

Scoring Loss in a Contemporary New Zealand Musical

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Abstract:

This paper is an exegetical account of a recent New Zealand musical, *Mum's Kitchen*. The show was a creative practice research project and involved a collaborative writing/composition process with a team of four creatives. The article explores the confluence of *musical* voices within the work with a focus on the distinct musical choices made in relation to particular narrative themes. Taking a cue from Murphy (2014), we analyse the songs in *Mum's Kitchen* that directly express loss and nostalgia. We suggest that the two composers have their own strategies for 'scoring' this theme: one uses 'anachronistic' styles (such as a country ballad) to evoke a past era, and the other uses a collection of contemporary harmonic devices (open chord voicings, harmonic ambiguity) that evoke emptiness and uncertainty. We then argue that Jeremy Mayall, as orchestrator, both unified these voices through a consistent sound palette, while also emphasising these themes through his sonic choices.

KEYWORDS: Creative Practice, Musical Theatre, Style, Exegesis, Orchestration

Introduction: *Mum's Kitchen*

Between 2019 and 2022, the authors of this paper were responsible for the creative conception, development, and production of an original two-act musical: *Mum's*

Kitchen. The show was performed as a one-act preview in August 2019 at The Meteor Theatre in Hamilton, New Zealand, before the material was extended, revised, and completed in advance of a premiere season in February 2022 at the same venue. The cast and musical ensemble were drawn from a mix of local professionals and overseas-based New Zealand performers, whose talents we were able to call on thanks to Visiting Research Fellowships through the Waikato Institute of Technology.

The show centres around three middle-aged brothers (Rueben, Martin and Frederick) whose mother has passed away; the brothers return to their family farm for the funeral (which occurs at the end of Act I) and must make decisions about the future of the estate, which is heavily in debt following years of poor financial management. The trajectory of the narrative is shaped by the enduring yet highly contrasting memories of the farm, their childhoods, and the relationships with their parents (particularly with the father, who had died at some indeterminate point in the past). To a certain extent, *Mum's Kitchen* treads similar plot ground to a film such as *Death at a Funeral* (2010). Yet it also draws extensively on themes that have a longstanding presence within Pākehā¹ artistic culture: the divide between cosmopolitan and rural settings; the communicative style of middle-aged males; and, finally, the evolving relationships that exist between family members and their place of home (see, for instance, Bannister 2005, 2006; Jensen 1996). In particular, the show is a story about what happens when people, family connections, and places are (or are at danger of being) lost.

For us as four middle-class males, predominantly of Pākehā background, there is a line of enquiry that would involve theorising how our own identities (particularly our whiteness) shaped the thematic and narrative content of *Mum's Kitchen*. Broadly speaking, the characterisations and plot for the show stemmed from our collective personal experiences – the recent loss of a parent; witnessing other family members fight over a will and inheritance; making poor financial investments with life-savings in years past – that reflect our particular (privileged) position within the sociocultural fabric of this country. When placed alongside the issue of developing a New Zealand musical theatre voice (di Somma 2016), there is need for sustained reflection on how the identities and lived experiences of the practitioners are borne out in the creative artefacts and, furthermore, how these entrench colonialist understandings of masculinity, land ownership, family, and loss.² But we also need to acknowledge that this is a significantly large topic that sits outside the scope of the current article. Our starting point, rather, and primary aims are to explore and articulate how key narrative themes were musically voiced by the creative team – or, in question form, in what ways was the concept of loss scored into *Mum's Kitchen*? The areas of identity and self-critique may therefore be suited for a subsequent study that expands on the findings below.

Following Skains (2018: 95), our approach can be understood as akin to the “post-textual analysis” component of an exegesis. Yet it was not the case that this project set out to answer such a question as stated above; the fact that we reached this specific point of enquiry is itself reflective of how the creative process unfolded – and not always according to plan. The opening stages of this article, then, will resonate with the more commonly-espoused function of an exegesis as an opportunity to “expand on [...] the *production* of the artefact beyond the practice”

(Mafe and Brown 2005: 3, italics added; see also Barrett 2007b: 31; Barrett 2007a: 162). Taken as a whole, we align with what Hamilton and Jaaniste (2010) have defined as the “connective” exegesis: one that “assumes a dual orientation – looking outwards to the established field of research, exemplars and theories, and inwards to the methodologies, processes and outcomes of the practice” (Hamilton and Jaaniste 2010: 31).

We begin with a narrative account of the creation of *Mum’s Kitchen*—how the artistic roles were conceived and executed; the contextual factors that influenced these decisions—which leads us to the central textual and thematic insights of this article. Given that our end-point (that is, the analytical material below) was not conceived at the starting point, it is tempting to reflect on something going awry in the research process. This is true – to the extent that some of our original research aims were cast aside. Such happenings, however, have allowed for further reflection on why this was the case. Thus in the conclusion of this article, we link our analytical findings back to the creative process, as a means of facilitating ideas on new creative research directions in a musical theatre context, thereby bringing our journey full circle.

Musical Theatre, Collaboration, and Creative Working Processes

Performance and theatre-oriented projects, broadly speaking, have found a ready home in the literature on creative practice research (see, for example, McLeod 2007; Haseman 2007; Kershaw 2009; Sholl 2021). The overlaps of creative practice research, creative process and musical theatre, however, are much less established. Indeed, in a review of this nascent sub-field, Zachary Dunbar (2014) identifies some of the philosophical underpinnings of musical theatre practice research and offers speculative suggestions of project types; yet there is much less attention given to accounts of research examples themselves. As may be expected, collaboration is a prevalent concern in the limited writing on musical theatre creative practice. Outside of academia, Stephen Sondheim figures prominently – *Finishing the Hat* (Sondheim 2010) blends exegesis and memoir forms in providing both significant insights into and trivial commentary on his lyric writing process; *Putting It Together* (Lapine 2021), written by his former collaborator James Lapine, documents the process of staging and creating *Sunday in the Park with George*.³ In academic contexts, Alexandra Grill-Childers (2016) analyses different forms of collaboration in commercial musical theatre, focusing on Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* and the wider creative team involved in *The Lion King*, and seeking to understand how such forms reflected varying internal hierarchies and power. Closer to the current area of focus, Dunbar’s PhD research examined songwriting collaborations between a writer-composer and an actor (Dunbar 2014: 66). Amy Mallet (2018) takes an exegetical approach in reflecting on her own modes of collaboration while composing original musical theatre works; she considers how different types of environment (for example, interdisciplinary, remote) enable particular forms of creative practice. Both Mallet and Grill-Childers also analyse the musical outputs as the result of interdisciplinary collaboration in which different artistic voices (lyrics/music/choreography, and the like) are subsumed into an overall *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

It was against this general backdrop that the creative research structures of *Mum's Kitchen* were conceived. Having established our four-person creative team, we allocated roles that, generally speaking, aligned with a well-established divide in the context of musical theatre writing: a book writer (Kyle Chuen); a lyricist (Nick Braae); composers (Braae and David Sidwell); and an orchestrator for seven-piece ensemble (Jeremy Mayall). Within this typical framework, however, we sought to emphasise two 'conditions':

- A) The presence of two composers working alongside one another, as opposed to composition being a single component within the creative matrix;
- B) Creative separation between phases to allow for individual and independent 'voices' to emerge as equal and distinct contributors to the artistic outcome; as opposed to, say, the orchestrator 'serving' the composer's vision or all parties openly working towards an idealised sense of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

These factors helped to forge a distinct angle for the project relative to those studies cited above, which focused primarily on unified collaboration *across* as opposed to within mediums. This translated into three interrelated questions initially underpinning *Mum's Kitchen* as piece of creative practice research:

- 1) What would emerge from having four autonomous creative voices within a single musical theatre output?
- 2) What would emerge from having three autonomous *musical* voices within a single musical theatre output?
- 3) How could orchestration be used to unify two compositional styles?

As is indicated by these questions, there was a strong focus on the output being the focal point of the research—indeed, the answers to the first two questions would effectively be '*Mum's Kitchen*'; and the third question could be answered through examination of the scores in their pre- and post-orchestrated states. Yet those first two questions would also invite reflection from the participants on their experiences with and perceived efficacy of the methodologies (that is, individual and autonomous roles) for creating the work—especially as concerning those on the 'musical' side of the equation. To that end, it was intended that each participant would provide personal commentary at the end of the process speaking to these matters, leading, as per the conventional understandings of practice-led research, to a greater knowledge of the creative acts itself (Candy 2020: 237). Excerpts of this commentary appear through the remainder of this article.

The first iteration of *Mum's Kitchen* more or less adhered to the principles and framework established above. *Vis-à-vis* the autonomous creative spheres of individuals, we set up collective opportunities to look at the general narrative structure of the show (in its one-act form) – the general settings/content of each scene and song and the progression of different storylines. But from these meetings, it was left to the individuals to go about their work in isolation. For Sidwell, this was desirable: "I feel I compose more creatively alone, in my studio, at the piano, with no-one looking over my shoulder". And for Mayall, he found it stimulating to be able to "step back" from the original creative discussions before receiving the

full complement of draft material and considering “how the orchestration/arrangement of the material for the ensemble would shape the connections between songs”. Having completed several successful workshop performances of then-act one in August 2019, there was enough momentum and positive feedback to warrant developing, composing and staging a complete two-act musical. This, it was anticipated, would also allow for a more thorough working out of the research methodologies, in turn, allowing for more insightful and fruitful conclusions about musical theatre writing.

A Shift in Focus

In *Practical Musicology*, Simon Zagorski-Thomas puts forth a pertinent provocation: “I would argue that the aim of artistic research is not to create great art, it is to create new knowledge about how great art can be made” (Zagorski-Thomas 2022: 3). Not that we should be so presumptuous to consider *Mum’s Kitchen* ‘great art’ (!), but his dichotomy alludes to a possible tension within education-sector creative environments between the needs of ‘the research’ and the needs of ‘the artistic output’. This conceptual distinction made itself known in the context of *Mum’s Kitchen*—that is to say, at some point in writing the second half of the show, one could observe a shift in priorities from putting on an ‘interesting’ show that satisfied a research methodology to producing a show that satisfied the perceived aesthetic aims of contemporary musical theatre, with the working processes subservient to that aim. There was not a single point at which this occurred nor a group consensus on such a matter. It is likely that we fell into a different mode of thinking due to the greater complexities of constructing a full musical with a complete narrative arc (contra a short one-act ‘preview’ that could leave storylines unresolved as desired); although one can identify other contextual factors, which we will return to in the conclusion.

The consequences of this shift in thinking could be observed in varied creative methods, as well as in the final product. In reference to Bennett’s (2011) models of collaborative songwriting, the initial creative process aligned with the *demarcation* approach in which the individuals take sole charge of their respective responsibilities—“the parties need not meet in order to co-write” and the options of “veto or negotiation” are not present (Bennett 2011). As *Mum’s Kitchen* expanded in scope, we adopted elements of the *asynchronous* model, whereby “co-writers work separately and iteratively, but do not necessarily define clear or exclusive creative roles” (Bennett 2011). This was especially true of Chuen and Braae: the book and lyrics were worked on concurrently, passing each component back and forth to ensure narrative consistency and flow between the scenes and songs. Furthermore, Chuen contributed lyrics for a couple of songs (“Just Another Morning” and “Going Through the Numbers”), which had grown out of scene dialogue; and Braae edited dialogue so as to work with the content of songs. There also became a stronger sense of ‘veto’ within the overall creative team usually enforced—though only to a very modest degree—by Chuen, whose work on the book meant he had the birds-eye view of the full story.

Examples of this included “All Alone” (the original second song of act one) being cut in favour of “Just Another Morning”: the former had Reuben wallowing in his solitude, which worked well in the one-act version as an immediate indicator of

the character's state of mind; but the newly-written "Just Another Morning" offered a more rounded and layered introduction to the character and the challenges in front of him. The opening of the show was also re-worked: originally, Mayall had composed an instrumental prologue (more on this below); his musical content was chopped up and recycled by Braae to form a quasi-recitative number ("Prologue/OK") in which the brothers talk on the phone immediately after their mother's death. It thus retained its prologue aesthetic (presented as outside of a specified time and place), but it allowed us to 'set the scene' before the narrative properly commences on the farm. And in a final change, "Breaking Free", originally sung by Martin near the end of the first act, was substituted for "When I Need You" at the end of the second act; it retained most of Sidwell's musical content, but with completely new lyrics. This song also offered an instance in which Braae 'sent back' a score from Sidwell—in this case, the harmonic wandering of a bridge section reached a point of emphatic tonal arrival; yet for Braae, this occurred too early to marry with the lyrical narrative (or at least how he had conceived the lyrics). Sidwell happily obliged by adding further material that did not harmonically resolve and took the opportunity to add an upwards modulation leading into the apex of the song – the lyrical and tonal denouement now as one.

The common thread running through these examples is the prioritisation of narrative structure and cohesion, particularly by Chuen and Braae who had the most 'complete' sense of the show as it was being constructed. We should not be so dramatic to suggest that this represented *everything* changing, as many of the fundamental premises of the creative process remained in place—the composing was still divided equally; Mayall still received a complete batch of scores on which to unfurl his orchestration vision. But it meant that the established frameworks for creativity (that is, independent and autonomous roles) neither remained central to the advancement of the project nor were robust enough to offer extensive insights into this particular method of musical theatre writing. We shall reflect on this point further in the conclusion; suffice to say, we don't think any of us harbour regrets about shifting our focus away from the 'practice as research' to producing an aesthetically and (very modestly) commercially successful work. But it did force something of a rethink about how the finished *Mum's Kitchen* might speak to some of our original research goals.

The upshot of our subtle shift in working method, however, was that we were able to observe the tightening of thematic content in the libretto. As noted in the introduction to this article, many of the songs of *Mum's Kitchen* dealt with themes of nostalgia and/or loss—whether the characters are looking back to childhood memories on the farm; confronting internal conflicts from their family past; dealing with the grief of losing their mother and potentially home; or fondly recalling their mother. What seemed further notable, by the end of the project, was that Sidwell, Braae and Mayall had each been presented with individual opportunities to *score* this emotive tone through the creative journey.

The use of the verb "to score" takes its cue from Scott Murphy (2014), whose article "Scoring Loss in Recent Popular Film and Television" documents the relationship between specific harmonic patterns, namely I–iii, and scenes featuring the emotive states of loss. This analytical approach is common within other music-theoretical studies of film music. Elsewhere, Murphy (2006) identifies and assesses

the use of tritone progressions in science fiction films; Brad Osborn (2020) creates a compendium of the subdominant tritone progression in films and television and associates these with a variety of emotionally pregnant moments, such as unrequited love, longing, and hope; Erik Heine (2018) creates a musical vocabulary of chromatic mediant progressions (harmonies related by thirds), each of which has its own distinct connotations; and Frank Lehman has addressed both signifiers of 'epic' qualities in Hans Zimmer's scores as well as the chromatic harmonic language that conveys states of wonder in Hollywood films (Lehman 2016, 2018).

What unites these studies is the notion that specific harmonic patterns in these contexts have become deeply intertwined with specific narrative contexts – the musical choices therefore act as a shorthand for precisely conveying an emotive tone. To date, one cannot point to comparable studies in a musical theatre context, although there are suggestions that the compositional choices in this idiom can operate along similar lines. Hoffman (2011) has identified harmonic and gestural elements of a 'musical theatre' style, which indicates a common language being employed by its practitioners. In a more recent article on 'tonal hermeneutics', Hutchinson (2020) argues that the prevalence of subdominant-functioning harmonies in megamusicals serves to articulate a sense of retrospection and looking back in time. Even if we cannot yet pinpoint as wide a gestural vocabulary as in a film music context, musical theatre productions offer a fertile ground for exploring the different strategies a composer might adopt to 'score' a consistent emotional tone, such as loss or nostalgia. *Mum's Kitchen* serves as a pertinent case study for documenting these relationships. Thus even if the intended creative methodologies were not worked through in their entirety, our unique division of labour allowed for the two composers to utilise their own set of compositional strategies for such narrative moments. Moreover, with the freedom provided to Mayall as orchestrator, it raised the prospect of identifying strategies in his work that both unified the diverse approaches as well as lending a third sonic representation of these emotive themes. The following analytical sections sketch out our findings.

Scoring Loss: Anachronistic Styles

We begin with the relevant songs composed by Sidwell. In these cases, there is a recourse to the use of pastiche, with the broad stylistic settings directing the listener to reference points both inside and outside of the musical theatre world.⁴ In "Who Sings the Eulogy?", Martin's opening verse is set as a hymn, made plain through its block chord piano accompaniment which follows the rhythms of the melody, strict diatonic harmonies, foursquare phrasing—not dissimilar to the manner in which "Anthem" or "I Know Him So Well" from *Chess* also imitate this generic musical form. Through his verse, Martin lays claim amongst the brothers for delivering the eulogy in a 'proper' way; the quasi-religious reference lends a humorous tone to proceedings, overplaying as it does the sheer earnestness of Martin's tribute to his mother. Equally, until the 1970s or so, Pākeha New Zealand culture retained strong Presbyterian and Anglican strains, such that it would not have been uncommon for someone like the titular 'Mum' to have been both a churchgoer and (maybe) a singer of hymns in a home context when the children were younger.⁵ Given such activities are less common in a contemporary context, as New Zealand has become

a wholly secular nation, it is possible that this simple hymn may serve to evoke an older era.

There are other moments of pastiche that have a similar transportive function. In “We’re Sure Gonna Miss This Place”, Martin and Frederick reminisce about growing up on the farm; for this pair of brothers, the memories are fond—recalling the adventures across the land, imitation of sporting heroes—but very much ones that belong to the past. In this song, Sidwell has imitated a broad Country and Western style replete with grace note figuration throughout the accompaniment; parallel sixth motion in the right hand of the piano; a very delicate semiquaver shuffle groove; and sliding chromatic chords (namely \flat VI–V7) with open piano voicings in both hands. The initial characteristics might be tied back to 1970s rock artists who overlapped with the country genre—Elton John (c. *Tumbleweed Connection*), The Band, Gregg Allman—while the latter harmonic feature would appear to derive from Frank Wildhorn’s score for *Bonnie & Clyde* (as heard particularly in “What Was Good Enough for You” and “Bonnie”), itself a pastiche of 1920s country and ragtime music. As with the “Eulogy”, it is not necessarily important that the intertextual references are heard as specific to a particular composer/artist, so much as painting a broad musical picture that recalls the older style. In two of Sidwell’s other songs, there are perhaps more specified points of imitation. When Martin and his wife Missy reminisce about the start of their relationship, it is done in the style of a Frank Wildhorn-penned ballad, such as can be heard in his megamusicals *Jekyll & Hyde* or *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Returning to the eulogy, when Reuben offers his take on the speech, the accompaniment bubbles away underneath his plaintive melody; the *moto perpetuo* rhythmic patterns, the oscillating harmonic progressions between I and IV, and the addition of major seventh, ninth, and eleventh notes recall the sound of Marvin Hamlisch and *A Chorus Line*—in particular “At the Ballet”.

In a musical theatre context, it can be tautological to say that a defining compositional feature is the prevalence of intertextual references; but what can be discerned through Sidwell’s songs are a thread of references to *anachronistic* styles. Certainly, with respect to the hymn and the country ballad, these have associations with an older era and, indeed, an older generation of New Zealanders. With respect to the Wildhorn and Hamlisch references, they are less distanced chronologically from the present day (Wildhorn’s hit musicals were on Broadway in the 1990s), however, one can argue that the styles of both are not as prominent within a contemporary Broadway soundscape. It is not to say that the references are dated, so much as they conjure past eras of musical theatre composition. Thus, we have consistent recourse to styles that exist in the past tense. Writing on the use of a brass band in Roy Harper’s songs, Moore (2012: 251) notes that this stylistic reference has connotations of nostalgia on the basis of it evoking an imagined society that is, in essence, no longer accessible for audiences. We can read something similar at play in the context of *Mum’s Kitchen* insofar as Sidwell’s choice of older styles are employed in service of narratives that emphasise a past which is fondly remembered, but cannot be returned to.

Scoring Loss: The Sounds of Contemporary Broadway

We turn now to the songs composed primarily by Braae. If those by Sidwell reflected a sense of a lost, yet somewhat distant past, then this next selection of numbers address loss as is felt by the characters in much more pointed terms. In the solo songs “Elephants, Art and Me”, “Just Another Morning” (plus its reprise), and “Martin, I Once Knew”, each of the characters (Reuben, Frederick, and Missy, respectively) reflect on lost opportunities to communicate and connect, and the attendant grief and pain that is the outcome of such moments. These fit within the same emotive family as the songs above, to be sure, but there is arguably a stronger and more dramatic expressive outlet. For Braae, this form of loss was scored with the sounds of contemporary Broadway musical writing.

In “Elephants, Art and Me”, at the end of Act I, Frederick sings to his mother. This is his moment of crisis within the show where he has to address his past, his place in the family, and his connection to the farm—as a young gay man, he had left home because of feeling desperately out of place in the rural community. Furthermore, as he explains, he had tried to come out to his father who stopped him from doing so and, essentially, forbid him from telling his mother (which, it is strongly implied, was a self-serving strategy for the father). The song is about Frederick’s internal conflict over selling the farm that he has long left behind, with the accompanying guilt from having lost the chance to connect fully with his mother before she died. The four sections of the song predominantly unfold over an accompaniment comprising a consistent right-hand pattern above a shifting bass voice. This is a typical feature of musical theatre accompaniment, identified by Hoffman as a “ConsistRH” gesture (Hoffman 2011: 39–42). As per Hoffman’s analysis, the right-hand patterns employed in “Elephants, Art and Me” are typically the first and the fifth of the local tonic triad with one of the voices (often the fifth) doubled at the octave; in the bridge section, the voicing is condensed and the second of the tonic triad added (thus, in B \flat , the notes F, B \flat and C are played).

One of the distinguishing features of this harmonic style is that it fosters *implied* chord patterns that emerge through the presence of the bass voice. Thus, in the opening phrases of “Elephants, Art, and Me”, the bass rises E – F# before falling to B, giving the impression of a IV–V–I (all in first inversion) chord pattern that is not fully articulated. In the second phrase, the cello plays a descending lament bass line between G and C#, again giving the impression of standard ballad progression (I–V⁶–I₂⁴–IV⁶–iv⁶–I₄⁶–II₅⁶) that will ultimately lead to a perfect cadence, as is exemplified in a song such as “Goodbye to Love” by The Carpenters. In addition to the consistent right-hand notes, what lends such progressions their idiosyncratic musical theatre character (as opposed to being a ‘pop’ progression) is the invocation of the *add4* sonority. When the open G5 chord is played against, for example, the F# in the left hand, we are encouraged to hear a dominant chord in first inversion, but one that contains both the third (the F#) and the fourth (the G). Similarly, the implied A7/C# at the completion of the descending line is also infused with the fourth scale degree; here, the G is the seventh, and the D is the fourth. Braae used this particularly harmonic sonority both throughout “Elephants, Art and Me”, in both open and closed voicings. We find only the closed voicing version employed at the cadences of “Just Another Morning”—Reuben’s grief-stricken lament for his adoptive mother, in which he breaks down at the thought of never again coming

back in from farm to see her in the home. On these occasions, there is a pointedness in the sonority, given the semitone interval is placed within the middle of the chord.

The two consistent techniques that underscore this loss are frequently heard together in the songs of Jason Robert Brown and the Pasek and Paul songwriting team, such that they act as sonic markers, it would seem, of a 'contemporary Broadway' style. Examples of the consistent open-voiced chords can be found in the former's "Nobody Needs to Know" (*The Last Five Years*) and the latter's "Words Fail" (*Dear Evan Hansen*), with variations in this pattern also clear in "Still Hurting" (*The Last Five Years*) and "Pretty Funny" (Pasek and Paul's *Dogfight*). The add4 chord is rife through "Still Hurting", "Words Fail", and "So Big/So Small" (also *Dear Evan Hansen*); "It's Hard to Speak My Heart" from Brown's *Parade* exquisitely melds both of the harmonic techniques noted above into its accompaniment. What unites these songs listed—and the reason for their use by Braae—is that they are song by a central character as they reach an emotional crisis point: there is either a turn towards realisation and reconciliation or the sense that all hope is lost. From a creative standpoint, there are possible explanations for why this harmonic style might be used in such a context: the open chord voicings allow for a degree of emptiness and ambiguity within the harmonic progressions given their implied nature. Furthermore, the add4 sonority simultaneously presents both the leading-note *and* the note to which it wants to resolve; when those two notes are voiced next to each other, it enacts the conflict and unsettled state felt by characters in that situation. Given their frequent use in contemporary Broadway scores, such patterns take on the appearance of a musical trope or topic that represent loss and grief—in much the same way as Osborn (2020) has identified the "subdominant tritone" sonority (also rife in Jason Robert Brown's scores) as signifying longing and desire. Thus to compare the two composers' strategies, if Sidwell's songs seek to transport the characters (and audience) into another musical world that is lost and no longer accessible, then those of Braae utilise contemporary musical signifiers to underscore the loss as felt in the present.

Scoring Loss and Bridging the Gap: Orchestration

In the eponymous number that closes the show, the three brothers reflect on their past lives together on the farm but, safe in the knowledge that they are not selling the estate, they cherish these memories. Each of the brothers has made his peace with the farm and what 'mum's kitchen' represented and they now look forward to a future with a closer fraternal relationship. Braae's approach to this song remained squarely in the contemporary Broadway mould, both recapitulating elements of "Elephants, Art and Me" and adding new sections, with the open harmonies now played as driving rhythmic patterns in the piano right-hand. This aligned it firmly with the contemporary style as noted above, but relying on the tropes of the 'resolution' song, such as "You Will Be Found" (*Dear Evan Hansen*), "Light" (*Next to Normal*), or "Goodbye to Tomorrow" (*The Last Five Years*). As noted above, *Mum's Kitchen* started from an unusual creative standpoint in allowing the two composers to explore and express their own musical voices. Upon reflection, if the work were to be revised, or done over, it would be intriguing to consider whether it is possible for the two voices to meld in some way. And surely, the finale would

have been a prime opportunity to musically enact the perspective shifts in the main characters.

Notwithstanding this potential missed opportunity, we were able to reflect on the altogether less common approach of allowing the unique orchestration by Mayall to act as the unifying musical voice. He scored the show for a seven-piece chamber ensemble: piano, upright bass, drums, guitar (acoustic and electric), cello, flute, and bassoon. Within the consistency of this sound-world, one can identify a selection of gestures and characteristics that emphasise the emotive tone conjured in the songs. Or in his words, “the orchestration itself was able to serve as a character element—or at least something like a blanket that the characters and story wrapped themselves in throughout”.

Firstly, in “Elephants, Art and Me” and “Just Another Morning (reprise)”, there are brief phrases of piano and solo cello, both with and without vocals. In these contexts, the expressive warmth of the cello contrasted with the bare piano harmonies does not necessarily connote ‘loss’ but rather evokes an image of a lone and unsupported voice—much as the characters perceive themselves through the show. This orchestration sound therefore serves to amplify the apparent emotional depth of the scenes and numbers. A second trait is more widespread. In the songs written in either triple or compound metre—“Elephants, Art, and Me”, “Just Another Morning” (plus reprise), “Mum’s Kitchen”, “What to Put in the Casket?”—the sections of higher dramatic intensity (for example, bridges) were typically scored for full ensemble, but with an emphasis on soaring flute melodies (doubling vocals or counterpoint), consistent acoustic guitar strumming, and rolling drum patterns on the snare and toms. The prominence of this instrumental combination loosely brings to mind traditional Celtic marching and folk styles. Mayall gave no indication during or after the creative process to suggest he was imitating a Celtic style with any degree of accuracy or authenticity; but in giving prominence to these sounds and accompaniment patterns, it is possible to hear traces of this musical lineage or, at least, a trope of these Celtic traditions. If we do hear this stylistic voice emerging through the score, then it operates in a manner similar to Sidwell’s pastiche, calling to mind a distanced era and a musical culture. This orchestration pattern, in a more subtle way, thus serves to remind the characters and the audience of this sense of looking back from the present time.

Our third observation regarding Mayall’s orchestrations is the most speculative. In anecdotal feedback after the show,⁶ a number of audience members commented on the role of the bassoon in the ensemble. In many cases, it was the skill and musicality of our player, Ben Hoadley, that came to the fore; but underpinning these comments was an apparent sense of intrigue about the instrument being used in this musical theatre context. This raised the question as to how it was being heard? What connotations were being brought forth through the musical from the bassoon? There is limited literature that might guide us on the semiotics of the bassoon. In a handful of studies on film music, it is suggested that the bassoon is utilised for comedic effect – often because its “nimbleness” and clarity as a melodic instrument seems incongruous and/or inappropriate relative to its low register (Mera 2002: 102–103; see also Griffith and Machin 2014: 85–86). Save for its appearance in the patter song “I Want My Coffee” of Act I, this was precisely not the purpose the bassoon served in *Mum’s Kitchen*!

The opening instrumental phrase and vamp of “We’re Gonna Miss This Place” may provide better insight. Above the swung country groove, the bassoon takes the primary melodic role, adding bluesy licks around the piano chords. Another moment of note in *Mum’s Kitchen* is the opening of “He Who Holds the Money”, a “Defying Gravity” pastiche, in which the flute and bassoon trade short motifs above the rock accompaniment. It is, in short, a strikingly unusual instrument to be playing such parts; and therein, potentially, lies the intrigue. A quick scan through orchestrations of classic Broadway musicals (for example, 1950s–1970s) shows that the bassoon was a highly common instrument within the orchestral setup, usually sitting within the Reed IV or V book. Yet within contemporary chamber musicals, the instrument disappears from view, with composers/orchestrators such as Brown, Pasek and Paul, Tom Kitt, Dave Malloy, or Alex Lacamoire favouring string additions and a woodwind part taken by either flute, clarinet or English horn. In those shows with a rock-influenced score, the Reed book would more likely include a saxophone. Suffice to say, both the appearance of a bassoon in a contemporary musical theatre ensemble *and* playing in comparatively idiosyncratic (that is, non-orchestral) styles is rare and distinct. With a very wide interpretative leap, we might say that it functions similarly to the pastiche strategy, insofar as it reminds the audience of a distant musical past (that is, classic Broadway). But perhaps more accurately, in both its presence and in taking on these unusual melodic roles at points, it has the effect of conjuring a tone of interpretative ambiguity: it serves to transport audiences from a well-defined and familiar stylistic world to one that is less grounded and less familiar, much like the characters as they move between present and past states of mind.

It is worth noting several final instances where Mayall’s contributions more directly aligned with the *compositional* strategies put forth by Sidwell and Braae. In “Just Another Morning”, for example, the opening chord progression oscillates between IV and I, over a G tonic pedal. On the second occurrence of this pattern in each verse, Mayall added an ascending flute melody from F# to G, thereby evoking the add4 sonority (essentially, Cadd4/G) that is associated with the states of loss throughout the show. It is an excellent example of Mayall utilising a stylistic trope that was not present in Braae’s piano sketch for the song (in that bar, at least), but worked to enhance the latent tone of the song. Similarly, his orchestral prologue (later becoming “Prologue/OK”) was originally written with the intention of establishing points of compositional inspiration for Braae and Sidwell. While this was another methodology that was not followed through in any meaningful depth—it is difficult to note *specific* points of influence from Mayall to the others—we can identify similar compositional approaches to what the others would later adopt: there are repeating right-hand patterns against shifting bass tones, non-triadic harmonic voicings and general tonal ambiguity. Furthermore, its use of minimalist tropes calls to mind composers such as Steve Reich or Terry Riley—it is not pastiche, à la Sidwell, but it is evocative of an older, inaccessible time, which seems appropriate given it underscores conversations that happen ‘out of time and place’ between the brothers soon after their mum has died. In making these observations, we cannot necessarily speak of ‘intention’ amongst the creatives, as per Candy (2020: 5–7), in terms of each of us deliberately choosing techniques that would neatly coalesce around certain strategies. Rather, the fact that we can observe

parallels and resonances between Mayall, Sidwell and Braae's respective voices reflects the experience in the shared language held by the group, with each possessing their own type of fluency in musical theatre composition. In tandem with the narrative expertise of Chuen, it speaks to our working environment that allowed for different forms of musical expression to emerge, as we have demonstrated, but all surrounding the cohesive thematic tone of loss and nostalgia.

Conclusions

To conclude, we offer several thoughts on contextualising the analysis and creative practice. Firstly, our focus on the connections between compositional strategies, tropes and emotional states has introduced a wider scope to the field of musical theatre analysis, which has tended to previously focus on idiomatic gestures. Furthermore, we have made a clear case for the primacy and value of *sound* and *orchestration* in emphasising and enhancing narrative elements, as well as unifying the compositional voices of Braae and Sidwell. Treating orchestration as a fundamental storytelling element of a musical is a novel approach within the broader literature on this art form. Suskin's mammoth text on Broadway orchestration asserts the importance of this element within a show, but his analyses tend towards descriptions of the rich instrumental textures rather than considering how such details enhance the narrative of a song or show (Suskin 2009). Thus, with this work, we hope to demonstrate in very preliminary form how more careful examination of these musical elements may illuminate further ideas about the characters and onstage action.

More importantly, proceeding through our creative journey and subsequent analysis has allowed for thoughts to percolate regarding musical theatre practice research. In reference to the research goals listed earlier in this article, we have been able to advance several answers to them by way of the analytical findings—in essence, the key outcome to emerge from the three autonomous musical voices was the presence of individualised compositional strategies to illuminate the consistent narrative themes. Yet as also noted, the particular unfolding of the project meant that we lost some ability to forcefully assess and critique our chosen methodology *as a method* (hence the renewed focus on the output in our analysis). We can reflect further, however, on why this apparent 'failure' happened and what lessons this holds for creative practice researchers.

One idiosyncratic feature of the creative team was the fact the four members were operating in very different research spheres—two for whom *Mum's Kitchen* was a 'side project' (in the context of an assessed research portfolio) alongside other academic and creative works; one for whom the musical was a key part of a creative practice PhD; and one for whom *Mum's Kitchen* was an introductory research project, having spent many years as an industry practitioner (that is, a professional actor). While this range of experiences and backgrounds was unarguably a strength of the team, it did mean that the different participants were invested to differing degrees in the *research* success of the project (*vis-à-vis* the *aesthetic* success of the project). For the team member coming in with an extensive industry background, it is likely that the needs of this domain (that is, creating a stimulating and enjoyable product for a ticket-paying audience) would be more familiar (and potentially

relevant) than the demands of rigorous research design. None of these observations should be taken as inherently good or bad, per se, but they speak to a need within collaborative creative practice research contexts of ensuring that there is a collective understanding of what is at stake for whom. To return to Zagorski-Thomas, is the aim 'good research' or 'great art'? And how might the answer to this question shape the unfolding process and project framework? We might also dangle in front of readers the intriguing issue of how different research environments prioritise different outcomes: for the four of us based in a vocationally-oriented tertiary institution, there is an ingrained focus and promotion of projects that 'engage with industry' (always loosely defined).⁷ For the practice-based researcher, then, it raises questions as to whether the 'industry' interests compete with 'academic' interests? But that, certainly, is a matter for another day.

At the conclusion of *Mum's Kitchen*, Braae noted the challenge of 'letting go' of his work, whether lyrics to give to Sidwell or songs to give to Mayall: "For some pieces of work, they might have been developed with a very particular 'sound' in mind ('it will go like this...'), which then, for obvious, might not be realised exactly as intended when someone else approaches it!" Yet he countered this by commenting on the benefits that came from observing how his collaborators would approach the material:

For instance, some of the lyrics that I had conceived (in a somewhat plain way) as a series of verses, David would turn into contrasting verses and extended recitative sections (such as, "We're Sure Gonna Miss This Place") [...] Not only did this feel like the others were making the songs 'better', but it also sharpens one's own creative practice by implicitly seeing how other minds work in comparison to your own.

The point we draw from this reflection is that despite the reduced insights into the *broad* practice of musical theatre writing, there were pleasing discoveries regarding *individual* practices. In tandem with the post-textual analytical findings, this has prompted ideas as to future projects that may reinforce, contradict or speak to our conclusions. For example:

- 1) A selection of composers setting a single theatre song to lyrics in order to compare compositional practices in relation to narrative prompts;
- 2) A group of theatre songs by multiple composers orchestrated by a single person in order to locate unifying sound-based techniques and strategies;
- 3) One composer producing a song sketch (akin to our prologue) which other composers then build upon in order to document the process of musical idea generation and development.

As we reached the end of *Mum's Kitchen*, there was resonance with the iterative cycle of research, research-led practice and practice-led research developed by Smith and Dean (2009: 20), which ultimately feeds back on itself. Our experiences and conclusions from *Mum's Kitchen* have produced similar outcomes: not only leading us to insights of an analytical kind, but also producing sparks that may restart the creative fires, which, in turn, may lead to greater knowledge (planned and expected or not) about our ongoing journeys of musical theatre writing.

Endnotes

1. Pākēha is the Te Reo Māori term for white European peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand.
2. As an example of this thinking, we can acknowledge that the narrative arc of the show – focused as it is on land *ownership* – is distinct to a Pākēha worldview and stands in counterpoint to the notion of land *guardianship* (*kaitiakitanga*) that prevails in Te Ao Māori (Māori worldview)
3. While frequently illuminating with respect to creativity and collaboration in this field, both texts should be understood against the backdrop of Sondheim mythology as opposed to practice-based research.
4. This understanding of pastiche draws on the work of Richard Dyer who defines this form by being “textually signalled” – that is, drawing attention to its imitative nature (Dyer 2007: 24; see also Williams 2013: 7-9). It is similar also to Burkholder’s concept of “stylistic allusion” in which there is a reference to a “general type” not a specific work (Burkholder 1994: 854).
5. This type of scene is referenced in the musical play *Coaltown Blues* written by Mervyn Thompson.
6. In hindsight, this could have been a point at which we took a more formalised approach in order to feed into the creative practice reflections.
7. For instance, when applying for institutional funding for *Mum’s Kitchen*, we were required to document the industry engagement that would arise from this project; and, moreover, we were looked upon favourably by our institutional Research Office, in part, because we could offer some commercial return on the investment through ticket sales over the performance season. Tensions between academic requirements and artistic vision are observed by Batty and Berry (2015) in the context of creative practice degrees.

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