

Daphne: A violent libretto, annotated

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ABSTRACT

In 2018 I was commissioned to write the libretto for a new operatic version of *Daphne and Apollo*, a myth of sexual violence that comes with a long history of art-ified rape. As I transformed *Daphne's* story into opera, I grappled with opera's own history of gendered violence and my role in it: in accepting this commission, I became part of a community that readily stages female victimhood and male entitlement. For a feminist playwright this was a difficult commission to navigate and problematic company to join. Female performers enact their own death and victimhood nightly for the entertainment or edification of others. Their bodies become the site of the performance's dramatic conflict and their audience's cathartic resolution. In opera, a genre with the power to transform even the darkest plot points into things of beauty, this violence is hidden in plain sight; sweeping melodies and exquisite costumes gentrify the seriousness of these violations and, thus, diminish the care with which opera companies navigate these difficult scenes. Opera is at a turning point, caught in a strange moment between the contemporary and the historic; it is an artform attempting to build a bridge between its looming heritage and progress in an era of charged sexual politics and the #metoo movement.

In *Daphne*, composed by Joshua van Konkelenberg, I attempted to re-appropriate this age-old tale of male violence. It is a very female, feminist and unambiguous depiction of gendered violence, that rejects the operatic instinct to make beautiful such acts. I offer up my libretto and its annotations, including the ways in which I succeeded and failed to break this tradition and, crucially, care for my collaborators – the women whose workplace *Daphne* became. Is it possible to carve a safe workplace within the violent words of *Daphne* and to use the libretto as a framework for collegial relationships? How can opera navigate its violent heritage to form workplaces in which women might have long, sustainable and satisfying careers without jeopardising their health and safety?

Why this essay is as it is

When I began this piece, I was an aspiring academic, lecturing at Monash University's Centre for Theatre and Performance. I always meant to take the time to flesh it out – fill it with smart

references and the deep thoughts of those who have thought before me so that it wasn't just about one woman's attempt to write an opera *right*. I wanted to research, and do justice to, the questions I was asking. Now, post a covid-induced job loss and the demolition of the Centre I once worked for, I am running Riverland Youth Theatre, a tiny theatre in South Australian farmland. My days are hands-on. I often teach literally holding a child (some of my autistic students are calmest and happiest when hugged tightly). I don't know when I last read an academic article. That all seems very far away: a city life of thinking before I became a dusty "doing" person with other people's children on my hips and gumboots by the door. So, this piece remains a reflection. It is shamelessly personal and unreferenced, but it is the product of 18 years of making theatre and I hope it contributes something to an important dialogue. I am deeply grateful for its inclusion in this publication and the dedication of Claire and Luciana for dragging it out of my saved files. It feels like the last hoorah for my short but passionate academic career, and I am so glad to be allowed to say goodbye like this: writing about care, safety, performance history and present.

Daphne

i.

I¹ don't know

¹ I am new to the Land of Opera. I am from the neighbouring Continent of Theatre and the libretto I wrote in 2019 for *Daphne*, composed by Joshua van Konkelenberg (Josh), was my first border crossing. So, through this annotated libretto, I will attempt to be your guide, despite being a tourist here myself.

I want to start with my first observation about this land I find myself in and what makes it a unique and troubling vantage point from which to observe gendered violence.

The first thing you will notice about the Land of Opera is that it is a beautiful place, inhabited by beautiful beings with beautiful voices, and their national dress is usually pretty beautiful. The thing about the violence in this country is that it is very visible, but, like all things in the Land of Opera, it is beautiful.

When screams become elegant crescendos, when rape becomes a "seduction duet", when a victimiser has a stunning, resonant baritone and his stunning, resonant arias are applauded, when everything is beautifully lit and costumes fall away from damaged bodies artistically, the line between visible and invisible is a blurry thing.

Daphne comes with her own history of beautified violence. She has been poems, songs, statues and paintings, the vast majority of which exploited her beauty. The way her hair catches in the wind, the way her clothes fall away from her body: they used these to art-ify her attempted rape.

And, in every painting, statue and poem, there is Apollo, arms outstretched. Weird, I know, but looking at the pictures I am struck by the lack of erections. The lack of closed fists. His gentle face and the dainty passivity of those reaching hands: it is a sexless, violence-free rape.

This is the first line of Ovid's telling of Daphne's story in *Metamorphoses* (Book 1, line 452):

*Prīmus amor Phoebī Daphnē Peneia, quem nōn
fors ignāra dedit, sed saeva Cupīdinis īra*

Phoebus's first love was Daphne, daughter of Peneus, and not through chance
but because of Cupid's fierce anger

I'm guessing how it might have been²
But take a moment
Paint the scene
One:
Golden
Do no wrong
God of Sun
God of Song³

(Translation by A. S. Kline; online, accessed 1 October 2021;
<https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph.htm>)

His name is before hers. She is introduced in relation to how this man feels about her. So the first thing we gave Daphne back was the right to a first person narrative. "I" is the biggest little word and Daphne, after so many objectifying statues, paintings and poems, has earned that word.

² When I first read Ovid's poem, I was struck by Daphne's absence from the start of her own story. Even with that first line cut, the precipitating event of her story is still not her own action: it is Apollo taunting Cupid. It felt very frat boy, very drunk boy, very entitled and unfair. My choice to emphasise her absence in this opening aria was the second thing I could return to her: *yeah, mate. There was nothing you could have done. You weren't a part of this. This was a thing these men did to you, without you.*

³ The next thing you should know about the Land of Opera is that it is very hierarchical. It is a land of kings. One of my colleagues told me via email of one such king: "I was a student in Vienna in the 90s," she wrote "and encountered Mr Domingo at the Staatsoper where I was staving off starvation by working as an extra. Gauche little Aussie that I was, I collapsed in a fit of giggles when he draped himself over me in the corridor with a 'I haven't seen *you* around here before, where have you been?'" Her laughter must have deflated him in some way because she escaped his draping arm. But, she said: "The unquestioning acceptance of his behaviour at every level of the organisation was extraordinary".

These are hierarchical workplaces. There is such a division between soloists and ensemble members in classical music. Placido Domingo is worth hundreds of chorus girls – staving off starvation – and they all know this. Accepting a job in that company meant accepting that you – your words and your work and your voice and your right to walk the corridors – are not valued as highly as he is.

There have been many of these stories (and worse) circulating about Domingo and other opera stars wielding their power in this way, but there are also petitions. At one point I noted that "Stop the ugly harassment of Placido Domingo" had just 900 signatures but "Stop the Persecution of Placido Domingo" had more than 7000. That petition starts with: "We are very fortunate to be living at the same time as one of the rare people whose tremendous impact on the world over the years has been undeniably positive".

Bethany Hill (Beth), the soprano who played the title, and only, role in our opera *Daphne*, says that the gender imbalance in opera also plays a part. There are more women than men auditioning for roles. Rather than this resulting in a matriarchal industry, this means that women – a dime a dozen – are valued less than their male counterparts. "The men are considered a rarity," says Beth. "They are given more opportunities. Even with the big stars, the males are bigger". A land of kings.

Then we have the dead kings – Mozart, Puccini, Rossini – and the stories they told, and the ways in which they told them, still rule. Opera is stuck in a loop of endless pilgrimages to their graves, traipsing over changing understandings of race, gender, sex and accessibility in

The other:
Quietly smirking
Quick mind working
This, a god of Tricks
Of wet knickers
Hard dicks

I don't know
I wasn't there
When he set himself the perfect snare
"See this" he says
Rolls up a sleeve
Reveals an arm he'd have you believe
Killed the serpent
"With bare hands"
Checks to see if this one lands

I don't know
I wasn't there
My life was changed by their dare
Small one leans in smiles long
Pale eyes fixed
On god of song
"I've never broken a bone
Never broken skin"
Fingers stroke
A hairless chin
"But I've broken hearts without breaking a sweat
Broke sane minds mad without breaking my step"

"Apollo"
Eyes now the god above
"You want to do this?"
Said god of love

"I've broken hearts without breaking a sweat
Broke sane minds mad without breaking my step"

A sneer
Sneered
A bet
Made
A hand
Shook

order to get there. To programme new work, to write new work, to be dissonant, to be ugly, to be Australian, to be women, to be queer, to be anything other than a pilgrim is a radical act in opera.

A plan
Laid

ii.

At the start⁴ of my story
I am in the trees
To still my anger
And maybe ease
This rift through my family
A gulf that was split
When father
That morning saw fit
To request grandsons
A son-in-law
Demand them of me
My plans ignored

I said “that’s not me⁵”

⁴ At the start of every script or libretto, I write a version of the following:

My words are a workplace
Before you enter this workplace
I ask that you commit to safe workplace practices
To a transparent process for complaints
To zero tolerance of harassment
To respect the physical and emotional safety of all of your company
I ask that you discuss with your cast and crew channels of communication
Everyone has the right to feel safe at work
And art is too hard to make miserably
Mad love
Fleur

My words are a place of work. This is part of the deal with writing for performance. Both as a playwright and a librettist, I take as a starting point the words playwright John Romeril said to me in a master class in 2018:

We are employment artists. Our work breeds work. Each script is a workplace. Therefore, we must work with an awareness of this. We must not jeopardise the health – physical or mental – of the people our words employ.

What I write will dictate who ends up in the room, what they have to say and do to each other, think about and sit in. And while it is a place of work it also a place of creativity, of fun and of exploration. I consider us hugely fortunate to work in places of play and I do not wish to take away from what is so special about our creative spaces. But I think that prioritising creativity and exploration has led to years of lopsided workplaces where safeguards are seen as an oppositional force to creativity. We have made creativity contingent on danger.

⁵ The beauty and the hierarchy inside opera that I have been talking about are part of the “Given Circumstances” of this work *Daphne*.

Given Circumstances – a rarefied concept in my regular artform of theatre – usually means “What is this character walking onstage with?”, “What has just happened to them?”,

That's not me
That's not
That's not
Dad that's not me
Dad that's not"
Ninth time he hears my plea⁶

“Where are they?”, “When are they?”. But, as a writer operating beyond the realms of naturalism, I have re-appropriated this term. In contemporary performance, the first priority is not the character; my priority is that the audience should have an experience that helps them conceptualise the big ideas that I and my collaborators are trying to convey. Far more important than what a character enters a scene with is what the audience and my collaborators walk into an opera about gendered violence carrying.

We know that we are inundated with images of violence against women. We know it forms plot points in contemporary entertainment as much as it has been the subject of beautiful paintings and sculptures and operas. And we know that violence against women is rife in Australia.

In the building I worked in at Monash University there is a small plaque dedicated to one of our theatre students, Nikita Chawla, who was killed by her partner in 2015. I once asked some of my students if they had read the plaque in the foyer, and most of them were not aware there was one. It is part of the architecture of the place and they walk past it each day. Which feels strangely reminiscent of Australia's relationship with male violence: once it is pointed out to you, you will see it everywhere, but it is an easy thing to let your eyes slide over it.

Theorist and critic Viktor Shklovsky says “Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war... and art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make the stone stony”. If we are “habitualised” to gendered violence, then our job as artists approaching it must be to make it stony again.

⁶ But what of contemporary Australian opera? What are the Given Circumstances of this artform here today? Well, we premiered *Daphne* at a really important moment for Australian opera. In April that year, at the New Opera Workshop (NOW2019) the anger of female creators came to a head. The conversations at the workshop spilled out into the media and, for a brief moment, the conversation about Australian opera was a gendered one.

Responding to the conference, a letter calling for change was published on the *ARTS hub* site on 13 May 2019, co-authored by Sally Blackwood, Liza Lim, Peggy Polias and Bree van Reyk and titled “Opera and the doing of women” (online, accessed 1 October 2021; <https://www.artshub.com.au/news/opinions-analysis/opera-and-the-doing-of-women-257968-2363191/>). This is from the letter:

Laura Bowler's work-in-progress about rape, *Laura Sings*, was presented at NOW2019 accompanied by the artist's trigger warning whereas other operas dealing with this topic composed by male composers didn't offer any such framing. The presence of a female telling of such sensitive subject matter in this context served to highlight the unthinking default mode of opera as synonymous with the violation of women. There was no trigger warning for the other operas because acts of sexual and physical violence against women are culturally accepted and often glorified as an essential and “appropriate” dramaturgical component of the “love, passion and desire” that are the stock-in-trade of opera.

Reading this I re-heard the little murmur of surprise when Josh warned *Daphne*'s first audience of what was to come and told them they could leave if they needed to. Despite arriving with

“It’s a waste”
He told me
I ran to the trees
Left him there
Those grandsons to grieve

iii.

Up on Parnassus Cupid crafts
Two long arrows
Tip fletching nock shaft
For me he makes
A thing of lead
With crows’ feathers
Weighted with dread⁷
The other
Golden
Tip dripped in lust
To embolden
That golden boy
He set it thus

the knowledge that they would see an opera about Daphne and Apollo, people seemed genuinely surprised to be told that this was a work about sexual assault and might be distressing.

Opera is caught in a strange moment between the contemporary and the historic, an artform working to build the bridge between heritage and progress. The letter went on to say that Australia’s epidemic of violence against women

needs to be taken into consideration in [the] programming of the operatic canon and the making of new operatic work. As creators and curators of opera in contemporary Australia we must constantly interrogate what we are placing on stage and question why we are telling this story, in this way, today.

All this forms the Given Circumstances of Daphne.

And this is important because when text becomes performance, it is a collision of many things: my words and Josh’s music collide with the lived experiences, thoughts, assumptions and beliefs of the audience and of my collaborators. To write for live performance is to purposefully create something unfinished and to sit and wait for the collision it is destined for.

⁷ Artists work in highly charged environments. Our workplaces are more complicated than other peoples’ and require a level of vulnerability that most people never reach in their day-to-day lives. There is never going to be a time when the bank teller will be asked to push his co-worker up against a wall and close his hands around her throat. The political lobbyist won’t have to simulate his own suicide and the carpenter can safely assume that she won’t be pinned down by three colleagues today.

But an actor might be. A singer might be.

As artists, we need to work with an acute awareness of the demands of our world. The reason our workplaces demand vulnerability is that vulnerability is the superpower of art. And yet, in going to these places, we need to be proactive in how we work with this.

Takes breath
Takes aim
Takes care
Takes –
The arrow is released
She is hit
*She writhes*⁸

“Help
Forgive me
Gods what is this?”
Pain spits and twists then
– No warning –
Desists

iv.

He⁹ moves like one

⁸ And “writer” is a strange vantage point from which to examine this. As a playwright, I straddle this line of being simultaneously the most and least important person in the room. (Less so with opera because there is also the composer). But my words form the framework for the collegial relationships of my collaborators. And yet, I am often not physically in the room. So I am both omnipresent and totally absent.

My collaborators are my first readers and, in many ways, they are the people I write for. When I write a script, format it, write statements at the start or character descriptions, this is my chance to tell them what I value. Writing that statement at the start puts the language and formalities of work in their minds before they read a single line of libretto. I hope that, in doing so, I remind them that art is a job, and with a job comes the right to go home at the end of the day and leave it behind. The right to breaks. The right to put up the barriers you need to put up in order to do this work safely.

When writing sexual or vulnerable content, I try to state exactly what needs to happen in the stage directions or the lines. My words act as a position description: *This is the job, do you want it?*. And in saying that, I need to acknowledge how few jobs there are in Australia, so there may be a necessity to do work one is not passionate about. But at least I can ensure that performers in my work will not be surprised about what their job entails.

⁹ Part of the reason I took this commission was that, from the start, Josh had a vision that there would only be Daphne on stage. I do not want to write Apollo. I think we have given him enough stage time and applause. I do not want to write a workplace where colleagues have to hurt each other to teach us something. When talking to Beth, she said that, even when acts of violence have been handled with professionalism, it still changes her relationship with her male colleagues to have them do this.

Without showing it, *Daphne* is very clear about Apollo’s violence and his entitlement to her body. I was explicit because I would not be there and I wanted my collaborators to read the words I had written and be able to know that I “got it”, that they could talk to me, and that I knew what I was asking of them. *I’m not going to use metaphor, I won’t allude, I know what this job is that you are doing for me.*

I hoped this would make their work easier, and before the opera went on I was pretty confident that I had done that. But I had not. It was really hard on them. They took some time

Who knows he's tall
Golden
He glows with like one
Who knows he enthrals
Golden
But I see his wound
My own wound's twin
Marrow pierced, shattered bones
Broken skin

“Nymph – lady
I ache I thirst
Hear my heart?¹⁰
Hear it ready to burst
Your hair your eyes
Your mouth your face
Your fingers your arms
Your body your grace
The curve of your neck
That sweeps past your ear
Curls tumbling down
To dance in the air
The way that your leg –
The way that your hand –
The glimpse of your thigh
Makes me feel like a man”

“Sir – man
I want I need
You to halt
Do you know me?
The words you exalt
Must be for another
This I am sure
No stranger would do this”
My words are ignored
This golden boy
This man of men

to recover. Which is a really uncomfortable and important knowledge for me to sit in. My good intentions are not protection.

¹⁰ Perhaps my failure to look after for my collaborators in this work was due to my newness in the Land of Opera and its Given Circumstances.

Bronwyn Palmer, *Daphne*'s director, says: “The function of opera is to convey emotions through music”.

The music and its emotion are situated inside Beth's body. That is a really personal burden to carry – to use your lungs and vocal folds and soft palate, not to mention your face and body, to give voice to these sounds so perfectly crafted to evoke big emotive responses.

Has he ever heard no?¹¹
The world his play pen
He hears but does not
He's just begun
I have no choice
Now I must run

v.

Earth spins I've been told
Past planets through space¹²
So fast I have heard
If you stood in one place
You would still fly
A thousand miles in an hour
A journey through cosmos

¹¹ And then there is education. I asked Beth how many times she had died or been assaulted on stage and she could not even estimate: "Oh God, I can't even think. The woman has to die to redeem herself. I can't count!". And yet, many conservatoriums are still not teaching singers how to portray this safely and how to come back to their own life and reality and leave it behind. Without learning these skills women are asked to carry the burden of narratives that so often have violence against women and death as their key plot points.

"You often die from heartbreak. I find that quite insulting," says Beth. "Where is the woman who is mad? Where is the woman who says 'fuck it, I'm going to go and drink piña coladas on a beach!'".

If you were, as an operatic soprano, to declare a moratorium on portraying your own death and suffering, you would not have work. To be a part of this industry is to accept your fate and perform it again and again. Bronwyn said: "It is frowned upon to change the stories. So these women keep dying. For centuries. They keep dying".

¹² *Daphne* is the second work I have had on in South Australia in the last two years that presents gendered violence. *Terrestrial* went on tour with the State Theatre Company, so I want to touch briefly on the safeguards I wrote into that play.

Terrestrial was a work about domestic violence in which we never saw the violent father, just as we never see Apollo. It was a play about how hard it is to leave abusers, how hard teenage Liddy and her mother had tried, and their determination to keep trying. To help the performer, the company and the audience with this story, I gave Liddy a friend on stage, Badar. One high-school drama teacher, no doubt preparing to guide her class through their essays, pointed out to me that Badar did not really have a character arch. And it was true. He was unrelentingly kind, caring and funny from start to finish because I thought Liddy deserved that and I thought the actor portraying her deserved that and everyone watching that play who related to Liddy needed to see that they were worthy of immense care and kindness.

And I gave her a sky full of aliens. An escape route to look to when things on Earth seemed too hard. *Daphne* has that too: a chance to leave this planet.

The position of this aria is strategic: *Daphne* steps back from the storytelling, the chase, the Earth itself, like a camera pulling away. I hoped this, in the middle of the opera, would give us all a moment of beauty and a safe distance from Apollo and his ilk.

That thought gives me power¹³
I've heard we tilt too
Twenty-three degrees
I think of this now
Running into the breeze
If the world could tip
A little more
Would we fall off the edge?
And then would we soar

And if I could soar
Untethered unbound
Would he still follow?
This merciless hound
And am I running now
Against or with
This rotating globe
This star-bound monolith?

I'm running through space
I then surmise
As my feet hit the ground
I am also in skies
All this I think

¹³ I think the lack of teaching around how performers handle these roles comes back to our Given Circumstances: whilst violence against women, their sacrifice and victimhood are a staple of operatic storylines, this violence is gentrified – beautified in such a way that the burden of carrying it has been lost. “Habitualisation” and tradition have diminished our understanding of the toll these famous roles can take.

Now, as modern composers and librettists attempt to re-appropriate these stories and reclaim them for women and marginalised communities, opera companies, accustomed to such material being a staple of the repertoire, enter into sensitive subject matter without adequate conversations about safety, boundaries and care.

Bronwyn suggested that, in the face of the subject matter I am dealing with in *Daphne*, my statement declaring my words a workplace was inadequate. She suggested there needed to be a more explicit and direct statement to any artist seeking to direct or produce the work:

And this workplace is particularly dangerous and needs to be treated as such. You will need to be proactive in how you approach these hazards. Do your risk assessments. Schedule time for debriefs and de-roling at the end of rehearsals and performances. Get out ahead of this.

If I, as the writer, simultaneously acknowledge that my words are a workplace and hand them over to collaborators who may be any distance away, I need to step up.

And yes, maybe I am picking up a burden that most writers would not consider theirs to carry: to tell a company how to do this. But I have been writing for performance for 16 years. That is half my life. I teach students and mentor emerging playwrights. I am well respected in my industry and community. People listen when I talk. I am in a privileged position and I want to use that to make my community safer because I want women to have sustainable careers in artistic industries and that should be everyone's responsibility.

As I run between trees
And Earth charges through Heaven
At twenty-three degrees

vi.

I run¹⁴
Forest blurs red brown green leaves
He calls cries gasps
“Lady” “love” “beauty” “please”
“Don’t hurt yourself
Run on soft grass
I’ll go slow”
Had I breath I would laugh
“Don’t mar your perfection”
So he wants me whole
I’d rather skin shredded
Than pawed grabbed controlled¹⁵

“I don’t usually do this
Chase first meet second
I’m a nice guy I’m polite
If you met me out I reckon
You’d like me you’d love me
You’d see my good side
So let’s do this now
Whilst we slip pant slide

¹⁴ So, on my journey through the Land of Opera, I have observed many things, perhaps the most important being that, in order to pay for their beautiful violence, the kings have been taxing women for centuries. I wrote a new take on an old story thinking I could right this imbalance, but it was still hugely taxing for my collaborators. The difference was that this time they could see what their taxes were being used for. As we all know, paying taxes feels very different when you can see what they are buying for your community. The taxes that the team performing the work are paying are building roads. I do not regret writing this because they do not regret being a part of it. Bronwyn says:

We have been knocked around by this work but we felt from the beginning that it is right to tell it. It is like necessary pain. It felt like lancing a boil. At the end of the show I felt like it was a letting go of something I was holding onto. It was cathartic. I felt very seen.

¹⁵ Clarifying why she felt it was important, Beth told me that this work was different to other stories of violence:

Because it was her perspective on it. There was no heroism. Daphne wasn’t glorified at the end of the opera. Not through death, not through becoming a tree. It felt cold and lonely in some ways. People felt confronted and sad on a different level. But I also had an audience member come up and say “thank you so much, I related to that”. I think we did the right thing.

Hi I'm Apollo
God of Song God of Sun¹⁶
And something else
There's another one
I like music and hunting
Love a good wine
Slow down a minute
We'll reset rewind"

Dress slips down an arm and my throat tastes of blood
Skirt ripping away and my feet red with blood
Hair trails like a flag and my ears hammer blood
He shouts "you're divine" as I slip on my blood¹⁷

vii.

Gods
Gods

I have a question
If you don't mind
Why give him that body

¹⁶ Bronwyn put her hand up for this opera because:

I've wanted to explain to people in my life what it's like. What the trauma is like. Sometimes it doesn't matter how fast you run, how hard you fight. Sometimes people are just stronger than you and that's a reality that women live with. It is trying to convince people that there was nothing you could have done. This is a way to show that Daphne had no chance. He is a god. He is fast.

Gods and kings. Golden boys.

¹⁷ Women and minorities need to be a part of telling these stories that disproportionately impact our lives, our bodies, our workplaces and our sense of safety in the world. Without us you get this Daphne (from Ovid):

He would have said more as timid (Daphne) ran, still lovely to see, leaving him with his words unfinished. The winds bared her body, the opposing breezes in her way fluttered her clothes, and the light airs threw her streaming hair behind her, her beauty enhanced by flight. (Translation by A. S. Kline; online, accessed 1 October 2021;

<https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph.htm>)

Objectified even as she flees. Violence made simultaneously visible and invisible by its beautification. With us, you get the blood:

Dress slips down an arm and my throat tastes of blood
Skirt ripping away and my feet red with blood
Hair trails like a flag and my ears hammer blood
He shouts "you're divine" as I slip on my blood

This is visible violence, pure and simple. And yes, this is harder to look at, harder to inhabit but it is also more truthful. It speaks of the physical and mental toll this work demands, with honesty.

And give me mine?
I have beauty
I need skill
Speed
Strength
Eyes that kill
Medusa was armed
Equipped for this world
You made me hate my face
The way my hair curls

Gods
Gods
Mercy

If you have divinity
If you have grace
Change this body
Destroy my face
If he wants it
I don't
It pleased too much
Make this flesh hard
Let me not feel his touch
Gods
Gods
Mercy

The world turns
So does my ankle
I fall, get back up
It spins on its angle
Closing the distance
Hand reaches through space
Catches hair then flesh
Mercy I beg you
Make this stop
Wood
Wood
Wood
Would you not?

viii. *She is transformed*

ix.

Before he left¹⁸

¹⁸ I want to end these notes with some of the gifts I left for Daphne to thank her and protect her.
We start this opera in past tense:

He took wood
To wear, shoot, play
To honour my maidenhood
His tears wet my roots
Face pressed to my bark
He hunted the beat
Of a still beating heart
God of Sun
God of Song
God of Reason restored and strong
He left me a tree
Branches stripped bare
Returned to his life
My leaves in his hair

The world stills turns
I stand still¹⁹
In this planet I'm planted
Monument to his will
And to my own
My flight and fight
Frozen in wood
I stand day I stand night
A push away
A lean away
On a leaning Earth
Statue of a body
Fought for all it was worth²⁰

I don't know
I wasn't there

And we return to past tense for a bit in the final aria just to remind the audience that this is a re-telling.

As a general rule performance works best in present tense – we like to see the moments as they happen. Big backstories and memories are hard to make work on stage. Past tense was my gift to Daphne: the past tense says *this has all happened to you already AND you are still here, still talking about it, still saying it was wrong and still advocating for yourself*. Past tense implicitly acknowledges that there is a future still to come for her. She is still with us. Yes, he forced her to change but she has retained her voice and women's voices are powerful.

¹⁹ At the end of the opera, Daphne asks to be and is turned into a tree. Her skin hardens before his hands can reach her. This transformation is many things. It is a tragedy that she must do this to survive but also, as a woman, I always read this as a certain respite and as a tribute to her strength: she changes herself into something that cannot feel his touch. She should not have had to do this, but we are in past tense, so we know that doing this kept her alive to tell her story in the present. As Hannah Gadsby said in her ground-breaking stand up, *Nanette*, “There is nothing stronger than a broken woman who has rebuilt herself”.

²⁰ We wrote this opera for Australian opera audiences. They can be diverse and they can be told big, hard stories in big hard ways. We wrote it to acknowledge the beautified, gentrified

violence against women that is still the bread and butter of art. But, more than anything, I think we wrote it for singers who might pick up this score now or in the future. After a career of playing a soft-skinned, bruise-able victim, this opera is an invitation to its collaborators:

Go on. Transform. To put up barriers between you and your work is an act of power. An act of strength. Do what you need to do to plant yourself in this industry and not go anywhere. Because we need you. We need the wisdom of grown-up, powerful women who have seen shit and are still standing strong. We need them to have long careers and empowered voice so they can change their artform for the better. So do what you need to. You deserve your armour.

Fleur Kilpatrick is an award-winning playwright and educator. She is the Creative Producer of Riverland Youth Theatre, working to enrich the lives of young people in regional South Australia through performing arts, play and silliness. Fleur holds a postgraduate diploma of directing and a master's degree in playwriting from the Victorian College of the Arts and Music. She was a lecturer and producer/programmer at Monash University's Centre for Theatre and Performance for five years. Fleur teaches and researches care in performance – for self, community and environment. Her latest academic publication is the chapter “Sinking feelings and hopeful horizons: Holding complexity in climate change theatre”, co-written with Sarah Walker, in *Affective Movements, Methods and Pedagogies* (Routledge, 2021), edited by Anne Harris and Stacy Holman Jones. Fleur's plays have won the 2019 Helen Noonan Award (*Whale*), 2018 Max Afford Playwrights Award (*Whale*), 2016 Jill Blewett Award (*Blessed*) and 2015 Melbourne Fringe's Emerging Playwright Award (*The City They Burned*).