performer and the recipients” (28). Affect indeed plays a considerable part in a space’s heterotopic potential, especially in an affectively charged genre as spoken word poetry.

These studies on the workings of space (and the heterotopic) in theatre as well as poetry performance inform my investigation of spoken word theatre's spatial potential and negotiations. In the case studies undertaken in this chapter, through analyses of video recordings and conversations with practitioners, I examine how the place of performance and its spatial conditions operate upon and control the performance. In their experimentation with spatial design, poets and collaborators are controlled by the limitations imposed by spaces. In turn, in manipulating the spatial design, practitioners repurpose and transform these spaces and their social function. Or as McGowan suggests:

When the café or the pub becomes a site of performance the performance space exercises its capacity as a heterotopia. Through spoken word what exists as a gathering place circumscribed by socialization through shared utilization of space and, in most cases, product, accepts into its heart the spectacle of the performance. As this occurs an increasing recognition of shared affective experiences restructures the space as one fulfilling an entirely different function. Performance poetry formulates a new purpose for the space which is that of a site for shared spectatorship — the space for a show. (272)

Spoken word poetry's, and in particular, spoken word theatre's potential to transform a space and delimit its purpose — or, to formulate a new purpose, that is, as a site of performance, in a space designed for other forms of gathering — is demonstrated through the three case studies in this chapter. These transformed spaces are a subject of my examination, especially in sections concerned with spatial appropriation of other spaces within Edinburgh Fringe and the Free Fringe venues. In the next sections, I engage with the spatial potential of spoken word theatre briefly before analysing three shows, which either transform alternative spaces into sites of performance, such as in Stephen Durkan's *Why Am I Doing This?* or, as in the case of Malaika Kegode's *Outlier*, transform traditional performance spaces into alternative sites of world-building. While the heterotopic potential of Fringe spaces in *River Time!* And *Why Am I Doing This?* is manifest, I am particularly interested in heterotopia's function in Kegode's *Outlier*, which even while staged in a traditional proscenium arch setup, generated possibilities of a different world, a different order, which were also felt through the multiple screenings of its filmed version across Vienna.

4.2 Spoken Word Theatre and the Fringe Stage

Spatial design plays a crucial role in the realisation of spoken word theatre. Poets often tour their shows across the length and breadth of the UK and need to keep the design minimal enough to be compliant with travel conditions. I have noted elsewhere that poets often stage their shows in a range of settings — from traditional theatre spaces to unconventional or makeshift stages, that it is not uncommon for poets to perform their pieces in open spaces or tops of pubs or even on public transport³⁸. Poets have successfully utilised unconventional spaces to their advantage, to innovate spoken word theatre, especially in Fringe settings. For instance, Scottish spoken word theatre company In the Works staged their show *The 900 Club*, revolving around a bus journey between Glasgow and Edinburgh on board the 900 bus, in a bus at the UKYA City Takeover: Nottingham in 2019. Additionally, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, many poets have created or reconceptualised their shows for virtual performance. This phenomenon will be discussed in the following chapter with a typology of four strategies of online adaptation. In this section, I examine the DIY stages of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and its offshoot the Free Fringe. I discuss two self-funded one-person performances to unknot the underlying thread of DIY aesthetic and an alternative ethos that inform the shows. But first, it is important to contextualise the Edinburgh Fringe and PBH's Free Fringe.

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe was established in 1947 as a spontaneous artistic response to the Edinburgh International Festival, where “eight theatre groups turned up uninvited to perform” (“History of the Fringe”) at the festival. As the name suggests, the artistic response grew into a fringe movement over time, where artists showed up to perform in the periphery of the Edinburgh International Festival, in small community theatres, alternative spaces and makeshift stages. The movement led to the establishment of the Festival Fringe Society in 1958 and the formalisation of the movement as a festival. Due to its radical, grassroots ethos, the Fringe has served as the ideal stage for spoken word theatre over the years. Poets such as Kat François and Luke Wright have staged their solo shows on Fringe stages, ranging from Sweet Grassmarket to Pleasance Dome.

Today, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe is a global phenomenon. In 2024, “60 countries were represented” on the Fringe stage, “3746 shows registered” and “over 2.6 million tickets were issued” (“2024 Fringe”). While these statistics demonstrate the Fringe's sheer scale and

³⁸ See “Spoken Word Theatre and its DIY Potential: Rose Condo's *The Empathy Experiment* and In the Works' *The 900 Club*”.

impact, they also highlight the play of economic and cultural capital involved. What emerged as a fringe movement has over decades entered the cultural mainstream. With a grander scale, the economic stakes have increased, leading to the overriding of the foundational philosophy of the festival to some degree. Financial barriers for both audience members and performers have surfaced with inflated costs of both production and event attendance. For Edinburgh Fringe 2026, registration prices for shows begin at £96 for a singular run to £295 for a full run (“Show Registration”) and based on my experience of Fringe 2024, ticket prices ranged anywhere between £10 and £35 for audience members. Hiring a venue may also involve steep renting charges. For self-funded artists not supported by cultural institutions and funding entities, these costs may be difficult to bear, making it almost impossible to break even (Healy). Additional expenses include production costs as well as travel and accommodation for non-Edinburgh based performers. As Stephen Greer observes in *Queer Exceptions*:

In the competitive mainstream of the Fringe, even a comparatively modest solo show will face significant production costs – including but not limited to fees for venue hire, marketing and accommodation, even as the far larger costs of staging work with multiple cast members makes solo work appear more financially viable. These conditions include the requirement for a guarantee against ticket sales to be paid before the festival begins, and additional charges beyond venue hire for technical support, inclusion in a venue’s publicity materials and use of their promotional street team. The prospect of debt has been institutionalised to the extent that the Fringe Society’s own sample budgets all anticipate that artists and companies will lose money. (41)

Pete Bearder, similarly, remarks in *Stage Invasion* that “the Edinburgh Fringe is a long way from being accessible to most artists. Growing costs and commercialisation mirror the path of the festival scene more broadly, and poets are often not in a position to risk losing money for the potential exposure” (161). Indeed, as the festival becomes a coveted stage to debut or introduce one’s work to new audiences, financial risks outweigh the rewards for performers at the Edinburgh Fringe (see also Logan, Spowart).

At the fringes of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe is Peter Buckley Hill’s Free Fringe (popularly known as PBH’s Free Fringe), which offers artists respite from the exorbitant costs of performing a show. The Free Fringe website, detailing its history, states:

The Free Fringe was started on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1996 at its original venue, The Footlights and Firkin by Peter Buckley Hill with his comedy show *Peter Buckley Hill and Some Comedians*. [...] Disheartened by what he saw as unreasonable hire charges for venues and high ticket prices for the public, PBH (as he is more commonly known) tried a new model for putting on shows. Instead of paying for a venue and charging for tickets, there should be no hire charge and free entrance for everyone. If the audience like the show, they put a voluntary donation in a bucket at the end. (Free Fringe)

Early career and self-funded spoken word poets often introduce their long-form shows at the Free Fringe to test them in front of relatively smaller audiences as well as mitigate the costs of performance. In August 2024, I had the opportunity to attend several spoken word theatre shows at the Edinburgh Fringe and the Free Fringe, many of which were debut productions. In the following sections, I examine the appropriations and negotiations of space in both the Edinburgh Fringe and the Free Fringe, through case studies of two performances I attended: Laura Thurlow's *River Time!* and Stephen Durkan's *Why Am I Doing This?*

4.2.1 Laura Thurlow's *River Time!*

Laura Thurlow is a Canadian poet, storyteller and filmmaker based in Scotland. Thurlow's *River Time!* is a 50-minute one person show, self-labelled as a tragicomedy, effortlessly amalgamating storytelling and poetry. In the performance, the poet blends autobiographical anecdotes about loneliness and depression with observations about writer Virginia Woolf and singer Janis Joplin, both of whom suffered similar afflictions, to underscore themes of emotional pain, grief and vulnerability. Interestingly, the poet also juxtaposes these observations with conjectures about the fictional character of Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The plot thus oscillates between the auto/biographical and the fictional. *River Time!* is Thurlow's third spoken word theatre show. Thurlow has performed all three of her shows at Edinburgh Fringe. The first performance of *River Time!* was in Manchester in July 2024, following which Thurlow took the show to various festival stages and venues across the North of England. In August 2024, the piece was part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe programme and staged at the Pickle Studio, a considerably small makeshift performance space in Riddle's Court managed by Greenside. Riddle's Court is a historic merchant's tenement on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh's Old Town. I attended an Edinburgh Fringe performance on 14 August 2024. In my analysis, I consult a video recording

from the same Edinburgh run, which the poet offered me. This analysis is complemented by a few observations from my own attendance of the show.

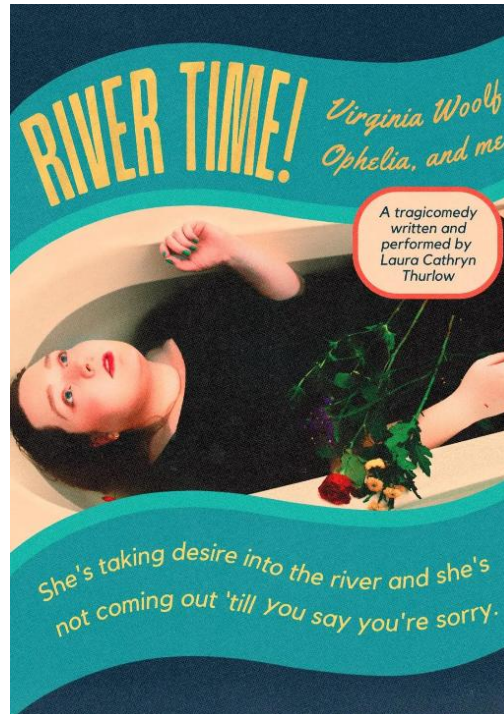


Figure 27 *River Time!* poster inspired by John Everett Millais' painting of Ophelia. (Courtesy: Laura Thurlow)

The recording opens with Thurlow entering the performance space from the right and sitting down cross-legged on the stage. There are a few pebbles placed centre stage and a folding chair in the back. As the poet settles down, she picks up and plays with the pebbles, exclaiming, “So lately I’ve been thinking a lot about death. I know that’s probably not the kind of thing you want to hear at 2:45 [referring to time of performance] on a Sunday afternoon” (*River Time!* 00:36–00:47). The poet simultaneously pockets the pebbles one by one, a not-so-subtle nod to Virginia Woolf’s suicide, suggesting the dark themes represented in the show. The poet is dressed in a flowing linen gown supplemented with a flower crown atop her head, a homage to John Everett Millais’ famous painting of Ophelia (whose influence is also evident in the show’s poster, fig. 27). The poet calls Ophelia her style icon during the performance. She introduces the character of Ophelia into the narrative thread through a poetic extract:

She embodies rejection /
 she takes her unloved body to the river /
 she takes desires into the river /

and only when she does /
are they sorry /
I think Ophelia dies of /
Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (15:28–15:46)

As the performance continues, the poet likens herself to Ophelia both in verse and prose. The performance, meanwhile, effortlessly straddles the boundaries of storytelling and spoken word poetry; the poetic flows into the prosaic seamlessly. The narrative entails Thurlow detailing her struggles with Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria, a condition that is linked to ADHD. It leads to Thurlow explaining the premise of the title:

River time is my spiritual practice / my deeply held belief / that if I can just get my body to the river / it will solve all of my problems / There is something called the mammalian diving response / where science suggests human beings / who used to be whales essentially / feel calm when submerged in water / It's why we take baths to relax / it's why every woman who ever lived / has craved the cold sanctuary of the sea / it's why I once climbed into the fountain of the Hockey Hall of Fame / and cried there for like 4 hours (12:52–13:27)

In the space of 50 minutes, through poetic storytelling, Thurlow takes the audience on a poignant yet oft-hilarious journey of “feminine grief”, in a cosy setup that makes room for an intimate storytelling ritual and diminishes any presumed space between the performer and audience. As the poet's website details:

River Time! pulls its title from one of the show's opening anecdotes. As a student in Edinburgh with unmanaged ADHD, Laura would often go for a night out on the Cowgate, perceive someone as looking at her wrong, become paranoid that her friends secretly despised her, and have a meltdown. To regulate these intense emotions, she would take moonlit walks at 4am along the water of Leith. To this day, if she texts a friend River Time, they know that she means her brain is on fire. [...] *River Time!* discusses Hamlet's Ophelia and the life and loss of Virginia Woolf. Laura tells anecdotes of rejection and desperation — feeling adrift in one's own mind. She speaks on grief, and guilt through describing the loss of a friend who did not survive their messy student days. (Thurlow, “River Time”)

Thurlow narrates her story of rejection, grief and isolation through the deployment of dark humour. Death is a recurrent motif in the show, and the intimate black box setup of the space

amplifies the theme's affect, generating an intensity and heaviness that looms over the venue, closing in on the performance. The intimacy of the space makes the story even more personal. After Ophelia's tale, the poet proceeds to liken herself to Janis Joplin, an interesting shift in strategy: from a fictional character to a celebrated artist. The underlying thematic link is women's grief, whether real or fictional. The strategy demonstrates a montage-like quality, the fragmentary nature of which is heightened in the modest performance space of the Pickle Studio.

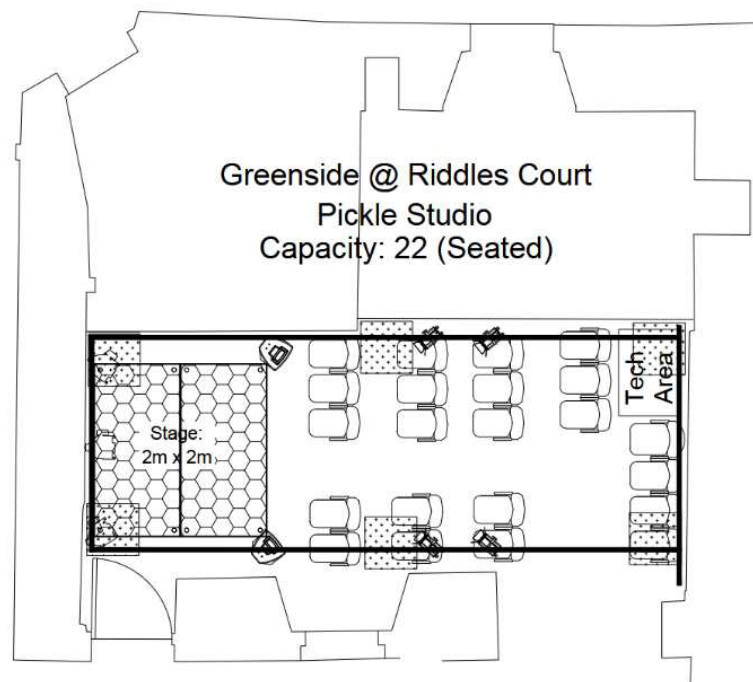


Figure 28 Plan of Pickle Studio – venue for 2024 performance of *River Time!* (Courtesy: Greenside)



Figure 29 Setup of Pickle Studio – venue for 2024 performance of *River Time!* (Courtesy: Greenside)

The Pickle Studio is a considerably small space accommodating up to 22 people and a 2m x 2m wide stage. The whole setup is surrounded by black curtains, approximating a black box experience, elevating the sense of proximity latent in the space (fig. 28 and 29). The show's design, true to spoken word theatre's DIY aesthetics, is rather uncomplicated and malleable. The show therefore fits into the performance space, without much complication. It is easy for the poet to adapt the show to the spatial restrictions of Pickle Studio. As the poet notes in the interview I conducted with her in February 2025, "*River Time!* was meant to be a show in a bag, like it was meant to be inherently portable" (Thurlow 0:41:48–0:41:55). The show design is thus flexible. However, despite the Pickle Studio's constrained space and Thurlow's intention of "do[ing] it cheap and do[ing] it simple" (Thurlow 0:57:58), performing the show posed a certain financial risk for the performer, as she informs me in our interview. This politics of economics support the claims Bearder makes about Edinburgh Fringe, as well as my own argument about risks of participation. Despite the high costs of the performance, the show and the space it is performed in exhibit a DIY aesthetic. The performance space's heterotopic potential is invoked when the performance of vulnerability is complemented by the poet's staging strategies and the intimacy of the venue. To understand this attribute better, it is important to consider the composition and stage design of the show.

Thurlow performs *River Time!* mostly sitting cross-legged on the stage floor. In several key moments that indicate a shift in the narrative, the poet returns to a folding chair propped on the stage. However, the more autobiographical and vulnerable passages are performed sitting

down, which add to the intimacy of the performance. While the artistic choice to sit down on the stage blends organically into the theme and narrative of the show, the decision was made from necessity. Thurlow explains in our interview,

It was a really high stage. So, what that meant is that I couldn't get on and off the stage very easily. And how I had like walked the show in other venues, I had been sort of like coming down to audience level occasionally. Doing that in the Greenside place would have been too weird and too jarring because it took too much like physical effort to come off and down the stage. And that's also how I adapted to sitting on the floor for so much of it. (0:50:31–0:51:10).

Elaborating on this choice, the poet informs me that a chair was not made available to her by the Riddle's Court team for the first show, further stating, "I had to overnight ship a chair — a folding chair" (0:51:30–0:51:34) which broke a few shows in and was replaced by a camping chair. "[E]ventually they relented and like let me have one of their chairs because they just had hundreds of chairs. But it was not an easy negotiation to get a chair out of those people." (0:51:53–0:52:03). On DIY stages such as these, making do with little to no material support is a reality artists have to contend with regularly and they must always be prepared to adapt to changing performance conditions. Even the non-availability of a chair can significantly alter the stage design of a show that exhibits a bare stage aesthetic, and performers must stay open to revisions emerging out of spatial or logistical obstacles. Beyond simply not having a chair, there emerged another motivation for Thurlow to perform the show sitting on stage. The poet embraced the modification to embody a storytelling that is personal and that can reach out to the audience. To engage with the audience and forge a connection, to maintain eye contact, Thurlow conceptualised her position:

[T]he first show I did, I had to sit on the floor at Greenside. And I realised in doing that, that sitting on the floor meant that I was actually at eye level with people. I'm very tall. I'm about 6 ft. tall. And if I was sitting on the chair or standing, people were pretty much like looking up my nose. So, I ended up sitting for a lot of it just so I could like make eye contact with people. And a few of the reviews of my show mentioned this, mentioned how weird it was, how up high I was. [...] And I was just so physically tall during that show. So, there was nothing to be done at that point. So yeah, I had to think a lot about that, about how to like adapt to kind of the very weird little room that I was performing in. (0:52:05–0:53:18)



Figure 30 Thurlow performs sitting cross-legged on the 2m x 2m stage. *River Time!*, 2024. (Screenshot)



Figure 31 Thurlow performing standing up during the show. *River Time!*, 2024. (Screenshot)

During my attendance of the show, my experience was also closely tied to Thurlow's position on the stage. Seated in the second row, I was able to engage and empathise with the narrative in segments where Thurlow was sitting down. However, every time Thurlow stood up or sat on the chair, the involvement with the narrative dwindled, a disengagement ensued. Due to the increased spectator-performer distance and skewed viewing angle caused by the experience of

having to look up at the towering figure of the performer on a small stage in a confined space, there was a break in the intimate connection hitherto established. Having Thurlow high up on the stage was indeed distracting and I found myself repeatedly hoping the poet would sit down soon so I could pay attention to the storyline (See fig. 30 and 31). By contrast, when the poet sat down, a rapport was established with the audience even though audience engagement was not necessarily incorporated in the performance. This characteristic is demonstrated in the following poetic segment, where the poet describes a date from Hinge:

He orders himself a double vodka-soda /
and then just sort of slyly backs away expecting me to pay for it /
so I do /
because I am a lady /
even though we are in Chelsea /
but I also intend most severely to finish my drink as quickly as possible and leave
/
because I am a lady (02:50–03:14)

As Thurlow performs this extract sitting down, there is an instant connection established between the audience and the poet. There is a sense of intimacy which generates a certain authenticity effect. The poet casually sitting on stage emulates the effect of a dialogue in lieu of a performance. However, I am also mindful of the fact that someone sitting in the last row would have had a completely different experience than mine. They could have potentially preferred that Thurlow perform standing up on stage so they could have a better view of her — helping them follow the plot. The correlation between a performer’s position on the stage in an intimate setup and variations in the audience’s engagement with the narrative speaks to the affective potential of both stage design and the performance space. As McGowan notes in *Slam the Book*, these “impermanent sites of social engagement [...] can adapt to function under a varied spectra of explorative social encounters delineated by the emotional contexts or the assumed affective purposes of the performances” (268). While the disconnect reviewers and I experienced is an unintended consequence of the high stage and constricted space of Pickle Studio, it confirms the connection between a poet’s strategies of appropriating a performance space and how it shapes audience’s reception of the narrative. Due to a restricted performance space, movement is not an intrinsic part of the show in its Edinburgh run. However, when the show is performed in other spaces, the poet utilises the stage area differently, in a much more expansive manner, as the poet tells me during our conversation (Thurlow). The flexibility of

Thurlow's stage design thus makes *River Time!* adaptable not only to Pickle Studio but to all forms of non-theatrical stages and alternative spaces. As Thurlow confirms in our interview, she has performed the show in a variety of spaces ranging across pubs to small performing arts festivals.

Beyond spatial dynamics of the poet's position in the venue, it is also important to examine the plot's effect on the space. The narrative revolves around the feeling of being trapped in sadness, the closed in room responds to this feeling with its black curtains. The metaphorical darkness looming upon the story finds resonance in the darkness of the performance space. As the audience finds themselves in the inner recesses of the poet's psyche, the bleakness of the atmosphere is transposed onto the room. The dark, small, closed off performance space makes the audiences hyper fixate on the poet's presence, attention is locked on the poet and the story she narrates. The audience travels with the poet to the banks of Leith, the air clamps down upon the room, the waves of anguish are felt in the room. Due to the intimacy of the space, river time becomes a shared ritual. The performed poetry heightens the effect of this ritual, while the poet's proximity generates emotional resonance — an attribute also demonstrated in the performance of Durkan's *Why Am I Doing This?*

4.2.2 Stephen Durkan's *Why Am I Doing This?*

Stephen Durkan's *Why Am I Doing This?* is the poet's debut spoken word theatre show. The show opened as part of the PBH Free Fringe in August 2024 and was performed at the Whistle Binkies, a live music bar housed in the vaults under South Bridge in Edinburgh. The performance was staged in a tiny room, one of the "caves", as the institution calls it (fig. 32). These caves are usually venues for intimate parties and celebrations. I attended a performance on 15th August 2024 at the Whistle Binkies. The name of the venue is inspired by *Whistle-Binkie*, a Scottish poetry and song anthology comprising texts first published in "distinct Serieses throughout a period of fifteen years, the first having been issued in 1832" (*Whistle-Binkie* v). The cave seemed to have a capacity of about ten people, and there were four of us in the audience in the performance I attended. I analyse the show based on observations from this attendance. I was also offered a recording of a later performance by the poet. This performance was part of an event at the Poetry Club Glasgow and took place on 20th October 2024. The event is of interest since it featured both Durkan's *Why Am I Doing This?* and Thurlow's *River Time!* In my analysis, however, I use the recording only to examine the performance text and poetic elements of the show. To this extent, I also make use of the script, where needed, which the poet

kindly shared with me. The discussions pertaining to the spatial negotiations of the show are, nonetheless, informed by my attendance of the live performance.

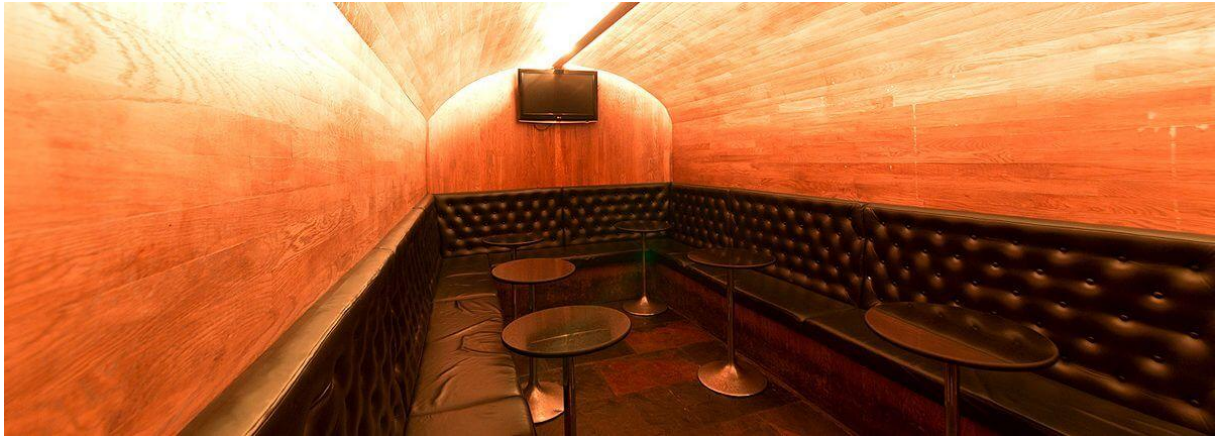


Figure 32 Venue for *Why Am I Doing This?* – one of the caves at Whistle Binkies. (Courtesy: Whistle Binkies)

Stephen Durkan is a Glasgow-based writer, spoken word artist, and musician who grew up in small Scottish town called Saltcoats. As a musician, he blends spoken word poetry with electronic post-punk, which has led to his EP *The Stories We Tell Ourselves About Ourselves*. *Why Am I Doing This?* is an auto/biographical show about Durkan’s journey of becoming a working-class artist as he moves from the small post-industrial town of Saltcoats to Glasgow to his final ascent to the ranks of an Oxford student. As the poet describes it in a social media post, the show consists of

stream-of-consciousness spoken word mixed with elements of theatre, music, and comedy. There will be harrowing tales of working in call centres, the existential rollercoaster of wanting to be a working-class artist, and some Glaswegian Zen wisdom, all in service of the overwhelming question: Why Am I Doing This? (Instagram)

At the Free Fringe performance in Whistle Binkies, as we gathered in the small “cave”, the poet came in to introduce himself, told us that the show would start soon, and left the room. He re-entered the room, already in the performance persona, and exclaimed: “In the beginning was the word and the word was why” (0:00:09). This signalled to the audience that the performance had already begun. The show also begins similarly in the recording from the Poetry Club performance, where the poet, already on the stage, voices the opening line. The poet continues

this ‘stream-of-consciousness’ musing for a while, before proceeding to the first poem, entitled “A Day in the Life of a Modern Man”. The show begins on a rather austere note of feeling desolate and discontent with life from a young age. The venue, an underground room of a bar, appeared to be an ideal location for the account. The space sets the mood for Durkan’s narration of his childhood in Saltcoats, where he discovered his love for music and disapproval of the establishment. The underground setup then reflects the poet’s love for alternative cultures. The poet also registers his disapproval of societal norms of respectability:

We don’t need a dictator /
Twats on the street are our secret police /
Making sure everybody stays in their lane /
contorting our bodies in the sanctioned fashion (0:18:03–0:18:11)

There is an echo of punk aesthetics in these lines, heightened by the performance space of the Whistle Binkies. As the narrative proceeds, the poet’s discontent with normative conventions of Saltcoats grows, which instigates his move to Glasgow: “That’s where things are happening. Live music. Art. Culture. Drugs. Pubs. Clubs. Yeah, that’s where we need to be” (0:19:07–0:19:14). Soon he finds himself occupied with pubs and booze, with a dreary job in a call centre:

I am on the phone /
All day /
They watch me /
On the phone /
They make sure I don’t log off /
On the phone /
They make sure I don’t disable the line /
All Day /
We need to stick to the script /
9 till 5 /
I need permission to urinate /
On the phone /
Talk to my colleagues seated beside me /
In between calls /
All day (0:28:46–0:29:03)

The crispness of the verse generates a sense of panic and urgency while repetition suggests the mundaneness of his work routine. The short, curt refrain of “On the phone / All day” dredges up in one’s mind the image of a lacklustre desk job. The crispness of the verse in the setting of a dark and clustered underground room affects resonance, potentially affecting a sympathetic response in the audience. The plot continues, the theme of survival in a soulless company and a neoliberal world persists: “I was contractually obliged to believe the big company over the little person / The logo over the flesh” (Unpublished script³⁹, 0:30:05–0:30:11 on video). The tension builds until one day, the poet informs the audience, he quits his job. Circumstances change for the worse as he soon finds himself in a jail cell overnight after an evening out, drinking. This is, however, the turning point in the show. The poet discloses that this moment inspired him to change course, until one day he found himself:

In a room that is impossibly ornate /
I’m wearing a gown? /
The University of Oxford /
I didn’t see it coming either /
[...]
A barely believable plot twist /
So how does that happen then? (0:42:52–0:43:14)

The poet then explains his move to the city of Oxford, attendance of night classes, and later acceptance into the University of Oxford. In Oxford, the poet also found his inclination for writing poetry and got nominated for a poetry prize, leading to his career as a working-class poet. Here, the poet ponders: ‘why is he doing this?’ — this being poetry and performance. In a meta-moment, Durkan exclaims: “I do this to perform these manufactured thoughts in places like this / back rooms of dingy pubs / no offense” (0:55:40–0:55:47). This indeed is a full circle moment. From getting drunk in pubs to performing poetry in them, the poet has supposedly come a long way. Yet somehow the destination is the same. The significance of Durkan’s journey from Saltcoats to Glasgow and Oxford appears admittedly stark in the small cave of Whistle Binkies. This effect was accentuated by the minimal stage design of the show. A small box full of diaries and notes, a headset, a portable speaker and guitar were the only props the poet used. There was no additional scenography. The show had a DIY quality to it. Due to the

³⁹ In this instance, the performance text follows the script.

starkness of the setup, we, as audience members, were completely focused on Durkan's embodied performance.

Durkan used the space of the tiny room freely. The room had a rectangular setup, where there were cushioned sofas on three walls and an empty spot near the fourth. This became Durkan's temporary performance area. Since there was no elevated stage, it opened the whole space for the poet to move in between the makeshift performance area and the section where the audience were seated. At one point of the show, the poet sat in the open spot next to me while delivering a segment about the utility of performing poetry. In the moment, the performance text was experienced like an informal conversation, not a staged bit. On this flexibility, the poet says: "that intimate sort of feeling really worked for certain parts of the show and made it very, sort of real and very lo-fi and [added] kind of DIY sort of aesthetic to it [...] which is pretty cool." (Durkan 0:30:22–0:30:45). The scratchy alternative essence of the plot and the performance were reinforced by the venue and the performance space, which affected how we experienced the show. This rough and underground quality was not merely an aesthetic choice, however; it was informed by the poet's material circumstances. As a working-class poet, Durkan opted to debut his show in the Free Fringe due to economic constraints. Owing to its free and voluntary nature, the PBH Free Fringe assigns venues to the performers based on their requirements. The venue is not paid, neither is the artist. However, the artist also does not need to pay to perform as part of the PBH Free Fringe, a consideration much different from the rising costs of performing at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. This is how the poet was allotted the Whistle Binkies cave as a venue. Having seen the venue, Durkan had to reimagine or scale down the show, to fit the constraints of the space, as he tells me in our interview:

So Whistlebinkies — that was a case of... I had an idea for a show in my head which was quite expansive and once I realised that the room I was going to be performing in was the size of a cupboard, then I had to make adjustments. Once I got over the grief of 'oh this idea in my head isn't gonna quite gonna be the thing it is', I started doing the important work of bringing my dream into reality, and shaving away the edges, and sort of killing some darlings, and working with it — which brings some interesting creative sort of, you know, outcomes. (0:26:45–0:27:34)

The adaptability of plot and stage design, an intrinsic attribute of spoken word theatre, made the performance at the Whistle Binkies effective, even as the poet was dissatisfied with the venue. In our conversation, Durkan later joked about the venue: "If you are a real estate agent,

you would call it intimate or, you know, cosy. If you are less inclined, you would call it very small and claustrophobic” (0:29:39–0:29:50). However, the small, constrained atmosphere of the ‘cave’ emphasised the theme of feeling trapped well in the performance. The dystopian, mundane narrative thread running through the show found resonance in this window-less small setup. In a way, the space created conditions for audience members to experience the show up close and personal, as the distance between performer and spectator barely existed. The auto/biographical, intimate narrative and the DIY performance design of the show demonstrate the formal and spatial adaptability of spoken word theatre, even when it is performed in a “small and claustrophobic” underground venue.

4.3 Spoken Word Theatre on the Mainstream Stage

While Edinburgh Fringe and other similar festivals are popular grounds for the performance of spoken word theatre, the art form has a history of appropriating mainstream theatre stages with a DIY ethos. Two of the earliest spoken word theatre shows — Roger Robinson’s *Shadow Boxer* (2000) and Lemn Sissay’s *Something Dark* (2004) — were staged in London’s Battersea Arts Centre and Manchester’s Contact Theatre respectively. Even in spaces that maintain a traditional stage-auditorium dynamic and uphold the performer-spectator divide, practitioners of spoken word theatre find ways to break the fourth wall. The stage design is often modest, boasting a bare stage aesthetic that circumscribes the affective potential of the performance. Where the production involves a complex spatial and technological setup, poets adopt strategies and props that help the shows to maintain a raw, handcrafted quality that echoes spoken word’s grassroots origin and DIY aesthetic. An example of such stage manipulation is found in Malaika Kegode’s *Outlier* (2021). Performed on Bristol Old Vic’s main stage, the show employs an unpretentious, DIY set design which projects simplicity, even when it is not necessarily the case. In the following section, I undertake a detailed analysis of the show’s spatial design to illuminate its influence on the performance’s reception.

4.3.1 Malaika Kegode’s *Outlier*

Malaika Kegode is an award-winning writer, poet, performer and theatre maker based in Bristol. Her spoken word theatre show *Outlier*, which centres themes of isolation, addiction, mental health and their impact on young people’s friendships, was commissioned by and premiered at Bristol Old Vic in June 2021. The film I analyse is from this run at the Bristol Old Vic, offered

to me by the poet. The film is a professional edited adaptation of the show's livestreams across two days. Set in rural Devon, the show is performed in collaboration with the prog-rock band Jakabol, with animation and production design by Chris Harrison, lighting design by Joe Price, stage design by Rebecca Wood, direction by Jenny Davies and dramaturgy support by Marietta Kirkbride, who is also the violinist for the band. Suffice it is to say the production is a medium-scale one, with a sophisticated spatial and technological design.

The show, which is two-hour-long, opens with an extended music set by Jakabol which merges effortlessly into Kegode's performance of a poem, as she enters stage right. This introductory poem, performed in a measured pace, creates a sombre effect, contrasting the heavy acoustic experience of the band's set prior. The lilting quality of the performed verse accompanied by a steady beat and instrumental music establishes the poetic bent of the show. The opening lines set the premise of the performance:

When I think about it now, it doesn't feel like a dream.
It feels real still, as though I could turn around a corner
and just find myself back there.
As though time and place were the same thing.
And my phone might start ringing, and it's one of them,
so I'd walk down the lane to meet them,
we'd pick up where we left off
and keep on walking...
There's not much else to do but walk around here.
The sky is painfully big, but our worlds were small, our lives little.
So when we found each other in the muddle of it all,
found some quiet understanding in the grey and green
that feeling of belonging was addictive.

(Script⁴⁰ 2; 0:09:56–0:10:51 on video)

The isolation experienced by the characters later in the plot is foreshadowed in this opening poem, revealed in lines such as "The sky is painfully big, but our worlds were small". Since the poem follows an explosive set by Jakabol, it has a calming, grounding effect. This effect is also

⁴⁰ I have both the script and the published book of *Outlier*. In this instance, I am quoting the script.

intensified by the stage design of the show. The cosiness of the set, the poet's calming presence and soothing voice, the warmth of lighting effects intimacy.



Figure 33 Performer positions and setup. *Outlier*, 2021. (Screenshot)



Figure 34 Stage design. *Outlier*, 2021. (Screenshot)

The stage design of *Outlier* with its rugged visual aesthetic belies its intricate conceptualisation. Consisting of old warm-toned rugs hung in the backdrop, which also serve

as a screen for Chris Harrisson to project his animation on, an old red sofa, and lamps of different kinds, shapes and sizes projecting warm light into the performance space, the stage design generates the warmth and familiarity intrinsic to the show's plot. The poet takes centre stage while the band is positioned behind her in the background (fig. 33 and 34). Each band member embraces the role of a central character, or in the case of guitarist Joe Williams, several characters. None of them, however, are admittedly acting. As Kegode informs the audience at the start of the show:

I want to tell you a story. It's a true story, it's my story. And because it's true and because it's mine, sometimes it's a bit hard for me to tell. So, I brought some friends along with me to help me tell it. [...] Now, we are not actors. And all the people we are gonna talk about tonight — they are real people. So, we are not gonna pretend to be them, we are not gonna act this out in a traditional sense. These guys — they've just been kind enough to lend their voices to help our story to come to life. (0:13:25–0:14:08)

The confessional nature of this disclaimer further heightens the intimacy between the performers and audience members, leading them to perceive the show as authentic (Ailes). The engagement consequently is felt on a less abstract, more personal level. Further, in her 2025 artist talk at the University of Vienna, Kegode explained that when it came to lighting and animation, each character was coded using different hues and shapes that represented their intrinsic traits and qualities. This form of design strategy can deepen visual engagement with the performance. These artistic details were, however, originally designed for a smaller space. Initially envisioned as a small-scale show for the recently built studio space at Bristol Old Vic and performed as an hour-long scratch version there in 2020, the final version had to be reconceptualised in the aftermath of the pandemic. As Kegode informed me in our interview in October 2023, which was conducted in Bristol Old Vic itself, that developing the show to cater to a socially distanced audience was a key consideration for the team. The studio space was too small to create a socially distanced show in a meaningful way and would have accommodated very few people. The bar area/foyer space was another candidate for the performance but was ultimately eliminated due to its design. The open windows of the space allow passersby to look in, which would have created potential discomfort in vulnerable moments for the poet. Additionally, the space would not have allowed for the incorporation of animation. The final contender was the main stage, albeit the space behind the safety curtains on the stage which is deep enough to hold performers and audience members (fig. 35). However, the Old Vic's then

artistic director Tom Morris offered the main stage and the whole auditorium to Kegode for the show which, as she remarks, “was this massive step up that none of us were expecting” (Kegode 0:36:52). The Bristol Old Vic main stage comprises of a colossal Georgian auditorium whose origins date back to 1776 (“The Building”; fig. 35 and 36). As a conventional theatre space, it digresses from the usual underground venues in which poet-practitioners perform their DIY shows today. However, *Outlier* has regularly been performed on big theatre stages. What is more, the show constantly plays and negotiates with the performance space. In 2024, the show was performed at Theatre Royal Plymouth. Kegode notes in our interview that a studio version of the show is also in the works.

The narrative is mostly set in rural Devon, where the poet grew up. The scenes shift between house parties, the four characters’ bedrooms, and rural outdoors and working-class neighbourhoods of Devon. These settings are represented in the illustrations by Chris Harrison. The warm, cozy aesthetic embedded in the narrative is also brought into the stage design of the show. As the show’s set designer, Rebecca Wood, informed me in our interview, budget was allocated especially to bring the homely atmosphere of the plot onto the stage (see also fig. 34):

So part of our budget for that was that I felt really, really clear that we needed to bring as much domesticity out into the theatre as possible, which meant that we were kind of draping rugs and throws over the sides of the boxes. We were putting lamps anywhere that there was a plug socket. There were plants that we popped all over the venue, which was a bit of a pain because we had to kind of keep taking them outside for sunlight. (0:11:01–0:11:39)

As stated earlier, the homely effect of the set design reflects the cosiness imbued in the plot and its narration, mainly through Kegode’s poetry performance. The warm undertones of the stage area echo Kegode’s soft, grounding presence on stage; her position is mostly central. The poet, however, freely moves around the space at regular intervals. She dances and walks about or remains still, depending on the emotional remit of a moment or a scene. The stage lighting responds similarly to emotionally charged moments, to complement Kegode’s performance. In moments of joy, the lighting makes the stage appear open and warm; in sombre moments, the spotlight shifts to Kegode’s embodied presence, and the stage appears to close in on the poet.



Figure 35 The Bristol Old Vic main stage extended area behind the safety curtains. (Courtesy: Bristol Old Vic)



Figure 36 The Bristol Old Vic main stage auditorium. (Courtesy: Bristol Old Vic)

The light on band members dims, while they remain on stage, playing music that heightens the moment's affect. The focus on the poet shifts how audiences perceive the moment and the performance space. One such moment appears just before the interval in the show, which signifies a climactic moment in the plot. Here, kneeling on stage, with the spotlight upon her, Kegode narrates an episode where Oskar, the protagonist's boyfriend, overdoses at a house party:

I am reeling /
and ringing and Oskar's not /

breathing or I'm not /
 breathing or /
 we're not /
 breathing /
 I clamber over to him and press my lips to his /
 when you breathe into someone's mouth /
 their chest swells like a balloon /
 have you ever felt /
 a body feel inanimate? /
 feel like material? /
 I can breathe into him the way they do in films /
 I have no idea what I'm doing /
 just feel his body bloat /
 under my hands /
 until he jerks up /
 throws up on my hands /
 glares at me /
 and falls straight back to sleep again /
 and I /
 am leaning against the toilet bowl /
 body buzzing
 swaying nauseous, giddy rhythms, I /
 watch him sleep /
 listen to the music /
 as it continues seeping in through the door (0:57:16–0:58:20⁴¹)

The staccato effect generated by the performed verse, where the poet voices her distress through uneven rhymes, elongating the enunciation of words such as “reeling”, “ringing”, “breathing”, to draw attention to them, intensifies the emotional charge of the moment. As the poet kneels, disjointed, on the stage, the fractured text and irregular stresses, accompanied by a higher pitch, affects a sense of panic in the performance. This moment is complemented by a singular

⁴¹ In this instance, the performance deviates slightly from the script.

spotlight focused on the poet, which heightens its climatic quality. The backdrop turns blue, perhaps to signify the gloominess of the incident (see fig. 37):



Figure 37 Kegode kneels on stage against a black & blue backdrop, as the spotlight shines on her. *Outlier*, 2021. (Screenshot)

The spatial design of the show extends beyond the stage area and into the audience. It included taking out the front rows and replacing them with old sofas bought on Facebook marketplace to create a cosy, rugged, homely atmosphere. As Kegode informed us in a conversation with students at the University of Vienna in 2025:

We took out the front rows, that was like an *Outlier* themed revision. And our director Jenny fought the good fight. 'Cause when you tell a theatre, especially a traditional theatre like that, we want you to take out 5 rows so we can put some old sofas in that we found in, like, a reclamation centre, they are like — 'absolutely not!' (Artist Interaction 2025)

The purpose of this modification of the audience space was to create a more inclusive setup, to make the space less intimidating. In *Theatre Audiences*, Susan Bennett remarks that “proximity to, and visibility of, the stage is usually proportionate to the price paid for the seat. The cheapest seats are farthest away, often with a restricted view, and distance their occupants not only from the stage action but from the rest of the paying audience” (132). *Outlier* challenges these social and economic codes of theatre spectatorship. Kegode informs us that the sofas were the

cheapest seats on the programme, subverting the usual custom of front row seats being the most expensive, in order to unsettle the spatial politics at play. Kegode expands:

It's still a kind of space that you walk into [...] you're like whoa this is proper, this is proper theatre [...] And we wanted to break that down and be like, we are in this space, and we've made it like a little living room [...] We want this to reach out into the audience and for them to feel comfortable as well. [...] And I think and hope that what that did is make people feel more at ease in that space. And when you're more at ease, you're more able to take in the story — like interact with the story in whatever way feels right to you. (Artist Interaction 2025)

The cosiness of a living room is well replicated in the set, and its intimacy and warmth are experienced by audiences viewing the film version of the show as well. At the screening of *Outlier* hosted at Villa Vida Café Vienna, several audience members remarked on the cosy and warm stage design which brought the performance closer to home, where the audiences experienced the show intimately and resonated with the characters on a deeper, personal level (“Outlier Movie Night”). The spatial politics is further disrupted by placing a sofa off stage near the audience area, where Kegode comes down and sits to interact with the audience in one instance (fig. 38). During this segment, the poet shares an anecdote about breaking her back during rehearsals:

So, the first week of the run, I completely threw out my back by turning around. I just turned one day and my back went ‘nope, nope’. You aren’t 18 anymore. You can’t be turning around. You gotta face in one direction your whole life. And I kept sitting on this chair but now look at me. (*Outlier* 33:06–33:24)

Kegode’s admission of why she sits on the sofa elicits an empathetic response from audience members. The off-stage area is specifically designed to bleed the performance space into the spectator area and close the distance between the two in order to break the fourth wall. As the poet exclaims at the beginning of the show, “There is no fourth wall here, I can reach out and touch you!” (0:13:00–0:13:02).



Figure 38 Kegode sitting on a sofa off-stage and interacting with the audience. *Outlier*, 2021. (Screenshot)

When Kegode and her production team attempt to retain the DIY aesthetic of the show conceived for a smaller studio space, they also break the social encoding of the theatre space. By manipulating the norms of theatregoing, through cheap front row tickets on second-hand sofas, the team tried to mitigate the elitist conventions of theatre-going associated with traditional theatres like Bristol Old Vic. For two hours, *Outlier*, through stage design as well as Kegode and Jakabol's performance, firstly, attempts to emulate the aesthetics of a working-class living room of rural Devon, and secondly, turns the theatre space from a social (and socially distanced) space to a community space of gathering, emulating the contours of a home. The living room aesthetic of the performance bleeds into the auditorium, affecting a cosy communal spirit, a domesticity — one that was felt even during film screenings, thereby demonstrating the show's heterotopic potential. *Outlier*, thus, serves as an example of how spoken word theatre appropriates mainstream theatre stages while negotiating or disrupting the spatial politics imbibed within.

4.5 Chapter Summary

Spoken word theatre encompasses the potential for spatial adaptability. This potential is demonstrated by the three case studies undertaken in this chapter. The spatial adaptability allows performances to be staged in a range of venues, from the big traditional stage of Bristol

Old Vic to the party cave of the Whistlebinkies, a gig-hosting underground pub in Edinburgh, at PBH's Free Fringe. The spatial adaptability is woven into the performance design of a show and is rooted in the art form's DIY ethos. Spatial adaptability and spoken word theatre's appropriation of alternative spaces in fringe settings also demonstrates the art form's heterotopic potential. In Laura Thurlow's *River Time!*, the negotiations of space become apparent through the poet's control of a small square elevated stage. In Stephen Durkan's *Why Am I Doing This?*, spatial adaptability arrives by delimiting the makeshift stage area and extending the performance space into the spectator's area, all the while appropriating an underground party room. Spoken word theatre's spatial adaptability is further reflected in the complex medium-scale production of Malaika Kegode's *Outlier*, whose spatial design attempts to subvert theatrical conventions by replacing front row seats with second-hand sofas and pricing them the cheapest. Of course, the spatial adaptability of spoken word theatre is also tied to economic considerations. In self-funded shows, minimal design and spatial malleability becomes a requisite. However, even in shows such as *Outlier*, flexibility is a key consideration in spatial design, for ease of performance and touring. Overall, the chapter demonstrates how space is negotiated, adapted and manipulated by poets in spoken word theatre, creating conditions for a heterotopic experience.

5. Spoken Word Theatre Online: After COVID-19

Everything has always-already been virtual.

Matthew Causey, *Theatre and
Performance in Digital Culture*

To imagine that the theatre may be on the verge of giving itself up to the digital amounts to either the worst possible threat or a much-desired revolutionary promise.

Bill Blake, *Theatre and the Digital*

During the first lockdown from around April to the summer of 2020, the digital crept into theatre and, as many argued, resurrected it from the dead.

Heidi Lucja Liedke, “Ecologies
of Care in a Digital Age”

The world of live performance came to a standstill in early 2020 due to social distancing guidelines and lockdown regulations implemented to mitigate the outbreak of COVID-19 worldwide. The cultural sector took a hit in terms of cancelled events, lost jobs and precarious working conditions. Underscoring the severity of the situation, Maria Chatzichristodoulou et al. in “Covid-19: Theatre Goes Digital — Provocations” detail the pandemic’s⁴² impact on EU’s cultural sector:

Data analysis shows that, in the EU, arts and recreation was the 2nd worst hit sector by Covid restrictions based on people employed and hours worked (European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies 2021, 26). In the UK, more than 15,000 theatrical performances were cancelled over the first twelve weeks of lockdown, resulting in a loss of more than £303

⁴² While there have been several pandemics throughout history, in this chapter, “pandemic” always implies COVID-19, owing to the ambit of the study.

million in box office revenue. (GOV.UK 2021) According to a study undertaken by Rurale et al. (2020, 5) the Covid pandemic reduced live performances by an average of 56.12% in venues across Italy, France, Germany, Spain, UK and USA in 2020 compared to the year before, and revenues dropped by a comparative 51.32% at the same time. (1)

Under exceptional circumstances of precarity, as demonstrated by the data provided by Chatzichristodoulou et al., spoken word theatre had to quickly adapt to the performance conditions of a time then categorised as the “new normal” in order to mitigate losses. Practitioners in the UK staging spoken word theatre shows reconfigured their performances to online settings, shifting to conferencing and broadcasting platforms such as Zoom and YouTube to retain their gig commitments and livelihoods. This strategy aligned with the art form’s DIY ethos and spatial adaptability, phenomena discussed in the previous chapter. As noted in Chapter 4, since its inception, the form of spoken word theatre has been malleable to the spaces it occupies, often inhabiting unconventional venues, public spaces and makeshift stages. The COVID-19 pandemic created conditions for performances to take over the virtual stage. But how did spoken word theatre adapt itself to the digitally mediated lockdown world of COVID-19? How were virtual platforms utilised to disseminate performances when most physical spaces, including the makeshift ones occupied by spoken word theatre generally, were closed down or allowed only distanced presence? What were the affordances and discontents of spoken word theatre’s move online? How was the question of access negotiated? In this chapter, I answer these questions by tracing the digital and online/virtual scope of spoken word theatre, exploring shows that employed various creative strategies to cater to online audiences during the pandemic.

By invoking theatre’s move to digital, my intention is not to revisit the debates on liveness and mediation. Scholars in the field of poetry performance are already investigating the implications of liveness in digital spoken word (see Palzer). I rather concern myself with the various strategies adopted by poets to adapt their work online. To this end, I first unpack the scope of digital theatre and performance as well as online theatre — the latter being a subtype of the former; I then explore briefly the manifestations of both in spoken word theatre, following with the art form’s adaptation to online platforms in 2020 upon the outbreak of COVID-19 worldwide. Here, I also engage with scholarship on theatre productions of the pandemic, in manifestations such as theatre of lockdown and online theatre. I study four strategies that poets

deployed to adapt and reframe their shows to the online stage via four case studies⁴³: namely, Mel Bradley’s *Ms Noir’s Seven Deadly Sins* (2020), Rose Condo’s *The Geography of Me* (2020) and *The Empathy Experiment 2.0* (2021), as well as Malaika Kegode’s *Outlier* (2021). While Kegode’s show was also discussed in the last chapter owing to its spatial design, it is important to analyse it here once again to examine its strategy of online dissemination via livestreaming and later adaptation of the stream to an edited film. I also discuss two of Condo’s shows here, owing to the differences in their adaptation strategies. Condo was one of the few poets who quickly adapted her performances to online modes in the early phases of the pandemic (2020–2021). In fact, all of my case studies are taken from the first two years of COVID-19, which led to the gradual opening of theatres and staging of socially distanced *hybrid* performances, as demonstrated by the example of Kegode’s *Outlier*. In each of the case studies, I analyse the affordances and discontents of the adaptation to digital, and conclude by exploring the overall question of access in online spoken word theatre.

5.1 The Digital and the Online

Steve Dixon, in his collaborative work with Barry Smith in *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (2007), offers us a broad definition of the term “digital performance”. In their work, the term is meant to “include all performance works where computer technologies play a *key* role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery forms” (3, emphasis original), ranging from performances incorporating projections “that have been digitally created or manipulated” (3) to works and activities accessed through computer screens, and disseminated via computer games, CD-ROMS, and so on. While the definition itself is almost two decades old, it continues to guide scholarship on digital performance, digital theatre as well as intermediality in theatre. In recent scholarship, Nadja Masura (2020) and Aleksandar Sasha Dundjerovic’ (2023) have both distinguished digital theatre from the expansive remit of digital performance outlined by Dixon. Masura in *Digital Theatre: The Making and Meaning of Live Mediated Performance, US & UK 1990–2020* writes that

⁴³ Parts of this chapter (and two of the case studies) have been taken from two publications; namely, “Digital Spoken Word Theatre in the UK: Navigating the Theatre Screen with Rose Condo’s *The Geography of Me*” in *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, vol. 13, no. 1, and “Spoken Word Theatre and its DIY Potential: Rose Condo’s *The Empathy Experiment* and In the Works’ *The 900 Club*” in Novak, Julia et al., *Contemporary British Poetry Performance in Context – The Event of Poetry*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2026.

Digital Theatre can be defined as demonstrating the synthesis of coexistence of “live” performers and audiences with digital media in a manner which contains spoken words or narrative elements and limited interactivity/participation. It thus retains a limited distinction of performer/audience roles. Digital Theatre utilizes both the strengths of human connection found between “live” performers and their co-present audience, and the flexibility and global reach of digitally processed data. (8, emphasis original)

Masura expressly limits the scope of digital theatre by invoking liveness and co-presence, such that it only consists of “a ‘live’ performance placing at least some performers in the same shared physical space with an audience” (7). Masura also notes that in digital theatre, audiences observe limited interaction and the content is predominantly shaped by the artists (8). Dundjerovic’ in *Live Digital Theatre: Interdisciplinary Performative Pedagogies* remarks that “*Digital Theatre*, as a generic name, refers to the use of digital technology used in making and representing live theatre, opera and dance. It is commonly used to describe the streaming of recorded live performances on film or for television for audience entertainment” (6). Here too, the focus is on physical co-presence, in some sense, in that the presence of artists and some audiences in a shared space is implicit in the recording of the live performance. It is important to note here that both scholars are concerned with live digital theatre — that is, theatre performed in a physical space in the presence of some audiences which is simultaneously livestreamed or recorded for dissemination online. This chapter, however, is concerned with shows performed in the initial phase of COVID-19, with lockdowns in place worldwide, where physical co-presence was not yet possible for artists and audiences in most cases.

Scholarship on intermediality in theatre, as has been discussed in Chapter 3, has taken a digital turn since the 2000s with Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt’s assertion of theatre being a hypermedium. They locate intermediality at the intersection of performers, audiences, the different art forms deployed in a performance, and the use of digital technologies, thereby positioning digital as a vital component of theatre (24). This critical digital turn rises from theatre’s sustained experimentations with digital technologies, going back to late twentieth century, for example, in George Coates’s work in 1970s San Francisco, where the artist “began integrating early webcams and internationally telematic performances into his productions” (“Discontents” 12), as Sarah Bay-Cheng notes, or, in the online performance of “*Hamnet*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*”, which “premiered in December 1993 by the *Hamnet* players under the direction of Stuart Harris via Internet Relay Chat (IRC), a type of text-based

chat room” (*Adapting the Theatrical* 60), as Chen writes. The digital is a continuation of theatre’s enduring play with new technologies, Dixon argues:

Digital performance is an extension of a continuing history of the adoption and adaptation of technologies to increase performance and visual art’s aesthetic effect and sense of spectacle, its emotional and sensorial impact, its play of meanings and symbolic associations, and its intellectual power. (*Digital Performance* 40)

If digital performance, and its offshoot digital theatre, is a continuation of theatre’s sustained experimentation with new and evolving technologies, online theatre — a subtype of digital performance — arrived at the juncture when internet was becoming an everyday phenomenon for the masses. As soon as developments in website interfaces and file sharing technologies emerged in the 1990s, theatre found itself a new home in the “cyberspace” and the mode of virtual performance proliferated, or as Dixon writes:

the range of “virtual drama” sites on the Web became surprisingly extensive, and within a decade, vast. As website technology developed the range of performance-related sites not only increased but also brought with them new concepts such as “virtual drama,” “online performance,” “theatrical chat programs,” “immersive storytelling,” “virtual characters,” “avatars,” and “vips” (virtually independent people). The Virtual Drama Society first established its Web presence in 1996 ... (460)

If we take this decades-long boom in online performances into consideration, theatre’s appropriation of our device screens in-lieu of a physical stage during COVID-19 does not seem incongruous. “Online theatre”, which is also sometimes called “virtual theatre”, though the latter also consists of theatre mediated through virtual reality, which is not the remit of this chapter, engages spectatorship through the online mode, more commonly using livestreaming or video conferencing software and other web technologies. The trajectory of online theatre using videoconferencing programmes, as Chen notes in her doctoral thesis, can be traced back to an early example in

George Coates’ *The Nowhere Band* (1994), a musical piece about a magical bird. During the performance, four musicians played simultaneously from different locations in the Bay Area and Australia and were projected on a stage screen for an audience in San Francisco via CU-SeeMe” (*Adapting the Theatrical* 69)

Since this early experimentation in the 1990s, online theatre, especially when disseminated through videoconferencing programmes, has become ubiquitous. This has also been the case for spoken word poetry, which has arguably exhibited a higher inclination towards digital technologies and online dissemination than traditional performance forms and theatre. This bent towards the digital will be explored in the next section.

5.2 Digital Experimentations in Poetry Performance

Digital technologies have been increasingly utilised in spoken word poetry over the years, where poets have incorporated various digital strategies for production and dissemination in both performances of individual poems and long-form shows, revealing an intermedial artistic proclivity in their work. Henrik Wehmeier and Clara Cosima Wolff open their “Introduction” to *Audioliterary Poetry between Performance and Mediatization* (2024) thus:

Poetry in the digital age is experiencing a surprising surge in popularity, aided by its various performative formats and closely linked to processes of mediatization. Recordings and streamings of poetry slam and spoken word events are uploaded and shared on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, attracting large audiences. At the same time, experimental approaches — for example, in sound poetry — use media and technology as compositional means in various ways to produce innovative work, fostered by the many possibilities offered by digitality. (1)

The online modes of dissemination, as outlined by Wehmeier and Wolff, offer poets access to broader audiences. Concomitantly, digital technologies offer poets tools to reinvigorate their performance work and reimagine the aesthetics and meaning making process of their performed poetry. From animation, text and image projections (the visual) to sound manipulation (the sonic), digital technologies have played a key role in poetry performance experimentations as well as spoken word theatre. As David Devanny posits in “Speaking with Machines and Machines that Speak: Spoken Word and Digital Performance Poetry”, digital spoken word, and by extension digital spoken word theatre, “implies not just the use of computers in producing or documenting performances but the intrinsic use of computational media as part of the performance” (400).

Notable examples of digital spoken word performances, as Devanny cites, include poet and performer cris cheek's *Backlit* (2012), "which features performed spoken word alongside a series of community-generated digital art projected onto the bare back of the performers body" (402). Additionally, digital spoken word also manifests in the form of technologically modified voice and sound, as in the case of Mark Leahy's *Subject to Gesture* (2017), created in collaboration with Ben Duvall, where "Mark's spoken word poetry is digitally distorted and mixed with treated guitars and drum in a live context" (Devanny 402). In the context of spoken word theatre, digitally augmented sound poetics features heavily in Hannah Silva's show *Total Man* (2014), where they use a looping device and sound technologies in their performance. Animation has also been an intrinsic part of a few long-form shows such as *Shame* (2013) by John Berkavitch, *Too Pretty to Punch* (2019) by Edalia Day, and *Outlier* (2021) by Malaika Kegode. In the latter case, animation was part of Kegode's show since its inception before the outbreak of COVID-19. In all of the shows, animation not only features as an aesthetic component but also contributes to the meaning-making process, as has been discussed in detail for Berkavitch's show in Chapter 3. While in *Shame*, animation plays an important role by suggesting the location and setting of the performance and contextualising individual poems and anecdotes, in *Outlier*, animation sometimes replaces the oral, such that, instead of a verbally stated phrase or question, what follows is a text animation projected in the backdrop and accompanied by music/drums. In *Too Pretty to Punch*, animated video projections are intrinsically tied to the plot's progression, where, on occasion, an illustrated version of the poet is in dialogue with the poet live on stage. This animation was designed by Day herself. While these examples outline experimentations with digital in poetry performances, the digital plays a key role in disseminating spoken word performances too through the online/virtual mode.

Spoken word performances are regularly livestreamed and recorded online via streaming services as well as social media platforms. Livestreamed events have gained popularity for both spoken word theatre and other forms of poetry performance, and national-level spoken word events across the UK are often livestreamed. For instance, the finals of Hammer and Tongue National Poetry Slam are streamed via Facebook; whereas UniSlam relays its event via YouTube (Pfeiler, "Popularising Poetry"). Further, "[o]nline platforms like YouTube, Spotify, Soundcloud, or Bandcamp contain the whole range of sound poetry: recorded live performances and streams, studio recordings [...] as well as sound and audio poetry" (10), observe Wehmeier and Wolff. Elsewhere I have noted how poets often maintain self-archives (Banerji, "Wonder of the Archive") by keeping a record of their performances and/or uploading corresponding videos online. Many poets and cultural producers disseminated recordings of

spoken word theatre shows through platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo even before the pandemic: for example, both Berkavitch's and Day's shows are uploaded in their entirety to YouTube, while Hannah Silva's *Total Man* is found on Vimeo. In this case, if digital technologies have been such a key element for the production and dissemination of poetry performance generally, and spoken word theatre particularly, it is important to study how the conditions of productions and dissemination were altered at the onset of COVID-19. This change can be studied against theatre's move online in 2020 more generally.

5.3 The Impact of COVID-19: Theatre Goes Online

Focusing on the 2020–21 season of theatrical performances, Barbara Fuchs charts the rise of online performances during the COVID-19 pandemic and terms it “theater of the lockdown”. Outlining the possibilities that this new genre of theatre offered practitioners during the early years of the pandemic, Fuchs delineates:

Though born of necessity, recent productions offer a new world of practice, from plays on Zoom, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitch, to enhancement via lenses and augmented reality, to urban distanced theater that enlivens streetscapes and building courtyards. Based largely outside the commercial theater, these productions transcend geographic and financial barriers to engage new audiences, while offering much needed, though limited, support for artists. (Theater of Lockdown 1–2)

The adaptation to online modes was, indeed, a move born out of necessity, and hence became a mode of survival, rather than one of innovation. As Chatzichristodoulou et al. observe: “Digital practices, which used to belong to the fringes of performance experimentation, seeped into the mainstream, informing the very nature of theatre and performance as we know it” (“Theatre Goes Digital” 2). The authors further call this a “‘forced’ marriage between performance and technology” (2) in some cases, bringing into focus the extraordinary nature of this adaptation to digital. In the context of the UK, the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the already underway funding cuts to arts, “exacerbate[ed] the threat to live theatre” (Dundjerovic’ 8), and so moving theatre online was not as much an artistic choice. While theatres faced aggravated precarity, since “the British theatre industry is much less supported by public funding and relies heavily on ticket sales and commercial sources” (Chen 123), the effect on individual practitioners and freelance artists was potentially worse. Compounding results from

several studies, Chen offers the following data pertaining to the impact of the first lockdown on British theatre worker:

The first six months after the first national lockdown witnessed 55,000 job losses, about a 30% decline, as well as a significant reduction of working hours in average (O'Brien, et al., 2020). Over 80% of staff were furloughed⁴³ at the beginning of COVID-19, considerably higher than the average proportion (about 20%) in other sectors, including heavily affected hospitality (Brook, et al., 2022). [...] According to Freelancers Make Theatre Work, a community of self-employed and freelance workers in performing arts, freelancers make up 71% of the theatre workforce in the UK, significantly greater than the average percentage of the nation which is 16% (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2021: 15). The figure of theatre freelancers is even higher (88%) according to the 2022 'Freelancers in the Dark' report (Maples et al., 2022: 5). For most project-based and freelance artists, cease of live in-person performance basically means immediate unemployment. The 2021 SOLT survey shows that one in four theatre freelancers responded that they were out of business due to theatre shutdown ... (124–25)

These figures represent the stark reality of the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected independent theatre workers in the UK. It is necessary to study theatre's adaptation to the virtual in conjunction with these figures. Under these conditions, how did theatre practitioners in the UK switch to the online mode? Chen outlines three strategies: "streamed archival productions, Zoom performances and productions filmed in empty theatre venues" (129). Streamed archival productions constituted the online release of previously recorded stage productions by theatre companies. Many traditional theatres employed this strategy to retain some form of stream of income during the pandemic. The second form, that is Zoom performances, became another prominent form where productions were staged from artists' living rooms on livestreaming and videoconferencing platforms, most often Zoom (hence the name). This mode of performance became an arsenal for many smaller companies as well as independent or freelance artists. It certainly became a prominent mode of performance for poets, as will be discussed in the next section. Finally, productions filmed in empty theatres was a strategy that allowed artists and production teams to stage productions in theatre venues and stream them live to audiences at home. Sometimes the productions were not livestreamed but turned into edited films. As far as spoken word theatre is concerned, Ellen

Renton's *Within Sight* (2020), discussed in Chapter 2, falls under this category. I would add the category of hybrid performances to Chen's taxonomy, which, though not purely online, were a significant intervention to theatre produced during early years of COVID-19. In these cases, when "indoor live in-person events were permitted with socially distanced audiences" (Chen 117) in August 2020, many theatre companies and practitioners also chose to simultaneously livestream the productions to local and global audiences, in order to reach broader audiences and mitigate financial losses incurred due to restricted in-person presence. This strategy was also adapted by poets to perform their spoken word theatre productions, as is demonstrated through the case study of Malaika Kegode's *Outlier*. The next section, therefore, outlines some of the ways poets adopted these strategies for their long-form poetry shows in the aftermath of COVID-19.

5.4 Strategies of Adaptation in Online Spoken Word Theatre

Poet-performers and producers of long-form spoken word theatre shows were faced with the same dilemma as theatre practitioners when it came to restrictions imposed on physical venues. As a result, Claire Palzer underscores, they

responded quickly and creatively to the strictures of the pandemic and, through their practices, expanded the definition of liveness in poetry performance and used the structures of livestreaming to explore the shared condition of isolation and social distance enforced upon audiences and performers alike. ("Liveness During the Pandemic" 2)

This quick adaptation to the online mode resonated with spoken word theatre's DIY ethos, as has been discussed throughout this thesis, which espouses a keen sense of adaptability. However, I am mindful to not romanticise this adaptability and the swift move online, as the flexibility is potentially a result of the precarity associated with the art form and the broader genre. Poetry performance is a fairly marginal genre that has not received the institutional support afforded to established forms such as theatre. Additionally, spoken word theatre, a comparatively newer art form, has a more marginal status owing to its limited recognition. Foregrounding this context, it is understandable that the pandemic created deeply precarious conditions for poets. Under such circumstances, poets implemented creative ways to adapt their shows to the "new normal" of the digital screen. In this chapter, I offer a typology of these methods by analysing poets' strategies of adaptation to online modes. Here, four distinct

manifestations of spoken word theatre's adaptation to online settings are represented through the shows *Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins* (2020) by Mel Bradley, *The Geography of Me* (2020) and *The Empathy Experiment 2.0* (2021) by Rose Condo, and finally, *Outlier* (2021) by Malaika Kegode. While *Ms. Noir's Seven Deadly Sins* involved live digital and pre-recorded segments in its performance, *The Geography of Me* was pre-recorded completely while the poet-performer joined live for a Q&A session. *The Empathy Experiment 2.0* was performed live exclusively on Zoom, and *Outlier* was a hybrid performance with a socially distanced audience attending the live in-theatre performance at Bristol Old Vic, and an online audience tuning into its livestream. I discuss each of the shows in detail below.

5.4.1 Mel Bradley's *Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins*

Mel Bradley is “a spoken word artist, writer, playwright/theatre-maker, multimedia artist, designer, actor and activist” (Bradley, “About Me”) based in Northern Ireland. Bradley's *Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins*⁴⁴ is a “one-woman show combining spoken word poetry, storytelling and burlesque” (“Seven Deadly Sins”) and was written over three years. The show was first performed in 2016 and reimagined for the virtual stage as a livestreamed performance utilising pre-recorded material due to various logistical considerations at the onset of COVID-19. A 55-minute show in duration, it entails the character of Ms Noir, a persona adopted by Bradley, narrating seven tales of people involved with or falling prey to the seven deadly sins. Here, Bradley's character, Ms. Noir, is the “Keeper of Keys” in the “Hotel Hell”. The show includes poetry performed live virtually by Bradley and pre-recorded prosaic segments by photographer and artist Denzil Browne, who plays the role of the Caretaker, and whose interludes cater towards audience engagement. The show also features music by Siobhán Sheils.

Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins was scheduled to be performed on Zoom as part of the 2020 Derry Halloween Festival, but on the day of performance, the poet switched platforms due to stability concerns. Consequently, the show was livestreamed on YouTube, where Bradley performed live online from her home, incorporating Browne's pre-recorded interludes which the artist had sent to her earlier. The interludes, though betraying their pre-recorded nature, paradoxically help maintain the liveness of Bradley's performance. During the course of the

⁴⁴ I was introduced to this show by Claire Palzer. With permission from the poet, Palzer also kindly shared the recording of the show with me as well as the show's script. I also draw my observations from her interviews with Mel Bradley conducted in 2022 and 2023.

Caretaker's pre-recorded interludes, Bradley has the opportunity to switch around the DIY sets of her home setup, which she had built with support from set designer Phil Ruddock, as well as change costumes (Palzer "Liveness During the Pandemic"). The transitions are mostly well-timed so that as soon as each of the pre-recorded interludes is finished, Bradley is ready with a new set and/or costume change to continue her live performance. The pre-recorded interludes from Browne thus helped Bradley to seamlessly navigate the changing stage setup and deliver a smooth live performance with effortless transitions, maintaining the flow of the narrative.

The character of the Caretaker is important also in sustaining audience interaction and narrative progression. The show opens with Browne, as the Caretaker, directly addressing the audience in attendance and embarking on a monologue that masquerades as a conversation. Spitting his drink, as if caught unaware, the Caretaker exclaims, "Oh blimey! You're here already!". Looking into the camera lens, thereby symbolically engaging in a conversation with the audience, he proceeds:

Look at this / all your disembodied little heads floating on a screen / the magic
in your world is amazing / that you can come all the way down here / without
leaving the comfort of your own home / suppose you're here for the show
(02:25–02:39)

Interludes like this are scattered throughout the show to engage the audience and help sustain the liveness of Bradley's performance. The poet, in her "Keeper of Keys" persona, delivers us seven cautionary tales around the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, envy, lust, gluttony, wrath, sloth. However, the poet replaces "sloth" with a tale of "peaceful apathy" to make it contemporaneous. The first tale, thematising pride, revolves around a right-wing politician called Dave whose political career is built on a façade of conservative virtues and habitual bigotry. While maintaining a front of a deeply traditional family, behind closed doors, he and his wife have a supposed secret⁴⁵:

Seated high in government ranking
His politics were somewhat calvinistic
Behind closed doors, in private quarters
His preferences were distinctly masochistic

(Unpublished script; 08:09–08:22 on video)

⁴⁵ The passages cited here have been taken from the unpublished script of the show. Where the performance deviates from the script, the performance text has been cited (as is the case for the Caretaker's introduction).

In the course of the tale, through performed poetry, it is revealed that Dave and his wife Martha had several sexual kinks they enjoyed that remained separated from (and at odds with) Dave's political persona. The tale concludes with a rather disgraceful reveal of these kinks, where a police raid along with a camera crew exposes Dave's secret and hence also his hypocrisy. As Dave is found in a "red latex cat suit with the most impossibly high heel shoes" (09:48–09:54) by the raiding party, his political career comes to an end, and his pride takes a terrible fall. The tale ends with Dave's suicide, followed by Martha's success as a "career dominatrix" (10:17).

The second tale is one of greed and introduces the character of a wannabe playboy and wordsmith Jack, who sells his soul to the devil for riches, literary success and admiration. The catch in this deal is that after a period of twenty-four years, Jack must die a torturous death. When the time comes, he indeed regrets it; the tale thus serving as a lesson against selfishness and avarice. The third tale of jealousy revolves around an insecure poet who murders all his competitors at a poetry grand slam. The recurrent use of the artist figure is a fascinating device deployed in the performance. Three out of the seven main characters are artists: a writer, a poet and a musician. The fourth tale of lust is set in a night club. A "roguish rake" approaches a lesbian "ingénue" figure, who rejects his advances and proceeds to the dancefloor to flirt with a woman. In the fifth tale, gluttony is represented through the cannibalistic tendencies of a woman; in the sixth, wrath is invoked through the tale of two women, the best of friends, whose path crosses with a "serial philanderer" Bob. The final tale narrated by Ms Noir's character is one not of sloth, as stated earlier, but of modern-day apathy, about another artist:

Our subject, a talented singer and skilled musician

A regular attendant on the hipster party scene

An ambassador of the motto 'go hard or go home'

Frequently mixing narcotics, cannabis and methamphetamine

(Unpublished script; 45:40–45:55 on video)

Over time, as the central character of the tale grows older, he refuses to let go of his old habits, latching on to patterns of youth. One night, the musician, whom the poet calls Peter Pan teasingly, finds himself in a gathering of "polyamorous nature lovers" (46:45) in the woods, surrounded by "a campfire / Naked dancing, smoke and druggie baked goods" (Unpublished script; 46:46–46:51). As he concludes his song, a young girl, entranced by the music and acting like "a slightly stoned doe" (47:23) catches his attention. Something about her manner is familiar. Regardless, he makes a move ignoring the "nibbling in his psyche" (48:26). At daybreak, when the lovers wake up, and the man looks at the girl's face, the tingling in his head

turns into a screaming siren. As he asks the girl her name and the whereabouts of her mother, the girl narrates the details about her conception, that “her dad [was] some random lover” (49:02–49:05). Here, the central character comes to the horrible realisation that this young girl was in fact his daughter.

All of the seven tales, despite their gruesome or scandalous ending, have a playful air, owing to the show’s situatedness in the burlesque tradition. Burlesque shows have historically “satirized the eternal foibles of mankind — greed, lust, vanity, vengefulness — rather than current events” (Hornby 558). As satire is the strategy of performance, humour arrives alongside horror in the show. “I didn’t say my tales will be pretty” (*Seven Deadly Sins* 51:11–51:14), exclaims the poet as the figure of Ms. Noir, after returning to the reception desk at the end of the seven tales. While indeed disconcerting in plot, the tales are masterfully delivered in verse, following usually the *abcb* rhyme scheme, with pauses that emphasis climactic moments.

The Caretaker’s interventions throughout the show are quite fascinating as well. After the first tale, we find him in-medias-res in a graveyard setting singing a song (fig. 39). After finishing the song, he welcomes audience members again, cautioning one in particular — the unnamed “top left” — to “watch your step” (12:22). Later, after Ms. Noir’s second tale, arrives a taxidermy scene by the Caretaker. Browne is seen stitching close a fox-like creature while offering wisdom on how to do it properly. This thematic format also follows into the next interlude after the third tale where the Caretaker is seen in his workshop, wrapping up body parts, specifically a leg, for the fire whistling. He once again offers advice as to how to do the wrapping of a body part properly, asking audience members for a hand in the process. The double entendre in the segment is clever: insinuating both needing a hand for the fire but also seeking help from the audience members with the task. On supposedly remembering this is an online performance, the Caretaker exclaims: “Ah forgot, bloody virtual presence! It’s no good to anyone, isn’t it?” (25:12–25:15). The exasperation in his tone possibly also echoes the growing discontent people were beginning to experience, having to live their lives mostly online in the aftermath of the pandemic.



Figure 39 Denzil Browne as the Caretaker in a "graveyard" setting. *Ms. Noir's Seven Deadly Sins*, 2020. (Screenshot)

After the fourth tale, the Caretaker is seen taking a lunch break, remarking upon how nothing goes waste in his kitchen, a foreshadowing of the following tale of gluttony. The fifth tale is followed by the Caretaker philosophising on modern-day voyeurism and its manifestation on social media:

The funny thing is ... none of us like being watched. But you lot, you all like doing the watching part. Don't you? Ooh yeah! We're all voyeurs at the end of the day. Isn't that right, Claire? [...] Social media [...] Mindless scrolling. Searching to the minutiae of other people's lives for entertainment. Hmmm. We've got all our secrets ... (37:14–37:41)

With this rant about the audience's voyeuristic tendencies, the sixth tale of wrath is introduced. Between the sixth and the seventh tales, there is no segment by Browne. Instead, we are met with a black screen and silence. It is unclear from the video whether there was supposed to be a part here or whether the performance was supposed to effortlessly segue between the two tales. Regardless, Bradley's interludes throughout the rest of the performance strengthen the horror element of the show through the artist's performance and the scene's visual explicitness. While Bradley's script already laid out segments for the Caretaker to act out, the poet had offered Browne "freedom to rewrite his parts as he felt comfortable" (Palzer, Email Interview), as she notes in an email interview with Claire Palzer. This led Browne to effortlessly enact the Caretaker figure and bring a distinct flair to the character.

The online staging of the show offered both performers geographical and spatial possibilities usually not viable in an on-site performance. Firstly, the recorded interludes by Denzil Browne afforded Bradley time to quickly change the performance spot and move between sets laid out in different corners of her apartment. While set changes are very much part of traditional on-site performances, moving between different spots situated in different corners of a venue, less so. Additionally, due to the recorded nature of Browne's parts, the Caretake figure could easily move between indoor and outdoor locations in the course of the performance. Furthermore, the online mode made it possible for the two artists to collaborate across cities, with Bradley being based in Derry and Browne in Donegal. Finally, the virtual performance allowed audiences from a much wider geographical arena to tune into the show.

An intriguing aspect of *Ms. Noir's Seven Deadly Sins* involves the strategies deployed to engage the audience. From the very beginning, the fourth wall is dispelled as the Caretaker figure opens the show with a direct address to the audience. As detailed earlier, a meta moment is evoked when Browne, as the Caretaker, remarks on the utility and convenience of the online mode, where audience members can tune in from anywhere, including the comfort of their homes. We go back to the artist's opening remark once again: "Look at this / all your disembodied little heads floating on a screen" (02:25–02:30, but also 03:23–03:28, the cause for this repetition is discussed below). This meta commentary responds to the unprecedented circumstances of lockdown that prompted performers to adapt to the conditions of social distancing and create work from their homes to maintain their livelihood.

The move to online also allowed Bradley and Browne to experiment with digital technologies and adapt an intermedial constellation for the show. For instance, the live virtual performance of Bradley interspersed with pre-recorded material from Browne already complicates the traditional notions of liveness associated with physical or on-site performances. The transitions are "almost seamless" (Palzer, "Liveness During the Pandemic") and thereby emphasise the potential for online spoken word theatre to play with conditions of liveness. Interestingly, towards the end of the performance, a conversation between the Caretaker and the Keeper of Keys is staged via a conference call setup between Bradley and Browne. This segment too is pre-recorded, but the phone call was indeed a live conversation that was recorded for the purposes of the show. This strategy of blurring the lines of liveness, of constantly switching between live and pre-recorded elements outlines the possibilities inherent in the virtual mode of performance.

The strategy of straddling between live and pre-recorded, however, also comes with limitations. The transition between live and pre-recorded elements is not always efficient, as has been stated above. At the very start of the performance, the pre-recorded introduction from Browne is restarted three minutes into the show, so that parts of his “performance” are repeated. This disrupts the beginning of the show and would have potentially left the audiences confused by upsetting the narrative progression. These forms of issues plague the performance all through, as is evident in the archival video. For instance, halfway through the show, the video momentarily freezes and then slows down exponentially while the audio carries on, thereby creating a disjunction between the two (37:35–38:32). Later on, in one particular instance, the screen is blacked out for a few moments, with no activity happening, before the performance resumes (44:20–45:22). This prolonged blank space (its effect is extensive though it only lasts a minute) once again unsettles a smooth online performance and can potentially affect audience’s engagement with the show. Moreover, the pre-recorded nature of Browne’s parts betrays the spontaneity emblematic of a live performance. Even when the character of the Caretaker is addressing the audience, the specificity of the script does not correlate to the conditions of the live attendance, as in the introductory segment of the show where the Caretaker supposedly checks the audience’s attire to ascertain they maintain the dress code and decorum of theatregoing. He objects to a variety of supposed transgressions — from the wearing of “trainers” to non-wearing of shirts or even trousers. Yet, due to the livestreamed nature of the show, there is no way to find out what the audience was actually wearing in the comfort of their homes. Additionally, because these segments were recorded for a Zoom performance, they do not make much sense for a YouTube livestream. Unlike Zoom, there is no possibility to see or hear the attendees on a YouTube livestream. Hence, even within the make-believe world of online performances, the interactive elements from the Caretaker’s introduction do not make much sense due to the discrepancy of platform.

A broader issue with online performances may be unintended disruptions by audience members or performers themselves. While digital technology makes interactions in the online world convenient, the potential for slippages and misuse is also always imminent. During the introductory segment by Denzil Browne, a female voice can be heard talking in the background. While it is not clear from the archival video who it could possibly belong to (though it in all possibility is Bradley’s), it undoubtedly serves as a distracting moment in the performance. However, interestingly, these forms of spontaneous moments of imperfections are also a hallmark of on-site live performances, bringing us to one of Claudia Georgi’s defining characteristics of liveness: “the **unpredictability** or risk of imperfection” (*Liveness on Stage* 5,

emphasis original) which shows up even in online live or mixed performances, as in the case of *Ms. Noir's Seven Deadly Sins*.

5.4.2 Rose Condo's *The Geography of Me*⁴⁶

Rose Condo's *The Geography of Me* is an hour-long solo spoken word theatre show, developed with creative support from Chol Theatre and the Lawrence Batley Theatre in 2013. The show toured in the UK and internationally and inhabited a wide range of venues from pubs to living rooms to libraries, owing to its uncomplicated DIY aesthetic and design. In 2020, the show was adapted for digital performance for the Yorkshire Festival of Story, in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rose Condo is an award-winning poet, who studied theatre at the University of Winnipeg and the University of Leeds. She is currently the Head of Community for Arts Emergency, "an award-winning charity and national support network for young people who don't have influential contacts of their own" (Condo, "About"). The poet was consistent in her experimentations with different online platforms for performing spoken word theatre during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this section, I analyse the archival footage of the 2020 Yorkshire Festival of Story's online broadcast of *The Geography of Me*. Condo performed the show from her flat in Salford. An important characteristic of the performance is that it was pre-recorded by the poet in order to facilitate close captioning — a feature not available then on Crowdcast, the livestreaming platform used by the festival for the event. The show was broadcast to the audience during its stipulated timeslot at the Yorkshire Festival of Story, where the poet was present virtually, albeit not as an active performer, during the broadcast. Despite the act's pre-recorded nature, the audience members engaged in the virtual collaborative activity of postcard writing in real time halfway through the performance. The show was also followed by a live Q&A session with the poet. Despite its lack of live captioning services, Crowdcast was used to provide an engaging experience to the audience. In the Yorkshire Festival of Story 2020 evaluation report, Kirsty Rose Parker writes: "Crowdcast helped to achieve a live festival atmosphere for the audience who could use the chat function to talk to one another, could be invited onto the screen during

⁴⁶ This analysis has been adapted from the following previous publication, "Digital Spoken Word Theatre in the UK: Navigating the Theatre Screen with Rose Condo's *The Geography of Me*", in *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, vol. 13, no. 1

events if they chose and ask questions and vote on questions to be asked of the artists” (7). Condo’s show used some of these features to interact with the audiences.

Through the medium of spoken word poetry, *The Geography of Me* stages the poet’s journey, both outward and inward, in the world. It begins with light-hearted anecdotal poetry detailing a transcontinental voyage — the poet’s move from Canada to the UK — and the accompanying cultural differences she navigates. The show then goes on to explore sensitive subjects such as the poet’s struggles with mental health and domestic abuse in the second half of the performance, exploring the deeper recesses of the poet’s inner world. The show opens with an a-cappella song called “Spin” (00:16–02:39), where the screen displays not the figure of the poet but images of various maps in a slideshow. The song revolves around the theme of change and hints, however subtly, at the difficult subjects to follow in the second half of the performance, in excerpts such as:

someone once sang times are a-changin’ /
but change isn’t easy when I’m standing still /
I’m like the eye of a storm — the world flies around me /
I hope that peace comes, and I know that it will /
so spin me towards the next curve of this journey /
follow the arc and around I will go /
I will face and embrace what lies before me /
thankful for all of the blessings I know. (00:16–01:05)

In the course of the song, the display takes us through the maps of Newcastle, Manchester, London, Morecambe, and other cities or towns, with the signpost of “You Are Here” marked on each. The maps employed are ones typically found in public places and transport lines to help people navigate streets and locales. Thus, the images include maps of subway lines, bus routes, and other modes of commute (fig. 40). As Robert Tally writes on the efficacy of maps in *Spatiality*: “The map offers a fictional or figurative representation of the space in which we find ourselves, and the reassuring ‘You are here’ arrow or dot or other marker provides the point of reference from which we can both imagine and navigate the space” (2). In this sense, “You Are Here” orients the audiences to the fictive places represented in the performance.

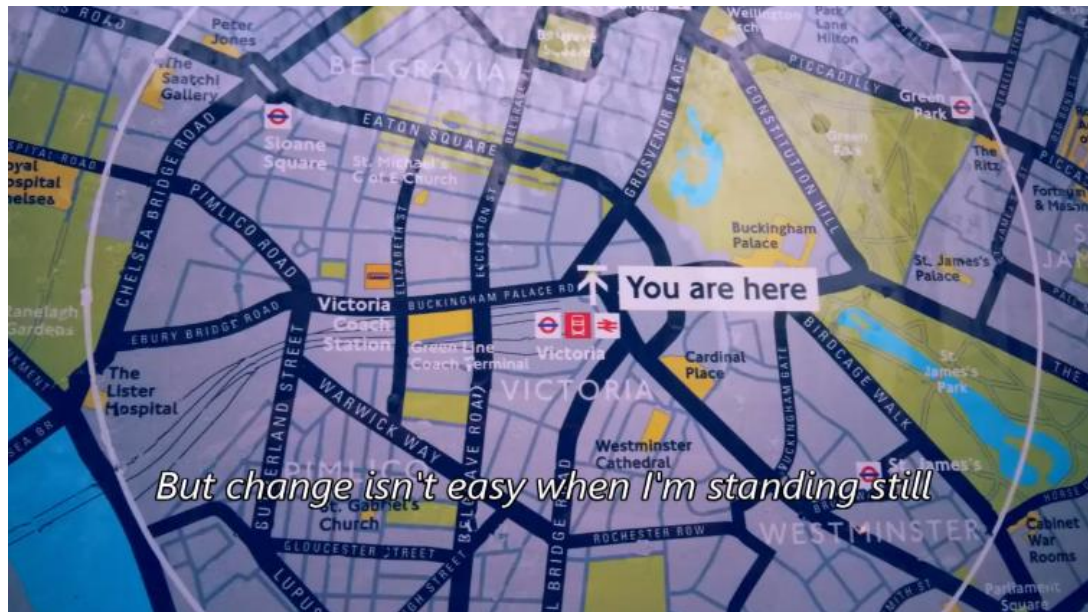


Figure 40 A map denoting the "You are here" sign. *The Geography of Me*, 2020. (Screenshot)

At the end of the song, Condo appears on screen and explains the premise of the piece and the whole performance, her love for travelling and maps. The phrase “You Are Here” features prominently in this section and also serves as the title of the first poem. *The Geography of Me* comprises storytelling, autobiographical anecdotes, a song, as well as eight poems — “You Are Here”, “Queue-Forming Nation”, “Flash Drive”, “True North Confessions”, “Time Management”, “She Sleeps”, “After the Storm”, and “True Likeness” — that are woven into the theme of movement and travelling. The show is split into two halves, where the interval engages the audience through a postcard writing exercise. The first four poems are light-hearted, humorous, charting the poet’s various journeys in life — both geographical and metaphorical — as well as her interactions with different topographies and the people that inhabit them. The subsequent four poems, after the postcard writing activity, are thematically sombre, dealing with serious subjects such as depression and abusive relationships.

Prior to its reconceptualisation as a virtual performance, the on-site show had Condo standing on a red dot, to represent the “You Are Here” pin. Owing to the confines of a virtual platform, where the poet cannot stand on a red dot without creating an awkward distance from the screen and the audience’s gaze, Condo revised her strategy. In the online version, she fixes a circular red “You Are Here” sticker on the wall. To emphasise the significance of the dot, she brings it closer to the camera first, to facilitate readability of the sticker. Condo then informs the audience that she carries around the red dot everywhere, in order to ground her when she is lost, both physically and figuratively. For the rest of the performance, the dot remains on the

wall. Through the course of her performance, Condo remains on the left side of the screen, making room for specific props. These props, such as a world map with red sticky dots marking all the places the poet has visited, the “You Are Here” sticker on the wall, a set of balloons, and a red bag with a maple leaf motif to represent her Canadian roots (fig. 41), are objects of artefactual communication (Novak, *Live Poetry* 168) from the on-site show.



Figure 41 The virtual setup for the performance. *The Geography of Me*, 2020. (Screenshot)

The pre-recorded nature of the show allowed the poet to subtitle the performance. Whereas closed captioning services are available on Zoom and YouTube, Crowdcast, where the show was streamed, does not offer this feature yet. Due to this absence, Condo made the ethical choice of pre-recording the performance. This decision to let go of visible liveness in lieu of creating a more accessible experience for the audience speaks to the performance ethos of the poet. Pre-recording the performance also afforded the poet the chance to include a pitch to audiences. The digital has amplified the possibility of attracting international performance opportunities. Geographical limitations are not a consideration in the virtual world. In view of this potential, Condo, shortly before performing her final poem, makes an appeal to the audience for more virtual performance gigs and booking possibilities. This rather unusual plug by the poet is inspired by the desire to reach more audiences through digital performances; the likely incentive of such self-promotion is indeed considerable.

Furthermore, *The Geography of Me*, like many spoken word theatre shows discussed in this thesis, is marked by a DIY aesthetic, employing minimal props and stage design, which makes it easier to adapt to a host of different venues and public spaces, and also to a screen. A map, balloons, a red sticker, a bag, and a table to prop it on is all that is required to stage the show anywhere. Therefore, it seems to translate well to an online platform. Even the audience engagement activity of the on-site performance is adapted to a digital one. Here, it is vital to stress that audience engagement is a significant feature of Condo's performance strategy, as will also be corroborated by the next case study, *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*. In her article "Audience Participation in Spoken Word Performance" (2021), Condo states "three main reasons" for her employment of participatory activities for audiences: "(1) To offer a tactile activity," "(2) To invite critical engagement and reflection," and "(3) To challenge [herself] as a performer" (324–325).

When *The Geography of Me* is staged in a physical space, Condo hands audience members postcards to write down their experiences and memories. In the digital adaptation, midway through the performance, audience members are offered time to write their messages on a downloadable version of a postcard, provided to them beforehand, and post it on social media with the hashtag #TheGeographyOfMe. Days after the event, the poet also shared the physical postcards she received after on social media (fig. 42).



Figure 42 X and Instagram posts by Condo and an audience member following the performance of *The Geography of Me* at Yorkshire Festival of Story 2020. (Screenshot)

These adjustments in engagement strategies evidence the adaptability of Condo's show to various mediums and stages. Besides, for Condo, the format of online spoken word theatre entails significant relief in terms of logistical, technical, and economic considerations that inform the making of an on-site/in-theatre production, saving her both time and costs required for travel, set-up, and so on. In our 2023 interview, Condo states that owing to her self-funding of the show, *The Geography of Me* was a financial liability as an on-site performance. This is not the case for the 2020 digital version. While the festival was based in Yorkshire, the poet was able to participate live from the comfort of her home in Greater Manchester, owing to the geographical transcendentality of the digital. As Fuchs succinctly observes, the virtual stage affords practitioners opportunities to "transcend geographic and financial barriers to engage new audiences" (*Theater of Lockdown* 2). The minimal use of props in the stage design entailed fewer adjustments and negligible technical complexities for an online staging. No green screen, no sets, no costume changes, the show was recorded without much technical hassle.

Like most theatre, the visibility of corporeal presence is an intrinsic feature of spoken word theatre. When transmuted to the domain of the virtual, this visibility is still fundamental to performance, albeit through a digitally mediated presence. The dynamic of visibility, however, is out of balance on digital platforms where audiences are mostly not visible in a broadcasting set-up, and the performer is exposed to an intensified spectatorship, bordering on voyeurism, an attribute Denzil Browne also comments on as the figure of the Caretaker in a pre-recorded segment in *Ms. Noir's Seven Deadly Sins*. *The Geography of Me* negotiates the expectation of persistent visibility, a form of hyper-visibility, in online spoken word theatre through the employment of pre-recorded material. While the intent for this use was to augment accessibility of the performance with the aid of captioning, the strategy also serves as an effective exercise in negotiating visibility by controlling factors that influence it. In the pre-recorded performance, Condo offers us her hyper-visible body that is devoid of her liveness and is characterised by her absence. On the other hand, in the moments before her live online attendance in the post-show Q&A session, she is present in the Crowdcast studio but is not visible on the theatre screen. Her live online presence remains, to borrow from Peggy Phelan's influential work, unmarked, thereby bending the rules of visibility.

Besides the notion of co-presence of performer and audience, discourses on liveness vs mediation are also dominated by the concept of unpredictability of live performances (Phelan; Georgi, etc.). Digitally mediated performances thus are considered inferior counterparts to on-site live acts for their supposed lack of unpredictability. While it may be true that a mediated

theatre performance, and especially a pre-recorded one in Condo's case, lacks the general unpredictability of a live experience, we must also bring into question the forms of unpredictability that govern both types in the first place. A live theatre experience may generate greater excitement and anticipation due to the risk of imperfection. And yet it is the performance itself which may be unpredictable and not the performance environment (in most cases). In fact, on-site performances take place in highly controlled environments, even when they occupy public spaces. There are measures in place, usually, to mitigate external disruptions. At the same time, in a digitally mediated performance, the environment is increasingly volatile and unpredictable. A performer may not disappear on the theatre stage against their will, but they may on the theatre screen. A digital performance depends on a stable Internet connection, the dependability of the device used for broadcasting, as well as the reliability of the online platform. Indeed, technical mishaps may happen even in live on-site shows, but none so drastic that they may remove the performer altogether from the performance site. This, however, is a risk inherent in digital performance. In such a case, it is reasonable for performers to attempt to control the conditions of their performance, to mitigate the unreliability of the environment through various strategies including the use of pre-recorded material.

The pre-recorded nature of *The Geography of Me* also moderates risks concomitant with staging difficult subjects. Considering both the negotiation of hyper-visibility as well as navigating unreliable conditions of online performances, the strategy affords the poet some control, allowing her to perform thematically heavy poems on her own terms. In line with Ailes's concerns regarding the impact of staging traumatic narratives on poets' mental health outlined in her doctoral thesis, the strategy shields the poet from adverse effects arising out of performing vulnerability to an invisible audience in an unstable online environment. In poems such as "She Sleeps" (33:10–35:00) and "After the Storm" (36:49–41:25), which deal with depression and domestic abuse respectively, the necessity to regulate the hyper-visibility of the sexed body as well as the uncertainty of the theatre screen and its environment appears as especially significant. The pre-recorded nature of *The Geography of Me* serves as a strategy to undertake this form of regulation. Pre-recorded material helps Condo negotiate the expectations of visibility, especially of a gendered body, on the theatre screen. This strategy further affords the poet control over the environment. It enables Condo to shift between a visible non-presence and a non-visible virtual presence, thereby affording her a liminality that complicates the relationship between liveness and visibility itself.

A pre-recorded performance also comes with its discontents. The element of shared experience is significantly reduced in a digitally mediated online performance that lacks the physical co-presence of all participants. This problem is further aggravated by the deployment of a pre-recorded performance, as in the case of *The Geography of Me*. Unpleasant attributes for spectators such as distractions, distance and Zoom fatigue can impede audience's enjoyment of an online performance. In a pre-recorded digital performance, with the poet doubly removed from the audience by way of the two prefixes: pre-recorded and digital, the risk of losing the shared community experience of spoken word theatre is higher. As a strategy for online spoken word theatre during the pandemic, a fully pre-recorded performance thus has its merits and disadvantages, as has been outlined in this case study.

5.4.3 Rose Condo's *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*⁴⁷

Condo's later online show, *The Empathy Experiment 2.0* is an online reconceptualisation and revision of the poet's 2019 on-site show, *The Empathy Experiment*. This rendition was wholly performed live to a virtual audience in 2021 and incorporates metacommentary on the merits and affordances of Internet technologies. *The Empathy Experiment 2.0* was staged by Condo as part of Saboteur Awards 2021 on Zoom to a virtual audience. My analysis of the show sometimes also refers to the earlier on-site version, specifically the 2019 Lawrence Batley Theatre performance, since I have access to recordings of both shows. This offers me a unique perspective of the ways the show was adapted to the online model following the pandemic.

Before analysing the online adaptation and revision of the show, it is important to discuss the premise of the earlier on-site version. *The Empathy Experiment* questioned whether "empathy [is] facing extinction because of our addictions to mobile devices" (Condo, "The Empathy Experiment"). The one-person show received funding from Arts Council England (ACE), and had successful runs the same year at the Greater Manchester Fringe and the Edinburgh Fringe. From January 2019, owing to the ACE funding, the poet had embarked on a 3-month research and development process. The poet collaborated with practitioners such as Dominic Berry, Kirsten Luckins, Victoria Firth, Kate Morton and Eleonora Rosca on the conceptualisation of the show, which is designed in the form of an experiment. In the experiment, the poet forgoes her smartphone and all devices with access to internet for 24 hours

⁴⁷ A condensed version of this case study is forthcoming in "Spoken Word Theatre and its DIY Potential: Rose Condo's *The Empathy Experiment* and In the Works' *The 900 Club*" in Novak, Julia et al., *Contemporary British Poetry Performance in Context – The Event of Poetry*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2026.

to see whether it makes her more mindful and empathetic. The show opens in the 23rd hour of the experiment, and the poet aims to spend the final hour with her audience to ascertain whether the experiment has succeeded. The experiment follows eight scientific steps written out on large white sheets. The props visually suggest the proceedings of a scientific experiment, involving a lab coat and research material in the form of articles, books, and surveys. All these props fit into a bright red case, which, as Condo notes in our interview, is convenient to carry around for touring, aiding mobility and flexibility to perform the show anywhere (Condo 00:56:18–57:04). Condo, lively and animated, performs the show in a dynamic fashion, moving around the stage and interacting with the audience.

In contrast to *The Empathy Experiment*, *The Empathy Experiment 2.0* is a loosely structured performance, which the poet calls a “half show” (00:05:56–06:03) or “an ad-hoc development process” (00:45:17) in our interview. *The Empathy Experiment 2.0* was performed as part of the Saboteur Awards Festival 2021, as noted earlier, on the video conferencing platform Zoom. The poet shared with me the archival recording of the performance, which begins with an announcement typical of the platform: “[recording starting] now”, reminding the viewer of the cinematic ritual of a director commanding “Action” before filming a shot. Condo, in contrast to the dynamism of the earlier live on-site version, sits on a chair here, her movement restricted due to the virtual setting of the performance. She begins by contextualising the first version, subsequently laying out her motivation for a “revision”, “retraction”, or alteration of the show, a convention that plays out all through the performance. The costume in this version is different from the on-site performance. The red case, meanwhile, with all its props and ephemera from the earlier version, lies beside her, in view. Most of the show is framed as a reflection, a ‘walk down memory lane’. Familiar motifs come into play, where the poet looks through envelopes, fringe flyers, her costume, lab coat, shoes, white sheets, and research material to revisit and revise the premise of her earlier show in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The differences in the online version extend beyond restricted movement; the shift to a screen, naturally, also brings significant changes to the setup. At the beginning of the show, viewers are informed that the poet had asked audience members to provide alternatives for the word “pandemic” — words starting with P — which she then continues to use throughout the show. The audience suggestions are “pentameter”, “paper”, “parcel”, “poppy”, and “page.” As the recording begins after the audience had already offered the alternatives, the proceedings and details of this activity cannot be ascertained. However, Condo, while writing about her

experience of performing the show online and employing digital tools in a 2022 blog post, details:

Since the new version of the show was pushing back against my original claims about the perils of mobile use, I decided to embrace digital engagement. For example, as people entered the Zoom room, I posted a question in the Zoom chat asking people to type in words that start with the letter ‘p’. I wrote these on slips of paper and folded them into a cup. Early in the show I explain that since we are tired of hearing the word ‘pandemic’ I would draw out their p-word suggestions to use instead.

In the show, we find a smooth transition between conversational storytelling that establishes the premise of the show and an intimate, interactive poetry performance that advances the plot, as is the customary style of Condo’s poetry performance. The pop culture references from the earlier version, ubiquitous in *The Empathy Experiment*, return, in different ways, ranging across the sitcom *Friends*, hypercolour T-shirts, the TV drama *Game of Thrones*, the movies *Pitch Perfect 2* and *Pitch Perfect 3*, and the game *Among Us*, which was immensely popular during the early phases of COVID-19 lockdowns. During the show, autobiographical anecdotes make a comeback as well, in Condo’s customary style. “This is a hundred percent true” (*Experiment 2.0* 24:55), exclaims Condo, reading aloud a letter from her apartment building’s management objecting to her display of paper snowflakes past the festive season. While recounting this absurd episode, Condo proceeds to craft a paper snowflake out of the letter. As in the first version, different art forms are employed in *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*. Condo incorporates music — she sings self-composed songs while strumming a ukulele at the beginning and end of the show. As these songs replace the earlier version’s background score composed by Eleonora Rosca, they highlight the DIY potential of the performance through the adaptability of the theme and performance strategies implemented within.

In her verbal delivery, Condo once again merges rhymes and alliterations with anecdotal storytelling. However, foregoing the earlier version’s use of humour, the poet here employs a tone of reflection and contemplation. Condo revives the refrain of “put it away” from *The Empathy Experiment*, which was a key moment in the show deployed to dissuade people from being addicted to their smartphones, only to refute it. Proceeding to “unbox the show”, Condo opens the red case to symbolise both a literal and metaphorical unboxing (12:04). Here, Condo reconsiders the applicability of her initial hypothesis in the context of a pandemic. The effects of the pandemic upon the premise of the show are discernible throughout the performance, both

explicitly and implicitly. Midway through the performance, a metatextual moment materialises — Condo explores the disconcerting feeling of being on Zoom in a poem. With simple rhymes that exhibit a sporadic rhythmic quality, the poem’s delivery mirrors the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic, as in the following extract:

lockdown was the case /
that never have I seen so much of my own face /
monitoring my on-screen movements and what I look like when I speak /
and constantly fiddling and faffing and adjusting to tweak /
the camera angle to hide my roots or my grey hair or my red patches /
or my double chin or the constant glare of the screen on my glasses /
or the light or my background /
or being on or off mute to manage my sound expecting myself to appear from
the waist up polished and attractive /
and constantly showing that my listening is active (20:40–21:25)

Towards the end of the show, in a nod to the earlier version’s conclusions, Condo highlights the utility of smartphones in modern life, displaying her device to show the audience the live transcription app that her mother uses for everyday communication, to navigate the effects of masking on lipreading — an anecdote recurrent from *The Empathy Experiment*.

A vital characteristic of both versions of the show is Condo’s sustained interaction with the audience, a recurrent feature of her repertoire, as noted earlier. This engagement extends beyond a conversational narratorial tone to include a range of participatory activities. In *The Empathy Experiment*, we are informed that the poet had handed over envelopes with pencils to members of the audience before the start of the show. This is significant as halfway through the show, the poet asks audience members to write their names on the envelopes, put their phones in, and hand the envelopes over to join her in the experiment. This, however, is an optional activity. Similarly, towards the end of the show, the poet invites an audience member on stage, whose consent she had sought earlier, to swap shoes with. She asks this individual to make eye contact with her for ten seconds to exercise a moment of connection. Condo, throughout the show, shares results from a survey she had conducted with miscellaneous participants prior to the performance, in preparation for the show, thereby extending the engagement of the show beyond attendees at the venue. In *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*, apart from the activity of substituting the word “pandemic” with other P-letter words, there are other interactive strategies in place. While Condo cannot digitally swap shoes with an audience member, she “shares” her

screen and organises a virtual collaborative exercise on the interactive website Menti. Here, she undertakes a live digital survey with questions akin to the ones posed in the on-site version of the show, once again giving the audience the choice to participate or sit back (fig. 43). The members of the audience respond with words or phrases that pop up on the screen. These words symbolise audience participation. In her digital artistic design, Condo exploits various tools of online communication to interact with her audiences. Through these interactive modes, Condo successfully navigates physical distance and forges a virtual connection with her audience. These variances in engagement strategies also evidence the adaptability of the show to various media and stages, thereby once again emphasising the DIY potential of the show. What is more, they make it possible for audiences to stay connected to the performer and each other, even if virtually. Tamara Radak, in her analysis of Dead Centre's *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)* — and the resonance between the titles of Dead Centre's and Condo's shows are fascinating —, remarks upon the potential of the digital to generate a sense of community in a performance:

Giving audience members the chance to voice their opinions and visions via the Chat box not only establishes an even stronger emotional bond between performer and audience; it also facilitates a certain sense of community between audience members in the absence of physical co-presence and potential chance encounters during interval drinks (45)

Indeed, the online participation activities in real time has the potential for heightened engagement from the audience and a boosted investment in the performance.

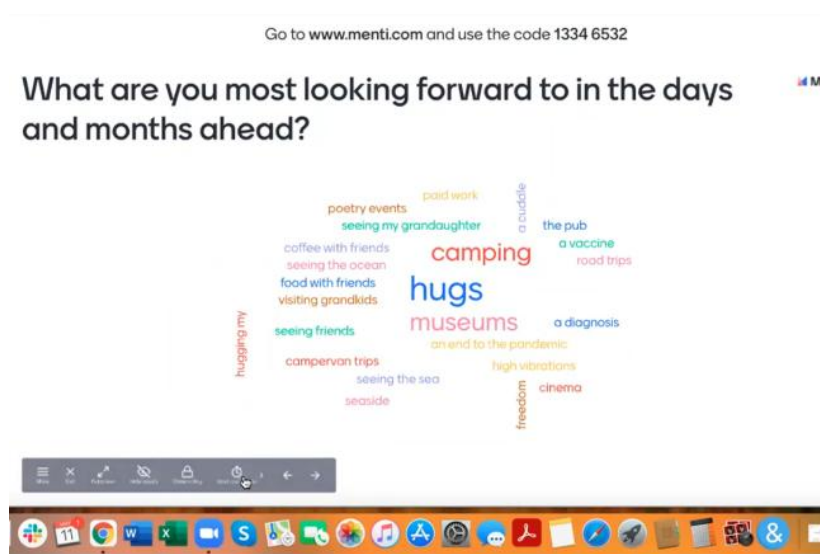


Figure 43 Condo's deployment of an audience engagement activity using Menti. *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*, 2021. (Screenshot)

However, while digital engagement activities may account for increased attention from the audience, the frame of a *theatre screen* may subsequently impact it. Due to the spatial dynamics of on-site performances, *The Empathy Experiment* is a corporeally engaged act. *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*, on the other hand, due to the constrictions of a virtual platform, is less dynamic and involved. In contrast to the spatial potential of the Lawrence Batley Theatre stage, the Zoom room of *The Empathy Experiment 2.0* is limiting. With the imposition of the frame of a camera and the necessity of sustained presence on screen, the performer's ability to move about the space is significantly restricted. Khaled Mostafa Karam and Galal Mohamed Naguib note that in the context of Zoom theatre, "limitations in camera range, angle of vision, and resolution influence the quality of display, and restrain the actors' movements. Sudden and quick gestures appear hazy, and confuse communication with audiences" ("Potentials and Challenges" 157). These conditions also affect Condo's performance. While the poet cannot walk about freely or make quick movements in *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*, which was possible in the first version of the show, Condo does employ animated gestures utilising the upper half of her body, visible to the audience, to complement the verbal performance. For instance, when Condo muses, "What if I try unboxing the show?", she follows it with the act of unboxing the red case, previously established as a symbol of the first version of the show. (12:00–12:30, also fig. 44). Similarly, later in *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*, while segueing into the audience engagement activity, Condo contextualises the task in relation to the previous version of the show, using both verbal and corporeal cues. She states: "I'd asked people to define the word 'empathy' and so many people wrote 'shoes', as in being in someone else's shoes. And [...] in every single performance of the live show, I swapped these shoes with a member of the audience" (35:03–24). Here, she simultaneously reaches below, beyond the purview of the Zoom screen, to grab a pair of shoes and brings them up to the centre-left screen area, to fit within the frame of the screen. This gesture complements and intensifies the effect of the performed text (35:03–35:25, also fig. 45). These are a few instances among many in the show that reflect upon the scope of playing with the confined space of a Zoom stage in spoken word theatre, even when the possibilities and choices are narrow.



Figure 44 Condo unboxing the red case. *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*, 2021. (Screenshot)



Figure 45 The poet holding up a pair of red shoes. *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*, 2021. (Screenshot)

A factor that could have potentially impacted both the poet's and audience members' experience of the show could be the phenomenon of "Zoom fatigue". In fact, Condo comments on this twice on the show. Halfway through the performance, while talking about the nimiety of on-screen communication during lockdown, Condo recites:

Working through noise to hear what's being uttered /
 this communication can feel overwhelming and cluttered /
 and a year into this, here I am a year older /
 and sick of the sight of my head and my shoulders /

and despite having faced my own face frequently from my own home /
 it occurs to me that I am very likely not alone /
 in feeling like this /
 whether it's a one-to-one chat or a Zoom meeting of a hundred and twenty /
 I reckon these feelings are really familiar to many /
 along with the obligation to feel gratitude /
 because they didn't have Zoom during the Spanish flu /
 I'm supposed to feel lucky for what video chats help us to achieve /
 while navigating this very real thing called Zoom fatigue (21:26–22:22)

This passage of verse emphasises the exhaustion and disconnect associated with online communication, especially when carried out in excess. While the novelty of Zoom gatherings and Zoom performances generated much intrigue during the early days of the pandemic, by 2021, when this performance was virtually staged, the debilitation of socialising always-only vicariously through the online mode had set in. In 2021, the first peer-reviewed study on “Zoom fatigue” was published by Jeremy N. Bailenson. In his study, Bailenson chalked out “four possible explanations for Zoom Fatigue: Excessive amounts of close-up eye gaze, cognitive load, increased self-evaluation from staring at video of oneself, and constraints on physical mobility” (“Nonverbal Overload” 1). Interestingly, Condo in her poetic performance, touches upon at least two of these aspects: “cognitive load” and “increased self-evaluation” as can be observed in the extract cited above. The second invocation of phenomenon comes at the end of the show, when the poet acknowledges the audience’s Zoom fatigue: “Just in finishing, I just want to thank you very much for navigating your own Zoom fatigue and being part of this evening's sharing” (*Experiment 2.0* 49:33–49:42). Zoom fatigue led to a renewed desire for attendance of on-site performances, as evidenced by the hope expressed by Carla Neuss in the conclusion to her short reflection in *Theatre Survey* in August 2021: “As the spaces we’ve been separated from over these past months begin to reopen, we’ll be reunited not just with long-absent objects and people but with spatial atmospheres and their attendant affects as well” (338–39). Indeed, as lockdown restrictions relaxed, poets returned to theatre stages but also brought along their online audiences. Hybrid performances became the fourth strategy adopted by poets to navigate the conditions of the pandemic, as is demonstrated by Malaika Kegode’s *Outlier*.

5.4.4 Malaika Kegode's *Outlier*

To recall from the previous chapter, Malaika Kegode is an “an award-winning writer, performer, creative producer and mentor. She creates work for stage, radio, music, and screen” (Kegode, “About”). Kegode’s *Outlier* premiered in 2021 amidst lockdown restrictions at Bristol Old Vic and was both performed live to a socially distanced audience and simultaneously livestreamed to audiences at home. The show is written by the poet and performed in collaboration with a live band, the Bristol-based Jakabol, directed by Jenny Davies, with live animation from Christopher Harrison, and stage design by Rebecca Wood. An early hour-long version was created with support from the Ferment programme, Bristol Old Vic’s writing scheme and festival, and performed in February 2020 at Bristol Old Vic’s studio space and The Crofters Rights (now The Croft). It was later developed into a two-hour show which premiered on the theatre’s main stage (Kegode) in June 2021. The video I analyse here is the film version derived from the livestream recordings of the 2021 performance, which was made available to order post-performance as video on demand by Bristol Old Vic on their website from July 26th to August 8th. An interesting aspect about the film is that it is a composite of two live-streamed performances that took place on June 24th and 25th, 2021. As *Outlier*’s director, Jenny Davies informed me in our interview:

we [Jenny Davies and editor Chris Hicks] sat together and we kind of looked at the two productions and [...] borrowed shots from both. So probably what you saw is the on-demand version, where we sat for a couple of days and I was like, ‘oh, I kind of like this shot for this bit’. And we kind of worked out the best version. So, you’ll see things that are happening across two nights. (Davies 0:51:39–0:51:57)

In the filmed version, these transitions between different performances are imperceptible. The flow is effortlessly seamless and had this information not been offered to me, I would have not perceived the film to be a composite of two performances.

The film opens with a prolonged set by the band, following which the poet enters the stage area and performs a poem. Audience interaction plays a significant role in the introductory section where Kegode informs the audience: “there is no fourth wall here” (*Outlier* 0:13:00). The show is emotionally charged, and the set design enhances the affective potential of the performance by recreating the setting of the auto/biographical story using props and more. Throughout the narrative, animation and music add to the highs and lows of the emotive moments of the poetry performance. Kegode deftly navigates feelings of despondency and

hope, pathos and joy in her performance. The show depicts the tragedy of everyday life, the struggles and troubles of disconnected, isolated living. It “explores the impact of isolation, addiction, and friendship on young people coming of age in the often-forgotten places” (Kegode, “Outlier”). That it was first staged during the slowly relaxing lockdown conditions of COVID-19, where UK, like elsewhere, was gradually transitioning into socially distanced living, could have potentially coloured audience’s reception of the show. The narrative is embodied through poetry performance and live music and relayed using a cross-arts aesthetic. A quarter into the show, music and animation begin to fill in the gaps and silences *and* replace words, such as in the instance where a drum beat and the animated words pictured below appear instead of the question posed by a character (fig. 46), heightening the dramatic effect and emotional resonance of the moment.



Figure 46 Use of animation and drums instead of speech for meaning-making. *Outlier*, 2021. (Screenshot)

While digital strategies such as animation and projection enhance the performance in-theatre, at-home audiences too get to fully experience the intermedial design of the show through various livestreaming tools. As the Bristol Old Vic website’s FAQ section on livestreaming details: “We use state-of-the-art cameras and sound equipment to capture the magic and excitement of live theatre, and to send it out across the world for thousands of theatre-lovers to watch simultaneously” (Bristol Old Vic). To emphasise on the quality of the livestream, another response reads: “This is not a scratchy archive recording, or a low-fi zoom

broadcast. Our experienced team are filming and streaming in HD, with 6 state-of-the-art cameras used to capture the show” (Bristol Old Vic). These claims can be corroborated upon viewing the film version of *Outlier* where the quality is indeed high definition, both for the video and the audio.

Creative strategies such as vision mixing (fig. 47), a technique that “enables the operator to select and switch between various sources such as cameras, video players, and computer graphics” (Media Looks), and animation were employed in the livestream to turn the show into an immersive experience for audiences at home. Vision mixing is “used in video production to combine multiple video sources into a single output [...] The output of the vision mixer can be recorded, broadcasted, or displayed on a screen for a live audience” (Media Looks). Multiple cameras offered various angles and perspectives simultaneously during the broadcast. In the course of the performance, Kegode even acknowledges the audience at home, making eye contact with one of the cameras, joking that she sees them, asking them to put their phones down.



Figure 47 Vision mixing in action. *Outlier*, 2021. (Screenshot)

The animation within the show also plays with the visual aesthetic of the mediated version, where animated lines, drawings, and art are superimposed on to the performance virtually, such that the viewer observes artistic doodles float around the screen during the performance (fig. 48). However, whether this was part of the actual livestream or an artefact of

the edited film is unclear. Regardless, the interplay of the digital both in a live venue and on a virtual platform, where digital technologies deployed in an in-person setup are embedded into livestreaming in order to facilitate an equally engaging theatre experience for virtual audiences, complicate the dichotomies of liveness usually emphasised in discussions on physical and online performances. In general, hybrid modes of performance hold new potential for spoken word theatre to reach broader audiences.

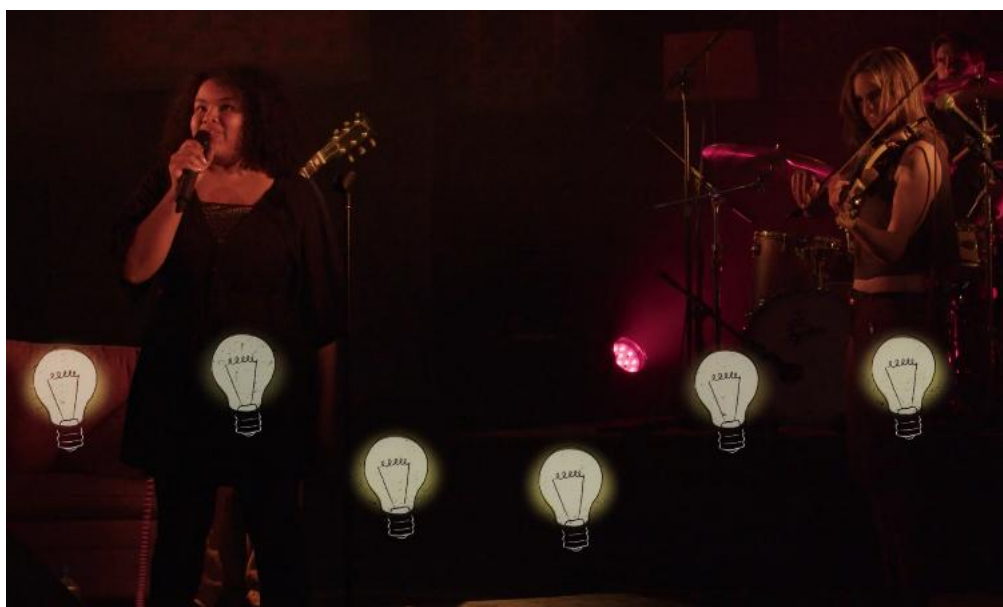


Figure 48 Deployment of animation to enhance the filmed version's visual aesthetic. *Outlier*, 2021. (Screenshot)

The animated illustrations represent many of the thematic motifs and changing settings of the show. Throughout the performance, they also come to symbolise the inherent traits of the different characters, as Davies tells me during our conversation:

Ama is hands, and Oskar is, like, the scribble, the scribble. So, like, that kind of communicates his, like, addiction, but also the sort of tension and then release of tension when he's with Mal. And so, you see that line dance, and Lewis was full of colour, and he's represented in strawberries and blue. So, they all have, like, really clear themes. (Davies 0:11:17–0:11:48)

These character traits through illustration, thus, become key signifiers in the narrative. For a clearer representation of how these motifs illustrate the characters, see fig. 49 for the scribbles depicting Oskar and fig. 50 for strawberries depicting Lewis.



Figure 49 Scribbles across the screen and as animated backdrop representing Oskar. *Outlier*, 2021. (Screenshot)



Figure 50 Strawberry illustrations signifying the character of Lewis. *Outlier*, 2021. (Screenshot)

The elaborate visual setup for livestreaming involved not only Bristol Old Vic's Digital Team but also direction by director Jenny Davies. As Davies details in our interview, knowing the intricacies of the performance, she could direct the shifts and transitions, zoom ins and fades between the camera visuals during the two livestreamed performances. Here, Davies also had a role in deciding the frames of vision mixing and other digital strategies of visualising. Further,

in the edited film, Hicks had access to the animation files which he reintroduced into the video to enhance the visual aesthetic.

The livestreamed version of *Outlier*, while fascinating in its sonic and visual communication, lacked key access features such as live captioning and audio descriptions. Again, as noted on the Bristol Old Vic FAQ website: “Our technology doesn’t (yet) allow us to caption or audio-describe the live broadcasts, but we will be making captioned and audio-described recordings available” (Bristol Old Vic). This absence of accessibility features can be cause for frustrations, given that videoconferencing and livestreaming apps such as Zoom and YouTube had features like closed captioning by this point. Another drawback for hybrid performances with in-theatre audiences is the privileging of those audience members over online ones. At several instances during the performance, Kegode interacts with audiences at the venue. This element of audience engagement, which the poet and the creative team called “gig space”, where Kegode paused to check-in with the audience, was considerably crucial to the thematic structure and performance design of the show (Kegode; Davies). However, the engagement is limited almost exclusively to the on-site audience, owing to the format of the livestream. Livestreaming on Zoom or YouTube allows a performer to sit in front of the camera and receive instant feedback from the audience in the form of chat comments and reactions, or specifically in the case of Zoom, actual speech or dialogue. This was not possible at Bristol Old Vic. Owing to the sophisticated, dynamic nature of the livestream setup with six cameras, online audiences could experience fully the show’s visual and sonic specificities. However, since there was no screen, no feature for audiences to respond to the performance virtually or make their experience or perception known to the performers, the communication turned one-way where Kegode and the band had no way of gauging at-home audiences’ reactions. In this way, the livestream was closer to a live telecast of traditional TV than other online performances discussed until now. These considerations also highlight the limits of hybrid performance. Nevertheless, the possibility to tune in to a live theatrical performance is still lucrative for various demographics. As Nina Mühlemann, Celestina Widmer and Yvonne Schmidt (2023) underscore regarding online performances of the COVID-19 era:

Digital and hybrid formats made work accessible for those who cannot leave their homes, an audience rarely considered previously. [...] the fact that physical presence was no longer a requirement to access performing arts addressed a barrier that had been present in many disabled people’s lives, and continues to be present. (19–20)

Disabled and immunosuppressed people were indeed a considered demographic for the livestream, as Davies stated in our interview, and so the hybrid model offered different groups the choice to join on-site or online. What the hybrid performance of *Outlier* thus demonstrates is firstly, one of the strategies adopted by poets to perform their work in socially distanced conditions during the 2021 wave of COVID-19, and secondly, the inherent potential for spoken word theatre to create hybrid/dually disseminated work in a post-pandemic world. In the next section, I explore the drawbacks of online spoken word performances along with the question of access.

5.5 Access and Limitations of Online Performance

Virtual platforms such as Zoom and YouTube have helped expand spectatorship beyond physical proximity and geographical affinity, opening up proverbial doors to audiences beyond the performers' locales. For poets particularly, this has meant access to communities beyond their regular scenes, therefore widening the horizon of opportunities for them. However, considerations of accessibility are also important when considering the convenience of online performances.

From the viewpoint of a spectator, online spoken word theatre staged on virtual platforms contains the possibility of closed captioning the performance, thereby creating a more inclusive, accessible experience for the audience. This is demonstrated in Rose Condo's *The Geography of Me* through the deployment of subtitles. In the case of Condo's *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*, while it is unclear whether the live online performance had any form of captioning, for archiving, the poet "created a captioned YouTube video from the recording" ("Empathy Experiment: Revisited"). These features, however, are not utilised in Bradley's and Kegode's shows, as far as the recordings are concerned. Beyond closed captioning, a virtual performance also extends attendance opportunities to audiences with mobility limitations, as well as immunocompromised and medically vulnerable audiences. It mitigates the cost of travelling, institutional barriers to on-site venues, and enables international participation. However, this accessibility comes with a caveat, as far as marginalised populations are concerned, as Chatzichristodoulou et. al remark:

One's ability to participate in virtual forms of assembly, performance, and education is deeply influenced by intersecting aspects of one's identity, including

economic class, race, gender, religion, sexuality, nationality, and citizenship status. (2)

This limitation of online attendance extends to one's access to digital technologies. Internet services, a device which enables access to the internet, and a dedicated space where one can participate in or engage with an online show are privileges that are not afforded to everyone. Time zones too are a matter of consideration. The shows being scheduled in the UK time zone imply attendance outside of Europe for each of them would have been limited. Similarly, the context of each of the performances and the locational specificity of the wider event they were a part of could further limit their reach. These considerations thus complicate the question of accessibility when it comes to virtual performances in general, where Zoom, YouTube, Crowdfunder and other similar platforms, on one hand, provided ease of access to socially isolated but digitally adept audiences, and, on the other, carried the probability of precluding geographically distant and digitally isolated ones.

Beyond questions of access, there are several limitations and discontents of online spoken word theatre. In the case of *The Geography of Me*, due to its pre-recorded nature, a certain spontaneity and the improvisational nature of spoken word theatre was lost during the broadcast. This is also emphasised in the pre-recorded elements of *Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins*. On the other hand, Kegode's *Outlier*, even with all its spontaneity and interactive elements, seldom engages the online audience, excepting the one instance mentioned earlier, thereby understandably privileging in-theatre audience members, with whom the poet and the band can interact directly, over an online one, whom the performers cannot hear or see. Finally, Condo's *The Empathy Experiment 2.0*, with its attempt to cultivate a community setting through various participative exercises, may appear prescriptive in its strategies. Audiences do not get to actively respond to the show, owing to the structure of the virtual platform, but they are only allowed to participate when the poet calls upon them to do so. Spoken word theatre is a community art built upon the involvement of the audience in the performance through not just various activities but by the incorporation of a dialogue between performer and audience, of 'call and response'. Light banter, simple questions and check-ins are a regular feature of these shows, in order to create a shared experience. Both the performer and the audience are actively engaged in a performance, which Tom Kew (2021) in "Performance Poetry, Covid-19 and the New 'Public Sphere'" emphasises: "This intangible sense of togetherness, of empathy and, ultimately, of shared joy, underpins the art form of performance poetry" (39). This co-presence is possible virtually as well but does not have the same effect. The mutual sense of being is lost.

This discontent is exacerbated with the deployment of pre-recorded performances in a virtual setting or a hybrid setup that caters to physically present audiences over virtual ones.

In addition, as the differentiation between home and the performance space blurs for the performer, as in the case of both of Condo's shows as well as Bradley's *Ms. Noir's Seven Deadly Sins*, conflating the private with the public, the controlled environment of a physical performance site is lost. It is easier for both the performer and audience members to be distracted. The problem of performing to a camera, to a spectre of an audience, whom you cannot see but who is there, whose response and engagement you cannot gauge unless they type out their feelings in the chat or through the use of interactive emojis, is another divergence that takes away from the communal experience of a live spoken word theatre show. External factors on which a performer has no control such as lagging internet connections at the audiences' end, software failures, interruptions by audience members or other disruptions from one's private surrounding, can impair the performance experience. Liedke and Pietrzak-Franger observe in "Viral Theatre: Preliminary Thoughts on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Online Theatre" (2021) that an unhindered enjoyment of an online performance is characterised by tensions inherent in the platform, such as

the optionality of engagement vs distraction and the willingness to accept the workings of a virtual frame that seems both to distance viewers from performers and at the same time to create a platform for intimacy among both viewers and performers and viewers among themselves. (141)

Both virtual and physical distractions, low threshold of commitment to engage, and digital fatigue which Sarah Bay-Cheng in "Digital Performance and its Discontents" ascribes to "not the ubiquity of presence, but a lack of absence" are issues that can prevent online spoken word theatre from being a fully immersive experience. These shows when performed on-site, after all, are social events. In contrast, in virtual shows, the spectator's viewing environment can make or break the affective potential of a show. Hence, with the ease of access, the excess of availability and a flawed, disconnected shared experience arrives the susceptibility to both distractions and overwhelm, making online spoken word theatre today a less-than-ideal alternative to on-site performances. Yet, in the context of COVID-19, when social isolation plagued the whole world, online spoken word shows were effective and served their purpose. Most importantly, they enabled poets to maintain gig commitments despite the adversities of a pandemic.

5.6 Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, spoken word theatre shows were reconceptualised for virtual stages to mitigate losses and adapt to the conditions of the “new normal”. In this chapter, I have summarised digital spoken word theatre and examined online spoken word theatre shows which also incorporated digital strategies in the fabric of their performance. I studied the four types of online spoken word theatre shows that emerged in the early phases of COVID-19, in the year 2020–21. In my analysis, I investigated the strategies utilised by poets to reimagine their shows for an online audience. I followed the analyses of the shows with an inquiry into the question of access, and the discontents of online spoken word theatre. My analyses of the four case studies have thus demonstrated spoken word theatre’s DIY ethos which enabled poets to quickly adapt their shows to online modes during the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in this chapter, I have also attempted to complicate notions of accessibility and convenience in such online performances. The frustrations of the medium, however, do not in any way negate the merits. In the past six years, online and hybrid performances have become a viable medium for poets to mitigate economic, logistical and geographical limitations associated with in-person only shows.

Conclusion

Spoken word theatre has become popular in the UK. Over the past decade, poets have readily experimented with the art form to expand the boundaries of their artistic practice. In this time, spoken word theatre has also developed a makeshift or grassroots infrastructure of support, demonstrating its DIY ethos. While much is still left to do on the critical front, the art form has somewhat marked its place in the cultural industry. State-subsidised funding entities like Creative Scotland and Arts Council England have sponsored the staging of several shows in the past decade. While this economic support is still considerably small (that is, the ratio of successful applications to total applicants is staggeringly low, as poets have repeatedly claimed in my interviews), the potential for economic support exists. Additionally, workshops and programmes dedicated to the craft of spoken word theatre, such as the organisation Poetic Unity's Spoken Word Theatre programme, which is "a year long programme which provides weekly workshops teaching young people performance skills, writing skills and to create a play to be performed to an audience" (Poetic Unity), have also become popular. Finally, traditional theatre and cultural institutions have begun to stage spoken word theatre shows around the year. A few examples would be Malaika Kegode's *Outlier* performed at Bristol Old Vic and Theatre Royal Plymouth, Jasmine Gardosi's *Dancing to Music You Hate* staged at Warwick Arts Centre and Birmingham Symphony Hall, and Caleb Femi's *Goldfish Bowl* realised at Battersea Arts Centre.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to define spoken word theatre and delineate its intrinsic features by way of DIY as a grounding principle. I have further demonstrated through 13 case studies how these attributes are represented in the art form. In Chapter 1, I traced the historic continuities and inheritances of spoken word theatre to then demarcate it from other art forms across various literary and theatrical traditions. Here, I also outlined the art form's four key attributes, as revealed in my analysis. Chapter 2 was concerned with the art form's thematic properties — it studied the prevalence of identity performance through the auto/biographical and the autofictional mode. Chapters 3 through 5 engaged with its defining performance characteristics: from intermediality to spatial adaptability, further exploring the online screen as a viable performance platform for spoken word theatre in the aftermath of COVID-19. These chapters consolidate my effort to define and describe spoken word theatre. Through this study, I have attempted to establish spoken word theatre as a vital cultural practice that has its place

in the worlds of theatre and spoken word poetry, extending the reach of both, in the context of the UK.

Spoken word theatre has also gone global. As noted in the Introduction, in the early 2000s, scholars were already shedding light on North American spoken word theatre (Jorge Huerta and Ashley Lucas; Trish Salah), albeit by engaging with individual poets or performances. Spoken word theatre, however, has a much wider appeal. As Sophia Walker notes in her interview with Claire Trévien in 2017, the art form has found its footing in countries like Nigeria and Malaysia. At the 2025 Poetry Off the Page, Around the Globe conference in Vienna, this reach was apparent. In her talk, Malaysian poet and scholar Sheena Baharudin shed light on the 2014 and 2015 *Pontianak* ensemble performances that combined spoken word poetry with theatrical performances, further noting that “these productions adapt local ghost stories and folklore — including the titular female vampire — into spoken word poems. Through reimagining folklore and critiquing traditional narratives, *Pontianak* marks a dynamic shift in Malaysian spoken word poetry” (Poetry Off the Page, “Abstract booklet” 27). This form of performance which melds traditional folkloric storytelling practices with spoken word poetry fall within the remit of spoken word theatre.

Similarly, New Zealand-based poet and scholar liz breslin introduced us to spoken word theatre productions from their country. In their presentation, breslin “explore[d] the interactions between funding bodies (such as Creative New Zealand) and embodied poems in long-form spoken word shows” (“Abstract booklet” 9). In their repertory, of particular interest is the show *45 Cents An Hour* by Dominic Hoey. The one-poet auto/biographical show takes the form of an “informal monologue as Hoey walks us through the ups and downs of his life as an artist, with the help of Rose Northey in the multifaceted role of stagehand/mime/various characters/usher” (Forlong). Cross-arts aesthetic is endorsed by the show as it is “interwoven with poetry, audience interaction, jokes, skits, phone calls and philosophical interjections by the abrasive and foul-mouthed dog, Prince Chilli” (Forlong). The supposedly minimal stage design also reflects spoken word theatre’s spatial dynamics. Indeed, the show demonstrates the attributes of the art form and invites critical engagement as such. In India, performing arts organisation Kommune has also staged spoken word theatre shows. *Coping Hearts*, a show featuring five prominent poet-performers: Gurleen Arora, Kalki Koechlin, Shikha Talsania, Shweta Tripathi Sharma and Sriti Jha premiered at the G5A Warehouse Mumbai on 5th May 2023. Since then, Kommune has experimented with many poetry-based theatrical performances which demonstrate characteristic features of spoken word theatre. These international

experimentations with the art form invite detailed examination, which I hope will be pursued by poetry performance scholars in the coming years.

There is indeed much to investigate about spoken word theatre's potential in the UK itself. In this dissertation, I have not explored the dimension of multi-poet spoken word theatre shows. While less prevalent, my hope is that this study will inspire inquiry into shows involving more than one poet. Further, I have only engaged with in-theatre or online productions of spoken word theatre. The art form however is also gaining traction in the podcast and audio drama arena. Scottish spoken word theatre company In the Works' *Folxlore* delves into this genre, and with poetry's sonic potential, the format is sure to become more popular with poets. The sonic dimension of spoken word theatre, thus, demands further attention. Finally, there is room to explore spoken word theatre's transnational connections and global resonances. All of these aspects make the scope of spoken word theatre research exciting. The present study is just the beginning.

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Appendix

i. List of Total Interviews Conducted

No.	Name of interviewee	Date of interview	Profession/ Artistic Practice	Based in	Interview Link (All interviews will be archived on Phaidra by August 2026)
1.	Adam Kammerling	23.04.2026	Poet	England	Archiving in process
2.	Aditya Narayan	30.05.2026	Poet	Scotland	”
3.	afshan d’souza-lodhi	28.10.2025	Poet	England	”
4.	Antosh Wojcik	11.02.2026	Poet/Musician	England	”
5.	Bridget Hart	31.01.2026	Poet	England	”
6.	Clare E. Potter		Poet	Wales	”
7.	Edalia Day	16.12.2025	Poet/Illustrator-Animator	England	”
8.	Ellen Renton	13.01.2026	Poet/Co-Founder (In the Works Spoken Word Theatre Company)	Scotland	”
9.	Imogen Stirling	08.02.2023	Poet	Scotland	https://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:2156874
10.	Jasmine Gardosi	06.02.2023	Poet	England	https://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:2045509
11.	Jemima Foxtrot	05.08.2025	Poet	England-Germany	Archiving in process
12.	Jemma McDonnell	27.04.2026	Artistic Director (Paperbird Theatre Company)	England	”
13.	Jenny Davies	19.12.2025	Director/Theatre maker	England	”
14.	John Berkavitch	06.08.2025	Poet/ Former Producer (Apples &	England	”

			Snakes Midlands)		
15.	Katie Ailes	05.02.2023	Poet/Programme r (Loud Poets)	Scotland	”
16.	Kevin McLean	09.03.2023	Poet- Programmer (Loud Poets)	Scotland	”
17.	Kevin P Gilday	24.10.2023	Poet	Scotland	”
18.	Laura Thurlow	25.02.2025	Poet	Scotland	”
19.	Luke Wright	10.11.2023	Poet	England	”
20.	Malaika Kegode	28.10.2023	Poet	England	https://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:2127185
21.	Mark Blayney	12.02.2023	Poet	Wales	Archiving in process
22.	Mick Wood	18.03.2026	Poet/Artistic Director (Théâtre Volière)/Co- Founder (Poetry Plays Festival)	England	”
23.	Nathan Penlington	18.08.2025	Poet-Producer (Shortfuse)	England	”
24.	Rebecca Wood	06.01.2026	Set Designer	England	”
25.	Roger Robinson	01.02.2023	Poet	England	https://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:2045511
26.	Rose Condo	27.01.2023	Poet	England	https://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:2127184
27.	Ross McFarlane	04.02.2023	Poet/Co- Founder (In the Works Spoken Word Theatre Company)	Scotland	https://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:2166667
28.	Rupinder Kaur Waraich	01.12.2023	Poet	England	Archiving in process
29.	Sarah Grant	04.02.2023	Poet-Filmmaker	Scotland	https://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:2156871
30.	Stephen Durkan	06.03.2025	Poet	Scotland	Archiving in process

ii. List of Spoken Word Theatre Shows in the UK

(The following only lists recordings watched, and performances attended of UK-based poets. In the course of my doctoral degree, I have also come in contact with spoken word theatre by international poets touring the UK, both through archival recordings and live performances. These performances are not mentioned here.)

ii.i Live Shows Attended

No.	Poet	Show	When	Where
1	Edward Tripp	<i>No Man Is An Ireland</i>	15.08.2024	Just The Tonic at the Caves (Edinburgh Fringe)
2	Jasmine Gardosi	<i>Dancing to Music You Hate</i>	24.01.2023	Symphony Hall Birmingham
3	Jude FireSong	<i>Made of Magic: Poetry of Rage and Belonging</i>	11.08.2024	Sketchy Beats Café (Edinburgh Fringe)
4	Kevin P Gilday	<i>Spam Valley</i>	21.10.2023	Etcetera Theatre London
5	Laura Thurlow	<i>River Time!</i>	14.08.2024	Pickle Studio, Greensides at Riddle's Court Edinburgh (Edinburgh Fringe)
6	Luke Wright	<i>Luke Wright's Silver Jubilee</i>	02.11.2023	Pleasance London
7	Luke Wright	<i>Joy!</i>	13.08.2024	Pleasance Dome Edinburgh (Edinburgh Fringe)
8	Phil Okwady	<i>The Gods Are All Here</i>	19.10.2023	Arena Theatre Wolverhampton
9.	Ross McFarlane	<i>Life Goals of the Millennials: Or The Commune Manifesto</i>	12.08.2024	SHRUB: Zero Waste Hub Edinburgh (PBH's Free Fringe)
10	Stephen Durkan	<i>Why Am I Doing This?</i>	15.08.2024	Cave at the Whistle Binkies, Edinburgh (PBH's Free Fringe)

ii.ii Show Recordings Watched/Listened

No.	Poet	Show	Source
1	Adam Kammerling	<i>Seder</i>	Private archival recording
2	afshan d'souza-lodhi	<i>How to Eat Mangoes</i>	Private archival recording
3	Alice McCullough	<i>Earth to Alice</i>	https://youtu.be/6dAN_T-oP3A?si=uWv4D501oWTpwmfC
4	Antosh Wojcik	<i>How to Keep Time: A Drum Solo for Dementia</i>	Private archival recording
5	Edalia Day	<i>Too Pretty to Punch</i>	https://youtu.be/UenhXhReHFs?si=WtAgOKVZ4jtssn08
6	Ellen Renton	<i>Within Sight</i>	Private archival recording (filmed version)
7	Genevieve Carver	<i>A Beautiful Way to Be Crazy</i>	https://www.scenesaver.co.uk/production/a-beautiful-way-to-be-crazy/
8	Hannah Silva	<i>Total Man</i>	https://vimeo.com/68613215?share=copy&fl=cl&fe=ci
9	Imogen Stirling	<i>#Hypocrisy</i>	Private archival recording
10	Jasmine Gardosi	<i>Dancing to Music You Hate</i>	Private archival recording
11	Jen McGregor	<i>Fragmental</i>	Private archival recording
12	John Berkavitch	<i>Shame</i>	https://youtu.be/msUM2n4qjF4?si=oOFSp_gplzy9BTJT
13	Jonzi D	<i>Aeroplane Man (Extract)</i>	A&S Spoken Word Archive
14	Kae Tempest	<i>Brand New Ancients</i>	https://youtu.be/0qW7HHzKWSI?si=fXGPVVcaPuvFNFXf
15	Kae Tempest	<i>Let Them Eat Chaos</i>	https://youtu.be/3xu5HL1Xl64?si=6UeQ4ySvqyzQKBii
16	Kat François	<i>Raising Lazarus</i>	Private archival recording
17	Kevin P Gilday	<i>Spam Valley</i>	https://youtu.be/A95UWhjsJ8o?si=y_p6AouSB60cKM0C
18	Laura Thurlow	<i>River Time!</i>	Private archival recording
19	Lemn Sissay	<i>Something Dark</i>	A&S Spoken Word Archive
20	Luke Wright	<i>Live at Komedia (Untitled)</i>	Private archival recording
21	Luke Wright	<i>The Ballad Seller</i>	”
22	Luke Wright	<i>Luke Wright's Silver Jubilee</i>	”
23	Malaika Kegode	<i>Outlier</i>	Private archival recording (Bristol Old Vic Video-On-Demand; filmed version)
24	Mel Bradley	<i>Ms. Noir's Seven Deadly Sins</i>	Private archival recording
25	Mel Bradley	<i>You Maiden, I Mother</i>	https://youtu.be/JnCOK0njNEY?si=ARliCMgNhL7Lhhlx

26	Mick Wood	<i>The Capital of Europe</i>	Private archival recording
27	Molly Naylor	<i>Stop Trying to Be Fantastic</i>	Private archival recording
28	Roger Robinson	<i>Shadow Boxer</i>	A&S Spoken Word Archive
29	Rose Condo	<i>How to Starve an Artist</i>	Private archival recording
30	Rose Condo	<i>The Empathy Experiment</i>	”
31	Rose Condo	<i>The Empathy Experiment 2.0</i>	”
32	Rose Condo	<i>The Geography of Me</i>	”
33	Sarah Grant	<i>Spark</i>	https://youtu.be/V2kXn-rJP10?si=KX7SlQZO5xMq_-QI
34	Stephen Durkan	<i>Why Am I Doing This?</i>	Private archival recording
35	SuAndi	<i>The Story of M</i>	https://youtu.be/0uvMKfCnwPc?si=OZlvV9xn5kg1kuof
36	Zena Edwards	<i>Security</i>	Part 1: https://youtu.be/zcZglYdbpWU?si=ynCpohi7V5fJbn_P Part 2: https://youtu.be/mONvS_Wjksk?si=acjbpQtos-IN_eFw Part 3: https://youtu.be/m1daBckQAbQ?si=GH5jS3oVuXO7qy6U

ii.iii Master List of Shows Identified

No.	Artist name	Name of the Show
1	Abby Oliveira	<i>Cast Away Your Compass</i>
2	Abby Oliveira	<i>Legends of the Coven</i>
3	Adam Kammerling	<i>Seder</i>
4	Adam Kammerling	<i>Shall We Take This Outside</i>
6	Aditya Narayan	<i>My Name is A Two-Person Sport</i>
7	afshan d'souza-lodhi	<i>How to Eat Mangoes</i>
8	Aisle 16	<i>Service to Poetry</i>
9	Alice McCullough	<i>Earth to Alice</i>
10	Anna Freeman and Chris Redmond	<i>Animal (Are You A Proper Person?)</i>
11	Antosh Wojcik	<i>How to Keep Time: A Drum Solo for Dementia</i>
12	Bridget Hart	<i>Riot Mouth</i>
13	Caleb Femi	Goldfish Bowl
14	Cat Hepburn	#GIRLHOOD
15	Chris White	<i>Moist, Moist, Moist</i>
16	Chris White	<i>Sunked</i>

17	Clare E. Potter	<i>Sucking on Sugarcane</i>
18	Colin Bramwell	<i>Umbrella Man</i>
19	Colm Keegan, Kalle Ryan, Stephen James Smith	<i>3 Men Talking About Things They Kinda Know About</i>
20	Dean Atta	<i>I Don't March to That Drum (Upcoming)</i>
21	Debris Stevenson	<i>Poet in Da Corner</i>
22	Edalia Day	<i>Too Pretty to Punch</i>
23	Edward Tripp	<i>No Man Is An Ireland</i>
24	Elizabeth McGeown	<i>Cockroach</i>
25	Ellen Renton (In the Works)	<i>Within Sight</i>
26	Francesca Beard	<i>Chinese Whispers</i>
27	Genevieve Carver	<i>A Beautiful Way to Be Crazy</i>
28	Gray Crosbie	<i>Lycanthropy</i>
29	Hannah Lavery	<i>The Drift</i>
30	Hannah Silva	<i>Total Man</i>
31	Harry Josephine Giles	<i>Drone</i>
32	Imogen Stirling	<i>#Hypocrisy</i>
33	Imogen Stirling	<i>Love the Sinner</i>
34	In the Works	<i>Folxlore (Audio; Podcast; Episodes)</i>
35	In the Works	<i>Make/Shift</i>
36	In the Works	<i>The 900 Club</i>
37	Inua Ellam	<i>The 14th Tale</i>
38	Jasmine Gardosi	<i>Dancing to Music You Hate</i>
39	Jay Bernard	<i>Surge</i>
40	Jemima Foxtrot	<i>Above the Mealy-Mouthed Sea</i>
41	Jemima Foxtrot	<i>Melody</i>
42	Jen McGregor	<i>Fragmental</i>
43	Jenny Lindsay	<i>Ire & Salt</i>
44	Jenny Lindsay	<i>This Script</i>
45	Joelle Taylor	<i>C+nto (Upcoming)</i>
46	John Berkavitch	<i>Shame</i>
47	Jonzi D	<i>Aeroplane Man</i>
48	Jonzi D	<i>Lyrical Fearta</i>
49	Jonzi D	<i>The Letter</i>
50	Jude FireSong	<i>Made of Magic: Poetry of Rage and Belonging</i>
51	Kae Tempest	<i>Brand New Ancients</i>
52	Kae Tempest	<i>Let Them Eat Chaos</i>
53	Kat François	<i>Raising Lazarus</i>
54	Kat Lyons	<i>Dry Season</i>
55	Keisha Thompson	<i>Man on the Moon</i>
56	Kevin P. Gilday	<i>Spam Valley</i>
57	Kevin P. Gilday	<i>Suffering from Scottishness</i>
58	Kit Finnie	<i>Mabel and Mickey</i>
59	Koko Brown	<i>WHITE</i>
60	Laura Thurlow	<i>River Time!</i>
61	Lemn Sissay	<i>Something Dark</i>
62	Lemn Sissay	<i>The Report</i>

63	Leyla Josephine	<i>Hopeless</i>
64	Luke Wright	<i>Live at Komedia (Untitled)</i>
65	Luke Wright	<i>The Ballad Seller</i>
66	Luke Wright	<i>Joy!</i>
67	Luke Wright	<i>Poet Laureate</i>
68	Luke Wright	<i>Luke Wright's Silver Jubilee</i>
69	Luke Wright	<i>Pub Grub</i>
70	Malaika Kegode	<i>Badgers (Upcoming)</i>
71	Malaika Kegode	<i>Outlier</i>
72	Malika Booker	<i>Unplanned</i>
73	Mel Bradley	<i>For the Love of Mary</i>
74	Mel Bradley	<i>Ms. Noir and the Seven Deadly Sins</i>
75	Mel Bradley	<i>You Maiden, I Mother</i>
76	Mick Wood	<i>The Capital of Europe</i>
77	Molly Naylor	<i>Stop Trying to Be Fantastic</i>
78	Nathan Pelington	<i>If My Life Hadn't Turned Out Differently</i>
79	Nathan Pelington, Rhian Edwards and Suzanne Andrade	<i>Invisible Ink</i>
80	Patience Agbabi	<i>Telling Tales</i>
81	Phil Okwady	<i>The Gods Are All Here</i>
82	Roger Robinson	<i>Shadow Boxer</i>
83	Roger Robinson	<i>Letter from My Father's Brother</i>
84	Roger Robinson	<i>Prohibition</i>
85	Rose Condo	<i>How to Starve An Artist</i>
86	Rose Condo	<i>The Geography of Me</i>
87	Rose Condo	<i>The Empathy Experiment 2.0</i>
88	Rose Condo	<i>The Empathy Experiment</i>
89	Ross McFarlane	<i>Life Goals of the Millennials: Or The Commune Manifesto</i>
90	Rupinder Kaur	<i>Imperfect Perfect Woman</i>
91	Salena Godden	<i>Waiting for Godden</i>
92	Sarah Grant	<i>Oracles</i>
93	Sarah Grant	<i>Spark</i>
94	Selina Thompson	<i>salt.</i>
95	Stephen Durkan	<i>Why Am I Doing This?</i>
96	Steve Tasane	<i>Klepto</i>
97	SuAndi	<i>The Story of M</i>
98	Tina Sederholm	<i>Till Debt Us Do Part</i>
99	Tina Sederholm	<i>Everything Wrong With You Is Beautiful</i>
100	Tina Sederholm	<i>This Is Not Therapy</i>
101	TS Idiot	<i>Salt in the Wound</i>
102	Vanessa Kissule	<i>Sexy</i>
103	Vicky Forster	<i>Bathwater</i>
104	Zena Edwards	<i>Security</i>
105	Zena Edwards	<i>Travelling Light</i>



iii. Interviewee Info Sheet

An Oral History of Poetry Performance in the UK and Ireland

Information for Interviewees & Declaration of Consent to Participate in the Study

Dear,

“Poetry Off the Page: Literary History and the Spoken Word, 1965-2020” (PoP) is a five-year project that investigates the significance of poetry performance to recent British and Irish literary history. “An Oral History of Poetry Performance in the UK and Ireland” forms part of this project. Given that you are a significant figure in UK/Scottish/Welsh/Irish spoken word poetry, we would be keen to invite you to participate in a **recorded interview** that will be permanently archived and freely accessible to the public.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can decide not to participate or to terminate your participation at any time before or during the interview, without having to give a reason, and without this being to your disadvantage.

Your written consent to participate in an interview in the terms outlined below is an indispensable prerequisite for us to conduct this study. Please take time to read the following information carefully, and do not hesitate to ask questions.

Please only sign the declaration of consent

- if you have fully understood the type and procedure of the study,
- if you are willing to give your consent to participate, and
- if you are aware of your rights as a participant in this study.

1. What is the purpose of this study?

Poetry Off the Page is directed by Dr. Julia Lajta-Novak (University of Vienna) and carried out in collaboration with the poetry organisation Apples & Snakes, Goldsmiths University of London, the Centre for Poetry at Queen Mary University of London, and University College Dublin. The project aims to take account of the aesthetics and politics of oral performance in conjunction with the alternative institutional structures, publication channels, career pathways, presentational formats, styles, and poetic genres that have emerged from its dynamic performance scenes. For this purpose, we believe that it is vital to include interviews with

practitioners that will contribute to an oral history of poetry performance in the UK and Ireland. We would really value your perspectives on this important chapter of British/Irish literary history. For further information, see www.poetryoffthepage.net.

2. The interviews

Our questionnaire was developed by the PoP research team, in consultation with poets Patience Agbabi; Kat François; Amerah Saleh; Benjamin Zephaniah; and Russell Thompson (Apples&Snakes). We – the PoP researchers (Shefali Banerji; Julia Lajta-Novak; Claire Palzer; Martina Pfeiler; Shalini Sengupta; Emily Timms; Helen Thomas; Rachel Bolle-Debessay) – are planning to interview about 120 practitioners who have been active in British and/or Irish spoken-word poetry over the past decades. The interviews can be conducted face-to-face, in a place agreed on by interviewee and researcher, or online via Zoom. They will last for up to 2 hours. The interviews require no special preparation on your part, though we can send you some questions in advance, for your information. Our questions will relate to the development of your career as a (performing) poet; your views about your craft; your memories of specific events and of the poetry (performance) scene at large at specific points in time. Interviews will be recorded on audio. Interviewees will incur no costs from participating in the study and will not be remunerated.

3. How we handle your data

Interview recordings will first be stored on a data server of the University of Vienna with limited access. We will send you a link to the recording, after which you will have 14 days to decide whether you would like:

- to approve the recording
- to have certain utterances pseudomised
This means we will create a new audio file for publication that excludes the relevant utterances. The original audio file will be retained and accessed only by the PoP team. We may refer to pseudomised utterances in our publications by paraphrase, in a manner that does not connect them to your person.
- to withdraw certain utterances
If you wish to withdraw certain utterances, we will create a new audio file for publication that excludes the relevant utterances. The original audio file will be retained and accessed only by the PoP team and will not be referred to in publications.
- to withdraw the entire interview
In this case we will delete it completely.

The Poetry Off the Page team retains the right to delete specific utterances from the file before publication so as to comply with the GDPR's data minimization principle (for instance when they treat personal matters at length that clearly have no relevance for our project) or in cases where utterances may be considered libelous. Any such planned modifications will be pointed out to you when we send you the link to the recording.

After this 14-day period, Poetry Off the Page has the right to **archive the recording permanently** online via the University of Vienna's Phaidra repository (<https://phaidra.univie.ac.at>)⁴⁸, where they are **freely accessible**, and via the SpokenWordArchive.co.uk / the <https://www.nli.ie/en/born-digital-collection.aspx>). In these repositories, the recording will be attributed to you by name.

For further information on the processing of data at the University of Vienna please refer to University of Vienna's general Privacy Policy, available at <https://dsba.univie.ac.at/en/privacy-policy>, or contact the University of Vienna's Data Protection Officer at dsba@univie.ac.at.

In our **publications** (books, journal papers, special issues of journals, podcasts, etc), we will refer to these recordings either by paraphrase or by direct quotation, attributing them to you by name (except for pseudomised utterances). You will be offered a clearance read of the relevant passages before we submit them for publication.

4. Risks

We do not foresee any specific risks for participants in this study.

⁴⁸ It is possible to delete the recording from Phaidra, though the system will retain the metadata.



5. Any questions?

We very much hope to be able to work with you and would truly value your participation in this project. Of course, please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have further questions.

Principal Investigator & Study coordinator	Name: E-mail: Phone:
Interviewer	Name: E-mail: Phone:



Declaration of consent

Name of the participant in block letters:

Date of birth:

I agree to participate in the study “An Oral History of Poetry Performance in the UK and Ireland”. (*name of the person who provided the information*) provided me with clear and detailed information about the objectives, significance and scope of the study, as well as about the requirements resulting from my participation in the study. In addition, I have read this information sheet for participants and the declaration of consent. The interviewer answered all my questions sufficiently and in a comprehensible manner. I had enough time to decide whether I would like to participate in this study. At the moment, I have no further questions.

I will follow the instructions that are necessary for conducting this study. However, I reserve the right to end my voluntary participation at any time, without this being to my disadvantage. If I want to withdraw from the study in the terms outlined above, I can do so by contacting my interviewer or the PI Julia Lajta-Novak, either in writing or verbally.

At the same time, I agree that my data collected in this study are recorded and analysed.

I agree that my data are permanently saved electronically on the University of Vienna’s digital **Phaidra repository**, in line with the Federal Act on General Matters Regarding Art 89 GDPR and Research Organisation.

(Date and signature of the participant)

.....

I agree that my data are permanently saved electronically on the **SpokenWordArchive.co.uk** / the digital audio collection of the **National Library of Ireland** (delete as appropriate).

(Date and signature of the participant)

.....

I have read and understood the information for participants. I had the opportunity to ask all the questions I was interested in. My questions were answered fully and in a comprehensible manner.

I have received a copy of this information for participants and declaration of consent. The original remains with the study coordinator.

(Date and signature of the participant)

(If applicable: Date and signature of a parent or guardian)

.....

(Date, name and signature of interviewer)

.....

iv. Interviewee Guide

An Oral History of Poetry Performance in the UK and Ireland

(The following is the general interview guide for the Poetry Off the Page project, which includes questions on spoken word theatre as well as poets' general artistic practice. It also includes a section on programming. Not all questions listed here were asked during the interviews. Instead, based on prior shortlisting as well as real-time interviewee responses which ascertained the direction of our conversations, I decided which questions were relevant for the purpose of the interview.)

iv.i Poets

[Interviewees: poet-performers]

Careers & views of craft:

- To begin, would you like to share what you are currently working?
How is performing for instance?
- How did you come to poetry, and when and where did you start performing your work?
 - How has poetry impacted your life? Why is it important to you? Why have you kept doing it?

Perhaps we could start by thinking a bit more about your creative work as a whole.

Artistic practices:

Definition

- In addition to writing and performing poetry, what art forms have you worked in?
- There are various terms for a poet's performance practice. What would you call your performance work, and has that definition / perception changed over time? (e.g. poetry reading, poetry performance, performance poetry, spoken word poetry/slam)
- Given your responses to the previous questions, what does the term "spoken word poetry" mean to you and has that changed over time?
- Does your work relate to the spoken word form or would you rather use a different term to describe your work / your performance practice?

Topics

- [*Coming in with knowledge of performer's work; flag knowledge.*] Which topics/issues have you been most interested in throughout your career? Why are they significant to you?
- [*Use this question if you want to know something very specific about a performer's work*] I have really enjoyed your work in xy / at the xy event as it seems to resonate with larger - cultural issue such as xy. Could you tell me some more about this?
- [*Only ask if political issues are not discussed Coming in with knowledge of performer's work; flag knowledge.*] Does your performance work engage with political issues? Could you tell me some more about this?

Traditions / Canon / Influence

- Which poets do you admire as performers? And why?
- Are there any poets who have had an impact on you?
- [*Depending on above answer*] And more specifically, are there any poets who have influenced your performance practice across your care
- Do you situate your poetry performance work in relation to specific spoken word [*or poet's own term!*] traditions? [dub, rangers, Beats, grime, punk, slam, hip hop...]
- [*Signal knowledge*] Do you situate your poetry performance work in relation to other performance traditions (e.g., dance, carnival, storytelling, theatre, stand-up comedy, music...)? Could you tell me about how you engage with them? (And to what purpose?)
 - What is the nature of this engagement? (for example, do you see yourself as reimagining / expanding / reframing / challenging / satirising such inheritances? Raising awareness and educating?)
- [*Question should be tailored to the interviewee*] Do you engage with (other, not previously mentioned) specific cultural traditions, histories, or inheritances in your work? [*give an example – e.g., religious; feminist; ...*]
 - What is the nature of this engagement?
- [*If not mentioned yet:*] And how about your literary influences? (if no poetry mentioned) How about poetic traditions?
- What is your perception of the so-called 'literary Canon'? How would you position your work in relation to it? [*if necessary, offer a few sentences on debates surrounding the "canon"*]

... Perhaps we could now think a little more about the **development of your career and the**

people, collectives, and networks you have worked with.

Development

- When you think back on your journey as a poet and performer [or poet's self-definition as poet/performer], what were significant moments for you?
- [Signal knowledge of collaborations] Could you tell me more about your collaboration with x (individuals / collectives / professionals)? Are there any other artists / practitioners that you have collaborated with that you would like to tell me about?

Network / local/ national /

- Have you been involved in any poetry groups or networks relating to your poetry and / performance practices? (e.g., like Malika's Kitchen, Leeds Young Authors)
 - Could you tell us a bit about your involvement? Why did you join them/found them etc?
- Did you attend any grassroots writing groups, workshops, or more 'institutional' writing/performance courses?
 - How were they useful to you?/Why did you go?
- Have you ever acted as a teacher or mentor to other poets?

And thinking more broadly about Spoken Word in the UK:

- What makes a key player in spoken word poetry, in your view, and who do you consider key players or key collectives in spoken word poetry today?
- Who was vital or a key player when you started out? [Prompt interviewees to think about historical development; decade-by-decade even]
- Can you think of any events that you would consider key events in the history of UK / Ireland spoken word poetry? Why was it a significant or special event in your view?

Barriers

- Can you think of any individuals or groups who you think have not received enough recognition?
- Can you identify any structural barriers that are there for certain poets within spoken word? (e.g., Kate Fox book chapter: harder for working-class poets to gain recognition, to be considered for gigs or awards; or 1965 International Poetry Incarnation was an all-male all-white line-up; Free Verse report showing relative dearth of Black and non-white poets)

published; or might region be a factor?)

- And have you personally experienced any barriers in your career as a poet, and would you be willing to share these experiences?
 - [-> *Hold space! Acknowledge! Thank them for sharing!*]

... Thank you for telling me about the people you have been involved with. Could we move on to the various 'places' where spoken word happens.

Local / regional / national / transnational aspects

- Looking back over your career, Did/Do do you see your work as resonating with any particular local or regional scenes or groups? How so/why not?)
- Does your work also resonate with poets from outside of the UK or with international and transnational movements? Could you tell me more?
- There have been multiple attempts to try and map “British” poetry performance, (for example Bearder, Lucy English, the Spoken Word Map...), For you, does it mean anything to speak of ‘British’ spoken word poetry? Why/why not?
- Do you find anything distinctive about spoken word poetry scenes in the UK’s devolved nations? (perhaps themes, styles or in terms of how it is are organized?)

Performing/Writing

... Let’s move on to discussing your performing processes.

- What can you do in performance that you can’t do in writing?
- What does a successful spoken word performance (poetry performance) look like to you?
- How do you choose which poems to perform?
- How do you use particular vocal techniques? How do you use your voice?
To what effect?
- How do you use gesture or other forms of embodiment?
- How has your performance practice changed over time?
- When you write, to what extent do you have live performance in mind?

- Do you ever write pieces specifically for live performance? If so, how do you compose your **performance** pieces?
- There is this persistent idea of a tension between writing for the page and writing for the stage – is this a familiar tension in your work?
- How do you engage and/or interact with your audience when performing?
Does that change depending on the audience?

[for poets who have entered slam competitions]

- Does the slam competition format influence the way you write poetry?
- Have you created poems specifically for slam competitions?
- What's the value of being part of a slam for you?
- From your experience of slam poetry events, what kinds of poems enjoy the most success? *[acknowledge that there are different forms of success]*

Spoken Word Theatre

- When did you start performing full-length one-person shows? What led you to experiment with the form?
- Could your shows be called “Spoken Word Theatre”? Or what would you call them?
- How long does it take to prepare for the show? What's the timeline like? What's the preparation routine like? What goes into the writing?
 - Do you write from scratch, or do you incorporate some existing work with new writing to create a show?
- Do you work with directors, producers, choreographers, musicians, etc. (depending on which art forms they incorporate in their shows)? Can you tell me about their role?
- What's your relationship with stage craft/ props/ other theatrical elements?

- How important is the venue and setting for a longer show? How does your show respond to the venue? Do you develop shows keeping the venue in mind?
- Putting on a show is a massive commitment for both the poet and the venue. How do the financing and budgeting of the shows work? Who are the major players when it comes to financing a show? Who are the stakeholders?
- Who would you consider your contemporaries in the Spoken Word Theatre genre?

Authorial self-presentation

... Can we talk a little about your presence as a poet and performer on stage?

- Why is it, do you think, that in spoken word poetry it is most frequently poets themselves performing their work as opposed to actors performing a playwright's work?
- When you are up on stage, who is it that's performing to the audience? *[come in with example of their work]* Do you ever adopt a specific stage persona or character? Have you ever experimented with different personas on stage?

*... Now that we've spoken about personas, perhaps we could now think about the **autobiographical mode** in spoken word poetry. [proceed with caution when asking about personal experiences]*

- Poets and academics such as Katie Ailes have noted that autobiographical experience is common in spoken word. Why do you think poets share personal experience / or seemingly personal experience on the stage? To what effect?
- In your poetry performances, do you ever draw on autobiographical experiences and material? Could you tell me more about that? *[Come in with knowledge/ proceed with caution and empathy! Trauma! Hold space & acknowledge!]*
- Do you find that there is an expectation to perform autobiographical experiences? Why do you think this is the case? *[researcher should have an answer]*
- Do you try to subvert or play with these perceived expectations? *[give examples]*

*... Could we switch lanes a little now and talk a bit about **how you get your work out***

into the world and where you perform.

Publication / distribution / self-promotion:

- Could you tell me about some of the most important places and venues where you have performed throughout your career?
- Have you ever performed your poetry at events where poetry is not usually the primary focus? (political rallies, commemorations, celebrations, other types of public gatherings, or for commercial purposes, ...)
- [*flag knowledge*] What media have you used to publish or disseminate your work and why?
- Is there a primary medium in which most people encounter your work, do you think?
- Have certain media types allowed you to reach wider or more specific audiences?
[ask for specific media, e.g., live performance, chap books, CDs, online, audio tape, video, radio; we conceive of publication in the broadest sense]
- How have you promoted your work across your career? When you were starting out, how did you get your name out there?

Now that we have spent time talking about your work as a whole, could we now take some time to think about spoken word as a cultural industry?

Cultural industry: infrastructure

- How important have live events been for you when it comes to meeting other poets, or producers, or publishers?
- Has the significance of live events changed for you over time? How so?
- What were the most important events or event series for you and why?
Who ran them?
- How important have grassroots organisations or groups been to the development of spoken word as an artform?
- Which organisations or cultural producers have been the most instrumental to and/or supportive of your spoken word/poetry career?
- [*Flag knowledge*] What poetry publishers have been important to you (if any?)

- What about performances on social media?
- How vital are performances for poets in economic terms? For instance, do you see local gigging/literary festivals as being more significant than print publishing?

Closing:

- What advice would you have liked to be given at the start of your career? (Or do you have any advice for new poets?)
- What topics do you think you will address in the future in your creative work? Why is this of interest or importance to you?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

iv.ii Programmers

[Interviewees: event managers, programmers, publishers, journalists]

- How did you get into [*programming events / journalism / producing spoken word / organising...*]? [If time not mentioned, when did you start? What year was that?]
- How has programming poetry impacted your life? Why is it important? Why have you kept doing it/did you do keep doing it?
- What art forms have you programmed? [*organised / programmed / written on / ...*]? (e.g., poetry reading, poetry performance, performance poetry, spoken word poetry, stand-up comedy, poetry theatre, spoken word play/one person show ...)
- [depending on when they were active] Given your responses so far, what does the term “spoken word poetry” mean to you?
- Would you rather use a different term to describe the poetry performances you [*manage/write on/programme*]?
- [If applicable] You are both a poet and a programmer, how do these two roles sit together? [conflict? productive?]

Key players

- **What** was the poetry performance scene like when you started out?

- Who were the vital or key players and collectives when you started out?
- How about as your career [*in organising / journalism / ...*] progressed?
- Who do you consider key players and collectives in spoken word poetry today?
- Are there any individuals or groups who have not received enough recognition in your view?
- Can you identify any structural barriers that have been there for certain poets within spoken word? (e.g., Kate Fox book chapter: harder for working-class poets to gain recognition, to be considered for gigs or awards; or 1965 International Poetry Incarnation was an all- male all-white line-up; Free Verse report showing relative dearth of Black and non-white poets published; or might region be a factor?)
- And what about barriers for programmers? [if they share personal experience, thank them and hold some space here!]

Let's now talk about programming trends in general.

Programming Trends & Venues
--

- Have you noticed any developments or trends in the programming of spoken word events over time? (In terms of what kind of work is being put on – or “put together” at events; such as new event formats)
- Do you feel that you/your organization are innovating or creating trends in spoken word?
- What were the most important events or event series in poetry for you and why?

Could we now turn to the venues or places where poetry is performed?

- Where were spoken word events happening when you started out? (Ask about venues) Have these venues and/or locations changed over time?
- Have you noticed a change in the *kinds* of venues in which spoken word is put on?
- Where is spoken word happening now?

*Can we now discuss **your organisation's [e.g., A&S] programming practices?***

- Could you summarise the ethos / mission statement of your organisation / work?
- How do you decide on the kinds of events that you organise? Can you give us examples? [*Indicate prior knowledge e.g., performance last month*]
- How do you choose poets to perform in your events and according to which criteria? (Could you give examples?)
- [Come in with knowledge] What poetry event formats have you worked with? [e.g., open-mic; one-person show; slam; tours; festivals...]
- What other aspects do you consider when programming? (For instance, what themes do you choose and why; what venues; collaborators; ...?)
- Does your programming work respond to social or political movements of the day? [Give examples]
- Can the work that you program be related to specific performance traditions? (e.g., dance, carnival, storytelling, theatre, stand-up comedy, music...)?

Spoken word theatre:

Can we now move on to talking about spoken word theatre.

Traditions / Canons

- Around when would you say one person shows emerged on the scene, and who would you say were the earliest practitioners? For example, SuAndi with her *The Story of M*, commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1994. Or were there shows and practitioners even before that?
- From your bird's eye view of a programmer, what could you say about the development of the one-person show since [whatever start they mentions]? Have you noticed any specific trends (regarding themes, style, types of venues, etc.)?
- How would you say organising and/or programming a one-person show is different from other spoken word events? For instance, as regards preparing the stage, or as regards promotions. Or is it different at all, from a programmer's or organiser's perspective?

- Could these one-person shows be called Spoken Word Theatre? Or what would you call them?

Slam

Can we now move on to talking about poetry slam.

- What do you think about poetry slams and do you have any experiences with the format?
- [In case we don't know] Have you ever organized / programmed a poetry slam?
(if applicable):
- [Flag some knowledge] How do you prepare your slam event? [for example, how do you select poets? Which slam rules do you use? Time limit? Jury?]
- What is the purpose / ethos of the xy slam (fun? excitement? artist development?)
- Where do the performers come from? [Are they locals? from other cities?]
- Do you ever host poets from other countries?
- Are there any poetry slam events that you have organized/MC-ed that stand out to you as highly memorable? Why?
- Are there any other slam series that you consider important for spoken word in the UK?
- In which ways, do you think, have poetry slams changed over the past few decades?

Audiences

Can we talk about the people who come to your poetry events.

- Which audiences do you/ does your organisation want to appeal to and how?
- Have the audiences of your events changed over time? If so, how? [in terms of demographics, ...]
- How do you promote your events? Have certain media types allowed you to reach more specific or wider audiences?
- Have you ever worked with live-streaming events?
- [Come in with knowledge] What is your experience with live-streaming xy event?

- Do you/ does your organisation record and archive your events, and if so, how?

Collaborations / Networks

- *[Signal knowledge of collaborations]* Could you tell me more about your collaboration with x (individuals / collectives / professionals)? Are there any other artists / practitioners / organisations that you have collaborated with that you would like to tell me about?
- As an organizer/programmer, have you worked with any poetry performance group or networks? (e.g., like Malika's Kitchen, The Roundhouse Collective?)

Cultural industry / infrastructure

Let's now take some time to think about “the business” of spoken word as a cultural industry.

- How important have grassroots organisations been to the development of spoken word as a cultural industry?
- Who were the most influential spoken word organisations when you first started [programming / organising / reviewing / ...]? How has this organisational landscape changed?
- How does the live performance scene intersect with/relate to the poetry print publishing scene?

Cultural Industry / Economics

- How do you fund your programme? (For example, entry tickets, book sales, funding bodies, charity donations, ...)
- Who do you see as the main funders of spoken word in the UK / Ireland?
- Have you ever engaged with them? Could you tell us about your experience?

Artists Careers'

- Drawing on your experiences as a programmer / organiser / journalist, what do you think is important for artists who want to be successful in spoken word?
- Have you nurtured any new and emerging artists who later became central figures in spoken word?

Key Events and Leads:

...Now that we're reaching the end of the interview, I'd like to ask a few questions to help with further investigations.

- Can you think of a few events that you would consider key events in the history of UK / Ireland spoken word poetry? (For example, events organised by you, or any other significant events) Why was it a significant or special event in your view?
- If you think back on the past decades of British spoken word, which names should absolutely come up in a history of British spoken word? Who comes to mind? (... Anyone else? ... Can you also think of some event organizers?)

Closing:

- Would you like to share what you are currently working on/what are your current interests/concerns in your programming / organising / journalism / reviewing?
- What poetry events do you hope to create / programme in the future? Why is this of interest or importance to you?
- What other event managers / poetry programmers / spoken word producers can you think of that we should talk to?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

iv.iii Questions about specific events

[Interviewees: poets, event managers, programmers, publishers, journalists]

1. Opening question: What are your memories of xxx event?
2. Key topics:

Incitement:

- How did you come to take part in / organise it?
- Why did you choose to perform these particular pieces / programme these particular artists? [Also ask about MCs, slam judges, DJs, musicians, ...]
- You were on a bill with artist xy - why do you think you were programmed together?

Institutional support:

- How did you come to collaborate with xxx venue?

- Who else was involved with xxx event?
- How was the event funded?

Audience:

- What do you remember about the audience at that event?

Significance & impact:

- Looking backward, how significant was this event for you? [Would you say that this event marks a particular turning point in your career, for instance? Were there any follow-ups to this event? Did it bring you a specific type of recognition?] Did it bring you new contacts? Or new ideas for your work?]
- [Come in with knowledge/speculation] What significance did this event have for poetry/spoken word/x movement?-(What impact did it have?)
- Are you aware of any press coverage of xxx event? [perhaps ask if interviewee has a copy of article]