

# CHANGING THOROUGHLY? A PLAYWRIGHT / RESEARCHER REFLECTION ON RESEARCH-BASED THEATRE AND *BEING FRANK*

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper explores the educational possibilities and limitations of Deakin University's CHASE (Centre for Health through Action on Social Exclusion) trans and gender diverse Research-based Theatre project, *Being Frank*, in Victoria, Australia, 2016-2020. Adopting the perspective of the playwright / researcher, this paper documents the tensions between playwriting as artistic practice and Research-based Theatre within scholarly and educational contexts. The paper critically outlines the advisory group sessions, workshops, and presentations of the project - including within secondary school, tertiary and community-based programs - raising questions related to ethics / representation when seeking to dramatise complex issues. This paper offers Research-based Theatre practitioners, educational workers and artist / researchers insights into using theatre to advocate for inclusion and diverse perspectives.

**CHANGING THOROUGHLY? RÉFLEXION D'UN DRAMATURGE / CHERCHEUR SUR LE THÉÂTRE FONDÉE SUR LA RECHERCHE ET *BEING FRANK***

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article explore les possibilités et les limites éducatives du projet de théâtre trans, de genres divers et fondé sur la recherche nommé *Being Frank*. En adoptant la perspective du dramaturge-chercheur·e, cet article met en évidence les tensions entre l'écriture dramatique comme pratique artistique et le théâtre fondé sur la recherche dans des milieux académiques et éducatifs. L'article présente de manière critique les séances du groupe consultatif, les ateliers et les présentations du projet en soulevant des questions liées à l'éthique et à la représentation lorsqu'il s'agit de dramatiser des enjeux complexes. Cet article offre aux professionnel·le·s intéressés des pistes de réflexion sur l'utilisation du théâtre comme moyen de plaidoyer en faveur de l'inclusion et de la diversité des perspectives.

## INTRODUCTION

*FRANK takes a breath.*

**FRANK:** But then I started Googling.

I found the word. It gave me this joy, this total relief...

It's in the dictionary, from Latin: "across," "beyond," "changing thoroughly."

...I'm trans. (Summers, 2019, p. 2)

A few minutes into the performance, sixteen-year-old Frank – the protagonist of Research-based Theatre play *Being Frank* – embraces and speaks his gender identity openly for the first time. In this moment, he is speaking, and represented, to multiple audiences: his parents Gita and Hutch, his best friend Marco, and his online following watching live on Facebook. The theatre audience are assembled in front of – or around – him, in whichever space the performance is taking place. A projection showing the livestream of Frank is positioned behind him, with positive comments and thumbs-up reacts flooding the frame, tempered by the occasional negative comment. This moment, with its layers of identities and characters adjusting to change, introduces the central conceit of *Being Frank*: not a singular coming out narrative, but a *becoming* story shared between Frank and those closest to him. As a piece of educational Research-based Theatre, it establishes multiple entry-points – characters, content, digital – for audiences to engage with. Frank's moment ignites and implicates us all in a bigger conversation about what it might mean to be – and to provide support and love to those who are – trans. This moment also speaks to the complex, overlapping entanglements of the artists and academics behind the project, the juggling of roles and responsibilities, navigating the shifting intersections between ethics and theatre-making – elements I explore through the playwright/researcher lens I adopt in this article.

In late 2016, I was commissioned by Professor Ann Taket at Deakin University's CHASE (Centre for Health through Action on Social Exclusion) in Melbourne to write a roughly thirty-minute educational piece of theatre responding to the lived experiences of trans and gender diverse people. The piece needed to be staged in any school hall or meeting space with minimal set up and technical requirements, and to be performed by a single actor (of any gender identity). The performance

would always be followed by a panel session directly discussing content from the play, and featuring a group of local health professionals from advocacy organisations (such as Transgender Victoria) experienced in speaking on trans issues and sourced from the community in which the work was performed. Previous works produced in Australia by CHASE using this model – *You the Man* (Plourde et al., 2016; Plourde, 2017; Crisp & Taket, 2022), and *The Thin Line* (Plourde, 2018; Taket, 2020) – dealt with gender-based violence and eating disorders respectively, and were pre-existing texts written by American health professor and playwright Cathy Plourde. This would be the first time CHASE commissioned an original script, one from an Australian playwright, and one with a much broader thematic focus, less centred on a singular issue than authentic representation of a marginalised group. An advisory group of trans and gender diverse people of varying ages and cultural backgrounds was formed by CHASE, with university ethics approval, during the initial development and workshop performance stages of the project. This group would be encouraged to maintain an ongoing relationship with the work by giving feedback at future showings.

The general parameters that I, as playwright, was given were that the play script needed to:

1. contain multiple discussion points on trans and gender diversity issues,
2. be educative for general audiences of upper-secondary school students to adults (who could become better equipped to support trans and gender diverse people), and
3. be broadly positive – without sacrificing honesty or integrity – in its representation of trans and gender diverse experiences.

In this article, I critically reflect on the process of wrestling with this brief as a playwright, and my growing awareness of my ethical responsibilities (and those of the project) as playwright / researcher. In particular, I consider my identity and positioning, how to work with / from / alongside an advisory group and their lived experiences, the development, workshoping, and casting process when working with trans and gender diverse content, and presentations of the work in different contexts.

*Being Frank* by CHASE was developed as an interdisciplinary undertaking of both a) health promotion educative theatre resource, and b) Research-based Theatre project. Two central questions framed the conception of the project: how can we better understand the lived experience of trans and gender diverse people in Australian society through theatre, and how

can we provide connections to resources to audiences of predominantly cisgender young people and adults to be better-informed allies to trans and gender diverse people in their communities? In this paper, I reflect on these ambitions from my perspective as playwright / researcher writing plays in a scholarly context for the first time, discussing the complex interrelationships between theatre, education, and social issues. While *Being Frank* has been briefly analysed from a health promotion perspective (Taket, 2020), I offer a playwright / researcher account of the project's methodology, outcomes, and limitations in attempting to address the extremely broad topic of the marginalization of trans and gender diverse people in Australian society. As Mackenzie and Belliveau note, the playwright's contributions to research have been underrepresented in scholarly writing (2011, p. 3); this article aims to closely investigate that perspective.

#### FINDING FRANK WITHIN / ACROSS RESEARCH-BASED THEATRE METHODOLOGIES

**MARCO:** I come crashing through the quadrangle.

Spot him.

Bowl him over with an enormous hug, and we hold each other tight.

(Pause) Frank!

We just got back from Cyprus three days ago.

Your video – woah – soooooo –

I've been proactively doing research, and I have a number of questions for you so that we can interact respectfully and I do not cause undue offence.

Firstly, what name would you – oh, I guess you've already decided?

You're Frank.

It's cool, it's still *you*, but – *different*.

Secondly: which pronouns would you like to be referred to by?

Some of the popular options include: he / xie / they / zhe / fae.

You're *he*: you're a trans – dude?

But you could also be nonbinary, or genderqueer, or –

Sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself, I've been reading literally *everything*.

Even though my brain is melting into overloaded slushie goo: I want you to know that I'm looking out for you.

I've spoken to the Year Level Coordinators and we're going to start a LGBTQIA and Allies group.

So don't worry about anything, alright? (Summers, 2019, p. 3)

Representing the intersection of a health-based initiative designed to educate and the creative work of a playwright / researcher, I now understand that *Being Frank* sits within the broad category of Research-based Theatre. But in 2016 when I was commissioned, I was a middle-class, white, cisgender, gay male playwright with a keen interest in political issues, and writing plays that explored gender, sexuality, cultural identity (all four of my grandparents were Ukrainian refugees), and marginalised communities. Though I had studied theatre and playwriting throughout my early 20s and won awards and worked with mainstream Australian theatre companies, this project would begin my engagement with the role – and responsibilities – of a playwright / researcher within scholarly paradigms focused on educational potentialities.

Through my own independent research, I discovered that Research-based Theatre is an umbrella term to describe a variety of performance-based approaches to arts-based research (Belliveau & Lea, 2016) involving collaboration – often between artists, researchers, and research – that balances ethical rigour with the aesthetic demands of theatre (Cox et al., 2022; Belliveau et al., 2010). I was intrigued to discover that there is no singular way to do Research-based Theatre; it exists on a complex spectrum (Beck et al., 2011). The models of ethics and inquiry can similarly shift between projects, participants / advisory group members, and contexts (Lea, 2012; Bishop, 2014; Sallis, 2022).

Within this broad category, I initially considered ethnodrama / ethnotheatre as the most useful approach in shaping my understanding of how I would write plays as a researcher: piecing together scripts from interviews with recruited participants, documents, statistics, and other forms of data, which are then performed back to them and for select audiences (Mienzakowski & Moore, 2008; Saldaña, 2008). These “ethno” approaches to theatre-making have for several decades been used in health, humanities, and science fields to represent and empower individuals, create engagement and empathy, and achieve positive outcomes for marginalized communities (Mienzakowski, 2001; Nimmon, 2006; Sweet & Carlson, 2018).

However, I was given the brief as playwright / researcher to independently create new characters reflecting (but not limited to) aspects of our advisory group, insert fictional circumstances, alter and add words to form new

dialogue, and use aesthetic and poetic devices. Ethnodrama / theatre traditionally possess a greater reverence toward participant interview transcripts than what was conceived here, with careful editing rather than original creation being used to guide the final performance text, particularly in relation to ‘juicy stuff’ (Saldana, 1998; 2008). In this instance, I realised that my methodology could be described as a “playwright-centred” (Lea, 2012, p. 63) approach to Research-based Theatre, and more closely aligned with theatre created in non-academic contexts, yet still with direct access to the main source of the research (the advisory group).

The stated purpose by CHASE of this playwright-centred brief was twofold; firstly, to protect the identities and lives of the advisory group as an ethical act, and secondly, to drive non-academic audience engagement through creative / aesthetic choices. This may be frowned upon in ethnodrama / theatre, as this can be seen as a betrayal of the ethical relationship between participants and researchers that prioritised artistic vision over data (Saldana, 1998). Further, the goal of creating a play script which would travel to non-academic settings, and become part of larger public community conversations, might also sit in contrast to methodologies where audiences are more likely to be closed. I also began to understand that *Being Frank* may therefore align more closely with other approaches including play-building (Norris, 2000; 2009); performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003), and applied theatre (Thompson, 2009; Prendergrast & Saxton, 2016).

Perhaps further distinguishing *Being Frank* was the play script’s role in briefly raising and sparking a number of issues, rather than exploring any of them in substantial aesthetic or conceptual depth. The script was not designed to reflect back, or represent, any specific individual or member of the advisory group. Nor was it designed to track a simple narrative from start to finish; artistic and aesthetic questions were secondary to the health-based issues that needed to be readily identifiable for a non-academic audience. *Being Frank* was also never designed to stand on its own: social / health issues would be dramatically signposted, then picked up in the panel discussion session afterwards, and / or in the accompanying package of resources. The re-orienting of the play as entangled and inseparable from the panel session would take pressure off the script achieving the educative outcomes, positioning it as a starting point for more substantial discussions to follow. As Taket identifies, the two would work together to create empathy, understanding and awareness of supports (2020, p. 441), similarly reflected in the empathetic power of Research-based Theatre argued by Mienickowski & Moore (2008).

Lea argues that as the choices made that inform the script-development process ultimately influence the research, these should be discussed in detail (2012, p. 82). The understanding and theoretical justifications of theatre-based work to educate and achieve social benefits are often different in health disciplines to arts-based disciplines. Reflecting on the *After the Crash* project, which united health and theatre-based practitioners, Colantonio et al. (2008) argue that “the methodological approaches and the ultimate outcome in representing the source material were understood differently by artists and scientists” (p. 181). Now, with a PhD using Research-based Theatre methods, I understand the importance of this. I have come to question whether more discussion and codification within Research-based Theatre frameworks – both theatrical and ethical – might have more closely guided the early stages of the work’s development, particularly for me as an experienced playwright, but, at that stage, an emerging arts-based researcher. Looking back, it is hard to escape the feeling that, after the initial advisory group session, I was left largely to my own still-forming creative and ethical devices; although I accept, as Research-based Theatre practitioners, these are continuously in formation. Further, greater clarity and communication around the specific Research-based Theatre brief could have afforded advisory group members – who signed informed consent statements and whose involvement was approved through university ethics – a greater understanding of exactly *how* their engagements, words, experiences might be used, theatrically. This suggests a challenge when introducing an artist into the intermingled methodological ecologies of health-based and arts-based research, trusting their creative practice alone will be enough to guide them through. A potential solution as a go-between for practitioners / researchers – a dramaturg(e) – has been floated by Belliveau and Lea (2011, p. 335) as someone versed in both the arts and research to support, critique, develop the project from multiple lenses. While many “outside eyes” were informally consulted throughout the project’s development, this suggestion is worthy of further consideration for future Research-based Theatre projects, particularly at the time of their originating.

**“WE ARE SUCCESSFUL *BECAUSE* WE ARE TRANS, NOT IN SPITE OF BEING TRANS”: THE INITIAL ADVISORY GROUP MEETING**

**FRANK:**       *(holds up the brochure)* “OMG – I’m Trans.”

Written by young trans people, it keeps blowing my mind, because what I thought I knew, I realised I didn’t at all.

Trans isn’t just feeling trapped inside one body and wanting to be in another.

It isn't just about accessing hormones, or having gender affirmation surgery.

It can be for some people, but it doesn't have to be.

There's a billion possibilities.

A whole constellation – who don't fit into masculine or feminine – who are fluid and can change.

I shut my eyes think about myself between these pages.

What could I look like?

*Frank* – he's got muscular legs.

A chest with a bit of a gut, because he isn't ever going to give up pizza.

And a moustache like Freddy Mercury.

An initial meeting between Professor Ann Taket, theatre director Suzanne Chaundy (who had directed previous CHASE shows), myself, and the advisory group was conducted at Deakin University in late 2016. The group, as recruited by CHASE in conjunction with advocacy groups Transgender Victoria, Y Gender (who published the *OMG – I'm Trans* resource), and Minus18, represented a cross-section of trans and gender diverse people from across Melbourne. This encompassed a diversity of ages, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, and geographical locations. The purpose of the initial meeting was to ask the group three questions, which would guide the development of the work:

1. What are the key messages that the program needs to include?
2. What are the hurtful / harmful / derogatory myths that the program needs to explode?
3. What sources/resources should be used to inform the text, as well as be available to link in for audiences afterwards?

A transcript of this meeting reveals the breadth of responses across the three questions. There is a strong desire for a work that reflects a strengths-based, positive approach towards trans representation: the unique skills, creativities, and qualities of trans individuals, each having one (or more) “seven billion gender identities.” There is want for a work that will create empathy, warmth, and connection, while reflecting resilience using humour to explore pressing issues. There is concern that trans people's narratives are often depicted as overly simplistic, confusing gender and sex and rendering them as binary, and that trans people's sexualities are often not separated from their gender identity. Further, there is acknowledgement that trans and gender diverse representations in arts /



media are largely white and Western. In terms of the issues to be discussed, multiple advisory group members made reference to the challenges of interacting with the medical system, myths of chromosomes, the difficulty obtaining proper medical care as a trans person, being required to educate doctors, and the external fixation on surgery and hormones towards effectively 'passing.' As one advisory group member stated: "I'm not a curiosity, a specimen: I am a real person." Many of these medical concerns are similarly reflected in members' experiences of administrative processes, legal systems, and challenges in workplaces or with government agencies. They are also frequently raised in the media with references to bathrooms, pronoun use, and participation in sports: issues which one advisory group member deemed "institutionalised cissexism." A general theme across the advisory group is the complexity and multifaceted nature of trans and diverse gender identities –while it can be possible to not feel "trans enough," the diversity within trans and gender diverse communities is ultimately a defining strength. A strong overall message is that the diversity of trans and gender diverse identities and experiences demands recognition and celebration.

This initial meeting was illuminating and exciting, offering so many possibilities for how these themes could be realised theatrically. Indeed, the statements around the diversity of the trans experience – the ever-expanding constellation of identities – informed the motif of space-travel, planets, and stars that runs throughout *Being Frank*. The meeting was also confronting on two counts. Firstly, listening to the depth of the systemic challenges faced by trans people to live, access services, be employed, and express themselves authentically. Secondly, that I wasn't aware of these; that my own marginalization contained unacknowledged privilege that blindsided me from the experiences of trans and nonbinary others I lived amongst and counted as friends. Despite considering myself an aware ally, I had become, silently, part of the problem. As one advisory group member recalled of the ignorance from within, not outside, of the LGBTQIA+ community: "I was told 'you're really a gay man that can't face being gay.'"

While diversity of, and within, trans and gender diverse experiences was critical to the conception of the project, it was apparent from this first session that there were many layers of nuanced experience to educate audiences about in a single performance. Given the time-based constraints of the performance and the importance of the panel sessions, it was clear that *Being Frank* couldn't do justice to all of them. This raises challenging questions about exactly who is recruited to inform a Research-based Theatre advisory group when the parameters are so broad: Would it have been better to recruit fewer members, of less diversity in background and

lived experience, but to go deeper with them during the interviews? Surely this would dictate the direction of the play script before the research data had been generated – limiting the perspectives that could be covered. But would this necessarily be a bad thing?

From this point onwards, as playwright / researcher, I was required to make decisions to interpret, synthesise, transform, and edit the narratives and experiences of real trans and gender diverse people into a play script – ironically, given the goals of the project, rendering them visible or invisible as I went.

#### AESTHETIC AND FORMAL QUESTIONS: BALANCING ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

**GITA:** I'm driving Frank to see a new doctor.

Our bomb of a car stalls on the West Gate and almost carks it for good.<sup>1</sup>

I'm ashamed to say it, and I could never tell him, but I –

*Hormones.*

Jabbed and injected and, swirling around inside my –

*My child.*

“Yes, sorry – Doctor – how do we get the hormones?”

**FRANK:** “Psychiatrist sessions?

Paediatricians?

En-do-cron-olo-gists, Mum, what are they?

And that's just to get puberty blockers?

I want facial hair.

I want to sound like – a dude.

*It's my body.*

I'm not going to be told what I'm allowed to do with it.

And I'm not going to change my mind.”

I don't hear Mum as we walk out of the clinic.

I don't hear the car struggling to start, or Mum trying to help Dad with dinner, or the crickets outside my window.

This was supposed to be about me being *me*, not having to prove who I am, costing so much money.

This *sucks*. (Summers, 2019, p. 6).

Being present for, and then re-reading the transcript of, the first advisory group session, my biggest challenge and undertaking as playwright / researcher was how to balance the aesthetic, poetic, and theatrical aspects of the play script, with the necessary research and raising of issues identified by the advisory group as an important part of a “reflexive drama-based process” (Belliveau, 2015, p. 6). This process was constantly evolving, requiring ongoing character experimentation (descriptions, monologues, actions), dialogue writing / rewriting, re-reading, and reflection, all with a heightened awareness of a) my responsibility to this group, and b) my responsibilities as a playwright / researcher who could engage and potentially educate audiences.

The initial meeting led to the identification of key themes and ideas: namely, the diversity of experience in being trans, the multiple and intersecting layers of challenges from individuals and systems when trying to live as trans or gender diverse, the role of technology in connecting and facilitating authentic expressions of trans and gender diverse people, and the necessity of positive trans and gender diverse narratives. These were guiding concepts when beginning to plan the characters and narratives of what quickly became titled *Being Frank*. *Frank*, the main character, as in honest, upfront, and a masculinized version of dead-name Francesca; *being* as in the lived experience of the present, the constant state of becoming yourself. Inspired by the advisory group’s suggestions as detailed in the initial meeting, the dramatic underpinning of the work became: *how do you discover what kind of trans or gender diverse person you might be, and how might this journey impact the people around you, and the support that they can give?*

The constraint of having a single actor present multiple perspectives in the same piece was significant, requiring a script that was detailed enough to carry this, yet nimble enough to allow an actor to shift between distinct characters quickly. I was intimidated by the challenge of how to do all of this and not overwhelm an audience, or actor, while still providing plenty of important points for discussion afterwards.

I made the decision to have a secondary school-age protagonist, Frank, and three characters in Frank’s orbit: cis male over-enthusiastic friend Milo, cis female concerned mother Gita, and trans female trailblazer Noor. These characters, speaking largely in active intersecting first-person monologues, would offer contrasting perspectives from family, friends, and another trans person / romantic interest. They would also allow different entry points for the play to speak, at least somewhat, to its various audiences. Each supporting character would explore key issues raised by the advisory group members as framed by Frank’s narrative journey: Milo and school-

based bullying as Frank debates which toilet to use, Gita and Frank's father Hutch's concerns over how best to support possible medical interventions (such as puberty blockers and surgery) given financial and legal constraints, and Noor and Frank's efforts towards forming relationships and discovering community across the spectrum of trans and gender diverse people.

At the centre of all this would be Frank, who audiences would experience in two ways, adding complexity to his experiences and depth to his emerging identity as a trans man. The first would be, like the other characters, an ongoing monologue depicting roughly a year in his life as he wrestled with the social, interpersonal, and medical challenges of becoming himself. The second would be mediated 'streamed' performances; Frank would be a social media vlogger, performing songs and sketches, documenting his experiences of transitioning to the world, dispelling myths, and sharing trans dating disasters while engaging with online fans. The importance of technology in connecting communities of trans people was a common thread in the initial meeting with advisory members and reflected in the large presence of trans and gender diverse people on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and other platforms (Horak, 2014; Byron et al., 2019). Theatrically, the aim was that these streams would offer a simple but engaging way to break up the intersecting monologues of the characters, while allowing audiences to experience a disjunct between the outer performance and inner feelings of a teenage trans or gender diverse person. Though initially this level of technology was out of the project's scope, as determined by CHASE, this issue was solved with the provision of a projector and screen that would travel with the actor to each performance, as well as workshopped pre-recorded sequences.

One of the most difficult aspects of the drafting process was deciding on what from the initial meeting could be included, and what would need to be left out. A focus on a younger trans person who had some exposure to an older generation of trans and gender diverse people meant forgoing a deeper focus on the middle-aged trans experience. Similarly, choosing to centre the performance text on a character assigned female at birth meant forgoing an opportunity to represent a trans woman protagonist. While I felt it was important for me to set the text in the culturally diverse western suburbs of Melbourne where I was living, with characters reflecting cultural and socioeconomic diversity, I knew this may not be enough to provide a counterpoint to the prevailing white, Western trans narratives (Miller, 2012) many in the advisory group were keen to see avoided. An

initial draft would, at least, allow for these choices to be tested before returning them to the advisory group for feedback.

### “OUR LIVES, OUR WORDS”: REDRAFTING, RESHAPING, AND FINDING FORM

**FRANK:** I stand out the front of the Sunshine Library with a packet of peanuts and a half-eaten block of Bega cheese.

Peer into the meeting room.

And then a girl pops out from around the corner.

“Jenny?”

**NOOR:** Jenny? Jenny Derr?

Oh-em-gee, you don’t get it.

Jen Derr.

Jen-der?

Jeez, I only use it on Facebook for a laugh.

I’m Noor.

I love your videos, Frank.

I’m a filmmaker too. I’ve been interviewing everyone here for my University application. It’s a documentary about us, trans people of all ages, colours, religions. But, mostly, it’s for me.

I’m so happy you’re here.

Everyone, this is Frank! (Summers, 2019, p. 14)

Upon completing and submitting the early first draft of *Being Frank*, the discussion between Suzanne Chaundy, Ann Taket, and myself hit at an interesting tension raised by the advisory group: *how to be positive, educative, and representative without falling into the tropes of existing narratives depicting trans people?* In being hyper-aware of avoiding pitfalls and creating a meaningful, strong representation of many aspects of trans and gender diverse experiences, I initially went too far to the opposite: avoiding all conflict where it should have been depicted, avoiding representation of perspectives that could be seen to do harm if shown and left unchecked. It was clear that in rewriting, wrestling with the thematic mess of substantial issues would need to become more important, rather than ‘writing them off.’ Much like Owis et al. (2022) in their *Out at School* LGBT project, balance had to be sought between honouring the vulnerability of marginalised people, and authenticity of interactions when

dramatizing challenging moments. Theatrical devices – like the characters speaking to each other within monologues (requiring the actor to jump quickly between roles) – would also need to be sacrificed for the sake of performer and audience clarity.

After a casting process where cis and gender diverse actors were encouraged to apply, Genevieve Guieffre, a professional cis female actor, was employed. She would also take on the role of script dramaturg. A week in April 2017 was spent at Deakin University workshopping the text, discussing our personal relationships to the material, experimenting with character work, staging scenes, and collaborating on clarifying strong story arcs. This process raised key issues leading to fruitful discussion about the presence of masculinity / femininity in all of the characters; honing in on Frank being a flawed, at times selfish, protagonist while on his journey of self-discoveries; and different props and performance styles that would help distinguish characters. The workshop culminated in the first reading, at Deakin University's city campus, of *Being Frank* to a group of academics, health workers, and many of the original advisory group.

I was extremely nervous about this reading, more than I normally would be as a playwright seeing my work in front of an audience. Not because I didn't ultimately trust the integrity of the process that the team and CHASE had followed and the work we had done, but because I was aware of the immense responsibility that we had to the advisory group (who I had not seen or communicated with since the first meeting). I hoped to demonstrate that we understood and wanted to broadly educate others about aspects of their experiences. Not just their experiences, but their identities – which had already been called into question, challenged, and delegitimised in so many other contexts. I knew that it was impossible to make everyone happy, which was a testament to the diversity of the advisory group and their experiences, but hopefully the work – and its educational potential – would make them feel their involvement was validated. When asked if I had anything to say to the advisory group at the end of the presentation, I anxiously but deliberately offered: "I think now is the time for me to listen."

Thankfully, for the most part, the audience were receptive. The advisory group recognised the presence of their own words and experiences in the text and did not feel like gratuitous liberties had been taken to invent dramatic or thematic tensions that weren't authentic. As one advisory group member said, "*those are our lives and our words.*" One academic was keen for the work to be performed to their pre-service Health and Physical Education teachers, believing it would be a useful resource for tertiary

students. Many other group members looked forward to seeing where the work would go and offered suggestions on how it might develop.

There were clarifications of dialogue or content, which were extremely helpful while redrafting: specific terminology around hormones and puberty blockers that required clarification, references to surgery that could better reflect the community's language, and clarifying the framing of Frank's journey to arriving at a point of possible nonbinary identity rather than binary trans man.

There were also deeper theoretical concerns raised (predominantly by one advisory group member in written feedback) about two things both of which we had already anticipated and could not easily be resolved. These pertained to the balancing of artistic and aesthetic goals in the project, while covering the necessary issues and questions of representation. The first concern was the decision to make the protagonist a trans man, when trans women were statistically more likely to be marginalised in society (and have reductive representations in film and media). Our attempt to rectify this with the depiction of a trans woman of colour character, Noor, was viewed by one advisory group member as largely cursory and not a substantial enough presence to have a place in the narrative. This was a completely fair criticism, and a difficult one to address: in discussions of this storyline with the creative team, it was thought that it would be better to include Noor – to spark thought and discussion about trans women of colour – rather than not to include her at all. At least then she could be raised by panelists, or audiences, in future presentations, and perhaps questions about representation could accompany that.

The second ethical concern was the casting of a cis woman as an actor to play all the roles. From a very early stage of the project, casting had been a topic of consideration and debate. The script itself does not denote that the actor playing all the roles should be any specific gender identity or have specific physical attributes. While CHASE wanted to support a trans actor should they choose to be involved, the organization was concerned about the impact that performing the work for audiences who may not be immediately receptive might have on the health of a trans or gender diverse performer. Additionally, it was flagged that a trans or gender diverse actor may feel the burden of the work being viewed by audiences as autobiographical or pressured to offer autobiographical content in the panel sessions following. While it was always envisaged that at least two actors would be trained to deliver *Being Frank* (so the work could travel more widely pending availabilities and demand), this was still difficult feedback to receive. Genevieve had offered so much to the workshoping

process as a thoughtful actor / dramaturg, as well as having her own experiences of trans and gender diverse people in her family to draw from. These were not necessarily things that the advisory group member would have been aware of, even though we had thought about them very closely as a creative team. In hindsight, making some of these thought processes and discussions available to the advisory group may have helped them understand the difficulty of the competing decisions at play. And although this feedback was only raised by one advisory group member, I questioned: couldn't this same criticism be levelled at me, as a cis gay male playwright? Was Genevieve only receiving this critique, and not myself, because she was the public face of *Being Frank* – what about all my biases and subjectivities that, as playwright / researcher, subconsciously shaped the text itself?

Ultimately, showing the work to the advisory group at this stage of the process was extremely beneficial, while also identifying some of the ethical and artistic challenges in creating a new Research-based Theatre work in this health promotion space. Even the advisory group members who raised the complex issues of representation were happy with the overall potential of the work to educate and connect with general audiences, which was gratifying for the team. However, as playwright / researcher, I was again reminded of the limitations – mine, the project's – and the impossibility of doing justice to all perspectives, simultaneously.

#### WHO IS BEING HEARD? POSSIBILITIES AND ETHICAL FUTURES OF RESEARCH-BASED THEATRE

**FRANK:** I walk around the room, like an astronaut.

I'm inside my spaceship, surrounded by all these bright supernovas.

George, a trans man lawyer in his late 40s who had to have a hysterectomy to meet a medical definition of 'man.' That scares me a little – it scares me a lot.

A nonbinary couple – Sky and Rainbow – who moved to Warrandyte in the 1980s from overseas and made their own family of kids and fur-babies.

Some who have surgically transitioned, some who illegally obtained hormones from the dark-web, some who have the same bodies as always, maybe just a bit saggier.

And by the end of the night, I don't feel like I'm inside my spaceship anymore.

I'm part of this galaxy.



Subsequent work-in-progress presentations of *Being Frank*, including for school students and teachers in late 2017, received strong positive feedback through voluntary surveys and unsolicited follow-up emails (Taket, 2020, p. 313). However, it is important to acknowledge that comprehensive methods for evaluating educational efficacy of Research-based Theatre work remain incomplete (Lea & Belliveau, 2011). Notwithstanding the limitations of the gathered data, Taket reported that not a single piece of negative feedback pertaining to trans or gender diverse identities (as opposed to how the play could incorporate them differently) was received (Taket, 2020, p. 314). Perhaps, in such a contested political space, those with conflicting views didn't feel comfortable sharing them. Or perhaps the play and panel were able to make them feel something, to shift or challenge their minds.

I attended a showing at a low-socioeconomic high school in Western Melbourne that had students totally engaged, respectfully asking questions afterwards, and giving snippets of feedback on post-it notes. As Taket (2020) observed, students, teachers, and a health nurse connected to the importance of the content, learnt distinctions between gender / sex and related terms, and appreciated the generosity of the trans man representing Transgender Victoria who sat on the after-show panel. Another showing in 2018, where teachers and community health workers were brought into Deakin University, evoked similar responses but also some fear / hesitation about the politically sensitive nature of the content in their faith-based educational settings<sup>2</sup>. This was ultimately prescient, and not only for religious schools. Teachers indicated, broadly, both to members of CHASE at showings, or in private written feedback, that they felt they could not risk staging *Being Frank* in their school communities for fear of leadership and/or parent backlash. Ironically, these were environments in which the project was perhaps required the most. As playwright / researcher – and former secondary school teacher – I was acutely aware of the toxic political environment surrounding trans and gender diverse issues in Australia and the hyper-politicised nature of this within schools, particularly following the anti Safe Schools campaigns of the mid 2010s (Jones et al., 2016; Thompson, 2019). I hadn't fully considered the extent to which this could limit the ability of *Being Frank* to find younger audiences, and this remains a critical consideration when measuring the educational reach of Research-based Theatre work.

While schools were reluctant to book the work, it was able to travel for health and community-based organisations in regional Victoria across 2018-2019. *Being Frank* was featured at multiple universities both as part of formal education programs for pre-service teachers and during new

student orientation programs, as well as at a range of government and non-government organizations – many of whom wrote, unprompted, to give thanks and praise the performance. During this time, the original performer / dramaturg, Genevieve, left the project to relocate overseas, but two new performers – a woman of colour, and the first trans actor involved in the project – took over. Responses continued to be overwhelmingly positive, though my personal involvement as playwright / researcher was now limited to the occasional panel session. My last panel, scheduled to take place at Deakin University in early 2020, was ultimately cancelled due to the suspension of on-campus activity with the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, the challenges of staging theatrical work over the ongoing lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions in Melbourne in the years following meant that *Being Frank* has not been staged since. The theatre-based programs team within CHASE has been dismantled, a larger research project about *Being Frank* abandoned, and an uncertain future lies ahead for the work. While there were always limitations with the project, there had been momentum; 2020 ground this to a halt, and it has never recovered.

In the years since *Being Frank* was first commissioned, my own understanding and engagement with Research-based Theatre, and the complexities of its aesthetic and ethical entanglements, has developed substantially. Unlike a commercial theatrical work, *Being Frank* was conceived in conjunction with relevant community and advocacy groups through overlapping health and Research-based Theatre frameworks. Despite this, I have become increasingly uncertain about exactly whose voice was / is foregrounded through the project, and to what extent this could have been better addressed at multiple stages. Belliveau et al. distinguish between procedural and practical ethics in relation to Research-based Theatre, focusing on the *Contact!Unload* project enacted with returned war veterans. They establish six guiding principles from conceptualising, creating, and evaluating a Research-based Theatre project (2021, pp. 142-143), which do not prescribe but rather raise awareness around ethical considerations that may arise in doing this critical work. While *Being Frank* had formal university ethics approval at all stages, did that amount to the same ethics being realised in practice, across our roles?

I have frequently reflected on the fact that I do not identify as trans or gender diverse yet was commissioned to structure and shape the play as a playwright. Did I take this opportunity from a qualified trans person? Or should I trust that I was employed for my skills in “transmediation” of the material (Belliveau et al., 2021, p. 143)? Would a trans writer have been able to “avoid over-privileging narratives they resonate with”? (Belliveau et

al., 2021, p. 143) And did I even do this? Did we do enough to support trans and gender diverse performers, researchers, and creatives to participate meaningfully in the project? By participate I mean not just serve as the advisory group, but feel deeply embedded at all levels? Further, in terms of how audiences in a pandemic-affected world listen and engage, I wonder if we could've conceived the project to better account for "accessibility" in all definitions of the word (Belliveau et al., 2021, p. 145). Could we have created an online performance and series of video-based resources to sit alongside – in non-hierarchical arrangement – live theatrical performances? How might digital and emerging social media forms have helped us engage diverse new audiences across the country and internationally, or existing audiences in new ways? Or would this media influx have restricted our capacity to use the full potential of live performance?

*Being Frank* represented my first foray into Research-based Theatre. Just as for those working in this methodological space (Gallagher & Sallis, 2018), it has continued to raise questions, challenges, disconnects, and provocations for me as I interrogate the relationship between playwright / researcher, performance and education / social change in my subsequent practice. Looking back, I do not believe the project, or the play, was perfect in its design or implementation (or that it ever could have been). However, it had an impact on audiences as an educative, sometimes emotional, and genuine performance. It was supported by a well-intentioned connection to, and respect for, the advisory group, and the empowerment of trans voices in the after show panel.

*Being Frank* demonstrated a step towards addressing the critical lack in theatre-based work that educates and advocates for marginalized trans and gender diverse people to predominantly non-academic audiences in Australia. The question of which Research-based Theatre practitioners will fill this gap now, and how their ethics and creativity will entangle, remains.

## NOTES

1. The West Gate freeway is a popular and busy highway that connects Western Melbourne with the city. "Carks it" is a colloquial way of referring to breaking down or stopping.
2. A significant proportion of Australian primary and secondary schools are non-government and faith-based).

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